

The Usefulness of an Onesimus: The Sexual Use of Slaves and Paul's Letter to Philemon

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Bitinna, I am a slave: use me as you wish.

—Herodas, *Mimes* 5.6

You are her master, with full power over her, so she must do your will whether she likes it or not.

—Chariton, *Chaereas and Callirhoe* 2.6.2

For fourteen years I pleased him; it is no disgrace to do what a master commands. I also gave my mistress satisfaction.

—Petronius, *Satyricon* 75.11

I like sex that is easy and obtainable.

—Horace, *Satires* 1.2.119

Unchastity is a crime in the freeborn, a necessity for a slave, a duty for the freedman.

—Seneca, *Controversies* 4, Praef. 10¹

The proper “background” to Paul’s all too brief arguments in the letter to Philemon has long proven elusive. The difficulty in articulating an adequate con-

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¹ Unless otherwise noted, all classical references follow the available LCL translations. The translation of Horace is taken from Craig A. Williams, *Roman Homosexuality: Ideologies of Masculinity in Classical Antiquity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 32, while the Petronius and Seneca translations can be found in Moses I. Finley, *Ancient Slavery and Modern Ideology* (New York: Viking, 1980), 96.

textualization for this letter might be remedied, however, if one were to begin considering the sexual use (χρησις) of slaves in antiquity as providing some relevant historical clues or rhetorical cues. Indeed, a few interpreters have begun to consider this element in examining Pauline materials, but rarely have they done so with concentrated effort on the letter to Philemon.² As reflected in the quick sampling of ancient selections opening this article, various sources show that this use of slaves was both ubiquitous and unexceptional for the centuries preceding and following the creation and circulation of Paul's letters. Nevertheless, an appreciation of this ubiquity is itself far from ubiquitous among Pauline scholars, since the limited considerations of the sexual use of slaves have yet to extend to understanding the terminologies of use and the figure of Onesimus in Paul's shortest letter.

Each of the opening selections reflects the expectation that slaves' bodies will be accessible and available for sexual use, whether directly or more implicitly, given further context. A couple of the quotations communicate this expectation by seemingly presenting more idealized depictions of slaves willingly offering to comply with the master's desires, thus exemplifying their default status as erotically available, while the rest reflect that the will or desire of the enslaved is almost entirely inconsequential. This lack of interest in the slaves' will is reflected also in the casual, even flip remarks quoted both above and below. Such an indifferent and often humorous attitude to the sexual use of slaves (and freed slaves) indicates how utterly conventional and uncontroversial such use was in these slave societies. When Greeks, Romans, and Judeans do place limits on or offer moralizing condemnations of some sexual uses of slaves, their focus is not on what some in the twenty-first century would call homosexual (or "same-sex") erotic contact but on containing elite women's practice in order to preserve matronly chastity and patrifamilial honor.³ Such concerns stress that the perspective of most of our sources is primarily ordered and oriented around those of the freeborn and slave-owning ranks.

These perspectives do manage to indicate some of the social conditions and expectations for slaves in the Roman imperial era. However, since the study of slavery is too often seen as divorced or isolated from the study of sexuality (and vice

² The most persistent presentation of the sexual use of slaves and its impact for understanding biblical materials is Jennifer A. Glancy, *Slavery in Early Christianity* (2002; repr., Minneapolis: Fortress, 2006). See also Sheila Briggs, "Paul on Bondage and Freedom in Imperial Roman Society," in *Paul and Politics: Ekklēsia, Israel, Imperium, Interpretation. Essays in Honor of Krister Stendahl* (ed. Richard A. Horsley; Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 2000), 110–23; J. Albert Harrill, *Slaves in the New Testament: Literary, Social, and Moral Dimensions* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2006); and Richard A. Horsley, "The Slave Systems of Classical Antiquity and Their Reluctant Recognition by Modern Scholars," *Semeia* 83–84 (1998): 19–66.

³ The texts more consistently assert the nonproblematic use of slaves by male masters, even as they often reflect on the female master's uses of slaves. For further reflections, see *Women and Slaves in Greco-Roman Culture: Differential Equations* (ed. Sandra R. Joshel and Sheila Murnaghan; London: Routledge, 1998).

versa), the relevance of the sexual use of slaves has often been obscured, and not only in Pauline studies. In the interpretation of the letter to Philemon, this disconnect is all the more stark, given the richly troubling exegetical possibilities raised by Paul's argumentation and the vital importance of finding suitable context(s) for the slim epistle. Philemon is a letter that discusses the utility of Onesimus and selects arguments in an effort to gain the consent of an owner. I suggest that these kinds of rhetorical choices signal the letter's place within, rather than distance from, the imperially gendered slave system reflected in the opening quotations and the following discussion. Paul's punning characterization of Onesimus and seemingly deferential appeal to the autonomous authority of a slave owner take on different hues in light of the sharp shadows of the sexual use of slaves.

I. THE USE OF SLAVES

The second volume of Michel Foucault's *History of Sexuality* asks, "[H]ow could one, how must one 'make use' (*chrēsthai*) of this dynamic of pleasures, desires, and acts?"⁴ This question of right use (avoiding both excess and passivity in the use of food, drink, and sexual activity) is about the proper *Use of Pleasure*, the title for this second volume, from the Greek expression χρῆσις ἀφροδισίων. The correct forms of χρῆσις relate to and communicate one's status both generally, in a context where there is an "isomorphism between sexual relations and social relations," and thus, specifically, where women, slaves, and other males of lower status and age were the proper objects for use.⁵

A Priapic Protocol

This disposition of austerity and its practice in the context of a series of interlocking sociopolitical relations cannot be isolated either to the Greeks or to the at-times-controversial study of them by Foucault.⁶ Indeed, such attitudes and arguments about erotic practice in general and the sexual use of slaves in particular persist as similar dynamics in the Roman imperial era. The Romans' priapic model of gendered and erotic practice details a protocol for the maintenance of Roman masculinity that centers on the insertive role as "the prime directive of mas-

⁴ Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, vol. 2, *The Use of Pleasure* (trans. Robert Hurley; New York: Vintage, 1990; French original, 1976), 52.

⁵ Ibid., 215.

⁶ Such interlocking sociopolitical relations are likely best described as kyriarchal, where multiple and mutually influential structures of domination and subordination function together in pyramidal relations. On kyriarchy, see Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *Rhetoric and Ethic: The Politics of Biblical Studies* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1999), ix.

culine sexual behavior.”⁷ This model of masculinity does not differentiate between the gender or status of the receptive party in a sex act, except to exclude the use of freeborn Roman males or freeborn Roman females who are not one’s wife.

When the prime directive of penetration meets the exceptions to this prerogative, it also generates a corollary:

slaves’ bodies were entirely at the masters’ disposal, and from the earliest of times it seems to have been understood that among the services that Roman men might expect their slaves to perform was the satisfaction of sexual desires . . . it seems always to have been assumed that the master would make such use of his slaves of both sexes.⁸

These two parts of the priapic protocol, aggressive pursuit of insertion and disposability of slave bodies in this pursuit, thus expound on the formulation found in Seneca: the necessity of receptive use for slaves and the reprehensive criminality of the same for the freeborn elite (Seneca, *Controversies* 4, Praef. 10). As our sources and a wealth of classical scholarship are increasingly acknowledging, this sexual use of slaves was not sporadic. Indeed, it was so ubiquitous that Craig Williams can fittingly argue that a “comprehensive catalogue of Roman texts that refer to men’s sexual use of their male and female slaves would be massive,” since “it was simply taken for granted that this kind of freedom (or rather, dominion) was one of the many perquisites of being a Roman slave owner.”⁹

What the owner held in dominion is what the slave lacked in slavery; owners demonstrated control of self and surroundings (both locally and more imperially) through their control over the body of the slave. The slaves’ status as property is indicated by what Moses Finley described three decades ago as slaves’ “unrestricted availability in sexual relations.”¹⁰ Since Finley, scholars such as Thomas A. J. McGinn and Keith Bradley have affirmed and expanded that slaves “were sexually available and completely subject to the will of their owners,”¹¹ so that “it is taken without question that slaves can and do become objects of sexual gratification for both the men and women who own them. It is one of the prerogatives of ownership and the servile response is scarcely worth considering.”¹² This sexual use of slaves cannot be limited to any one period of Greek or Roman preeminence or isolated as

⁷ Williams, *Roman Homosexuality*, 18. See also Amy Richlin, *The Garden of Priapus: Sexuality and Aggression in Roman Humor* (rev. ed.; New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 57–64.

⁸ Williams, *Roman Homosexuality*, 30–31.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 31.

¹⁰ Finley, *Ancient Slavery*, 95.

¹¹ McGinn, *Prostitution, Sexuality, and the Law in Ancient Rome* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 196.

¹² Bradley, *Slavery and Society at Rome* (Key Themes in Ancient History; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 28.

an idiosyncratically fleeting anomaly, in view of how commonly it is reflected in the literature from Homer up to and through the height of the Roman empire.¹³

Sexual Use

While this overview provides the broader system and protocol for the elite slave owner's use of pleasure, it does not specify how the terminologies of use (χρῆσις) specifically relate to and reflect upon slaves in antiquity. To clarify, one can return to the quote that opened this article. Here, the male slave Gastron's response is given in a context where the female master has already used him sexually and she is currently angry that he has had sexual relations with another. Gastron links his slave status with his availability for use: "use me as you wish" (χρῶ ὅτι βούλῃ, 5.6).¹⁴ A reply containing the verbal form of χρῆσις (χράζομαι) stresses that the use of this slave has already included sexual use. The erotic resonance of this verb can be confirmed by its recurrence in the following mime, where two slave-owning women discuss acquiring a particularly finely crafted dildo, but Koritto complains about a third friend who has borrowed it before she even had a chance to use it (χρήσασθαι, 6.29) herself.¹⁵ In such instances, slaves and dildos are similar "objects." As a result, Page DuBois can characterize "slave bodies as ubiquitous and serviceable . . . as sexually desirable and available," since in Herodas slaves fall somewhere in a kyriarchal hierarchy of objects, "as a slightly higher form of dildo for the women of the master class."¹⁶

The influence of *Mime 5* in particular extends into the first century C.E., as an anonymous papyrus mime fragment is clearly modeled on this mime of Herodas in character and setting (only harsher, since the female slave owner angrily plans to execute the slave Aesopus for trying to choose his own sexual partner).¹⁷ The repetition, or miming, of Herodas's mime in the first century indicates the persistent continuities across the centuries when it comes to the sexual use of slaves and the terminologies of use. Indeed, the χρῆσις of male slaves continues to appear in later imperial works such as Athenaeus's *Deipnosophistae*, where both Sophocles

¹³ See Finley, *Ancient Slavery*, 95. For references to the sexual use of slaves in Homer's *Iliad* (2.1.366; 2.9.128–34; 2.22.164; and 2.23.257–61), see Bettina Eva Stumpp, *Prostitution in der römischen Antike* (Berlin: Akademie, 1998), 26. See also Hans Klees, *Sklavenleben im klassischen Griechenland* (Forschungen zur antiken Sklaverei 30; Stuttgart: F. Steiner, 1998), 155–75.

¹⁴ For further discussion of this passage, including the connection between dildos and slaves, see Page DuBois, *Slaves and Other Objects* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 99–109.

¹⁵ The sexual resonance of the "use" of Gastron (in 5.6) is reinforced by such continuing erotic references for this verb (see also ἐχρήτο, 6.55; χρήσασθαι, 6.78).

¹⁶ DuBois, *Slaves*, 102, 104, respectively.

¹⁷ See P.Oxy. 413 verso in *Select Papyri*, vol. 3, *Literary Papyri; Poetry* (text, trans., and notes by D. L. Page; LCL; Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1962), 350–61.

and Euripides were described as “consorting” with the same handsome boy (χρησόμενος αὐτῷ in 604D and κεχρηῆσθαι τῷ παιδί in 604E).¹⁸

In discussing the relevance of this asymmetrically gendered sexual protocol for the interpretation of another of Paul’s letters (Romans), Bernadette J. Brooten stresses that “Greek authors from the classical period through late antiquity use both the noun *chrēsis* and the verb *chraomai* (‘to use’) in a sexual sense. A man ‘uses’ or ‘makes use of’ a woman or a boy.”¹⁹ For example, when Charicles argues that the sexual “services rendered by a woman are far superior to those of a boy” (Lucian, *Erōtes* 25), this service is *χρήσεως*. Indeed, he furthers this point by highlighting that a woman can also “be used like a boy” (καὶ παιδικώτερον χρώμενον ἔξεστιν [*Erōtes* 27]). In this landmark study of female homoeroticism, Brooten discusses how the sexual use of slaves would have fit with common perceptions of “natural” use, acknowledging the role of slaves as appropriate receivers as well as formulaic figures for describing those who are possessed by love.²⁰ To find an overlap between slavery and sexuality, though, one need look no further than this dialogue on erotic relations in Lucian. In recounting the conditions of Callicratidas and Charicles’ living arrangements, the text stresses each of their inclinations through the slaves attending them. The “love of boys” advocated by Callicratidas involved male slaves since he “was well provided with handsome slave-boys and all of his servants were pretty well beardless” (*Erōtes* 10). Likewise, Charicles’ “love of women” is displayed in “a large band of dancing girls and singing girls” that so filled the house with an almost exclusively female presence (*ibid.*).²¹

¹⁸ In most of the following instances, it is more likely that *puer* and *παῖς* refer to a male slave (rather than simply a male of “minor” age). See Mark Golden, “*Pais*, ‘Child’ and ‘Slave,’” *L’Antiquité classique* 54 (1985): 91–104; and Peter Garnsey, “Sons, Slaves—and Christians,” in *The Roman Family in Italy: Status, Sentiment, and Space* (ed. Beryl Rawson and Paul Weaver; Oxford: Clarendon, 1997), 101–21.

¹⁹ Brooten, *Love between Women: Early Christian Responses to Female Homoeroticism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 245. Here Brooten also cites (as this article might) the standard dictionary entries for *χρησις* and *χράσθαι* in LSJ and BAGD.

²⁰ Brooten discusses the sexual use of slaves (*Love between Women*, 250–51 and notes on pp. 179 and 182) and details the role of slaves and slave imagery in erotic spells (pp. 87–106). More recently, see *Beyond Slavery: Overcoming Its Religious and Sexual Legacies* (ed. Bernadette J. Brooten with Jacqueline L. Hazelton; Black Religion/Womanist Thought/Social Justice; New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010); and eadem, “Sexual Freedom: Overcoming Slavery’s Legacy in Jewish, Christian, and Islamic Foundational Texts,” *SBL Forum* <http://sbl-site.org/Article.aspx?ArticleID=793> (accessed August 2008).

²¹ Ironically, David M. Halperin’s observations about these groups of slaves (*How to Do the History of Homosexuality* [Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2002], 96) called my attention to this passage, even as Halperin failed to consider more fully the significance of slaves as included in his consideration of ancient inclinations and more modern orientations.

Acceptable Accessibility

Thus, the Greek Lucianic text illustrates a disposition similar to the one Horace communicates in a fuller version of one of the Latin quotations that open the present article. There Horace recommends a utilitarian attitude to fulfilling one's desires for food, drink, and, of course, sex:

Now really, when your throat is parched with thirst, you don't ask for golden goblets, do you? When you're hungry, you don't turn your nose up at everything but peacock and turbot, do you? When your crotch is throbbing and there is a slave-girl or home-grown slave-boy ready at hand, whom you could jump right away, you don't prefer to burst with your hard-on, do you? I certainly don't. I like sex that is easy and obtainable. (*Sat.* 1.2.114–19)²²

The sentiment reflected in the text, though satiric, is also indicative of an attitude about the appropriate, fulfilling, and perhaps safest outlet for satisfying one's urges and needs: slaves function interchangeably with each other (across gender) and with other "basics" to keep one sated and out of trouble. The trouble avoided by the elite male slave owner becomes a recurring problem, however, for the protagonists of ancient Greek novels from Chariton, Longus, Achilles Tatius, and Xenophon of Ephesus. In these, male and female masters dispose of enslaved heroes as they please, arranging for sexual exchanges or seeking their own fulfillment with both female and male slaves.²³ Though the heroes in most Greek novels escape without being used sexually, their stories repeatedly reflect a reality about slave life. As Bradley asserts about an episode in Chariton's novel: "The significant point here is that the owner's sexual access to slaves was regarded as conventional, a norm made explicit."²⁴

This normative access to slave bodies, then, is part of a more general ethos and practice of *χρησις* in the ancient world. Thus, even when figures like Epictetus and Plutarch argue for an elite male prioritizing of moderation, the terminologies of use and the management of food, drink, and slaves in the household recur.²⁵ If one properly manages oneself and others, purity and sexual use need not be incompatible:

²² The translation can be found in Williams, *Roman Homosexuality*, 32. (Compare, for example, the more sanitizing translations in the LCL edition of Horace.)

²³ See, e.g., Achilles Tatius, *Leuc. Clit.* 5.17; Chariton, *Chaer.* 2.6; Longus, *Daphn.* 4.11–19; and Xenophon of Ephesus, *The Ephesian Tale (of Anthia and Habrocomes)* 1.16; 2.9; 5.7.

²⁴ Bradley, *Slavery and Society at Rome*, 49.

²⁵ For example, Epictetus prefaces his advice on *χρησις* by instructing: "In things that pertain to the body take only as much as your bare need requires, I mean such things as food, drink, clothing, shelter, and household slaves; but cut down everything which is for outward show or luxury" (*Ench.* 33.7). See also *Ench.* 41, where he worries over excessive time spent on bodily matters like exercise, eating, drinking, defecating, and sex.

In your sex-life preserve purity, as far as you can, before marriage, and, if you indulge, take only those privileges which are lawful. However, do not make yourself offensive, or censorious, to those who do indulge, and do not make frequent mention of the fact that you do not yourself indulge. (Epictetus, *Ench.* 33.8)²⁶

Thus, even for a philosophical champion of detached moderation seeking to put limits on the predominant priapic protocol, it is not contradictory for one to be virtuously pure and moderate while making use or “indulging” (χρη) in nonexclusive erotic contact.

Of course, those “privileges which are lawful” include the erotic use of slaves. These privileges are useful because they violate neither the law nor one’s reputation (Plutarch, *Mor.* 288A).²⁷ For Plutarch, the sexual use of slaves is even a sign of a good husband, one who shows respect for his wife by engaging in debauchery with parties held in much lower esteem (*Mor.* 140B).²⁸ Thus, not only are virtues of purity, moderation, and even chastity left unviolated by erotic contact with slaves and other non-elite bodies, but this sexual use could also be the means of maintaining one’s status as virtuous in the kyriarchal management of one’s wider household (and often, by extension, the empire). Though it might sound strange, figures like Virgil can practice a passion for young male slaves and become sexually involved with a woman and still be so associated with virginity and austerity as to be called “Parthenias.”²⁹ The sexual use of slaves is itself not a moral problem, so long as the elite participant maintains a proper disposition in this, or any other, activity.

While these authors convey attitudes about preferable practices for the typically elite, mostly male slave owner, the evaluation of these acts also communicates a fair amount about the value of the slave. In certain ways, such activities with slaves do not “count” as ethically or socially significant, showing in turn the lesser significance of slaves in general. This view toward sexual use, in particular, is evident in Trimalchio’s exaggerated pride in his days as a slave, or the jokes that follow upon Haterius’s explanation in Seneca:

[H]e said, while defending a freedman who was charged with being his patron’s lover: “Losing one’s virtue is a crime in the freeborn, a necessity in a slave, a duty for the freedman.” The idea became a handle for jokes, like “you aren’t doing your duty by me” and “he gets in a lot of duty for him.” As a result the unchaste and obscene got called “dutiful” for some while afterwards. (*Controversies* 4, Praef. 10).

²⁶ See also the discussion in David E. Frederickson, “Natural and Unnatural Use in Romans 1:24–27: Paul and the Philosophic Critique of Eros,” in *Homosexuality, Science, and the “Plain Sense” of Scripture* (ed. David L. Balch; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 197–222, esp. 199–207.

²⁷ See also Horsley, “Slave Systems,” 45.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 44; Glancy, *Slavery*, 21.

²⁹ See Seutonius, *Virgil* 9–11; and the discussion of this passage in Williams, *Roman Homosexuality*, 33.

The sequence described by Seneca illustrates the elite Roman predisposition to joke about others' sexual vulnerability: *officiosi* became a demeaning pun for "doing one's duty" sexually.³⁰

In these sources, then, the joke is perhaps even more "on" the slave *and* the freed slave. Indeed, Haterius's words in Seneca reflect the ongoing vulnerability of even the freed slave, the figure presumed to be dutiful in continuing to submit to a sexual use by the master. This expectation of ongoing service demonstrates how the relative frequency of manumission should not be mistaken for the emancipation of slaves from within a flawed but mostly altruistic institution. As Keith Hopkins has detailed, manumission functions "not as a solvent of the slave system, but as a major reinforcement."³¹ Manumission is not a softening but a tightening strategy for keeping slaves under control. The promise or prospect of manumission was apparently enough to keep many slaves obedient until their bodies were worth less than a younger replacement.³² These ongoing obligations reinforced the (freed) slaves' continuing place as implements, not as people but as bodies, τὰ σώματα.³³

Some Suasion and Affection

There is often little to no interest in the view of the slave or freed slave in these bodily uses. From the slave owner's perspective, though, dutiful compliance certainly makes it easier to manage dominion over slaves, as reflected in the acquiescent words of freed slave characters such as Petronius's Trimalchio or in Arrian's accounts of the freed slave philosopher Epictetus. While Epictetus associates the use (χρεία) of a slave with that of a dog or ox (*Diatr.* 2.23.24), Trimalchio insists that it is not disgraceful to do what is commanded when a slave (Petronius, *Sat.* 75.11). In Chariton's novel *Chaereas and Callirhoe*, the slave owner Dionysius initially feels spurned by his new slave Callirhoe. Yet he is shortly reminded by his steward that this is mostly irrelevant: "You are her master, with full power over her, so she must do your will whether she likes it or not" (*Chaer.* 2.6.2).³⁴ While agreeing to or obeying a master's order would be nice (doing something willingly, ἐκούσα), it is not

³⁰ For a fuller grasp of the often ugly, if colorful, sexual humor of the Romans, see Richlin, *Garden of Priapus*.

³¹ Hopkins, *Conquerors and Slaves* (Sociological Studies in Roman History 1; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978), 118.

³² For this strategy of recapitalizing on the original value, not the declining value, of a slave body by requiring the manumitted slave to earn the cost of a younger, healthier (and far more valuable) slave, see Hopkins, *Conquerors*, 118, 128.

³³ See esp. Glancy, *Slavery*, 10–38. Inscriptions at Delphi show how the slaves are still described mainly as things, as bodies, even as they are being manumitted. See Hopkins, *Conquerors*, 142–44.

³⁴ The Greek of the second clause is: ὥστε καὶ ἐκούσα καὶ ἄκουσα ποιήσει τὸ σοὶ δοκοῦν. See the discussion of the adverbial willingly (ἐκούσα) and unwillingly (ἄκουσα) above.

necessary. The slave may be unwilling (ἄκουσα) but the authority of the master is what counts in such situations. One might even say that the typical state of living for the slave is to be lacking the free will, autonomy, or authority to act on his or her own volition. As Jennifer Glancy so succinctly puts it: “Slaves did not have the legal right nor cultural power to say ‘no’ to their owners’ sexual demands.”³⁵

Even as slaves had no legal or cultural right to refuse commands, masters frequently chose suasion as much as force in order more effectively to exercise control. The incentive and promise of manumission and the various stories and sayings that justify the social order described thus far would be just two examples of masters’ attempts to rule through persuasion. In the scheme to get the enslaved hero Habrocomes for his pirate master’s sexual use in Xenophon’s *Ephesian Tale*, Habrocomes is advised to show affection (ἀγαπᾶν, 1.16.3) to his new master. Yet, as part of the same attempt at suasion, he is told to obey (ὑπακούειν, 1.16.5) his master when he is commanded. Later in the novel, when the other half of the star-crossed couple, Anthia, is sold into prostitution, a similar strategy is applied with the pimp “alternately asking her to cheer up and making threats” (5.7.3). Hopkins observes: “As in other slave societies, the tie between master and slave could be warm; this warmth did not necessarily lessen exploitation; though it may have softened the slave’s feelings about it.”³⁶ Plautus’s comedy *Epidicus* depicts a slave fretting over whether a new captive has usurped his place in the master’s love (64–66). Another slave taunts him in reply: “He loves her more than he ever loved you” (66). Here love is not incompatible with the buying, selling, and casting off of various slave bodies. The love, affection, and positive feeling toward the slave or between master and slave are not mitigations of the imperially gendered slave system but expressions of its inner workings.

Family and Friends

Cultivating this feeling of connection to the master is a savvy strategy for running the hierarchical household in antiquity, especially because slaves are bodies that have been removed from various forms of connection. Orlando Patterson’s acute formulation of the constituent elements of slavery stresses slaves’ permanent natal alienation, their symbolic and social removal from the bonds of their ancestral kinship.³⁷ As Finley has described these conditions, the slave is “always a derailed outsider—an outsider first in the sense that he originated from outside the society into which he was introduced as a slave, second in the sense that he was

³⁵ Glancy, *Slavery*, 52.

³⁶ Hopkins, *Conquerors*, 154.

³⁷ See Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death: A Comparative Study* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1982).

denied the most elementary of social bonds, kinship.”³⁸ Slaves are dissociated from their ethnicity, kinship, culture, and locale, so that they might be integrated into a different family (the master’s) and incorporated into a particular role in a stratified household structure. Slaves simultaneously “had no family” and were deeply embedded in a *familia* and *domus* to be managed by the *paterfamilias*.³⁹ Their sexual availability stresses the inherently tensive place of the slave “in” the family. The slave can cause jealousy and anger in a marriage as an “external” factor, yet the occurrence of this threat is likely because the slave is, in Horace’s words, “easy and obtainable”—one who is “within” these structures and relations.⁴⁰

Not only, then, should one consider an expanded version of family in examining Roman imperial-era slavery, but one must also grapple with an expanded ambit of relations for whom the slave is sexually available. This latter expansion includes two different aspects, as Finley highlighted: “Prostitution is only one aspect. More interesting in the present context is the direct sexual exploitation of slaves by their masters and the latter’s family and friends.”⁴¹ Typically, prostitutes were slaves whose clientele were lower in status, but slave owners did not need to go to brothels since their slaves could serve as “private prostitutes” for them and their friends and family.⁴² Just as the sexual use of slaves introduced some tensions and concerns in “family life” between husband and wife, providing this service to friends and family could be a matter to be carefully negotiated between friends in terms of the roles of patron and client. On this matter Horace gives a warning: “Let no maid or boy within your worshipful friend’s marble threshold inflame your heart, lest the owner of the pretty boy or dear girl make you happy with a present so trifling or torment you if disobliging” (*Ep.* 1.18.72–75). Horace indicates that one has to be deliberately prudent when developing a friendship with a powerful man. If one owes the new friend (too much), the minimal gain in political advantage could be outweighed by the loss of self-determination or control in new obligations. The advice, of course, assumes that free men are giving slaves for these purposes, even as it advises care. It stresses once more that this sexual use is mostly

³⁸ Finley, *Ancient Slavery*, 75.

³⁹ On slavery within conceptions of “family,” see *The Family in Ancient Rome: New Perspectives* (ed. Beryl Rawson; Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1986); Carolyn Osiek and David L. Balch, *Families in the New Testament World: Households and House Churches* (Family, Religion, and Culture; Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1997); and *Early Christian Families in Context: An Interdisciplinary Dialogue* (ed. Balch and Osiek; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003).

⁴⁰ Thus, to understand Philemon, an examination of slave institutions and images is neither contradictory to nor incompatible with family institutions and images (as found, for example, in Chris Frilingos, “‘For My Child, Onesimus’: Paul and Domestic Power in Philemon,” *JBL* 119 [2000]: 91–104).

⁴¹ Finley, *Ancient Slavery*, 96.

⁴² On this status differentiation in terms of the sexual use of slaves and prostitutes, see Stumpp, *Prostitution*, 26.

trivial; the significance of the exchange is not in the treatment of the slave but in the relationship with the master and the friend.⁴³

II. THE USE OF ONESIMUS

The ubiquity, acceptability, virtue, and even the occasional political peril (for the “user” not the “used”) in and of the sexual use of slaves put the letter to Philemon in a different light. As reflected in the context delineated above, the imperially gendered protocol of penetration presumes the relatively uncontroversial availability of slave bodies for such use. It seems that most interpreters of Philemon, though, have failed to consider more fully how this part of the kyriarchal context might provide insight into the argumentation and, thus, the potential background of this slim and elusive letter.

Χρῆσις and Consent

The first and most pressing phrase to notice is Paul’s characterization of Onesimus as “once ἄχρηστον to you, but now εὐχρηστον (both) to you and to me” (v. 11). Having demonstrated how regularly the χρῆσις of slaves involved sexual uses of their bodies, such descriptions of Onesimus as previously “useless” or “not-useful,” but currently “good-for-use,” “well-used,” or even “easy-to-use” strikingly evoke the embodied aspect of his (likely) role as a slave. This description of Onesimus is completely compatible with, rather than counter to, the context delineated above, where the sexual use of slaves is acceptable, even preferred in some instances, and such use is consistently described in the terms of χρῆσις. Indeed, the letter’s use of two χρῆσις terms resonates even further with Onesimus’s name, as ὄνησις is similar to (if not exactly synonymous with) χρῆσις in describing something useful, beneficial, profitable, or enjoyable. Onesimus’s name reflects his own placement within this imperially gendered slave system, since it contains a constellation of characteristics sought by owners in their slaves. The slave exists not for his or her own benefit, profit, or pleasure but for the enjoyable use of the master, and Paul’s description of Onesimus in terms of his utility (ἄχρηστον/εὐχρηστον) reinforces the status quo of this erotically kyriarchal system.

Scholarship on the letter has justifiably focused on this verse’s pun with Onesimus’s name in explicating the likely slave status of Onesimus; Carolyn Osiek

⁴³ Though these sources mostly reflect their elite male Greek and Roman origins, scholars of Judean slave and family relations agree that such ruling perspectives governed these relations also. See Dale B. Martin, “Slavery and the Ancient Jewish Family,” in *The Jewish Family in Antiquity* (ed. Shaye J. D. Cohen; BJS 289; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1993), 113–29; and Catherine Hezser, *Jewish Slavery in Antiquity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005).

even remarks that Paul is here using a “condescending pun.”⁴⁴ Yet most if not all scholarly treatments of Philemon have not mentioned that these terms of *χρῆσις* could connect Onesimus’s slave (or potentially manumitted) status to the sexual use (*χρῆσις ἀφροδισίων*) of slaves. This gap includes even those scholars who note the ubiquity of this use in antiquity. Yet one must recognize and begin to consider the significance of an argument that depicts Onesimus as an “easy-to-use” entity. Given an ancient background benignly neutral to and even encouraging of the sexual use of such embodied entities, it is not impossible that Paul is arguing that Onesimus is “good-for-use” as a slave, and thus “easy-to-use” sexually, for the letter’s addressee, for other community members, but also even for Paul himself.

This gap in considering the usefulness of Onesimus would likely strike a host of Pauline scholars as odd, particularly given studies of other Pauline letters. In Romans, for example, the sexual meaning of *χρῆσις* (in 1:26 and 1:27) is patently uncontroversial, even as different understandings of this passage continue to spark ecclesial and public controversy. One of the most common ancient Greek words for sexual relations is *χρῆσις*, so common that the NRSV simply translates (if softens) the word in Romans 1 as “intercourse.” Thus, if there were some consistency across the translations of Paul’s letters, Paul’s characterization of Onesimus in Philemon could have been translated as “good for intercourse” rather than simply “useful.” The resulting gap in fuller considerations of the rhetorical and historical contexts of Philemon, then, is likely a product of the splintering of scholarship into specialties and subspecialties. The division of labor in biblical studies means that interpreters of particular letters, or experts on certain topics, focus on their own passages and perspectives, obscuring the places where topics such as slavery and sexuality meet and obstructing potentially illuminating connections to texts that trouble.

A letter such as Philemon and passages like this might prove troubling precisely because they reflect a cold, even flip attitude toward slave bodies and their disposability for a range of uses. Paul’s playing on Onesimus’s name and station (or lack thereof) are akin to puns and wordplays in ancient sources that joke about the sexual duties and uses of slaves and freed slaves. Onesimus’s name and Paul’s description of him as “good-for-use” in this letter resonate with demeaning descriptions like Seneca’s erotically “dutiful” freedman (*Controversies* 4, Praef. 10) or Horace’s preference for slaves as “sex that is easy and obtainable” (*Sat.* 1.2.119). The rhetoric of Philemon is more consonant with than counter to such conditions and sentiments, callously indifferent to the fate of the figures behind these asymmetrical dynamics and descriptions.

Paul’s claim that he sought to do nothing without the addressee’s consent, knowledge, or judgment (*γνώμης*, v. 14) also coheres seamlessly with a slave master’s perspective on the use of slaves (and his description of a *εὐχρηστος*

⁴⁴ Osiek, *Philippians, Philemon* (ANTC; Nashville: Abingdon, 2000), 137.

Onesimus).⁴⁵ Paul appeals to the owner to agree with his exhortation “not according to constraint but according to a voluntary [ἐκούσιον] act” (v. 14). The direction of the argument demonstrates whose will matters here: Paul does not speak of Onesimus willingly (ἐκούσα) acting, but of his master’s “good” in this exchange. As with the slave owner and the enslaved Callirhoe in Chariton’s novel (see 2.6.2, discussed above), the enslaved Onesimus’s preference does not matter; he must do the will of his master. J. Albert Harrill recognizes, for example, that in this instance Onesimus is “a ‘living tool’ caught between ‘masters’ deciding on the use of his services.”⁴⁶ Paul’s rhetoric exemplifies how inconsequential Onesimus’s will is; the letter rather attempts to steer a discussion between Paul and Onesimus’s owner.

A Warm Body

Yet Paul does describe Onesimus as “my σπλάγχνα” (typically translated as “heart”) in v. 12 and applies a number of kinship terms to their relationship (vv. 10, 16). Affectionate language is not foreign to the imperially and erotically asymmetrical dynamics of ancient slavery: the mostly elite, master, male (or kyriarchal) sources frequently describe and prescribe the relations between slaves and their user-owners as warm. They comfortably speak of intimacy and harmony in the slave-owning household and society, but these affections do not contradict the harsh coercion of slavery, where “generosity” and “love” are accompanied by force, threats, and fear.⁴⁷ As Hopkins argues, “this warmth did not necessarily lessen exploitation; though it may have softened the slave’s feelings about it.”⁴⁸ As with the condescending and chilling turn of phrase (in v. 11), even the affection reflected by Paul’s perspective (in vv. 12 and 16) aligns comfortably with that of the slave owners.⁴⁹

If this anatomy of affection is indeed compatible with the priapic protocol of penetration followed and maintained by slave user-owners, then it raises further questions about any assembly that gathers in an extended household of the Roman imperial era (v. 2). The letter highlights Paul’s joy at this community’s relieved σπλάγχνα (v. 7), the same refreshing release of σπλάγχνα that Paul later seeks from

⁴⁵ For arguments that the letter’s “addressee” is not Philemon, see John Knox, *Philemon among the Letters of Paul: A New View of Its Place and Importance* (1935; rev. ed.; New York: Abingdon, 1959); and Sara B. C. Winter, “Paul’s Letter to Philemon,” *NTS* 33 (1987): 1–15.

⁴⁶ Harrill, *Slaves*, 16.

⁴⁷ See, e.g., K. R. Bradley, *Slaves and Masters in the Roman Empire: A Study in Social Control* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), 13–14, 113.

⁴⁸ Hopkins, *Conquerors*, 154.

⁴⁹ Further reflections about embodied terms such as σπλάγχνα (v. 12; cf. vv. 7, 20) should include its relation (as “the guts”) to erotic contact, as with the “heart,” “lips,” and “mouth” in Achilles Tatius 2.37.10, or with graphic uses of slaves in Juvenal, *Sat.* 9.43–46.

the addressee (v. 20). In light of the commonly unexceptional sexual use of slaves, what could this refreshment of the body entail? As Glancy observes:

We have no evidence to suggest that Paul interacted with slaves or slaveholders as lavish as Trimalchio's. Still, when he accepted hospitality from a slaveholder, domestic slaves would have tended to his needs, from washing his feet upon entering the household to preparing the food for communal meals.⁵⁰

Glancy stops short of imagining the *full* range of Paul's bodily needs, even as Paul specifically seeks hospitality (ξενίαν, v. 22) from a slave owner. For such an owner, though, one of the advantages of having slaves to use was to provide the kind of hospitality that would have included sexual uses for family and friends.

Indeed, despite the potential warmth of Onesimus's description as Paul's σπλάγχνα (in v. 12), the place of Onesimus in Paul's vision of the wider community is made clear in this same verse, since he is the animate object being sent to the owner-addressee. Onesimus is a thing to pass along, to send at Paul's will, even as Paul also claims that he wants to continue holding or possessing (κατέχειν, v. 13) this "good-for-use" tool. Such expressions recall a context where humans can be given, sold, or simply exchanged between parties for any number of reasons, including sexual ones.⁵¹ Again, Paul specifies in the following verses that this interaction is between the owning addressee (whose consent he seeks in v. 14, and with whom he shares a partnership, v. 17) and Paul. In this matter, two people besides Onesimus are negotiating over the now "easy-to-use" figure sent by Paul.⁵²

Thus, even when Paul enlists warmly affectionate language like "beloved" (ἀγαπητόν, v. 16) to describe Onesimus as a "brother" to both of the parties negotiating over him, it is from a context of coercion and the customary χρήσις of slaves. Affection and the many uses of slaves can and do go together; love and obedience do in fact work together in the imperially gendered slave system. Since the enslaved Habrocomes can be advised to show ἀγάπη and remain obedient (ὕπακούειν) at the same time, it is not so strange for Paul to describe a (freed) slave as beloved while still expecting compliance and obedience, both from Onesimus (v. 12) and from the addressee (v. 21).⁵³ Thus, on its own, the rhetoric of affection and emotion does not cancel out the rhetoric of use in this letter; rather, it can be a subtle support for the social and sexual practices of slave use.

⁵⁰ Glancy, *Slavery*, 45.

⁵¹ See, for example, the gift of the beautiful Alexander from Pollio to Virgil, described in Sen-tonius, *Virgil* 9.

⁵² In this light, Onesimus is not really a substitute for Paul (as perhaps indicated by v. 17). This is made clear by the letter's emphasis on Paul coming soon himself (vv. 19–22).

⁵³ See Xenophon, *Ephesian Tale* 1.16.3–5, and the discussion above. On obedience (ὕπακοή), see Cynthia Briggs Kittredge, *Community and Authority: The Rhetoric of Obedience in the Pauline Tradition* (HTS 45; Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 1998), esp. 13–51.

Keeping It among Kin

The expression “beloved brother” also raises the issue of Paul’s use of kinship terminologies in his letters. In the first and only instance in which Paul explicitly names Onesimus in this letter, he introduces him in the clause: “I exhort you concerning my child, whom I begat in chains, Onesimus” (v. 10). One should not presume that such terms of kinship connote the same degrees of warmth and closeness as our contemporary terms (at least claim to) do, especially given the relatively non-affectionate and hierarchical view of the ancient *paterfamilias*.⁵⁴ In the Roman imperial context, the forms of emotion owed to and bestowed by one’s social superior do not negate or “relativize” the dominant position and power of those sharing in some form of kyriarchal privilege (lord, owner, father, emperor). Specifically, in the context of slaves and their owner-users, diminutive terms were applied to the slave so as to demean and even dehumanize the slave. As Finley warns, “We must rid our minds of the warm overtones of the word ‘child’ in this connection.”⁵⁵

However, such words were often used to manipulate or maintain slave acquiescence and obedience, since the “naturally alienated” and “deracinated outsider” slave was uniquely and oddly positioned to be incorporated into his or her role in the household—somehow “in” the *familia* but not of it. It is possible that just such a tensive flexibility can account for how Paul can claim to be both father (v. 10) and brother (v. 16) and still not disrupt the agenda and arc of his argumentation.⁵⁶ In both the ancient context and the Pauline corpus, such argumentation fits a pattern that comfortably mixes affection with asymmetry, harmony with hierarchy.⁵⁷

“My child” Onesimus (v. 10) is also described as “no longer a slave, but ὑπέρ slave, a beloved brother, especially to me, but how much (more) especially to you, both in the flesh and in the lord” (v. 16). Onesimus is not just a slave, but acts as “more than” (ὑπέρ) a slave, somehow exceeding his previous role.⁵⁸ Once harder to

⁵⁴ On the mostly nonaffectionate and hierarchical view of the parent–child relationship in the ancient world, see Antoinette Clark Wire, *The Corinthian Women Prophets: A Reconstruction through Paul’s Rhetoric* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1990), 45–47; and Elizabeth A. Castelli, *Imitating Paul: A Discourse of Power* (Literary Currents in Biblical Interpretation; Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1991), 99–102. On the interconnection of kinship with power dynamics in Philemon, see Frilingos, “‘For My Child,’” 91–104.

⁵⁵ Finley, *Ancient Slavery*, 96.

⁵⁶ This argument is counter to the key thesis of Lloyd A. Lewis, “An African American Appraisal of the Philemon–Paul–Onesimus Triangle,” in *Stony the Road We Trod: African American Biblical Interpretation* (ed. Cain Hope Felder; Minneapolis: Fortress, 1991), 232–46.

⁵⁷ For more on Paul’s hierarchical argumentation, see Joseph A. Marchal, *Hierarchy, Unity, and Imitation: A Feminist Rhetorical Analysis of Power Dynamics in Paul’s Letter to the Philippians* (SBL Academia Biblica 24; Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2006).

⁵⁸ For the argument that Paul is seeking Onesimus’s manumission, see Knox, *Philemon*, 24–27, 36–37; Winter, “Paul’s Letter,” 1, 4, 11–12; and Clarice J. Martin, “The Rhetorical Function of Commercial Language in Paul’s Letter to Philemon (Verse 18),” in *Persuasive Artistry: Studies in*

use and now much better or easier to use (v. 11), he has more uses now, even possibly as a (freed) slave. Indeed, this role change for Onesimus could mean that he is a particular kind of (freed) slave, perhaps not unlike those “favorites” (sexual or otherwise) of an owner-user. In such an ancient “family” situation, a slave owner and his friends would have no difficulty in using such terms of loving kinship.⁵⁹ Of course, Paul often argues about communal belonging in similar terms, even negotiating and commending particular uses of “kin” for erotic purposes in the community and for ἀπόστολοι (1 Cor 7:1–16, 25–40; 9:5; 1 Thess 4:1–6). There was at least some sex “in the family” of the ancient communities addressed by Paul’s letters. In such arguments a (freed) slave being or becoming a “brother” in an assembly does not, by itself, rule out sexual relations with this “brother.” In fact, Paul nowhere condemns or rules out the sexual use of (freed) slaves for such “brothers and sisters.”⁶⁰

In this context, the strange dual prepositional phrases that conclude v. 16 (“both in the flesh and in the lord”) can be clarified. Allen Callahan has pointed to this description of the relationship between the addressee and Onesimus to argue that they are “indeed brothers both literally and spiritually. They are siblings at odds with each other.”⁶¹ Callahan is right to highlight that the “fleshly” role goes with the “lordly” role in this argument and in this community of a κύριος. However, this ignores that the sexual uses of slaves *are* “lordly” uses in the Roman imperial context: the κύριος, or one of his family and friends, is the presumed user (this is simply one of the presumed privileges of being in a “lordly” kyriarchal role). This need not (yet) rule out that Onesimus and the addressee are *actual* kin, though to propose this one would be wise to attend more closely to the sexual use of slaves. In the context of the history of interpretation and the experiences of African Americans, Demetrius K. Williams argues that being a slave and being a “brother” are not

New Testament Rhetoric in Honor of George A. Kennedy (ed. Duane F. Watson; JSNTSup 50; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1991), 321–37. For the creative (if rarely affirmed) argument that Onesimus is the actual brother of the addressee, see Allen Callahan, “Paul’s Epistle to Philemon: Toward an Alternative Argumentum,” *HTR* 86 (1993): 357–76; idem, *Embassy of Onesimus: The Letter of Paul to Philemon* (New Testament in Context; Valley Forge, PA: Trinity Press International, 1997). For more on the resonance of excess and elite male aims of moderation, see Dale B. Martin, “Heterosexism and the Interpretation of Romans 1:18–32,” *BibInt* 3 (1995): 332–55.

⁵⁹ Dale Martin stresses that slaves can play a variety of “family” roles, simultaneously blurring yet maintaining authority structures (“Slave Families and Slaves in Families,” in Balch and Osiek, *Early Christian Families in Context*, 207–30, esp. 207, 222–30).

⁶⁰ See, e.g., S. Scott Bartchy, “Slavery, Greco-Roman,” *ABD* 6:65–73, esp. 69; Briggs, “Paul on Bondage and Freedom,” 114–15, 117; Glancy, *Slavery*, 49, 58, 70; Osiek, “Female Slaves, *Porneia*, and the Limits of Obedience,” in Balch and Osiek, *Early Christian Families in Context*, 255–74, esp. 269–70, 274.

⁶¹ Callahan, *Embassy*, 50.

mutually exclusive possibilities.⁶² Whether in Roman imperial or Southern U.S. contexts, slaves were “children” if not heirs; slaves were “brothers” if not equals; and slaves were “loved” if still obedient and useful (even *because of* the sexual use of slaves).⁶³ Thus, depending on Onesimus’s origins (as a “homegrown” product or one otherwise acquired), he could even be an incarnate sign of this use: a product of the use of a female slave by an owner-user. This distinct, but seldom considered historical possibility is all the more stark in this epistolary instance, given Paul’s use of a verb of embodied generation earlier in the letter (“begetting,” v. 10). From an owner-user’s perspective, such a verbal expression might serve adequately, even affectionately, to describe the products of his (or even her) use of slave bodies.⁶⁴

On Puns and Patrons

Conditions such as those discussed above also recontextualize some of the more troublesome passages in the letter. For instance, if Paul is in fact angling his argument to achieve the manumission of Onesimus (e.g., vv. 16 and 21), it does not necessarily function as a counter to the coercion and $\chi\rho\eta\sigma\iota\varsigma$ delineated here. Manumission is not a lessening of the exploitation of this system but a continuation of it through the management and replacement of less useful bodies. Such argumentation, then, more likely reflects rather than diminishes the ongoing vulnerability of even the freed slave, as these conditions can require erotic duties even after manumission.⁶⁵

These kinds of arguments, whether focused on manumission or some other outcome, tend not to narrow the hierarchical relations Paul expects between the addressee and himself, between the owner-user and Onesimus, or between Paul and Onesimus.⁶⁶ In discussing the hospitality he seeks from the addressee (vv. 20–

⁶² Williams, “Philemon Interpreted: A History,” in *Onesimus, Our Brother: Reading Religion, Race, and Slavery in Philemon* (ed. Matthew V. Johnson Jr., James A. Noel, and Demetrius K. Williams; Minneapolis: Fortress, forthcoming). My thanks go to Dr. Williams for generously sharing a pre-publication draft of his contribution.

⁶³ Dale Martin also discusses a number of inscriptions that combine *dominus* with familial terms like father, mother, brother, and son. See *CIL* 6.21787; 6.36351; 6.2233; and 6.11511; and the discussion in Martin, “Slave Families,” 226 n. 43.

⁶⁴ The same Greek verb ($\gamma\epsilon\nu\acute{\alpha}\omega$) is used for the production of a slave “child” in Phlm 10 and in Gal 4:23. These expressions are compatible with the attitude displayed by the “joke” about Quirinalis in Martial, *Epigrams* 1.84.

⁶⁵ On this ongoing vulnerability, see Horsley, “Slave Systems,” 48–53; Briggs, “Paul on Bondage and Freedom,” 111–13; and Glancy, *Slavery*, 14.

⁶⁶ For further reflections on the relationships between all of these figures and/in the community receiving the letter, in terms of both Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s concept of erotic triangulation (*Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire* [New York: Columbia University Press, 1985], esp. 21–27) and the ethos of contemporary S/M communities, see Marchal, “Foucault at the Foot of Philemon: The Sexual Use of Slaves and Scholarly Evasion” (paper

22), Paul uses the rare optative verb *ὀναίμην* (“may I have this benefit,” v. 20), derived from the same root as Onesimus’s name. Another wordplay and the continuing exchange between Paul and the addressee indicate that the letter’s arguments have not moved past the mind-set of disparaging utility and glib diminution reflected earlier in the letter.

While these arguments reflect and maintain a hierarchical difference between Paul and Onesimus, they also seek to negotiate the situation with the letter’s addressee to generate a similar kind of hierarchical differentiation. Though Paul seeks hospitality from this (likely) owner-user (v. 22) and makes use of Onesimus (vv. 10–13), he also appears to be arguing carefully for how such conditions do not make him the client of the owner-user. To manage such a situation, Paul stresses that he could command this potential patron (v. 8) and that the addressee “owes” the considerable debt of his very self (v. 20). By the end of the argument, Paul declares his confidence in the addressee’s obedience (v. 21), or, as Osiek sums the sentiment of this verse, “if nothing else, you will be obedient.”⁶⁷ If Onesimus was the property or even a gift of this owner-user to Paul, such an argumentative arc is a savvy way to deflect a focus on the benefits Paul has *already* received from this potential patron. By attempting to show indifference to the benefits of such a useful tool, Paul shapes an implicit claim that he did not *need* the service of someone else’s (freed) slave (even if he did use the good-to-use Onesimus [v. 11] or does demand hospitality [v. 22]). If Paul does not want to become someone’s client, his actions and arguments nevertheless indicate that he is willing to take the benefits typically viewed as patronly in the Roman imperial context.⁶⁸ To avoid “owing” the one whom he claims owes him dutiful obedience, then, Paul must recognize that using someone else’s slave, sexually or otherwise, is a matter to be carefully negotiated by the friends and family of the owner-user.⁶⁹ This is likely why Paul implements these patron–client rhetorics of owing and obedience in this letter, because Paul’s apparent actions violated the advice offered by Horace above (he made use of another’s slave).

Further, Paul is aiming not simply to avoid this dynamic but to reverse the ancient expectations about such an exchange by seeking obedience from the potential patron. This likely explains the oddly emphatic comparative turn of phrase when Paul insists that Onesimus is also “a beloved brother, especially to me, but

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⁶⁷ Osiek, *Philippians, Philemon*, 142. Callahan (*Embassy*, 64) also sees the following verse as a “tacit threat.”

⁶⁸ On patronage and friendship, see John T. Fitzgerald, “Paul and Friendship,” in *Paul in the Greco-Roman World: A Handbook* (ed. J. Paul Sampley; Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 2003), 319–43; and Marchal, “‘With Friends Like These . . .’: A Feminist Rhetorical Reconsideration of Scholarship and the Letter to the Philippians,” *JSNT* 29 (2006): 77–106.

⁶⁹ See the caution required for this situation (noted above) in Horace, *Ep.* 1.18.72–75.

how much (more) especially to you" (v. 16). The one whom Paul is sending, described as his "child" and his "brother," is *even more* the "brother" of the addressee. Even if and as some differentiations persisted among "kin" in the communities (which is why Paul addresses the owner-user, not Onesimus), Paul is indicating that he is more above and less like (or "akin" to) the (freed) slave than the addressee is. Thus, even as Paul may be trying to rearrange the format of patronage through this letter, there are few indications that the forms and practices of the use of slaves (sexual or otherwise) are reordered. Rather, it demonstrates just another instance where grappling with the unexceptional historical conditions of the *χρῆσις* of slaves offers vital contextual clues and rhetorical cues for a richer understanding of the letter to Philemon.

III. A CONCLUSION BY WAY OF OBJECTIONS AND HYPOTHESES

The largest scholarly objection to the argument of this article is likely to invoke Paul's arguments elsewhere for particular kinds of erotic austerity, moderation, and self-control. There is little in these letters that is incompatible with reading Philemon in light of the sexual use of slaves. In both Paul's letters and the ancient priapic protocol discussed above, the priority is on managing one's self, treating a wife, and generally expressing one's status (particularly that of dominion) in appropriate ways. In the priapic protocol, the sexual use of slaves is a mostly consequence-free strategy for properly fulfilling these roles. Recall that in this context the *χρῆσις* of slaves is one way to show respect to one's wife (Plutarch) or to indulge in ways that still preserve one's purity (Epictetus). In such a worldview, sexual contact with women and young male slaves need not contradict the reputation for chastity of a figure such as Virgil (in Seutonius).

Thus, Paul's stated *preference* in 1 Corinthians for the community members to be as he is, unmarried and implicitly self-controlled (7:8–9), is not necessarily incompatible with ancient views of the sexual use of slaves. Paul's earlier condemnations of contact with prostitutes (*πόρνη*, 6:15–17) suggest some limits on the use of at least those slaves who were prostitutes (that is, many prostitutes). Yet one cannot safely and responsibly argue that such condemnations extend the category of *πορνεία* ("prostitution") to the sexual use of all slaves, including especially the use of a household slave.⁷⁰ As Glancy's work continuously stresses, Paul's own arguments are evidence that he was not particularly concerned with this vulnerability.

⁷⁰ There is considerable ambiguity as to whether making use of a *πόρνη* would be viewed as *πορνεία* in the Roman imperial context. Paul's letters never clearly delineate what *πορνεία* is, only that it is problematic. See Briggs, "Paul on Bondage and Freedom," 116–17; Glancy, *Slavery*, 49–50, 58–66; and Osiek, "Female Slaves," 268–70. As in Philemon, Paul is comfortable using slave images and arguments in 1 Cor 6:19–20.

Indeed, Glancy also highlights how other passages might, in fact, fit rather than contradict such use in the communities. For instance, Paul similarly exhorts an (androcentric) audience to “obtain his own vessel” (1 Thess 4:4) in order to avoid *πορνεία* (4:3–6).⁷¹ Glancy suggests that Paul is calling for them to “find morally neutral outlets for their sexual urges. . . . domestic slaves were considered to be morally neutral outlets for sexual urges—vessels, we might say.”⁷² This suggestion looks even stronger when one notes how the purpose of getting such a vessel (*σκεῦος*) is to prevent wronging another “brother” (4:6).⁷³ Viewed this way, Philemon and 1 Thessalonians are similarly negotiating issues around the sexual use of slaves without damaging the rights of another in the community. In his letters, Paul is not outraged by *χρῆσις* but only by “unnatural” uses, those that violate the isomorphism between erotic contact and the kyriarchal order.⁷⁴ The *χρῆσις* of slaves was not considered an unnatural use, nor would it have been necessarily thought a violation of calls for chastity or an infringement on marriage practices. The interpretation of Philemon under development here, then, need not be viewed as inconsistent with the arguments found elsewhere in Paul’s letters.

In terms of the specific contextualization of this letter, the additional virtue of my argument here is that it can act as a complement to, an addition to, or an elaboration of many of the rhetorical and historical analyses of Philemon. As we scholars struggle to find a sufficient context for this brief epistle, the sexual use of slaves can add shade and nuance to various hypotheses regarding the occasion of this letter. In terms of ancient legal, social, literary, and moral background, this condition of slavery has nearly as much historical attestation as the conditions lifted up by various fugitive slave, emissary, apprenticed slave, and third-party intercession hypotheses that have assembled around the interpretation of this letter.⁷⁵

⁷¹ See Glancy, *Slavery*, 60; but also Beverly Roberts Gaventa, *First and Second Thessalonians* (Interpretation; Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1998), 53.

⁷² Glancy, *Slavery*, 60. For a similarly instrumental argument that makes an exception for the adult male community member(s), see 1 Cor 7:36–38.

⁷³ This “vessel” (*σκεῦος*) recurs in the only other letter where *εὐχρηστος* appears (2 Tim 2:21; 4:11). Dominion and utility arguments persist into later “Pauline” traditions, as the purpose of preparing a vessel is to become useful to the master of the house (*δεσπότης*, 2 Tim 2:21).

⁷⁴ See Brooten, *Love between Women*, 216, 241–53.

⁷⁵ The fugitive slave hypothesis is the traditional and predominant interpretation, as reflected in recent works such as Larry J. Kreitzer, *Philemon* (Readings; Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix, 2008), 38–52; and John Byron, *Recent Research on Paul and Slavery* (Recent Research in Biblical Studies 3; Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix, 2008), 116–27. On the theory that Onesimus was sent as an emissary, see especially Winter, “Paul’s Letter.” For the influential (if contested) suggestion that Onesimus legally sought a friend of the owner to intercede on his behalf, see Peter Lampe, “Keine ‘Sklavenflucht’ des Onesimus,” *ZNW* 76 (1985): 133–37. Harrill (*Slaves*, 7–11, 14–18) disputes Lampe’s hypothesis and proposes the relevance of different materials, for example, journeyman apprentice contracts.

Though this element of slavery is both ubiquitous and unexceptional in the ancient sources on slavery, it has been neither in interpretations of Philemon. This is unfortunate, since the argument of this article does not require the sexual use of slaves to be the exclusive explanatory condition or exegetical illumination for the letter. This use of slaves, for instance, can provide additional historical and rhetorical support to hypotheses about Onesimus as a runaway slave, but not only to these theories. My present argument about the letter, then, is compatible not only with arguments from other Pauline letters but also with arguments from many other Philemon interpreters. If taken seriously, such compatibilities should continue to be disturbing challenges, as they generate significantly different and troubling questions and consequences for the interpretation of Paul's letters. The letter's echo of a kyriarchal ethos requires that we find other, ethically and politically accountable uses for letters that reflect this kind of *χρῆσις*.

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