

Translation and Engagement: Reclaiming Philemon for the Emancipatory Movement

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1. Bible Translation and Scripture Engagement

In Bible Translation praxis there has been an increase in the production of Bible Study and engagement material by means of readers' helps for the modern constituency. The actual use or abuse of NT texts to condone ethically wrong actions of oppression, as in the case of slavery or a misogynistic hermeneutic of Scripture, is well-known. In the Caribbean basin and the Americas where the history of slave trade and a plantation legacy has left its mark in the way Scripture has been used and is perceived by many, there is a need to provide background information to a text like Philemon and other texts that speak about slavery. Although there is a general tendency in the NT documents to approve the social status quo so as not to hinder the spread of the gospel, the article proposes that, even though cloaked under the diplomatic nature of the letter, Paul's appeal to humanize the slave Onesimus is still evident. Ultimately the main goal of Bible translation is engagement with the message behind the text. The audience's engagement with the message is facilitated through, for example, the type of translation; modern functional-equivalent translations were produced exactly to promote this engagement or impact. Furthermore, the use of paratextual features helps embed the text in its socio-cultural context, while on the other hand, helping to link the message to, for example, the modern Caribbean context, which is saturated with the memory of the Atlantic slave trade and

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its role in the formation of people's identity. Thus, the translator has the possibility and maybe even the responsibility of offering valid alternative points of departure which can encourage the disclosure of the *euangelion*, *the good news to the oppressed*, in what superficially would seem to be the ultimate occasional letter; a letter just written for a very personal matter that required mediation.

The increasing demand for Study Bibles and Study Bible material requires a new kind of translation team, who will be able to draw on relevant material in their presentation of not just the text but its paratextual features. This writing will proceed to offer an analysis of Philemon which makes clearer from the Greco-Roman context why it should be seen as an appeal to change the socio-cultural position of Onesimus, the slave, and provide information which the translator could use for the development of engagement material. Needless to say, there are different views on the matter at hand and the translator will not be able to use all detailed information exhaustively, but at least should be able to select consciously and in an informed manner. Beyond the focus of just a written text, churches and modern audiences should be encouraged to engage the text from their own perspective and within their own socio-cultural context. The ultimate goal of the Bible translator, while respecting the integrity of the text as such, should be to encourage the modern audience in the discovery of the humanizing message of Philemon or any NT book for that matter.¹⁾

2. Slavery and Philemon

In the annals of biblical text abuse, or to be more specific, the use of

1) One of the most seminal writings on Philemon, from the theological perspective of African American scholars is Matthew V. Johnson, James A. Noel, and Demetrius K. Williams, eds., *Onesimus Our Brother: Reading Religion, Race, and Slavery in Philemon (Paul in Critical Contexts)* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2012). The collection of writings presents a reading from the "margins" which aims at establishing the marginalized letter of Philemon as an important key stone in the interpretation of Pauline theology, in contrast to traditional Euro-centric Biblical criticism.

Scripture to de-humanize instead of humanize, the promotion of the evil of slavery, whether in ancient times or in our more recent history, ranks high on any list. A superficial reading of the NT documents seems to attest an implicit approval of the institution of slavery or even a tacit indifference as to the status of the enslaved person. When we look at texts like Luke 7:1-10; Phm 1Co 7:20-24; Col 3:22-25; Eph 6:5-8; 1Pe 2:18-19, we are struck by the fact that the very possibility of taking another person's freedom, that is, of a human person being owned like cattle or a mere object of trade, seems to be taken for granted.²⁾ However, on a close reading, it is clear that the gospel preached by Paul did include the seed for the dismantling of this very institution. While there are texts which seem to approve of slavery, he explicitly declares in Gal 3:26-28 that in Christ no difference should be made on the basis of gender, ethnicity or the status of being slave or freeman. Of course, the vivid imagery of slave emancipation is exploited in the whole NT, and especially in Paul. The Exodus tradition with *Adonai*, as the great slave liberator, through the agency of Moses, looms large over the NT. In the NT the thought is that ultimately all human beings, irrespective of ethnicity or social status, are slaves to sin; all are in need of freedom which is brought about through Christ the liberator. But history shows that this spiritual stance has not and does not necessarily lead to actual socio-cultural transformation of oppressive paradigms by its adherents.

The actual use of specific biblical passages from the OT, including the infamous curse of Ham (Gen 9:20-27), as a standard defense for the slave trade, in the 17th century, is well-known. Most notably, the Pauline texts already mentioned, were particularly popular in the master-slave rhetoric³⁾.

2) In the monograph James Albert Harrill, *The Manumission of Slaves in Early Christianity*, Hermeneutische Untersuchungen zur Theologie, 32 (Tubingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1998), James Albert Harrill gives an in-depth analysis of the socio-cultural background to slavery in ancient times with an aim to explain Paul's view on manumission in 1Cor 7:21 and a comment by Ignatius (*Ad. Polycarp* 4.3) on the use of church funds to help the manumission of Christian slaves.

3) Mitzi Jane Smith, "Roman Slavery in Antiquity", *The Holy Bible: The African American Jubilee Edition*, American Bible Society (1999), 157-187. "Charles Colcock Jones, a white Presbyterian plantation missionary, recalled in his memoirs a sermon he gave before a slave congregation in 1833", the slave audience walked away, dismissing both his message, him as a preacher and

Part of the great violence heaped upon the African slaves was that often a gospel was preached, if it was preached at all, in which Pauline texts were used to justify slavery. It is not surprising that former slaves grew to dislike the Pauline corpus; history even gives examples of former slaves refusing to ever listen to that rhetoric again or walking out of spiritual gatherings where these texts were mis(quoted). This might be one of the factors that have contributed to the dislike or neglect of certain Pauline epistles in the Afro-Caribbean religious experience; the fact that no outright condemnation of slavery is found, demands an explanation, one way or the other.⁴⁾ However, this dislike might also have to do with the expository nature of the text; for an optimum Scripture engagement, these expository texts have to be reconstituted as stories, as narratives based upon a concrete socio-cultural frame in their reception, acceptance and proclamation. The interpretation of these “difficult passages” that seem to condone slavery still continue to merit our attention, because not only were they used in the recent past, but are still used by a growing number of hate groups to justify the past existence of slavery and thus, the present prejudicial segregation of races. More importantly, they still present a challenge to any Christian interested in the Bible’s main message as liberating and as “humanizing”, because, sadly enough, prejudice is universal.

But the evil of slavery and the misuse of biblical texts do not disappear from the scene, once the emancipation of slaves in any culture or time period

even questioned if such a book that condoned slavery existed. (Demetrius K. Williams, “No longer a Slave: Reading the Interpretation History of Paul’s Letter to Philemon”, Matthew V. Johnson, James A. Noel, and Demetrius K. Williams, eds., *Onesimus Our Brother: Reading Religion, Race, and Slavery in Philemon (Paul in Critical Contexts)* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2012), 35.

4) As Demetrius K. Williams observes in “No longer a Slave: Reading the Interpretation History of Paul’s Letter to Philemon”, 32 : “To be sure, this “silence” of the New Testament writers and later Christian writers in particular on the moral question and challenge against the institution of slavery provided the seedbed for supporting its social and economic resurgence in the early modern period in Europe and the Americas. Protestant denominations in America used Philemon and other passages in the Bible to debate the church’s position in slaveholding. Philemon in particular was considered a ready resource in particular for the American Protestant church’s response to the Fugitive Slave law of 1850, because they read the letter as a depiction of their own historical and judicial situation: Paul was returning a fugitive/runaway slave to his Christian master.”

is obtained. The negative legacy is both dormant and active in the collective consciousness as a powerful meme. How does one go about interpreting the letter to Philemon? There are different ways of dealing with its message. One should search the text for seeds of redemption or at least contrast the text with the brute reality of slavery.⁵⁾ In this article we will proceed to show how the letter can be read in such a way as to liberate its message from the intricacies of cultural and rhetorical cloaking, while not hiding the unsolved tension between opposing views. The letter of Philemon can help us see how the problem of dehumanization, whether based on color, ethnicity, gender or socio-economic differences can be addressed by the powerful gospel of Christ, when we take the socio-historical context into account. This analysis should help the translator to translate and annotate the text in such a way as to bring out the liberating feature, despite the text's diplomatic nature.⁶⁾ Our argument is that beneath the rhetorical style of the text, there is a way of redemption, which although not unambiguous, from our modern perspective,

5) At times scholars and writers have sought to soften the realities of slavery in ancient times using examples of slaves who have moved up on the societal ladder and/or were adopted as sons by their master. These exceptions and societal possibilities do not negate the reality of human beings being sold and treated as chattel property as shown in M.I. Finlay, *Ancient Slavery and Modern Ideology* (New Haven: Viking Press, 1980) and be declared socially dead. See Orlando Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death: A Comparative Study* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1982). There must have been a good reason for ex-slave Publius to write: "It is beautiful to die instead of being degraded as a slave (*occidi est pulchrum, ignominiose ubi servias*)" (Pubilius Syrus, *Sententiae* 489). See also K. Williams, "No longer a Slave: Reading the Interpretation History of Paul's Letter to Philemon", 19. Mitzi Jane Smith also points to the fact that whatever the level of cruelty or specific type of bondage, the body of the slave became the property of the owner in terms of its productivity and its sexuality. (See her article "Utility, Fraternity and Reconciliation: Ancient Slavery as a Context for the Return of Onesimus", Matthew V. Johnson, James A. Noel, and Demetrius K. Williams, eds., *Onesimus Our Brother: Reading Religion, Race, and Slavery in Philemon (Paul in Critical Contexts)* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2012), 48-49.

6) James Albert Harrill (*The Manumission of Slaves in Early Christianity*, 2-3) prefers to focus on 1Cor 7:21, because of what he correctly identifies as the ambiguity in Philemon, although he concedes that Phm 16 ("no longer as an enslaved person, but more than a slave, as a beloved brother. He is especially so to me, and even more so to you now, both in the flesh as in the Lord") might show an indication of manumission. We contend that 1Cor 7:21 supports our view of Paul's intention in Philemon and that the letter has to deal with the socio-cultural parameters of honor and shame: Paul did not, could not, dishonor Philemon. The very rhetorical nature of the letter demanded being subtle in order to ultimately emancipate and go beyond mere legal manumission.

did communicate a surplus of meaning to the original audience.

3. Exegetical conundrums

Different interpretations have been given to this shortest of NT texts. Traditionally the text has been read as a plea for a runaway slave. However, this position (*the Onesimus fugitivus* hypothesis) has been under considerable attack over the past century or so. In fact Paul, never mentions this explicitly and on another note, when it comes to a plea for manumission, one must admit that it is a rather subtle plea. Indeed, the letter must be Paul's most diplomatic effort ever that we possess. All the rhetorical tools of the trade are pulled out to persuade Philemon to take Onesimus back: even to the point of referring to the spiritual debt that Philemon had incurred ("...not to mention that you owe me your very self"). Some have even suggested that in fact Onesimus and Philemon were blood brothers and that Onesimus had rebelled against the authoritarian *paterfamilias* who according to Roman literature could treat his siblings as slaves and did this in many occasions. Thus, in this interpretation, verse 16 is taken quite literally: "ouketi hōs doulon all' hyper doulon, adelphon agapaton": "No longer as a slave but above and beyond the position of a slave, rather as a beloved brother".⁷⁾ Defenders of the *non fugitivus* and thus, non-slave status of Onesimus, wonder why a runaway slave would go to a friend of the former master, knowing what kind of punishment awaited him.⁸⁾ Furthermore, given the fact that Paul himself is incarcerated, how could he have been able to receive Onesimus as a former slave without incurring the wrath of the Roman authorities? Under Roman law Paul would have been delinquent in not sending Onesimus back to his master. The punishment for runaway slaves was rather severe and was left in the hand of the slave master. No longer

7) Demetrius K. Williams, "No longer a Slave: Reading the Interpretation History of Paul's Letter to Philemon" gives an excellent selective review of the different interpretations of Philemon across time.

8) P. Lampe, "Keine 'Sklavenflucht' des Onesimus", *ZNTW* (1985), 76.

would the slave fall under the protective measures of the Roman state, but the master could “do to him as he pleased.”

However, against the latter position, and in favor of the traditional stance, one can reply that, quite possibly, it is precisely in the situation of incarceration that Paul got to know the *Onesimus fugitivus*, who came to accept the Pauline gospel in that period and endeared himself to Paul. Furthermore, Paul’s incarceration was in a “prison cell”; just like in Acts 28, it could be that Paul was under house arrest; for sure, it is clear from his letters that he had considerable freedom to entertain people and to communicate. Paul is thus not the one sending him back officially, but rather the authorities are doing so. The apostle gives a personal letter of appeal to the slave so as to plead with Philemon to re-access his relationship to Onesimus who used to be just a slave, who now has become “very useful”⁹⁾ to Paul and shall be also to Philemon in the faith. In another possible scenario, there is evidence from Roman law that slaves who fled for fear of punishment to a friend of the slave owner in order to seek mediation, were not considered to have absconded.¹⁰⁾ So in that sense it could be fairly deduced from verse 18 (“if he has caused you any financial harm, or owes you anything, I will repay it”) that Onesimus had not so much stolen in order to flee, but might have fled because in one way or the other he had incurred the wrath of Philemon, by causing him financial harm.¹¹⁾

Malina and Pilch¹²⁾ argue that most probably Onesimus had a grievance against Philemon “and that he had sought out Paul as a mediator”. Roman law stressed the intention of the person; in this case a slave who had “run away” in order to seek mediation would received a different treatment than a slave that was caught and was not seeking mediation.¹³⁾ In this scenario one

9) “By means of a pun on the words ἄχρηστον/εὐχρηστον (“useless”/“useful”) a sharp contrast is drawn between what Onesimus had once (ποτέ) been and what he had now (νυνὶ δέ) become in Christ: τὸν ποτέ σοι ἄχρηστον νυνὶ δέ [καὶ] σοὶ καὶ ἐμοὶ εὐχρηστον” (Peter T. O’Brien, *Colossians, Philemon* 44, WBC (Dallas: Word, Incorporated, 1998), 291.

10) S.R. Llewelyn, *A review of the Greek Inscriptions and Papyri: Published 1984-1985*, New Documents Illustrating Early Christianity 8 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 41. And Bruce J. Malina and John J. Pilch, *Letters of Paul* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2006), 326-327.

11) P. Lampe, “Keine ‘Sklaventrucht’ des Onesimus”, 76.

12) Bruce J. Malina and John J. Pilch, *Letters of Paul*, 326-327.

would have to assume, in any case, that Onesimus had spent some time with Paul. Paul does not mention this at all, while for example in the case of Plinius' pleading for a slave, we see that it is explicitly mentioned that the slave had repented. Would Paul not have mentioned Onesimus' rightful act of looking for mediation in such an emotional but diplomatic letter?¹⁴⁾ It is, after all, a letter in which he is asking the slave owner to take back the former slave "as if it was myself", and indicating that he, Paul, would be liable for any damages incurred. Indeed, different aspects of this letter continue to intrigue us, because of lack of additional information.

On another matter, the reason for the subtle appeal on behalf of Onesimus is that it would have been improper to explicitly ask for manumission for a runaway slave. And moreover, under Roman law, a *fugitivus* would not have been eligible for manumission. The important question here is whether Paul was necessarily complying with Roman law or whether, rather, a key social injunction from the Torah played a role. Deu 23:15-16 states: "[Y]ou shall not give up to his master a slave who has escaped from his master to you; he shall dwell with you, in your midst, in the place which he shall choose within one of your towns, where it pleases him best; you shall not oppress him" (NIV).¹⁵⁾ And to complicate matters, even when speaking about Roman law, we must remember that Roman law had some variations in different provinces as to its application and content.¹⁶⁾ Ultimately, it does

13) S. R. Llewelyn, *A review of the Greek Inscriptions and Papyri: Published 1984-1985*, New Documents Illustrating Early Christianity 8 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 41.

14) "The records indicate that there were cases where a slave sought temporary refuge from an abusive owner with the owner's friend (*amicus domini*), who, in assuming the role of intermediary, had to incur responsibility for any financial loss suffered by the owner. Manumission was another possibility. A party to the slave or the slave himself could secure his manumission for a price. In certain instances an owner could manumit a slave for exemplary service." James A. Noel, "Nat is Back. The Return of the Re/oppressed in Philemon", Matthew V. Johnson, James A. Noel, and Demetrius K. Williams, eds., *Onesimus Our Brother: Reading Religion, Race, and Slavery in Philemon (Paul in Critical Contexts)* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2012), 61.

15) Translations are the author's own unless otherwise noted.

16) See Peter T. O' Brien, *Colossians, Philemon* 44, 293. The juridical complexities as to the exact definition of slave trade in both ancient times have been correctly dealt with by Orlando Patterson as a situation of social death: the slave owner has absolute control over the slave and the slave is not seen as an agent in society, having genealogical future or past; Orlando

not really matter, if Onesimus was a *de jure fugitivus* or not, in his situation he was a *de facto fugitivus* anyway, and still needed Paul's mediation to the believers' "in-group" to which he now belonged.

Another interesting historical insight is the existence of a lively trade between slave-catchers (*fugitivarii*) and slave-owners. The former would, for example, capture the slave and bargain his return without informing the master that the slave was already caught. Then, the catcher would buy the slave from the master at a very low price and proceed to sell the slave at a much higher price to interested buyers. And of course, there were instances when the same slave catchers would instigate a slave to flee and to steal whatever they could from their masters in order to be able to catch them later and make, thus, a double deal in the aftermath. A papyrus from the 3rd century A.D (P. Oryn 1643, 11.12-13) probably refers to this practice, when it orders the arrest of an unnamed official together with a slave, named Magnus who had stolen from his master and had run away (Llewelyn 1998, 33-34). Thus, the order to capture the slave reads:

Flavius Ammonas, *officialis* on the staff of the prefect of Egypt,
To Flavius Dorotheus, *officialis*, greetings! I order and trust you to
arrest my slave called Magnus, who has absconded and is staying at
Hermopolis and stolen certain things belonging to me, and to bind
him and bring him back as a prisoner, together with the head-man
of Sesophtha. This order is valid, and in answer to any formal
questioning I give my approval...¹⁷⁾

In that sense, it is clear that Paul is not attempting to gain anything from the relationship, but, though not officially responsible for Onesimus, is making an appeal, based on the fact that they are all brothers in the Lord. The position of the runaway slave seeking his/her freedom or just trying to escape the cruel punitive actions of the owner, is the typical position where

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

17) S. R. Llewelyn, *A review of the Greek Inscriptions and Papyri: Published 1984-1985*, 33-34.

the oppressed finds himself in any situation. In our days we see how immigrants can become barter currency between human smugglers, on one side, and harsh government officials, on the other side.

4. The nature of Paul's Appeal: A comparative approach

But what exactly is Paul appealing for? Was it for manumission or just that Philemon would accept the runaway slave without punishment? Paul's appeal is not as direct and as obvious as, for example, the appeal of Pliny the Younger to Tattius Sabinianus (Sabinus) (Letters 9.21). That letter reveals some interesting material for comparison, which in a form of a sidebar could be very enlightening as background material in a printed or electronic Bible.

*Pliny the Younger (A.D. 62? -c. A.D. 113). Letters.
The Harvard Classics. 1909-14.¹⁸⁾*

CIII. To Sabinianus

YOUR freedman, whom you lately mentioned to me with displeasure, has been with me, and threw himself at my feet with as much submission as he could have fallen at yours. He earnestly requested me with many tears, and even with all the eloquence of silent sorrow, to intercede for him; in short, he convinced me by his whole behavior that he sincerely repents of his fault. I am persuaded he is thoroughly reformed, because he seems deeply sensible of his guilt. I know you are angry with him, and I know, too, it is not without reason; but clemency can never exert itself more laudably than when there is the most cause for resentment. You once had an affection for this man, and, I hope, will have again; meanwhile, let me only prevail with you to pardon him. If he should incur your displeasure hereafter, you will have so much the stronger plea in excuse for your anger as you shew yourself more merciful to him now. Concede something to his youth, to his tears, and to your own

18) <http://www.bartleby.com/9/4/1103.html>

natural mildness of temper: do not make him uneasy any longer, and I will add, too, do not make yourself so; for a man of your kindness of heart cannot be angry without feeling great uneasiness. I am afraid, were I to join my entreaties with his, I should seem rather to compel than request you to forgive him. Yet I will not scruple even to write mine with his; and in so much the stronger terms as I have very sharply and severely reproved him, positively threatening never to interpose again in his behalf. But though it was proper to say this to him, in order to make him more fearful of offending, I do not say so to you. I may perhaps, again have occasion to entreat you upon his account, and again obtain your forgiveness; supposing, I mean, his fault should be such as may become me to intercede for, and you to pardon. Farewell.

Some important issues have to be taken into account:

- I. The runaway slave for whom Pliny is pleading in the *Sabinianus* has shown great remorse. Onesimus' remorse is not the focus in Philemon, but rather his acceptance of the gospel and his "usefulness" to Paul in the endeavor of spreading the same gospel.
- II. In Philemon, Paul's language is cloaked in subtleties and in ambiguities. This could be a sign of the apostle's own internal tension as to the status of slaves and the essence of the gospel. He did not want Christianity to be perceived as challenging the status quo by seeming to harbor runaway slaves. This, for sure, is a general tendency in the Jesus movement at first, but there is another voice in the texts. When we see the demands that Paul makes to accept Onesimus as "a brother, as myself, as the son I have engendered in prison", he might have been going for more than just "not rocking the boat". He might have been trying to slowly sinking the ship of slavery!
- III. The important difference between these two writings is that Paul's letter is heavily theologized. Pliny the Younger does not indulge

in the Greco-roman custom of invoking the gods. In Philemon the name of Christ is mentioned eight times in this short text. Paul's appeal is based on the relationship he shares with Philemon and Onesimus in Christ, and now, as he wishes Philemon would understand, exists between Philemon and Onesimus, through Paul. Pliny's appeal is only based on the relationship he, the mediator shares with the addressee; Paul refers to a hidden, spiritual relationship that exists between the former slave master and the slave.

Then again, the same question comes to the fore, what is the goal of Paul's appeal? Paul is not just appealing for a return to the status quo, but in cloaked language - understandable to Philemon, a fellow Christian, - he is asking for a real liberation of Onesimus. Another intriguing issue is how come Onesimus was not a Christian, being a slave in the house of Philemon in a society where automatically those subservient to the *pater familias* would normally adhere to the religion of the slave master. In any case, it might be that Paul is actually not even implicitly asking for a formal manumission. In his excellent article, Craig de Vos¹⁹⁾ gives enough evidence to prove that often slaves who gained their freedom were still expected to serve their masters. Manumission did not imply total autonomy, but was rather a legal status granted to the slave. Usually it was granted to very loyal and subservient slaves whose identity had become so embedded in that of their masters that they could not but continue to be slaves after their official freedom. Of course, there were many examples of slaves becoming the inheritors of their childless master's property. Legal adult adoption of slaves as sons of the master preceded their becoming legitimate inheritors in the testaments.

Indeed, it is also true that ancient literature gives ample proof that even in the literal sense manumission did not always mean actual liberty. For example, in Tacitus' writings we see the presupposition that freed slaves

19) Graig S. de Vos, "Once a Slave, Always a Slave? Slavery, Manumission and Relational Patterns in Paul's Letters to Philemon", *JSNT* 82 (2001), 89-105.

continued to treat their masters with reverence or else be punished. Even the actual contract granting the manumission would carry in it a list of stipulations as to how the freed slave would continue to behave towards the former master.²⁰⁾ The slave would still continue to be a slave in a certain sense and would even still be accountable. To put it in other words, manumission in itself did not automatically mean social freedom, it depended on the slave owner. Thus, without asking for manumission, Paul directly hits the core of the issue by asking for a real changed relationship, a change of mind (*kardia*), that really has social and practical implications. Aristotle's dictum that some humans were born to be slaves, although not theoretically accepted later by the Romans, for whom there was not such a thing as natural slavery, might have influenced society at large, but actually the dictum itself is also a reflection of societies' attitude towards slavery. On the other hand, Stoic philosophy's stance against slavery did not permeate all layers of society. In addition, the ancient Mediterranean societies were collectivistic societies where form was thought to determine character.²¹⁾ Ancient writings show that conclusions were drawn about a person's status, based on his race, nationality, gender, etc. Relationships were embedded in a network of honor-shame dynamics, where every human or groups of persons were placed. This stereotypical thinking can be seen in writings from the whole era in that region, both among the Romans, the Greeks and the Jewish people.

History has shown that for example, in the United States, although slavery was officially absolved after the civil war; there was still the need for the civil rights movement. And indeed, there is still need for a call for social justice, because a *de jure* proclamation does not necessarily imply a *de facto* social change. Actually, in many a Caribbean and Latin-American country one sees that the former slave population was not necessarily seen as equal,

20) The issue of manumission is very complex. Ancient Rome, knew a variety of formal and informal manumissions, which varied at different times. In different forms of manumissions the slave actually became the slave of another master or remained in a certain type of bondage, owing service to the former master. (For a detailed study of manumission and the status of "freemen and women" in Ancient Rome and Greece see James Albert Harrill, *The Manumission of Slaves in Early Christianity*, 52-65.)

21) Bruce J. Malina and John J. Pilch, *Letters of Paul*, 343-347.

after the official abolition of slavery; the civil rights movement was just addressing the legal ramifications of the ongoing perception of the majority. As Craig de Vos²²⁾ rightly states: “[T]he structural and legal change of manumission would have no significant change to the relational dynamic between Philemon and Onesimus.” This because prejudice both in the ancient world, as well as, in our modern days, is not a matter of legislation but of the heart, or rather of the mind. And one must not forget the (ex-)slave’s role as an integral and, often perceived, as an indispensable part of the family economic unit.

5. Structure and presentation

Before bringing our argument as to the intention of Paul to a close, and offering another line of thought for inclusion in study Bible material, a few cursory remarks about the structure and presentation of the letter to Philemon has to be made. Form and content are intertwined and, although this is not the theme of our ponderings, as translators we must give attention to the actual form of the letter. A productive way of linking function and structure is through Greco-Roman rhetoric. The ancient rhetorical structure has to be kept in mind in translation and translation should not only be thought of as a written exercise. Without being dogmatic or myopic, it is our contention that orality played an important role in the formation, transmission and consolidation of NT texts.²³⁾ This implies that although the letter was addressed to Philemon, very early on, it did become a letter for

22) Graig S. de Vos, “Once a Slave, Always a Slave? Slavery, Manumission and Relational Patterns in Paul’s Letters to Philemon”, 99.

23) Performance Criticism as a field of study has grown over the past decade, with different variations and applications of its main tenets. For two good introductions, see Richard A. Horsley, *Text and Tradition in Performance and Writing*, *Biblical Performance Criticism* 9 (Eugene: Cascade Books, 2014) and Pieter Botha, *Orality and Literacy in Early Christianity*, *Performance Biblical Criticism* 5 (Eugene: Cascade Books, 2012). For the relationship between Performance Criticism and Bible Translation see James Maxey, *From Orality to Orality: A New Paradigm for Contextual Translation of the Bible*, *Performance Criticism* 2 (Eugene: Cascade Books, 2009).

public reading²⁴⁾ and that one of the best ways to understand its impact is to perform it.²⁵⁾ Scripture engagement as such cannot be thought of as a matter of content; the exact presentation of that content is a key in how to facilitate engagement. The use of punctuation, segmentation and the attractive presentation of reader's helps should all be key to this endeavor. The opportunities that the internet age offers with hyperlinks and combination of audio and visual content should be fully exploited to place the text within its right exegetical and hermeneutical context so that it can gain relevance for the modern audience.

Indeed, any presentation of the text and certainly Study Bible material, whether written, oral or in multimedia, must include information as to the structure of the text. It is not enough to teach translators that the text is of the epistolary genre. This in itself does not really say much as to the rhetorical intent. Just keeping the form of a letter in the mother tongue translation could in some cultures lead to an obscuring of the rhetorical purpose which is expressed by the actual content, structure, and communication setting. The persuasive intention of each part of the letter must be reproduced as much as possible by translation choices, and paratextual information should be provided that explicitly shows the link between form and rhetorical function in the Greek text and what the implications are for the language and culture of translation.

What follows are some basic preliminaries which can guide translation choices and selection of background information as to this all important feature of rhetorical intent and structure.²⁶⁾

24) Sarah Winter has argued for the public character of the letter given its use of legal, commercial terminology (cited in Demetrius K. Williams, "No longer a Slave: Reading the Interpretation History of Paul's Letter to Philemon", 20); furthermore, whether one interprets the formal addressees (Philemon, Apphia, Archippus and the church that meets in your home) as rhetorical flourish or as actual interlocutors, on different levels, depends on one's view of the purpose, function and thus, one's genre expectation of the letter.

25) See "Translation as Performance and Engagement: Performing Philemon from a modern Caribbean Perspective", forthcoming in *The Bible Translator*, April 2015, where the author gives an illustration of contextualized performance.

26) For the rhetorical analysis see Juan Luis Caballero's article "Retórica y Teología. La Carta a Filemón", *Scripta Theologica* 37 (2005), 441-474.

There is a threefold division:

- 1-3 Salutation
- 4-22 Appeal
- 23-25 Greetings

The salutation starts with five names and ends with *The Lord Jesus Christ*. The final greeting has the same structure, thus forming an *inclusio* which sandwiches the main text which is the appeal. The passages are quoted from the NIV1984 translation.

- 1 Paul, a prisoner of *Christ Jesus*,
and Timothy our brother,
To Philemon our dear friend and fellow worker,
- 2 to Apphia our sister, to Archippus our fellow soldier and to the church
that meets in your home:
- 3 Grace to you and peace from God our Father and *the Lord Jesus Christ*.

- 23 Epaphras, my fellow prisoner in Christ Jesus, sends you greetings.
- 24 And so do Mark, Aristarchus, Demas and Luke, my fellow workers.
- 25 The grace of the *Lord Jesus Christ* be with your spirit.

The complete appeal to Philemon (verses 4-22) has been analyzed by many as a deliberative discourse with the aim to persuade, possessing one of the classical structures of Greco-Roman rhetoric:

Exordium, Probatio and Peroratio.

4-7 The Exordium (Preface, beginning)

The so-called exordium secures the goodwill of the audience (vv. 4-7): “I thank my God always”, “I hear of your love”, “I have received much joy”.

8-16 The Probatio (Evidence, proof)

This is the segment where the author moves to his main argument and even uses intense feelings (“I call upon you”, “I did not want to do anything, without your permission”.) to persuade the listener/reader.

17-22 The Peroratio (preoration, conclusion)

This part constitutes the summation of the arguments; the argument is extended and the reader/listener is persuaded to change his frame of mind: “If he has harmed you financially or owes you anything, charge that to my account”; “I know that you will do even more than what I am saying”.

6. Appeal to humanize Philemon

Returning to the all important matter of authorial intent, Paul appeals to Philemon to no longer treat Onesimus as “a slave but as a brother in Christ. As de Vos states: “As such, Paul expects Philemon to publicly treat Onesimus with honor and privilege, even if they are not necessarily equals.”²⁷⁾ We must understand that Paul is asking Philemon to subvert all the social customs of Roman society. His appeal goes beyond manumission, it leads to violating the domestic rules code; it’s not just a matter of giving a slave a new legal status, but in the daily reality changes his position in the social network of honor and shame and give him honor that does not belong to him, as a (former) slave.

Indeed, the appeal to take Onesimus in as a brother would, if accepted, certainly certainly have resulted in a change in the social relationship. Independent of the official status, in the absence of manumission, this would have led to a “status incongruity”.²⁸⁾ Of course, this status incongruity would

27) Graig S. de Vos, “Once a Slave, Always a Slave? Slavery, Manumission and Relational Patterns in Paul’s Letters to Philemon”, 103.

28) A term coined by Graig S. de Vos, “Once a Slave, Always a Slave? Slavery, Manumission and

have to ultimately lead to manumission and then emancipation. In the same way, one can argue that Paul's appeal that in Christ there are no slaves or freemen (Gal 3:28) is ultimately part of a subversive strategy. As mentioned already there is an accommodating strategy in how Paul, like other early Christians dealt with a volatile issue like slavery. He did indeed not want to appear to be "too revolutionary". However, that is not the whole story; in 1Cor 7:21-25, where he urges believers not to seek a change in their social status -married/single, slave/free, circumcised/uncircumcised-, because of the eschatological crisis, he comments that in the case of the slaves "it would be far better to take the opportunity to be free". This is the only group he singles out!

As mentioned already, in the Mediterranean culture there were physiognomic theories that related people's physical characteristics, including race, genealogical and geographical descent, to their status in life.²⁹⁾ It was not customary for a slave to actually abandon his embedded position in a family structure even after manumission. As mentioned, actual change in social relations often did not follow. Theories about races or ethnic groups who were destined to be slaves, were part of the cultural mindset, and the color line was not the focus. The text of Titus 1:12 ("Cretans are always liars, evil brutes, lazy gluttons.") is a clear example of this kind of prejudice. In any case, Paul's appeal implies asking Philemon, and ultimately other Christian slave masters, to go beyond these prejudices and generally believed misconceptions, and to accept their fellow brethren, who were slaves, as equals. This would gradually lead to the practical abolition of slavery and once that happened, manumission would be more than a mere *pro forma* legal mutation.

7. Appeal to go beyond the call of duty

Relational Patterns in Paul's Letters to Philemon", 44.

29) See socio-cultural reading scenario for letters of Paul. Bruce J. Malina and John J. Pilch, *Letters of Paul*, 343-347 (Collectivistic Personality), 400-401 (Social Identity).

Furthermore, Paul seems to be touching upon the societal relationships when he says in v. 16: “no longer as an enslaved person, but more than a slave, as a beloved brother. He is especially so to me, and even more so to you now, both in the flesh (social human realm), as in the Lord”. Paul equates Onesimus with Philemon as a brother (Phm 7, 20). Moreover, not only as any “brother” based upon the common Lordship of Christ, but also in the realm of social relationships, as a “guest”, requiring the benevolence and protection of the host, and more than that, as an “honored guest like Paul himself”: “So if you consider me a partner, welcome him as you would welcome me”. (17) The importance of the hospitality code in the Mediterranean culture is well-known. Even the needs of family members could be superseded by the needs of the guest.

Thus, indeed, Paul is not asking for manumission in the juridical sense, he is asking for a total change of social relationships, for a total subversion of the honor code, for a total sabotage of the slave-master relationship.³⁰ The stereotypical expectations of the culture regarding (ex-)slaves had to be superseded, not by an appeal, first of all, to a social revolutionary “institutional change”, but rather an appeal to spiritual realities, to a new sense of kinship, which leads to actual *concrete* liberty, proclaimed by and through the *euangelion*. Indeed, the demands of this gospel would first lead to an internal change on the relationship level that could not but affect the visible social patterns and the institute of slavery on the long run. The gospel humanizes in the most powerful of ways.

Onesimus was not just to become Philemon’s brother and an honored guest, he had become so dear to Paul that he said: “I am sending my heart (*splagchna, intestines, inward part*) to you” (v. 12)! Onesimus had become very useful to Paul, while Paul was in chains; metaphorically speaking, he had become a brother, a son, as was a Timothy. What more could a *fugitivus* ask? Implicitly Paul was putting him on a par with all the other people he

30) *Contra* Peter T. O’ Brien’s (*Colossians, Philemon*, Plm 16 comment) who states that: “It is quite clear that in this letter Paul is not really dealing with the question of slavery as such or the resolution of a particular instance of slavery. In this verse, at least, he treats the question of brotherly love. Although Onesimus’ earthly freedom may be of a positive value, in the last analysis it is of no ultimate significance to him as a Christian as to whether he is slave or free.”

mentions in this letter: five at the beginning and five at the end. They were “brother, sister, fellow soldier” and “those who are called” (via 1-2); Philemon himself was a “dearly beloved friend” and “fellow laborer”. In concluding the letter, descriptions like my “fellow prisoner, fellow workers” are mentioned, referring to those who are with Paul. In between, in the crux of the letter, “*Onesimus the useless*”, useless from the perspective of Philemon, in the default Greco-Roman system of oppression, had now become in a new way the meaning of his own name (*Onesimus* literally means “useful”). On the one hand, this expression and play on words expresses the default utilitarian perspective on the slave, as a “non-entity”, as a person without social status, dead to society, in the words of Orlando Patterson. However, on the other hand, as we read on, we see that there is a “rebirth” in which Onesimus is described in relational terms that transcends the economics of slavery. No longer slave or just a brother, but even co-worker, co-prisoner for the sake of the gospel. Paul says that he can be useful to him; indeed “he could take your place in helping me while I am in chains for the gospel”. So in the letter, Onesimus is equal to other co-workers, including Philemon. Study Bible material that seeks to engage the modern audience should certainly highlight this humanizing element of the text that is embedded in the new social relationships which are birthed by the gospel.³¹⁾

31) Mitzi Jane Smith in “Utility, Fraternity and Reconciliation: Ancient Slavery as a Context for the Return of Onesimus”, 51 ff, interprets this type of kinship language as part of the typical fictive kinship idiom that is used in order to oppress the slave who in fact remains a slave. Indeed there is the whole use of the “useful/nonuseful” paradigm which expressed the slave in terms of his/her productivity and usefulness for the master, the oppressor, and the wider society. She correctly goes on to state that this is what has been described in the work of Orlando Patterson as the liminality of the slave: The slave is dead to society but has to be reconstituted in one way or the other as having access to that same society so as to be useful. The use of the term is in itself one of the cardinal tension points in interpreting Paul’s emancipatory stance. It could also be that he is echoing the term in a sarcastic or ironic way; it is an echo of what is the default setting. A default setting which he will brilliantly deconstruct by verse 16 “no longer as a slave, but better than a slave, as a dear brother. He is very much loved by me but even more loved by you, both as a man and as a brother in the Lord.”

8. Translation and Scripture Engagement

We live in a world of prejudices. Not only was this particular text used to approve slavery, but it was particular interpretations of these texts on slavery that became part of the subconscious default setting of many a Christian community and of society at large, even after emancipation. A wrong interpretation and application will automatically lead and has led to a confirmation of well established stereotypical patterns of social oppression. The challenge is how to bring this information to the general church public in an accessible manner. The following criteria are important in any endeavor :

1. Information needs to be given about slavery in Roman times. The assumption of color needs to be corrected. The differences between the Atlantic slave trade and slave trade in NT times needs to be brought to the fore. For example, slaves who functioned as tutors often possessed a higher education than some of their masters.
2. Information needs to be given as to the cultural embedding of the texts in the honor-shame, collectivistic, stereotypical, cultures of the Mediterranean in order for the modern reader to (re-)discover the revolutionary, but sub-versive nature of the gospel message.
3. The role of the church as the prophetic mediator for the “humanizing” force of the gospel between the oppressed and the oppressor in the way Paul stood up for Onesimus needs to be addressed. (It concerns here not just “a proclamation to those who are in darkness”, but rather to those who consider themselves “not useful” members of the body of Christ, and whose reading of the text has been marginalized, because of racial, ethnic social, genre and educational background. Examples are abundant: black church and white church in America, First World vs. the Global South, traditionalists vs. postmodern Christians, clergy vs. laity, immigrants vs. native or local population, and on and on it goes.)
4. We also need to take into account that biblical texts will reflect the

default cultural setting. Awareness of the non-default countercultural passages has to be stimulated. In other words, texts that go against the normative patriarchal mores of the day should be highlighted, as well as texts where, within the matrix of societal norms and against them, a new liberating insight is promoted.

5. The translator has to take serious account of those rhetorical features that help to establish the letter in an intimate sphere of familial and collegial terms. Bold and clear choices have to be made in either explaining or transforming ancient rhetorical devices, so as not to cloak the demanding nature of the letter for a modern audience. The letter is exhortative in a way, different from 1 Corinthians or Romans, and there is a strong appeal, presented in a diplomatic manner, because of communicational and societal constraints. It is an appeal to reverse the position of Onesimus, in not just a superficial way, but in the actual reality of relationships within the household which had now a house church embedded in it. Onesimus has to be set free, first in Philemon's mind, then in the household and then in society at large!
6. Besides translation issues in the traditional sense, there remains the necessity to help the modern reader in his or her context to read and hear this text anew, offering a window to a gamut of emancipatory interpretations, like the one presented in this writing.

The Word of God is not the Word of God, if it is not liberating, humanizing, emancipating. Ultimately it wants to deliver us from our prejudices: prejudice against God, against the other, and ultimately against ourselves. Bible translation should deliberately use Scripture engagement, which under rigorous analysis is actually translation in praxis and theory, to facilitate the interaction of modern audiences with the biblical message in meaningful but relevant ways.

We should not box in other human beings or box in the text of the Bible, so that it ceases to speak beyond its socio-cultural setting. Bible translation in all its forms and manifestations, including Scripture engagement, should

focus upon the liberating message of the gospel that can remain hidden to a particular audience, because of its textual, socio-cultural and literary layers. Conscious translational and paratextual strategies can facilitate a true encounter with messages behind the text.³²⁾

<Keywords>

Philemon, Scripture Engagement, Atlantic and Greco-roman Slave Trade, Caribbean theology, Study Bible, Pauline studies.

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32) In 2005-2006, the writer composed “A post-modern monologue” based on Philemon, where the slave Onesimus speaks out before going back to his slave master. The monologue draws upon the ancient socio-cultural context of slavery, while interacting with examples of oppression in our modern times. It was published in Dewey Martin Mulholland, Jean-Claude Loba-Mkole, and Nsiku Edouard Kitoko, *Your Slave, Your Brother. The New Intercultural Reading of Paul’s Letter to Philemon* (Sarrebrücken: Lambert Academic Publishing, 2012). Their book is a good example of how to engage a specific modern audience with a Scripture text by means of an “intercultural reading”. Depending on the type of Study Bible, intercultural reading can further facilitate engagement.

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<Abstract>

**Translation and Engagement:
Reclaiming Philemon for the Emancipatory Movement**

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The Bible Societies' movement has seen an increase in Study Bibles and engagement material by means of readers' helps for the modern audience. Study material should not only focus on information content, but aim at maximum relevance. In the Caribbean basin and the Americas where the history of Atlantic slave trade and a plantation legacy has left its mark in the way Scripture has been used and is perceived by many, there is a need for background information to a text like the letter of Philemon. Despite the general tendency in the NT to accommodate cultural elements of the Greco-Roman status quo so as not to endanger the spread of the Jesus movement, this article proposes that under the guise of a diplomatic appeal, this letter, as an instance of deliberative Pauline rhetoric, is aimed at revealing the dignity of the human being Onesimus who is enslaved. And study notes and introductory material should keep this hermeneutical aim in mind.

Ultimately the main goal of Bible Translation is engagement with the message behind the text. This audience's engagement is facilitated by the type of translation and paratextual features like footnotes and side bars, which can help embed the text in its ancient socio-cultural context, while relating it to the modern Caribbean history and identity. The offering of valid alternative points of departure in study material can encourage the disclosure of the euangelion to the oppressed in what seems to be the ultimate occasional letter. Depending on the type of Study Bible material, creative engagement material from the culture of translation, which highlights the hermeneutical issues, can be added.