SOME MATTERS FAVOURING THE RUNAWAY SLAVE HYPOTHESIS IN PHILEMON

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Abstract
Recent scholarship draws distinctions between ancient ‘roaming’ slaves (errones) and runaways (fugitivi), and suggests further that Onesimus was a menial in the employ of his master Philemon. Pertinent evidence in the parables and extra-biblical material suggests, however, that (1) the line between ‘roaming’ and running away was muddled; (2) Onesimus could have been a highly trusted slave in Philemon’s household, not a menial; and (3) responsible slaves had access to the master’s wealth, were capable of betraying trusting masters and mistresses without provocation, and were susceptible to the type of servile diversions one easily imagines Onesimus fell prey to. Light cast on Onesimus’ likely role in the household of Philemon continues to favour the runaway slave hypothesis in Philemon.

Although many support—with great enthusiasm—the idea that Onesimus ran away from Philemon, comparatively few have attempted to shed light on the particular circumstances themselves that possibly attended Onesimus’ flight. The fathers of the church assumed that Onesimus ran away, and it has been suggested that certain details within the letter provide “solid support for the runaway slave hypothesis” (Nordling 1991, 108). Some scholars remain opposed to the runaway

1 An earlier form of the paper was presented to fourth year Theology students in a seminar on Paul and the Pauline literature within the Department of New Testament Studies at the Faculty of Theology, University of Pretoria, on 19 May 2009. I would like to thank Dr. Kirk Freudenburg, Professor of Latin, Department of Classics, Yale University, for suggestions used in this article’s conclusion; Matthew Zickler, a student and technical assistant at Concordia Theological Seminary, for help accessing the online Duke Database of Documentary Papyri (DDBDP); Dr. David Coles, Seconded Professor of Historical Theology, Concordia Theological Seminary, for help with secondary scholarship in French; and Professor Roland Ziegler, Assistant Professor of Systematic Theology, Concordia Theological Seminary, for help with secondary scholarship in German.

2 For surveys of scholars who support traditional views cf. Nordling 1991, 97-8 n.1; 2004, 4 n.9.

3 Nordling 1991, 118 n.1; 2004, 244-245 nn.31-34; Gorday 2000, 315-316.

4 The passages elaborated upon in Nordling 1991, 107-114 were “whom I am sending on to you [δι᾽ ἀνεπαγωγόν μοι]” (Phlm 12a); “for perhaps for this reason he was separated for a while

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slave hypothesis in principle, and I shall be among the first to admit that the evidence—such as it is—can be interpreted variously. However, I also insist that the foundations upon which the runaway slave hypothesis rests in Philemon are sound. Thus, there could have been “a… pattern of runaway slave behaviour” (Nordling 1991, 99) to which Onesimus conformed before his conversion and return to Philemon bearing Paul’s letter. This article, then, brings forward some additional matters favouring the runaway slave hypothesis in Philemon. I shall examine, in particular, the overlap between servile “roaming” and “running away” that existed in antiquity, and the likelihood that Onesimus was a managerial slave in Philemon’s employ, not a menial. Next, I will consider extra-biblical evidence demonstrating that responsible slaves could have routine access to the master’s wealth, were capable of betraying trusting masters and mistresses sometimes, and were susceptible to the sort of servile diversions to which one suspects Onesimus might have yielded. Finally, I shall attempt to respond to the most damning criticism to be leveled against the runaway slave hypothesis thus far: that traditional scholars “read in” interpretative backgrounds not warranted by the text. The results of investigations conducted here continue to favour the runaway slave hypothesis in Philemon.

I. Was Onesimus a Roaming Slave (Erro) or Runaway (Fugiitrus)?

Arzt-Grabner (2001a; 2004, 141-142) has prepared for Paul’s letter an interpretation in which he argues, among other things, that Onesimus was “a

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5 E.g., Callahan 1997, 5-6: “Nowhere is it explicitly stated that Onesimus had run away, and the motive for such action is equally obscure. The entire fugitive slave hypothesis was cogently challenged by John Knox [1959] ... Arguments for the untenability of the fugitive slave hypothesis have been recovered from the rubble only recently and augmented in the independent treatments of Peter Lampe [1985, 135-137] and Sarah Winter [1984, 203-212; 1987, 1-15].”

roaming slave” (Lat. *erro*) but not a runaway (fugitivus), a position shared by Lampe (1985, 137) and others (e.g., Dunn 1996, 304-06; Fitzmyer 2000, 20). Legally, an *erro* was “a vagrant slave” who left his master’s house in order to roam about and who, “after spending his [the slave’s own] money”, returned to his master (Berger 1953, 456). Negatively, the reason why Onesimus had to be an *erro*, according to Arzt-Grabner (2001a, 605), was because “there are no explicit hints [for the runaway slave hypothesis] in the text [of Philemon]”. Positively, Arzt-Grabner believes evidence afforded by pertinent extra-biblical papyri favours the roaming slave theory over that of the runaway slave hypothesis. Here are two passages in Philemon, supplemented by papyri Arzt-Grabner believes support the roaming slave theory:

- the phrase that Onesimus was “once... useless” to Philemon ([Ωνήσιμον...] τὸν ποτὲ οὖν ἀρησθένον, Phlm 11) is thought to correspond to the phrase “for you know how I need him every hour [ὁδὸς γὰρ πῶς αὐτοῦ | ἐκκύκλωσεν ὁδὸς ἑρῆξεν [τὸν]]” (*BGU* 1 37.6-7; 12 September CE 50; in Arzt-Grabner 2001a, 606; 2003, 210; 2004, 135 n. 18);7
- the phrase “he [Onesimus] was parted from you for a while” (ἐξορθῆθη πρὸς ὄραν, Phlm 15) is thought to correspond to the phrase “and he did not dare to land here, but he went away [χωρισθέντος] to the Herakleopolite nome [καὶ ὁδὲ μὴν οὐκέτι τολμήσαντος ὑποβῆσαν, εἰς δὲ τὸν Ἠρακλεόπολίτην | χωρισθέντος]” (*UPZ* 1.19.13-14; Memphis, 163 BCE; in Arzt-Grabner 2001a, 607; emphasis added).

These examples suggest that correspondences between the text of Philemon and the documentary papyri can be quite subtle. Indeed, the first example above shows only surface similarities between the documentary papyri and Paul’s letter to Philemon. Nevertheless, further consideration of Arzt-Grabner’s work reveals that there are in fact many significant correspondences. We will consider more of these in Part II below.

Here let us probe Arzt-Grabner’s theory that Onesimus was not a runaway (fugitivus) but was instead a roaming slave (*erro*). In a rescript that should be considered quite pertinent to Arzt-Grabner’s argument, I note, first, that in efforts used to track down runaways in order to bring them to justice, the line between fugitivi and errones seems quite blurred:

Unusquisque eorum, qui fugitivum adpraehendit, in publicum deducere debet. Et merito momentur magistratus eos diligenter custodire, ne evadant. Fugitivum accepit et si quis erro sit. Fugitivi autem appellatone ex fugitiva natum non contineri Labeo libro primo ad edictum scribit.

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7 The papyrus appears also in Olsson 1924, 96-98; Deissmann 1927, 170-71; White 1986, 138.
Every person who apprehends a runaway [qui fugitivum adpraehendit] must produce him in public. Magistrates are rightly warned to keep careful guard on them in case they escape. “Runaway” should be interpreted as covering a truant as well [fugitivum accipe et si quis erro sit]. But Labeo, in the first book of Edict, writes that the term “runaway” does not include a child born to a female runaway (Dig. 11.4.1.1.3-5, citing Ulpian [CE 211-222] and Labeo [flor. CE 1-5; died ca. CE 15]; trans. Watson 1985, 1.345). 8 Hence the problem with Arzt-Grabner’s examples from the documentary papyri—as pertinent as several of them are—is that quite often it is impossible to tell whether the ancients really had slave runaways in mind, or mere wanderers (or “truants”, following Watson’s translation of the word erro in the passage above). The texts Arzt-Grabner cites do not preserve a clear distinction between wanderers and runaways, which must represent overlapping categories. Indeed, the law code cited above states that the term “runaway” should be “interpreted as covering a truant as well” (fugitivum accipe et si quis erro sit; trans. Watson 1985, 1.345), and there are additional examples in Roman literature wherein the words “runaway” (fugitivus) and “wanderer” (erro) occur literally in the same breath. 9 Two more examples suggest that “running away” and “wandering” could be used virtually interchangeably:

- “And while amusing himself with other slaves [vernaculis], the careless vagabond [vagus atque erro] found Plato without looking for him” (younger Seneca, Ben. 6.11.2, Basore, LCL [of a slave sent on the errand of finding Plato in the marketplace]);
- “Nevertheless, he too [the king bee] must be despoiled of his wings when he oft-times attempts to break out with his swarm and fly away [profugere]; for, if we strip him of his wings, we shall keep the vagrant chieftain [erronem ducem] as though in fetters chained, who, deprived of the resources of flight [fugae destitutus praesidio], ventures not to leave the confines of his realm” (Columella, Rust. 9.10.3, Forster and Heffner, LCL [agricultural treatise]).

Second, as to Arzt-Grabner’s observation (2001a, 605) that “there are no explicit hints” for the runaway slave hypothesis in Philemon, let us briefly consider my original argument that it would not have served Paul’s conciliatory purpose had he been more forthright about the issue that undoubtedly obliged him to write the

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8 Although the Digest was not published until CE 533-534 (Jones 1970, 571), it contains the names and legal pronouncements of many earlier jurisprudents. I have used the dates for Labeo and Ulpian provided in Clark 1906, 156-63.

9 Elder Seneca Contr. 7.6.23: “He is not a runaway or a vagrant [fugitivum, erronem non esse]” (my trans.); Horace Sat. 2.7.113-14: “you shun yourself, a runaway and vagabond [fugitivus et erro], seeking now with wine, and now with sleep, to baffle care” (my trans.).
letter to Philemon in the first place (Nordling 1991, 118-19; cf. Byron 2004, 129; Kreitzer 2008, 68). Thus, Paul referred to Onesimus’ illicit activities “euphemistically” (Meyer 1880, 378; Nordling 2004, 244). As Garland (1998, 300) has suggested, a runaway slave incident would have involved others beyond the one fugitivus, and such a situation could only have set the master in a bad light—especially if (as most suppose) master Philemon was a Christian: “It caused a master to lose face as one who could not control his slaves or as a brutal master who drove his slaves to try something desperate” (Garland 1998, 300 n. 29; cf. Llewelyn 1992, 60). Garland’s further comparison (1998, 300) between household dynamics that quite possibly lay behind Onesimus’ theft and flight and the kind of “sexual molestation and violence” that can infiltrate Christian homes yet today seems apropos. I maintain, then, that the nature of the situation required the utmost diplomacy on Paul’s part, and that tact and diplomacy go farthest in explaining the famous obliqueness that has become such a distinguishing feature of the letter (e.g., White 1971, 36; Wilson 1992, 118). Modern pastors, counselors, therapists, and anyone else involved in the sordid affairs of others should be able to see why Paul could not, in effect, have crassly blurted, “Hey, Philemon! Forgive Onesimus for having stolen so much property from you and for having run away. Then send him right back to me, okay?” (Nordling 2004, 142; original emphases). Arzt-Grabner realizes (2001a, 605 n. 93; 2004, 132 n. 7), in fact, that the letter’s lack of explicitness could well have been caused by Paul’s “pastoral discretion” in the matter (citing Nordling 1991, 118), yet fails to take seriously the impact that such discretion would have had to have on Paul’s word choice and written style.

It cannot be denied, of course, that—legally speaking—there was indeed a distinction between “running away” and “wandering”:

sed proprae errone sic definitus: qui non quidem fugit, sed frequenter sine causa vagatur et tempore in res nugatorias consumptis serius domum reedit.

However, if we wish to be accurate, we define a wanderer as one who does not indeed run away but frequently indulges in aimless roaming and, after wasting time on trivialities, returns home at a late hour (Dig. 21.1.17.14, Ulpian; trans. Watson 1985, 2.607).

Ulpian provided this distinction because the earlier jurist Labeo defined an erro as a “petty runaway” (pusillum fugitivum) and—to put it differently (ex diverso)—a fugitivus as a “great wanderer” (magnum errorem). Arzt-Grabner notes the distinction, but fails to make much of it; I merely point out that definitions—

11 Arzt-Grabner 2004, 141 n. 43: “Ulpian schreibt dies gegen Labeo, der den erro zu vereinfacht definiert als pusillum fugitivus (‘kleinen Flüchtigen’) und umgekehrt den fugitivus als magnum erro (‘großen Herumtrieber’; Dig. 21,1,17,14).”
especially for Labeo—seem quite muddled: “Labeo defines them as greater and less degrees of the same offence” (Buckland 1908, 55). To be sure, Ulpian tried to tidy things up (above) but his attempts at greater exactitude must indicate that also for him there was considerable overlap, and another jurist, Callistratus (CE 193-205), attempted to distinguish still more finely between “simple runaways” (fugitivi simplices) and “runaways” of yet other kinds (Digest 11.4.2). It must have been difficult to determine just what the categories were:

The Digest ... records a complex historical development (over a period of at least two hundred years) for the technical term servus fugitivus, whose final definition could not be found without resorting to excessively fine distinctions in reasoning. The relevance of all this hairsplitting for the exegesis of Philemon is difficult to see (Harrill 1999, 136; cf. Byron 2008, 129).

At any rate, it seems obvious that—from the perspectives of Paul and Philemon in the mid-fifties to early sixties CE—there could not have been too great a difference between “running away” and “roaming” either. There may, indeed, have been a different “attitude of mind” between the two activities (Buckland 1908, 56), but one senses that Paul would not have been overly concerned about maintaining minute legal distinctions between two categories that seem easily to have coalesced, both in the legal codes and in practicality. On the other hand, Paul would have cared a lot about the sort of crimes on Onesimus’ part that could have put Philemon and the house congregation at peril. We will consider several of the more well-known crimes in Part III below; here it is enough to point out that the words “if he has wronged you at all, or owes you anything” (ἐὰν αὐτῷ ἔτηκαν τις ὑμῖν ἢ ὑπέκειται, 18a RSV) need not be so “vague” as has sometimes been suggested (e.g., Llewelyn 1998, 40). Indeed, this part of Paul’s letter may actually contain a quite telling hint of illicit activities once undertaken by Onesimus against his master Philemon:

Onesimus is the implicit subject of the verbs “to do wrong” (ἀδικάω) and “to owe” (ὀφείλω). These two verbs occur in documents designating the illegal activities of people who refuse to pay debts and so incur criminal prosecution. In one papyrus, for example, Attalus complains, “I am being wronged” (ἀδικοῦμαι) by Ptolemaios in the matter of a failed debt.14 In

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12 I have accepted the dating of Kreitzer (2008, 2).
13 Harrill 1999, 137: “If Cicero and Quintilian conducted their daily affairs in Rome with little contact or regard for the technical deliberations of the iurisconsulti, then provincials like the apostle Paul and Philemon would have had even less contact with, and concern for, such minutiae”.
14 “I am being wronged by Ptolemaios, younger [son] of the Ptolemaios [who is] the tax-gatherer of private affairs [ἀδικοῦμαι ὑπὸ Πτολέμαιον μείζονος τοῦ Πτολέμαιος πρόκτορος ἰδιωτικῶν]” (P.Mich. 1 71.1; Philadelphia, 247-221 BCE; my trans.). That the verb ἀδικάω in
Demetrius proceeds against several guarantors who owe (ὀφείλον) hundreds... of unpaid drachmas for olive oil and wine.15

Paul’s use of this same terminology provides a clue as to the sort of activity in which Onesimus may well have engaged before his estrangement from Philemon and flight: probably fraud and/or financial mismanagement. Yet Paul deemphasizes Onesimus’[s] infidelities by casting them into a conditional clause: “If [εἰ] he has wronged you...”. That way the emphasis rests on Paul’s all-important promise to make amends: “Charge this to my account. I, Paul, ... will repay” (vv 18b-19a) (Nordling 2004, 261-262; original emphases).16

the passive voice meant “to be wronged” financially is suggested by the following examples: “So I beg you, if it seems right to you, don’t overlook that I have been wronged by him [μην περιθύς με δοκιμήθηνα ὥς αὐτοῖς]” (P.Mich. I 71.6; Philadelphia, 247-221 BCE); “I am being wronged [ἀδικούμενος] by one Pasinosiris and Theodotos and Horos” (P.Mich. III 173.3; III cent. BCE); “your kindheartedness persuades those who have been wronged [τοὺς ἀδικηθήνας] to approach you fearlessly” (P.Berl.Frisk 3.6-7; Arsinoe, CE 211-212); “I won’t allow you to be wronged [οὐκ ἂν σε ἀδικηθήνα]” (CPR VIII 84.6; VII-VIII cent. CE). That the same verb in the passive may also occur non-technically is suggested by the following: “we found the workers of the apparatus completely overcome by the fire [καὶ τὸν πυρὸς ἀδικηθήνας τέλεσον] and, having come to their aid [καὶ ἁμαρτάνετε], we put out the fire” (P.Oxy. XL 2297.11-15; Oxyrhynchus, CE 214; my trans.).

15 “...owing me [ὀφείλον μοί] as a price for olives [πρὸς τιμὴν ἐλαίας] 1300 drachmas” (P.Mich. III 173.7-8; III cent. BCE; my trans.). I shall provide a translation of the first seventeen lines of P.Mich. III 173 in Part III below. Here it is enough to mention that this papyrus is riddled with formulae that occur in many papyri of this type, e.g., for ὀφείλον μοί (“owing me”, P.Mich. III 173.7) cf. BGU VI 1255.10 (I cent. BCE); P.Enteux 35.2 (Magdola; 222 BCE); P.Hib. I 30.D.15 (Hibeh; 300-271 BCE); P.Stras. IV 210.12 (Arsnome; CE 90-96); for ὀφείλον (“owing”, P.Mich. III 173.27) cf. P.Mich. V 314.4 (Tebtunis; I cent. CE); P.Mich. IX 554.34, 51 (Karanis; CE 81-96), etc.; for προσωπεύθηκα (“he owed”, P.Mich. III 173.21-22) cf. BGU VII 1506.16 (Philadelphia; III BCE); P.Cair.Zen. III 59366.14 (Philadelphia; 241 BCE); P.Cair.Zen. III 59499.11 (Philadelphia; III cent. BCE); P.Cair.Zen. IV 59645.2 (Philadelphia; III cent. BCE); P.Cair.Zen. IV 59651.6 (Philadelphia; III cent. BCE); P.Eleph. 27.12 (Elephantine; 223-222 BCE); P.Grad. 10A.12, 39 (Tholthis; 215-214 BCE); P.Grad. 10B.17 (Tholthis; 215-214 BCE); P.Lond. VII 2153.7 (Philadelphia; III cent. BCE); PSI V 510.11 (Philadelphia; 254-253 BCE); P.Teht. III 815.2.17-18 (Tebtunis; 228-221 BCE); P.Teht. III 818.16 (Tebtunis; 174 BCE); P.Teht. III 884.3.44 (Tebtunis; 210 BCE).

16 In response to Martin’s assertion (1991, 333) that, on account of the conditional clause (εἰ) in Phlm 18a, we cannot say “with certainty that Onesimus harmed or injured (εἵκοσιν) Philemon” (original emphasis), one might fairly reply that we also cannot say—with certainty—that Onesimus did not harm or injure Philemon. Pearson points out (1999, 269) that first-class conditionals “carry the least interpretative weight”. If possible, the greater context of the letter should determine the situation (Robertson and Davis 1979, 350; Glaze 1996, 8-9), not the type of condition the sentence may be.
II. Onesimus’ Likely Occupation

It would help to know what job the slave Onesimus held in Philemon’s household, although “we do not know anything precise about [his] duties” (Arzt-Grabner 2001a, 600). Although Arzt-Grabner mentions a wide range of occupations in which Onesimus (or any slave) might possibly have engaged, he does not suppose that Onesimus’ rank in Philemon’s household was very high and he speculates further that Onesimus probably was “working in the house or in the fields of Philemon”, or perhaps was a “messenger or craftsman” (Arzt-Grabner 2001a, 601). The reason why Onesimus’ servitude could not have been very high, according to Arzt-Grabner, is because several turns of phrase in Philemon lead one to suspect that Paul was familiar with apprentice contracts, particularly those associated with a specialized type of weaver known as a τυσικάριος (“weaver of Tarsian fabrics”, Liddell, Scott and Jones 1940, 1759 s.v. τυσικάριος). Thus, when Paul reminds Philemon in verse 8 that he has much boldness in Christ “to command” Philemon (ἐπιτάσσεις σοι), this could indicate Paul’s awareness of apprenticeships in weaving contracts of about the same time period wherein the verb ἐπιτάσσο (trans. Arzt-Grabner 2001a, 600: “We find slaves in domestic service or in agriculture, we find them as messengers, craftsmen, stenographers, musicians, as rented nurses and prostitutes, but also as managers and trustees for their owners, or within the Roman administration”.

17 Arzt-Grabner 2001a, 600: “We find slaves in domestic service or in agriculture, we find them as messengers, craftsmen, stenographers, musicians, as rented nurses and prostitutes, but also as managers and trustees for their owners, or within the Roman administration”.

18 Lexicographers use the following passages to support this definition: P.Lips. 26.9 [IV CE]; P.Lips. 89.2 [CE 379?]; I am able to provide these additional passages: BGU III 738.3 (CE 323-642); BGU III 750.5 (21 August CE 655); CPR XIV 16.9-10 (8 September 674 CE); P.Bodl. I 27.19 (II CE); P.Lond. II 387.3, 4 (VI-VII CE); P.Palaurib. 14.6 (26 January-24 February CE 431); P.Ross.Georg. III 56.3 (26 April-25 May CE 707); P.Stras. VII 618.24 (ca. CE 310-320); PSI IV 287.4 (29 December CE 377); PSI Congr. XVII 27.4 (beginning IV CE); SB X 10236.13-15 (CE 36).

19 E.g., ποιοῦντα πάντα τὰ ἐπιτασσόμενα αὐτῶ | ὑπὸ τοῦ Σαμῖου κατὰ τὴν γεροδικὴν τέχνην (P.Oxy. XLI 2971.9-12 [CE 66]); ποιοῦντα πάντα τὰ ἐπιτασσόμενα αὐτῶ | ὑπὸ τοῦ Ἰρύ[τος] κατὰ τὴν γεροδικὴν | τέχνην (P.Oxy.Hels. 29.12-14 [CE 54]); ποιοῦντα τὰ πάντα τὰ ἐπιτασσόμενα αὐτῶν | ὑπὸ τοῦ Ἀμάρου | κατὰ τὴν γεροδικὴν τέχνην (SB X 1036.13-15 [CE 36]).
account for several additional phrases in Philemon that seem just as suggestive, e.g.:

- the phrase, “that he might serve me [ἵνα ... μοι διακονή, Phlm 13b]” corresponds to the phrase, “serving [διακονοῦντα] and doing all the deeds that shall be ordered him by Abaros according to the weavers’ trade [διακονοῦντα καὶ ποιοῦντα] to the ἄργα πάντα τά ἑπτάσσωμαι αὐτῷ ὑπὸ τοῦ Πολεμαίου κατὰ τήν γεροδικήν τῆς πασίου]” (SB X 10236.12-15; CE 52; in Arzt-Grabner 2001b, 72-73; 2003, 67),20

- the phrase, “apart from your consent [χορής δὲ τίς σὴς γνώμης, Phlm 14a]” corresponds to the phrase, “without his own consent [δίκαι γίνει τῇς ἑαυτοῦ γνώμης]” (Stud.Pal. XXII 40.18-19; CE 140; in Arzt-Grabner 2001b, 73 and 2003, 219 n. 145);

- the phrase, “I will repay [ἐγὼ ἀποτίσω, Phlm 19a]” corresponds to the phrase, “If he does not perform [ποιήσῃς] all the tasks, let him pay back [ἀποτελέσαι] to the master for each day wherein he was idle one drachma of silver [ἐὰν δὲ μὴ ποιήσῃς πάντα] τὰ ἑπτάσσωμαι τοῖς διδασκάλωις | ἐκ [᾿αὐτῷ τῆς ἡμέρας, ἢ ἐὰν ἀποτίσῃς] | [σε ἰς ἵ Ὄγοιν ἐμφυλέτημα]” (Stud.Pal. XXIV 16253.6-11; CE 98-103).

20 The following formulae are very similar: “serving [διακονοῦντα] and doing all the things that have been ordered him by Ptolemaios according to the entire weavers’ trade [διακονοῦντα καὶ ποιοῦντα] to the ἄργα πάντα τά ἑπτάσσωμαι αὐτῷ ὑπὸ τοῦ Πολεμαίου κατὰ τήν γεροδικήν τῆς πασίου]” (P.Oxy. II 275.10-13; CE 66); “serving [διακονοῦντα] and doing all the things that have been ordered him [διακονοῦντα καὶ ποιοῦντα] to the ἄργα]” (P.Wisc. I 4.20-23; CE 53; in Arzt-Grabner 2001b, 74 n. 12; 2003, 68).

21 For the formula, “let him repay so-and-so [ἀποτίσωμαι] and Dative”, cf. P.Alex. 9.2 (I CE); P.Athen. 14.26 (30 October CE 22); P.Oslo. II 16.10 (261-260 BCE); P.Tebt.Wall 12.26 (14-23 June CE 101); C.Pop.Gr. I 24.11(23 July CE 87). For the more emphatic expression προσπαρατίσωμαι + Dative (where the compound form of the verb is used), cf. P.Humb. III 217.13 (I CE); P.Mert. III 109.17-18 (II CE); PSI X 1118.23 (CE 25-26).

22 For the expression, “I may owe in addition [προσφέρομαι]”, cf. P.Cair.Zen. III 59317.12 (250 BCE); P.Cair.Zen. III 59516.21-22 (275-225 BCE); P.Cair.Zen. IV 59626.2-3 (275-225 BCE); P.Lond. VII 1940.73 (26 April 257 BCE).
Many more examples could be added, and indeed Arzt-Grabner’s “papyrological” commentary on Philemon (2003) does nothing but establish clear, convincing correspondences between Paul’s letter and the 1,791 papyri, ostraca, and tablets I count in his commentary’s Verzeichnis (Arzt-Grabner 2003, 279-307). Arzt-Grabner shows repeatedly that Paul must have been familiar with all pertinent legal and social aspects of Greco-Roman culture that the ancient documents—and also Paul’s letter to Philemon—presume. Particularly convincing are the following modest conclusions Arzt-Grabner puts forward in an article wherein he attempts to draw connections between the work that transpired in Philemon’s house and ancient weavers (2001b, 74-75): first, that St. Paul, the working apostle, probably had a keen understanding of the apprentice contracts of working men and women in then-contemporary society; second, that since Paul was himself a working man by profession (Acts 18:3) he could very well have been familiar with every aspect of ancient craftsmanship, such as, e.g., weaving; and third, that Paul quite possibly had himself been apprenticed by his own parents to a “Webermeister oder Zeltmachermeister” during childhood—even though, as Arzt-Grabner himself admits (2001b, 74)—this latter possibility “ist spekulativ”. 

In conceding such points to Arzt-Grabner, however, one ought not imagine that the latter’s scholarship is completely “the final word” on Philemon, first, because even Arzt-Grabner overlooks pertinent papyrological corre-spondences sometimes and, second, the papyri illumine background aspects that may or may not reflect situations encountered by Paul and those congregations for whom he wrote: “As one might expect, by far the larger part of the evidence that can be gained from the papyri informs us about socioeconomic realities rather than about religious or, for that matter, theological issues” (Verheyden 2007, 440). Thus, not even on the basis of the papyrological nature of the evidence can it be demonstrated that Onesimus had to be a menial. There was, to be sure, an old

25 E.g., for the expression, “you owe to me your very self in addition [καὶ σεαυτόν μοι προσφέρεις, Philm 19b]” Arzt-Grabner (2001b, 74; 2003, 245) inexplicably overlooks the highly pertinent word προσφέρεις in the following documents: P.Cair.Zen. III 59326.125 (13 February 249 BCE); P.Cair.Zen. IV 59564.1 (ca. 251 BCE); P.Cair.Zen. IV 59690.1 (257-256 BCE); P.Hal. 13.3-4 (III BCE); P.Lond. VII 1995.335 (October 251 BCE); P.Lond. VII 2002.7-8 (ca. 13 February 249 BCE); SB 1 4369.B.25 (III BCE). Arzt-Grabner (2003, 245) does, to be sure, note the occurrence of προσφέρεις in P.Hib. 1 63.14-15 (ca. 265 BCE); and O.Petr. 280.5 (13 September CE 53).
26 While technically a criticism of Arzt-Grabner, Kritzer, Papathomas, Winter 2006, the same is no less true of perspectives adopted in Arzt-Grabner 2003.
association between manual labour and slavery, but this is a conceit that Paul and the first Christians by no means shared so we should consider the possibility that Onesimus’ servitude could have been of a much different nature than that commonly presumed by scholars who often focus on such negative aspects of slavery as violence and sexual exploitation. In fact, a much more positive view of slavery is often warranted (Lyall 1984, 38, 125; Barclay 1991, 167; Byron 2004, 134, 136; 2008, 140-41; Nordling 2009).

What type of servitude might Onesimus have rendered, then? I believe a quite pertinent parallel is afforded by the elite managerial slaves featured in several of Jesus’ parables. Consider, e.g., the servant entrusted with supervision (Matt 24.45-51//Luke 12:42-48): the master, on taking leave of the household, puts this faithful and wise slave in charge of the other slaves “to give them their food at the proper time” (τοῦ δοῦναι τούτοις τὴν τροφὴν ἐν καιρῷ, Matt 24:45). To be sure, this managerial slave fails to measure up to his master’s trust and so begins to beat (τύπτειν, Matt 24:49//Luke 12:45) his fellow slaves. The verb τύπτειν (in both versions) represents the action of one who thinks he can behave as a master; moreover, this same fellow “eats and drinks” (ἐσθιεῖ καὶ πίνει, Matt 24:49) with

27 “Unbecoming to a gentleman ... and vulgar [illiberales ... et sordidi] are the means of livelihood of all hired workmen whom we pay for mere manual labour, not for artistic skill; for in their case the very wages they receive is a pledge of their slavery [ipsa merces auctoramentum servitutis]” (Cicero Off. 1.150, Miller, LCL). The passage has received much attention: Westermann 1955, 27 nn.75-76; Cowell 1961, 112, 114; Finley 1973, 41-43; MacMullen 1974, 115 n. 86; Shelton 1988, 129-30; Barnett 1993, 927; Bradley 1994, 65.

28 Nordling 2008, 13: “The New Testament reflects a quite different attitude toward work from that encountered in the classical sources. Much had to do with the first Christians’ physical and social environments. Theirs simply was a world of work and trade, of craftsmen and craftswomen in constant engagement with other artisans along the trade routes of the Roman empire: a world of tools and product, of conversations exchanged between customers, employers, and employees at the shop; and of an entire didactic tradition (inherited equally from rabbinical Judaism and Greco-Roman itinerant philosophy) that valued manual labor as the particular context for teaching converts and disciples”.


32 Stählin 1972, 263: “Striking and carousing are an enviable prerogative of masters according to the opinion of slaves”. Stählin points to the following texts: Aristophanes Pax 743; Eubulus frag. 60; Plautus Asin. 628; Poen. 384; Curc. 197; Merc. 396; Menander Dysk. 195-96; Lucian Tim. 23.
the drunken, a traditional description (Weiser 1971, 194-5). In spite of these unsavoury details,³³ however, the unfaithful slave must have been a person of considerable ability and of a high caliber when measured against the other slaves;³⁴ otherwise, the master would not have entrusted the slave with tasks upon which the entire household depended. Other competent slaves who figure prominently in parables are the slave who ends up owing the king 10,000 talents (Matt 18:23-35),³⁵ the doorkeeper (טיוθοροφ, Mark 13:34),³⁶ the unjust steward (Luke 16:1-8),³⁷ and the more enterprising of those slaves to whom the talents/minas are entrusted (Matt 25:14-30/Luke 19:12-27).³⁸ The phrase “to each according to his ability” (יו לש תומי הז העון, Matt 25:15 RSV)³⁹ would seem to have had the widest application: “the slaves have their abilities, the master has his

³³ They are part of the parable, but such passages as 1 Cor 11:21; 2 Pet 2:13; Jude 12 suggest that violence and carousal were known in the Christian assemblies too.

³⁴ Matt 24:45-47 features “the faithful and wise” slave (יו שיו תומי הז עון, on the basis of ΣΙΓ 22,4; IMagMai 115,4; LXX 1 Sam 29:3; LXX 2 Kgs 5:6; Josephus Ant. 2.70): “The parable would then be about a king and one of his governors or satraps” (Davies and Allison 1991, 797).

³⁵ If one accepts the sum of 10,000 talents as an original part of the parable, ֒ייו תומי הז עון in Matt 18:26, 28 may mean not “slave” but—in accordance with oriental usage—“minister” or “official” (BAGD, 260 s.v. ֒ייו תומי הז עון, on the basis of ΣΙΓ 22,4; IMagMai 115,4; LXX 1 Sam 29:3; LXX 2 Kgs 5:6; Josephus Ant. 2.70): “The parable would then be about a king and one of his governors or satraps” (Davies and Allison 1991, 797).

³⁶ There is a tendency to relate this person to the emerging apostolate of the church (so Swete 1913, 317; Lane 1974, 483), but that Mark intends to depict a literal slave here seems likely in light of other passages cited by LSJ [1940], 812 (s.v. ֒ייו תומי הז עון) to illustrate the definition “door-keeper, porter”—namely, Herodotus Hist. 1.120; Aeschylus Cho. 565; Plato Phileb. 62c; BGU 1061.10 (I CE); Lucian Vit. auct. 7.


³⁸ Davies and Allison 1997, 405: “That a wealthy businessman, before leaving on a commercial venture, entrusted slaves with so much money and responsibility may seem strange to us; but ‘slaves could fill an enormous range of functions, including positions involving onerous duties, political influence, and relatively high social esteem’” (citing Beavis 1992, 40; original emphasis).

³⁹ The phrase occurs nowhere else. However, cf. the following expressions seem worthy of note: “according to his own plan [בֵּין תִּיְוָנ [ִיּוֹלִּית] [בֵּין תִּיְוָנ [ִיּוֹלִּית]” (P.Oxy. LIV 3756.15; 26 January-24 February CE 325); “according to the validity of the sale you have had from me [בֵּין תִּיְוָנ [גֵּשֶנמִית] [בֵּין תִּיְוָנ [גֵּשֶנמִית]” (BGU II 371.16-17; VII CE); “according to the validity of my rent [בֵּין תִּיְוָנ [גֵּשֶנמִית] [בֵּין תִּיְוָנ [גֵּשֶנמִית]” (BGU II 371.27-28; VII CE); “according to the validity of the sale you have from me [בֵּין תִּיְוָנ [גֵּשֶנמִית] [בֵּין תִּיְוָנ [גֵּשֶנמִית]” (BGU XII 2189.4-5; VI CE); “according to the validity of the sale you have from me [בֵּין תִּיְוָנ [גֵּשֶנמִית] [בֵּין תִּיְוָנ [גֵּשֶנמִית]” (CPR VI 6.8; 8 July CE 439); “according to the power of the divine command that was enjoined upon you [בֵּין תִּיְוָנ [גֵּשֶנמִית] [בֵּין תִּיְוָנ [גֵּשֶנמִית]” (P.Cair.Masp. I 67032.69; 11 July CE 551), etc.
What has received the most attention of late is the physical abuse to which managerial slaves could be subject (e.g., Bradley 1994, 152; Glancy 2002, 103, 111); however, even Glancy admits that elite slaves could aspire to impressive “heights”, and Jesus obviously pitched his parables to persons cognizant of the abilities competent slaves needed to get ahead (Nordling 2004, 54; cf. Landry and May 2000, 295). Slave managers may have been of minor economic importance when compared to other slaves in terms of production (Garnsey 1982, 105), but they are important to the social historian because they were frequently manumitted and so upwardly mobile:

A slave manager or agent in a position of responsibility could enhance his own social and financial position… By capitalizing on his master’s position and business activities, Hesychus advanced his own position (Martin 1990, 19).

My suspicion, then, is that Onesimus was one of the managerial slaves in the employ of Philemon, not a menial. Indeed, I think it likely that Onesimus had an ability upon which Philemon relied—a considerable ability, one gathers, based on Paul’s not-so-cryptic remark in v. 18a that Onesimus had “wronged” (ἠδίκησεν) Philemon and “owe[d]” him something (δέψαξεν). I take the remark to mean that Onesimus—like several of the managerial slaves featured in the preceding paragraph—was the sort of person to whom Philemon had entrusted much. Onesimus, however, had proven unfaithful to the master’s trust, or even—so I speculate—had taken advantage of a privileged position in Philemon’s house to harm his master in ways that Paul is careful not to reveal too precisely. That said, there are some additional texts that cast a bright light on the picture of Onesimus that seems to emerge.

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40 Cf. the expressions, “he will repay every man for what he has done [κατὰ τὴν πράξιν αὐτοῦ]” (Matt 16:27 RSV); “gifts that differ according to the grace given to us [κατὰ τὴν γὰρ τὴν δοθησάμεν ἡμῖν]” (Rom 12:6); “grace was given to each of us according to the measure of Christ’s gift [κατὰ τὸ μέτρον τῆς δοσιμάτως τοῦ Χριστοῦ]” (Eph 4:7 RSV); “as each has received a gift [διακοστος καθός έλαβεν χηρσομοι], employ it for one another, as good stewards of God’s varied grace” (1 Pet 4:10 RSV). Added emphases.

41 Glancy 2000, 72: “The parable of the unmerciful slave [Matt 18:23-35] gestures toward the heights that elite slaves could reach: the unmerciful slave apparently has access to his royal master’s resources, to the extent that he eventually accrues a vast debt to his owner totaling ten thousand talents”.

42 On the basis of the experience of Hesychus, the industrious slave agent of the imperial freedman Ti. Iulius Evenus Primianus. Cf. Casson 1984, 108-10; Martin 1990, 18-19, nn. 91-94.
III. Four Additional Texts

In 1991 I pointed to some extra-biblical texts that favour the idea that the pre-conversion Onesimus conformed to a “uniform pattern of runaway slave behaviour” (Nordling 1991, 99). This evidence seemed suited to the runaway slave “racket” Daube identified in 1952—namely, dissatisfied slaves sometimes stole from their masters, ran away, then sent a slave-catcher (fugitivarius) back to the original master in hopes of arranging a sale of the slave to a kindlier master, or of arranging a manumission on terms not favourable to the original master. In intervening years I have run across four additional passages which—even if they do not favour Daube’s “racket”—do lend credence to the idea that Onesimus was a competent slave who, in certain critical respects, abused the trust which Philemon reposed on him and ran away.

Let us begin with a text that could support the idea that such slaves as Onesimus had access to wealth and property, rather than that they were menials marking time in some dreary ergastulum. Quite suggestive are the words ἰδίηκαι (“he wronged”, Phlm 18a) and ὑπελείπει (“he owes”, Phlm 18a) which, as has already been observed (notes 14-15 above), occur frequently in petitionary papyri aggrieved persons wrote to regional magistrates in hopes of recovering damages from those who had “wronged” them financially and therefore “owed” them something. How badly a complainant could be “wronged” is indicated in the following papyrus that has been dated to the early second century BCE:

Ἀντιώκε Εὐστάτη Φίλιππος
τοῦ Κεφάλανος, ἄδικόκου
ἔχει Παππονίφρος τινος/ καὶ
5 Ὑσσάιος/ ἔρημος—μορφάκως, ὁ μὲν Παππονίφρος ὑπελεῖλον μοι πρὸς τι—
μὴν ἐλαῖασ (ὁραμαῖς) ἀν ὑπὸ τοῦ Μεζεῦρ τοῦ Ἰβ (ἔτους) καὶ

43 Nordling 1991, 99-106 focuses upon the following extra-biblical documents: Pliny the Younger Ep. 9.21; UPZ I 121 (12 August 156 BCE); P.Oxy. XIV 1643 (CE 298); P.Oxy. XII 1423 (IV CE); ILS 8727, 8730, 8731. Many more documents of this type appear in Llewelyn 1998.


45 The word, derived from ἔργαζομαι (“I work”), means “workhouse for debtors or slaves” (Simpson 1959, 217); also, “a workhouse for offenders (slaves, debtors, etc.), a house of correction, penitentiary” (Lewis and Short 1879, 655). Lexicographers use the following passages to support these definitions: Columella Rust. 1.6.3; 1.8.16; Cicero Clu. 21; Rab. Perd. 20; Livy ab Urbe Condita 2.23.7; 7.4.5; Suetonius Aug. 32; Tib. 8; Vulg. Exod 6:6.
To Antaeus, manager of Philadelphia, from Demetrius, son of Kephalon. I am being wronged \([\text{ἀδίκουμεν}]\) by \([\text{ὑπόθημα} \text{κρήφηων καὶ} \text{ἀμὴν καὶ ὀρμίσκων καὶ ἄργυρου ἔπιστήμου (δραχμῶν) δ ὁδὸ ἐως τοῦ} \text{15 νῦν κομίζαται ταξάμων εἰς τὴν ἐξομήνυν…} \)

To Antaeus, manager of Philadelphia, from Demetrius, son of Kephalon. I am being wronged \([\text{ἀδίκουμεν}]\) by \([\text{ὑπόθημα} \text{κρήφηων καὶ} \text{ἀμὴν καὶ ὀρμίσκων καὶ ἄργυρου ἔπιστήμου (δραχμῶν) δ ὁδὸ ἐως τοῦ} \text{15 νῦν κομίζαται ταξάμων εἰς τὴν ἐξομήνυν…} \)

Then follow Demetrius’s complaints against two other persons named in the papyrus, namely, Theodotus, who “owed” Demetrius 475 drachmas for olives, and Horus, who likewise “owed” Demetrius 340 bronze drachmas for wine. The suggestive words “wrong” \([\text{ἀδίκουμεν}]\) and “owe” \([\text{ὀφέλεσθν}]\) occur in brief compass also in Philemon 18a: “if he has wronged \([\text{ἡδίκησεν}]\) you at all, or owes \([\text{ὀφέλεσθεν}]\) you anything ...” (RSV). The subject is of course Onesimus. The proximity of such language—ἀδίκουμεν and ὀφέλεσθεν in one breath, similar to the papyrus—could cause one to suspect that Onesimus likewise “owed” a lot of money too, although just how much is not mentioned by Paul. Still, one may perhaps be forgiven for suspecting that possibly Onesimus likewise “owed” Philemon quite a lot, both because the pertinent papyrus features debtors who “owed” Demetrius hundreds or even thousands of drachmas, and because the verb ὀφέλεσθεν appears also in parables.

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46 The papyrus uses the “alphabetic system” of numerical notation, the signs for which are provided in Smyth 1920, 103-4.
47 Schuman 1936, 172: “I find the word nowhere else. Cf. Hesychius \([\text{Lexicon K 4032}]\), κρήφηα: ὁ ὁδὸς κρήφηων τῶν δραχμῶν ἐπιμενον [‘hoe: with which the gardeners clear away the roots,’ my trans.], cited in the new Liddell and Scott \([\text{LSJ 1940, 992 s.v. κρήφηα}]\). Could κρήφηα be considered a diminutive form of κρῆφα, meaning ‘small hoe’?”
48 “And this other fellow Theodotos, although he has given as a surety a tunic and a goblet for the 475 drachmas which he likewise owed \([\text{προσφέρεσθαι}]\) as a price for olives, neither is he redeeming it, even though he promised [to do this] on the appointed day” \((P.\text{Mich. III} 173.17-27; \text{my trans.})\).
49 “And Horus here, although owing \([\text{ὀφέλεσθων}]\) from the same month as a price for wine 340 drachmas of bronze, and having given as a surety a tunic, neither is he redeeming it” \((P.\text{Mich. III} 173.27-33; \text{my trans.})\).
wherein the fictionalized characters “owe” masters and each other exorbitant sums (e.g., Matt 18:28, 30, 34; Luke 7:41; 16:7). At any rate, one gets the impression—both by reading the parabolic material (citations in previous sentence) and suggestive formulae in pertinent papyri elsewhere—that causing financial “harm” and “owing” creditors exorbitant sums were ordinary enough occurrences in ancient times. Interpreters used to assume such dynamics lay at the heart of Paul’s letter to Philemon too, even if other details remain unclear: “the case is stated hypothetically but the words doubtless describe the actual offense of Onesimus. He had done his master some injury, probably had robbed him; and he fled to escape punishment” (Lightfoot 1886, 341; cf. Goodenough 1929, 182; Dunn 1996, 303 n. 8).51

In another text we learn of one Sarapion, a δοῦλος (“slave”) who had become attached to his mistress, Aurelia Sarapias, as part of the estate of her father:

Αὐρελίας Πίλροας ἄρθρῳ τῷ καὶ Ἡρωνί τρεχ(τηνή) Ὀξέ(ψυχήσου)
παῦρε Ἁρπή(λα)σαις Σ ο ρ ο η π ηρὰς Διονυ-
σαρίου θεοπατρος Ἀπολλοφάνους τοῦ καὶ Σαρα-
πίμου οὐξηγητεῦσαντος τῆς Ἀντιοῦ (όθ)
τέ λύουσες χρυσὸν χρηματεύσείς δικαίο
τό κ ναζουντα πρότερον
τοῦ πατρὸς μου δούλου ὁμήμερα Σαραπίωνα
καὶ τούτου νομίσασα ὑπὲρ φαίλον τι δια-
πρᾶξει τῷ εἶναι μου πατρικὸν καὶ πε-
ταῖον πετεῖσθαι ὑπ’ ἐμοὶ τὰ ἡμέρα, οὐὸς
οὐκ οἴθ’ ὄποιος εἰ ἐπετρῆμεν τοῖς ἀνάλο-

50 Quite a number of papyri reflect situations similar to the one Demetrius presumes in P.Mich. III 173. A recent search in online DDBDP (http://papyri.info/navigator/ddbdssearch, accessed 27 December 2009) for the phrase, “I am being wronged by so-and-so [áδυκοϊμα ὑπο]”, revealed 135 hits (most quite fragmentary), and the same sentence in the first person plural (“we are being wronged by so-and-so [áδυκοϊμαθα ὑπο]”) uncovered seventeen additional examples. Consider the following representative examples (with the approximate number of letters missing indicated in brackets [ ]): [ca. ?] áδυκοϊμαθα ὑπο Διονυσίου (P.Cair.Zen. V 59826.1; 254-251 BCE); áδυκοϊμαθα ὑπο Τεμισίδου και Σενεμεντίπου και Τετεμ [ca. ?] και Ἐρίω και τῶν λοιπῶν [θεοπατρίτων τῶν ἐκ Κερκηπόθορος, τῆς Πολύμανου μερίδος (P.Enteux 21.1-2; 13 January 218 BCE); áδυκοϊμαθα ὑπο [Ἀνδρογήθην τοῦ Σοπάθου] ([ca. 10]) [ ] ἐν τῇ ἀγορᾷ ἐν τοῖς τεμεία ([ca. 10]) μύρτυροι (BGU VI 1470.3-6; before 190 BCE); áδυκοϊμαθα ὑπο Πολυλάμπος τοῦ (ca. 4) τοῦ Σισίνου ([ca. ?]) και Πολυλάμπο και Πάλι (P.Coll.Youie I 10.1-2; second half of III BCE), etc.

51 Lightfoot 1886, 310: “He [Onesimus] seems to have done just what the representative slave in the Roman comedy threatens to do, when he gets into trouble. He had ‘packed up some goods and taken to his heels [aliquid convassasem, atque hine me protonam conjicerem in pedes, Terence Phorm. 1.4.13; trans. Lightfoot 1886, 310 n. 3]’.”
NORDLING  Matters Favouring Runaway Slave Hypothesis in Philemon101

τρια φρονήσας τής παρεχομένης αὐτοῦ ὑπ’ ἐμοῦ τιμῆς καὶ χορηγίας τῶν ἀνάγ-
κατον πρὸς διὰταυ ωφελόμενος τινα
15 ἀπὸ τῶν ἠμέτρου μὲθ’ ὄν αὐτοῦ κατεσκεύασα ἡμαίων καὶ ἄλλων καὶ ὄν καὶ αὐτὸς ἐκαμάτω περιποιηθέντα ἐκ τῶν ἠμέτρου λάθηρα ἀπόδρα. περιγραφεῖ-
[ . . . ( ) τ]οῦ νομοῦ εἰρήν[αρ]γ( ) Αὐρήλ[ι] [ - ca. ? - ]
[ . . . ] [ - ca. ? - ] [ . . . ] [ - ca. ? - ]
[ - ca. ? - ] [ - ca. ? - ]
25  
Text breaks

To Aurelius Protarchus, also known as Hero, governor [στρατηγῷ]52 of Oxyrhynchites, from Aurelia Sarapias, also the daughter of Dionysius Apollophanes, also known as Sarapammon, former adviser [ἐξερευνοῦσα]53 of the city of Antinoos, as I—without a guardian—conduct business according to the right of children.54 Although I kept formerly a slave of my father, named Sarapion, and I had supposed that he had managed nothing negligently, since he was my inheritance and had been entrusted by me with our affairs, this fellow—I know not how—by the instigation of certain folk and out of sheer spite [ἀλλότρια φρονήσας],55 even though a place of honour and life’s provision were provided to him by me—stole

52 In Ptolemaic and Roman Egypt the noun στρατηγός could have the specialized meaning, “military and civil governor of a nome” (LSJ 1940, 1652 s.v. στρατηγός). Lexicographers use the following passages to support this definition: P.Enteux. I 79.12 (III BCE); P.Cair.Zen. III 59351.4 (ca. 243 BCE); BGU VIII 1730.11 (50/49 BCE), etc.

53 The definition of the verb ἐξερευνοῦσα is “hold the office of ἐξερευνοῦσα” (LSJ 1940, 593 s.v. ἐξερευνοῦσα). The cognate noun ἐξερευνήτης means: “one who leads on, adviser” (LSJ 1940, 593 s.v. ἐξερευνήτης, -οῦ, ὁ). Lexicographers use the following passages to support these definitions: P.Lond. II 343.2 (Boubastos?; CE 188); III 1226.2 (Thead; CE 254?); III 1157.2 (Herm nome; CE 246); SB I 1492.2 (Arsnome; ca. CE 250); P.Fay. I 85.1 (Thead; CE 247); Herodotus Hist. 5.31; Demosthenes 35.17.

54 The phrase ὅτι τόκον seems to be the Greek equivalent of ius liberorum (cf. Hagedorn 1981, 172; “Drei-Kinder-Recht”). For the so-called “right of children” cf. Berger 1953, 530: “The most important application of ius liberorum concerned women. A freeborn woman with three children and a freed-woman with four children (ius trium vel quattuor liberorum) were freed from guardianship to which women were subject (tutela mulierum) and had a right of succession to the inheritance of their children”.

some things from those items with which I had provisioned him (clothes and other items he had saved up for himself) and ran away secretly [...]. And having got wind of the fact [περιηγήθησα]56 that this fellow is in the hamlet of Nomos at the house of Chairemon, I have resolved to ... from Aurelius, commander of the nome ... (P.Turner 41.1-24; ca. 249-250 CE; my trans; other translations appear in Hagedorn 1981, 172 [German]; and Llewelyn 1992, 55-56).

The papyrus breaks off tantalizingly in lines 20-21, before Aurelia Sarapias states just why she has petitioned Aurelius Protarchus in the first place. I disagree with Llewelyn who argues that that ἥξισα in line 20 indicates that Aurelia Sarapias had petitioned the magistrate before, and that her petition had been unsuccessful.57 The text is too fragmentary to support such an assertion, nor does Llewelyn deal with the fact that finite forms of ἀξιόω pattern frequently with infinitives—such as one finds, e.g., in Liddell, Scott and Jones (1940, 172 s.v. ἀξιόω)58 and in the documentary papyri.59 So it seems quite certain to me that the prolate infinitive upon which Aurelia Sarapias’ ἥξισα depends in line 20 has been irretrievably lost. Nevertheless, as several documents provided in Nordling 1991, 101-105 demonstrate,60 it seems obvious that Aurelia Sarapias meant for Aurelius Protarchus to launch an all-out expedition to retrieve Sarapion and take legal action against those persons responsible for her slave’s theft and flight. The responsible persons are designated by the phrase “by the instigation of certain folk” (ἐξ ἐπιτρήβης τινῶν, 11)61—an expression which, under the circumstances, must

56 This is the aor. pass. ptc. of the vb. περιηγήσα, which, in the pass. voice, may mean “get wind of a fact” (LSJ 1940, 1374 s.v. περιηγήσα). Lexicographers use the following passages to support this definition: P.Oxy. VIII 1119. 7 (CE 253); XLVII 3350. 9 (CE 330).

57 Llewelyn 1992, 57: “[S]ince the document does not appear to be the first petition (see ll. 19-20 especially the aorist ἥξισα), it could be concluded that the former petition had been unsuccessful, with the slave surprisingly still residing in the Oxyrhynchite nome”.

58 “III. c[um] inf[initivo], ἀξιόω κομίζωθε, τοῦτον εἰσέλθων think one has a right to receive, expect to receive, Θ[uc]1.43; 7.15; προῖκα θεωρίαν ἰδιώμα τ[θεόφραστος] Char. 6.4; ὅλο τι ἰδίως ἢ ἑποθήνων; Lys. 22.5: with a negative, οἷς ἰδίω ἑποθήνωθαι I think I do not deserve to be suspected, have a right not to be…, Θ[uc] 4.86”, etc.

59 E.g., “inasmuch as they have planted the vineyards in part up to the 25th year, I have resolved to make the rounds [ἵξωσα ... ἐρῳδεῖσθαι], having taken an attendant from Heracleides, in order to enroll those who have planted cucumber or round gourd or any other [such] thing…” (P.Cair.Zen. III 59300.1-3; 23 June 250 BCE; my trans.). Cf. also ἰδίωσα ... ἀγοράσα (P.Cair.Zen. III 59311.2; 250 BCE); ἰδίωσα ... ἀποδήμησα (P.Cair.Zen. III 59496.8; 248-241 BCE); ἰδίωσα ... γράψα (P.Coll.Youtie I 17.4, 7-8; 37 BCE); ἰδίωσα ... προσφάνησα (P.Flor. I 43.7; CE 370); ἰδίωσα ... εἰπαγήθηνα (P.Lips. 40.20; Hermopolis, IV-V CE); σὲ ἰδίωσα τὸν μάγλον ἀποστείλα μου (P.Lond. VII 2059.3-4; III CE), etc.

60 Namely, UPZ I 121.15-16, 25-26 (12 August 156 BCE); P.Oxy. XIV 1643.12-13 (CE 298); P.Oxy. XII 1423.9-10 (IV CE).

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indicate that mistress Aurelia Sarapias’ acute distress was “not unexpected” (Llewelyn 1992, 57 n. 66). The papyrus’s legalese cannot quite mask Aurelia Sarapias’s extreme outrage: not only does the ὀὔς (in line 10) suggest utter contempt for Sarapion (cf. ὀὔς, 19), but the words ὀὔκ ὁδί ὀποῖος (“I know not how”, 11) might well constitute an instance of aposiopesis (Ἀποσιώπησις), a form of ellipse by which, under the influence of passionate feeling or modesty, a speaker comes to an abrupt halt (Smyth 1920, 674 §3015). The tangle of depending clauses culminates finally in the damning words ἰτ (18). “He was nothing but a lousy runaway”, Aurelia Sarapias seems to complain, and statements that she had inherited the slave from her father, entrusted him with her affairs, provided living necessities, and a position of pre-eminence in her household demonstrate that “there were no grounds for [the] flight” (Llewelyn 1992, 57). Yet what had Sarapion done? Aurelia Sarapias claims he had “stolen” (ἅπαζ ἀπόλλων, 14). But just what he had “stolen” is jumbled in the papyrus: certain clothing items, clearly, and other things she had “made available” to him (ἄρτως | κατασκευάσας ἰματίων, 15-16); then too there were “other” things he had “saved for himself” from out of those items that were Aurelia Sarapias’ to give (καὶ ἄλλον καὶ ὄν | καὶ ἄλητος ἐσωτήρ περιπατήσατο ἐκ τῶν | ἱματίων, 16-18). The papyrus indicates that there was no clear distinction in Aurelia soweit auch für die Provinzen galt, wird an zwei Stellen die Anstiftung eines Sklaven zur Flucht mit Strafe bedroht: Dig. 48, 15, 6, 2: qui servo alieno ... persuadeit, ut a domino dominave fugiat ... (lex Fabia) und Dig. 11, 3, 1, 5 qui servo persuadet, ut ... fugiat ... (actio de servo corrupto)..."

62 LSJ 1940, 1276 s.v. ὀὔς: “ὀὔς is used emphat[ically], generally in contempt, while ἵκεινός denotes praise”.

63 Obviously an orthographic variant for ὀὔκ ὁδί ὀποῖος, just as ὀὔς (5) represents ἰματίων and ἱματίων (13) represents ἱματίων.

64 Smyth (1920, 674 §3015) provides the following example by way of illustration: “Massachusetts and her people ... hold him, and his love ... and his principles, and his standard of truth in utter—what shall I say?—anything but respect”.


66 Nom. sing. masc. aor. mid. ptc. of ῥυσωρέω which, in the middle voice, means, “filch, purloin” (LSJ 1940, 1907 s.v. ῥυσωρέω). Lexicographers use the following passages to support this definition: Aristophanes Eq. 745; Nub. 179; Plut. 1140; Demosthenes 45.58; P.Cair.Zen. XIII 59350.4 (BCE 244).

67 For the declaration of items runaway slaves stole together with themselves, cf. UPZ I 1211.9-11 (12 August 156 BCE) and P.Oxy. XII 1423.8 (IV CE), in Nordling 1991, 102 and 103-4, respectively.

68 The verb περιπατήσατο (3 sing. aor. Indic. mid. < περιπατήσω) must mean something akin to “save for oneself”, although this meaning cannot be substantiated lexicographically (cf. LSJ 1940, 1384 s.v. περιπατήσω). Nevertheless, Hagedorn supposes (1981, 171) that Sarapion had
Sarapias’ mind between her own possessions, what Sarapion managed for her and the greater estate, and what moderns might be tempted to suppose was Sarapion’s own (peculium, etc.). Yet neither Sarapion himself, nor those “things” to which he had access, enjoyed, and used for his own purposes, belonged to the slave as an autonomous self: everything belonged to Aurelia Sarapias, and the overall tone of the papyrus indicates that she was quite put out by her slave’s brazen—and completely unexpected—flight. So the papyrus proves that highly trusted, well-provisioned, and apparently unassailable slaves could, on occasion, betray trusting masters by running away.

This papyrus’s pertinence for a traditional interpretation of Philemon should be obvious. If, as I have been suggesting, Onesimus was an important slave in Philemon’s employ—such as Sarapion was to whom Aurelia Sarapias had “entrusted” her household effects (πε[ι]στεφθαί ὑπ’ ἐμοῦ τὰ ἡμέτερα, P. Turner 41.9-10)—and Onesimus had done something to Philemon even remotely akin to Sarapion’s crime against Aurelia Sarapias, then we might reasonably expect that Philemon likewise was quite put out. Not many have suggested that Paul wrote the letter to assuage Philemon’s inner man, though Paul’s desire to effect a reconciliation between Philemon and Onesimus seems, in my mind, to be a much more plausible explanation for Paul’s interest than any of the other ingenious possibilities that have been offered.

Then, too, there is the role that Philemon’s house congregation apparently played as a linchpin between Ephesus (where Paul ministered for more than two years, Acts 19:8-10) and congregations founded still further east during the first journey (Acts 14:21; 16:1, 6; 18:23; Nordling 2004, 36-38; 2010). Such reconstructions grant scope not only to the importance of Philemon’s house church in the Pauline travelogue, but to the probably indispensable role Onesimus played in Philemon’s household as a highly responsible slave before something approximating greed, financial mismanagement, a falling out with short-tempered Philemon—or a combination of the preceding—caused Onesimus to do the unthinkable. Nor should Paul’s failure to mention such possibilities be permitted to scupper the runaway slave

“exhausted” (“mitgenommen hatte”) those funds that had accrued to him from gifts, rewards, and outright cash resources that slaves had access to as agents of their masters.

69 Berger 1953, 624: “Peculium. A sum of money, a commercial or industrial business, or a small separate property granted by a father to his son or by a master to his slave, for the son’s (or slave’s) use, free disposal, and fructification through commercial or other transactions”. Peculium could grant relatively high levels of independence to slaves and freedmen (Garnsey 1982, 106). Lyall (1984, 38, 125) connects the peculium to Matt 25:14-30 and Phil 2:12-13.


hypothesis (contra Dunn 1996, 303 n. 11; Arzt-Grabner 2001a). As has been argued all along, there should be ample room in the interpretation of Philemon for tact and pastoral sensitivity on the part of Paul. The point is that shocked disappointment at someone who has done one wrong—especially at someone whom one thought one could trust—constitutes the sort of very human response one plainly sees in *P. Turner* 41 (above) and also in Paul’s delicate words to Philemon, without reading too much between the lines. Of course, we shall have to accept Paul’s reticence toward the unseemly matters that apparently caused the apostle to write the letter in the first place. Still, the overall tone of Paul’s letter seems clear enough:

> [Paul] ... used wit, a personal relationship with Philemon (cf. v 19b), and perhaps even an intentional ambiguity to remain discreet and not cause Philemon undue grief. It would have violated the highly charming tone of the letter—to say nothing of the Gospel—had Paul written, more forthrightly: “Forgive Onesimus for having stolen so much property from you, and send him back to me immediately, or else ...!” (Nordling 2004, 13-14; original emphases).

Paul desired, therefore, that relational dynamics between Philemon and Onesimus be considerably improved, even if the two were to continue on as master and slave. Paul expected Philemon publicly to treat Onesimus with respect, “even if they [were] not necessarily equals” (de Vos 2001, 103).

A third text suggests the type of diversions that could cause competent slaves to fall afoul of masters: gambling, maintaining love affairs, spending too much time at public entertainments, becoming seditious, squandering one’s *peculium*, or the outright falsification of a master’s accounts:

> Is quoque deteriorem facit, qui servo persuadet, ut iniuriam faceret vel furtum vel fugeret vel alienum servum ut sollicitaret vel ut peculium intricare, aut amator existeret vel erro vel malis artibus esset deditus vel in spectaculis nimi

72 Nordling 2004, 254: “Like everything else about this letter, Paul chose the perfect words to soothe and appease Philemon’s inner man. Paul’s design throughout the letter is to lead Philemon gently, by a series of nearly imperceptible steps, to forgive Onesimus and receive the slave back into his good graces and complete confidence. Paul’s goal is that in Christ Philemon might have Onesimus back ‘forever’ (τιμων, v 15”).

73 Nordling 2004, 13 n. 71: “Paul knew that *Philemon* knew what Paul was writing about”. Original emphasis.

74 For others who have seen intentional ambiguities in Phlm cf Barclay 1991, 175; Wilson 1992, 116; de Vos 2001, 90, 91 n. 10.

75 de Vos 2001, 101: “The legal act of manumission, in and of itself, would not have fundamentally altered the actual relationship between the freed slave and his/her former master. It is unlikely, therefore, that Paul’s specific aim in the letter is the manumission of Onesimus”.

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75 de Vos 2001, 101: “The legal act of manumission, in and of itself, would not have fundamentally altered the actual relationship between the freed slave and his/her former master. It is unlikely, therefore, that Paul’s specific aim in the letter is the manumission of Onesimus”.
This rescript represents legislation directed against persons who “make a slave worse” (*deteriorem facit*, *Dig* 11.3.1.5). Making slaves “worse” was the province of certain “outside agents” described in Nordling 1991, 104-105, and another evidence of such activity is likely provided in the phrase “by the instigation of certain folk” (*ἐξ ἐπιρρήσεως τῶν, P.Turner* 41.11, above). Heeding Harrill’s advice (1999, 138) that we not use the Roman jurists to interpret Philemon too woodenly, I believe, nevertheless, that the rescript presents a picture of the kind of distractions to which Onesimus could well have been susceptible, even though Paul breathes not a word of this in his letter. At any rate, we should not think of the rescript as providing merely factual information about potential distractions for slaves; instead, here we have an instance of that “stereotypical thinking” whereby some ancients came to form (mostly negative) opinions about others. This mode of thinking could well explain why Paul was not more

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76 In place of this word the critical apparatus suggests (Watson 1985, 1.341) *adulteraretve*.
77 Bradley uses the same translation (1994, 21); Udoh paraphrases it (2009, 331 n. 116). I have used the dates for Ulpian provided in Clark 1906, 162-63.
78 The title of the rescript from which this legislation is taken is *De Servo Corrupto* (“The Action for Making a Slave Worse”, trans. Watson 1985, 1.340).
79 Malina 2008, 4-5: “Cicero observes how the Carthaginians (from Carthage) are fraudulent and liars because their ports are visited by too many merchants. Then there are the Campanians (the region around Naples), who are so arrogant because of the fertility and beauty of their land. And the Ligurians (from the region around Genoa) are hard and wild because they are just like all other people who struggle to make mountain soil productive ([Cicero *Agr.*] 2.95). Josephus, an Israelite writer, notes how the Tiberians (from Tiberias in Galilee) have ‘a passion for war’ (Josephus [*Vita*] §352); Scythians (from north of Iran) ‘delight in murdering people and are little better than wild beasts’ (Josephus [*C. Ap.*] §269). In ‘the seamanship of its people . . . the Phoenicians in general have been superior to all peoples of all times’ (Strabo [*Geogr.*] 16.2.23; ‘this is a trait common to all the Arabian kings,’ that they do ‘not care much about public affairs and particularly military affairs’ (Strabo [*Geogr.*] 16.4.24). ‘These are the marks of the little-minded man. He is small limbed, small and round, dry, with small eyes and a small face, like a Corinthian or Leucadian’ (Ps. Aristotle [*Physiogn.*] 808a, 30-33). And in the New Testament we find judgments such as: ‘Cretans are always liars, evil beasts, lazy gluttons’ (Titus 1:12) and ‘Can
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forthcoming in the letter about Onesimus’ behavior: not only would Paul not have badgered Philemon with “painful reminders of details already known too well” (Nordling 1991, 107; cf. Byron 2004, 129), but the crimes in which Onesimus engaged would have been so notorious that Paul need not have elaborated. Yet more than a hint of such notorious activity may be perceptible in Luke 16:6 and 7 where a shrewd steward (οἰκονόμος)—doubtless a slave (Marshall 1978, 618-19; cf. Beavis 1992)—rewrites the master’s accounts as follows: “‘take your bill, and sit down quickly and write fifty [δέξασθε σοι τὰ γράφματα καὶ καθίσματα ταξιάρχου γράφον πεντήκοντα]’” (Luke 16:6 RSV); and “‘take your bill, and write eighty [δέξασθε σοι τὰ γράμματα καὶ γράφον ὀγδοίκοντα]’” (Luke 16:7 RSV). It is the opinion of several parable scholars that the steward of Luke 16:7 was engaged in a crime which might best be described as “a misappropriation of funds” (Landry and May 2000, 298 n. 46; cf. Scott 1983, 187; Kloppenborg 1989, 491 n. 58). Such suspect practices in the parable provide a context for understanding better the rescript’s phrases “tampering with or falsifying the master’s accounts” and “confusing accounts entrusted to him” (above). While it is impossible to demonstrate in which illegal activities Onesimus engaged precisely, it is at least instructive to see that Ulpian regarded negligent managerial slaves as completely irresponsible persons and thus capable of all the notorious crimes listed. From the perspective of those who framed the law, to err in one respect (financial mismanagement, let us say) meant that a compromised slave was capable of anything else: running away, playing the truant, becoming involved in failed love affairs, engaging in the dark arts, spending time at the public entertainments, etc. Thus, the rescript aims not at legal exactitude, but rather tars with the same brush any and all engaged in such activities: “Fugitive servile persons were typically accused of theft” (Udoh 2009, 334).

A final text supports the idea that Paul’s ἐχορῆσῃ (“he was parted from you”, Phlm 15a RSV) may drop a quite precise hint of what Onesimus’ crime had been:

anything good come out of Nazareth?’ (John 1:46)”. For more on “stereotypical thinking” in antiquity cf. de Vos 2001, 93-96.

80 Marshall 1978, 619: “The debtor is asked to take his bill (τὰ γράμματα, plural used for one document: here, a promissory note ...) and either alter it in his own handwriting or more probably write out a new one to half the amount”.

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The numerical sign is missing on the papyrus. For the numerical system which uses alphabet letters for numbers cf. Smyth 1920, 103-4. Although the figure (400) in line 3 "is doubtful" (Edgar 1928, 14), Rostovtzeff accepts it and it seems likely that the numerical symbol—whatever it was—represented a nearly certain (1922, 179)—represents 211 animals and, second, by contrast, 629—one, if 629 is a pig that is full grown (Liddell, Scott and Jones 1940, 377 s.v. Artemidorus greets Zenon. If you are well, it would be well; For I also am well. He used to hold for us 400 [490] sacred animals (esp. sheep) at the great feasts of the Greek religious calendar of the magistrate" (LSJ 1940, 174 s.v. αὐτος). The noun ἀυτος, a cognate of αὐτός, meant, "a summary process by which a person caught in the act (or a cognate) might be cited before a magistrate" (LSJ 1940, 174 s.v. αὐτος). The noun ἀνευμένος, a cognate of αἵνευμαι, might be arrested by any citizen and brought before the magistrate" (LSJ 1940, 174 s.v. αὐτος). For the numerical system which uses alphabet letters for numbers cf. Smyth 1920, 103-4.

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get our lawful claims. Indeed, we have received the sacrificial pig which you sent us. Farewell. The 36th (year), Loios [15].

VERSO:
The 36th (year), Thoth 15. To Zenon.

The letter, “badly preserved” though it is (Edgar 1928, 14), nevertheless presents a clear picture of a situation that should appear increasingly familiar to us—namely, a once competent person proves untrustworthy, bringing about financial hardship for a complainant. I suspect that Petos was not a slave, though that detail should by no means invalidate the pattern of illicit behavior exemplified here: the document twice states that Petos has “withdrawn” (ἀνακεχύρησαν, P.Cair.Zen. III 59310.2, 4). It was sometimes said of defaulters that they had “no property”, and during financially difficult times defaulters became virtual desperadoes in areas of Egypt that once supported abundant populations (Parsons, 1928, 14).

90 The third pers. sing. perf. indic. act. of ἔτηῃ (ή) occurs at BGU XVI 2645.4-5 (19 February 13 BCE); P.Athen. 19.9 (28 October-26 November CE 153); P.Cair.Zen. III 59310.2, 4 (25 October 250 BCE); P.Cair.Zen. IV 59613.2 (275-225 BCE); P.Cair.Zen. IV 59620.25 (248-239 BCE); P.Cair.Zen. V 59837.4 (252 BCE); P.Lille 13.76 (216-215 BCE); UPZ I 121.2-3, 21 (12 August 156 BCE).

91 E.g., “Orsenophis ... removed abroad [ἀνεβαίνειαν] some considerable time ago, having no property [πῶλον μὴ ἐξαν]” (P.Oxy. XXXIII 2669.7-10 [CE 41-54]; trans. Parsons, Rea and Turner 1968, 98); “and we swear by Tiberius Claudius Caesar Augustus Germanicus Imperator that Orsenophis has removed [ἀνεβαίνειαν] and that there is no property belonging to him [καὶ μὴ οὐκ ἔχεις ἄρτο] πόρον[ν]” (P.Oxy. XXXIII 2669.10-15 [CE 41-54]; trans. Parsons, Rea and Turner 1968, 98).
Rea and Turner 1968, 97; Orrieux 1983, 120-122). A papyrus from CE 180-192 illustrates that the village of Nemeo contained a high percentage of defaulters-turned-desperadoes: although the original population consisted of “150 hommes” (Kambitsis 1985, 59), the number later dropped to 45, out of whom no fewer than 34 “took to flight” (ἀνακεχώρηκαν), leaving 11 to pay the tax (P.Thmouïs I 70.20). Later the amount imposed “aux fugitifs” (Kambitsis 1985, 61, for τοις ἀνακεχώρηκοις, P.Thmouïs I 70.22) was erased by a kindly administrator. The scenario suggests that only a fine line separated the financially solvent from the insolvent. That fluidity is reflected in Petos’ plight too: once he “held” (ἰ肟ȣȣ) a large number of sacrificial animals for the benefit of those persons who had written the papyrus (ἰ肟ȣȣ ḫȣȣ ȣ ȗ ȗ, P.Cair.Zen. III 59310.3), and still “owed” some 211 δελφάκια for the tribute (καὶ δελφάκια κυα[ proton] φελ[ ἔφ] εἰς τό ὑπ[ό]ρ ζεχὶ ἃ. P.Cair.Zen. III 59310.3). But Petos could not pay. Therefore, he had “withdrawn” (ἀνακεχώρηκεν, P.Cair.Zen. III 59310.2, 4), a word twice used to describe the flight of runaway slaves in UPZ I 121.2-3, 18 (12 August 156 BCE). The examples suggest that there would have been little or no difference between “withdrawal” and “flight” in actual practice, and that both slaves and persons of free but low social status could be involved.

Pearson has criticized the suggestion that Paul’s ἔχωρίζει (he was parted from you”, Phlm 15a RSV) could hint subtly at what had been Onesimus’ flight: “the very prefixing of this form [ἀνακεχώρηκεν] argues strongly for the fact that the stem, on its own, did not carry the sense for which Nordling argues” (Pearson 1999, 266 n. 30; original emphasis; contra Nordling 1991, 109 n. 2). It is worth pointing out, however, that compound verbs prefixed by prepositions frequently intensify the meanings of uncompounded verbs that share common stems—such as, e.g., ἀναβλέπω/βλέπω, ἀναζώω/ζάω, ἀνίστημι/ύστημι, or ἀναλαμβάνω/λαμβάνω, thus, the compound ἄναχωρέω (“to withdraw, run away”) might seem,
at first blush, to intensify the more generic meaning in χωρίζω ("to separate, part, sever, divide") since both verbs share the same stem (-χωρ-). A more difficult fact is that the two verbs in question employ different terminations: -ἐκ (which terminates ἄναχωρέω) is often intransitive (Smyth 1920, 245 §866.2), whereas -ίζο (which terminates χωρίζο) denotes action (Smyth 1920, 245 §866.6). However, further digging reveals that χωρίζο in the passive voice frequently possessed an intransitive meaning and on this basis the connection between ἄνακχωρήσκεν and ἐκχωρίσθη rests secure. Is it really such a stretch to suspect, then, that Paul’s apparently innocent ἐκχωρίσθη (Phlm 15a) conjured—for readers who would have understood the deeper associations of the Greek language—all the “baggage” we see connected to ἄνακχωρήσκεν in the preceding paragraph? I think not; and so Pearson’s objection really amounts to an overly fastidious understanding of Paul’s ἐκχωρίσθη—one, I submit, that is out of sync with the apostle’s habits of writing one thing yet really meaning something else (irony), delighting in palpablecrudities (e.g., Gal 5:12; Phil 3:2), or of reveling in ideas that seem extreme even when softened by translation (e.g., 1 Cor 4:15; 2 Cor 11:19-20; Gal 4:19, 15). If, moreover, Paul’s ἐκχωρίσθη possessed the doubled sense that I am proposing here, it would possess the type of duality encountered elsewhere in the letter, such as, e.g., τὰ σκλάψυχά (Phlm 7, 12, 20), ἀναπηρίας (Phlm 9), ὀναόμην (Phlm 20), and ἐγέννησα (Phlm 10). Thus, the suggestion that Paul’s ἐκχωρίσθη alerted readers in the know to a deeper appreciation of Onesimus’ treachery seems quite plausible. Only bias against the traditional interpretation keeps some scholars from considering what would otherwise be a quite compelling interpretation.

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97 BAGD 2000, 1095 2b s.v. χωρίζω: “be taken away, take one’s departure, go away”, on the basis of Acts 1:4; 18:1, 2. These additional passages establish the intransitive meaning: LXX 1 Chr 12:9; 2 Macc 5:21; 10:19; 12:12; 1 Cor 7:10, 11, 15.

98 As evidence of irony (εἰποκοίτα) “of the sharpest kind” BDF (1961, 262 §495) cite 1 Cor 4:8; and 2 Cor 11:19-20.


100 Means “old man” (NIV), but probably sounded like ἄρσεφικτος (”ambassador”)—which is, in fact, the translation assigned by RSV. Dunn supposed (1996, 327) that Paul was between 50 and 60 years old when he wrote Phlm.


IV. Conclusion

This article demonstrates, first, that supposed distinctions between servile “roaming” and “running away” have been exaggerated; second, that Onesimus could well have been an important slave in Philemon’s employ rather than a menial; and, third, that additional evidence favours the various possibilities attached to the runaway slave hypothesis in Philemon—such as, e.g., that responsible slaves routinely had access to the master’s wealth, were fully capable of betraying trusting masters and mistresses without provocation, and were susceptible to the same sort of servile diversions one suspects Onesimus could easily have fallen prey to, if one may think imaginatively about such matters. Observations that the traditional reconstruction represents “a legend without foundation” or “a fiction of Pauline interpreters” (Harrill 2006, 7) seem unwarranted; on the contrary, the parables featuring dishonest or less-than-enterprising slave stewards in the gospels (Part II) provide a plausible interpretative context for understanding Onesimus’ likely role in Philemon’s household also. Indeed, Paul’s letter to Philemon cries out for the interpretation that Onesimus, a once trusted slave in Philemon’s employ, took advantage of the confidence reposed on him by stealing from his master, falsifying the latter’s accounts, falling into arrears, or “harming” Philemon in still other ways—now dimly known to us—that would have involved a lot of money (cf. P.Mich III 173.1-17, in Part III above). From the parable of the dishonest steward (Luke 16:1-8a) we may take it that a subordinate’s behaviour was a reflection upon the master’s honour (Landry and May 2000, 299); thus a steward who squandered the latter’s property would make the master “look like a fool in front of his peers” (Kloppenborg 1989, 488). A similar scenario between Onesimus and Philemon transpired, then, causing such a ruckus in Philemon’s household that Paul, writing for Christians of a “high-context” society, would hardly have had to drop the sort of details many assume must accompany crises of this type. It should not be too difficult to see, however, that the aftermath of this situation necessarily involved Paul himself, Philemon, Onesimus, the affected congregation in Philemon’s


104 Trainor 2008, 5: “[T]he letters to Philemon and Colossians presume information well-known to their audiences. This presumption indicates that the letters were written in a ‘high-context’ society. High-context societies produce sketchy and impressionistic texts, leaving much to the reader’s or hearer’s imagination. Since people believe few things have to be spelled out, few things are in fact spelled out. This is so because people have been socialized into shared ways of perceiving and acting, and therefore much can be assumed. What is communicated is understood by those who hear the letters. Detailed information does not have to be spelled out. The context of understanding is ‘high,’ that is, it is highly understandable” (original emphasis).
“house” (οἶκόν σου, Phlm 2), and many other Christians—both near and far removed—who were linked to one another in the bond of faith (cf. Trainor’s “extended network zones” [2008, 23-24]).\(^{105}\) Granted, Paul drops few details in the letter about any of these possibilities, but Paul would not have had to elaborate because the situation was well known to all (note 104 above) and he was being diplomatic. Indeed, we should assume that, in responding to a difficult situation, Paul exemplified all the tact\(^ {106}\) that befits a person who occupies apostolic office in the church, an office originally embodied by Paul himself (Wright 1986, 180-81; Barth and Blanke 2000, 310; Nordling 2004, 154-55). Other qualities that befit pastors and office-holders are sincerity, unselfishness, humility, gravity, cheerfulness, purity, patience and endurance, and faithfulness (Fritz 1932, 15-17). Paul exhibited all these qualities—and then some—in his letter to Philemon.

Thus far side-stepped is the criticism of assuming prior conclusions and reading in interpretative backgrounds not warranted by the text. The goal is to be “as open and transparent as possible” (Pearson 1999, 280; cf. 255, 256), something for which earlier scholarship on Philemon has been roundly criticized.\(^ {107}\) Perhaps, however, “reading in” interpretative backgrounds is not as great a problem as Pearson supposes. That there should be some historical context associated with the letter has long been recognized;\(^ {108}\) it is just that traditional scholars cannot quite agree on the specific shape of the reconstruction because too many key details are missing (Garland 1998, 293; Nordling 2004, 1). However, living with a bit of haziness about how historical details may have converged seems infinitely better than what can only be called an agnosticism-bordering-on-arrogance that translators should try to read the text of Philemon “as if they know nothing certain about its background, because they do not” (Pearson 1999, 280).\(^ {109}\) That opinion seems already to have decided the issue, so there can be no point in noticing certain background matters that really do support the runaway slave hypothesis in

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\(^{105}\) The letter presumes that a kind of “pipeline” existed between Paul (wherever he was when he wrote Phlm), large numbers of Christians in the Lycus Valley (Kirkland 1995, 111-13), and possibly Christians still further east who had been won for Christ as early as the first missionary journey (Acts 14:21; 16:1, 6; 18:23; Nordling 2004, 36-38; 2010).

\(^{106}\) Defined by Fritz (1932, 16) as a mental discernment shown in “avoiding what would offend or disturb”.


\(^{109}\) Very similar is Pearson’s conviction (1999, 280) that Phlm is “an almost context-less letter with an obscure subject matter”.

Philemon, if one may dare to consider the possibility. Some have conceded, of course, that “weaknesses and fallacies… beset the traditional reconstruction” (Taylor 1996, 260); it should be pointed out, however, that hypotheses which discount the traditional interpretation are “equally contrived” and thus raise “at least as many problems as [they] answer questions” (Taylor 1996, 260).

The present article does nothing more than fill in the sort of background details to Philemon that any reader should imagine when he or she encounters a document whose background is not obvious. Any reader can see that the exact background details of Philemon cannot be recovered with certainty! That admission hardly scuppers the runaway slave hypothesis, however, for circumstances pertinent to understanding Philemon better may be reconstructed on the basis of the type of evidence provided in Part III above. Treatment there resembles the archaeologist’s conceptual reconstruction of a temple from the rubble of shattered columns, pediment fragments, and roof tiles that litter many ancient sites. A perceptive reader of Philemon should look at how what we have in the letter fits in with other, fuller patterns in the ancient world, and go from there. If readers cannot engage in plausible reconstruction, the path to reading Philemon comprehendingly is blocked. Hence, scholars who argue, e.g., that the runaway slave hypothesis in Philemon cannot exist because Paul is not more forthcoming in the letter fail to see easily explained complications Paul faced when he wrote Philemon, and why it would not have behooved him—psychologically and theologically—to be more up front.

Why would Paul have hedged so much over the exact details of the wrongs that were done (apparently) on both sides, by Onesimus and Philemon? If the letter were intended only for Philemon, there would be no need to hold back. But Paul must have known that his letters were already living much greater afterlives as they circulated in the Christian communities (Malina 2008; Trainor 2008). In other words, there must have been an acknowledged communal purpose to the letter besides the personal one of fixing up a broken relationship between an injured master and his slave. Thus, the runaway slave hypothesis delivers a much greater theological punch than many lesser options that have been proposed since Knox (1959; 1960), and this despite the fact that Knox’s imaginative reconstructions “have occupied the minds of NT scholars for almost four generations” (Byron 2008, 123). Already demonstrated is what runaways could expect from outraged masters “by the letter of the law” (Nordling 1991, 114-16); to

110 Taylor (1996, 260) cites the following as studies that have been “founded upon the traditional reconstruction”: Feeley-Harnik 1982; Petersen 1985; Barclay 1991.
112 Kreitzer 2008, 13: “[T]he letter was not simply a private communication, and there is every reason to assume that it would have had a wider audience than just Philemon himself”. Cf. also Wickert 1961, 235; Winter 1984, 206; Petersen 1985, 65-78.
this should be added the extreme disappointment masters likely felt toward promising slaves who “threw their lives away” by stealing entrusted funds and running away. This latter reaction has not survived antiquity in so many words. However, in the parable of the talents the slave who buries the one talent and returns it in full to his master is cast out into the night (Matt 25:30), and the wastrel son in another parable expected to be disowned by his father (Luke 15:19, 21). What Onesimus did to Philemon and the congregation was far worse, as any reader suspects who can connect the dots. This, then, is where the best theological potential lies—not in accounting for lesser matters that conceivably transpired between Paul, Philemon, and Onesimus, but in setting a scenario for radical grace and the forgiveness of sins. And the likelihood that forgiveness prevailed in Philemon’s house (instead of an horrific beating, or something worse) suggests why the church remembered the repaired relationship between Philemon and Onesimus at all. Indeed, some have supposed Paul’s briefest letter provides a clue as to the identity of the one who put the Pauline corpus together in the first place: Onesimus himself (Goodspeed 1947, 215; Knox 1957; 1959, 8, 107; 1960, 63-78; Gamble 1975; Kreitzer 2008, 16).

In short, there is still plenty to commend the runaway slave hypothesis in Philemon. This article adds to the evidence and restates the case in ways that demonstrate that the traditional interpretation is still viable and, in many ways, preferable to other explanations that have been proposed.

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113 Lightfoot 1886, 312: “The alternative of life or death rested solely with Philemon, and slaves were constantly crucified for far lighter offences than his”. Cf. Plautus Mil. glor. 2.4.19; Juvenal Sat. 6.219-24.


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