

History, Illocution, and Theological Exegesis: Reading Paul's Letter to Philemon

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THIS ARTICLE participates in two related conversations: first, the role of historical and critical reconstruction in Catholic theological exegesis; second, the interpretation of Paul's Letter to Philemon. The Church calls interpreters to attend to individual biblical authors' historical audiences and communicative intentions, as well as to a text's further significance within the broader context of divine revelation, but the role of historical reconstruction of what is "behind the text" in the theological task remains debated. To emphasize and explore the relevance of history in interpretation, this article highlights especially its role in determining the force of a text's illocution, illustrated in the interpretation of Philemon. It must be acknowledged that such a limited article will leave lacunae in both conversations that must be assumed from other studies or investigated elsewhere. It is hoped, however, that the points made here sufficiently illustrate the necessity and relevance of the historical task for the process of theological interpretation, both at its first stage and throughout.

History, Theology, and Christian Exegesis

Though emphases differ across time, Christian biblical interpretation has consistently tasked its practitioners with both history and theology, or differently put, critical and canonical interpretative strategies. Pius XII quotes as far back as Athanasius, *Against the Arians* 1.54, about the need to understand a text's background to understand its import. Commenting on Heb 1:4, Athanasius writes: "Here also, as is expedient and indeed necessary [*prosēkei . . . anankaion estin*] in the case of all the divine Scripture, we

must [*dei*] note on what occasion the Apostle spoke; we should carefully and faithfully observe to whom and why he wrote, lest, being ignorant of these points, or confounding one with another, we miss the real meaning of the author.”¹ For canonical interpretation, Leo XIII can quote as far back as Clement of Alexandria to prove his statement that “the sense of Holy Scripture can nowhere be found incorrupt outside of the Church,” calling those who would read Scripture for all its worth to attend to the whole of the canon and the dogmatic tradition.² As ascertained by the faithful, a text’s meaning takes into account both (1) the broader controls of the rule of faith and dogmatic development and (2) the impulse of the inspired author’s communicative intent. Visible in writers such as Augustine, Aquinas, the Tübingen theologians, and more recently *ressourcement* thinkers like Yves Congar or Benedict XVI,³ the duality of this task found its fullest magisterial synthesis in the Second Vatican Council’s dogmatic constitution *Dei Verbum* [DV] (esp. §§11–13): the transcendent God self-discloses on the plane of history and, in Scripture, makes assertions by inspiring human communication for a community of faith; hence the faithful must hear divine assertion through human voice and text while also listening to the entirety of what the same God speaks in canon and in his leading of the Church.⁴ In the words of the Pontifical Biblical Commission in 1964, the exegete must evaluate the texts in history, but “should not stop halfway.”⁵ For, biblical interpretation aims at the Church who hears Scripture in every

¹ Pius XII, *Divino Afflante Spiritu* [1943], §34. Translation is from *The Scripture Documents: An Anthology of Official Catholic Teachings*, trans. and ed. Dean P. Bécharde (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical, 2002), 128, but altered toward the Greek text (*PG*, 26:123).

² Leo XIII, *Providentissimus Deus* [1893], §32 (in Bécharde, *Scripture Documents*, 128). He cites Clement of Alexandria, *Stromateis* 7.16; Origen, *De Principiis* 4.2.1; Tertullian, *De praeceptione haereticorum* 15.

³ Note Benedict XVI, *Verbum Domini* [2010], §34: “Only where both methodological levels, the historical-critical and the theological, are respected, can one speak of a theological exegesis, an exegesis worthy of this book.” Interest in the divine author’s intent (e.g., Augustine, *De civitate Dei* 16.2) hardly nullifies appeals to the hagiographer’s or even translator’s intent (e.g., Augustine, *De civitate Dei* 20.30).

⁴ Articulations of inspiration vary, of course. For two accounts to which I am sympathetic, see Robert Sokolowski, “God’s Word and Human Speech,” *Nova et Vetera* (English) 11, no. 1 (2013): 189–212 (published also in *Phenomenologies of Scripture*, ed. Adam Y. Wells [New York: Fordham University Press, 2017]), and James B. Prothro, “Theories of Inspiration and Catholic Exegesis: Scripture and Criticism in Dialogue with Denis Farkasfalvy,” *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* (forthcoming).

⁵ Pontifical Biblical Commission, *Sancta Mater Ecclesia* [1964; *The Historical Reliability of the Gospels*], §12 (in Bécharde, *Scripture Documents*, 232).

age, encompassing critical and dogmatic questions in order to expand to “actualization,” the interpretation of a text *into* the life and praxis of the faithful today.⁶

Nonetheless, questions abound about the practicability and necessity of historical study in theological interpretation. Ascertaining the history “behind” a text sometimes requires significant speculation, and some question the degree to which authorial intent can be determined. And is not the text, rather than what is behind it, what is inspired for our reading?⁷ As Ignacio Carbajosa notes, even those operating with a synthetic view of God’s assertion of eternal truth through contingent human communication often conceive of our historical task as separate and perhaps unessential to hearing the word of God in the text.⁸ Denis Farkasfalvy even critiques conciliar and pontifical mandates to seek the human author’s intention to ascertain divine meaning.⁹ He maintains that historical work is important, but “history and criticism” are only “sovereign in their own sphere (the beginning phase of the exegetical process).”¹⁰

Such arguments are easily understandable as reactions against the hegemony of (sometimes historically erroneous) critical methods in especially the last century.¹¹ It is likewise true that an exegete who studies *nothing*

⁶ See particularly Peter S. Williamson, *Catholic Principles for Interpreting Scripture: A Study of the Pontifical Biblical Commission’s The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church*, Subsidia Biblica 22 (Rome: Pontifical Biblical Institute, 2001), 273–325.

⁷ See: Olivier-Thomas Venard, O.P., “Problématique du sens littéral,” in *Le sens littéral des Écritures* (Paris: Éditions du Cerf, 2009), 293–353; “*Behind*” the Text: *History and Biblical Interpretation*, ed. Craig Bartholomew, C. Stephen Evans, Mary Healy, and Murray Rae (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2003).

⁸ Ignacio Carbajosa, *Faith, the Fount of Exegesis: The Interpretation of Scripture in Light of the History of Research on the Old Testament*, trans. Paul Stevenson (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2013), 194–96. See also Gabino Uríbarri, “Para una nueva racionalidad de la exégesis: Diagnóstico y propuesta,” *Estudios bíblicos* 65 (2007): 253–306. Critiquing less synthetic accounts, see Michael M. Waldstein, “*Analogia Verbi*: The Truth of Scripture in Rudolf Bultmann and Raymond Brown,” *Letter & Spirit* 6 (2010): 93–140.

⁹ Denis Farkasfalvy, O.Cist., “How to Renew the Theology of Biblical Inspiration?,” *Nova et Vetera* (English) 4, no. 1 (2006): 231–53, at 239. See also Farkasfalvy, *A Theology of the Christian Bible: Revelation, Inspiration, Canon* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2018), 53.

¹⁰ Denis Farkasfalvy, O.Cist., “The Case for Spiritual Exegesis,” *Communio* 10 (1983): 333–50, at 346. Compare Christopher Seitz, *Word without End: The Old Testament as Abiding Theological Witness* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1998), 99.

¹¹ See Mark Reasoner, “*Dei Verbum* and the Twentieth-Century Drama of Scripture’s Literal Sense,” *Nova et Vetera* (English) 15, no. 1 (2017): 219–54.

but the circumstances “behind” the text can be little more than a quartermaster for theological interpretation—and believing critics are not unaware of this.¹² But reconstructive work and the data it provides shape the mediation of God’s word from beginning to end. We may elaborate this in a few brief points.

First, all words are inescapably embedded in history, even when they apprehend a *res* that transcends language.¹³ Guy Mansini argues the validity of trans-temporal dogmatic language precisely *by* affirming that “there is no human cognitive possession of reality that bypasses language,” which of necessity is “historically conditioned.”¹⁴ Insofar as “theology” is a discipline of articulation and reason, therefore, there is no separation of theology from history. This is not relativism but a reality, one inherent in the doctrine of inspiration itself, wherein God self-discloses by using language for its current and potential value within a (historically conditioned) network of generic and linguistic symbols.¹⁵ “Christian Scripture is an instrument of human and divine meaning making in history.”¹⁶ A friend

¹² E.g.: Joseph G. Prior, *The Historical Critical Method in Catholic Exegesis*, Tesi Gregoriana Serie Teologia 50 (Rome: Editrice Pontificia Università Gregoriana, 1999); Roy A. Harrisville, *Pandora’s Box Opened: An Examination and Defense of Historical-Critical Method and Its Master Practitioners* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2014); Karl Möller, “Renewing Historical Criticism,” in *Renewing Biblical Interpretation*, ed. Craig Bartholomew, Colin Greene, and Karl Möller (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2000), 145–71; Joseph A. Fitzmyer, S.J., *Scripture, the Soul of Theology* (New York: Paulist, 1994).

¹³ I mean here to agree with John Paul II, *Fides et Ratio* [1998], §95, though emphasizing what he concedes: “Human language may be conditioned by history and constricted in other ways, but the human being can still express truths which surpass the phenomenon of language. Truth can never be confined to time and culture; in history it is known, but it also reaches beyond history.” Compare Thomas Aquinas’s *Summa theologiae* [ST] I, q. 1 a. 7 (on the transcendent object of doctrine) and II–II, q. 1 (on faith’s division into articles). Hans Urs von Balthasar strikes similar notes in *Love Alone is Credible*, trans. D. C. Schindler (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2004), 61, 75, 105–6.

¹⁴ Guy Mansini, O.S.B., *Fundamental Theology*, Sacra Doctrina (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2018), 129 and 132 (respectively); on “trans-cultural” dogmatic categories, see 123–24, 132–39, 178–83. See also: John Paul II, *Fides et Ratio*, §96; Yves Congar, O.P., *La Foi et la Théologie*, Le Mystère Chrétien (Tournai, BE: Desclée, 1962), 62–71.

¹⁵ See James B. Prothro, “The Christological Analogy and Theological Interpretation: Its Limits and Use,” *Journal of Theological Interpretation* 14, no. 1 (2020): 102–19, esp. 114–18.

¹⁶ Joseph K. Gordon, *Divine Scripture in Human Understanding: A Systematic Theology of the Christian Bible*, Reading the Scriptures (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2019), 172.

once quipped that, while historical footnotes are interesting, he can still understand Aristotle without them. He was, however, reading an English translation, whose renderings are based not on some intrinsic likeness of sound with sense (despite Plato's *Cratylus*) but on the reconstructed encyclopedia of the ancient mind in a particular century and dialect of Greek, assuming a certain social location, to understand the relation of words to acts or realities in the mind of the author as that author anticipated his audience's prior understanding and capacity.¹⁷

Second, when the "things" signified by words signify other things in turn—in simple metaphor or allegorical readings—a correspondence from one to the other is necessary. Christian reading of the Old Testament need not confine all meaning to the original author's or audience's field of vision. Still, the "divine pedagogy" (*DV*, §15) presumes that God did legitimately self-disclose to the text's first audience, if imperfectly; moreover, allegorical transference comes about when the initial historical referent is *then* filtered through salvation history and the canon.¹⁸ The Song of Songs, for instance, can be applied *mutatis mutandis* to the prototypical love of God and his people because its words refer to analogous intimacy between lovers. The literal is organically related to the *sensus plenior*.¹⁹

¹⁷ Compare Robert D. Miller II, O.F.S., *Many Roads Lead Eastward: Overtures to Catholic Biblical Theology* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2016), 53.

¹⁸ Recall here Hugh of St. Victor, who does not disapprove of allegorical moves, but cautions readers to slow down and acknowledge each move and its continued foundation in the literal: "What then does it mean to expound the letter if not to show forth that which the letter signifies? They say, 'But the letter signifies one thing according to history, another according to allegory. Indeed, *leo* signifies a beast according to the letter, but according to allegory it signifies Christ: therefore that sound, *leo*, signifies Christ.' I then ask you who hold this, how does *leo* signify Christ? Perhaps you will respond, as the response is often given, 'By the convention of similitude put forth for signification: because a lion [*leo*] sleeps with opened eyes,' or some other such reason." Hugh objects: "the vocable [*dictio*] does not sleep with opened eyes, but the actual animal which the vocable signifies. Understand then that when one says *leo* signifies Christ, it is not the name of the animal but the animal itself that is meant. For this [animal] is what, it is said, sleeps with opened eyes, according to which by a certain similitude it figures him, who slept caught in the slumber of death by his humanity but stayed awake with eyes opened by his divinity. And so you should not exult about your knowledge of Scripture while you are ignorant of the letter. To ignore the letter is to ignore what the letter signifies and what is signified by the letter. For what is signified by the first thing signifies the third" (*De Scripturis* 5 [*PL*, 175:13; my translation]).

¹⁹ Rightly noted by Craig A. Carter, *Interpreting Scripture with the Great Tradition: Recovering the Genius of Premodern Exegesis* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2018), 161–90.

Third, words do more than signify things. Phenomenologically considered, words and speech acts intend effects that are not merely referential or cognitive. Significant here is the matter of a communicative act's *illocution*, what the communicative act counts as in terms of a request, command, rebuke, and so on within the historical and rhetorical situation.²⁰ As an example, the statement "the light is green" directly makes a small claim simply that a light (known to communicator and recipient in the situation) appears or perhaps has just become green in color. But if I live in a society in which a red light commands ordered lines of vehicular traffic to stop but a green light commands the opposite, and my spouse utters, "the light is green," while I am keeping the car stopped, it *counts as* a rebuke and an implicit command ("Drive!") as much as informative speech. Indeed, the statement in that situation is not made without such intent; it is part of the *meaning* of the words themselves. For those who, within their own place in salvation history, hope to share the faith of the biblical writers, this is hermeneutically significant both for hearing the text's intent and for actualizing it.²¹ But this hermeneutical task requires reconstruction of the original communicative situation at both the beginning and the end of the interpretive process, for modern readers must appreciate how the inspired

²⁰ See, classically, J. L. Austin, *How to Do Things with Words: The William James Lectures Delivered at Harvard University in 1955* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1962), esp. 94–106.

²¹ Speech-act theory and illocution have been utilized for Scripture in, e.g.: *After Pentecost: Language and Biblical Interpretation*, ed. Craig Bartholomew, Colin Greene, and Karl Möller (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2001); Stephen E. Fowl, "The Role of Authorial Intention in the Theological Interpretation of Scripture," in *Between Two Horizons: Spanning New Testament Studies and Systematic Theology*, ed. Joel B. Green and Max Turner (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2000), 71–87; William M. Wright IV and Francis Martin, *Encountering the Living God in Scripture: Theological and Philosophical Principles for Interpretation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2019), 199–201. Though the mechanics of interpreting and transferring illocution are apparent in the moral hermeneutics of the Fathers, older systematizations of biblical "senses" are most often focused at the level of words, things, and reported acts, rather than the words *as* acts. The closest heading in the handbooks under which this may fit is perhaps the *sensus accommodatitius*, wherein the literal sense can be transferred by extension to another (originally unintended) word or thing under certain analogies, as *pars pro toto*, etc.: I. H. Ianssens, *Hermeneutica Sacra Seu Introductio in Omnes Libros Sacros Veteris ac Novi Foederis*, ed. C. E. Morandi, 4th ed. (Turin: Marietti, 1922), 333; P. Michael Hetzenauer, O.C., *Epitome Exegeticae Biblicae Catholicae* (Innsbruck, AT: Wagnerian, 1903), 18–19; P. H. Höpf, O.S.B., *Tractatus de Inspiratione Sacrae Scripturae et Compendium Hermeneuticae Biblicae Catholicae* (Rome: Institute of Pius IX, 1923), 140–44.

author responded or actualized the Gospel in a certain set of exigencies in order to determine whether and how we can do the same and in what analogous exigencies.

If the above has sufficiently reiterated that the historical aspect of Christian hermeneutics is entirely necessary, it has been woefully general or theoretical. Rather than continue in a theoretical vein, we may exercise ourselves with an illustrative example. The need for reconstruction for theological—especially moral—interpretation is perhaps nowhere more obvious than in Philemon, an inspired book whose meaning potential is tightly tethered to its illocution within a historical situation that is, unfortunately, less than clear.

History, Illocution, and Christian Interpretation of Philemon

Philemon often receives scant treatment. The letter apparently depicts Paul returning a runaway slave to his master without any explicit pronouncements about human dignity or slavery as an institution. Indeed, it says little explicitly theological.²² Treatments of Pauline theology, unless prefaced by treatments of individual letters, mention it infrequently.²³ Books on biblical ethics are more likely to use the table of duties in Ephesians or Colossians to discuss slavery.²⁴ A few argue that Paul *really* wants Onesimus manumitted, and so build an anti-slavery case with Philemon as precedent,

²² Looking for traditional *loci*, Joseph A. Fitzmyer, S.J., finds very little (*The Letter to Philemon: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, Anchor Bible 34C [New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2008], 37–40).

²³ E.g., Brant Pitre, Michael P. Barber, John A. Kincaid, *Paul, a New Covenant Jew: Rethinking Pauline Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2019), mentions only Phlm 5 (163n4). Perhaps more proportionate, Phlm is mentioned on twenty-one pages out of the 737 pages of James D. G. Dunn, *The Theology of Paul the Apostle* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1998). Udo Schnelle's developmental look at Paul (*Paulus: Leben und Denken*, 2nd ed. [Berlin: De Gruyter, 2014]) includes a treatment of each letter, yet his theological synthesis employs only Phlm 2 and 9, according to the index.

²⁴ E.g.: Florence Michels, O.L.V.M., *Paul and the Law of Love* (Milwaukee, WI: Bruce, 1967), 56–57; L. H. Marshall, *The Challenge of New Testament Ethics* (London: MacMillan, 1950), 328–29; Frank J. Matera, *New Testament Ethics: The Legacies of Jesus and Paul* (Louisville, KY: Westminster / John Knox, 1996), 225–27. C. Spicq, O.P., also, despite several sections on slavery (real and metaphorical), mentions Phlm only rarely, and mostly in relation to apostolic commands and the need for willing agency in love (*Théologie morale du Nouveau Testament*, 2 vols., Etudes biblique [Paris: LeCoffre, 1965], 2:581n2, 612n5, 662n3, 836n2). See also: Victor Paul Furnish, *Theology and Ethics in Paul* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1968), 94–95; Willi Marxsen, *New Testament Foundations for Christian Ethics*, trans. O. C. Dean Jr. (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1993), 220–24.

but the problem is that Paul does not quite say what he wants to happen.

The letter's lack of explicit theological statements leaves interpreters to follow the precedent set by (1) Paul's action of returning Onesimus and (2) the illocution of his words on the slave's behalf. Understandably, Paul's returning Onesimus is troubling to many readers. This leaves us with the illocution of Paul's epistolary intervention into the situation, but appreciating this requires understanding the situation. And herein lie the complications, for the letter leaves much unsaid.

The letter does not say outright exactly the relation between Philemon and Onesimus excepting "no longer as [*hōs*] a slave" (v. 16), and some have argued that this is mere simile (no longer *like* a slave) and that Onesimus was never a slave at all.²⁵ This reading has rightly received little following, but this hardly exhausts the reconstructive difficulties. Assuming that Onesimus was a slave, the circumstances under which he met Paul are unclear. Did he fit ancient landowners' stereotypes of thieving runaways? Or did he tarry too long on business in order to seek out Paul's intercession in a conflict with his master?²⁶ Was Philemon the master imagined by certain moralists, clement and justly manumitting loyal slaves after a few years? Or did Paul send Onesimus back to an abusive master? Is Philemon even his master? Based on letter introductions in some papyri, John Knox argues that the "you" who owns the slave is not the letter's first-named recipient, Philemon, but the second-named male Archippus.²⁷ Might the command that the Colossians "tell Archippus" to fulfill his "ministry" in Colossians 4:17 illuminate this, or is Colossians a later reception of Philemon by a pseudepigrapher?²⁸ Though we do not know what happened

²⁵ See Allen Dwight Callahan, "Paul's Epistle to Philemon: Toward an Alternative Argumentum," *Harvard Theological Review* 86, no. 4 (1993): 357–76.

²⁶ For debates over whether Onesimus was "fugitive" or "truant," see, e.g.: Peter Lampe, "Keine 'Sklavenflucht' des Onesimus," *Zeitschrift für die neutestamentliche Wissenschaft und die Kunde der älteren Kirche* 76 (1985): 135–37; Sara C. Winter, "Paul's Letter to Philemon," *New Testament Studies* 33 (1987): 1–15; J. Albert Harrill, "Using the Roman Jurists to Interpret Philemon: A Response to Peter Lampe," *Zeitschrift für die neutestamentliche Wissenschaft und die Kunde der älteren Kirche* 90 (1999): 135–38; John G. Nordling, "Onesimus Fugitivus: A Defense of the Runaway Slave Hypothesis in Philemon," *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 41 (1991): 97–119; Nordling, "Some Matters Favouring the Runaway Slave Hypothesis in Philemon," *Neotestamentica* 44 (2010): 85–121.

²⁷ John Knox, *Philemon Among the Letters of Paul: A New View of its Place and Importance*, rev. ed. (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1959), 53–70.

²⁸ Most who take Colossians to be authentic see it and Philemon dispatched together. But see Vicky Balabanski, "Where is Philemon? The Case for a Logical Fallacy in the Correlation of the Data in Philemon and Colossians 1.1–2; 4.7–18,"

to Onesimus, interpreters certainly want to know what Paul *wanted* to happen.²⁹ The master is clearly to forgive his debt (vv. 18–19) and be reconciled with him (vv. 15–17). But does Paul want him *sent back* to himself to serve the Gospel, as he says he “would have liked” (vv. 14–15)? Does his rhetorical confidence that the owner will do “even more than I say” (v. 21) hint at manumission?

All these questions bear on interpretation. The earliest known commentaries or homilies featuring Philemon make their exhortations and interpretations based on their reading of the historical situation.³⁰ Slavery debates in nineteenth-century America did the same, with some seeing Onesimus’s return as affirmation of fugitive slave laws while some abolitionists rebutted that Onesimus was never a slave at all (cf. above). More recently, James Burtchaell’s study of grace in Christian ethics takes its starting point from Philemon, but only via a particular reconstruction of the background.³¹ Modern commentaries often devote as much space to isagogics as to verse-by-verse exposition.³²

Journal for the Study of the New Testament 38 (2015): 131–50, who argues these are written years apart.

²⁹ Some later episcopal lists identify this Onesimus with a bishop of the same name mentioned in Ignatius, *To the Ephesians* 1.3, 2.1, and 6.2, implying a happy resolution to his trouble with Philemon. Knox has argued for the historicity of this view (*Philemon*, 91–107), but Scot McKnight is more accurate merely to “hope that is true” (*The Letter to Philemon*, New International Commentary on the New Testament [Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2017], 114).

³⁰ See: Margaret M. Mitchell, “John Chrysostom on Philemon: A Second Look,” *Harvard Theological Review* 88 (1995): 135–48; Ronald E. Heine, “In Search of Origen’s Commentary on Philemon,” *Harvard Theological Review* 93 (2000): 117–33.

³¹ James Tunstead Burtchaell, C.S.C., *Philemon’s Problem: A Theology of Grace* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1998), 6–7, tries to eschew a decision on whether Onesimus was a runaway or truant, but makes both about his desire for manumission, which frames his treatment.

³² We may offer some examples. Fitzmyer’s *Philemon* spans 127 pages, but verse-by-verse commentary begins only on page 81, after introduction and bibliography. Compare: McKnight’s *Philemon*, with commentary spanning pp. 46–114; Peter Stuhlmacher, *Der Brief an Philemon*, 4th ed., Evangelisch-katholischer Kommentar zum Neuen Testament 18 (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener, 2004), with about thirty pages of commentary after the same length of introduction; John G. Nordling, *Philemon*, Concordia Commentary (St. Louis, MO: Concordia, 2004), an over-350-page volume with pages 1–150 dedicated to introduction. Nor is this a problem of recent commentary-on-commentary pileup in exegetical scholarship. J. B. Lightfoot’s commentary on Philemon spans pp. 301–46, and the introductory setup ends at p. 327 (*St. Paul’s Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon* [London: MacMillan and, 1897]).

In brief, the letter is a snapshot of Paul's intervention into a household relationship in the name of the Gospel. This provides great promise for theology and ethics, even beyond the question of slavery, for those who would hear its illocution and seek to imitate Paul in their own circumstances. But this cannot be done without historical reconstruction. In what follows of this interpretive exercise, we will attend to two of the main aspects of the situation in order to illustrate their relevance and use for theological interpretation.

Onesimus and His Owner

It strains credulity to argue that Onesimus is not legally a slave. Allen Callahan's argument, following on older abolitionist readings, is ingenious but implausible.³³ He is correct that the letter's only direct reference to Onesimus's status as a slave is Paul's statement that his master may now receive him back "no longer as a slave, but more than a slave, a beloved brother . . . both in the flesh and in the Lord" (v. 16). But he is incorrect, as Margaret Mitchell has shown decisively, to assert that Onesimus's enslavement was first innovated by Chrysostom.³⁴ Further, Paul's desire for permission and consent from the addressee even to keep Onesimus, along with *ouketi hōs doulon* (v. 16) and the nominal puns about his "usefulness" (vv. 11, 20), suggests his enslavement. It is perhaps possible that this suggests Onesimus had been the owner's natural brother "in the flesh" (*en sarki*; v. 16) in addition to being his slave; such relationships were not unknown. However, if the owner is as charitable as verses 4–7 describe, it is difficult to imagine that he would also have put his own kin in such potential terror as seems required by the forceful character of Paul's intervention.³⁵

Is he owned by Philemon or Archippus? Knox's argument that Paul writes to Philemon as Church official, but addressing Archippus as the owner, is possible. However, Knox's appeal to the proximity of Archippus in the address to the singular "you" of verses 4–23 is weakened by the intervening plural grace wish (v. 3). Further, it is easier to read the object of closing greetings from other ministers in verse 23, clearly the same "you" as Onesimus's owner, as the same official thus greeted in verses 1–2 (Philemon). The majority view that Philemon is the owner remains preferable.³⁶

³³ Callahan, "Paul's Epistle to Philemon."

³⁴ Mitchell, "Chrysostom on Philemon."

³⁵ Paul's choice of words in depicting the owner's charity are rhetorically chosen in anticipation of Paul's request (see below), but the appeal to his character is effective only if the description is accurate overall.

³⁶ Knox's reading is possible, but there is no textual signal that should cause us to

What has happened between Onesimus and Philemon? Onesimus has clearly gone “absent without leave”—otherwise Paul would not need to invoke divine providence about why he was “separated” from Philemon or send him back for Philemon’s consent (vv. 13–15). For how long, and why? The only other clear datum to follow is Paul’s insistence in verses 18–19 that Onesimus must be forgiven any injury to Philemon. As noted, scholars debate whether this suggests Onesimus was a stereotypical runaway who absconded with his owner’s goods *or* whether he would have been legally considered a truant, not intending to run away but being too long away (however defined), perhaps intentionally seeking Paul to intercede in a dispute with his master. Peter Lampe cites this legal rescript from Justinian’s *Digest*: “Whoever flees to beg intercession from a friend of his master is not a runaway; indeed, even if he intends not to return home should he not obtain this help, he is still not a runaway, for that is the term not only for the intention but also for the act of fleeing” (*Dig.* 21.1.43.1).³⁷ If we imagine Onesimus knowing prior Paul’s connection to Philemon—a plausible assumption if Philemon was a house or managerial slave who had some acquaintance with the worship assembly—it is difficult to imagine he would not avoid him if he were a thieving runaway. From that angle, it is more likely that Onesimus and Philemon had some falling out over a (perceived?) injury (mentioned in v. 18), Onesimus met Paul (intentionally or not) and delayed for baptism, and Paul now sends Onesimus back with a letter asking pardon for Onesimus regarding the injury and time lost while delayed with Paul.

However, the lines between runaway and truant blurred in practice and perception.³⁸ J. Albert Harrill offers an example from a jurist admitting as much: “Vivianus writes, ‘the common belief of laypeople [*quod plerumque ab imprudentibus*], which is that a slave who without the master’s consent stays away for a night is a *fugitivus*, is not true; one has to assess the slave’s purpose in so acting [*ab affectu animi*]’” (*Dig.* 21.1.17.4).³⁹ The distinction is a matter of intention. And intention can vary, even change. It is also possible that Onesimus did intend to run away but later encountered Paul or someone connected with the Pauline mission and saw an alternate opportunity that changed his mind.

prefer it. Paul’s other references to house churches in greetings (Rom 16:5; 1 Cor 16:19; Col 4:15) also offer no sufficient comparison to support such shift in address.

³⁷ Lampe, “Sklavenflucht,” 136 (my translation).

³⁸ Rightly Nordling, “Some Matters,” 89.

³⁹ Harrill, “Using the Roman Jurists,” 137.

The question of Onesimus's motivations and the circumstances under which he met Paul is significant, and our answer can affect other decisions about other situational components like the letter's provenance and date. Nevertheless, from where we sit as interpreters, any number of sequences must remain possible. Historically, it took only one sequence of events, perhaps even one which we on balance would deem implausible. "History, after all, is the arena of the unique rather than the average."⁴⁰ Hermeneutically, however, we are justified in prioritizing *perception* in this matter. For, even if Onesimus's intentions (which we do not know) would please the jurists, that hardly diffuses the situation into which Paul *writes*. The rhetorical situation addresses a master, not a jurist, and one to whom Onesimus's intentions and actions are not fully known (at least) until Onesimus returns with this letter.⁴¹ The letter envisions a Philemon who has been left to fume over his slave's absence and an injury he perceives against himself. And this makes perception potentially a matter of life and death for Onesimus. The longer Onesimus is thus absent, the more Philemon is left to assume the worst and to fury over the slight. Philemon has every reason and legal right to punish Onesimus, perhaps harshly. Formed in his legal and social environment, he may fear that leniency would cost him honor (and consequently business) among his peers and set a poor precedent for other slaves. He may believe punishment will improve and sharpen this human "tool," as jurists and some philosophers classified slaves.⁴² And, it must be stressed, he has every legal right to adjudicate this himself. The distinction between runaway and truant would be of no help to Onesimus unless he or Paul could sway Philemon's perception of the situation.

What of Onesimus's perception? If Onesimus's reasons for being gone in the past are hard to determine, the rhetorical situation draws us into the present tense of his return to Philemon. If a runaway, we may expect his hopes or expectations were dealt a blow when Paul urged (or commanded?) his return. But even if he were a truant intending to return

⁴⁰ Robert Jewett, *Dating Paul's Life* (London: SCM, 1979), 54; similarly G. K. Beale, *Colossians and Philemon*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2019), 368.

⁴¹ Note the "if" (*ei*) in Paul's phrasing of v. 18—"If he has injured you or owes you anything"—which acknowledges the injury but leaves any reckoning to Philemon himself. Paul's appeal to God's intentions (v. 15) rather than Onesimus's may delicately pass over a runaway's guilt or simply assume truancy, so it offers inconclusive evidence here.

⁴² See J. Albert Harrill, *Slaves in the New Testament: Literary, Social, and Moral Dimensions* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2006), 18–21.

all along, we must imagine he stands in fear and trembling about how he will be received and treated by his master above all else. Burtchaell frames Onesimus's hopes and the stakes of Paul's appeal in terms of manumission: Onesimus was "desperate for his freedom," either as a runaway or as a dis-favored slave nervous that he would not receive a timely manumission.⁴³ I have no intent to sketch slavery as a pleasant form of life, no matter the differences between ancient Rome and the American South or Brazil, but we should beware assuming legal manumission meant "freedom" as the boon we moderns imagine.⁴⁴ Being a slave, especially a managerial slave, of a wealthy and just master afforded upward social mobility even without manumission.⁴⁵ On the other hand, manumission could be just as harsh, depending on the will of the master. Manumitted slaves were still members of the *paterfamilias's* household, and manumission came with costs beyond the redemption price: a master might require, for the loss of a slave by manumission, that the freedman surrender his children to slavery; in some situations, a freedman's property would be returned to the master (or the master's heir) when the freedman died.⁴⁶ Onesimus's situation—whether he continues as a slave *or* is manumitted—is dependent upon Philemon's regard and choice of action regarding him. And this is precisely the nerve Paul's appeal means to hit.

Hearing Paul's Appeal

Framed against Onesimus's potential fates and the duty or entitlement Philemon had to punish, Paul interjects his own theological perception of the situation when he sends Philemon back with this letter. Paul's choice to return Onesimus appears, frankly, offensive if we imagine it as disinterested compliance with fugitive slave laws. But Paul could also have appealed to another law. Deuteronomy commands: "You shall not hand over to his master any slave who has escaped to you from his master. Let him live with you, in your midst, in any place he chooses in any of your communities that

⁴³ Burtchaell, *Philemon's Problem*, 7.

⁴⁴ For a broad analysis, see Orlando Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death: A Comparative Study* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1982), 209–96.

⁴⁵ Hence Paul's self-appellation *doulos Christou* (Rom 1:1; Phil 1:1; etc.). See Dale B. Martin, *Slavery as Salvation: The Metaphor of Slavery in Pauline Christianity* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1990), 1–49. For a survey of various slave jobs and qualities of life, see Keith Bradley, *Slavery and Society at Rome*, Key Themes in Ancient History (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 57–106.

⁴⁶ See: Laura Salah Nasrallah, *Archaeology and the Letters of Paul* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), 40–75; Jennifer A. Glancy, *Slavery in Early Christianity* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2006), 95.

seems good to him. You shall not oppress him” (Deut 23:15–16 [16–17 in the Hebrew text]). If Paul does not impress the Torah comprehensively as a binding code in his gentile assemblies, he at least reads and applies its intentions and principles as expressive of God’s will (e.g.: 1 Cor 5:7–8, 13; 9:9).⁴⁷ And he is hardly unwilling to follow God despite the state (see: 2 Cor 1:8–9; 11:25). One assumes he has a reason beyond mere blind obedience to Roman laws here. So what is Paul up to?

We may first ask after Paul’s actual request. Explicitly, he asks relatively little. He emphasizes the value of Onesimus in Christ by noting his hypothetical desire to keep him along to serve the Gospel with Paul, and sending Onesimus back to Paul (legally freed or not) is clearly an implicit option for Philemon should he refuse to forgive. However, Paul’s threat of a future visit halts us from viewing Onesimus’s return as the primary request.⁴⁸ What Paul commands outright is reconciliation: to welcome Onesimus as he would Paul (v. 17) and charge any wrong to Paul’s account rather than seek retribution against Onesimus (vv. 18–19).

If the request appears minimal, however, the pressure he puts on Philemon is anything but minimal. Paul does not speak peer-to-peer about the fate of a subordinate; the Paul who intervenes here “is not as much Philemon’s friend as Onesimus’s advocate.”⁴⁹ With rhetorical savvy, he praises Philemon for his love for the saints and calls him now to exhibit the same in receiving Onesimus, who now is a saint.⁵⁰ Indeed, Paul exerts considerable pressure and raises himself *over* Philemon in the power structure.⁵¹ He appeals to Philemon’s love rather than give orders (vv. 8–9, 14), but still

⁴⁷ See here Brian S. Rosner, *Paul and the Law: Keeping the Commandments of God*, New Studies in Biblical Theology 31 (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2013), 159–205.

⁴⁸ Despite, e.g., Knox, *Philemon*, 22–30.

⁴⁹ McKnight, *Philemon*, 39.

⁵⁰ Philemon is praised for refreshing the *splanchna* of the saints (v. 7) and is now called to do the same with Onesimus, who, now also a saint (v. 11), is Paul’s own *splanchna* (vv. 12, 20). Philemon is praised as having a partnership (*koinōnia*; v. 6) with Paul in ministry and now is commanded to receive Onesimus in the stead of his partner (*koinōnon*) Paul (v. 17). Philemon is praised for his knowledge and obedience to what good deed can be done do unto Christ (*en epignōsei pantos agathou tou en hēmin eis Christon*; v. 6), and Paul’s explanation for returning Onesimus calls Philemon to see this as just such a situation: “but I desired to do nothing apart from your knowledge [*chōris de tēs sēs gnōmēs*], that your good deed [*to agathon sou*] might not be done out of compulsion but willingly” (v. 14).

⁵¹ See Timothy A. Brookins, “‘I Rather Appeal to *Auctoritas*’: Roman Conceptualizations of Power and Paul’s Appeal to Philemon,” *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 77 (2015): 302–21.

expects “obedience” (v. 21) as an authoritative apostle (cf.: 1 Thess 2:6; 2 Thess 3:9; 2 Cor 13:10).⁵² He superimposes the “usefulness” and spiritual debt that Philemon owes *Paul* in Christ over any comparatively petty evaluation of Onesimus’s usefulness to Philemon (vv. 19–20). Paul has become Onesimus’s spiritual “father” in his conversion (v. 10; cf. 1 Cor 4:15 and Gal 4:19), making Onesimus and Philemon both children together by the same means and with the same status in baptism (cf. Gal 3:28).⁵³ Paul *adopts and redeploys* Philemon’s perception of household obligations and authorities.⁵⁴ If Philemon had seen it as his personal business to judge what to do with a slave in his household, Paul calls Philemon to see himself instead as Onesimus’s brother, with both of them dependents who owe fealty and service *to Christ through Paul* in the “household” of faith (cf. Gal 6:10 and Eph 2:19). Even more, this public letter—not private—puts at least Philemon’s entire congregation on notice that Onesimus’s treatment of Philemon is a matter of obedience to Paul and to Christ.⁵⁵ The letter closes with a rhetorical threat that Paul, whenever he is released, will arrive unexpected to check Philemon’s compliance, and the guestroom requested would in the meantime remind all parties of Philemon’s duty in the Lord (v. 22).

Paul and Deuteronomy both—albeit differently—protect slaves from the wrath of their masters despite legal status or entitlements. But Paul’s return of Onesimus and the grounds on which he makes his appeal value

⁵² Despite Marxsen, *Foundations*, 222. See also Wolfgang Schrage, *The Ethics of the New Testament*, trans. David E. Green (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1988), 192, 196 (respectively): “Nor, however, are Paul’s admonitions a more-or-less optional contribution to the dialogue or an unauthoritative personal opinion. They establish the will of God with authority and demand to be followed (2 Cor. 2:9; 7:15; Phil. 2:12; Philem. 8–11). This is also the basis on which the apostle calls on his readers to imitate his conduct (1 Cor. 4:16–17; 11:1; Phil. 4:9; 3:17). . . . Conscience in particular does not dispense Christians from the authority of the apostle’s command, from accepting it freely and obediently.”

⁵³ Historical reconstruction of other matters may add weight to Paul’s appeal: if Colossians is genuine, and if Philemon’s congregation is the nearby church meant to read Colossians also (Col 4:16), then Philemon and his church would have to hear not only the household codes in Col 3:18–4:1 but also Col 3:11: “There is no Greek and Jew, circumcision and foreskin, barbarian, Scythian, slave, free, but Christ is all and is in all.” For this possibility, see, e.g., Knox, *Philemon*, 54–55.

⁵⁴ See Chris Frilingos, “‘For My Child, Onesimus’: Paul and Domestic Power in Philemon,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 119, no. 1 (2000): 91–104.

⁵⁵ Note the public address to the whole church and certain named officials in vv. 1–3, 25, and Paul’s publicized expectation that the whole church (“you” plural) is praying for his release and a future visit in v. 22.

an *ongoing* change in the parties' (especially Philemon's) perception of the situation and their *continued* moral and communal progress. Paul's appeal does not terminate in a single act or sequence of acts—not in sending Onesimus back, not in refusing to punish him merely "this time," and not even in manumitting him. He offers instead a theological reality meant to renew thinking and behavior indefinitely (cf. Rom 12:1–2). Whatever specifically happened in Onesimus's departure and absence, Philemon (and Onesimus) must honor the use to which God has put it: "For perhaps this is why he was separated for a time, that you might receive him back eternally, no longer as a slave but more than a slave, as a beloved brother—much so to me, how much more to you!—both in the flesh and in the Lord" (vv. 15–16).⁵⁶ Paul refers every aspect of the relationship and every potential decision of Philemon about how to treat Onesimus to the domain of God's evangelical economy, because all is changed by one fundamental fact: Onesimus and Philemon are now brothers, and in Christ both owe charity toward one another and obedience toward Paul, a relation that overlaps and even supersedes the quotidian order.⁵⁷ "For he who was a slave when called is the Lord's freedman; likewise, he who was free when called is a slave of Christ. You were bought with a price" (1 Cor 7:22–23a).

"What does Paul want Philemon to do?" Ultimately, the answer must be "more." Surely, Paul says suggestively, "you will do even more than what I say" (v. 21). Paul puts ongoing pressure on Philemon not only in his public request for a guestroom but in grounding his appeal on Onesimus's

⁵⁶ Paul's phrasing *hina aiōnion auton apechēs* (v. 15) might use *aiōnion* as an adverbial accusative, though this use of *aiōnios* is otherwise unattested in the NT, indicating the duration of the receiving ("receive him back *eternally*"). Comparison of this to Septuagint passages about slaves choosing to remain "eternal" or lifelong slaves when offered manumission might hint that Paul means to call the offer of manumission and the slave's choice to mind for Philemon (see Beale, *Colossians and Philemon*, 431–32), but the letter does not otherwise press any OT echoes; further, those passages consistently use the adverbial phrase *eis ton aiōna* (Exod 21:6; Lev 25:46; Deut 15:17) rather than the adjective applied to a person (but cf. Job 40:28). It may rather be classified as a predicate complement to the pronoun *auton*, i.e., that Onesimus's person is now one that pertains to or is marked for the next age. In any case, seen with the fraternal ecclesial language of v. 16, the term must weight the new ecclesial relation between them. "Paul, Philemon, and Onesimus are now Christians, related in an eternal sense that not even death can undo. Clearly, Onesimus does not return as the same person who departed from Philemon's house" (Fitzmyer, *Philemon*, 113; see also McKnight, *Philemon*, 94).

⁵⁷ See: Michael Wolter, *Paulus: Ein Grundriss seiner Theologie* (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener, 2011), 95; Burtchaell, *Philemon's Problem*, 14.

and Philemon's shared membership in the body of Christ (rather than on, say, the slave's contrition or promise not to repeat the offense).⁵⁸ So long as Philemon expects to remain in good standing with Paul, and so long as Onesimus is a believer, the terms of Paul's command remain unchanged. Giving no countenance to Philemon's or Onesimus's esteem or rights outside the communion of Christ, Paul calls Philemon (and Onesimus, though differently) to pursue obedience to the Lord and to deal with each other asking first and always this question: *how should I treat my brother?*

From Illocution to Actualization: Philemon beyond Slavery

The above has focused on reconstruction of only certain elements of Philemon's background as they can inform exegesis. There are numerous others that add shades of meaning for interpretation and actualization. But those we have treated are productive.

The letter's brevity and subject matter often leave it to be interpreted only with regard to the question of slavery, and sometimes for that reason it is swept under the rug as morally outdated or embarrassing. This is unfortunate for a least two reasons. First, we simply should not expect this letter—addressed to one situation in which Paul knew both parties and a substantial bit of the back-story that eludes us—to address the entire anthropology necessary for our understanding of human dignity.⁵⁹ Indeed, modern embarrassment at the more explicit *Haustafeln* or “household codes” in the New Testament misses the fact that the commands to be willingly subordinate in the hope of eschatological reward (Col 3:22–25; Eph 6:5–8; 1 Pet 3:16–25) actually *humanized* slaves by ascribing moral agency and divine esteem to persons commonly classed as mere “tools.”

Second, and perhaps more unfortunate, a narrow focus on the institution of slavery blocks Paul's intervention from relevance to things analogous to slavery or other aspects of the letter's occasion and addressees. Even in Paul's own day, “the institution of slavery marked the character of the inhabitants of the Greco-Roman world in ways that will not always appear immediately to be associated with the practices of slavery.”⁶⁰ In our day as well, there are numerous analogues to the relational and institutional

⁵⁸ It is fruitful to compare the difference between Paul's appeal and that of Pliny the Younger, who interceded for a slave with his displeased master by appealing to the slave's contrition, the master's accrual of honor if he displays clemency, and the fact that Pliny has already reprimanded the slave sufficiently (*Epistulae* 9.21).

⁵⁹ See: Glancy, *Slavery*, 91–92; Rudolf Schnackenburg, *The Moral Teaching of the New Testament*, trans. J. Holland-Smith and W. J. O'Hara (New York: Herder and Herder, 1965), 259.

⁶⁰ Glancy, *Slavery*, 152.

dynamics of Philemon's situation, despite the superiority over the ancients to which some pretend. Burtchaell is correct: "Paul's demand required of believers endlessly more than abolition: both before any laws could be changed, and after. Those who take the Gospel to heart often make poor subscribers to moral manifestoes and petitions and coalitions, because their imaginations usually run more wildly and deeply beyond the specific grievance at hand."⁶¹

Envisioning Paul's appeal, its grounds, and its force within the situation offers a precedent that applies beyond the specific situation. It leads us to interpret via "the fact that." Knowing the situation, what do we learn from *the fact that* Paul chose this particular way to intervene, *the fact that* he thought this truth should supersede these other considerations in Philemon's or Onesimus's mind? The text's illocution and the precedent it sets offers much to theological exegesis as it looks to actualize the biblical text in the lives of today's faithful. We may conclude by exploring three fruitful aspects that can be gleaned from the reconstruction above.

The Priority and Reality of Ecclesial Relation

Paul often speaks of those in Christ as brothers and sisters (e.g., 1 Cor 7:15). This fits with the metaphor of adoption and inheritance, the saving boon of being children of God and, under God, of Paul by conversion and baptism (cf.: Rom 8:12–17; 1 Cor 4:15; Gal 3:26–29; 4:19). In that regard, his description of Onesimus's "birth" in Phlm 10 and his appellations "brother" and "sister" may seem unremarkable. But *the fact that* he asserts ecclesial relation (vv. 10, 16) as primary over relation in the legal and secular economy shows that, for Paul, it bears constant significance in ordering Christian behavior. Philemon has every legal right and every personal reason to punish Onesimus. But he must now see Onesimus as his brother, "in the flesh and in the Lord" (v. 16).

The ties and duties owed to real kin are, for Paul, binding on these two Christians now.⁶² These duties go beyond mere polite greetings in liturgical gatherings; they flow from a real bond in which the one's honor and wellbeing is bound up in that of the other. The bond of brotherhood between believers must be *real*, more real indeed than blood. If Philemon is nervous, say, about what receiving Onesimus back might do to his business and thus the quality of his own children's or wife's life, he must also apply the same concern for wellbeing now to his brother Onesimus. If

⁶¹ Burtchaell, *Philemon's Problem*, 33.

⁶² If Onesimus was in fact also his owner's brother in the flesh (see above), Paul's emphasis on his conversion leaves our present argument unaffected.

Philemon has concerns about the “body” or “household” of the state, as his contemporaries often imagined society, and what forgiving this injustice might upset within it, he must see Onesimus’s relation to him in the “household of faith” as even more pressing, as the slave is now a beneficiary and contributor to that communion’s good in ways that societal norms did not countenance. And Onesimus, in returning, must likewise seek a reconciled life with his brother Philemon, rather than see him as a threat or a force to be escaped. If in Christ there is no longer slave and free (Gal 3:28; Col 3:11), each must see the other not as enemy or competitor but as mutual body members of equal worth, with each having equal need of the other for edification, correction, and service (1 Cor 12:12–26; cf. Eph 4:11–16). This might mean Philemon obeying Onesimus inasmuch as Onesimus functions as Paul’s emissary or representative (cf. Col 4:7–9). It means Onesimus emptying himself for his brother in service—whether commanded or voluntarily—in imitation of Christ (Phil 2:1–11) and for Philemon’s own good. It means both being ready to lose to the other rather than let their minds and relations be ruled by pagan jurists (cf. 1 Cor 6:1–11). They must each strive to outdo the other in showing honor (Rom 12:10).⁶³

Paul’s appeal, envisioned within its situation, shows that ecclesial relation is “not merely . . . a cognitive construction,” but has necessary “effects on the social relations between persons.”⁶⁴ In short, it means a real application and execution of all the general commands and exhortations Paul gives as he envisions the healthy and growing body of Christ, *within and despite* legal, social, and economic stratifications and ordering. It means charity over practicality, sacrifice over rights. Those who aim to hear Paul’s words and share his faith in a new context are invited to see and take up Paul’s stance anew in analogous situations. Paul’s voice intrudes into our habits of maintaining secular or legal strata within the liturgical assembly. It leads us to ask the duties of the Christian U.S. border guard toward the family praying rosaries and begging deliverance from the cartels. It leads us to actualize the precedence of ecclesial relation to the same degree that Paul does in societies that ascribe (or prescribe) precedence to one gender, race, and so on over another. And the echo of Paul’s words in his situation impress themselves on us all the louder the more we consider what other analogues there are in our own lives and relations. And in every relation in which we encounter another believer in Christ, it calls us to ask the same

⁶³ See Peter Oakes, *Reading Romans in Pompeii: Paul’s Letter at Ground Level* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2009), 107–12.

⁶⁴ Wolter, *Paulus*, 238 (translation mine).

question Paul put implicitly to Philemon: *this is my closest kin, God's own child, so what should I do?*

Divine Opportunity in Human Folly

From Philemon's perspective, Onesimus has wronged him. The degree to which he estimated the egregiousness of the offense is affected by the duration of Onesimus's unpermitted absence and how shocking it was to Philemon—hence our view of it depends on whether he was a runaway, sent to Paul, or a truant, and on how long he stayed with Paul and how far away Paul was from Philemon. But we can at least posit that Philemon, when he sees Onesimus and receives this letter, saw the wrong as willful and culpable.

Here a hermeneutical and ethical precedent emerges as we see Paul redirect Philemon's gaze from the culpability of Onesimus to divine opportunity in which both God's Church and Philemon benefit: "For perhaps this is why he was separated for a time, that you might receive him back eternally, no longer as a slave but more than a slave, as a beloved brother" (vv. 15–16a). Paul does not here deny human folly or error—on the side of either party—in what has happened. He cannot erase Philemon's memory or his perception of any injury (see vv. 18–19). One recalls Joseph's words to his brothers: "You meant it for evil against me; God meant it for good" (Gen 50:20). But Paul's passive *echōristhē* focuses Philemon's eye simply on the fact of the situation in order to frame it as an opportunity for divine providence to work within the exigencies of human folly.

Beyond a mere deference to providence's "untraceable" ways (Rom 11:33), Paul's appeal to the providentially wrought benefit of gaining a "brother" presupposes a teleology and invites Philemon to reevaluate what is "good," or at least what is the higher "good" here. Onesimus's departure, resulting in his conversion and now return, has afforded another brother in the household of God. And this is not just a quantitative boon of increasing the number of the baptized as an end in itself; were that the case, their reconciliation would hardly be worth Paul's effort or the risks he demands of both parties. This new member of Christ is a boon to Philemon as well—and Philemon is a boon to Onesimus—in that they each gain a new object of affection and care, a new supporter and edifier in whom each may serve the Lord. The same perspective is expressed in the command in Ephesians 4:28 that the thief not steal but work, not primarily because stealing is wicked, but because by working he may earn a legitimate possession to "share with one who is in need." This is the ongoing "good" that Philemon should willingly do and a situation in which he should rejoice; Onesimus's conversion and return afford him a constant opportunity to love another

saint, and thereby do good *eis Christon*, unto Christ (v. 6).

Paul invites Philemon to a change of perspective that prioritizes providence and charity in Christ. Knowing the situation and imagining Philemon's perspective as he is encountered by Paul's text—or indeed imagining Onesimus's situation and the revaluation to which he, for his part, is called—should invite us to let the same take shape in our own lives. Do we cast aspersions on those who convert in questionable circumstances? Do we rejoice in added opportunities and obligations to charity, or see them as burdens or risks? Do we look on those whom God saves *through* the circumstances of their own folly and see only their own blame for those circumstances, or rejoice in the opportunity of grace and seek reconciliation? If the end of exegesis is actualization, the interpretation of Philemon calls for this and so much more among us who were ourselves “slaves in Egypt,” “sold under sin,” and delivered from our own folly (cf. Deut 15:15; 16:11–12; Rom 7:14).

Not a Private Affair

Thirdly, the fact that Paul intervenes at all—and the public way in which he intervenes—says much about what counts as public and private in the Church of God. It is baffling to encounter interpreters who, despite the conventions of Pauline letter reception generally and the plural addressees of this letter specifically (vv. 1–3, 22, 25), insist that this is a “private” letter and that Paul would never have aired Philemon's “personal affairs” before the community.⁶⁵ This not only flies in the face of the text's own address but misses a primary point of Pauline ecclesial ethics: sin against and forgiveness of our brethren is not a private affair. Paul is not afraid even to name names and call for the intervention of local believers (Phil 4:2–3; cf. 1 Cor 5:1–12). The body of Christ is interdependent, and if prudence discourages publicizing every detail of our affairs, each *person* is the business of the whole church. Paul's exhortations center on love, patience, and correction for “one another” (e.g.: Rom 12:5; Gal 5:13; 6:2; Phil 2:1–3).

⁶⁵ See: Lightfoot, *St. Paul's Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon*, 279; Peter T. O'Brien, *Colossians, Philemon*, Word Biblical Commentary 44 (Waco, TX: Word Books, 1982), 268, 273. Most, rightly, see the communal audience of the letter: James D. G. Dunn, *The Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon: A Commentary on the Greek Text* (New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1996), 313; Beale, *Colossians and Philemon*, 370, 379; McKnight, *Philemon*, 57–58; Fitzmyer, *Philemon*, 81. Note Stuhlmacher, *Der Brief an Philemon*, 31: “At the same time, the address to the house church makes it clear that the trouble treated in our letter is no private matter of Philemon's, but a challenge for the entire congregation” (translation mine).

If Philemon might see this as a matter of choice as to how he will deal with his own unruly property, Paul makes it the business of the whole community—a community that likely included not only other communal leaders and slave-owning peers of Philemon, but also believing slaves (cf. Col 3:22–4:1). This is no private affair in which Paul gives advice and leaves Philemon to his own devices and considerations; it affects a brother's whole person, it affects the whole community, and it affects Philemon's and his congregation's fellowship with the wider Church in the person of the apostle (vv. 17–20).

If earlier we envisioned ourselves in the places of Philemon or Onesimus hearing and challenged by Paul's directives, this aspect of Paul's intervention also invites us to put ourselves in Paul's or the congregation's place. Paul intervenes at personal risk not only in his Christ-like offering to pay Onesimus's debt (vv. 18–19); he also risks his reputation among landowners who might side against Onesimus (and who might then withdraw support for Paul's mission). The other members of the congregation—of all social strata—are also invited to keep Philemon accountable and, surely, to encourage Onesimus, and likely at potential risk to themselves. Heeding this call in our own day, we might ask ourselves if we are ready to interject ourselves into what is legally another's business with self-sacrifice (beyond mere public indignation), like early Christians who searched out and raised exposed children. Do we toe party lines for fear or follow the Gospel no matter what it might cost us in the public square or business or within our families or ecclesial "politics"?

Conclusions

As stated above, interpreters continue to investigate how the historical and theological tasks of exegesis relate in theory and praxis, and some question the relevance of historical study to theological interpretation and actualization. While we began with some theoretical observations defending historical study's relevance, this article has exercised itself in practical illustration.

Philemon is an inspired book which, due to its lack of explicit theological or ethical pronouncements and its subject matter, says little unless its historical situation is reconstructed and envisioned throughout one's reading and contemplation. If the letter does not say what those who know the boon of abolition want it to say about slavery, human dignity, or the natural law, the book has much to say about how Christians live the Gospel within the social structures of their day.⁶⁶ The force and grounds of Paul's appeal say much about ecclesiology—the reality and prominence

⁶⁶ Cf. Matera, *New Testament Ethics*, 226–27.

of relation in Christ, the communal and interpersonal nature of reconciliation, the duties of charity and obedience to apostle and community—and about the force of its realization amid practical quotidian concerns.

We suggested certain specific applications of Philemon. There are more; no essay can exhaust the potential actualizations of God's word. What our investigation does show, in the interpretive conversation, is that the theological and ethical data gleaned from the text's illocution require constant reference to the historical situation reconstructed. It is in the structure and dynamics of that situation that the force and implications of Paul's appeal are heard. And this is not superseded by other concerns at a second "level" or "stage" of interpretation. To embody Paul's stance or heed his words *mutatis mutandis* in an analogous situation requires that we investigate in what respects our situation is analogous and whether and how Paul's appeal addresses them; without continuing to envision Paul's situation, we risk either a fundamentalism that repeats his actions in all circumstances (as did those who used this letter to legitimize fugitive slave laws) or an arrogance that disregards his apostolic exhortation and precedent altogether.

Interpreters are not wrong to be wary about overly speculative historical reconstructions. We treated only certain aspects of the situation, and attempted to privilege the text's rhetorical situation in order to hear Paul's appeal where certain elements of the text's background were uncertain. This solution may not work in every instance, however, as some genres are not as overt in their address as are Paul's epistles. In the end, historical reconstruction is necessary even when it requires speculation. Thankfully, if the rule of faith and Christological canon of love govern hermeneutics anyway, our interpretations will not lead us off the rails even when specificities of our reconstructions are provisional.⁶⁷ Likewise, the amount of detail necessary to hear a text's illocution and actualize its meaning will differ on a case by case basis. Further studies will do well to explore the function of history and illocution in hermeneutics as it is affected by genre, single or multiple authors/editors, and a book's location within revelatory history and the divine pedagogy. Certain genres will require more or less, as will certain texts due to the specific way in which the inspired speech is directed. But this relativizes the *extent* of reconstruction needed, not its value. N.V.

⁶⁷ See Augustine, *De doctrina christiana* 3.15.23 and 3.27.38–28.39.