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# Paul, Philemon, and Onesimus: a Christian design for mastery

Ulrike Roth
# Paul, Philemon, and Onesimus

## A Christian Design for Mastery*

**Abstract:** Dieser Beitrag erklärt das Verhältnis zwischen Paulus und Onesimus im Brief an Philemon als das zwischen (reellem) Herrn und (seinem) Sklaven. Zentral für diese These ist eine duale Interpretation der κοινωνία, die den Brief prägt – sowohl was das theologische Denken des Paulus anbelangt, als auch bzgl. einer ganz konkreten Abmachung zwischen Paulus und Philemon, wie sie im Privatbereich häufig eingegangen wurde, die praktische Konsequenzen für das Besitzverhältnis über den Sklaven hatte. Die Erkenntnis, dass Paulus durch die Verbindung in κοινωνία mit Philemon zum Mitbesitzer des Sklaven wurde, erhellt darüber hinaus die Argumentationsweise des Apostels im Brief ganz allgemein. Der Brief ist daher Zeuge dafür, dass Paulus die Sklaverei nicht nur im christlichen Gedankengut, sondern auch in der Realität der christlichen Mission aktiv nutzte.

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## 1 Introduction

It is a commonplace in the study of Paul's attitude to slavery to speak of what J.M.G. Barclay termed "the dilemma of Christian slave ownership":[1] Paul's mis-

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1 J.M.G. Barclay, Paul, Philemon, and the Dilemma of Christian Slave-Ownership, NTS 37 (1991) 161–186.

sionary activity was both dependent on the support of slave owners *and* directed at slaves (and *vice versa*) – creating a potential for conflict and tension between masters and slaves. It is therefore unsurprising that the student of early Christianity, equipped with an understanding of slavery as a social injustice, should foreground "the problematic of Christian relations under the Roman slave regime".[2] At the same time, the direct evidence for Paul's attitude towards slavery is slim: next to a couple of short but complex passages in 1Cor 7,21–24 and Gal 3,28, there is the (equally complex) letter to Philemon. The bibliography on the topic, on the other hand, is vast, reflecting well the importance attached to the matter by modern scholars: how the early Christians approached slavery is critical for our understanding of the wider issue of the relationship between the peculiar institution and the Church – and Paul's stance in this is, naturally, of great consequence.[3] Paul's use of slavery as a metaphor is one source for our understanding of his position;[4] his practical dealings with real slaves and real masters that underlie and frame (t)his usage, another: in *Philemon*, we are offered a window on both.

J.A. Glancy has argued that "(t)o take this ambiguous letter as a starting point for discovering early Christian attitudes toward runaway slaves or slavery more broadly is a futile enterprise".[5] Others have attempted to illustrate Paul's approach to slaves, masters, and slavery by locating the letter socio-politically.[6] Here, I offer a reading of the letter that, if correct, suggests a substantially greater involvement of the apostle with the peculiar institution than hitherto thought – for it exposes Paul as a slave owner.

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**2** A.D. Callahan, Paul's Epistle to Philemon: Toward an Alternative *argumentum*, HThR 86 (1993) 357–376, here 357.

**3** See the massive compilation of modern studies on the relationship between Christianity and slavery by H. Bellen and H. Heinen (eds.), Bibliographie zur Antiken Sklaverei, Stuttgart 2003, 390–404.

**4** See esp. D.B. Martin, Slavery as Salvation: The Metaphor of Slavery in Pauline Christianity, New Haven/London 1990; J.A. Glancy, Slavery in Early Christianity, Oxford 2002, 9–38, and eadem, Slavery and the Rise of Christianity, in: The Cambridge World History of Slavery, ed. by K. Bradley and P. Cartledge, Cambridge 2011, 456–481, esp. 457–461.

**5** Glancy, Slavery in Early Christianity (see n. 4), 92.

**6** For a detailed overview of mid to late 20th century scholarship on the letter see W. Schenk, Der Brief des Paulus an Philemon in der neueren Forschung (1945–1987), ANRW II.25.4 (1987) 3439–3495. The most recent full-scale commentary – with earlier bibliography – is P. Müller, Der Brief an Philemon (KEK 9/3), Göttingen 2011.

# 2 Two communication layers

*Philemon* is by far Paul's shortest letter; yet the letter is carefully crafted and organised.[7] After the prescript with greetings (Phlm 1–3) and thanks (Phlm 4–7), Paul presents himself in such a way as to add authority to the letter (Phlm 8–9) before the matter that has motivated the epistle is broached, which then dominates the rest of it apart from the concluding instructions, greetings and blessings (Phlm 22–25) – the relationship between Onesimus, Philemon, and Paul.[8] Unlike the letter's recipients (i.e. Philemon, Apphia and Archippus as well as the [other] church members in Philemon's house), we do not know the social context from which the letter arose. The introductory sentences of the letter make it clear, however, that Paul addresses in the first instance Philemon. Yet the mention of others, including the religious community in Philemon's house, ensures from the outset that the specific issue at stake is moved from the interpersonal sphere (i.e. that of dealings between Paul and Philemon) to the communal sphere (i.e. that of the church in Philemon's house). Modern scholars are agreed that we can therefore expect that the letter had two overlapping audiences with different knowledge and comprehension of the issue that prompted the letter; and that Paul took note of these diverse audiences when composing his text – creating two communication layers at a time.[9] What is important for present purposes, is that the letter offers an intriguing window onto Paul's relationship with slavery precisely at the most prominent point of intersection between the two communication layers – Paul's usage of the concept and reality of κοινωνία.[10]

    The term κοινωνία is used thirteen times in the Pauline correspondence alone (compared with [only] six uses in the New Testament otherwise): Paul's use of the term (and its derivatives) in his conceptual construction of the Christian community is fully appreciated today; it has been studied in great detail by J. Hainz.[11]

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**7** On the structural composition of *Philemon* as a letter see now T.J. Bauer, Paulus und die kaiserzeitliche Epistolographie, Tübingen 2011, 119–166.
**8** For brief discussion of the standard tripartite division of the letter see P. Arzt-Grabner, Philemon (Papyrologische Kommentare zum Neuen Testament 1), Göttingen 2003, 58–59.
**9** On the function of the dual communication layers in *Philemon* see generally Bauer, Paulus (see n. 7), 123–124 and 162–165.
**10** My view on the "intertwinement of private and official elements" is different from that expressed by M. Barth and H. Blanke (The Letter to Philemon. A New Translation with Notes and Commentary, Grand Rapids/Cambridge 2000, 115, with note 24) who argued that "(w)hen one member of the church is given apostolic guidance, the whole congregation is included in the admonition". In my reading, the intertwinement is conceptual rather than instructional.
**11** J. Hainz, KOINONIA. "Kirche" als Gemeinschaft bei Paulus (BU 16), Regensburg 1982.

Whilst the term is well attested in (earlier and contemporary) pagan or Jewish texts of various pedigrees, it is firmly accepted that "Paul's mastery of the κοινων-stem is clearly his own".[12] Concerning *Philemon*, E. Reinmuth calls the term "das wichtigste Stichwort des Proömiums".[13] More importantly, as Hainz has shown, κοινωνία is central to Paul's definition of the Church throughout the letter: "(D) as Wortfeld κοινωνία (erweist sich) geradezu als Schlüssel zum Gesamtverständnis des Phlm bzw. der Phlm als Konkretion dessen, was Pls unter κοινωνία versteht."[14] Paul's understanding of the term culminates in what Hainz calls a "Gemeinschaftsverhältnis" which is based on a relationship of (mutual) debt and gratitude – "ein Verhältnis geschuldeter Dankbarkeit".[15] This "Gemeinschaftsverhältnis" finds vivid expression in the shared participation in the spirit referred to in verse 6, where Paul speaks of the κοινωνία τῆς πίστεως.[16] This shared participation in the spirit (also often referred to as the community in the faith), is widely recognised as an important building block in Paul's theology.[17]

But Paul did not invent the term. It was in widespread use in Paul's day (as before and after) in its most fundamental and practical meaning to describe a private (voluntary) association of two or more members that aimed at the pooling of resources for a specific goal, located in this world and of a temporary nature; the same type of association was known amongst (contemporary) Latin speakers as *societas*.[18] In both the Greek and the Roman world, the association could move within and across other, pre-existing organisational frameworks without

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**12**  J.M. McDermott, The Biblical Doctrine of KOINΩNIA, BZ 19 (1975) 64–77 and 219–233, here 232.

**13**  E. Reinmuth, Der Brief des Paulus an Philemon (ThHK 11/II), Leipzig 2006, 30.

**14**  J. Hainz, κοινωνία, EWNT II, Stuttgart etc. 1981, 749– 755, here 753.

**15**  Hainz, KOINONIA (see n. 11), 110.

**16**  For an analysis of the concept's implications for our reading of *Philemon* see, e.g., M. Wolter, Der Brief an die Kolosser. Der Brief an Philemon (ÖTBK 12), Gütersloh 1993, 273–277.

**17**  E.g., J.D.G. Dunn, The Theology of Paul the Apostle, Edinburgh 1998, 561–562 (with earlier bibliography).

**18**  In his history of Roman private law, M. Kaser (Das Römische Privatrecht. Vol. 1, München 1955, 478 [²1971, 574]) describes the main characteristics of the *societas* as "ein Zusammenschluß zweier oder mehrerer Personen, um einen gemeinsamen Zweck mit gemeinsamen Mitteln zu fördern". See also A. Manigk, Societas, in: PRE III A1 (1927) 772–781. In what is the first full modern treatment of Greek voluntary associations, the main characteristics of such a partnership are similarly summarised as a "Vereinigung mehrerer Personen auf Zeit, und zwar zur Erreichung eines bestimmten Zwecks" (E. Ziebarth, Das griechische Vereinswesen, Leipzig 1896, 13). See also F. Poland, Geschichte des griechischen Vereinswesens, Leipzig 1909, 164. This type of κοινωνία is thus different from the fellowship of the same name in which the Essenes lived; for the latter, and other contemporary voluntary associations, see A. Baumgarten, Graeco-Roman Voluntary Associations and Ancient Jewish Sects, in: Jews in a Graeco-Roman World, ed. by M. Goodman, Oxford 1998, 93–111.

constituting or replacing these.[19] Membership was voluntary and individual members need not be subjected to equal contributions: some might contribute goods and financial resources, others labour and services. The particulars of each member's contribution could be detailed in a contract, but were more typically agreed upon in a formless manner. Partners had clear financial duties, although these could again be unequal. Should the association lose money, the loss was divided amongst the individual partners either equally or according to the particulars agreed upon by them when entering into the partnership; and the same applied to gains.[20] Members retained however separate accounts to carry possible losses that arose from the activities of the association. Individuals could cease to be members at any point at their own wish, but they retained their (financial) obligations accrued up to that point. A member's contribution could be enforced, providing a basis for coercion of truant partners.[21]

In general, discussion of the location of the idea of κοινωνία in Paul's theology, and its application in the Pauline communities, has taken account of this wider, practical usage: M. Wolter summarises the matter well when he states that Paul's conceptualisation of the Christian community in *Philemon* is constructed around a concrete model ("an einem ganz konkreten Modell orientiert").[22] But, as has been shown by S.C. Winter, the contractual texture of much of the apostle's language in *Philemon* suggests rather a *direct* and *particular* relevance of this wider, practical usage that goes beyond Paul's adaptation of this concrete κοινωνία-model in his theological thought and action: "Paul has framed his request in a legal form", using "legal language throughout the text";[23] the letter's contractual qualities, revealed by form and language, are further underscored by the direct mention of financial aspects (Phlm 18 and 19) as well as by Paul's identification of Philemon as his partner – κοινωνός (Phlm 17) – just like members in

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**19**  So succinctly L. Bormann, Philippi. Stadt und Christengemeinde zur Zeit des Paulus (NT.S 78), Leiden etc. 1995, esp. 185, in relation to the association in place between Paul and the Philippians. But note that Bormann's heavily Romanising conceptualisation of Philippi (op. cit., esp. 11–84) has rightly been rejected by P. Pilhofer, Philippi. Band I: Die erste christliche Gemeinde Europas, Tübingen 1995, 47–48 and *passim*.

**20**  E. Ziebarth, Koinonia, in: PRE.S VIII (1956) 252–253, here 253: "Das eventuelle Defizit (ἔνδεια) mußte jeder Metochos mit tragen, ebenso wie er am Überschuß (ἐπιγένημα) teilhatte. Doch kann der Verlust verschieden verteilt werden, da es nicht nötig war, daß die übernommenen Verpflichtungen der *socii* gleichwertig waren". See also Kaser, Privatrecht (see n. 18), 479 (²575), on the relationship between profit and loss amongst *socii* in a *societas*.

**21**  For both κοινωνία and *societas* see Manigk, Societas (see n. 18), 776 and 780.

**22**  Wolter, Brief (see n. 16), 273.

**23**  S.C. Winter, Paul's Letter to Philemon, NTS 33 (1987) 1–15, here 6.

a private voluntary association. In following the conceptualisation of this type of arrangement advocated by J.P. Sampley with regard to Paul's dealings with the Philippians, Winter argued for the workings of precisely such a private voluntary association as the contractual framework behind Paul's particular dealings with Philemon, including those that have a bearing on Onesimus.[24]

Winter's thesis attracted much criticism, largely on the basis of a number of implausible secondary arguments that accompanied her fundamental recognition of the workings of a private voluntary association in *Philemon*.[25] There has since been a renewed focus in modern scholarship on Paul's theological construction of the κοινωνία τῆς πίστεως mentioned in verse 6 (and a concomitant disregard of the concrete legal, contractual aspects of the discourse that penetrates in particular verse 17). But, as has been seen, Paul constructed his text in such a way as to create multiple layers of communication: there exists therefore no reason to exclude the possibility that he dealt with multiple issues too. Thus, Paul may have addressed both a very specific practical arrangement, between himself and Philemon (known as κοινωνία, documented in many of the letter's formal aspects) *and* the ideal construction of the Christian community (as a spiritual κοινωνία of the members in the faith, mentioned towards the beginning of the letter). If, then, we take seriously the contractual nature of most of the text in front of us *and* Paul's theological construction of the community of believers as a partnership referred to in verse 6, we must abandon the notion that an interpretation of the letter that identifies a practical, worldly partnership arrangement between Paul and Philemon excludes or is in conflict with an interpretation of the epistle that recognises a spiritual conceptualisation of κοινωνία by the apostle (and *vice versa*). In the first instance, then, an attempt will be made to disentangle the practical arrangements between Paul and Philemon (and Onesimus) from the relational web in which the apostle places the two κοινωνία-'types' in *Philemon*.

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**24** Winter, Philemon (see n. 23), following J.P. Sampley, Pauline Partnership in Christ: Christian Community and Commitment in the Light of Roman Law, Philadelphia 1980, Ch. 4. Note, however, that Winter (following Sampley) misunderstands a number of technical aspects concerning, e.g., the responsibilities of the partners (which she wrongly assumes to be equal: cf. note 20 above).
**25** For a summary of the criticism launched at Winter see, e.g., Arzt-Grabner, Philemon (see n. 8), 61–62.

# 3 Practical arrangements

The most direct reference to the association between the apostle and Philemon is also the most direct indication of the two men's relationship to the letter's other main 'player' – Onesimus, i.e. the moment at which Paul challenges Philemon to honour their partnership agreement (Phlm 17 and 18): Εἰ οὖν με ἔχεις κοινωνόν, προσλαβοῦ αὐτὸν ὡς ἐμέ. εἰ δέ τι ἠδίκησέν σε ἢ ὀφείλει, τοῦτο ἐμοὶ ἐλλόγα. As is obvious, Paul's relationship to Onesimus, like his power over the man, is based upon the apostle's association in κοινωνία with Philemon – εἰ οὖν με ἔχεις κοινωνόν ... – i.e. it depends upon the partnership: without Philemon's membership of the κοινωνία, Paul's deliberations concerning Onesimus would be without foundation and motivation. Further, Paul offers a payment for a loss incurred, it seems, by Onesimus: εἰ δέ τι ἠδίκησέν σε ἢ ὀφείλει, τοῦτο ἐμοὶ ἐλλόγα. As stated above, members of a κοινωνία kept separate accounts in relation to the profits and losses of the association; and losses were either divided equally or as per agreement amongst the members. The practical nature of the arrangement is self-evident in this mention of charges and transfers.[26]

Paul's offer to have any (potentially outstanding) debts owed to Philemon with regard to Onesimus charged to his account (alone) is remarkable for two reasons. First, because by doing so Paul reinforces the notion that the actions of Onesimus are subject to the partnership agreement – for otherwise the link created by Paul between the κοινωνία, Onesimus and the (possible) debts, lacks motivation. Put differently, Paul first stresses the obligations of the κοινωνοί (Phlm 17), thus moving the discussion firmly into the context of the κοινωνία between the apostle and Philemon, only to offer immediately afterwards what is above and beyond his own obligations as a κοινωνός (Phlm 18), making the satisfaction of the agreed terms by his κοινωνός look minor by comparison. Thus, and second, the debate over Onesimus' status can be settled: the man's name as well as the scrap over his services between Paul and Philemon hint at slave status;[27] but the fact that his actions are a matter of debate between the κοινωνοί demonstrates that Onesimus

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**26** It is irrelevant for the argument here presented how many members the κοινωνία had (or if Paul was the sole author of *Philemon*). For reasons of analytical clarity alone, my focus is on (just) Paul and Philemon.

**27** 'Onesimus' is a well-documented slave name in the ancient world, only rarely attested without ambiguity for persons of freeborn status, as the evidence from Rome demonstrates: H. Solin, Die stadtrömischen Sklavennamen. Ein Namenbuch, 3 vols., Stuttgart 1996, II: 465–467; idem, Die griechischen Personennamen in Rom. Ein Namenbuch, 3 vols., Berlin/New York 2003, II: 986–993 (with III: 1458 and 1467).

was a contribution to the κοινωνία – which is only possible if he was a slave.[28] Structurally speaking, Paul's logic behind verse 17 can by summarised as: 1) association in κοινωνία between himself and Philemon; 2) an obligation to adhere to the partnership agreement by the κοινωνοί; 3) the consequences that arise from that obligation as regards one asset of the κοινωνία, i.e. the slave Onesimus.

Amongst Greeks, Romans, and Jews, slaves were regarded as chattels.[29] Slaves could, consequently, be included in the material contributions to a κοινωνία by its members. In the light of Paul's well documented resource management that was based on the soliciting of material assistance of various types from individuals and communities, it is probable that a division of contributions similar to that known from Philippi was in place with Philemon: at Philippi, material contributions to the association between the apostle and the local church were made by members of the local church, whilst Paul's share consisted, to all appearances, primarily if not exclusively in non-material contributions – time and

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**28** *Pace* A.D. Callahan, Paul's Epistle to Philemon (see n. 2), who argues against Onesimus' slave status by reading the references to slavery in *Philemon* in a figurative sense only (to be read with the reply by M.M. Mitchell, John Chrysostom on Philemon: A Second Look, HThR 88 [1995] 135–148, to be read, in turn, with Callahan's reply to Mitchell: John Chrysostom on Philemon: A Response to Margaret M. Mitchell, HThR 88 [1995] 149–156). Similarly, Winter's suggestion that the slave Onesimus was taken into the association as a member in his own right both ignores the fact that in the Greek and Roman legal systems, slaves had no contractual status except as their masters' agents *and* requires a reading of the verb προσλαμβάνειν in Phlm 17 that is not borne out by Paul's use of it in (the only) three other occurrences (Rom 14,1; 14,3; 15,7). See Winter, Philemon (see n. 23), 11–12 (followed by Arzt-Grabner with an additional layer of confusion over the roles of agent, partner, slave, and manager in: How to Deal with Onesimus?, in: Philemon in Perspective. Interpreting a Pauline Letter, ed. by D.F. Tolmie, Berlin/New York 2010, 113–142, based on his Philemon [see n. 8], 226–237). For sound discussion of the slave's contractual status in the Greek and Roman worlds see W.W. Buckland, The Roman Law of Slavery. The Condition of the Slave in Private Law from Augustus to Justinian, Cambridge 1908, 82–83; H. Klees, Sklavenleben im Klassischen Griechenland, Stuttgart 1998, 388–409; and S.C. Todd, The Shape of Athenian Law, Oxford 1993, 187. And for a correct reading of the verb προσλαμβάνειν in Phlm 17 see Schenk, Brief (see n. 6), 3474, and Wolter, Brief (see n. 16), 273.
**29** See, e.g., W.L. Westermann, The Slave Systems of Greek and Roman Antiquity, Philadelphia 1955, 12–22; Buckland, Law (see n. 28), 10–11; C. Hezser, Jewish Slavery in Antiquity, Oxford 2005, 55–68. The definition of slaves as chattels, i.e. as property, is not the only conceptualisation of slaves in the Graeco-Roman world. For a (re)assessment of the slave's property-definition in the classical Greek world see K. Vlassopoulos, Greek Slavery: From Domination to Property and Back Again, JHS 131 (2011) 115–130 (but note also the comments by E. Harris, Homer, Hesiod, and the "Origins" of Greek Slavery, REA 114 [2012] 345–366 on much modern scholarship's misunderstanding – since the publication of Orlando Patterson's *Slavery and Social Death* in 1982 – of the use of the [legal] concept of 'property' in the study of slavery).

service in particular.[30] A slave like Onesimus would make an ideal contribution to a κοινωνία – especially if the slave was not needed for other tasks. Paul's play on Onesimus' name opens in fact a window for an exploration of the slave's perceived 'uselessness' by his master (Phlm 11) – and his employment by Paul.

The rhetorical ploy of describing slaves as useless, lazy, idle and given to sleep, features prominently in the master narrative: Paul's play on Onesimus' name therefore exposes, by itself, what J. A. Harrill termed "Paul's participation and deep implication in ancient slavery".[31] In the past, and irrespective of the rhetoric of mastery, Onesimus' 'uselessness' has been cited by modern scholars as a reason against his use by Paul.[32] In addition, the fact that Onesimus, described as ἄχρηστος (and ἄχριστος) whilst a pagan (Phlm 11), had only become truly useful, εὔχρηστος (i.e. 'onesimus'), in Paul's words, once he had been converted to the Christian faith by the apostle (Phlm 16), made it difficult to explain the nature of the services rendered by Onesimus to Paul: they could not have been of a religious nature. But, in the context of a reading of Paul's relationship with Philemon as one that is framed by a practical κοινωνία arrangement, Onesimus' 'uselessness' actually recommends him as a contribution to the κοινωνία – and explains Paul's emphasis on the matter: such a 'useless' slave should not have left much of a hole in his master's household during his absence, whilst simultaneously constituting a (potentially highly) valuable asset to the κοινωνία, rendering the slave doubly 'useful' – for Philemon *and* Paul: σοὶ καὶ ἐμοί (Phlm 11).[33] The fact that the slave was not a Christian originally does not undermine this suggestion: clearly, in Onesimus, Philemon exploited a slave in his house who was not converted to

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**30** See Sampley, Partnership (see n. 24).

**31** J.A. Harrill, Slaves in the New Testament. Literary, Social, and Moral Dimensions, Minneapolis 2006, 16. The critique of Harrill's interpretation of elements of the master narrative in *Philemon* by Tobias Nicklas (The Letter to Philemon: A Discussion with J. Albert Harrill, in: Paul's World, ed. by S.E. Porter, Leiden/Boston 2008, 201–220) is based on a one-dimensional conception of Paul's thought which does not do justice to its complexity.

**32** E.g., Barclay, Paul (see n. 1), 164; B.M. Rapske, The Prisoner Paul in the Eyes of Onesimus, NTS 37 (1991) 187–203, esp. 188–189. I follow the widely accepted understanding of Paul's play on words in verse 11; for discussion of the meaning of the relevant terms (ἄχρηστος and εὔχρηστος) in contemporary papyri see Arzt-Grabner, Philemon (see n. 8), 206–215.

**33** Slaves in the ancient world were known to be subjected to seasonal labour demands, and a wide variety of jobs could be asked of them, whilst masters were known to rent or hire out slaves for certain periods, thereby allowing for the slaves' employment by someone other than themselves: e.g. (from a Roman context), Columella, De re rustica 12,46,1 and 12,50,1; Ulpian *D* 14,3,13.pr and 33,7,12,8.

the Christian faith even after he himself had become a Christian.[34] The provision of Onesimus to render services to Paul should therefore be understood as an indication of the slave's employment by the apostle for tasks of a secular nature – until the slave's conversion to the faith: after Onesimus had become a Christian, Paul is able to recommend the slave for future tasks *within* the Church.[35] It is in fact telling that Paul emphasises the slave's potential for services of a religious nature in his letter to Philemon – thereby demonstrating that the slave had not previously been employed for tasks associated with the ministry as such.[36]

Onesimus' (original) function vis-à-vis Paul must, then, be sought in the secular aspects of the goal for which the apostle entered into κοινωνία with Philemon. A circumstantial clue for this is given at the beginning of the letter where Paul describes himself as being imprisoned (Phlm 1) and, in the main part of the letter, as having converted Onesimus to the Christian faith whilst he, Paul, was in chains (Phlm 10). Modern scholarship has been keen to see in this a reference to a real imprisonment: "Paulus spielt damit auf seine reale und aktuelle Gefangenschaftssituation an".[37] The notion that Paul was imprisoned when he wrote the letter is supported by the fact that a change in language between verse 13 and verse 14 reflects a change in his plans: as Winter has shown, verse 13 "expresses an ongoing plan whereas verse 14 expresses a single act of resolve".[38] A real, and by definition unexpected, imprisonment renders the two references to an imprisonment (in verses 1 and 10) and the change of plan behind the change of language (in verses 13 and 14) intelligible: whatever Paul's plans had been in detail, they were affected, negatively, by his detention. As is evident from the letter, Onesimus was with Paul during the apostle's incarceration, but, unlike Paul, not himself imprisoned. It follows that the slave functioned as Paul's link with the outside world, including – as the very existence of *Philemon* documents – the

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**34** Arzt-Grabner, Philemon (see n. 8), 96–97 suggests that Onesimus was either an ordinary domestic slave or an agricultural slave, if he was not a messenger or craftsman: I can find no evidence that would allow speculation over the nature of Onesimus' tasks for his master Philemon.
**35** The issue over Onesimus' tasks before his conversion, and its repercussions on our view of his use by Paul, are summarised in Bauer, Paulus (see n. 7), 116.
**36** The idea that Onesimus was sent by the church in Philemon's house (or some of its members) to Paul to assist him with tasks that were directly concentrated on the ministry – which underlies Winter's argument in: Philemon (see n. 23) – does not make any sense in the context of a conversion of the slave only after he had been with Paul 'for a while'.
**37** Arzt-Grabner, Philemon (see n. 8), 71. Just as with the apostle's usage of the term κοινωνία, Paul does not separate the reference to his imprisonment from his thought and action for the faith (cf. Arzt-Grabner, *op. cit.*, 71).
**38** Winter, Philemon (see n. 23), 8–9.

delivery of messages and letters.[39] In the light of the potentially life-threatening conditions of imprisonment, it is moreover tempting to assume that Onesimus looked after Paul more generally during the apostle's imprisonment:[40] his task may have been similar to that associated with Epaphroditus on a different occasion (Phil 2,25–30).[41] Yet, it is unlikely in my view that Paul would have entered into a κοινωνία with Philemon, and that Philemon would have given his slave Onesimus into the κοινωνία as a contribution, for the particular (i.e. sole) purpose of supporting Paul whilst in prison. We must remember that the change in plan, only just discussed, was most probably *caused* by Paul's imprisonment. Consequently, Paul's imprisonment demanded a deviation from the original undertaking and schedule that was framed by the κοινωνία arrangement between himself and Philemon – and, hence, Onesimus' tasks within this κοινωνία arrangement as well as the length of his service for Paul.

Paul is in fact only too well aware that Onesimus 'was away from (Philemon) for a while' (Phlm 15) – longer, perhaps, than Philemon had bargained for when he entered into the κοινωνία with Paul. It has repeatedly been suggested that Paul's admission as regards the slave's separation from Philemon indicates a lack of (prior) agreement between Paul and Philemon concerning Onesimus' absence from Philemon's house – or indeed between Philemon and Onesimus; and that, therefore, Paul here labours hard to create a positive perception of this separa-

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**39**  In the early Church, letters were an important means of community and network building, often carried by Christians who held lowish positions in the community, as the example of Paulinus of Nola makes clear (cf. S. Mratschek, Der Briefwechsel des Paulinus von Nola. Kommunikation und soziale Konflikte zwischen christlichen Intellektuellen, Göttingen 2002). The similarities with the social aspects and contexts of Paul's correspondence may not be incidental, but the result of a specific understanding, by members of the early Church, of the role model provided by the apostle.

**40**  Roman prisons provided only in the most minimalist fashion for prisoners; hunger was a permanent feature for anyone interned. Prisoners were therefore highly dependent on the support of friends and family – which is strikingly borne out in Cicero's invective against Verres (II in Verrem 5,117–119) and in the story of Paul's success during his imprisonment in Jerusalem in persuading the procurator Felix to grant his friends full access so that they should not 'be prevented from attending to his needs' (Acts 24,23). For a modern account of food provisioning in Roman prisons see J.-U. Krause, Gefängnisse im römischen Reich, Stuttgart 1996, 279–283. The notion that a prisoner's support by friends and family indicates a loose house arrest, as advanced by Winter (Philemon [see n. 23], 3) on the example of Paul, lacks evidential support.

**41**  The differences in language between Paul's description of Epaphroditus' and Onesimus' services have been used to argue that Onesimus could not have provided services to Paul during his imprisonment; instead, Onesimus would have been used by Paul for the ministry (only), probably to replace the (Christian) Philemon in his duties for the gospel. See Schenk, Brief (see n. 6), 3469 for a summary of this view; and the comments made above in note 36.

tion. Wolter writes that "(i)n V 15 versucht Paulus, der Trennung zwischen Onesimus und Philemon einen positiven Sinn für den Letztgenannten abzugewinnen"; and, he concludes: "Dieses Bemühen läßt darauf schließen, daß die Trennung nicht in beiderseitigem Einvernehmen bzw. daß sie ohne Philemons Zustimmung erfolgte".[42] But all we can say with certainty is that Paul is aware that Philemon is uncomfortable with the slave's (sustained) absence from his house at the point when Paul puts pen to paper; we cannot exclude on the basis of verse 15 that Philemon could have charged Onesimus with work for the apostle (which may have required the slave's presence in Paul's company for some time). As Wolter emphasises, Paul chooses a neutral term to describe the slave's separation from Philemon – ἐχωρίσθη.[43] Moreover, it is notable that Paul gives unambiguous prominence to the duration of Onesimus' absence from Philemon's house – πρὸς ὥραν – which takes us back to the change in plan, implied in the previous two verses, that resulted from Paul's imprisonment and that caused, plainly, a delay to the original undertaking. Given that, as shown above, Paul's authority over the slave arose from the κοινωνία arrangement between himself and Philemon, the crux of the dispute between Paul and Philemon must be sought in the timing and duration of Onesimus' separation from Philemon, rather than in his absence from Philemon's house as such. And Paul's imprisonment offers a cogent explanation for a prolongation of the slave's separation from Philemon (if not a tacit change in tasks – especially with regard to Paul's altered needs as a prisoner). The sequence of, first, the slave's absence from Philemon's house (and his presence with Paul) to assist with a goal mutually agreed by the κοινωνοί, followed, then, by a delay in the slave's return to Philemon, fits both Paul's argumentation and the parts of the letter's background that we can reconstruct – i.e. precisely Onesimus' presence in Paul's company; and the fact that the slave was not, originally, a Christian.

J.J. Meggitt demonstrated that "Paul's *modus operandi* did not allow him to combine his labour fully with his ministry".[44] It made therefore good sense for Paul to seek the assistance of others in terms of day-to-day services as often and as regularly as possible: the services of a slave or slaves to assist with everyday errands and communications would have been an ideal form of support and, whilst ultimately benefitting the spread of the gospel, not in itself of a religious nature. Paul's specific request to Philemon – sent from the prison cell – could not be clearer in this context, and demonstrates further the type of role allocated

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**42** Wolter, Brief (see n. 16), 269.

**43** Cf. Wolter, Brief (see n. 16), 269: "Paulus [verwendet] hier den neutralen Begriff *chôrizein* (,trennen, entfernen')".

**44** J.J. Meggitt, Paul, Poverty and Survival, Edinburgh 1998, 76.

Onesimus in what Meggitt has called Paul's "survival strategy" (Phlm 13):[45] ὃν ἐγὼ ἐβουλόμην πρὸς ἐμαυτὸν κατέχειν, ἵνα ὑπὲρ σοῦ μοι διακονῇ ἐν τοῖς δεσμοῖς τοῦ εὐαγγελίου. Whatever Onesimus' precise tasks before Paul's incarceration, the apostle benefitted from (and advocated vis-à-vis Philemon a continuation of) the slave's services during his imprisonment. In other words, Paul here asks for – '*um*' – Onesimus, not on behalf of – '*für*' – the slave.[46]

# 4 Overlapping partnerships

Despite Paul's request 'for' Onesimus, the existence of *Philemon* makes it plain that Paul actually returns the slave to Philemon, letter in hand. Nevertheless, Paul's recourse to the κοινωνία in *Philemon* demonstrates that the apostle saw the association's goal as unfulfilled, and the κοινωνοί bound by its terms: the return of the slave is not an expression of capitulation on Paul's part, i.e. the slave's return is not a sign of the dissolution of the partnership agreement between Paul and Philemon. In Paul's understanding of their practical partnership arrangement, the κοινωνία created a technical compulsion for Philemon concerning Paul's request for the continued use of the slave – even if Paul suggests that he did not wish to make use of the power arising from the κοινωνία (Phlm 14).[47] But, as has been noted repeatedly, Paul does not have direct recourse to other war-

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**45** Meggitt, Paul (see n. 44), 163 (and generally 75–79 and 155–175).

**46**  This fundamental realisation was already core to the thesis of J. Knox, Philemon among the Letters of Paul, Chicago 1935, 19–24 (which, however, assumes a number of unsupported hypotheses, e.g. that Archippus was the master of Onesimus). The reservation expressed vis-à-vis Knox' thesis by Arzt-Grabner (Philemon [see n. 8], 101–102) on the basis that παρακαλέω περί (Phlm 10) is only otherwise attested with regard to a conceptual value or a thing, ignores *inter alia* the definition of a slave precisely as a 'thing'.

**47**  A similar scenario has been sketched by B.J. Capper (Paul's Dispute with Philippi: Understanding Paul's Argument in Phil 1–2 from his Thanks in 4.10–20, ThZ 49 [1993] 193–214) for the situation at Philippi. Like Capper, I would not exclude the possibility that Paul's imprisonment caused a dispute amongst the κοινωνοί concerning the continuation of the κοινωνία; and that, in the case of *Philemon*, the apostle's imprisonment was seen by Philemon as terminating the κοινωνία, leading him to expect Onesimus to be returned to him. If that had been so, Paul's emphasis on his imprisonment (as well as on that of others) in Philemon cannot be understood as evidence for the apostle's undisputed pre-eminence and power, as Capper argues for *Philippians*; rather, it must be seen as an attempt by Paul to positively mark out and actively define imprisonment as a part of the contractual arrangement guiding the missionary work – and is thus evidence for the apostle's need to negotiate his power vis-à-vis the members of his churches, i.e. for the flexibility and potential weakness (rather than the strength) of Paul's position.

rants for (his) authority of the types employed elsewhere:[48] clearly, to foreground the κοινωνία was the apostle's strongest claim, based on the contractual obligations of the κοινωνοί to the κοινωνία of the kind here discussed.[49]

If we furthermore recall Paul's mention of the partnership in the faith earlier in the letter – ἡ κοινωνία τῆς πίστεως (Phlm 6) – we can immediately see how Philemon is in fact doubly challenged by Paul: for the practical, specific partnership arrangement that has caused the issue that led to the composition of the epistle arose from a much greater obligation that resulted from a spiritual partnership, i.e. from what Wolter termed "eine[] durch gemeinsame Teilhabe [am Glauben] zustande gekommene[] Gemeinschaft".[50] Put differently, κοινωνία B (the practical, voluntary association) between Paul and Philemon would not have existed without κοινωνία A (the fellowship in the faith) shared by Paul and his Christian communities. Naturally, it would have been substantially more difficult for Philemon than for us to separate analytically, in front of the church in his house, the various layers of compulsion that arose from the different, yet overlapping partnerships; and it may, for all we know, have been impossible for the other church members to differentiate between these at all. We must remember that the letter, as stated earlier on, was constructed with different communication layers in mind – and that the public reading of the letter would have added force to its content.[51] If the nature and details of the practical, specific partnership arrangement between Paul and Philemon were not apparent to the other church members in Philemon's house, they might have understood the apostle's challenge to Philemon only within the context of the κοινωνία τῆς πίστεως.

Paul's 'confusion' of the two types of partnerships in *Philemon* may moreover constitute an attempt at a conceptualisation visible also elsewhere in his correspondence. In the context of the collection for the Christians in Jerusalem, for instance, "the practical character of *koinōnia*", as J.D.G. Dunn put it, is paramount: the shared participation in the spirit "should come to expression in the 'sharing' of relative prosperity in 'shared' ministry".[52] In *Philemon*, the sharing

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**48**  For discussion of the warrants for authority used by Paul elsewhere see W.A. Meeks, The First Urban Christians. The Social World of the Apostle Paul, New Haven/London 1983, 136–139.

**49**  In a *societas*, the consensus of all *socii* is required for the continuation of the association (cf. Kaser, Privatrecht [see n. 18], 479 [²575]). If that was the case also in a κοινωνία, Paul's request to Philemon in verse 17 (εἰ οὖν με ἔχεις κοινωνόν …) may moreover be an expression of the apostle's concern for the continuation of the association as such.

**50**  Wolter, Brief (see n. 16), 277.

**51**  The significance of the public reading is well discussed in C. Frilingos, "For my Child, Onesimus": Paul and Domestic Power in Philemon, JBL 119 (2000) 91–104, esp. 99–100.

**52**  Dunn, Theology (see n. 17), 709.

of relative prosperity that follows from the shared participation in the spirit is expressed – as concerns Philemon – in the practical κοινωνία arrangement between the apostle and Philemon, i.e. it is mirrored and exemplified in Philemon's calling to what E. Ziebarth called a "Vereinigung mehrerer Personen auf Zeit, und zwar zur Erreichung eines bestimmten Zwecks".[53] "In each case", writes Dunn with regard to the Jerusalem collection, "the thought is of the act or experience of sharing, rather than of a condition or action created by the term qualified", i.e. "the actual taking part in the collection, not the generosity which prompts it (2Cor 8,4)".[54] In *Philemon*, it too is the actual taking part that signifies Philemon's sharing in the spirit and faith, here in the form of a membership in a κοινωνία aimed at the pooling of resources for a specific goal, located in this world (even if directed at a future world), and of a temporary nature. And just as the members of *that* partnership were subject to the contractual obligations that Paul alludes to in verses 14 and 17, so, too, is the partnership in the faith constructed around the concept of (multiple) duties or dues – for it is modelled, as stated above, on the private voluntary association.[55] As on other occasions, in his usage of κοινωνία in *Philemon* outwith a concrete practical context, Paul makes use of a term and concept known from everyday life in order to describe and 'design' an aspect of his theological construction of the Christian community, i.e. what has been termed succinctly "einen Vorgang oder einen Sachverhalt innerhalb der Sinnwelt des Glaubens".[56]

All the same, the 'confusion' created by Paul frames and reinforces Philemon's obligations as a κοινωνός in the partnership to which he gave Onesimus as an asset. If seen from this angle, it is not surprising that Paul concludes his appeal to Philemon on an assertive note: in verse 21, the apostle contends that he is '(c)onfident of (Philemon's) obedience […] knowing that (he) will do even more' than what Paul demands of him on this occasion – further contributions to the κοινωνία (of both 'types') not excluded. But, here, as in the case of the collection for the Christians in Jerusalem, "(t)he resulting picture is not", as Dunn put it, "of a Paul striding confidently forward, riding roughshod over feelings and views of others"; rather, we see Paul carefully manoeuvring a delicate issue concerning a matter that he regarded as of great importance and "conscious of the need to

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**53** Full reference in note 18 above.
**54** Dunn, Theology (see n. 17), 561.
**55** Wolter, Brief (see n. 16), 273. Philemon of course also 'owes' his faith to Paul, making the relationship of duties and dues that underlie Phlm 18 even more complex (cf. Arzt-Grabner, Philemon [n. 8], 95).
**56** M. Wolter, Paulus. Ein Grundriss seiner Theologie, Neukirchen-Vluyn 2011, 94.

carry people with him, uncertain as to various aspects of it, and nervous about the final outcome."[57] How Philemon was to respond to Paul's request concerning Onesimus was not a *fait accompli*.

# 5  Joint ownership

The identification of the practical partnership arrangement between Paul and Philemon carries legal repercussions concerning Paul's relationship to Onesimus. In its original form, the private voluntary association was one of ownership. As A. Biscardi described the general situation in his survey of joint ownership in Attic law: "Tutte le volte che due o più persone abbiano interesse a mettere in commune qualcosa e si accordino per soddisfare a codesto interesse, nasce un rapporto di comproprietà."[58] At Rome, too, the *socii* became joint owners of the resources pooled into the association, the *societas omnium bonorum*. But, whilst at Rome, as a result of the growth of the Roman empire and, hence, the increase in the volume of trade and socio-economic interaction, the *societas omnium bonorum* was joined in the course of the Republic by another that was profit-oriented, described by M. Kaser as a formless getting together of capitalists for the purposes of joint trading for which the joint ownership of resources was not an essential feature,[59] Attic law maintained its insistence on the idea of shared ownership with regard to the pooling of resources by two or more persons even at the height of the Athenian Empire (when trade and exchange with non-Athenians was at

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**57**  Dunn, Theology (see n. 17), 711. See also the comments in note 47 above.

**58**  A. Biscardi, Sul regime della comproprietà in diritto attico, in: idem, Scritti di diritto greco, Milan 1999, 23–74, here 42. For a general overview of the development of the concept of shared property in the (classical) Greek world see A. Kränzlein, Eigentum und Besitz im griechischen Recht des fünften und vierten Jahrhunderts v. Chr., Berlin, 1963, 130–137.

**59**  Kaser, Privatrecht (see n. 18), 478 ($^{2}$574): "formloser Zusammentritt von Kapitalisten zu gemeinschaftlichen Handelsunternehmungen". The oldest reference given by Kaser to document this development is to Cato's De agricultura (144,13 and 145,8). Members of this type of association need not be Roman citizens, and *socii* can be found as groups of slave traders, bankers, or men of business in general. Moreover, unlike members of a *societas omnium bonorum*, they need not enjoy shared ownership over the association's resources: the legal concept of shared use – *quoad usum* – made it possible for *socii* to share in the use (as opposed to actual ownership) of the association's resources. As Kaser, *op. cit.*, 479 ($^{2}$574) put it: "Ein Gesellschaftsvermögen, das im Miteigentum der socii nach Bruchteilen steht, ist für die societas nicht wesentlich. Es ist zwar für die soc. omnium bonorum als Nachfolgerin des alten consortium typisch, nicht aber für die Erwerbsgesellschaften. Wo es besteht, richten sich seine Verhältnisse nach den Grundsätzen für die communio".

an all-time high). There exists moreover no evidence that other or later Greek legal systems diverged from this rule. Although Paul was in any case not a profit-oriented trader, it is important to correct at this stage a widespread scholarly misapprehension that underlies Winter's interpretation of the association between the apostle and Philemon as (a Roman) *societas*. Thus, it is typically taken for granted that Roman law (and, by extension, culture) was, as F. Lyall put it, "the law that Paul's readers would take to be the reference".[60] But it is more likely that Paul's dealings with Philemon were framed by Greek customs and law – if we assume, as most do, that Philemon was at home in Asia Minor.[61]

Although a part of the Roman empire since 129 BCE, the province of Asia was far from being fully Romanised in the mid-first century CE, with many cities and their inhabitants going about their daily business much as they had done before; in self-governing cities, the local municipal authority was organised according to Greek models and traditions, and the dominant citizen body was Greek. The same applied to legal matters, for Rome quite deliberately allowed the cities of its eastern provinces to maintain much of their own legal systems: in the context of jurisdiction, for instance, regulation of private law disputes between their own citizens was left, at least in the first instance, to the local courts.[62] In addition

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**60** F. Lyall, Roman Law and the Writings of Paul – the Slave and the Freedman, NTS 17 (1970) 73–79.

**61** For discussion of the location of Philemon's home see generally W.A. Meeks, The Moral World of the First Christians, Philadelphia 1986, 26–29; and Schenk, Brief (see n. 6), 3480–3483. See also Arzt-Grabner, Philemon (see n. 8), 78–83 for a brief onomastic analysis of the names mentioned in the letter. For an overview of the socio-political changes that Roman rule brought to urban centres in first century CE Asia Minor see S. Mitchell, Land, Men, and Gods in Asia Minor. Volume 1: The Celts in Anatolia and the Impact of Roman Rule, Oxford 1993, 198–211; and (still) A.H.M. Jones, The Greek City from Alexander to Justinian, Oxford 1940, 129–146.170–191, and idem, The Cities of the Eastern Roman Provinces, Oxford ²1971, reprint Amsterdam 1983, 28–94 (for the province of Asia).

**62** The most succinct description is still that by L. Mitteis, Reichsrecht und Volksrecht in den östlichen Provinzen des römischen Kaiserreichs, Leipzig 1891, 91–92: "In Hinsicht auf das Privatrecht zeigt sich dieser Geist der Mässigung darin, dass das Landrecht der unterworfenen Gemeinden nicht aufgehoben, vielmehr seine Fortdauer ausdrücklich anerkannt wurde. Es ist bei der Einrichtung einer Provinz einer der grundlegenden Acte, dass den Provinzialgemeinden der Bestand ihrer früheren Gesetze und Einrichtungen, wenn auch unter der Aufsicht und dem beständigen Eingriffsrecht des Statthalters, zugesichert wird [...] Die Provinzialstadt hat zwar keine selbstständige Gerichtsbarkeit, wohl aber hat sie eigene Gerichte, welche vermöge Concession der Provinzialverfassung die grosse Mehrzahl der kleineren Rechtsstreitigkeiten in erster Instanz entscheiden, vorausgesetzt, dass es sich um einen Streit zwischen ihren eigenen Bürgern, vielleicht auch um ein limitirtes Streitobject handelt." See also the more specific comments on provincial law pertaining to slaves by Mitteis, *op. cit.*, 71–72.100.

to differences affecting the application of legal systems, there existed moreover clear differences in the legal conceptualisation of paternal powers between Rome and the peoples of its eastern provinces that had a bearing on the social construction of the household and its members:[63] the Roman Empire in the mid 1ˢᵗ century CE, from Britannia to Syria, was not a homogeneous unit in which Roman norms and customs prevailed.

If, then, we locate Philemon's household in Asia Minor, we need to start from the assumption that Philemon and the church in his house – the intended recipients of Paul's letter – were unlikely to take Roman concepts as their natural point of reference; and neither would Paul – as the letter's author – in a communication to *this* community.[64] Put differently, anyone wishing to interact with Philemon successfully would have needed to take account of the man's and his home's Greek culture; and there is little reason to think that Paul would not have been able to do so.[65] It makes good sense, therefore, to assume – unless and until better evidence or arguments for the location of Philemon's household outwith a Greek cultural context become available – that Philemon conceptualised his association with Paul in Greek (legal) terminology and thought, and the particular arrangement as κοινωνία (rather than *societas*). Paul's explicit reference to the

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**63**  See Mitteis, Reichsrecht, (see n. 62), 209–217. There was, logically, no such thing as "the first century Mediterranean family and household" (Frilingos, Onesimus [see n. 51], 94).

**64**  It is notable that *Philemon* is not addressed to a community named in accordance with Roman provincial naming practice. Paul's use of this practice elsewhere has been employed to argue that he "created a self-consciousness among the converts of being part of an empire-wide movement with local outposts called *ekklēsiai*" (M.M. Mitchell, Gentile Christianity, in: eadem and F.M. Young [eds.], The Cambridge History of Christianity. Vol. 1: Origins to Constantine, Cambridge 2006, 103–124, here 109), even if it is still subject to debate "(w)hether Paul saw his mission as a deliberate challenge or alternative to the Roman *imperium*" (ibid., n. 35). It is, however, not immediately obvious what alternative terminology Paul could have employed in the mid 1ˢᵗ century CE, i.e. two to three generations after the introduction of Roman provincial terminology had been completed.

**65**  On Paul's social and educational make-up see generally the substantial survey of many crucial aspects of his biography by K. Haacker, Zum Werdegang des Apostels Paulus. Biographische Daten und ihre theologische Relevanz, ANRW II.26.2 (1995) 815–938. For particular aspects of his education and cultural pedigree, including his familiarity with things Greek as well as his 'peculiar' place amongst Diaspora Jews, see, e.g., W.D. Davies, Paul: From the Jewish Point of View, in: The Cambridge History of Judaism. Vol. 3: The Early Roman Period, ed. by W. Horbury et al., Cambridge 1999, 678–730; J.D.G. Dunn, Who Did Paul Think He Was? A Study of Jewish-Christian Identity, NTS 45 (1999) 174–193; J.M.G. Barclay, Paul among Diaspora Jews: Anomaly or Apostate?, JSNT 60 (1995) 89–120. See also the discussion by D.G. Horrell (From ἀδελφοί to οἶκος Θεοῦ: Social Transformation in Pauline Christianity, JBL 120 [2001] 293–311) of Paul's familiarity with both Jewish and Greek concepts pertaining to the household and the family.

κοινωνία in verse 18 can then be taken at (its Greek) 'face value' (rather than as a Hellenised rendering of a Roman concept and practice).[66] The consequences of this realisation for other interpretations of the epistle from a Roman perspective (most notably P. Lampe's reading of the epistle in the light of the Digest) are equally self-evident: they can quietly be pigeon-holed.[67]

Within the context of the (Greek) κοινωνία, then, the material contributions of κοινωνοί became, as stated above, commonly owned property – regardless of the goal for which the κοινωνία was set up. Consequently, members of a κοινωνία must be regarded as joint owners of the goods contributed by each κοινωνός. Given that slaves were regarded as chattels, such co-operative or joint ownership could include the ownership of slaves.[68] It is notable in this context – as has repeatedly been pointed out – that Paul writes in some parts of the letter "als wäre er selbst der Herr des Sklaven Onesimus."[69] Yet, scholars have been reluctant to understand the apostle's demeanour in a direct sense. But in the context of a practical partnership arrangement, with all the trimmings of Biscardi's 'comproprietà', this is precisely what explains best Paul's comportment: for by contributing Onesimus, the slave, to the κοινωνία, Philemon made Paul in effect (and *de iure*) joint owner of the slave. Thus, the letter is a silent witness of the co-ownership of the slave Onesimus by the κοινωνοί, Philemon – and Paul, and, in turn, of the apostle's active involvement in slavery through personal slave owner-

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**66** Logically, Onesimus should not be regarded as a Roman slave, as implied by Arzt-Grabner, Philemon (see n. 8), 96–97 in his discussion of the labour tasks of Roman slaves. This does not question that Paul may have held Roman citizenship or that he was familiar with Roman traditions and practices, from legal issues to provincial terminology: on the modern discussion of Paul's familiarity with things Roman and the question of his Roman citizenship, see the survey by Haacker, Werdegang (see n. 65), 831–847. The recent contribution by E. Weber (Das römische Bürgerrecht des Apostels Paulus, Tyche 27 [2012] 193–207), does not add anything new.

**67** P. Lampe, Keine "Sklavenflucht" des Onesimus, ZNW 76 (1985) 135–137. The trend continues in the 21st century without new arguments or evidence for the underlying premise: see, e.g., a number of contributions in J.P. Sampley (ed.), Paul in the Greco-Roman World. A Handbook, Harrisburg etc. 2003, esp. (in order of appearance in the volume) D.L. Blach, Paul, Families and Households, 258–292; L. M. White, Paul and *Pater Familias*, 457–487; and P. Lampe, Paul, Patrons and Clients, 488–523.

**68** The joint ownership of slaves is one of the most often attested forms of shared ownership over 'things' in our Athenian evidence (cf. Biscardi, Sul regime della comproprietà [see n. 58], 30). The most famous case of (alleged) co-ownership of a slave in the Greek world must be that of Lysias IV ('On a wound by premeditation'). Joint ownership of slaves is also documented in our sources for Roman and Jewish slavery (cf. Kaser, Privatrecht [see n. 18], 124 [²142]; Hezser, Slavery [see n. 29], 290).

**69** Arzt-Grabner, Philemon (see n. 8), 246.

ship – going far beyond the present realisation of the level of Paul's participation and implication in the slave system.[70]

# 6  Pauline mastery

The juridical structures behind the contractual arrangements of the κοινωνία that made Paul joint owner of the slave Onesimus are plainly evident on a number of occasions in the letter – which demonstrates that Paul fully understood the legal implications of the κοινωνία arrangement and their social ramifications. Thus, whilst renouncing Onesimus' service to his person on the occasion captured in the letter, Paul returns the slave to Philemon asking the latter to accept the new brother in the faith ὡς ἐμέ (Phlm 17). If we regard Paul as the slave master that he was according to the κοινωνία arrangement, the meaning becomes clear: the slave Onesimus is to take on the apostle's role in the apostle's place, i.e. to act as his agent, and Philemon is to accept him precisely as Paul's agent – 'receive him as you would me' (Phlm 17), i.e. *as* Paul.

In the Greek world, just as in the Roman world, masters regularly employed slaves as their agents to conduct business of whatever type on their behalf; and the same holds true for the Jewish world. These slave agents were understood as (physical) extensions of their masters on whose behalf they acted. As a tannaitic ruling attributed to R. Meir put it strikingly for the Jewish slave master: 'the hand of a slave is like the hand of his master' (cf., e.g., y. Qid. 1:3, 60a); it is, in other words, an extended part of the same body.[71] Paul quite deliberately reinforces

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**70**  I think it conceivable that the same type of contractual arrangement put Paul in masterly control over Epaphroditus in Philippi – and that the latter was employed in a very similar manner to Onesimus. 'Epaphroditus' is a well-documented slave name in the ancient world, which was rarely carried by persons of free(-born) status, as the evidence from Rome demonstrates (cf. Solin, Sklavennamen [see n. 27], II: 281–283; idem, Personennamen [see n. 27], I: 343–348). I do not understand why Meeks, Christians (see n. 48), 55–63, excludes discussion of the name Epaphroditus from his prosopographic analysis of individuals mentioned in Paul's letters. See also note 41 above.

**71**  For discussion see Hezser, Slavery (see n. 29), 277–279 (and 280–282 for a general overview of the use of slaves as agents amongst Jews) and eadem, Slaves and Slavery in Rabbinic and Roman Law, in: eadem (ed.), Rabbinic Law in its Roman and Near Eastern Context, Tübingen 2003, 133–176, esp. 153–158. The Greeks, like the Romans, did not develop a concept of business agency amongst free people but typically employed slaves in order to acquire without direct (personal) representation (cf. E. Harris, Were there Business Agents in Ancient Greece? The Evidence of some Lead Letters, in: The Letter. Law, State, Society and the Epistolary Format in the Ancient

the bodily conceptualisation of Onesimus' agency in verse 16: there, Philemon is informed that the slave is not any longer like a slave, but above a slave, a beloved brother, to both him and Philemon, both in the flesh and in the Lord (ἐν σαρκὶ καὶ ἐν κυρίῳ). The description of the slave's being 'in the flesh' is, then, an allusion to the services provided by the slave to his master(s).[72] In this role, the slave functions as a physical means, i.e. a chattel, to help sustain one's livelihood: Paul here defines Onesimus not just in rhetorical terms as a 'thing' (as Harrill argued forcefully),[73] but also in real terms – and 'in the flesh', i.e. according to the precepts of the 'old' world.

It is likely that Paul's involvement with the peculiar institution in the form of personal slave ownership was as much framed and influenced by standard contemporary practices and expectations as it was shaped by his own distinct thought and *modus operandi*. Paul would have been familiar with a number of examples of notable master-slave relationships, be they Jewish, Greek or Roman, that provided ready role-models – whether fictional or real – for a close (working) relationship between master and slave at the highest political, intellectual and religious level. Zoilos, for instance, the great benefactor of the Carian city of Aphrodisias, most likely gained the trust and attention of the emperor Augustus as the latter's slave, and, once manumitted, put his enormous wealth into what was probably his home town.[74] And whether or not Paul was educated by Gamaliel, he would have known of Tbi, Gamaliel's manservant and travelling companion, the Jewish equivalent to Cicero's Tiro, remembered in our sources for his unusual erudition and piety.[75] These examples do not prove that Paul saw Onesimus in a similar vein; nor does the argument here presented depend on them. But they

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World, ed. by U. Yiftach, Wiesbaden 2012, 105–124; and A. Watson, Roman Slave Law, Baltimore/ London 1987, 105–106). The structural repercussions of this for the employment of slaves in certain roles and the resulting 'career paths' are well brought out on a Roman example in L. Schumacher, On the Status of Private *actores*, *dispensatores* and *vilici*, in: By the Sweat of your Brow. Roman Slavery in its Socio-Economic Setting, ed. by U. Roth, London 2010, 31–47.

**72** Phlm 16 is then to be added to the (short) list of the Pauline usages of the term that is fundamentally neutral in meaning as, e.g., in Rom 11,14 or 1Cor 6,16. For further references and discussion see Dunn, Theology (see n. 17), 64.

**73** Harrill, Slaves (see n. 31), 15–16.

**74** On the career of Zoilos see J. Reynolds, Aphrodisias and Rome. Documents from the Excavation of the Theatre at Aphrodisias conducted by Prof. Kenan T. Erim, together with some related Texts, London 1982, 156–164.

**75** E.g., Sukk. 2.1; Pes. 7.2. For discussion see S.J.D. Cohen, The Rabbi in Second-Century Jewish Society, in: The Cambridge History of Judaism, ed. by Horbury *et al.* (see n. 65), 922–990, esp. 945–946; and, at greater length, Hezser, Slavery (see n. 29), 155–162. For Cicero's appreciation of Tiro see, e.g., Cicero, ad fam. 42.

demonstrate the availability of such models for the master-slave relationship of which *Philemon* may have left us but a pale and cryptic semblance.

Beyond Onesimus' use as Paul's (slave) agent, the apostle's understanding of his role as the slave's master is visible also in a quite different aspect mentioned in the letter – namely the issue of the potential debts owed to Philemon (Phlm 18). It is a well known fact that among the Greeks and the Romans, masters were liable for damages caused by their slaves. And amongst Jews, Pharisees and Sadducees expressed their differences concerning their views on slavery not least in legal terms; in particular, the masters' financial liabilities for damages caused by slaves was a matter of contention: "the Sadducees accept the responsibility of the master for damages done by his slave whereas the Pharisees stick to the letter of the Law and accept responsibility only for damages done by one's animal".[76] Even though the specific pedigree of Paul's training remains subject to debate – Hillelite or Shammaite – there is general agreement that Paul was "a cultured Pharisee trained in the Law" who showed "extreme devotion to the Law (Gal. 1:13ff; Phil. 3:6)" and who, moreover, "insisted on stricter standards for himself than for his followers and for the generality (1 Cor. 7:7–9; 9:5)".[77] Viewed from this perspective, Paul's seemingly unmotivated readiness to include discussion of potentially unfinished financial business concerning Onesimus in what is but a short letter shows him thinking like a slave master.[78] As Arzt-Grabner put it in his comparison with the papyrological evidence: "Paulus redet hier [= Phlm 18] so, als wäre er der Besitzer des Onesimus".[79] The recognition of Paul's actual ownership of the slave now explains why. But this need not imply, as Arzt-Grabner suggests, that Paul wrote "als wäre Philemon gar nicht mehr Herr des Onesimus", or that Paul assumed a liability that he need not have taken on, legally speaking.[80] Quite the contrary: as Philemon's κοινωνός, Paul carried legal responsibilities concerning Onesimus (as did Philemon); and his attitude to financial matters is in keeping with his obligations as a slave owner. But Paul's offer also illustrates his attitude that he, the apostle, should be subject to harsher rules than others – for the proposition to pick up the bill (all by himself) goes beyond both the Pharisaic interpretation of the (Jewish) law and the constraints put upon him by the

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**76**  G. Stemberger, The Sadducees – their History and Doctrines, in: The Cambridge History of Judaism, ed. by Horbury *et al*. (see n. 65), 428–443, here 437.
**77**  Davies, Paul (see n. 65), 687.690; and generally the contributions listed in note 65 above.
**78**  *Pace* Winter, Philemon (see n. 23), 5, following Sampley, Partnership (see n. 24), 81, who argued that Paul's mention of possible debts "is in anticipation that (Onesimus) will be cutting all formal and legal ties to the household".
**79**  Arzt-Grabner, Philemon (see n. 8), 237.
**80**  Arzt-Grabner, Philemon (see n. 8), 236–237.

κοινωνία arrangement.[81] In verse 18, Paul thus responds, on his own terms, to the challenges of slave ownership, plainly accepting though his role of slave master.

# 7 Parallel universes

Paul's exploitation of the services of Onesimus strikingly acknowledges the apostle's acceptance of a worldly slavery. Simultaneously, however, the act of empowering Onesimus as his agent in the Christian community drives home the apostle's apocalyptic vision that is fundamentally detached from, i.e. not concerned with, the present world – for Paul effectively put the slave (Onesimus) over and above his (other) master (Philemon) in the Church – proving not only that Onesimus is quite literally 'above a slave' (Phlm 16), but also that there is 'no slave or free' in the Christian community (Gal 3,28). In *Philemon*, Paul has his cake and eats it.

The fundamental contrast or, rather, dualism behind the slave's definition ἐν σαρκί with his being ἐν κυρίῳ – briefly discussed in the preceding section – is not unique to *Philemon*.[82] In 1Cor 9,11 and Rom 15,27, the σαρκικά, understood, there, as the worldly means required to achieve a certain goal, are contrasted with the πνευματικά, the spiritual goods of the community. The similarities in the practicalities behind Paul's use of this type of dualism in his letters to the Corinthians and Romans with the actual situation behind his usage of σάρξ and κύριος in *Philemon* are self-evident: the financial support of the Pauline apostleship in Corinth

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**81**  The underlying issue here touched upon is that of the influence of Jewish law or halakha on Paul's (law) teaching and theology. The proposed interpretation of Phlm 18 corroborates the view that halakha remains important for Paul's thought (but that Paul moulds and transcends the Jewish law to suit his apocalyptic vision). Paul's choice of ἐλλογεῖν can be seen as a deliberate citation (albeit in an adapted and 'translated' form) of the idea of heavenly bookkeeping present in Jewish thought and the OT. On halakha in the Pauline letters see generally P.J. Tomson, Paul and the Jewish Law. Halakha in the Letters of the Apostle to the Gentiles, Assen/Minneapolis 1990, and idem, Paul's Jewish Background in View of His Law Teaching in 1 Cor 7, in: Paul and the Mosaic Law, ed. by J.D.G. Dunn, Grand Rapids/Cambridge 1996, 251–270. Phlm 18 (not discussed by Tomson) appears to fit Tomson's second category of halakha in early Christian literature, i.e. that "cited in support of a hortatory argument" (Tomson, Background, 260 and *passim*). For a brief overview of the meaning of ἐλλογεῖν in the Pauline correspondence (with particular regard to Rom 5,13), see O. Hofius, The Adam-Christ Antithesis and the Law. Reflections on Romans 5: 12–21, in: Paul and the Mosaic Law, ed. by J.D.G. Dunn, Grand Rapids/Cambridge 1996, 165–205, esp. 194–196.

**82**  I am unclear as to the meaning of the pun on κύριος in Phlm 16, which is of course also the slave's worldly master, and which, in Phlm 16, takes the place of the πνεῦμα in Paul's dualistic construction of the flesh and the spirit in 1Cor 9,11 and Rom 15,27.

and the collection for the Christians in Jerusalem on the one hand, and Paul's private voluntary association with Philemon – Ziebarth's "Vereinigung mehrerer Personen auf Zeit, und zwar zur Erreichung eines bestimmten Zwecks" – on the other. Whether the purpose of the κοινωνία arrangement consisted in the provision of practical support for a specific missionary activity, as suggested by some for Paul's endeavours at the time of the composition of *Philemon*, cannot be answered from the epistle:[83] it is for this reason that I have left this aspect without discussion. But it is the right kind of activity in the light of the κοινωνία arrangement and the parallels – if they are correct – with the situation in Corinth and Rome. Moreover, a specific missionary activity, as suggested above in general terms, would provide plenty of scope (and demand) for supporting activities of a secular type that could be provided by a pagan slave like Onesimus (in his function as an asset given into the κοινωνία by Philemon).

It is important to note, however, that Paul's emphasis on the bodily aspect of the slave's agency and service after Onesimus' conversion to the Christian faith follows the apostle's conceptualisation of σάρξ that is characterised by action, and that is contrasted to – albeit in dialogue with – a passive understanding of the (physical) body as σῶμα.[84] In Greek thought (just as in the Old Testament), the term σῶμα can denote a slave (e.g. Polybius 12.16.5; Gen 34,29; 36,6; 47,18): this usage characterises the individual who is not free to act but the object of the powers of others. Paul too makes use of the term that fits with the idea of a dependency or subjection to domination, for instance when he describes the body of man as the property of Christ (e.g. 1Cor 6,13), although he extends and transforms this meaning not least with regard to a conceptualisation of the Church in a collective sense (e.g. Rom 12,5). But Paul also uses the term in the sense of a (free) man's enslavement to the power of sin or death (e.g. Rom 6,6). The apostle's choice to identify, in *Philemon*, the slave as being ἐν σαρκί, and thereby differently from the conceptualisation of the slave as σῶμα, must be seen as a deliberate step away from the traditional understanding of the slave, here Onesimus, as an object or 'thing'. (The latter approach, as has been seen, is in evidence in Paul's play on Onesimus' name.) As a corollary, i.e. through his newly gained 'activity', Onesimus is ὑπὲρ δοῦλον. The reason for the shift in the slave's 'nature' is Onesimus' conversion to the faith; the result is what Dunn called "a transformation into a

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**83** An identification of Paul's endeavours as a specific missionary activity is typically coupled with an identification of Paul's location in Ephesus. See also note 61 above.

**84** For a detailed analysis of Paul's understanding of σάρξ and σῶμα see L. Scornaienchi, Sarx und Soma bei Paulus: Der Mensch zwischen Destruktivität und Konstruktivität (FRLANT 67), Göttingen 2008.

different kind of bodily existence".[85] At the same time, the definition of the slave ἐν σαρκί does not negate the slave's worldly status as a slave; if anything, it confirms it: one may want to speak of the slave's 'Menschwerdung' in slavery – a contradiction in terms, but one possible in Paul's theological thought.[86]

The seeming contradiction concerning Onesimus' 'nature' in *Philemon* is a good example, on a real case, of Paul's construction of a Christian world that is different to the world around him, whilst relying on the latter's concepts and actualities. This creation of a new reality, which exists beside and next to the 'old' world, has been well discussed by modern scholars with regard to other texts that employ the terminology of slavery.[87] In 1Cor 7,22, for instance, the slave who has become a Christian is called the freedman of Christ (whilst a free person who turned Christian is called the slave of Christ): the concept of 'the freedman', borrowed from the realities of slavery in the 'old' world, forms part of Paul's conception of the new world – without a change of status κατὰ σάρκα for the (unnamed) individuals that fall into this group. The window opened in *Philemon* shows Paul's theology in action on a particular case (and identifiable individual): Onesimus, once converted, remains a slave under the rules of the 'old' world (including his ownership by a fellow Christian, and by the apostle himself), whilst becoming an equal under the rules of the new world. There exists, however, no ultimate contradiction in Paul's thought because of the apostle's apocalyptic stance which transcends the 'old' world: whilst in the latter there is Jew and Greek, slave and free, man and woman, it is through the act of active disregard (but not dismissal!) of such statuses and roles that Paul attempts to establish their fundamental unimportance. In Paul's theological construction, active *dismissal* of the worldly statuses and roles of slave and free would, in turn, function to (re)establish their importance. In practice, then, Onesimus' slave status *has to remain* unquestioned by Paul, *thereby* postulating its ultimate insignificance – through the creation of parallel universes.

The scenario, then, behind *Philemon* depended on the one hand on the apostle's acceptance of the slave system and his preparedness to stay in masterly control of the slave, whilst, on the other hand, it allowed Paul to put a slave in a

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**85**  Dunn, Theology (see n. 17), 61. See also Scornaienchi, Sarx (see n. 84) who, at 82, speaks of "die Konstruktivität des σῶμα" as the result of redemption, and defines, at 295, σάρξ in contrast to σῶμα (amongst the free) more generally as "der aktiv wirkende und planende Mensch, der dies aber aus einer rein weltlichen Perspektive tut."

**86**  Similarly, in Eph 6,5 and Col 3,22, the slaves are asked to obey their masters' instructions κατὰ σάρκα. For brief discussion of Paul's usage of the idea of enslavement with regard to the free, see Scornaienchi, Sarx (see n. 84), 344–345.

**87**  For a recent discussion see Wolter, Paulus (see n. 56), 86–96.

position of socio-religious power over his (other) master, thereby negating the status hierarchy between master and slave that is the essence of slavery.[88] At the same time, Paul remained in apostolic power over both, not least because both owed their faith to him: Onesimus is quite explicitly referred to as Paul's 'child' (Phlm 10), whilst Paul recommends the slave as a 'brother' to Philemon (Phlm 16), so reminding Philemon that he too owes his new life to the apostle. And although, in principle, Paul too is a 'brother' to Philemon and Onesimus, the paternalistic conceptualisation in which the apostle figures as the 'father' to the 'children' re-inforces in turn Paul's elevated position vis-à-vis both Onesimus and Philemon in particular and the Church in general (e.g. 1Cor 4,14–17). Paul's apostolic role and leadership in the Church put him in first place to act as the (slave) agent of Christ with regard to god's property – i.e. the members of the faith (whether free or unfree): a model of agency that was based in slavery and that Paul imitated in actual terms at the microlevel with regard to Onesimus.[89]

# 8 Conclusion

The inclusion of slaves in the worship of gods next to persons of free status was not peculiar to the early Christians: both Greeks and Romans were known to in-clude slaves in their cult practices;[90] and amongst Jews, a gentile slave who was circumcised upon purchase or birth into a Jewish house in our period was, as

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**88** Slaves (and ex-slaves) were well known in the ancient world to have been capable of achiev-ing higher social status than free persons (although not normally higher than their own masters); and association with a slave of high status could in turn represent an act of social mobility on the part of the free, for which the marriage behaviour of the members of the *familia Caesaris* offers the most conspicuous example in the period under discussion here (cf. P.C.R. Weaver, Familia Caesaris: A Social Study of the Emperor's Freedmen and Slaves, Cambridge 1972, 112–136).

**89** It is not impossible that Paul's use of slavery as a mental construct for his conceptualisa-tion of the Christian community reinforced his sense of responsibility in a context already dis-cussed – the issue over the monies potentially owed to Philemon: since Paul had converted the slave to the Christian faith, his real master had become Christ; and as in the transfer of owner-ship over a slave amongst living masters, any outstanding accounts needed settling, only then was the transaction complete – here the 'Loskauf' from a life in sin and under the power of death. For contextual discussion of the concept of the slave sale and 'Loskauf' in Pauline thought see Scornaienchi, Sarx (see n. 84), 92–95.

**90** For discussion of slaves' involvement in religious activity in Greece and Rome see generally F. Bömer, Untersuchungen über die Religion der Sklaven in Griechenland und Rome, 4 vols., Wiesbaden 1957–1963, and I:179 for discussion of the concept of (Christian) brotherhood in par-ticular.

S.J.D. Cohen put it, "a proselyte in the making".[91] But just as such inclusion in religious practices did not question the slave's status amongst the Jews, the Greeks, or the Romans, it was quite clearly also not questioned by Paul.[92] An understanding of Onesimus as a contribution to the κοινωνία, as a human chattel, as argued here, provides a cogent explanation for some of the problems that previous readings of the letter failed to solve, including Paul's familiarity with Onesimus, and the slave's presence in Paul's company. More importantly, it explains why "the epistle maintains the claim that Onesimus 'belongs' to the apostle"[93] – for he did; and it explains further how Paul "has denominated and appointed […] Onesimus as his agent"[94] – for as his (co-)owner he could. It is only on recognition that Paul's appeal to Philemon was driven by the power of (co-)master over slave that we can fully grasp the consequences for our understanding of the apostle's attitude to the peculiar institution: in this Pauline version of Christianity there was no "tension between the realities of slavery and the demands of brotherhood".[95]

    M. Hengel emphasised that "(t)he important thing for Christians was not the privilege of an earthly citizenship but the fact that they were brothers and sisters".[96] Slavery, understood as the polar opposite to citizenship, was equally irrelevant in this Christian endeavour. But, whilst slavery, like citizenship, was irrelevant in the new world order, it was the order of the 'old' world, which acknowledged slavery, that allowed Paul a double coup: in his dealings with Philemon and Onesimus, Paul embraces the order of both this world *and* the next, creating parallel universes that, with regard to slavery, could only have been understood by non-Christians (and probably also by some fellow Christians) as an expression of a complete and unreserved acceptance of the slave system. It follows that, ironically perhaps, slavery was not at an end here, either functionally

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**91** Cohen, Rabbi (see n. 75), 945; see also S.J.D. Cohen, The Beginnings of Jewishness. Boundaries, Varieties, Uncertainties, Berkeley etc. 1999, 155. For some services in a Jewish domestic setting for instance, the slave's circumcision was even a prerequisite: Gen 17,12–13; for discussion see Cohen, Beginnings, 123–125.

**92** Slavery was generally accepted amongst the Jews (cf. Hezser, Slavery [see n. 29]). It is for this reason that the Essenes have been singled out amongst Jewish sects for repudiating slavery (see Philo, Prob. 79; Josephus, Ant. 18,21).

**93** Frilingos, Onesimus (see n. 51), 101.

**94** J.D.M. Derrett, The Functions of the Epistle to Philemon, ZNW 79 (1988) 63–91, here 88.

**95** Barclay, Paul (see n. 1), 186. There is, consequently, no reason to think that Paul asked Philemon to manumit Onesimus, as suggested recently again (see G.F. Wessels, The Letter to Philemon in the Context of Slavery in Early Christianity, in: Philemon in Perspective, ed. by Tolmie [see n. 28], 143–168).

**96** M. Hengel, The Pre-Christian Paul, in: The Jews among Pagans and Christians, ed. by J. Lieu et al., London/New York 1992, 29–52, here 31.

or technically – regardless of Paul's attempt to transcend the order of the 'old' world precisely in his approach to the (not so) peculiar institution.[97]

The proposed scenario evidently subscribes to an understanding of slavery that would regard it as "self-deception if one failed to see that Jesus of Nazareth, the apostles and the Church, both in its formative period and in its later development, accepted the going system of labor of its time, including the slave structure, without hesitation or any expressed reluctance".[98] Slavery was an accepted part of life, and those not subjected to it made use of it if they at all could:[99] it was, as N.D. Fustel de Coulanges put it in a quite different yet related context, a primordial fact, the roots of which went back to an age when all inequalities had their *raison d'être*: "[L'esclavage] était un fait primordial, contemporain de l'origine des sociétés, et il avait eu ses racines dans un âge du genre humain où toutes les inégalités avaient leur raison d'être".[100] Paul, too, had good reason to stick with the going system of labour of his day. At the same time, his theological concerns were foremost, and they penetrated all and every action so that, in *Philemon*, we also get a glimpse of what Dunn called "(t)he combination of profound theological reflection and sensitive grappling with all too real human problems":[101] next to the social realities involved in the case of Philemon and Onesimus, the letter's theological value, recently stressed again by modern scholars, needs equal recognition for the contribution it makes to our understanding of Paul's conceptual construction of the Christian community and the role played therein by the peculiar institution.[102]

Concerning the first Christian house churches, Barclay wrote that "(i)t is impossible to imagine someone like Gaius or Philemon offering hospitality to a whole church (Rom 16. 23; Phlm 2) without the aid of slaves: one could not maintain a house sufficient to accommodate a significant number of guests on a regu-

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**97** *Pace* Meggitt, Paul (see n. 44), 181.

**98** Westermann, Slave Systems (see n. 29), 150.

**99** Slaves too were known to have possession of other slaves. Some of the most remarkable examples stem from the Roman world, such as the many epitaphs mentioning *vicarii* in the *columbaria* of the Statilii and other aristocratic families (cf. K. Hasegawa, The Familia Urbana during the Early Empire. A Study of Columbaria Inscriptions, Oxford 2005, 56–61; N. Baba, Slave-Owning Slaves and the Structure of Slavery in the Early Roman Empire, Kodai 1 [1990] 24–35). But possession of slaves by other slaves is also known in Jewish slavery (cf. 2Sam 9,10).

**100** N.M. Fustel de Coulanges, Le colonat romain, in: Recherches sur quelques problèmes d'histoire, Paris 1885, 1–186, here 3.

**101** Dunn, Theology (see n. 17), xv.

**102** E.g., J.A. Fitzmyer, The Letter to Philemon (AncB 34C), New York/London 2000, 37–39; M. Wolter, The Letter to Philemon as Ethical Counterpart of Paul's Doctrine of Justification, in: Philemon in Perspective, ed. by Tolmie, (see n. 28), 169–179.

lar basis without the assistance of slaves, at least in door-keeping, cooking and serving at table".[103] We should now add that it is impossible to imagine someone like Paul or Peter or Philip engaging in missionary activity for a whole religion without the aid of slaves, both in secular and religious functions: the Christian 'oikos' could not have been built without the utilisation of slave labour by those in charge of its construction and maintenance – just as Paul's theology would have collapsed without the theoretical underpinning provided by the peculiar institution. In thus creating a Christian design for mastery – real and conceptual – Paul is likely to have set the agenda for his successors for centuries to come, turning the history of the early Church into the (ongoing) history of slavery. Perhaps, to take this ambiguous letter as a starting point for discovering early Christian attitudes toward slavery is not a futile enterprise after all.

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**103** Barclay, Paul (see n. 1), 166.