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Philemon, Game Theory and the Reconfiguration of Household Relationships

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RÉSUMÉ

La lettre de Paul à Philémon paraît curieusement opaque quant aux intentions de l'apôtre. Joel White vise à montrer que, lorsqu'on analyse la stratégie rhétorique de Paul selon la théorie du jeu, il devient clair que l'apôtre tente d'obtenir l'affranchissement d'Onésime en offrant à Philémon la possibilité d'y coopérer, plutôt que de lui présenter une demande qui serait perçue négativement selon les anciens codes de l'honneur. En outre, Paul emploie un vocabulaire familial pour tenter de déconstruire les hiérarchies du devoir dans la société ancienne et pour les reconstruire à partir d'une nouvelle compréhension de l'Église comme une famille, ce qui conduit nécessairement à rendre l'institution de l'esclavage illégitime au sein de l'Église.

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ZUSAMMENFASSUNG

Der Brief des Paulus an Philemon bleibt fremd unklar über die Absichten von Paulus. Der vorliegende Artikel vertritt die Ansicht, dass eine Bewertung der rhetorischen Strategie von Paulus im Sinne der Spieltheorie verdeutlicht, dass jener versucht, die Freiheit für Onesimus zu erwirken. Dies tut Paulus, indem er Philemon die Gelegenheit bietet mit zu wirken, anstatt ihn mit einer Forderung zu konfrontieren, die im Sinne des altertümlichen Ehrenkodex als negativ angesehen würde. Des Weiteren verwendet Paulus das Vokabular familiärer Beziehungen bei dem Versuch, die Hierarchien von Verpflichtungen in der Gesellschaft der Antike abzubauen und sie anhand eines neuen Verständnisses von Gemeinde als Familie wieder aufzubauen. Dieser neue Ansatz erklärt notwendigerweise die Einrichtung der Sklaverei innerhalb der Gemeinde für unrechtmäßig.

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SUMMARY

Paul's letter to Philemon is curiously opaque with regard to Paul's intentions. This article argues that when one assesses his rhetorical strategy in terms of game theory, it becomes clearer that Paul is trying to achieve Onesimus' freedom by offering Philemon the opportunity to cooperate rather than confronting him with a demand, which would be viewed negatively in terms of ancient codes of honour. Further, Paul employs familial vocabulary in an attempt to deconstruct ancient society's hierarchies of obligation and to reconstruct them around a new understanding of the church as a family, which necessarily delegitimises the institution of slavery within the church.

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1. Introduction

In recent years, the Epistle of Paul to Philemon has been the object of renewed scholarly attention and innovative new approaches.[1] Scholars are becoming increasingly aware that, in spite of its brevity, this letter provides a unique window on, among other things, the crucial period of early Christian identity formation, Paul's apostolic self-understanding and his rhetorical approach. The latter will be the focus of our interest here, though our investigation will have clear ramifications for the other topics as well.

We note at the outset that Philemon confronts us with a curious conundrum: It is quite clear from the letter that Paul is intent upon obtain-

ing Philemon's approval for *something*, but as John Barclay notes, although 'the letter is skilfully designed to constrain Philemon to accept Paul's request…, it is extremely unclear what precisely Paul is requesting.'[2] Specifically, there is no consensus among scholars as to whether Paul was actually trying to obtain freedom for Onesimus.[3] This lack of consensus on so basic a question for the correct interpretation of the epistle reflects the opaque manner in which Paul formulates his request. This opacity is on display throughout the letter:

- vss. 8-9: 'Therefore, though I have no reservations about commanding you to do what is right, out of my love for you, I would rather make an appeal to you.'
- vs. 14: 'I did not want to do anything apart from your consent, so that you would not do the right thing out of compulsion, but rather of your own free will.'
- vs. 20: 'Yes, brother, I am hoping to gain some benefit from you in the Lord.'
- vs. 21: 'I am writing to you because I am confident that you will comply; indeed, I know that you will do even more than I ask.'[4]

Paul's overly polite style in these passages often strikes Western ears as unfocussed or even disingenuous. What accounts for his cumbersome locutions and deferential tone? Why doesn't he come out and say, simply and clearly, what he expects of Philemon? One could argue, perhaps, that it is the result of inept communication, such that his intent was a complete mystery even to the letter's recipients. Such an explanation, however, seems less than satisfactory, given what we know of Paul's communication skills as they are on display in his other letters. Paul was clearly quite capable of saying what he meant when he wanted to.

2. Paul's rhetorical strategy

In what follows I will argue that 1) Paul's manner of communication is the result of a conscious rhetorical strategy designed to avoid confrontation and yet move Philemon by means of insinuation toward the goal Paul is trying to achieve, and 2) once this is recognised, it becomes clearer that Paul is, in fact, trying to obtain Onesimus' freedom from slavery. Here I am in substantial agreement with Ben Witherington,[5] though I remain sceptical of Witherington's overarching thesis that Paul is consciously appropriating 'Asian rhetoric' throughout his correspondence with the Colossian and Ephesian churches.[6] Apart from fundamental questions as to the usefulness of the category 'Asian rhetoric',[7] the fact that such rhetoric is conspicuously absent in the Epistle to the Galatians argues against its conscious use by Paul in particular situations. After all, the Galatian churches, regardless of whether they were located in north central or south central Anatolia, were not far away from Colossae and must have been equally attuned to Oriental conventions, so that one could expect, on the basis of Witherington's hypothesis, to find at least traces of Asian rhetoric in that letter as well.

If Paul's opaque style is, in fact, the result of a conscious decision, if it is, in other words, a rhetorical strategy that he has intentionally adopted, what purpose is it designed to serve? The most cogent answer is that it is a concession to the high value placed on the concept of honour in the ancient world.[8] There is now an extensive body of literature demonstrating that societal interactions in the ancient Mediterranean world were characterised by a strong concern for the accrual and maintenance of honour and the avoidance of shame, its binary opposite.[9] Cicero captures this attitude well when he asserts that 'the human race was designed by nature for what is honourable' and encourages orators to 'speak most of glory and honour' when addressing 'well educated people' and of avoiding disgrace when talking to the 'ignorant and unlearned', for 'there is nobody so boorish that he is not deeply sensitive to contumely and disgrace, even though he be less influenced by actual considerations of honour' (*De Partitione Oratia* 26.91-93).[10] All relationships were assessed in terms of the honour due to one's opposite and the honour one could expect from him or her.[11] Slaves were just as preoccupied with accruing honour within their relational networks as members of the elite.[12]

Any given interaction between equals – and Paul and Philemon would have probably viewed each other as social equals – would be characterised by a competition for honour, with each party concerned that the other did not gain honour at their expense.[13] Encroaching on the honour and status of others of the same class would conversely be viewed as unacceptable and would have risked the loss of one's own standing and prestige.[14] Thus, social peers had a vested interest in maintaining the 'balance of honour' in their interactions with each other.

3. A game-theoretical assessment of Paul's rhetorical strategy

Since honour had the character of a scarce commodity in the ancient world, it can be profitably analysed in terms of the basic principles of game theory. In what follows I hope to show on the basis of a game theoretical analysis of Paul's rhetorical strategy that it can best be understood against the background of the ancient world's code of honour, as it is briefly described above, and that Paul was, in fact, trying to secure the release of Philemon's slave Onesimus from slavery while still deferring to that code.

Two caveats are important at this juncture. First, I am neither a mathematician nor an economist, and I claim no expertise in the complex field of game theory.[15] Thankfully, for our purposes, we only need to master a couple of game theory's most basic and generally accessible principles.[16] Second, though it should be self-evident, it is perhaps important to stress at the outset that I view this exercise as purely heuristic. Paul clearly didn't think in these terms, but game theory has proven to be quite useful in examining the interactions of parties in just these sorts of situations.

In the case of Paul and Philemon, then, we begin with the assumption that Paul is, in fact, eager to secure the release of Onesimus from slavery.[17] Theoretically, he could have structured his exchange with Philemon as a 'strictly competitive game', also known as a 'zero-sum game',[18] a social interaction in which a 'util', defined as a hypothetical quantity of a commodity that has utility for both parties,[19] is forfeited by one 'player' and acquired by the other. (A coin toss is an example of a zero-sum game.) If Paul had chosen this course of action, his rhetorical strategy would have involved *demanding* that Philemon set Onesimus free. In terms of the mores of the ancient world, this would create a situation in which one of the parties gains honour and standing at the expense of the other. As noted above, there are only two possible outcomes, and they are winner-take-all scenarios. If Philemon were to accede to Paul's demand, it would entail a loss of honour on Philemon's part and effect the enhancement of Paul's standing in the community. Alternately, if Philemon were to choose to disregard Paul's demand (and it should be noted that Paul had no mechanism to force Philemon's compliance), Paul would forfeit honour, and Philemon's standing in the community would rise correspondingly. This is illustrated in table 1 below:

Outcome	Paul	Philemon
A. Paul demands that Onesimus be set free and Philemon accedes to Paul's demand.	Increased honour	Decreased honour
B. Paul demands that Onesimus be set free and Philemon refuses Paul's demand.	Decreased honour	Increased honour

Table 1

At this point, it is important to avoid anachronistic ethical assessments of Paul's rhetorical strategy, if we wish to understand him. For modern readers, especially in the West, it might seem self-evident that Paul *should have insisted* on a zero-sum game. In contrast to first-century inhabitants of the Roman Empire, we view the institution of slavery with unmitigated horror, and we would certainly place no value on preserving the honour of a slave owner. Indeed, we would probably view it as a desirable outcome if Philemon's standing in the community were to be diminished. We operate from the strong conviction that Onesimus must be freed from slavery at all costs, especially if the potential cost to us, if we lose the game, is merely the loss of standing in a society whose values we do not share. That would be a small price to pay for the satisfaction of championing the cause of justice, which, we would likely feel, is its own moral reward.

It is beyond the scope of this paper to examine the institution of slavery in Roman antiquity, but much has already been written regarding its variegated nature, which makes it difficult to align with our neat moral categories.[20] The situation of a house slave, which Onesimus seems to have been,[21] was not always undesirable; it was, in fact, often preferable to liberty in the eyes of slaves themselves, since freedom could be an economically precarious situation in which to find oneself. To be sure, slavery involved the loss of freedom and was rife with abuse so that, other things being equal, Paul probably saw it as a good and desirable thing to secure Onesimus' manumission (cf. 1 Cor 7:21).[22] However, he sensed not only an obligation to better Onesimus' lot, if he could, but also (and this is where we struggle to understand Paul's thinking) a responsibility to protect the honour of Philemon in his role as *pater familias* and as patron of the church that met in his house. To put

it in modern terms that do not quite fit but bring out the stark contrast to our way of thinking: Paul viewed both Onesimus' dignity and Philemon's honour as equally fundamental 'human rights'.[23] He therefore had adequate reasons for choosing a pragmatic rhetorical strategy that would allow him, potentially at least, to secure the latter without sacrificing the former.

4. The benefits of cooperation

We should not forget that Paul is concerned not only about Philemon and Onesimus, but also about the church in Colossae, which meets in the home of Philemon and to which the letter is also addressed (vs. 2). The other members of the community are by no means disinterested bystanders in this awkward situation. Philemon was most likely an important patron of the church, which would have been committed, according to the social conventions of ancient patron/client relationships, to the preservation and enhancement of his honour.[24] We do not know how they felt about Onesimus before his conversion, but the fact that he became a Christ-follower through his interaction with Paul would likely entail a sense of obligation to him on their part, as well.

Thus, the letter to Philemon evokes a situation in which Paul is weighing the various interests of four parties; not only his and Philemon's but also those of Onesimus and the church in Colossae:

- Philemon has incurred economic disadvantages due to the loss of a slave and (most likely) due to the fact that Onesimus had stolen from him (vs. 18); perhaps more importantly, he has suffered a loss of honour and esteem in his community.
- Onesimus presumably wants his freedom and acceptance in the church in Colossae as a brother in the Lord.
- The church in Colossae has an interest in avoiding an open conflict between Philemon and Paul and in the establishment of a new relationship between Philemon and Onesimus.
- Paul wants the church to acknowledge his apostolic authority, to achieve the freedom of Onesimus (so that Onesimus can join his missionary team) and to enjoy a continued close relationship with Philemon.

In this situation, a strategy of cooperation, rather than confrontation, offers the best chance of maximising the benefits for all the parties concerned. Table 2, below, illustrates the potential gains that such a strategy could afford.

With all these mutual benefits at stake, Paul's rhetoric can be understood as an attempt to avoid the zero-sum game that a demand on Philemon would entail. Instead, he sets up a situation in which both he and Philemon can enhance their honour by cooperating while at the same time achieving maximum benefits for the other parties involved. To be sure, Paul risks a loss of honour if Philemon refuses to cooperate, but this is the only strategy that allows him to potentially achieve

party / gains from	Paul	Philemon	Onesimus	Church
Paul	---	strengthened friendship; admiration	greater standing	recognition of autonomy
Philemon	strengthened friendship; gratitude	---	freedom, forgiveness	stronger leader; unity affirmed
Onesimus	loyalty; co-worker	gratitude and loyalty	---	increased devotion; joy in service
Church	recognition of authority; respect	standing confirmed; greater honour	recognition of equality	---

Table 2

both his goals: preserving Philemon's honour and bettering Onesimus' lot – not to mention contributing to the cohesion of the church in Colossae. For his part, Philemon stands to gain both materially and immaterially from cooperation, and alternately he will lose standing in his community if he snubs Paul.

5. Paul, Philemon and the 'prisoner's dilemma'

Given the potential benefits that accrue for all parties if Paul and Philemon cooperate, not to mention the loss of honour that both could suffer if they do not, it might seem that they would be eager to do so. But it is not that simple, at least not according to the basic tenets of game theory. Though it might seem counter-intuitive at first glance, game theory suggests that, generally speaking, a less than optimal outcome is more likely in these kinds of situations. To understand why, we must familiarise ourselves with one of game theory's most scrutinised scenarios, the so-called 'prisoner's dilemma',[25] which game theorists often explain by envisioning a situation like the following one: A prosecutor in rough-and-tumble Chicago in the 1930's has just apprehended the infamous gangster couple Bonnie and Clyde at the scene of a murder. He can prove that they supplied the weapons and are thus guilty of being accessories to murder, but in order to prove that they actually committed the crime of premeditated murder he needs a confession. So he separates Bonnie and Clyde for questioning and offers both a deal: If either confesses and testifies against the other, he or she will receive a reduced sentence of two years, while the other will be looking at 20 years in prison. If both confess, both will do 10 years in prison as part of a plea agreement. If, however, both keep silent, they will both face prison terms of 5 years for the lesser charge.

These outcomes are depicted in table 3 below:

		Bonnie	
		confess	*keep silent*
Clyde	**confess**	*10* **10**	*20* **2**
	keep silent	*2* **20**	*5* **5**

Table 3

The table makes clear that the best outcome for *both* Bonnie and Clyde would be achieved if both keep silent (the lower right-hand corner of the table). But in actual fact this is not the most likely outcome, assuming that both players are weighing their choices rationally and acting in their own best interest. The default outcome is actually that both Bonnie and Clyde will confess (the upper left-hand corner of the table) since that represents what has come to be known as the 'Nash equilibrium' (after John Nash, one the pioneers in the field of game theory, who later won a Nobel prize in economics for this ground-breaking theoretical insight[26]) in this particular 'game'. A Nash equilibrium holds when 'all players are simultaneously making a best reply to the strategy choices of others'.[27] It is therefore the best outcome either player in a two-person game can hope for regardless of the other player's strategy. In our example this means that since neither Bonnie nor Clyde can be sure that their partner will keep silent, they will both move instinctively toward an outcome that minimises their potential losses instead of one that maximises their potential gains: Rather than risking 20 years in prison while hoping for 5, they are more likely to risk 10 years and hope for 2.

In the case of Paul and Philemon, we are of course dealing with an abstract concept (honour) rather than an easily quantifiable commodity (years in prison), but game theory can still provide insight into Paul's understanding of the 'game' he is proposing. Essentially he is trying to move Philemon toward cooperation, i.e. taking advice instead of following an order. Both men stand to gain from cooperating, but Philemon could refuse to follow Paul's suggested course of action (which would entail a loss of honour on Paul's part). If Paul were to anticipate this, he might be tempted to revert to a heavy-handed exercise of apostolic authority (in which case Philemon would suffer a loss of honour). If both revert to zero-sum strategies, both will retain the measure of honour that derives from holding one's ground in the face of the presumed unreasonable behaviour of the other. Table 4 attempts to quantify the scenario in terms of the potential gains or losses of utils of honour:[28]

		Philemon	
		cooperate	*renege*
Paul	**cooperate**	*5* **5**	*10* **0**
	renege	*0* **10**	*2* **2**

Table 4

In this 'game' the following outcomes are possible: If Paul and Philemon cooperate, both gain 5 utils of honour (upper left-hand corner). If both refuse to cooperate, both gain 2 utils of honour (lower right-hand corner), since some honour is gained by holding one's ground. If either of the parties offers to cooperate while the other reneges, all the honour goes to the one who walks away from the table, because the other will lose face (upper right-hand or lower left-hand corner). The Nash equilibrium is represented by the lower-right hand corner, since both players are more likely to renege and settle for 2 utils of honour (and possibly gain 10), rather than going out on limb by cooperating and running the risk of losing everything.

In other words, by making Philemon an offer to cooperate, Paul may in fact inadvertently be nudging Philemon towards a strategy of non-cooperation. Even though a better outcome would be available if they cooperate, Philemon would actually be acting in his own best interests by choosing an outcome that guarantees the retention of some honour, rather than running the risk of losing it all, and Paul would be acting in his own interests if he reserves the right to exercise his apostolic authority.

6. Game theory and honour discourse in antiquity

Paul, of course, knew nothing of the Nash equilibrium and probably did not analyse his own strategy on this or any other meta-level, but the point of Nash's theory is that it anticipates how players tend to 'proact' (as opposed to react) when assessing the potential choices of their counterparts, and presumably that has not changed over time. In any case, I think it is not unreasonable to assume that, while composing his letter to Philemon, Paul thought through the possible outcomes of his intervention on Onesimus' behalf. He may well have realised, or at least intuited, that if his interaction with Philemon remained framed according to ancient society's honour codes, there was a good chance that the outcome would be less than ideal, not only for Philemon and himself, but also for Onesimus and the church.

Thus, though Paul did not pose the question 'What can I do to change the dynamics of this interaction so that it does not end in a non-cooperative Nash equilibrium?', he may well have thought about what he could do to make cooperation the more likely outcome. One way would be to undermine the entire discourse with regard to honour. In other words, Paul could discourage Philemon from placing inordinate value upon the preservation of his own honour. This would be very much in line with Paul's fundamental convictions, for already in 1 Corinthians 1 he had thoroughly deconstructed the ancient world's emphasis on honour, prestige and status.[29] In applying these insights to the case of Onesimus, it seems to me that Paul is trying to persuade Philemon that the question of honour was moot, since higher claims upon his person were now operative.

We must turn our attention one final time to game theory and the Nash equilibrium in order to note that one of the criticisms levelled against it is that it can only account for the behaviour of players who are acting in their own best interests.[30] There are, however, situations in which players consciously choose not to do this. They are well aware that their choice might accrue entirely to the benefit of the other player or players and will cost them dearly, but they act altruistically in spite of that awareness. Family members, for instance, are often quite willing to put the interests of other members of the family ahead of their own.

7. Paul and family rhetoric

Paul's frequent and intriguing use of familial language demands attention at this point.[31] This is, of course, not exclusive to Philemon, but the use of familial terms is especially salient in this letter. Note the following instances:

- vs. 1: Timothy is 'the brother' (ἀδελφός)
- vs. 2: Apphia is 'the sister' (ἀδελφή)
- vs. 2: the church is 'the household' (οἶκος)
- vss. 7, 20: Philemon is Paul's 'brother' (ἀδελφός)
- vs. 10: Onesimus is 'my child' (τό τέκνον ἐμοῦ)
- vs. 15: Philemon should receive Onesimus as a

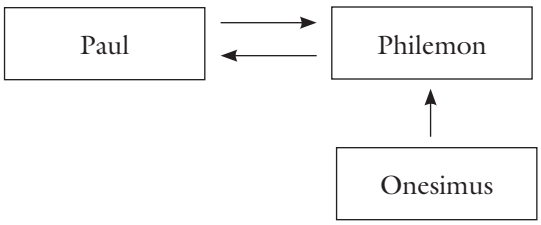
'beloved brother' (ἀδελφός ἀγαπητός)

In addition to these appellations, the metaphorical use of σπλάγχνα ('heart', vss. 7, 12, 20), the verb γεννάω ('generate, become father of', vs. 10), and possibly the noun πρεσβύτης ('old man', vs. 9) all carry strong connotations of kinship.[32] Together these references bear witness to the fact that Paul is seeking to establish so-called 'fictive kinship' relationships among the members of the church of Colossae, including its newest member, Onesimus. Though none of the relationships so denoted are in fact biological kinship relationships, Paul wants his audience to conceive of them as such and treat each other accordingly.

It has often been argued that this use of familial appellations for non-family members was a Christian *proprium* over against ancient guilds and associations that can be traced to Paul's Jewish heritage.[33] This view has recently been called in question by Philip A. Harland, who argues that the same phenomenon is attested among members of Hellenistic associations and trade guilds.[34] However, the very fact that the extant parallels are found in that context points to an interesting difference: Within the earliest Christian communities the practice of using familial terms cuts across the socio-economic barriers which the clubs and guilds codified and maintained.[35] What this implies for our investigation is that the expectation that a slave owner should view his slave as a 'beloved brother' would, in fact, seem to be a *novum* in the ancient world.

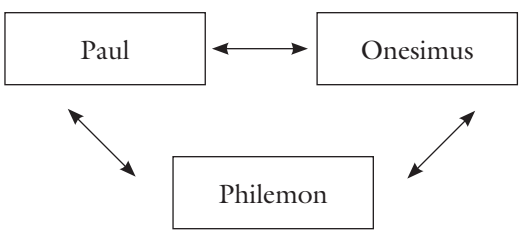
We are therefore not merely dealing with a social convention in early Christianity. Rather, it seems that Paul is using kinship language to deconstruct accepted values and norms, reconfiguring them around the new reality that characterises their relationships in Christ. This becomes clear when we assess the changes in the hierarchy of relationships between Paul, Philemon and Onesimus that Paul repeatedly nudges Philemon to acknowledge. Of special note are the verses 15-16, which in my opinion offers the key to understanding the entire letter: 'Receive him [Onesimus] no longer as a slave but as more than a slave, indeed as a brother in the flesh and in the Lord, which he certainly is to me and all the more to you.'

According to the conventions of the ancient world, which Paul's characterises as 'in the flesh' (ἐν σαρκὶ), he and Philemon are equal in status and are both higher in status than Onesimus, though only Philemon has authority over Onesimus. We can represent this simply as in graph 1 (the direction of arrows signify an obligation of deference to a greater claim of honour):



Graph 1

'In the Lord' (ἐν κυρίῳ), however, this hierarchy of relationships has to be reconfigured. In one sense, Paul, Philemon and Onesimus are now all brothers, and thus on the same level (cf. the list of familial terms above). This is best represented as a circle with mutual obligations flowing among all parties, as in graph 2 (which we should imagine we are viewing from above, since no vertical – i.e. hierarchical – honour claims are operative):

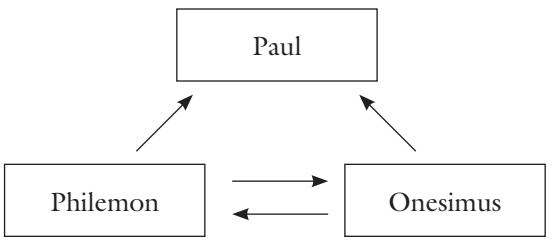


Graph 2

A comparison of graphs 1 and 2 makes it apparent that Paul has, by means of his subtle rhetoric, simply deconstructed one of the most stable, unquestioned and important institutions of the ancient world, slavery. He has ingenuously turned the relationship between master and slave – a key to maintaining the economic and social fabric of the Roman Empire – on its head and subverted it entirely. For if Philemon adopts Paul's way of viewing his relationship with Onesimus, i.e. if Philemon begins to view Onesimus as a family member, it *must* result in a change of status. No virtuous person willingly enslaved members of their own family; indeed, a loving sibling would do all his power to prevent his brother or sister

from falling victim to such a fate.[36] It is inconceivable that Paul would use this language without understanding its deepest implications: Christians simply could not hold their brothers and sisters in Christ as slaves.

Paul does not, however, shy away from invoking a different hierarchy of obligations in order to put pressure on Philemon to make the right decision. This new hierarchy arises from the fact that both Philemon and Onesimus owe their membership in Christ's family to Paul's apostolic engagement. Thus, Paul appropriates for himself, explicitly in the case of Onesimus (vs. 10) and implicitly in the case of Philemon (vs. 19), the role of father. This hierarchy of relationships is portrayed in graph 3:



Graph 3

This is clearly not the hierarchy that obtained before Philemon and Onesimus became members of the same family of faith, but in Paul's mind it is operative since Onesimus' conversion, and Paul does not hesitate to make use of it for his purposes. He thus puts maximum pressure on Philemon to take the action that Paul is convinced is the right one. This highlights one of the most troubling aspects of the letter to Philemon: the manipulative rhetoric that lies just below its surface throughout and becomes explicit in verse 19: 'I hardly need to mention that you owe me your very soul' (ἵνα μὴ λέγω σοι ὅτι καὶ σεαυτόν μοι προσοφείλεις). This is an audacious statement, even in its original context.[37]

Why does Paul risk jeopardising Philemon's willingness to cooperate by making such a statement? I would argue that it is precisely the creation of a family dynamic and Paul's appropriation of the role of 'father' that legitimises it. While it may not relieve all the ambiguities that surface here, it seems to me that this rhetoric of existential obligation may be deemed acceptable only within the context of a family, and indeed it is practised with regularity in families in a broad variety of cultures (though probably least in Western cultures). It is also essentially true: We do, in most cases, to a very large extent owe our lives, our well-being, even our identity, to our parents. While we might properly hesitate before making use of such rhetoric ourselves, we can hardly fault Paul for doing so.

Conclusion

Paul strongly insinuates that there is a hierarchy of relationships (apostle / church member; father / child in the faith) to which he could appeal directly if he chose in order to achieve his purpose: the release of Onesimus from slavery. Instead, he opts for a strategy of cooperation designed to maximise the potential benefits for all involved – Philemon, Onesimus, the church in Colossae and not least himself. Paul walks a fine line, holding out on the one hand the prospect of heightened honour for Philemon within the community if he acts in accordance with Paul's strong 'suggestions', while at the same time reconfiguring the relationships of all involved so that they are no longer based on hierarchies of honour, but rather on a sense of mutual obligation and a willingness to put others' interests ahead of their own that characterises families (at least good ones).

The rhetoric of family explains several features of the letter and adds credibility to the hypothesis that Paul was in fact seeking manumission for Onesimus. Commentators who see this otherwise are, however, right in one important sense: Freedom for Onesimus is a secondary goal of Paul's. His primary goal is nothing less than the re-envisioning of relationships among believers so that they adequately reflect a revolutionary new theological reality: Christ-followers are – by virtue of the fact that they belong to the one family of God – brothers and sisters. That this entails particular ethical obligations and what these obligations were in the case of Philemon and Onesimus should be clear enough. At least Paul thought they were.

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Endnotes

1 Two examples of the latter are Peter Arzt-Grabner, *Philemon* (PKNT 1; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2003), the flagship volume of the *Papyrologische Kommentare zum Neuen Testament*, who analyses the myriad quotidian texts contained in the papyri with a view toward understanding how average people in first century AD would have understood NT texts (cf. esp. 43), and N.T. Wright, *Paul and the Faithfulness of God* (COQG 4; London: SPCK, 2013), who views Philemon as uniquely suited to offer insight into Paul's understanding of his theological task and therefore devotes the first 70 pages of his *magnum opus* to the letter.

2 Cf. John M.G. Barclay, 'Paul, Philemon, and the Dilemma of Christian Slave Ownership', *NTS* 37 (1991) 161-186, esp. 170-171.

3 A glance at recent commentaries on Philemon demonstrates this lack of consensus. The following scholars argue that Paul is intent upon obtaining freedom for Onesimus: F. F. Bruce, *The Epistles to the Colossians, to Philemon, and to the Ephesians* (NICNT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984) 217; Michael Wolter, *Der Brief an die Kolosser, Der Brief an Philemon* (ÖTK 12; Gütersloh: Gerd Mohn; Würzburg: Echter, 1993) 271-272; Eckart Reinmuth, *Der Brief des Paulus an Philemon* (ThHNT 11/II; Leipzig: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 2006) 47-48; Ben Witherington III, *The Letters to Philemon, the Colossians, and the Ephesians: A Socio-rhetorical Commentary on the Captivity Epistles* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007) 76-80; Douglas J. Moo, *The Letters to the Colossians and to Philemon* (PNTC; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008) 373-374. Other scholars argue that it is a matter of indifference to Paul whether Onesimus obtains the legal status of a *libertinus*; cf. Eduard Lohse, *Die Briefe an die Kolosser und an Philemon* (KEK 9/2; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1968) 282-283; Peter Stuhlmacher, *Der Brief an Philemon* (EKK 18; 2nd ed.; Zürich: Benzinger; Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener, 1981) 42-43; Peter T. O'Brien, *Colossians, Philemon* (WBC 44; Waco: 1982) 296-297; N.T. Wright, *Colossians and Philemon* (TNTC 12; Downers Grove: IVP, 1986) 170-174; Markus Barth and Helmut Blanke, *The Letter to Philemon* (Eerdmans Critical Commentary; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000) 412-422; John G. Nordling, *Philemon* (Concordia Commentary; Saint Louis: Concordia, 2004) 249; Robert McL. Wilson, *Colossians and Philemon: A Critical and Exegetical Commentary* (ICC; London: T & T Clark, 2005) 325; Peter Müller, *Der Brief an Philemon* (KEK 9/3; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2012) 121-123; David W. Pao, *Colossians and Philemon* (ECNT; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2012) 395-396. James D.G. Dunn, *The Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon* (NIGTC; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996) 334, leaves the question open.

4 All translations from the Greek are mine, unless otherwise indicated.

5 Cf. Witherington, *Philemon*, 62-64.

6 Witherington, *Philemon*, 4-6.

7 Ancient writers were themselves divided as to what the term actually denotes. Cf. Ulrich von Wilamowitz-Moellendorff, *Asianismus und Atticismus* (Berlin: Wiedmannsche Buchhandlung, 1900) 1.

8 For helpful introductions to the concept, cf. J.E. Lendon, *Empire of Honour. The Art of Government in the Roman World* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1997) 30-106; David A. deSilva, *Honor, Patronage, Kinship, and Purity. Unlocking New Testament Culture* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2000) 23-93; Kunio Nojima. *Ehre und Schande in Kulturanthropologie und biblischer Theologie* (Wuppertal: Arco, 2011) 143-246.

9 Cf. Halvor Moxnes, 'Honour and Righteousness in Romans', *JSNT* 32 (1988) 61-77, esp. 63.

10 Translation H. Rackham, *Cicero, On the Orator*: Book 3; *On Fate, Stoic Paradoxes, Divisions of Oratory* (LCL 349; Cambridge, USA: Harvard University Press, 1942).

11 Cf. Lendon, *Empire*, 73.

12 Cf. Carlin A. Barton, *Roman Honor. The Fire in the Bones* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001) 11-12.

13 Cf. Robert Jewett, *Romans: A Commentary* (Hermeneia; Minneapolis: Fortress, 2007) 49-51.

14 Cf. Lendon, *Empire*, 57-58.

15 I am grateful to my colleague at the Freie Theologische Hochschule Giessen, Germany, Dr Carsten Ziegert, whose advanced degrees in both mathematics and theology made him the ideal consultant for careful scrutiny of my thesis and helpful suggestions for improving it.

16 I found Ken Binmore, *Game Theory: A Very Short Introduction* (Very Short Introductions 173; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007) quite helpful in this regard. For a more thorough discussion the reader is advised to consult one of the standard introductory texts, e.g. Martin J. Osborne, *An Introduction to Game Theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004) esp. 1-54.

17 I am aware of the danger of circular reasoning at this point. I am not trying to demonstrate in any strictly logical sense that Paul's rhetoric proves he desired the release of Onesimus. One cannot prove what one, for the sake of argument, must assume. Instead I am employing Bayesian categories for determining the inference to the best explanation (on which cf. Christoph Heilig, *Hidden Criticism? The Methodology and Plausibility of the Search for a*

Counter-Imperial Subtext in Paul [WUNT 2.392; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2015] 24-35). According to Bayes' theorem, named after the English philosopher Thomas Bayes (1701-1761), such an inference is a function of 1) *background plausibility* – the probability that a hypothesis is correct apart from any new evidence to be considered – and 2) *explanatory potential* – the ability of the hypothesis to satisfactorily account for the new evidence and to do so better than other hypotheses. It is beyond the scope of this article to make the case for the background plausibility of the hypothesis that Paul wanted to secure Onesimus' release, though I believe it is a solid one (cf. esp. Wolter, *Kolosser*, 271-277). My argument should be understood as a contribution to the explanatory potential of the hypothesis; in other words, it does a better job of explaining Paul's rhetoric than competing hypotheses.

18 Cf. Osborne, *Game Theory*, 365-366.

19 Cf. Binmore, *Game Theory*, 7.

20 Barth and Blanke, *Philemon*, 3-4, note several reasons why this so: First, we must distinguish between 'different forms of slavery' that 'coexisted side-by-side' in antiquity. Second, '[t]he dividing line between slaves and free persons was not always sharply drawn or easily recognized.' Third, ancient slavery 'was only in exceptional cases related to skin color, racism, nationalism, and work considered beneath the dignity of free persons'. Fourth, 'in many aspects an ancient slave's treatment was better and his life conditions more secure than those of a nineteenth-century factory worker'.

21 Cf. Stuhlmacher, *Philemon*, 22.

22 The Greek text of this *crux interpretum* reads: δοῦλος ἐκλήθης μή σοι μελέτω ἀλλ' εἰ καὶ δύνασαι ἐλεύθερος γενέσθαι μᾶλλον χρῆσαι. I agree with those who translate this verse along the lines of the NIV: 'Were you a slave when you were called? Don't let it trouble you – although if you can gain your freedom, do so.' Cf. esp. Will Deming, 'A Diatribe Pattern in 1 Cor. 7:21-22: A New Perspective on Paul's Directions to Slaves', *NovT* 37 (1995) 130-137 (but cf. also the recent rebuttal of Deming's position by Michael Flexsenhar III, 'Recovering Paul's Hypothetical Slaves: Rhetoric and Reality in 1 Corinthians 7:21', *JSPL* 5 [2015] 71-88). Other proponents of this reading include Wolfgang Schrage, *Der erste Brief an die Korinther (1Kor 6,12-11,16)* (Solothurn: Benziger; Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener, 1995) 139-140, and Roy E. Ciampa and Brian S. Rosner, *The First Letter to the Corinthians* (PNTC; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010) 320-322.

23 Cf. Joel White, review of Eckart Reinmuth, *Der Brief des Paulus an Philemon*, *JETh* 21 (2007) 280-281.

24 Cf. deSilva, *Honor*, 96-98, 113-114.

25 Cf. Osborne, *Game Theory*, 14-15; K.H. Erickson, *Game Theory: A Simple Introduction* (self-published, 2013) 12-30.

26 Cf. the award-winning biography by Sylvia Nasar, *A Beautiful Mind* (New York: Touchstone, 1998), which was subsequently made into an acclaimed film of the same name. Nash outlined his famous theorem in a 1956 article entitled, 'Non-Cooperative Games' in *Annals of Mathematics*, 286-295). Since then empirical research has confirmed the utility of this fundamental insight for endeavours ranging from selling turnips at the farmer's market to avoiding nuclear annihilation. Cf. Nasar, *Beautiful Mind*, 118-120.

27 Binmore, *Game Theory*, 14.

28 It should be noted that we must assign a value to honour that is greater than one, since only then can it be shared, but the values themselves are arbitrary and only important in terms of their respective relationships to other values in the grid.

29 Cf. Martin Hengel, 'Mors turpissima crucis. Die Kreuzigung in der antiken Welt und die „Torheit" des „Wortes vom Kreuz"', in Johannes Friedrich et al. (eds), *Rechtfertigung* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1976) 125-184, esp. 125-131.

30 Cf. Osborne, *Game Theory*, 7, who warns that the theory of rational choice, on which the discipline is based, has its limitations. Game theory does, in fact, try to account for altruism and attempts to represent it in terms of shifts in Nash equilibria to strategies of cooperation (cf. Erickson, *Game Theory*, 94-95). It does not, however, seem well-equipped to assess games in which players act against their own best interests (cf. Binmore, *Game Theory*, 75, who views this as utopian thinking), which is what Paul on at least one occasion admonishes his readers to do (cf. 1 Cor 6:7).

31 Paul uses familial terms far more frequently than other early Christian writers; cf. Wayne Meeks, *The First Urban Christians. The Social World of the Apostle Paul* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1983) 87. See also the following studies on the use of kinship language in Paul: Trevor J. Burke, *Family Matters. A Socio-Historical Study of Kinship Metaphors in 1 Thessalonians* (JSNTSup 247; London: T&T Clark, 2003), esp. 60-127, and Christine Gerber, *Paulus und seine „Kinder". Studien zur Beziehungsmetaphorik der paulinischen Briefe* (BZNW 136; Berlin: De Gruyter, 2005), esp. 205-214.

32 Cf. Müller, *Philemon*, 36.

33 Cf. Meeks, *Christians*, 87.

34 Cf. Philip A. Harland, *Dynamics of Identity in the World of the Early Christians. Associations, Judeans and Cultural Minorities* (London: T & T Clark, 2009) 63-81. According to Harland (66) 'there are clear indications that some Greeks and Romans, like

some Judeans and some followers of Jesus in the first centuries, did express a sense of belonging in an association, guild, or organization by identifying their fellows as "brothers" (or, less often attested, as "sisters")'.

35 Even among Jews, familial language was prevalent within particular naturally cohesive groups, such as the Qumran community. Cf. Meeks, *Christians*, 87.

36 Plutarch does not directly address the issue of enslaved siblings in his *De Fraterno Amore*, the only extant ancient text that focuses on the mores of sibling relations (so Hans Dieter Betz, 'De Fraterno Amore [Moralia 478A-492D]' in Betz [ed.], *Plutarch's Ethical Writings and Early Christian Literature* [SCHNT 4; Leiden: Brill, 1978] 231-263, esp. 232), but it is extremely unlikely that he would have condoned allowing a brother to remain enslaved if there were any possibility of freeing him. For instance, he approvingly relates the case of Athenodorus, who shared his portion of the estate with his brother Xenon, who had squandered his own portion, saving him from abject poverty, if not enslavement (Cf. *Frat. Amor.* 484A).

37 One anecdotal note: When teaching Philemon, I often ask Asian students how they react to the letter's rhetoric. I have found that they can readily identify with Paul's indirect form of communication throughout the letter, but not with this statement, which they tend to regard as humiliating.