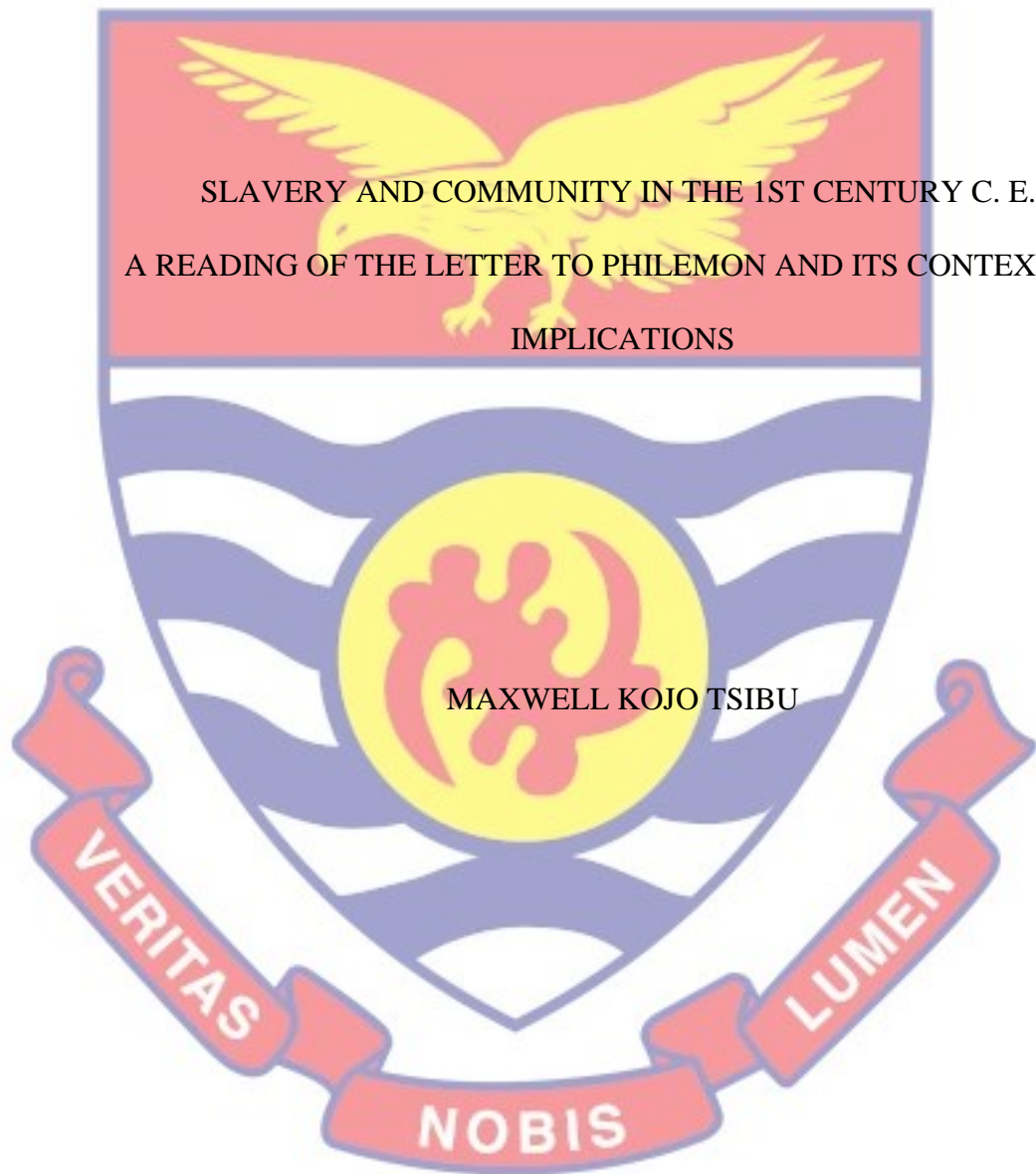
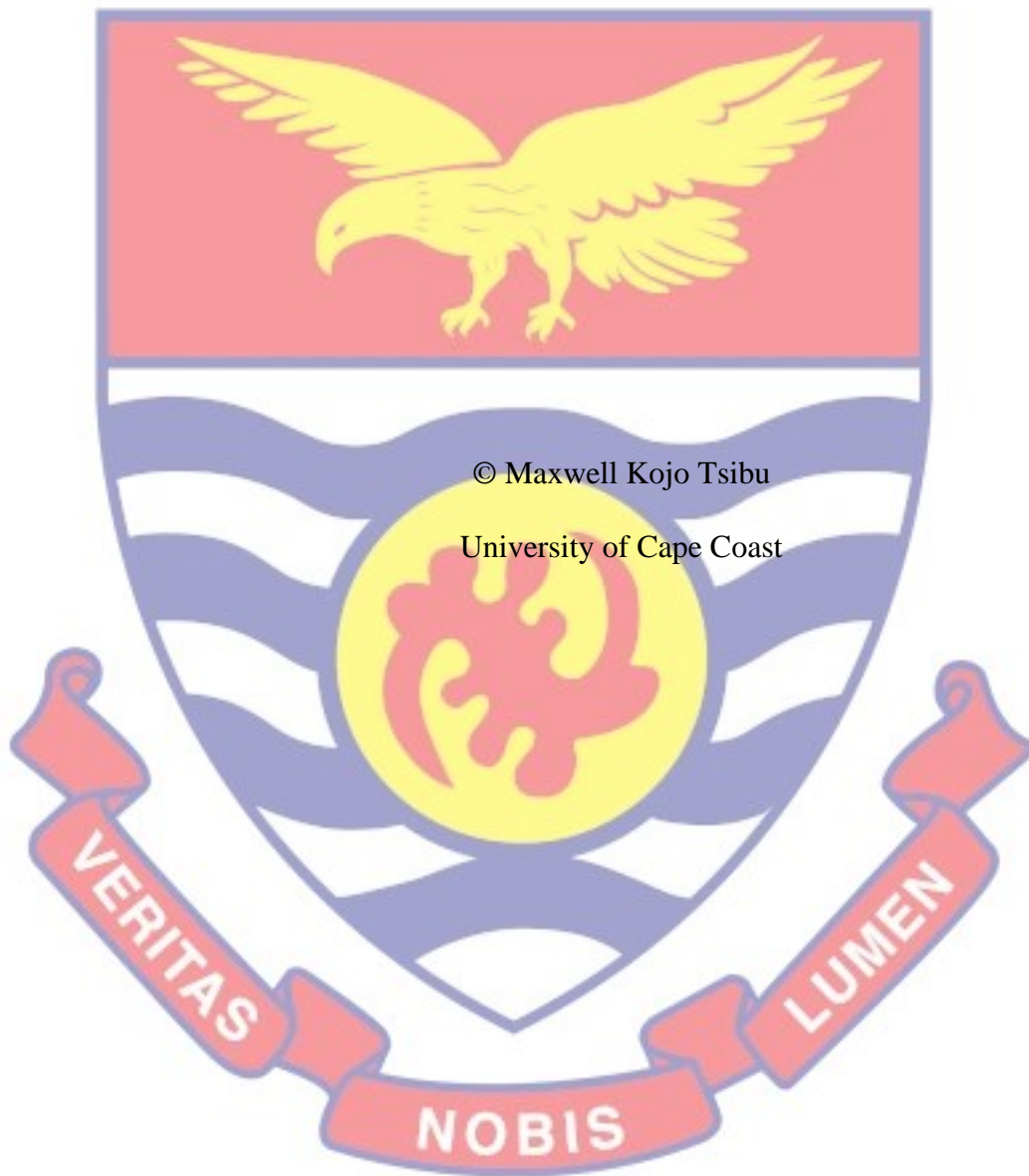


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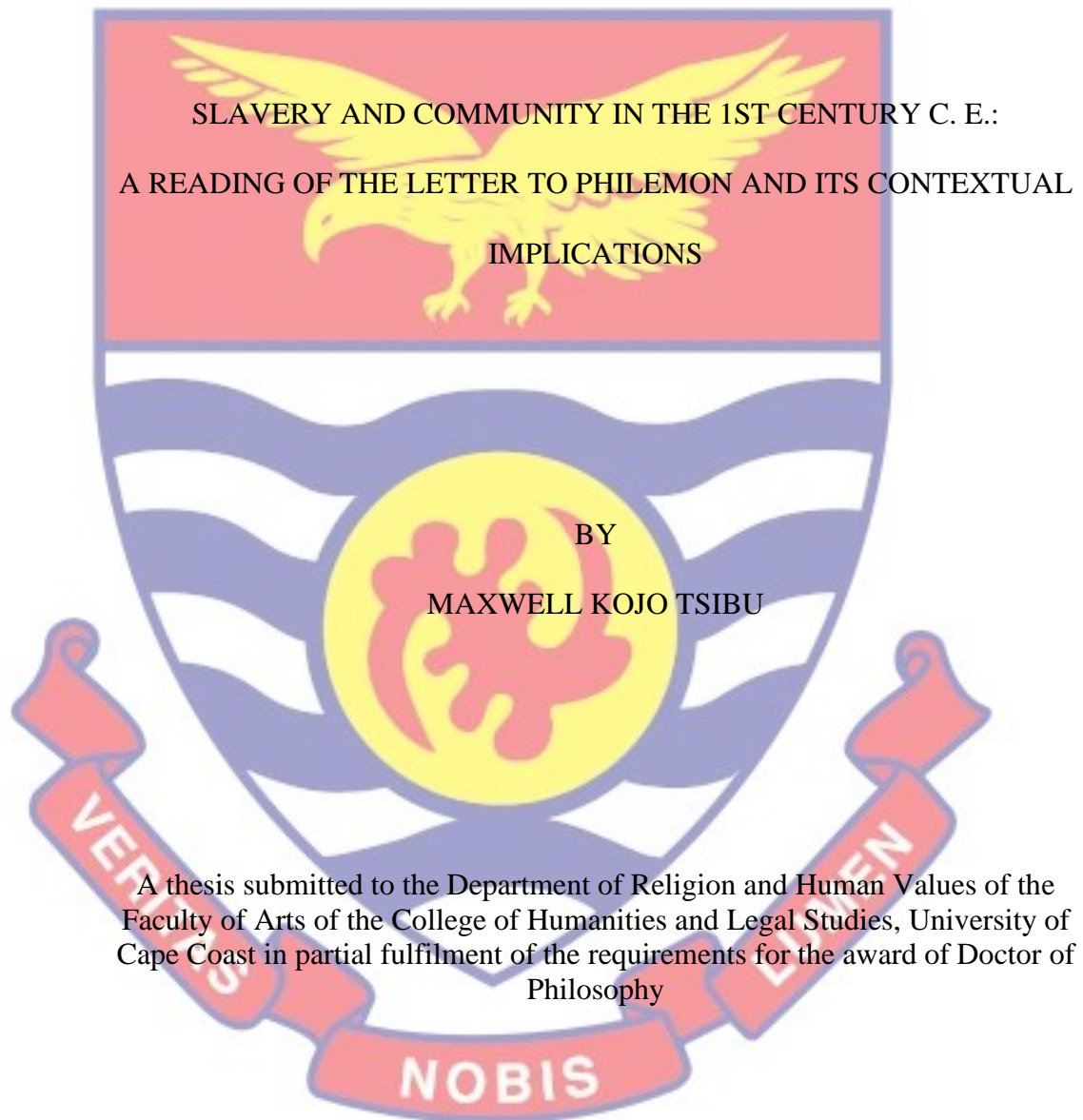
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JULY 2021

## DECLARATION

### Candidate's Declaration

I hereby declare that this is the result of my original work apart from scholarly works cited or quoted and that no part of it has been presented for another degree in this university or elsewhere.

Name: Maxwell Kojo Tsibu

Signature: ..... Date: .....

### Supervisors' Declaration

We hereby declare that the preparation and presentation of the thesis were supervised in accordance with the guidelines on supervision of thesis laid down by the University of Cape Coast.

Principal Supervisor's Name: Rev. Prof. Eric Nii Bortey Anum

Signature:  ..... Date: .....

Co-Supervisor's Name: Rev. Dr Sr. Alice Matilda Nsiah

Signature: ..... Date: .....

## ABSTRACT

The quest to incarnate Christianity in a multi-cultural society—to contend with dilemmas of modern slavery—has called for an interpretation of the Bible able to respect the text and engage with the culture. Given the interpretative challenges the Letter of Philemon poses to biblical scholarship, the study set out to analyse the text as a ‘rhetorical discourse’ situated in the socio-economic context of the 1st Century CE and to identify the insights that may be gained from the comprehension and appropriation of the text in the contemporary Ghanaian context where different forms of modern slavery are still present and often justified as part of the traditional culture.

The study employed the tri-polar exegetical model of African contextual interpretation as its theoretical framework to bridge the gap between the academic and popular reading of the biblical text and thereby make Scripture ‘relevant’ in the Ghanaian community. Empirical data was collected through personal interviews and secondary data were retrieved from journals, legal documents as well as institutional policies and reports on modern slavery in Ghana.

The findings revealed that modern forms of slavery are incompatible with the Christian faith and Ghana’s legal system, yet the menace is wide present and tolerated in our Christian communities. The study also discovered Christocentric values and actions indispensable for subverting abusive master-servant relationships. Accordingly, the study calls on Ghanaian contemporary churches to employ advocacy and diplomacy to denounce any hidden form of modern slavery in the community as part of their socio-religious responsibility. In particular, religious leaders should partner with frontline institutions in the fight against modern slavery.

## KEYWORDS

Christian slavery

Christocentric values

Contextualisation

Hermeneutics

Rhetorical reading

Slavery



## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I express profound gratitude to my supervisors, Rev. Prof. Eric Nii Bortey Anum and Rev. Dr Sr. Alice Matilda Nsiah, for the corrections, feedback, constructive criticisms and the sacrifices they made to help shape this work. Your patience, encouragement, adjustments and subtle promptings encouraged me to complete this work. I have particularly enjoyed divine grace through your instrumentality.

I appreciate very deeply and sincerely the authorities of the RHV Department for the uncommon love, encouragement, and more importantly, uncountable privileges that were given to me to help develop my potential. You always make me feel more than a mere student. Some of you continue to get me materials in my research area whenever you travelled overseas. I also like to express gratitude to GABES for providing me with an academic environment full of seasoned biblical scholars for insightful dialogues on the letter of Philemon and slavery. I am particularly thankful to Dr Kojo Okyere of UCC, Prof. Nicoletta Gatti of the University of Ghana and Dr Michael Dei of Valley View University for the eye-opening insights you shared with me during the Graduate Seminar at Akrofi-Christaller, Akropong, in January 2019.

Again, I am thankful to Dr Boakye-Yiadom and Prof. K. T. Oduro for spurring me on through All Saints Educational Trust/University of Cape Coast All Saints Scholarship. Finally, a special thanks to my family and bonded friends for all the prayers and various supports you have offered me. Because of you, my *viscera* are constantly refreshed in every circumstance. May God bless you and cause you to do 'more.'

## DEDICATION

To Mercy Darkwah: I owe you my very self.





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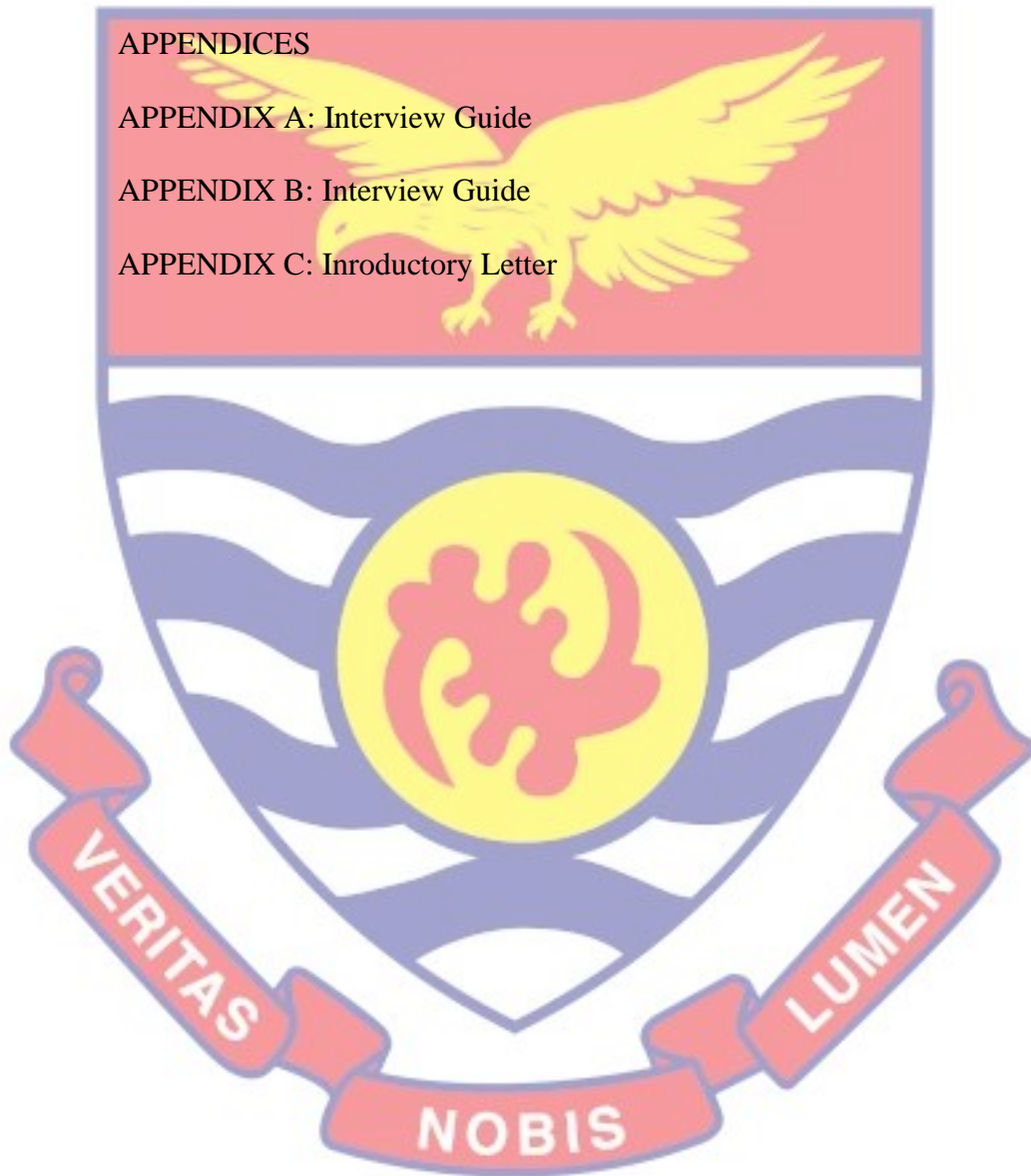
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## LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

ABH	African Biblical Hermeneutics
AHTU	Anti-Human Trafficking Unit
AHSTIP	Anti-Human Smuggling and Trafficking in Persons Unit
B.C.E.	Before Common Era
CE	Common Era
CBS	Contextual Bible Study
CHRAJ	Commission on Human Rights and Administrative Justice
CNN	Cable News Network, Inc.
CPC	Child Protection Compact
DOVVSU	Domestic Violence and Victim Support Unit
ENA	End Now Africa
EMS	End Modern Slavery
IITA	International Institute of Tropical Agricultural
ILO	International Labour Organisation
NT	New Testament
<i>Philem</i>	The letter to Philemon/Paul's letter to Philemon
RSV	Revised Standard Version
TIP	Trafficking in Person
NGO	Non-Governmental Organisation
UNICEF	United Nations International Children Emergency Fund
WACAP	West African Cocoa and Commercial Agriculture Programme
WFCL	Worst Forms of Child Labour

## CHAPTER ONE

### INTRODUCTION

This chapter gives an overview of the entire study. It situates the research in context and gives justifications for the chosen topic. It also considers how the study was done, particularly the methodology and interpretive assumptions underpinning the exegetical evaluation of the chosen text.

#### **Background of the Study**

In recent times, the world has shown deep concern about the phenomenon of modern slavery. Governments, civil societies and development partners in different parts of the world have expressed grave concerns about the devastating impacts of contemporary slavery on human dignity and society. The concept, ‘modern slavery,’ is employed in international and academic discourses as “an umbrella term covering multiple forms of exploitation which ‘includes but is not limited to human trafficking, forced labour, debt bondage, serfdom, children working in slavery or slavery-like conditions, domestic servitude, sexual slavery and servile forms of marriage” (United Nations, 2014). It has been recorded that over 215 million children are exploited in various economic activities currently and that 60 per cent of them work in the agricultural sector, including fishing and aquaculture (International Labour Organisation [ILO], 2018).

ILO (2018) defines child labour as any activity or “work that deprives children of their childhood, potential, dignity, and that which is harmful to physical and mental development.” It denotes activities that deny children the freedom to attend school, truncate their schooling, or force them to combine schooling with unreasonably extensive and demanding work. Forced child



labour includes “situations in which the child is in the custody of someone other than an immediate family member who requires the child to perform work that financially benefits that person, as well as situations in which a parent provides a child to others who subject the child to forced labour in which the child does not have the option of leaving” (ILO, 2018). The disturbing trends of child slavery and exploitation stick a direct blow at the heart of humanity. Although modern slavery occurs in many areas of Ghana’s economy, its pervasiveness in the fishing and cocoa industry has been of grave concern to the Government, development partners and the civil society, at large.

In spite of the efforts made over the last decade by the Ministry of Gender, Children and Social Protection and other non-governmental bodies, child labour and exploitation, an aspect of modern slavery, is still widespread across several domains in both urban and rural settings. According to survey research on child labour conducted in Ghana by Tulane University in 2015, over 880,000 children are employed in precarious conditions in the cocoa production industry.

Of Ghana’s total child population in cocoa-growing areas (2,236,124), a total of 957,398 (42.8%) children were estimated to be working in cocoa production, of which 918,543 (41.1%) were child labourers working in cocoa production, and 878,595 (39.3%) were estimated to be engaged in hazardous work in cocoa production (Tulane University, 2015).

Indeed, the dark side of cocoa production in Ghana and Ivory Coast is hard to miss. Though farming and aquacultural activities constitute a traditional means of giving apprenticeship and livelihood to many people, they can be abusive and exploitative to vulnerable workers. Some of these child labourers are often not remunerated for their labour because they are ‘used’ on farms owned by their

relations. They may also be hired on commercial plantations or engaged as labourers of a migrant family unit. Unfortunately, these children may become victims of child trafficking syndicates to offset the debts of their employers and are often treated as slaves.

On March 1st, 2019, Cable News Network, Inc. (CNN) broadcasted a documentary titled, “Troubled Waters: Freeing the Child Slaves of Lake Volta,” subsequent to similar publications confirming the pervasive reality of child trafficking and child slavery in fishing communities located along the Lake Volta in Ghana. The producers of the documentary estimated that about 20,000 children live in slavery on Volta Lake. Most of them come to the lake from hundreds of miles away. The CNN documentary crew observed that:

children as young as five are sold to human traffickers and made to work as fishermen for up to 12 hours a day, seven days a week. They are beaten. They are abused. They eat scraps off the table and sleep on the dirt. Some get drowned when forced to dive under the water to untangle fishing nets. These forgotten children become yet another anonymous corpse resting at the bottom of the lake. When they die, no one is there to grieve for them, and no one is punished for enslaving and endangering them. The only loss is a financial one. The fisherman who bought the child had paid the price of a cow to turn him into a slave (*Freeing the child slaves of Lake Volta*, CNN Freedom Project, 2019).

The shocking discovery of CNN comes a decade after the ILO conducted an extensive study of the involvement of children in activities on Lake Volta (Kulczyk, 2019). The ILO study revealed that some parts of children’s work on the lake occur under hazardous and abusive conditions. Although the Government of Ghana took measures through social intervention programmes to address social problems like those faced by children on islands and riverine areas of Lake Volta, the menace persists. The 2019 CNN documentary is another timely reminder that stakeholders, government, international bodies and

researchers have to do more to address the issue of child abuse and exploitation in economic and domestic ventures (Ntreh, 2008).

In a reaction to the CNN documentary, Mr Kojo Opong Nkrumah, the Government's Information Minister at the time, confirmed that the incidence of child labour and mistreatment in traditional apprenticeship and fosterage arrangements in areas on and around Lake Volta is 'heart-breaking stories to the Government and the people of Ghana. He reiterated that the Government of Ghana admits the sad reality of child slavery and the complexities involved in curbing the situation.

It is often assumed that child labour and exploitation occur only in the agricultural and fishing sectors. However, social workers have indicated that the phenomenon is even more prevalent in households with fictive children, maids, and bonded labourers. The nature of cruelty or inhumane treatments suffered by many maids and fictive children in domestic homes (both in the villages and cities) is not different from the sad realities of child labourers on cocoa plantations and in the fishing sector. Unfortunately, compared with child exploitation in economic ventures, these exploitative relationships in domestic contexts have not attracted the interest and attention of government and non-governmental bodies. These 'hidden' forms of (modern) slavery incompatible with the Christian faith and with the contemporary Ghanaian system but widespread and often tolerated in our Christian communities sustained my motivation to engage the traditional Ghanaian value with the biblical text in an effort to shape a unique and authentic Christianity resulting from the understanding of the worldview as they are confronted with the biblical teaching.

In the face of the rampant instances of the worst and most hazardous forms of child labour (including child slavery and trafficking) in a country depicted as “incurably religious” (Platvoet & Rinsum, 2003), there is an urgent need for interrogating the various meanings Ghanaians draw from biblical texts on master-slave relationships and the applications they make thereof. Even though Early Christianity did not respond to slavery consistently, an insight into how it negotiated this complex reality may offer significant reflections for today’s Christians in their communities.

This research focuses essentially on the nature of the master-servant relationship in domestic households. It is imperative to investigate how the freedom, education, welfare and human rights of maids and fictive children are prioritised in traditional fosterage and economic arrangements (Ibrahim, 2010; Asuman *et. al.*, 2018). In addition, one needs to know the challenges confronting both parents and children in master-subordinate relationships and how they can be addressed. The objective here is to explore how Paul repudiates human exploitation in the peculiar social institution of slavery in the letter of Philemon (*Philem*, hereafter). It also seeks to draw implications for transforming impaired master-servant relationships, which often lead to child labour, child trafficking, and bonded labour in our time.

The study emphasises the rhetoric tools employed by Paul to project the value of a transformative relationship in domestic and economic ventures that honour the name of God and the church. In addition, the study seeks to draw resources from the Bible to evaluate the difficulties and challenges arising from domestic relationships, which often turn out to be abusive, exploitative or win-lose ventures for the vulnerable party (i.e., the fictive child, maid or employee).

Slavery conventions have confronted Christians since the 1st Greco-Roman period.

Christianity developed in a setting where slavery was a typical component of the everyday landscape. According to Keith Hopkins' (1978) estimates, at the end of the 1st Century B.C.E., the Roman Empire had a slave population of over two million out of a population of about six million people. Many of these slaves became Christians and 'fellowshipped together' with their masters in the local assemblies. Thus, from the very beginning of Christian literature, Christian writers—albeit their socially peripheral location—wrestled with the social realities of enslavement phenomenon in the ecclesial context.

In *Philem*, Paul contends with a controversial domestic matter between a Christian patron and his slave in the local community. Different hypotheses have been advanced to throw light on the exact situation and intended purpose behind this eponymous letter. Despite the insights previous studies have been undertaken to clarify the message of this letter, one could argue that there is more to contend with.

The "runaway hypothesis"—which has been dominating the interpretation of *Philem* for a long time — states that Onesimus, a slave owned by Philemon, was "unprofitable" (*achrēston*, v. 11) in the past and had consequently fled from his master (*echōrīsthē*, v. 15) after he had robbed him (*ēdikēsen*, v. 18). It is said that Onesimus stole some small items from the household to finance his journey. As a result, Onesimus either of your own accord or fortuitously fell in with the apostle Paul, who catechised him into the Christian faith (v. 10). Paul, who had been the appreciative beneficiary of Onesimus's past services (v. 13), now appeals to Philemon not only to pardon

his previously insubordinate slave but to receive him as a comrade in the Lord (v. 16) (Nordling, 1991, p. 97). Traditionally, this hypothesis has served as a hermeneutical lens for the whole epistle.

The origin of the runaway hypothesis is generally traced to John Chrysostom in the fourth century. Modern commentators who have read *Philem* in the light of this theory include John Barclay (1991), Joseph Fitzmyer (2000) and Peter O'Brien (1982). For them, it was a common act for slaves to run away from their masters to gain their liberty in the first-century Greco-Roman world. Onesimus was on the run because he had robbed his master. The reason is simple: if Onesimus were indeed a fugitive and did something wrong to Philemon, it would be natural to infer that Paul's intent was to ask for forgiveness and at most, which may be more than what Paul asked for (verse 21), manumission for Onesimus. Historically, Pliny the Younger's letter to Sabinianus has often been cited to support the view that *Philem* belonged to the same type of letter asking for forgiveness.

However, the hypothesis appears to be biased against the slave. In the letter, Paul does not depict Onesimus as having stolen from the master and 'ran away' (Byron, 1997). Verse 18, among others, is in contention here. It has largely been interpreted to suggest that Onesimus had committed a theft offence. However, the same verse submits to another interpretation, perhaps more convincing than the alleged theft offence attributed to Onesimus. It could be said that Paul is employing a rhetorical tact in verse 18 just to indicate that the slave's deed (i.e., running away from servitude) in itself constituted a financial loss or offence to the master. Thus, Paul simply acknowledges that Philemon

may have suffered some loss due to the service Onesimus should have provided in the household.

Similar views are held by Markus Barth and Helmut Blanke (2000) who propose that the interpretations of Onesimus as a slave who has done something wrong to Philemon are biased by the interpreters. They further point out that most interpreters are established church leaders or scholars who easily choose to stand on the side of Philemon to explain the letter. These criticisms were supported by the findings from Peter Garnsey (1999) that the proposer of the runaway hypothesis, John Chrysostom, shows the same bias against slaves as other thinkers in the same period. He argues, “John Chrysostom says that slaves were every bit as bad as they were made out to be, and he even claims endorsement from the slaves themselves for this view” (Garnsey, 1999, p. 81).

Accepting the fugitive hypothesis gives us no room to consider some possible mistreatment that might have influenced the slave to take to his heels. We cannot simply write off this theory since it occupies a dominant role in the interpretation of *Philem*. However, it can be revised to give room for conjectures about the ordeals slaves suffered at the hands of masters in the first century CE. This will give us a fair hearing to both parties in master-servant relationships regarding their experiences and views on this social arrangement.

Sara Winter (1987), Frilingos (2000) and Craig Wansink (2010) have also argued that Onesimus, having been sent as a representative of his owner and the house-church at Colossae to bring Paul “food and services,” delayed to return on time. Hence Paul wrote this letter to beseech the master not to penalise the slave and make an additional request for Onesimus to be released from his duty so that he might come to serve him in evangelism. This interpretation of

dispatched slave is not convincing, as it glosses over too much of the elusive propositions of *Philem*, and it hardly explains why Onesimus, a “useless” pagan slave, would have been dispatched by Philemon or the Colossian congregation on such an important task: to attend on Paul. Again, if Philemon or the church had indeed dispatched Onesimus as their representative, then it is difficult to comprehend the reason why Paul uses the past passive verb *echōrithē* in verse 15. Since *echōrithē* rather implies that Onesimus departed without the permission of his master, the most likely explanation is that Onesimus was on the run. Upon meeting Paul, Onesimus was catechised into the Christian faith and became a source of friendship and service to the apostle (vv. 11-12).

Furthermore, there is the intercessory theory, first advanced by Peter Lampe (1985) and later supported by Rapske (1991), James Dunn (1996), and Bartsch (1973). These scholars maintain that Onesimus, who has been in a domestic dilemma with the master, left home to seek the intercession of a friend of the master (*amicus Domini*), hoping that he might be reinstated non-violently to his former status in the master’s house. They further argue that since Onesimus fled from his master with the explicit motive of going to solicit Paul’s service as an intermediary in a domestic dispute between himself and his master, then he was not a fugitive as posited by the traditional hypothesis. Although the *amicus Domini* theory elucidates much of the information in *Philem*, it is strange that there is no overt reference to the supposed crime Onesimus committed or his remorsefulness.

Allan D. Callahan (1997) advances the more tendentious hypothesis that the letter was prompted by a quarrel between two genetic Christian brothers—



Philemon and Onesimus—because the former had been treating the latter as if he were a slave. He further argues

nothing in the text conclusively indicates that Onesimus was ever the chattel of the letter's chief addressee, and the problem that Paul sought to address in the letter was not that Onesimus was a real slave (for he was not), nor that Onesimus was not a blood brother to Philemon (for he was), but that Onesimus was not a beloved brother to Philemon (Callahan, 2000, p. 372).

Callahan's (2000) estranged Christian brothers' hypothesis could at best be evaluated as a 19th Century abolitionist line of reasoning against proslavery advocates who interpreted *Philem* as a "Pauline Mandate" for keeping others as slaves. It would, however, be incorrect to assume that Onesimus was not a real slave in the light of Paul's thinking. Callahan's claim contradicts the rhetorical force of *hōs doulon* (as a slave) in verse 16 in the Greek text; it stresses the reading of this verse. As Fitzmyer (2000) rightly points out, the conjunction *hōs* cannot be altered to give "a contrary-to-fact nuance." Again, to assume that Philemon and Onesimus were "estranged Christian brothers" blatantly negates the Greek text of *Philem* since verse 10 implies that Onesimus might not have accepted the Christian faith before encountering Paul.

One of the problems of previous studies is that they do not make explicit how their hypotheses are established. Neither the traditional fugitive hypothesis nor recent proposals such as the intercessory theory of Lampe (1985), the emissary theory of Winter (1987), and the 'estranged biological brother' hypothesis by Callahan (1997) provide interpreters with convincing answers to the many questions posed by the letter's ambiguities. Sometimes, one will only focus on how well the hypothesis can help to fill the gap in interpreting the text.

Away from these interpretive hypotheses, the text of *Philem* has influenced slavery practices and conventions from the period of the Church Fathers through the antebellum era to the present situation of modern slavery. Particularly in the 18th century, *Philem* received different contextualisation and usages by (Christian) slaveholders and (Christian) slaves in British colonies in the New World and the Caribbean islands. However, it is not yet established whether or not a particular trend of interpretation could be mapped from how Church Fathers of the 5th century downwards as well as Christian slaveholders and mission groups that operated in the 17th, 18th and 19th century periods, interpreted *Philem* and how these past contextualisations reappear in the ongoing applications by masters and servants in the present era.

In spite of the historical lacuna between the 21st Century and the 1st-Century Greco-Roman world and culture, I contend that this ancient letter could still offer important exegetical insight for handling tensions emanating from master-servant relations in Christian households in our world today. Justin Ukpong (2002, p. 6) explains that “the actualisation of the theological meaning of a text in today’s context is to forge an integration between faith and life and engender a commitment to personal and societal transformation.” It is further underscored by Eric Anum (2009, p. 54) that “Africans most of the time would like to see biblical interpretation as a living exercise which must come into actual operation in their day-to-day experiences in their lives.” It implies that a contextual study of *Philem* can provide some insights for individual and social transformation in Ghana. Nsiah (2018) rightly remarked that a scholarly interpretation of the biblical text is pursued first and foremost to transform human society. African contextual biblical study essentially identifies with the

poor and underprivileged, yet the domestic space where most poor people work as maids, securities and hired labourers has not been given attention.

Therefore, this study seeks to undertake a contextualised reading on *Philem* by incorporating the lived experiences of ordinary readers into the reading process and drawing transformative lessons for contemporary Christian householders. This can undoubtedly help us see how Paul persuades Philemon to take up the new brotherhood relationship based on Paul's ethical thought and argue against the worldly economic-driven self-centred relationship.

### **Statement of the Problem**

Many research studies have been carried out on Greco-Roman slavery traditions and early Christians' responses to religious and domestic tensions (Ip, 2018; Ekem, 2009). Nevertheless, there is a scanty inquiry into challenges confronting Christian householders and maidservants, especially regarding their understanding and usage of biblical passages. As the only epistle in the Pauline corpus dealing with a concrete domestic incidence involving a slave and a Christian master, *Philem* continues to intrigue interpreters on what exactly occasioned this personal letter and what precisely Paul's rhetoric aimed at accomplishing. It remains unclear how Paul handled the tensions arising from a master-slave relationship in a Christian household without directly attacking the peculiar institution or disapproving of the keeping of slaves in the emerging community of faith.

Despite its enormous impacts on the interpretation of *Philem*, the runaway hypothesis has not yet been subjected to a thorough critical review to make sufficient room for interrogating how the conduct of a Christian master (not only the slave) could have led to the supposed tensions and impaired

relationship Paul is seeking to address and reform with the letter. Could it have been that Philemon, in spite of his public honour and generosity towards the Christian community, had an unchristian attitude towards his slave? What do popular anecdotes about Ghanaian Christian benefactors who are unkind and exploitative towards their employees and house servants tell us about the use of the fugitive hypothesis in the reading of *Philem*? How should we interpret the rhetorical structure and argumentative strategies of the letter? What insights can contemporary Christian householders and employers draw from Paul's intimate yet subtle rhetorical appeal in *Philem*? An attempt to provide carefully constructed responses to these pertinent questions would significantly contribute to scholarship on *Philem* and proffer exegetical reflections to both Christian masters and their servants in domestic and economic arrangements in the Ghanaian context. Hence, the study seeks to undertake a meticulous rhetorical analysis of *Philem* and how it has been contextualised and appropriated in different contexts.

### Research Objectives

The overall purpose of the study was to examine slavery problems among Christians through an exegetical reading of *Philem* to come out with biblical resources for handling dilemmas of slavery in the Ghanaian community. Specifically, the study set out to:

1. explore the concept of slavery in the Greco-Roman world.
2. examine the rhetorical strategies Paul utilises to persuade Philemon.
3. highlight Christo-centric values Paul establishes in *Philem* which seem to subvert Greco-Roman slavery practices.

4. look at specific contextualisations of the *Philem* in West Indies Island of St. Thomas and Ghanaian communities.
5. evaluate the signs of the appropriation of *Philem* within the St. Thomas milieu and Ghanaian Christian households.
6. deduce implications and offer suggestions from the various contextualisation and appropriation of the text.

### Research Questions

The main question of the study is: what is the rhetorical response of Paul to master-slave dilemmas in the early Christian community behind *Philem* and which transformative actions does the prophetic voice of the letter enjoin on Christians in Ghanaian communities today? To be able to attain the objectives stated above, the following specific questions give direction to the study:

1. What is the nature of slavery in the Greco-Roman world?
2. What rhetorical strategies are employed by Paul to move Philemon to acquiesce to his plea for Onesimus?
3. Which Christo-centric values and labels are highlighted in *Philem* to improve master-slave relationships?
4. What are the contextualisations of *Philem* in the 18th century West Indies' Island of St. Thomas and present-day Ghanaian communities?
5. What are the marks of appropriation of *Philem* in 18th century St. Thomas context and 21st-century Ghanaian Christian households?
6. What significant implications can be deduced from the complexities and tensions arising from the contextualisation and appropriation of *Philem*?

### Significance of the Study

The study brings another perspective to bear on *Philem* scholarship. Existing studies have largely evaluated *Philem* as a plea of forgiveness or reconciliation on behalf of a runaway slave who was catechised into Christianity (Kreitzer, 2008). Indeed, the life of Onesimus was at stake, considering that he was traumatised, worried and anxious about the punishment awaiting him. However, I think there is more to the rhetoric of this letter. Hence, I seek to contend that *Philem* puts the Christianity of the primary addressee in the spotlight. Paul does not focus on Onesimus' pitiful situation more than he does on Philemon's personality in the house-church. *Philem* draws the attention of the gathered saints to Philemon as if he were to prove the authenticity of his faith before them in the matter concerning his slave. An investigation into the rhetorical strategies in *Philem* will hopefully enable readers to gain deeper insights into the nature of slavery in the 1st century CE, – as well as into early Christianity's response to it.

Our society is confronted with deep-rooted forms of modern slavery and other forms of human exploitation bordering on master-servant forms of relationships in the Ghanaian community. This study brings out practical implications for maintaining a win-win relationship in domestic or economic arrangements between masters and servants or maids. It also points out selfish or careless attitudes that breed abuse and exploitation of maids or fictive children in domestic households (Ntneh, 2008). Finally, the study draws attention to *Philem* as a salient Christian document that implores Christian masters to consider it expedient to treat their subordinates with a touch of Christian love and sensitivity.

## Methodological Considerations

This section throws light on the theoretical and philosophical underpinnings of the study. It specifies the type of research, strategy, philosophy, approaches and the specific procedure to generate, interpret and communicate knowledge on a specific parcel of reality. The study adopts interpretivism as its qualitative paradigm with hermeneutics as the actual interpretive design. It is grounded on Hans-Georg Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics and the tri-polar contextual approach to African Biblical Hermeneutics (ABH).

### Interpretive paradigm

This study is qualitative. It is situated within the interpretive paradigm. This approach is chosen for the study because of the assumptions that underpin it. In using a qualitative methodology, the researcher seeks to interpret human behaviour within its natural setting and what accounts for such behaviour (Rennie, 2012). Unlike quantitative research which adopts numeric data such as scores and metrics, the qualitative study investigates the how and why of human behaviour (Silverman, 2014). The general characteristics of qualitative research methodology are summarised by Creswell (2009),

Qualitative research is a means for exploring and understanding the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem. The process of research involves emerging questions and procedures, data typically collected in the participant's setting, data analysis inductively building from particulars to general themes, and the researcher making interpretations of the meaning of the data (p. 8).

An interpretive paradigm has a strong subjectivist underpinning and is directed by a nominalist ontology and an anti-positivist epistemology. As I set out to explore an in-depth understanding of slavery within its natural setting (both in ancient and modern times), I am guided by the ontological view that

understanding every social reality is constructed by the social actor(s) who experience it. I am also influenced by the epistemological notion that knowledge is attained directly through experience or indirectly by means of those who have experienced it. In this vein, the study seeks to understand the challenges confronting Christian parents and employers and fictive children and housemaids in the Ghanaian community.

Schwartz-Shea and Yanow (2012) assert that “in interpretive research design, meaning-making is key to the scientific endeavour: its very purpose is to understand how specific human beings in particular times and locales make sense of their worlds,” and “because sense-making is always contextual, a concern with ‘contextuality’ rather than ‘generalisability’—motivates research practice and design” (pp. 1-11). Interpretive design is open to a collection of theoretical viewpoints such as phenomenology, phenomenological sociology, and hermeneutics. (Burrell & Morgan, 1979; Tesch, 1990). The specific design chosen for the study is hermeneutics, and our primary data is the text of *Philem*. Unlike a quantitative design that seeks neutral truth, hermeneutics refuses to accept the concept of objective certainty by exposing a variety of conceivable meanings (Yanow, 2006; Smith, 2010).

Hermeneutics is usually termed as a theory of both understanding and interpretation that offers a researcher both a “philosophy of understanding” and a “science of textual interpretation” (Farooq, 2018, p. 4). As a philosophy of understanding, the hermeneutic theory implies that people experience the world through language and that language serves as a vehicle through which understanding and knowledge are conveyed (Byrne, 2001).



Historically, hermeneutics has been associated with the interpretation of ancient and biblical texts and the development of a theoretical framework to direct and guide such exegetical exercise, a tradition that peaked in the Reformation era and Enlightenment period. The hermeneutical task was to determine a method whereby the meaning created by an author in another epoch and geographical location could be discerned, teased out and transposed so it would be applicable to the realities of the contemporary age.

However, somewhere in the late 18th and early 19th Century, theorists such as Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768-1834) developed the field of hermeneutics into an all-embracing theory of textual interpretation in general and as a methodology for the retrieval of meaning in all the ‘human’ or ‘historical’ sciences (*Geisteswissenschaften*). From that era onward, hermeneutics would become a broad discipline in the humanities that refers to a theoretical, more abstract reflection on the process of interpretation and understanding. Consequently, hermeneutics came to be known as the study of understanding to decipher meaning (Palmer, 1969). This is because all aspects of human existence are influenced by how we interpret the world.

### **Hans- Georg Gadamer’s thoughts on hermeneutics**

In terms of influence in the development of 20th-century hermeneutics, Hans-Georg Gadamer (1900-2002) is debatably the key character eclipsing the other principal figures such as Paul Ricoeur and Gianni Vattimo. Gadamer “revolutionised views about the nature of interpretation”, which “influenced the entire course of interpretive thought” (Porter & Robinson, 2011, p. 74). He was critical of the Enlightenment’s overreaching claims, asserting that knowledge is acquired through pure reason with scientific methods. He demonstrated that

understanding goes beyond the limits of method, especially when the Enlightenment worldview defined knowledge as empirically verifiable facts and methodologically derived content. In reality, our interrogations are all conditioned by our environment and bound up with tradition – all of which influence our understanding (Leonardo, 2003).

In his famous work, *Truth and Methods*, Gadamer (1975) points out that previous methods for interpreting entities such as speech, text, people, works of art and all historical events failed to notice that these methods were history conditioned. In their search for truth, earlier scholars thought that the truth could be sought in a vacuum and thereby forgot that all interpretive entities are history-bound (bias of one's being and environment). Early on, Schleiermacher (1966) has posited that history is a progression of human lives rather than the collection of ideas of manifestation of lives. Gadamer advanced an alternative model that underscored the importance of appreciating one's own phenomenological pre-understanding, which precedes interpretation and makes interpretation possible.

Gadamer (1976) contends that understanding goes beyond method or is beyond "methodological knowledge" (p. 294). The task of hermeneutics is not to advance a methodology of comprehension but rather to elucidate the interpretive circumstances in which comprehension occurs. Classical dogmatic exegetical methodology limits one's horizon; understanding a text goes beyond a reproductive process. Thus, the exegete needs to remain open to a creative engagement with a willingness to question, correct, and revise pre-understandings.

Whereas the Enlightenment philosophy viewed pre-understandings as negative, Gadamer argued the positive aspects of the “historical situatedness” as necessary for the process of understanding. Thus, the active process of hermeneutical engagement leads to questioning pre-judgments and results in the dismissal of unfruitful pre-judgments and affirming fruitful ones, moving toward a fusing of horizons.

Because cultures change over time, Gadamer (1976) argues that while an interpreter tries to understand a text in its past original context, understanding itself will be conditioned by the interpreter’s own context. He refers to this history boundedness of all attempts of interpretation as “the effective historical consciousness.” The historical text or artefact becomes a continuous manifestation of lived experiences (*dasein*) rather than a mere representation of the past. For instance, a text is the making of history that was made at the time. Similarly, when one considers a text, he/she does so while carrying some pre-understandings, which emanate from lived experiences and knowledge of the world (Charalambous *et al.*, 2008). We do not understand by forgetting or seeking to bracket our own historicity, our prejudgements and prejudices. There is no value-free interpretation (Gadamer, 1976). One’s pre-understanding regulates what meaning can be realised in the process of interpretation.

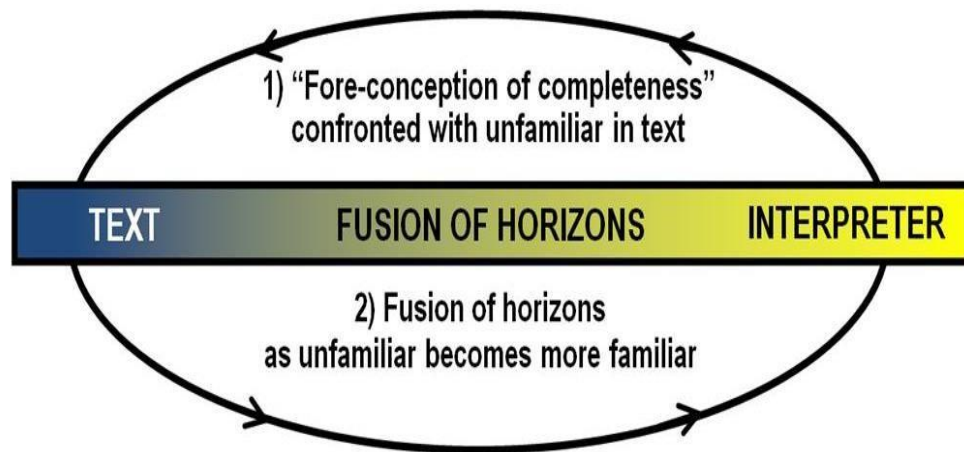
These pre-understandings constitute a fundamental part of the interpretation procedure. Every textual interpretation starts with the reader reflecting on his/her existing pre-understandings, which aid in understanding the meaning of the text. These analyses are based on the ontological philosophies of Heidegger, who states that to understand the world, one must ‘be in’ or ‘engage with’ the world (Jahnke, 2012). When people experience the

world or submerge themselves in the world, they begin to interpret and understand it or make sense of it. This subjective encounter with our past experience is a vital condition for securing truth/meaning.

Understanding, for Gadamer, is an 'effect' of history, while hermeneutical 'consciousness' is itself that mode of being that is conscious of its own historical 'being effected.' Effective historical consciousness means that every interpreter views the past from a particular horizon. Understanding is a matter of negotiation between oneself and one's partner in the hermeneutical dialogue about the matter at issue. However, each interpreter has limited experiences or "horizons" of understanding because of the historically shaped awareness. Hence one's present understanding becomes a combination of past and present. The coming to an agreement with the past and present, Gadamer (1975, p. 305) calls "*the fusion of horizon.*" Thus, he constructs understanding to be a process of the 'fusion of horizons.' Understanding is a product of a dialogic encounter between a text (as an entity) and an interpreter (as a *dasein*, a being) that produces profound effects on both actors. Gadamer's version of the hermeneutical circle recognises prejudices, revises them, recognises them again, and revises them in a continual process that never comes to a complete understanding.



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*Figure 1: Gadamer's hermeneutical circle*

The circle is represented by: (a) the interpreter's preunderstandings or "fore-conception of completeness" is confronted by the unfamiliar, here in a text, which provokes new questions; (b) as the interpreter explores the unfamiliar and develops new understandings, then a fusion of horizons develops. Finally, however, the new understandings stimulate the emerging questions, and the circle, or spiral, continues (Shklar, 2014).

One's horizon is affected by his/her pre-understandings. Through interpretations, we may form or open up new understandings that are distinct from our pre-understandings. By submerging oneself in the world of the text and sifting out unproductive pre-understandings, the interpreter endeavours to draw meaning (i.e., fresh perspectives and understandings) and new horizons of understanding. Therefore, the hermeneutic sphere emphasises the reiterative nature of the interpretation process and the goal of hermeneutical inquiry "as a fusion of horizons of the interpreter and the text" (Robinson & Kerr, 2015). The diagram below shows the key elements of Gadamer's hermeneutic circle.

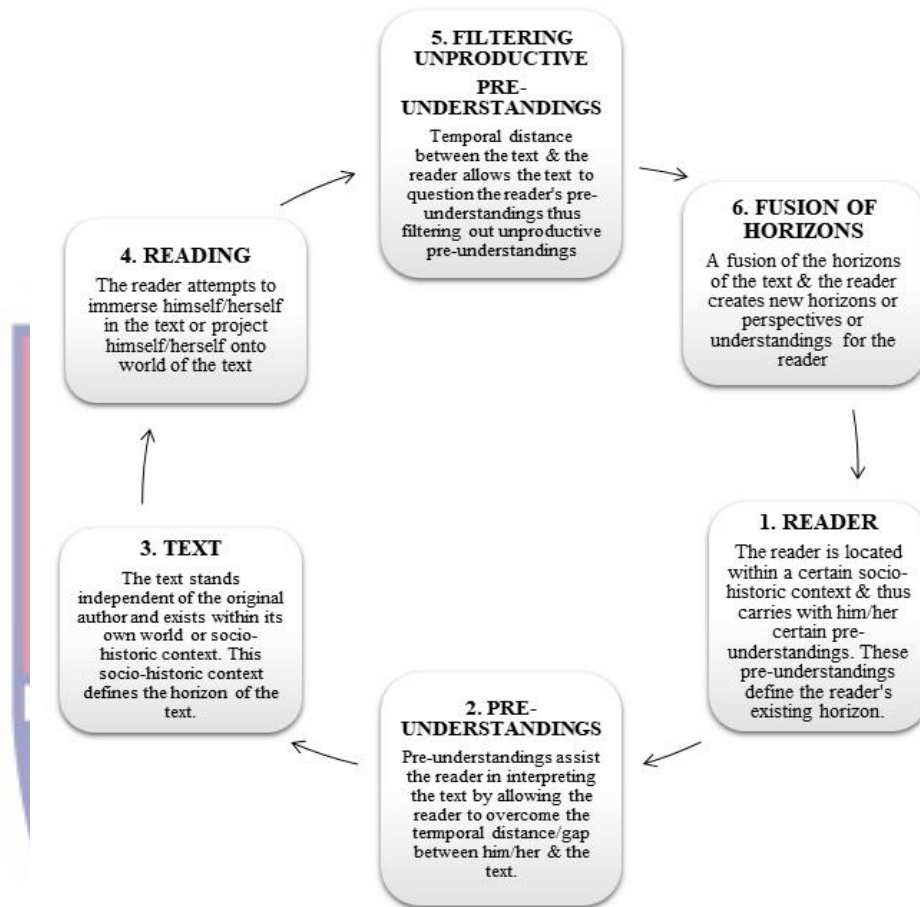


Figure 2: The critical elements of Gadamer's hermeneutic circle

This “circle of understanding is not a methodological circle, but one which describes the ontological structure of understanding” (Gadamer, 1975, p. 293). Interpretation is viewed as an ongoing process that never ends. Gadamer (1975) posits that the interpreter cannot arrive at a true interpretation; one cannot be sure that past interpretations of the text were ‘correct’ because those interpretations also involved a fusion of the text’s horizon and that of the prejudices of the historical interpreter. Hence, Gadamer contends the view that there is any final determinacy to interpretation.

For Gadamer (1975), the circuitousness of interpretation is not merely a methodological process or condition but also an indispensable element of all knowledge and understanding. Therefore, every interpretation relies on other

interpretations (Schwandt, 2001). Variations in interpretation are tolerable, but there is no need for an interpretive agreement. The reason is that every interpreter is distinctive and shaped by their pre-conceptions which generate distinct readings or interpretations.

Whereas there can be no such thing as objective truth or interpretation devoid of one's prejudices, Gadamer (1975) argues that a conscious application of one's prejudices can yield an authentic interpretation. For an interpretation to be authentic in the Gadamerian view, the interpreter must consider his/her own pre-understanding and their relations to history (of the text). However, hermeneutics is not just an understanding of the past of the text and its remains but also is a promotion of our self-understanding. The more one reveals a text, the more that text reveals him/her. Gadamer (1976) writes:

That is why a hermeneutically trained consciousness must be, from the start, sensitive to the text's alterity. But this kind of sensitivity involves neither "neutrality" with respect to content nor the extinction of one's self, but the foregrounding and appropriation of one's own fore-meanings and prejudices. The important thing is to be aware of one's own bias so that the text can present itself in all its otherness and thus assert its own truth against one's own fore-meanings (p. 271)

Therefore, truth is not an exclusive preserve of natural sciences; understanding is more about experiencing rather than just the act of revealing the intention of the artist or the author. To experience (i.e., a text or work of art) immerses the experiencer (i.e., the subject of experience) in the world.

A reader can certainly not comprehend what was in the original author's mind or completely appreciate the past; nor can the reader fully escape his/her own pre-understandings drawn from his/her experiences (Gadamer, 2008). Nevertheless, the reader shares several things in common with the text: language, tradition and the world. Bringing these concepts together, Gadamer

(1975) describes the interpretation process as involving a dialogue between the text and the reader/interpreter. “This negotiation climaxes in the fusion of the horizons of the text (based on the context of the text) and the horizons of the interpreter (based on the interpreter’s pre-understandings) which leads to an understanding of the meaning of the text” (Debesay *et al.*, 2008, p. 9).

All understanding is therefore interpretative, involving negotiation between the familiar and the alien. In other words, all understanding involves the addition of meaning because understanding is necessarily a dialogical process that fuses the horizon of the interpreter and the text. However, this conversation rests on the reader using his/her pre-understandings—drawn from the reader’s knowledge and experience of the world—to comprehend the message of the text.

In conclusion, Gadamer’s (1975) hermeneutic theory stipulates that the art of interpretation necessitates an open-ended and respective dialogue between the interpreter and a biblical text, as it is passed down to us by the effective history of tradition. In this dialogue, the interpreter never interprets a text as a solitary being since we always stand within a living tradition, whose effective history is woven into our own historically affected consciousness. This consciousness, in turn, guides the questions we put to the text.

By implication, meaning is not a fixed object awaiting recovery but rather something that changes over time according to how the text is read within different traditions, by different interpreting communities, in different historical contexts, over the centuries. In the ensuing dialogue, the text, the interpretive tradition, and our own horizons of meaning constantly recombine into new wisdom for living in the present. Gadamer thus develops philosophical



hermeneutics that accounts for the proper ground for understanding the ontological and all-encompassing nature of the hermeneutical practice.

### **Deductions from Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics**

Every study is somehow contextualised since our pre-understandings reflect our interests and concerns in a specific context. Gadamer's thoughts have shaped biblical interpretation by the discovery of the unknown (de Wit, 2008). According to Gadamer (1975, p. 61), "something becomes an 'experience' not only in so far as it is experienced but in so far as it is being experienced makes a special impression that gives lasting importance." Gadamer's metaphor of "fusion of horizons" is a valuable concept underpinning this study. Used initially by Gadamer to describe the limits of understanding due to a given viewpoint, this metaphor of 'two horizons' could be related to the ancient biblical text and contextualisation (and appropriation) of the text. With regards to enculturation hermeneutics, there are two horizons: (a) a text is engaged from (b) the cultural context of the reader. Through a dialogue with the text from one's worldview, a fusing of horizons can expand understanding of a biblical text, which otherwise would be limited by one's worldview. This hermeneutical idea allows me a particular purview to see which new experiences can be taken as answers to the silent questions posed by the text.

Finally, in the Gadamerian sense, the autonomy of a text does not imply a lifeless piece of object which becomes animated by reading. Instead, a text has its own being (*dasein*) comprising a compelling historical consciousness. The text is an embodiment of the writer's experiences by virtue of his/her interaction with his/her environment. Allowing the text to be 'other' implies peeling off the (mis)interpretations that have been imposed on the text. In our

reading, the text's own historical situatedness is allowed to emanate through a dialogue with the reader. The Enlightenment's movement away from what used to be doctrinal bible interpretation to what became a philosophical interpretation has persistently revolutionised the interpretation of the scriptural text. Under the influence of Gadamer's philosophical ideas, my interpretation may not necessarily yield a doctrinal meaning but would yield a similar or contrasting meaning of the text that may question the text's traditional readings (Leonardo, 2003). Gadamer's theory has inspired other scholars to invent reading models that are sensitive to both context and text. In the next section, we look at how Jonathan Draper draws on Gadamer's ideas to formulate a tri-polar reading model for exegetical reading of Scripture in Africa.

#### **A tri-polar reading model to contextual hermeneutics – Jonathan Draper**

In this study, there are three aspects of the exegetical reading: (a) distanciation, (b) contextualisation, and (c) appropriation. It must be pointed out that Jonathan Draper (2001) is not the inventor of these elements of the exegetical process. However, his extensive elucidation and application of these components in African contextual hermeneutics are well noted. The ideas of Gerald West (2007) has also shaped African biblical hermeneutics.

Distanciation is a term initially introduced into hermeneutics by Paul Ricoeur. Ricoeur (1980) used "distanciation" to refer to the state of a text being autonomous from the author's intentions. Draper (2001) adapted Ricoeur's idea to formulate the first task of the exegetical process. Thus, the first step of stepping into the world of discourse is by allowing our text (i.e., *Philem*) to be different to us – as an alien text intended for the first-century Christian community in Colossae. Next, contextualisation refers to how people over the

years have related to the discourse offered by the sacred text and the meanings they put to it. The third stage of the exegetical process is appropriation, where the reader would explore the practical uses people make from their understanding or interpretations of the text in particular life situations or contexts. Appropriation leads to a “fusion of horizons” between the historical prejudices of the text and reader.

“Contextual exegesis,” Draper (2006, p. 21) avers, “provides a possibility for a sacred text to be read on its own terms as located in a different context.” The African reader is always located in-between his/her context and the sacred text seeking appropriation. Hence, the text and the reader’s context are the two pivotal elements in meaning production. He re-echoes the central presupposition of contextual theology that exegetical study is primarily about the meaning of the text for these days rather than what the text meant to the people for whom it was written. This implies that the main “goal of the whole exegesis process is to lead out the meaning of the text as a sacred text for the faith community in its own context” (Draper, 2015, p. 22). Unfortunately, the classical Western approach to exegesis with its emphasis on ‘objectivity’ is disinterested in evaluating the implications of one’s reading for the ordinary reader and society.

In African contextual theology, there is strong attention to the milieu of the reader and the reading community. This emphasis derives from the belief that there is no unbiased or complete meaning to a text or any human communication. One can only appreciate what is meant in a written or oral literary piece when that person knows what is going on socially. Language

functions in the ‘context of situation.’ This captures Gadamer’s (1975) concept of ‘historical consciousness.’

***First pole: Distanciation***

It is the analytical pole of our tri-polar reading model. Owing to our prejudices toward the present socio-historical context, Draper (2001) suggests that the ‘tri-

polar’ reading process must start with distanciation to set the text in its own specific historical context. By its very nature, biblical texts are “sacred texts” which serve as ethical standards for faith and life for a particular community. How a faith community comprehends the sacred text has considerable implications on the wider community of which it is a fundamental component.

This stage of the exegetical process requires “the readers/reading community to allow the text to speak for itself by creating space or critical distance between themselves and the text” (Draper, 2001, p. 155).

As a rule, the text is allowed to be “other,” or different from our concerns and questions. This is because every text is “rooted in a specific historical, social, cultural and economic context” addressing questions related to its needs (Draper, 2001; West, 1996). Therefore, an exegete needs to distance himself/herself from the reading community to identify the text’s worldview, language, and rhetorical conventions, which are different from our own. Draper (2001) maintains, “exegesis should consider both *the context of the text*, and how it came into being, and *the structure of the text*, and how it signals meanings and seeks to manipulate the reader” (p. 156).

To give autonomy to the text over the reader, I employed rhetorical criticism to study the persuasive intents of *Philem* carefully. It helped to distance myself from the text of *Philem* in order to ‘see’ and ‘hear’ the voice of the text

rather than my own echoes. The analytical pole demands the “willing suspension of disbelief” – the conscious decision to allow the text to say unexpected things we are not prepared for or are unwilling to hear” (Draper, 2015, p. 15). Thus, the reader steps into the milieu of the text to experience a moment of the otherness of a life other than one’s own; “so that the text can open up vistas, possibilities and transformative impulses that would not be possible without the text” (Draper, 2015, p. 15). The structure of the text, the persuasive techniques used, and the verbal formulations contribute to the communication of the intended message of the text.

One reason that makes Draper’s model of contextual reading appealing to me is the way he foregrounds this model on Gadamer’s philosophical hermeneutics. In the Gadamerian sense, a text creates a world that we can enter and in which we can imaginatively “live” so that we may be transubstantiated by the experience of an-other (Draper, 2015). This dialogical approach reflects the enduring self-relatedness of our understanding of the other (the text), not the other’s objectivity but the other’s uniqueness even with the “thou” (i.e., the reader).

As flesh and blood readers, we cannot escape our own historical conditioning; however, before we can undergo the possibility of ‘comprehension and transformation through our engagement with the other (i.e., the text), it must be allowed to say something to us. Thus, the tri-polar model helps me acknowledge “ideo-theological orientation” and “the pre-understanding” with which, I come to this particular text (Draper, 2015).

### *Second pole: Contextualisation*

Contextualisation simply means looking at things from one's context or situation. The second component of the contextual reading model analyses the various meanings people assign to the text in their socio-historical contexts. West (2001) succinctly exemplifies this meaning in the post-apartheid

experiences of South Africans. From Draper's point of view, the exegetical process consists of linking two historical specificities together in their distinctiveness and prejudice so that each sheds illumination on the other, fusing their horizons in historical consciousness. The stage of understanding lays the ground for us to examine the various ways the text is appropriated.

In the chapter on contextualisation (i.e., Chapter Four), we looked at how critical issues in *Philem* were interpreted in the St. Thomas context of the West Indies. The gathered data from Christian parents, employers, domestic workers, and maids on the challenges faced in their day-to-day relations were substantiated by previous empirical studies in the social sciences. . The target population comprised Christian households with domestic workers or fictive children in the Assin South District and Cape Coast Municipality. The target population comprised Christian households with domestic workers or fictive children. However, few households with peculiar cases were purposively sampled for an interview since I was particularly interested in dilemmas faced by each group in the household.

Lorraine Rumbel Gay (2012) stipulates that purposive selection is used where the group or individuals possess specific information required. Therefore, ten (10) respondents from fictive children/maids/labourers were purposively selected to share their experiences in Christian households. Besides, I

snowballed ten (10) fictive parents and employers to recount their challenging moments with maids and fictive children. I employed a semi-structured interview guide as the instrument for gathering empirical data. The nature of this instrument allows the researcher to ask follow-up questions that might be triggered by the already prepared questions for the interview. The information gathered through the interview was presented anonymously to enhance privacy and protect the rights and identities of the respondents.

Cases of master-servant dilemma could be disturbing the emotional health of respondents as some would not feel safe and comfortable talking about their past or present experiences. The researcher took steps to overcome these foreseeable challenges and to assure the respondents of the confidentiality and credibility of the study. Firstly, I gave an assurance of credibility and confidentiality to my respondents through an Introductory Letter from the Department of Religion and Human Values. This letter gave ethical backing to the study and the field data gathering. Secondly, respondents were taken through a preliminary conversation about the right to withdraw consent from the interview when they feel to do so.

***Third pole: Appropriation***

To appropriate means ‘to take something that belongs to or is associated with somebody else for [your] own use.’ Appropriation is basically ‘the actions’ that readers take after their contextualisation of the text. It refers to the pragmatic or proactive use of the text in communities. “What does this text mean to us” is a contextual question that informs people’s practical usage of the text in their community context. The text users have no problems with the practical appropriation in their context but have challenges understanding the literary

aspects of the text. Usually, they disregard the historical and critical literary setting of the text and moved immediately into the contextual appropriation of the text. As Draper and West (1989) affirms, ordinary readers “believe, hope and act with little or no ‘expert’ biblical knowledge” (p. 40). In this process, they subvert the text to resonate with their contextual needs without giving consideration to the historical and literary context of the text.

The relationship between “scientific exegesis and the context must be enhanced in order not to make the Bible essentially dumb for the present, unable to address the problems of society” (Gatti, 2017, p. 24). A face-to-face dialogic encounter between “the text” and “the African context” creates the possibility for transformative implications to be deduced. This component climaxes the interpretive activity of the sacred text in the light of the reading community’s context where the text is normative.

### **Literature Review**

This section is an attempt to establish the study within the context of relevant and related scholarships. The review is separated into two parts. The first part focuses on hermeneutics, exegesis and meaning; African Biblical Hermeneutics (ABH). The second section looks at rhetorical criticism, rhetorical studies on *Philem*, the identity of Onesimus, and the occasion of *Philem*.

### **Conceptual Review – hermeneutics, exegesis and meaning**

There is a sustained scholarly debate over the relationship of basic terms such as hermeneutics, exegesis and meaning over the past two decades (Brown, 2007; Tate, 2008; Kaiser Jr. & Silva, 1994). In the subsequent paragraphs, I attempt to review the main arguments in order to reach a conceptual definition of hermeneutics and its related concepts, such as exegesis and loci of meaning.



The term ‘hermeneutics’ stems from the Greek ‘*hermeneuein*,’ which signifies “to interpret” or “to translate.” It originates from the name of the Greek god of messaging, Hermes, the son of Zeus. He was in charge of communicating messages from the Greek deities to the people. His duty was not simply to reiterate what the gods had spoken to him, but more notably, to decipher the messages and make them comprehensible to the recipients. Hermes had to interpret the meaning of the messages for his listeners and, in doing so, had to go far beyond just regurgitating the intended truth. He had to reconstruct or recreate the meaning that would match his audience’s history, culture, and concepts to enable them to make sense of things (Stanley & Robinson, 2011, p. 3).

Hermeneutics is conceived as the broad discipline in the humanities that deals with theoretical reflections on the process of interpretation: the theory and philosophy of interpretation. It stands back from the actual act of interpretation of any written text or work of art and gives attention to the processes of such interpretation by considering both the text or art under consideration and the person or persons who seek to understand it (Jeanrond, 1992). Consequently, Ricoeur (1980, p. 43) describes hermeneutics as “the theory of the operations of understanding concerning the interpretation of texts.” Theoretically, it designates formulated principles and methods to understand all written texts, including legal, historical, literary, and biblical texts.

In the discipline of biblical studies, hermeneutics is regarded as “the theory, method and practice of how to read, understand, and use biblical texts” (Longenecker, 1999). In his work, *Scripture as Communication*, Brown (2015, p. 33) also describes hermeneutics as “the analysis of what we do when we seek

to understand the Bible, including its appropriation to the contemporary world.” However, W. Randolph Tate (2008, p. 1) views hermeneutics as “the study of the locus of meaning and the principles of interpretation.” Furthermore, Schökel (2004, p. 4) explains hermeneutics as “the theory of the comprehension and interpretation of literary texts.” Also, Thiselton (2009) posits that hermeneutics explores “how we read, understand, and handle texts, especially those written in another time or another context of life from our own” (p. 37).

In sum, hermeneutics is the science and art of interpreting a biblical text to understand its original meaning and then describe its implication for the current audience. The fundamental goal of biblical hermeneutics is to provide the exegete with a framework consisting of tools, techniques, methods or principles needed to adequately extract the actual meaning or intention of the original author to the original audience. Applying the rules of interpretation brings to light an underlying coherence or sense of a text. Generally, many scholars view hermeneutics as a back-and-forth movement between the parts and the whole of the text, its structure and meaning, and the text and its contexts (Corley, Lemke, & Lovejoy, 1996; Osborne, 2006; Tate, 2008).

Closely related to hermeneutics is the concept of exegesis, a term that describes the wide-ranging set of activities a hermeneuticist executes to make thoughtful inferences from a text. Exegesis is a regular activity in which almost every human being engages in everyday life whenever they seek to understand an oral or written statement. The meaning stems from a Greek word that primarily means ‘to lead out.’ In textual studies, exegesis connotes the idea of ‘reading out’ of its meaning. Packer (1983, p. 345) neatly defines exegesis as “bringing out of the text all that it contains the thoughts, attitudes, assumptions,

and so forth – in short, the whole expressed mind – of the human writer.” Thus, it can also be referred to as ‘interpretation’ or ‘explanation.’ It applies the principles of hermeneutics to arrive at a correct understanding of the (biblical) text. However, exegesis is also not a random task. It is a process that carries with it specific demands and requirements. Exegesis is more concerned with how one understands a text and by which one can tell what one has understood.

While Kaiser and Silva (1994) view exegesis simply as an alternative reference to interpretation, Schökel (2004) contends that it is “the exercise of comprehending and interpreting a text” (p. 5). Consequently, if hermeneutics can be equated as the total sum of exegesis and interpretation by the reader of the text, then exegesis is the process of applying the principles of hermeneutics to tease out or lead out the meaning of the text or to attain a correct understanding of the text.

However, the concept of “meaning” does not lend itself to a precise definition. Brown (2015) asserts that meaning is the idea or knowledge we are trying to grasp when interpreting ‘a communicative act.’ This idea or knowledge is conceived as part of the process of interpretation. Every written text is an event in which a ‘sender’ composes a ‘message’ that reaches a ‘receiver.’ The contemporary debate about meaning is focused on ‘where meaning can be found.’

For some, meaning is to be located in the author (i.e., what the author intends or intended and what he/she actually wrote). For others, ‘meaning’ of a written text is just what the text says, irrespective of the author’s intention. Moreover, others contend that the meaning of a text is to be found in the reader (i.e., the impacts the text has on the reader’s world; the text’s relevance or

significance to the reader). Consequently, we can discern three ‘worlds’ of meaning in every communication event or text: (a) the world behind the text, (b) the world in the text and (c) the world in front of the text (Carvalho, 2009).

The “world behind the text” means that textual meaning is found in the historical events or sources that underlie the text. The “world in the text” signifies that meaning is found in the interaction of elements and structures that emerge in a close reading of the text in its final form. Finally, the “world in front of the text” denotes that textual meaning is found in the construction of meaning in the interaction between text and reader. Tate (2008) suggests a classification of the different hermeneutical methods/approaches designed to penetrate these three separate worlds of meaning. He isolates (a) author-centred approaches, (b) text centred approaches, and (c) reader-centred approaches.

Author-centred approaches, also known as the Historical-Critical-Methods, focus hermeneutical attention on the author and his/her world to sufficiently unearth the actual meaning or intention(s) of the original author to the primary recipient(s). A historical-critical approach gives attention to the text’s historical background, the author, and the intended audience. Textual meaning is identified with the meaning intended by the author. Influenced by scientific positivism and evolutionary ideas of the 19th century, these approaches assume that a text can be understood only in light of the historical context within which it originated. The text is merely the medium through which the author’s original intentions, which lie behind the text, find expression. These intentions were formed against the background of the author’s personal, social and historical circumstances. It focuses on “the historical setting of a document, the time and place in which it was written, its

sources, the events, dates, persons and places mentioned or implied in the text,” to reconstruct a chronological narrative of pertinent events, revealing where there are possible interconnections of the events themselves. Awareness of the socio-historical conditions in which texts were fashioned is essential to understanding them correctly.

Therefore, the interpreter’s task is to carefully collect the pieces of historical evidence behind the texts and fit them all together. Meaning is determined in a diachronic manner from the perspective of the author and subsequent redactors. In other words, the meaning is viewed as having developed through time. It is seen from a historical progression. These approaches look at the production and evolutionary processes of the text. These approaches create objectivity between the reader and the text, thus allowing one to hear more truly what the writer intended to say. They free the reader from the tyranny of one’s present circumstance by showing one the past.

However, diachronic approaches to the search for meaning are plagued by the wide historical chasm between the original moment in the author’s mind, the cultural specificity of the author’s language, and the neglect of the world within the text because of the excessive interest given to the world behind the text. It makes us forget that those human beings were very much like us and wrestled with the problems all human beings today encounter. Thus, it is practically impossible to access the intention of an ancient author who died over 2000years ago (Wimsatt, 1989). Moreover, strict pursuance of these approaches often leads to an intentional fallacy. To overcome these limitations, an interpreter should place a text in its specific context not merely with ‘who’ and ‘when’ but also with ‘how’ and in ‘what kind of society.’

Text-centred approaches centre on the text's literary features rather than its historical background for a meaning generation. It builds on the assumption that authors are imaginative, creative crafters of art employing structural elements (i.e., plot, setting, characterisation, style, syntax and diction) and literary devices usually associated with the poetics and the genre of the literature. Meaning is viewed as immanent in texts, not bounded to the author's intentions nor requiring events, objects or persons outside the text to understand it. The critic does not consider the texts as a mirror that reflects the real world outside them; they instead create new worlds of meaning. Again, the meaning of a text is not changed by the reader's reaction to it. To get to the meaning of texts, one does not have to study the minds of authors and readers (psychology) or events outside the world of the text (history) or social relationships (sociology).

The textual meaning is delineated by deciphering the various textures of the text and its relationship with the reader (Robbins, 1999). The critic closely studies the various aspects of the text's language and examines its internal form and structure to describe how the texts as a meaningful whole fit together. Poetics, semiotics, genre studies, stylistics, narratology or narrative studies, rhetorical criticism, and structuralism are some notable text-centred models which study the Bible purely as literature (Powell, 1990). One of the weaknesses the text-immanent approaches share in common with the historical-critical approaches is that the reader is simply the one who *receives* what is already objectively "there."

There is also a reader-centred approach that emphasises the reader as the source of meaning. The underlying notion is that reading is an interaction in

which the reader is far from a passive component. The reader does not merely discover meaning but plays an active part in the creation of meaning. Texts do not “have” fixed meanings that simply need to be “unwrapped”. Tate (2008) puts it succinctly when in these words: “once the text leaves the hands of the author, the author’s intent and the whole matrix of originating circumstances lose any claim of being constitutive of meaning” (p. 25). It runs contrary to the position of formalist critics, who claim that a text has autonomy and offers an objective standard of meaning. Instead, meaning emanates out of the dialogue between texts and readers who deal creatively with the text(s).

The contextual and ideological reading methods such as liberation hermeneutics, contextual bible studies, feminist readings, and Black theology operate on the presupposition that a text does not communicate without a reader. Emphasis is placed on the present context of the reader relating to the biblical text. Therefore, these approaches create a space for readers to bring their own points of view and concerns to the text and so may end up with different meanings. The reader is the one who makes crucial conclusions about what the text says. This approach to meaning sustains the relevance of the reader’s presuppositions such as interests, foresight and pre-understanding in the interpretation process. The setting of the reader affords the “horizon of understanding” that enables him/her to make sense of the text.

Meaning should not be conceptualised only in cognitive terms as something concerning ideas or thoughts only. Instead, the meaning of meaning should be broadened to include the effects or practical influence of the text’s language on a reader and the reading community. Thus, it is not just what the language of the text says but also what it does through a dialogic process of

interaction. Today, biblical exegesis has moved towards integrative approaches. In effect, this is the rationale for employing Gadamer's (1975) philosophical hermeneutics as the ontological theory for the study. It offers us the needed presuppositions for an integrated approach to biblical hermeneutics in Africa.

### **African Biblical Hermeneutics**

African Biblical Hermeneutics (ABH, hereafter) are the ingenious reading models carved out from African social-cultural realities and worldviews for telling the African's unique story to the entire world whilst allowing for transformative or incarnational dialogues between the word of God (the Christian gospel) and the people of God in African communities. Stated differently, ABH refers to the theorizing of interpretive models to the reading and application of the biblical messages for practical purposes of incarnating the 'beingness' of the African by offering hermeneutical insights into troubling existential and physical realities which Eurocentric approaches have failed to address. Hence, it operates within the universal framework of biblical interpretation.

Generally, ABH seeks to incarnate the word of God in concrete life situations of Africans. Nicoletta Gatti (2017, p. 47) writes:

Starting from the belief that context—social, economic, political and religious—constitutes the flesh of the Word (John 1:14), several different approaches have been developed in order to incarnate the Word within the African continent, a kaleidoscope of cultures and religions, rich in opportunities, however tragically marked by economic and political conflicts and deep social injustices.

The African biblical interpreter is not “a disinterested reader” of the Biblical text. Scripture is rarely read in a vacuum. It is always discerned in connection to the holistic lifestyle in a given contemporary community. It is primarily



“driven by a theological-ideological impetus toward personal and societal transformation” to enhance the worth of life of persons and societies (Nthambury, 2002, p. 3).

ABH seeks to uncover reading practices that include otherwise marginalised and excluded (African) voices and argue why such voices should be heard. African hermeneutics aims to empower the powerless by tolerating their unique contributions, which come from unique locations, to count as legitimate while at the same time showing why they are truly legitimate. In this sense, ABH does not deal with the Bible merely as an ancient text. It engages the Bible “to deal with present concerns, addressing issues that resonate with African (and world) realities” (Mbuvi, 2017, p. 154).

The historical inception of ABH is traced to the early 1960s. It has “travelled from the margins of political and interpretive alienation but has increasingly taken shape within centres of cosmopolitan, academic and governing power” (Masenya, 2018, p. 1). In the wake of the struggles for political independence and reconstruction of African’s identity and beingness, African interpreters began advancing models of reading with the goal of “inculturating the Bible in a dynamic dialogue with the multiplicity of cultures that characterise the African continent” (Ossom-Batsa, 2007, p. 92). These African reading models came to be designated collectively as ABH.

ABH “refuse to be confined by the methodologies, ancient concerns, and principles that govern biblical studies in the ‘west’... and instead charts a course that is more interested in making biblical interpretation relevant to present realities” (Mbuvi, 2017, p. 1). The African hermeneutical models offer theoretical arguments for altering the effects of the cultural and “ideological

conditioning to which Africa and Africans have been subjected in the enterprise of biblical interpretation” (Adamo, 2015).

The context of the reading communities becomes central in meaning-making. All experiences, challenges and ingenuities of African people are brought to bear on the theory and praxis of biblical hermeneutics. Theresa Okure (2000) aptly posits that the present-day life experiences are the only valid standpoints we have for understanding the biblical text because our sum-total life experiences are basically the prime context for undertaking theology and reading the Bible. A fundamental assumption underpinning ABH is that interpretation is a function of the meaning of a text derived from the interactions between the text and the reader in their respective contexts.

There are different approaches to ABH. Ukpong (1998) identifies five of them as (1) comparative, (2) evaluative, (3) inculturation, (4) liberative (Contextual Bible Study), and (5) feminist hermeneutics. West (2013), however, sees “inculturation” or “theologies of being” and “liberation” or “theologies of bread” as the two main tendencies constituting the two dominant models of bible scholarship in Africa. Schineller (1990) and Appiah (2000) also give an overview to and conceptualisation of inculturation reading.

I have chosen a contextual hermeneutical model because the study is interested in finding out how the text of *Philem* has been interpreted and used in communities where many people relate to the Bible as a sacred book. Ossom-Batsa (2007) notes that the Bible reveals itself as a dialogue between God and humanity. Reading the bible is more of a communicative exercise where one reads his/her own being in dialogue with God. Western critical tools for interpreting the bible “seem to have a natural bent for classical theology, a type

of reflection that does not travel well across cultural barriers” (Regier & Regier, 1994). Besides, the ordinary African reader struggles to appreciate the significance of scripture from western-oriented theories. Herein lies the motivation for employing the ABH model to read and incarnate the text in my context.

Instead of confining myself to a western reading method, I have chosen to embrace the assumptions of ABH to contribute to the pragmatic call for transformation in the African context, especially among Christian employers and employees, as well as householders and housemaids. While I share the presuppositions that the bible is contextual and its message needs to be contextualised, I am prompted by Ossom-Batsa’s (2007) careful observation that “too much stress on context and culture runs the risk of generating a ‘pseudo-biblical theology,’ not concretely founded on the scripture” (p. 92).

Using the ABH model would also help recognise the connections and disconnections between traditional historical-critical approaches and African biblical interpretative models. The outstanding progress of African Christianity emanates in part from the appropriation of the Bible in churches with solid roots in African culture. As a result, scholars of the bible in Africa are increasingly concerned with developing their relationship with ordinary readers of the Bible and theorising methods of theology that can critically engage with these new manifestations of church life in the community (Anum, 1999).

### **Rhetorical criticism**

Since the times of the Greeks and Romans, rhetoric has been a subject of study for literary artistry and persuasive effect. Rhetoric entails carefully choosing words in a communication aimed at influencing the audience into accepting

arguments. Vyacheslav Kirillov (2014, p. 127) describes rhetoric “as the science of the laws of eloquence and their practical application.” Fundamentally, it can be described as the art of writing or speaking convincingly. Robert S. Cathcart (1981) views it as “a communicator’s intentional use of language and other symbols to persuade or influence particular addressees to act, believe, or feel the way the communicator desires in problematic situations” (p. 2).

Furthermore, George Kennedy (1984) describes ‘rhetoric’ as that “quality in discourse by which a speaker or writer seeks to accomplish his purposes” (p. 3). It is more of a dialogue between the author and his/her listeners, with the author employing relevant techniques to influence the listeners.

It can be surmised from these scholars that rhetoric involves symbols created for representing objects in the communication process. Generally, it refers to the art of employing discourse, be it oral or written, according to accepted conventions and procedures to persuade, motivate, and persuade an audience according to the goals of the writer or speaker.

Rhetorical criticism is the scientific way of unearthing the means by which a text persuades its listeners or readers. Stated differently, it is the careful analysis of “the literary effectiveness” of a text. Scholars in biblical studies employ rhetoric to study devices the author uses in the effective discourse, for example, repetitions and patterns of the author’s choice of words or diction. This literary technique tries to understand the creator’s message, how it was constructed and intended to function, and how the audience was likely to comprehend and act in response to the text. Cathcart (1981) submits that rhetorical criticism tries to appreciate how or why a message was compelling.

He regards it as a qualitative research method intended for a “systematic investigation and exploration of symbolic acts and artefacts” to understand the rhetorical processes (Cathcart, 1981, p. 56). In iterating the connection of rhetoric with the social environment, Watson (1997) argues that rhetoric is “the connection between the text and the social environment, evaluating the latter through the former.” It studies the words, phrases and literary devices employed by authors to create an effect in the minds of their audience through texts.

Tate (2008) intimates that “rhetorical criticism dwells on the communication between an author and a reader by analysing the strategies an author adopts to shape a reader’s response or influence a reader’s view.” He points out that rhetorical critics share two notions: that, although imperfect, language is sufficient to communicate human intents and that a communicative act includes a deliberate use of language, a reaction, and a rhetorical exigency. Kennedy (1984) opines that:

Rhetorical critics take the text as we have it, whether the work of a single author or the product of editing, and looks at it from the author’s or editor’s intent, the unified results, and how it would be perceived by an audience of near-contemporaries (p. 4)

The rhetorical study of the bible dates back to the patristic era. In *De Doctrina Christiana* (Book 4), St. Augustine (354–430 CE) employed rhetorical standards from Cicero’s *De Inventione* and *Orator* to study scriptural passages. He noted that Paul, in his letters, adopted the canons of classical rhetoric. The interest in the rhetoric of scripture continued through the Reformation period. Reformers such as Philip Melanchthon (1497–1560), Desiderius Erasmus (ca. 1469–1536), and John Calvin (1509–1564) studied various New Testament (NT, hereafter) books rhetorically. Melanchthon gives a rhetorical analysis of

Greco-Roman procedures of invention, arrangement and style in his commentaries on Romans and Galatians.

Following the Reformation era, the scholarly interest in rhetoric declined until the late 18th to early 20th centuries when German writers such as Karl Ludwig Bauer, Johannes Weiss and Rudolf Bultmann directed their attention to it. Weiss evaluated the rhetoric of the Pauline communications, especially regarding parallelism, antithesis, and symmetry. Bultmann also “found features of the Cynic–Stoic diatribe in the Pauline epistles and concluded that Paul was functioning like a Cynic street preacher and his epistles were from a low level of rhetorical culture in which the Cynics dwelt” (Bultmann, 1941, p. 234). Around this period, scholars began to raise critical questions on the appropriateness to apply traditional categories of oratory and rhetoric to the New Testament (Wroth, 1997).

Until the last three decades of the 20th century, the rhetorical criticism of the NT concentrated largely on stylistic features but neglected more essential matters of invention and arrangement. Scholars such as Amos N. Wilder (1956) and Robert W. Funk (1966) reignited a renewed interest in the usage of rhetoric as a valuable means for interpreting the NT. Wilder (1991) argued that the literary forms and types of the NT books reveal a great deal of information about the socio-historical context and situation in which they were produced. Relatedly, Funk (1966) underscored that “every epistle constitutes a structured speech, and rhetoric is a key to understanding them” (p. 362).

Around the same period, Muilenburg (1968) addressed biblical scholars in the 1968 SBL presidential keynote on rhetorical criticism. By pointing out the impasse of biblical scholarship because of the exhaustiveness of form-

critical studies, James Muilenburg encouraged scholars to examine the unique artistic qualities of texts.

However, the reintroduction of rhetorical criticism to NT scholarship is credited to Hans Dieter Betz's (1979) ground-breaking work on Galatians. He echoed the earlier view of Augustine that Paul's letters conform to traditional categories of invention, arrangement, and style. Convinced by the notion that classical categories of rhetoric could aid interpretation, Betz analysed Galatians as an "apologetic letter that uses judicial rhetoric common to law courts." Betz's rhetorical study of Galatians is synthesised in his commentary, "*Galatians: A Commentary on Paul's Letter to the Churches in Galatia*." While Betz was working with Greco-Roman rhetoric, Wilhelm Wuellner (1987) introduced more modern rhetoric into NT studies in the late Twentieth Century. Working with Romans, he urged that Pauline epistles should be approached primarily as argumentative and rhetorical.

Consequently, Kirillov (2014) observes that modern rhetorical studies of the NT work together with other fields such as literary studies, linguistics, semantics, stylistic, and analysis theory of speech. Furthermore, he states that "almost all authors agree that rhetorical criticism is best used in conjunction with other conventional methods." On this basis, Kirillov (2014) argues that rhetorical criticism may anticipate an interdisciplinary future.

Over the past fifty years, the rhetorical study of Paul's letters has tremendously advanced knowledge in hermeneutical studies, especially in commentaries, dissertations, monographs and articles on Paul's writings and it is still in vogue. Paul's epistles are not understood as a systematic expression of theology but re-joined to their respective historical occasions and original

audiences and reinterpreted with a view to what Paul has to say in this historical context and how he says this. At this point, ancient rhetoric is put to the use of the exegesis of Paul's epistles. Just as orators utilised a specific kind of argumentation in their discourses to persuade or dissuade specific listeners, the writer of a letter may also have used a specific technique of persuasion to communicate his message to the audience.

While succeeding scholarship has agreed on the use of classical rhetorical theory to clarify the argumentative structure and the rhetorical situation of Paul's epistles, scholarly views have differed about the appropriateness of using classical conventions of rhetoric to interpret scripture. On methodological grounds, the question is whether it is cogent to import and apply ancient categories of rhetoric to the NT in general, and Pauline letters in particular. Critics of rhetorical criticism contend that the suitability of ancient rhetoric for examining Paul's letters has been overrated.

In his monograph *"Rhetoric and Galatians: Assessing an Approach to Paul's epistles,"* Philip Kern (1998) criticises the rhetorical method by arguing that the social scenery and style of rhetoric given in Greco-Roman handbooks do not fit Paul's letters. He claims, "the subject matter, venue, audience, and style of discourse in the Pauline letters do not reflect the contextual setting and means of delivery which teachers of rhetoric had in mind" (Kern, 1998, p. 34). He also alleges that classical rhetoric was solely intended for persuasive public speeches and that rhetoric and epistolography were two separate disciplines with completely different genres. However, Kern overlooks the striking resemblances between epistolography and oratory. Numerous traits in the epistles



show Paul's "acquaintance with recognizable epistolary conventions and rhetorical techniques reminiscent of oral argumentation" (Martin, 1991, p. 325).

Besides, the NT writers were conversant with rhetoric either through their education or through all kinds of contact with the Hellenistic culture. For instance, Walter B. Russell (1993) asserts that Paul may have been introduced to Hellenistic rhetoric as an introductory element of his rabbinic schooling. Christopher Forbes (1986) also opines that Paul might have learned rhetorical proficiency during his job as a peripatetic missionary and eristic in arguments and perhaps by self-didactics. Relatedly, Thomas O. Olbricht (1996, p. 78) maintains that rhetoric "so pervaded Hellenistic culture that it seems implausible for Paul to have escaped altogether rhetorical insight or, at minimum, a familiarity with Greek literature so affected." This ties in with Kennedy's (1984) conclusion that a rhetorical reading is not an imposition of an artificial structure on Paul's letters. He asserts, "Paul's rhetorical construction of his letter is intentional and meaningful as it drives the reader to the heart of his theological argument" (p. 27).

On the contrary, Schulenburg (2013) claims that "patristic exegetes agree that Paul's letters did not portray marks of education in rhetoric." Anderson (1999), for instance, has interrogated the notion that Paul would have made deliberate use of classical rhetorical theory to develop his argumentation in his writings. He also claims that the suggestion "that Paul would have had formal rhetorical training cannot be proved by the evidence which we have, arguing that Paul's Jewish education could only have allowed for a limited level of Hellenistic rhetorical training" (p. 278).

However, Anderson's (1999) argument against postulations about rhetorical training as part of Paul's background is contentious, as this argument depends on the perspective taken on the extent of intersection between Hellenistic and Jewish education in the 1st Century C.E. Murphy-O'Connor (2008) has recently placed the upper-class Jewish education in a Hellenistic context which included rhetorical training. Murphy-O'Connor cites Philostratus' information about rhetorical training in Tarsus (*Life of Apollonius* 1.7) and Philo's information about Hellenistic-Jewish education (*Spec. Laws* 2.229-230) to push further the argument that Greco-Roman rhetoric may have been an element of Paul's foundational education. Again, it is conceivable to give an interpretation of "Paul's own characterisation of his literary abilities", as in 1 Cor 1:17, 2:2.4.5; 2 Cor 10:10, 11:6, 11:1-12:13, which is different from Anderson's. Murphy O'Connor (2008) has underlined that Paul's presentation of his own (lack of) oratorical skills in reaction to the criticism by opponents should not be taken at face value, for it matches a rhetorical context of countering his rivals. Thus, even though Anderson has made an essential input to the critical and prudent use of ancient rhetorical theory, some of his points of criticism regarding Paul's education and unawareness of rhetorical techniques are contentious.

There is also the criticism that the rhetorical handbooks and the epistolary manuals developed independently of each other. However, the presence of letter writing in rhetorical instruction handbooks was not a strange occurrence. Around 4 C.E., Julius Victor made an insightful observation that 'many instructions which relate to oral discourse also apply to letters.' Rhetoric in a letter was not wholly unprecedented. Examples abound in some letters, such

as those of Pliny, Seneca and Jerome. Cicero alludes to letters he received from an individual who wrote ‘in much the same tone as the public speeches he is said to have made at Narbo’ (*Fam* 10.33.2).

Additionally, Mitchell (1991) has identified deliberative rhetoric within epistolary structures among classical writings, including Isocrates *Ep* 1–3, 6, 8–9, Demosthenes *Ep* 1, 3, *Socratic Epistles* 27, 30, and *1 Clement*. Hence, Morland (1995) argues vehemently that Paul “knew the conventional modes of argumentation, and that he recognised their persuasive force. Even the response on the part of the audience is believed to have been governed by this framework” (p. 127). Indeed, Paul’s writing shows “familiarity with recognizable epistolary conventions and rhetorical techniques reminiscent of oral argumentation” (Martin, 1991, p. 325).

Another scholar who has vehemently criticised the use of rhetorical criticism in Pauline studies is Lauri Thurén (2000). To him, the resort to the tools of rhetoric shifts the focus from the theology represented in the texts to the historical ‘context’ of the rhetorical situations. He does not criticise the use of rhetorical analysis in the exegesis of Paul’s letters per se but argues for a *de-rhetorizing* Paul’s texts to find the fundamental theological ideas put across by Paul. According to Thurén, “rhetorical criticism should not be one-dimensionally applied to Paul’s letters in terms of technical conventions and non-theological ploys of persuasion” (p. 214). However, it should be combined with a dynamic perspective on how such rhetorical devices work together with and affect Paul’s theological thoughts.

My position is that rhetorical criticism assists in uncovering the argumentative dynamics of Paul’s letters. Compared to other approaches, it

gives us a better way of expounding what Paul meant in an argument, how he developed his argument, and why he wrote his letters in the first place (Hansen, 1989). Church (1978, p. 19) aptly puts it, “whether [Paul] was trained in school or acquired his talent through a natural course of observation and imitation, Paul was a master of persuasion.” Aune (1987) has emphasised that Paul got exposed to the structures and styles of trained rhetoricians” where he had “ample opportunity to make speeches” (p. 10). Similarly, Kennedy (1984) admits that the evidence for Paul’s education was “ambivalent”; but, so far as the legitimacy of the method was concerned, the question was immaterial. He submits:

Even if he had not studied in a Greek school, there were many handbooks of rhetoric in common circulation which he could have seen. He and the evangelists as well would, indeed, have been hard put to escape an awareness of rhetoric as practised in the culture around them, for the rhetorical theory of the schools found its immediate application in almost every form of oral and written communication (Kennedy, 1984, p. 9-10).

For Kennedy (1984), Paul’s letters reflect the conventions of Greek rhetoric because rhetoric was commonplace, a cosmopolitan phenomenon conditioned by essential workings of the human mind and heart and by the nature of all human society. Kennedy has explained how the three basic types of speech in ancient rhetoric—the *epideictic*, the *deliberative*, and the *forensic* types—may also apply to written letters. Recent studies and guidebooks on rhetorical criticism as applied to biblical exegesis have stated more caution against associating Paul’s letters with a particular ideal type of rhetorical genre which might amount to ‘eisegesis’ rather than to exegesis.

Rhetorical criticism is a critical tool for evaluating the argumentative strategy adopted by Paul in addressing the issue between Philemon and Onesimus. Furthermore, a careful rhetorical analysis of *Philemon* would offer

valuable insights on how one should proceed from the literary text to the historical context of slavery. In Chapter Three of the study, we employed Kennedy's five-step approach to rhetorical analysis as outlined in his seminal work, NT *Interpretation through Rhetorical Criticism*. Kennedy's work provides a detailed explanation of the use of rhetorical criticism in NT scholarship. He maintains that the NT authors had a message to convey and sought to influence the addressees to believe it or believe it more passionately. Thus, his book serves well as a primer for the rhetorical study of early Christian texts for many modern readers.

The first task is to determine the rhetorical unit of the book, passage or discourse. The exegete must decide the amount of text to be studied and its setting within larger rhetorical units, including the rhetoric of the entire book. This delimitation parallels the isolation of a *pericope* by form-critical readers. The critic interprets the literary text as a composite unit or a self-contained unit of a full speech rather than splitting it into hypothetical sources, fragments, and interpolations. Kennedy (1984) indicates that

the rhetoric of large units often has to be built up from an understanding of the rhetoric of smaller units. [But] in the case of the short epistles of the New Testament, it is possible, to begin with the whole letter as a unit (p. 23).

The rhetorical unit chosen has a noticeable beginning and ending within itself, connected by some arguments or actions. Therefore, the critical reader will have to look for signs of opening or *proem* and closure or *epilogue*.

The second stage is discerning the *rhetorical situation*. Similar to *Sitz im Leben* in form criticism, the critic finds out the situations that might have compelled the author to write the text, the reason(s) it was written, the mood of

the audience and the author, and their societal values. The situation dictates the rhetorical discourse “in the same sense that the question controls the answer and the problem controls the solution.” The term “rhetorical situation” was devised by Lloyd F. Bitzer (1968) to denote

complex of persons, events, objects, and relations presenting an actual or potential exigence which can be completely or partially removed if discourse, introduced into the situation, can so constrain human decision or action as to bring about the significant modification of the exigence (Bitzer, 1968, p. 1).

From the definition, three interrelated constituents make up the rhetorical situation: the exigence, the audience, and the constraints that affect the rhetor and can be brought to bear upon the audience. The exigence “is an imperfection marked by urgency, an obstacle, something waiting to be done, a thing which is other than it should be and requires modification” (Bitzer, 1968, p. 5). There are numerous forms of exigence, but only those elements requiring or inviting the assistance of rhetoric for modification can be considered rhetorical exigences. The rhetorical audience refers to “those figures who are capable of being persuaded by discourse and of being mediators of change” (Bitzer, 1968, p. 5).

Finally, the rhetorical situation exhibits constraints—persons, events, objects, and relations—that are parts of the situation because they hinder the decision and action needed to modify the exigence. The rhetor could exploit the circumstances that interfere with or get in the way of a rhetor’s ability to respond to an exigence. The reconstruction of the rhetorical situation of Paul’s letters is constrained by the fact that only Paul’s part of the correspondence is available to the modern reader.

Schüssler E. Fiorenza (1987, p. 108) has reasoned that “the rhetorical situation, as it may be reconstructed from Paul’s letters, cannot be likened to the

historical situation.” She argues, “a careful examination of Paul’s rhetorical strategies should move beyond the face-value reading of the letters as just a response to a rhetorical situation to the idea that Paul also ‘creates’ the rhetorical situation” (Fiorenza, 1987, p. 108). With this argument, Fiorenza dissociates herself from the idea that the rhetorical situation deduced from Paul’s text brings us inevitably closer to the historical situation. She contributes to the rhetorical study of Paul’s letters by the important methodological point of the difference between rhetorical situation and historical situation. This distinction aids readers to get a clearer insight into Paul’s use of the historical occasion to create a rhetorical exigency in need of immediate attention and redress.

The third stage is establishing the rhetorical genre, the problem, and the status of the discourse. In most rhetorical situations, the speaker will be found to face one dominating rhetorical exigency. Kennedy (1984) states:

the audience is perhaps already prejudiced against him and not disposed to listen to anything he may say; or the audience may not perceive him as having the authority to advance the claims he wishes to make; or what he wishes to say is very complicated and thus hard to follow, or so totally different from what the audience expects that they will not immediately entertain the possibility of its truth (p. 36).

The effort to influence or convince usually indicates the existence of some resistance, i.e., a rhetorical problem, but it is often difficult to establish what the question or controversy was. The critic should examine how the rhetor overcomes the audience’s prejudices and make them recognize him as having the legitimate power to advance the claims he/she wishes to make. Also, the literary critic is asked to determine the rhetorical species of the literary text to discern different parts of the text and identify their intended persuasive effects.

The prologue induces the audience’s posture toward the author, and the elucidation of a point influences how another will be received. According to

Thurén (2000, p. 75), “the function of the techniques and arguments is determined mainly by their position in the text.” One should also ascertain the stasis – a series of steps or questions to ask the heart of the matter, whether it is one of fact, definition, or quality.

The fourth stage in Kennedy’s approach is analysing the rhetorical strategy of the text by looking at the invention, arrangement, and rhetorical styles to determine “how they work together ... to some unified purpose in meeting the rhetorical situation” (Kennedy, 1984, p. 37). What is the discourse’s structure, what arguments are used, and what assumptions do they make? What literary devices are employed, and how do they promote the purpose of the text? To do this, according to Kennedy, the reader should engage in a line-by-line study of the argument, including its hypotheses, its topics, and its standard features, such as enthymemes, and the devices of style, seeking to define their functions in a context.

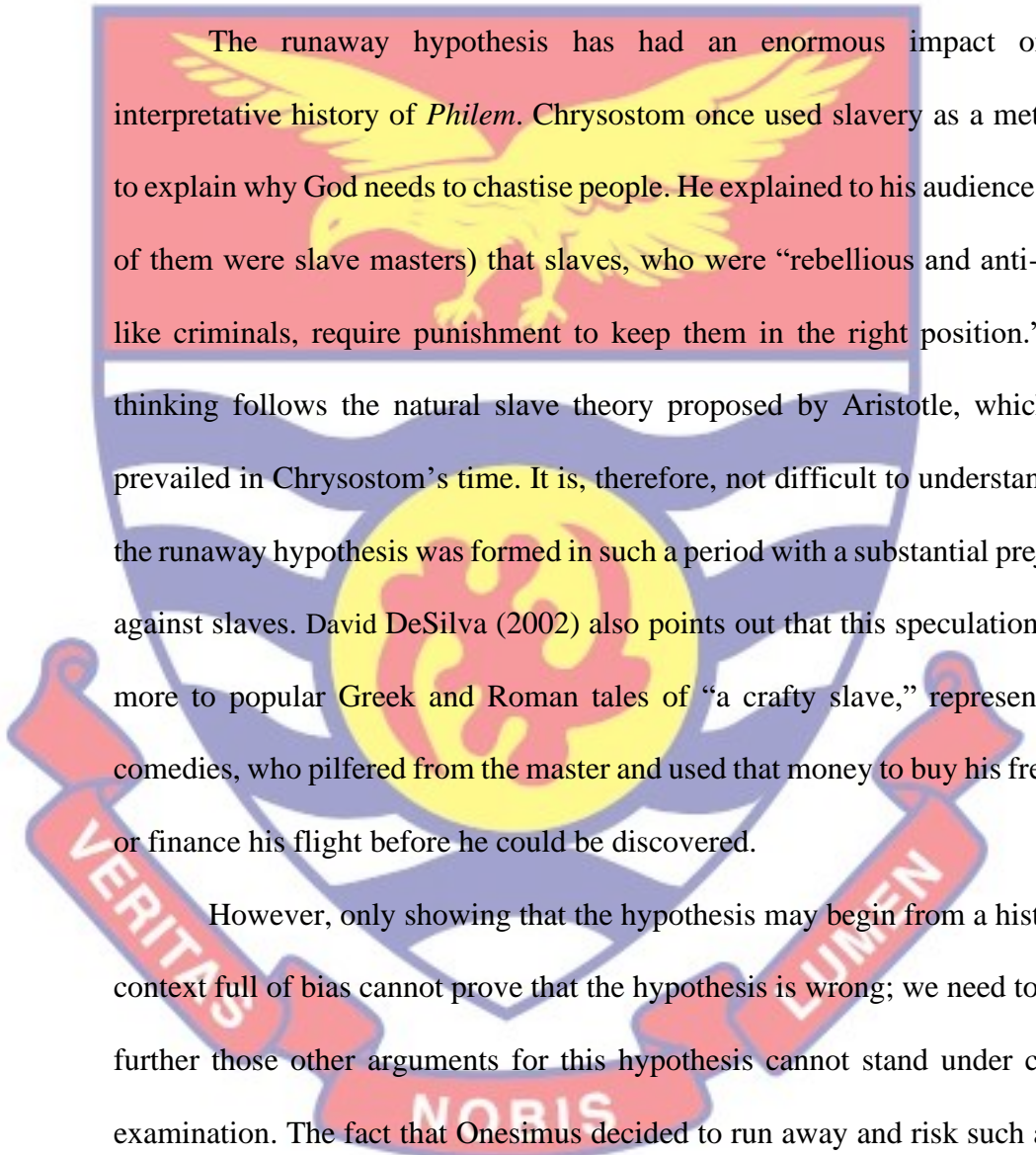
The final stage is to review the analysis “process by looking back over the entire unit and reviewing its success” in tackling the rhetorical situation and its implications for the speaker or audience (Kennedy, 1984, p. 38). Finally, the critic examines how the rhetorical strategy and design support the message and how the words and the style work together to affect the audience in their situation. The above-reviewed structure of rhetorical reading shall inform our analysis of the persuasiveness of *Philem* in Chapter Three of this study.

### **Interpretive views on *Philem***

The interpretation of *Philem* has long been affected by various hypotheses. The critical problem is that some are not sufficiently based on historical evidence and consistent with Pauline’s thoughts. Winter (1984) is



correct in pointing out that “[a] given method has its own bias; it is intended and equipped to analyse only certain aspects of the text” (p. 203). The following section seeks to review the hypotheses used in different main lines of discussion, with the view to show how different hypotheses affect the interpretation of *Philem* significantly.

The logo of the University of Cape Coast is a watermark in the background. It features a shield with a yellow eagle with wings spread, perched on a red banner that says 'VERITAS'. Below the shield is another red banner that says 'LUMEN'. At the bottom of the shield is a yellow circle with a red cross-like symbol. Below the shield is a red banner that says 'NOBIS'.

The runaway hypothesis has had an enormous impact on the interpretative history of *Philem*. Chrysostom once used slavery as a metaphor to explain why God needs to chastise people. He explained to his audience (most of them were slave masters) that slaves, who were “rebellious and anti-social like criminals, require punishment to keep them in the right position.” This thinking follows the natural slave theory proposed by Aristotle, which still prevailed in Chrysostom’s time. It is, therefore, not difficult to understand that the runaway hypothesis was formed in such a period with a substantial prejudice against slaves. David DeSilva (2002) also points out that this speculation owes more to popular Greek and Roman tales of “a crafty slave,” represented in comedies, who pilfered from the master and used that money to buy his freedom or finance his flight before he could be discovered.

However, only showing that the hypothesis may begin from a historical context full of bias cannot prove that the hypothesis is wrong; we need to show further those other arguments for this hypothesis cannot stand under critical examination. The fact that Onesimus decided to run away and risk such a long journey seems to indicate a severe breakdown in the social contract between slave and master. Onesimus risked both the physical hazards of the journey as well as the terrible consequences of being caught. If he had been sent back to his master, this incident could have led to severe punishment and reduced his

chances of being considered for release. Runaway slaves faced a penalty of severe flogging, torture and even execution by such cruel forms as crucifixion (Harrill, 2006). Whatever else he had done, he had compounded his crime by running away. While he is now with Paul, he implies that he did leave his master's house; however, robbery is nowhere explicitly stated in *Philem*.

The runaway hypothesis is supported mainly by two lines of reason. Textually, supporters use verse 11 to argue the slave's previous unsatisfactory services and verse 18 for the damage and loss done to his master. However, this is not a strong argument, as the interpretation of these two verses does not express an explicit meaning that supports the runaway hypothesis. Historically, the runaway hypothesis is also sustained by the use of Pliny the Younger's (1963) letter to Sabinianus as a piece of evidence to justify Paul's letter as a similar type. Pliny's letter has often been cited to advance the view that *Philem* belonged to the same type of letter asking for forgiveness (Porter & Adams, 2010).

Stanley Stowers (1986) categorises Pliny's letter and *Philem* as letters of mediation. He defines a letter of mediation as one in which "one person makes a request to another person on behalf of a third party" (p. 48). Below is Pliny the Younger's letter to Sabinianus:

Your freedman, with whom you said you were angry, has approached me, and grovelling at my feet he has clung to them as if they were yours. His tears were copious, as were his pleas and also his silences. In short, he persuaded me that he was genuinely sorry, and I believe that he has turned over a new leaf because he feels that he has misbehaved. I know that you are furious with him, and I know also that you are rightly so, but praise for forbearance is especially due when the grounds for anger are more justified. You were fond of him, and I hope that you will be so in the future; meanwhile, it is enough that you allow yourself to be appeased. It will be possible for you to renew your anger if he deserves it, and you will have greater justification if you have been prevailed upon now. Make some allowance for his youth, for his tears, and for your own

benevolence. Do not cause him pain, to avoid paining yourself, for you pain yourself when your mild disposition turns to anger. I fear that I may seem to be applying pressure rather than to be pleading with you, if I join my prayers to his, and I shall do this all the more fully and frankly for having rebuked him more sharply and severely, having threatened that I shall never plead with you again after this. That threat was addressed to him, for it was necessary to scare him, and not to you; indeed, I shall perhaps plead with you again, and my plea will again to be granted, provided only that it is fitting for me to request it, and for you to grant it. Farewell. (Pliny the Younger, 62 C.E.? – c.a. 113 C.E., cited in Fitzmyer, 2000, p. 13).

An obvious insight deducible from these two contemporary letters is that on both occasions, the subject of the appeal was desperately apprehensive and scared to face the anger of his master (i.e., *dominus*) primarily because the slave was declared a *fugitivus*. Again, both letters employ diplomacy by appealing to the goodwill of the *dominus* without any direct compulsion. Both also exert mediating skills that embed Paul's sensitivity in dealing with people of different social statuses.

Despite belonging to the same letter type and shedding some insights on each other, the two letters pose challenges to interpreters when a further critical comparison is made. Pliny explicitly mentions the freedman's genuine repentance, scolds the freedman for his bad conduct and firmly warns him never to indulge in that deviant act again. In contrast, Paul does not directly say what the modern reader must expect of a situation concerning a troublesome slave: Paul does not ask Philemon to forgive or have mercy. Another difficulty in interpreting *Philem* in the light of Pliny's letter is that Pliny discusses a freedman (not a slave or a runaway slave at all) compared with Paul's appeal, which is offered for a runaway slave.

Also, a closer comparison of the tone of the two requests reveals that while Pliny's words are "more forthright, direct and explicit", that of Paul is

more cryptic and goes much beyond the appeal of the former (Witherington III, 2007). The letter of Pliny follows the rhetorical convention of *deprecatio* (a plea for mercy), but there is not a single hint that the apostle is pleading for mercy in *Philem*. Again, Pliny aligns himself with his friend, not with the slave, assuring Sabinianus that he has reprimanded and warned the freedman regarding his actions, but Paul identifies with Onesimus as much as with Philemon.

Moreover, the situation of Paul's appeal appears more delicate compared to Pliny's appeal. For one thing, Pliny's appeal contains little or no subversive proposition to transform the ideology behind the master-slave relationship radically. However, Paul's appeal involves both the legal aspect of Roman culture and the essence of the Christian gospel. The triad— Onesimus the runaway slave, Paul the apostle and Philemon the angry master—are all Christians. What compounds the complexity of the situation is that both the master and the slave owe their catechism to the apostle (v. 19).

Another difficulty in using Pliny's letter as an argument is that Paul has not indicated his negative judgment on the one to be interceded for and his plea. Pliny's letter states, "I know that you are furious with him, and I know also that you are rightly so." However, in *Philem*, Paul does not indicate his negative judgment of Onesimus. So why does Paul not mention anything directly related to Onesimus' act? Also, concerning the plea, Pliny has explicitly, though rhetorically, raised his plea to Sabinianus: "Do not cause him pain, to avoid paining yourself, for you pain yourself when your mild disposition turns to anger." However, we find no such direct plea in Paul's letter related to the possible result of a runaway slave. It would then be very strange if Paul did not

even plead one word on Onesimus's possible severe punishment upon his return if Onesimus's runaway stemmed from the slave's own misconduct.

Peter Lampe (2010) has challenged the runaway hypothesis by arguing that the most probable behaviour for a runaway slave would not be to go to a big city but to join a gang. He asks: why would a slave voluntarily go to any prison? Why does Paul not scold or rebuke Onesimus for defiantly leaving his master's household? Moreover, if Onesimus is not a runaway slave, why does *Philem* have a different tone from Pliny's letter to Sabinianus?

In answering these questions, Winter (1987) has suggested that Onesimus was a 'dispatched slave.' This theory argues that Onesimus did not run away but was sent to attend on Paul by Philemon. Greco-Roman prisons were temporarily detention points for criminals before their trial or execution. The basic necessities of prisoners were left to the criminal's friends or family to supply. Knowing the dangers the imprisoned Paul faced, early Christian congregations sent representatives with money and other gifts to cater for the apostle in his imprisonment.

Winter (1984) draws on the precedence scenario in Philippians 2:25 where Paul thanks the church for dispatching Epaphroditus to "minister to my need" in prison. She contends that Onesimus ministered in a similar function on behalf of the congregation in Philemon's house. Onesimus could have aided Paul as a scribe, carrier, lector, daily assistant, cleaner, or a combination of these roles. One advantage of this theory is that it explains why the slave would go to a guarded prison. Again, Paul's judiciousness in not keeping the slave whom Philemon had sent him, according to Winter, is the plausible occasion of the letter.

Albert Harrill (2006) has evaluated Winter's proposal by examining parallel examples in extant classical letters. For example, a letter written to Cicero by Publius Cornelius Dolabella reveals the latter's notoriousness for keeping his friend's letter carriers for a more extended period. He also cites a Papyrus letter dated September 12th, 50 C.E., in which an Egyptian Olive, Mysterion, asks a chief priest Stotoetis not to detain the slave Blastus whom he sent because he needed him every moment. *Philem* and this Papyrus letter share parallel verbs in the original Greek. One, Mysterion asks Stotoetis not "to detain" (*katechein*) Blastus, and similarly, Paul discloses that he desires "to detain" (*katechein*) Onesimus (v. 13). Two, Mysterion stresses that he needs Blastus each "moment" (*hora*); likewise, Paul elucidates the need to keep Onesimus for a "moment" (*hora*, v. 15). This scenario is employed to explain why there is no scolding on the part of Paul for the slave's actions, as well as any reference to penitence on the part of Onesimus for misconduct. However, the difficulty with this historical reconstruction is that the pledge Paul makes "to repay" any offence (v. 18) appears to favour the runaway theory or the notion that the mistake lies with Onesimus. Thus, the argument that *Philem* makes no obvious reference to Onesimus's runaway is not a shred of substantial evidence that he did not do so (Barclay, 1991).

Church (1978) opens a new discussion of the purpose and argument used in the letter. He explains that the letter is arranged in the form and structure of deliberative rhetoric. After establishing his own argument, he also compares Pliny's letter to Sabinianus and concludes that, firstly, Philemon is not simply the same plea of mercy as Pliny, given the rhetorical structure Paul employed. He explains that the reason for Paul not begging forgiveness for the slave as

Pliny did was because Paul's understanding of Christian love and equality is different from Pliny's. Therefore, it is Paul's intention to ask for more than what will be asked in Pliny's world. Barclay (1991) supports Church's conclusion. By comparing the two letters, he suggests that it is natural for Paul to do likewise. The main reason is that Paul's emphasis is different from Pliny's as much as the

expected reconciliation is concerned. Paul emphasises the fact that Onesimus had become a new person when he was converted to Christianity; therefore, he deliberately does not mention the remorse.

Secondly, Church (1978) suggests that *Philem* is a public letter rather than a private letter. He argues that Paul has grabbed the occasion to exhort a whole community on the principle of practical Christian love by making use of the deliberative rhetoric in his epistle. Church successfully establishes a new direction to understand the epistle. He clearly demonstrates that Paul has employed the common understanding of Christian love and relationship in persuading Philemon to follow his request. There is a shift of focus from asking for forgiveness to requesting a transformation of the relationship based on Christian love. What is lacking is that Church does not explain explicitly how the existing master-slave relationship is in contrast to Christian love, relationships, and roles he mentions in the letter. Without providing a precise antithesis that Paul is arguing against in the letter, Church cannot provide a deeper interpretation of the letter, which can help us understand what he is precisely arguing against and for in the letter.

Church (1978) is not the only one to argue that Paul's primary concern was relational. Craig S. de Vos (2001) proposes that "Paul's concern would appear to have been a perceptual and relational one rather than a structural

one” (p. 89). Building on Barclay’s (1991) argument that it is practically complex and challenging for masters to manumit their Christian slaves, de Vos (2001) disagrees that Paul was “deliberately ambiguous” as he felt unable to make a clear and substantial one. The main argument of de Vos is that he points out that social structures, including the family, patron-client, and freedman, are suppressive in nature. He makes the point that “the act of manumission did not significantly change the circumstances of most slaves, or how they were perceived or treated” (De Vos, 2001, p. 89). Therefore, it is unlikely that Paul was requesting for manumission. Then, he proposes that, based on *Philem* verse 16, Paul does not aim to change the legal and structural relationship but the fundamental relationship between master and slave.

Although I agree with de Vos’s insight, his argument is not substantial enough. His argument mainly relies on attributing the social structure to three commonly known concepts: authoritarianism, patriarchalism, and patronage. In order to justify that Paul’s primary concern is transforming the relationship from *en sarki* to *en kuriō*, we need a detailed analysis of the worldly relationships and how they conflict with the teaching of Paul. In this perspective, de Vos’s argument is not substantial enough.

In his work, *Rediscovering Paul*, Norman Petersen (1985) argues from a social anthropological approach that the social roles used by Paul to describe different actors in the letters were intended to create the tension to be resolved. Based on the theory of sociology of knowledge, Petersen suggests that we should not look at the letter’s literary level and the narrative world that can be reconstructed from the information given in the letter. He distinguishes his method with the sociological approach in which social anthropology will be



based on the “typical patterns of social behaviour” and focus on “shared ways of understanding and behaviour.” Following this basic assumption, he argues that writers can use language to give orders and manipulate their fellows who share the same beliefs and experiences. Again, he proposes that research works back and forth on both the literary and social worlds. By looking at how different institutions and relations constitute the social world, the sociological researcher makes use of these relations and the self-definition of different social roles to read the narrative world reconstructed. This is the theoretical approach from sociology Petersen uses to read *Philem*.

Having reconstructed the narrative world from the letter, Petersen (1985) tries to use the social anthropological theory to investigate the relationship between different actors in the narrative world. He argues that there is a tension between the social roles in two different domains – church and society. He then proposes a bold but highly plausible claim that “Onesimus may have fled because he found Philemon to be a bad master” (p. 286). Petersen substantially argues that Paul has intentionally used different social roles in order to argue for manumission given his symbolic universe. However, the content he asserts into the relationship between different social roles was too general. Wayne Meeks (1987, p. 558) also points out “the relatively small role he (Petersen) allows for specific facts ... about the slavery systems in the Roman world.” Without giving the support of detailed historical facts concerning different specific social relations Petersen identified, the subsequent analysis becomes less convincing and trivial.

I agree with Richard Horsley’s (1997) criticism that there are problems interpreting the content of both the churchly and worldly relationships. In the

churchly relationships, Petersen (1985) barely quotes other undisputed Pauline letters to sustain his argument. This selective interpretation may result in a partial and sometimes biased interpretation. On the other hand, he also uses general information concerning those social roles in the worldly relationships, such as the relationship between slave and master. He does not provide any new

findings to support his assertions made on the master and slave relationship. For example, Petersen (1985) proposes verses 15–17 to be interpreted in the following way. First, he observes that “both in the flesh and in the Lord” refer to two social domains. Second, he points out that “the role names ‘slave,’ ‘brother,’ and ‘partner’ refer to structural positions: first in the domain of the world and second and third in the domain of the church.” Sociologically, Onesimus now plays two social structural roles in relation to Philemon.

With reference to 1Corinthians 7:21–24, Petersen (1988) argues that Paul here mainly tries to bring their relations in the church into conformity with their structural ground, but he makes no efforts to change the social structure. He further suggests that the role of the master is “undercut” by bringing the churchly relations of brotherhood between the two. Although Petersen’s argument is logically sound, it is not supported by historical evidence and the whole intention of the letter. Petersen simply takes for granted the difficulties of one transforming from one social role to another. On the contrary, this thesis argues that Paul understands well the difficulties for Philemon to transform from one role to another; therefore, he uses different arguments to persuade Philemon rhetorically.

In short, Petersen (1985) is right in pointing out that Paul is addressing the conflicting relationship between Philemon and Onesimus in two different

domains. However, his method, which focuses on the narrative world, creates some significant bias in his analysis. Also, only using selective verses from Paul's letters and using too-general historical evidence in the argument further makes his argument less convincing.

Regarding the conflict of the relationship between slave and master in Christian brotherhood, Barclay (1991) suggests that it would be challenging to either manumit or retain the slave within a Christian household. The reasons he proposes are all practical problems in the two scenarios mentioned above. He rightly points out that there is great tension in a Christian household between master and slave.

However, he wrongly assumes the ultimate concern for Paul is a practical matter. I do not intend to refute the fact that there are practical problems regarding whether to manumit or not manumit Onesimus. However, one more important question we have to address is what is more likely to be the major concern of Paul for a brother in Christ. Besides the practical problems, is there any other more critical concern for Paul in the letter? Thus, there is the need to bring in Paul's theological and ethical thoughts to help explore what is more likely to be Paul's primary concern in the letter.

Harrill (2006) suggests that *Philemon* can be identified as a genre called the "journeyman apprentice" contract, which Paul uses to recommend Onesimus for "apprenticeship in the service of the gospel." He posits that Paul, a master craftsman, requested Onesimus to train him as an apprentice. The parallels Harrill infers from journeyman-apprentice formulae include the following: a command for the slave to obey (v. 8), a reference to the slave "serving" under an agreement (v. 13), the recommended training will turn a

“useless” slave (i.e., one unskilled in any particular trade) into a useful one, both to the master craftsman and its original owner,” a penalty clause by which the master promises payment of any liabilities that might accrue (v. 19) in the event of sickness or unproductivity due to absenteeism, and the assurance to return the slave, using the language of receipts (v. 12). Paul also proposes to the would-be apprentice slave for new obligations as a complete business partner. Thus, Paul, Philemon, and Onesimus can be unequal partners in a common *koinonia*, just as we can have younger and elder brothers in a family.

In a separate discussion, Harrill (2006) has vehemently criticized Paul for advancing less evidence of “Onesimus’ own story” and more of his own participation and profound implication in ancient slavery. Paul judges Onesimus and his action in weak moral division into “useful” and “useless.” He says the letter says nothing about whether the historical Onesimus was “really useful.” Instead, Paul describes and recommends the slave in terms of stereotypes and flat moral polarities. Harrill argues,

[E]ven if journeyman-apprentice contracts provide the best interpretative context in which to read *Philem*, the affective language of the letter is still a cliché. This is because Paul treats Onesimus instrumentally, as a ‘thing’ to be transferred, owned, and used (Harrill, 2006, p. 79)

There is no proof from the letter that Paul and Philemon actually listened to what the powerless Onesimus may have wanted to do. Paul did not consider Onesimus’ wishes important enough to be mentioned to *Philem*. For Harrill (2006), it is ridiculous to think that Onesimus did not want any other life than serving Paul and his gospel as an apprentice. He claims that Onesimus the slave was “a living tool caught between two masters conferring on the use of his labour” (Harrill, 2006, p. 80).

Two edited books have been published. *Onesimus Our Brother*, published in 2012, argues that it is necessary and justifiable to read *Philem* from the margins. From a methodological perspective, the book seeks to demonstrate two main points. Firstly, there is a bias in the traditional, mainstream Eurocentric interpretation. Showing that there is a grand narrative determining what is “order” and “disorder” in different cultures and societies, the book argues that there is a need to have “a mini-narrative” and readings from the margins. Secondly, grounded in the postmodern framework, the book demonstrates different possible readings from the margins. It is right to point out the ideological bias underlying the traditional Eurocentric interpretation of *Philem*, especially in the period when slavery was still prevailing in America and Europe. However, the other way around is not necessarily the case. In order to clear all those biases in interpretation, I suggest one should return to discussing whether the premises used in the interpretation have any bias or are sufficiently grounded both historically and theologically. I do not seek to refute the reading from the margins, as suggested in this book, but suggest the reading should be grounded more solidly on different grounds, which this thesis may help to provide.

Another edited book requiring our attention is *Philemon in Perspective*, published in 2010. The book is a product of a colloquium held in 2008 in South Africa. As the book’s name implies, it does not aim at giving a new coherent interpretation of *Philem* but at showing various perspectives concerning the interpretation of the letter. The book provides excellent insights into some specific issues concerning the letter, which have been used in this thesis.

However, the book does not provide a specific direction and framework to yield a coherent interpretation of *Philem*.

### **The purpose of *Philem***

Closely related to the challenge of establishing the actual occasion of *Philem* is the question about the precise details or parameters of the letter's request. What does Paul mean by all the direct and indirect imperatives such as "have him back, no longer a slave but more than a slave, a beloved brother" (v. 16a); "welcome him as you welcome me" (v. 27); "refresh my heart in Christ" (v. 20b); and "you will even do more than I say" (v. 21b)? Is Paul requesting for legal manumission of the slave, a transformed master-slave relationship, or is he just asking the slave for missionary service? Critical readers and commentators have different positions on this issue.

According to Barclay (1991) and Jeal (2010), Paul does not ask for Onesimus to be freed (manumission). They argue that Paul deliberately keeps his request vague because both options open to Philemon are fraught with problems. If he manumits Onesimus, he sets a precedent that would make him unpopular with the other slave owners. It would also mean he would have to manumit any other Christian slaves in his home, causing either resentment among the other slaves or a sudden rush of slaves to 'convert' so as to obtain the same benefits.

Also, he will be seen to be rewarding a slave who ought to have been disciplined. On the other hand, if he does not free him, how does he treat him as a brother? Does he treat him differently at church gatherings than at other times? The wording of Paul's request is such that it is ambiguous. It could be interpreted as a request for manumission or for a new relationship in which

Onesimus is both slave and brother. “Thus, we are left with the particular irony of a letter which is framed with consummate skill, to induce Philemon to act in the way Paul wants and yet leaves extraordinarily unclear what exactly is being requested” (Barclay, 1991, p. 174).

De Vos (2001) argues that Paul was not being ambiguous. After all, he expects to be obeyed; therefore, he must have given a command. He asks the question, “What difference would manumission make here?” He constructs a cogent argument that manumission, though it might bring some relaxing of constraints and punishment, did not significantly alter the relationship between slave and master. He points to several examples from ancient Roman society indicating that freedmen or women could still be expected to carry out similar if not the same duties as before manumission, be punished as harshly for disappointing their masters, and remained disenfranchised and could even be sold again. Even if Paul had asked for manumission, de Vos claims, it would not necessarily have impacted the relationship that existed between Philemon and Onesimus.

De Vos (2001) concludes that Paul was asking for Onesimus to be treated as a brother and, even more radically, to be treated as a guest (v. 17). While a brother must be treated with care and respect, a guest must receive the best a host had to offer. The honour of the host was linked to the honour of his guest. A guest took precedence over everyone in the household except the host’s parent (de Vos, 2001). What Paul was asking for Onesimus was the freedom, care and honour worthy of his new status as a brother in Christ.

DeSilva (2010) judges that Paul desired Philemon to return Onesimus back to him to be a companion and help, a service which Philemon ought to be

providing, but perhaps cannot act personally due to his own responsibilities to the family and church. Being informed of Paul's need in this way would make Philemon want to respond positively to his patron or friend. It would also make his refusal to help a friend in such circumstances unacceptable. However, if Paul wants to see Onesimus being treated as a brother within the household, it seems too easy an option for Philemon to send Onesimus to Paul and rid himself of an embarrassing situation. Onesimus is more likely to stay with Philemon and live out this new relationship at least until Paul visits when Onesimus might be emancipated to assist Paul as the "new Timothy" (Lucas, 2006). This might be the "even more" that Paul expects Philemon to do (v. 21). Therefore, what Paul is asking for is far more radical and costlier than manumission. He asks for an improved condition for the slave Onesimus in the master's household.

### **Rhetorical techniques in *Philemon***

Interpreters have diverse opinions on the precise nature of Paul's rhetorical strategy, but all concur that Paul was very strategic in the way that he communicates with Philemon. Judith Ryan (2005, p. 192) accurately remarks, "Despite its brevity, this masterpiece of persuasion makes full use of ancient rhetoric..." The conditions of Onesimus' situation can only be fully understood when one appreciates the political and manipulative lengths that Paul went to secure Philemon's acquiescence.

Paul invented an eclectic group of addressees for this letter, creating an atmosphere of accountability for Philemon. Specifically, he delivered the letter not only to Philemon, Apphia and Archippus but also to the entire church that meets in Philemon's home. Thus, the audience included multiple people on both the sending and receiving ends. Philemon would have felt that Paul's personal



communique was being read aloud by two groups of people. Although a personal letter of communication to Philemon, it was also a public one.

Lokkesmoe (2015) has drawn attention to some of the more obvious rhetorical strategies that Paul employed. For example, Paul classifies himself as a prisoner and an older man, rather than emphasising his apostolic status (verses 1, 8, 9, 14, 23, 21). Even though Philippians, Ephesians, and Colossians are also written from prison, Paul did not designate himself ‘a prisoner’ right at the onset. What peculiar reason did Paul have in mind for designating himself ‘prisoner of Christ’ at the prescript of *Philem*? It perhaps was devised to elicit empathy and admiration on the part of the readers.

Another interpreter who has isolated rhetorical devices in *Philem* is Todd D. Still. He summarised that Paul applauds Philemon, suspends mention of Onesimus’ name; devises wordplays on Onesimus’ name; connects response to Onesimus as a response to himself; prompts Philemon of his debt of gratitude to him; “requests Philemon to refresh his heart; and asks that Philemon prepare a guest room” for his apostolic visitation (Still, 2009, p. 94)

Petersen (1985) puts forward a remarkable array of rhetorical insights for this epistle. He recreates a story out of the letter and analyses how Paul presents the actions in the story in succession. Petersen then likens the referential sequence of events in the letter to the poetic sequence of events (i.e., the way that Paul presented them). Finally, he takes note of what Paul moved out of order and exposes the rhetorical function of these changes. Petersen’s reconstruction of the story behind the letter (his referential sequence) is organised like this: (a) Philemon owes a debt to Paul, (b) Paul is imprisoned; (c) Onesimus runs away and acquires a debt to Philemon, (d) Onesimus is

catechised by an imprisoned Paul, (e) Paul hears of Philemon's love and faith, (f) Paul sends Onesimus back to Philemon, (g) Paul sends a letter of appeal to Philemon and offers to repay Onesimus' debt; (g) Onesimus and the letter arrive; (i) Philemon responds to Paul's appeal, (10) Paul's anticipated visit to Philemon (Petersen, 1985, p. 70). This is the story that Petersen assumes is

behind the letter, though not how Paul presents it in the text of *Philem* itself. Petersen remarks that Paul makes three strategic modifications in order to influence Philemon to respond favourably.

This is a brilliant insight on Petersen's part, and it is evident by these moves that Paul is making a rhetorical effort to concurrently cajole Philemon and apologise for a serious offence on Onesimus' part. Petersen also effectively shows Paul's reforming of roles in the epistle. He notes that according to secular conventions, Philemon enacts the roles of both a master and debtee. Onesimus, conversely, is the slave and debtor. Petersen (1985) argues that Paul invents a new set of metaphorical or spiritual roles. In that structure, Philemon is figuratively Paul's brother, debtor, fellow-worker, and partner. Onesimus, in Paul's reckoning, is a child to him and a brother to Philemon. In this instance, as with the re-arranging of the story elements, Petersen has shown that Paul utilised a strategic device of heightening the positive to get Philemon to succumb.

While Petersen (1985) does a great job of investigating the letter's rhetoric, he concentrates only on Paul and Philemon to the total neglect of Onesimus. For instance, he writes, "...Onesimus' storyline is not the one to follow; his story is a story within a story" (Petersen, 1986, p. 163). In Petersen's view, the referential sequence starts and ends with Paul and Philemon; therefore,

the actual story is about them and their *koinonia*. In this regard, Petersen overlooks an essential point of the letter – what it means for the toothless slave Onesimus. If we were to strip away the greeting and farewell sections of the epistle (vv. 1-3, 22-25), as well as the purely rhetorical discussion about Philemon’s value to Paul (vv. 4-7), the greater portion of the letter is about Paul’s appeal for Onesimus (vv. 8-21). That being the case, it is evident that Onesimus and his helpless condition constituted the driving force for Paul writing the letter in the first place. Paul would not inscribe a letter to Philemon just to greet him, eulogise him, and then ask him for a guestroom ahead of an impending visit. This is not to say that Paul’s relationship with Philemon is inconsequential. It is obvious to submit that Onesimus was the prime reason that Paul composed the letter, and the majority of the message is about Onesimus’ situation. Because Onesimus’ life was at issue with this letter, Petersen’s claim that Onesimus’ story is secondary within *Philemon* is erroneous and unsustainable.

Other readers such as Church (1978) and Ryan (2005) have maintained that Paul’s letter epitomises the three classical components of deliberative rhetoric, namely, *ethos*, *pathos*, and *logos*. The objective of deliberative rhetoric, according to Church, is “to exhort or dissuade”, which is unquestionably applicable in the situation of *Philemon* (Church, 1978, p. 19). Ryan (2005) links *ethos* (i.e., a believable character) in the thanksgiving section with an expression of Paul’s appreciation for Philemon’s love and generous character. He also identifies *pathos* (i.e., empathetic emotions) as the foundation of the appeal (v. 9) that aims to evoke brotherly caring relations between Philemon and Onesimus. Finally, Ryan shows that *logos* (i.e., reason, or logical proofs) stands behind Paul’s appeal to love, but she maintains that “perhaps

Paul's logical rhetoric is used to the greatest effect where he downplays Onesimus' temporary absence as he effectively places the entire appeal within the context of God's providential plan" (Ryan, 2005, pp. 192-193).

While *Philemon* is considered unique in many ways, it seems apparent that the classic elements of *ethos*, *pathos* and *logos* are interwoven throughout the epistle. Added to Judith Ryan's illustrations, I would argue that *ethos* is displayed in Paul's refusal to classify himself as an apostle of Christ in the prescript. Paul's emphasis on the fact that he is ageing, as well as his profuse use of emotional language like *splagchna* (i.e., the entrails or viscera), is a perfect example of *pathos*. Peter Lampe (2010) has labelled this rhetorical strategy as 'emotionalising.' He writes, "By using the word *ta splagchna* three times in Philemon, Paul directly refers to his innermost feelings." Lampe goes on to explain that the letter is replete with "conflicting emotions that Paul can exploit..." (Lampe, 2010, p. 62). He further enumerated some emotions that Paul leveraged to his rhetorical advantage: (a) Philemon's anger; (b) Onesimus' fear of Philemon; (c) Onesimus' trust in Paul; (d) Paul's love for Philemon; (e) pity for Paul the prisoner; (f) respect for Paul the apostle; (g) Philemon's indebtedness or thankfulness toward Paul; (h) Philemon's honour and shame; (i) curiosity of the house church about the situation (Lampe, 2010, pp. 62-66). If, as Lampe (2010, p. 66) contends, "all of the above-mentioned feelings are 'in the air,' how does that affect Paul's argumentation in the letter? Lampe concludes that Paul's "main rhetorical task is to calm Philemon's reactive aggression toward Onesimus and to prevent him from seeking revenge for his pagan slave's misbehaviour" (p. 67).

Lampe is undoubtedly correct in identifying all these emotional dynamics in the letter. Paul's rhetorical strategies would not have only influenced Philemon; they would have moved his listeners, who would, in turn, exert their own pressure on Philemon.

To sum up, the compelling fact about these rhetorical theories is that each makes good sense in the light of Paul's letter. First, Paul definitely presented the material in the most premeditated order possible to emphasise the positive (Petersen, 1984). Second, he manifested all three rhetorical conventions of his day (Church, 1978) and played on the emotions of the readers (Lampe, 2010). Paul made adequate use of every part of his letter; he loaded every phrase with rhetoric to realise his goal of Philemon's acquiescence. The fact that Paul so skilfully employed these manoeuvres shows that he is indeed striving to persuade Philemon against certain actions, which strongly suggests that Onesimus' actions were quite serious and necessitated such intervention.

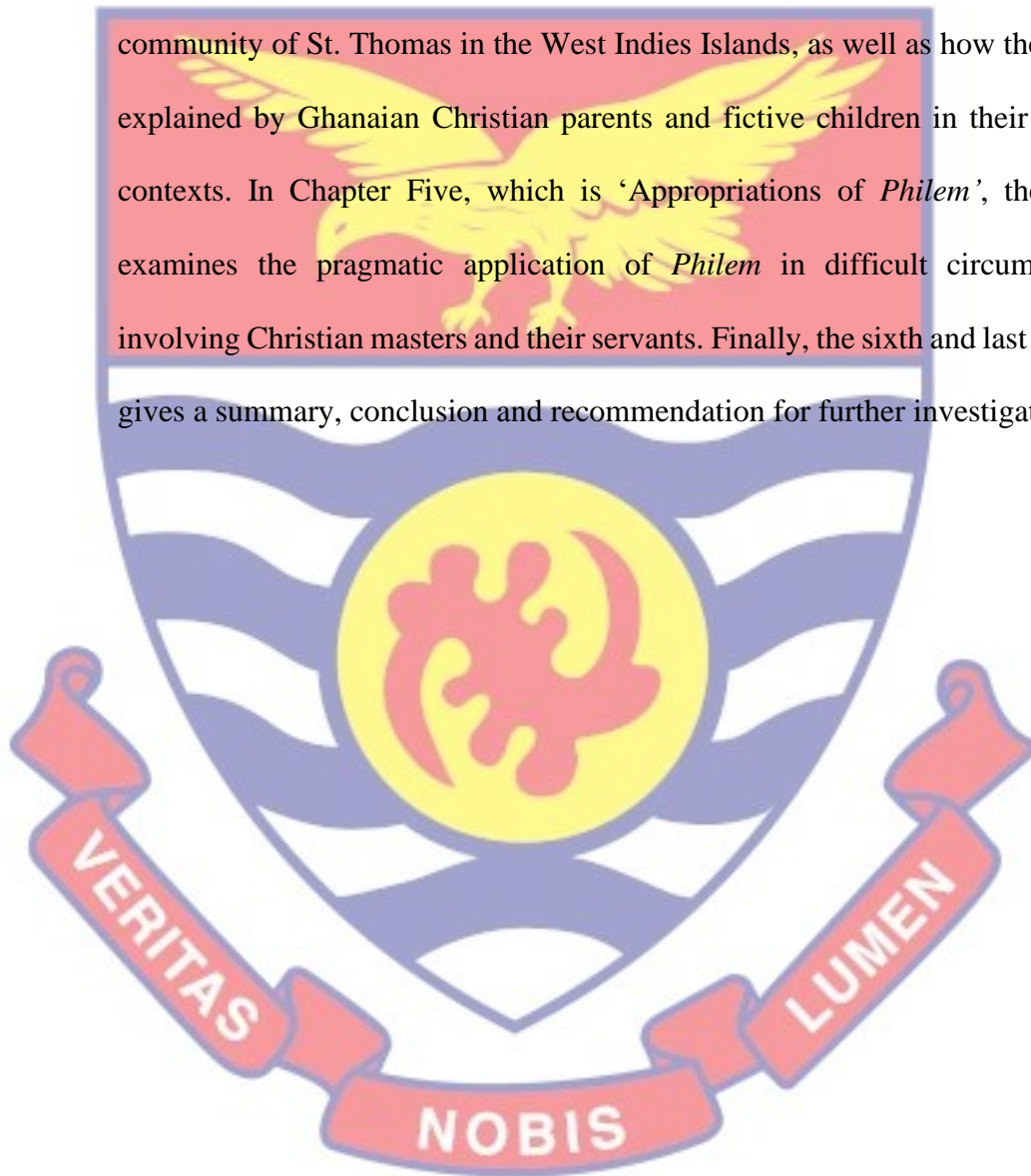
### **Organization of the Study**

The study is structured into six chapters. Chapter One introduces the entire study. First, it looks at background information and the statement of the problem. It also outlines the specific purposes of the study with their related research questions. Again, it discusses the methodology of the study and reviews related literature.

Chapter Two is titled, "Background to Slavery in the 1st Century C.E. Greco-Roman communities." It explains the concept of slavery, who was a slave in the 1st Century Roman empire, forms of slaves, ways into slavery, manumission practices, the concept of *fugitivus servus* (runaway slave), and the views of classical philosophers and poets on slavery. Chapter Three is captioned

‘Distanciation: An Exegetical Analysis of *Philem*.’ It looks at the critical reading of *Philem* to expose the persuasiveness of the letter.

Under the heading, ‘Contextualisations of *Philem*’, the fourth chapter discusses some meanings users have put on the *Philem* in their contexts. It specifically examines how *Philem* was understood in the 18th-century community of St. Thomas in the West Indies Islands, as well as how the text is explained by Ghanaian Christian parents and fictive children in their unique contexts. In Chapter Five, which is ‘Appropriations of *Philem*’, the study examines the pragmatic application of *Philem* in difficult circumstances involving Christian masters and their servants. Finally, the sixth and last chapter gives a summary, conclusion and recommendation for further investigations.



## CHAPTER TWO

### BACKGROUND TO SLAVERY IN 1ST CENTURY C. E. GRECO- ROMAN WORLD

#### Introduction

Given that the NT authors and the people about whom they wrote, lived in a world where multiple cultures met, including Jewish, Roman, and Greek, at least, it is crucial to examine the cultural practice of slavery because even if not directly stated in our *Philem*, it does still have relevance to the meaning of the text. Thus, the Chapter looks at the definition of slavery, types of enslavement, modes of enslaving or getting enslaved; treatment of slaves; flight from slavery; liberation or manumission practices; and philosophical thoughts on the institution in the first century C.E.

#### What is slavery in Greco-Roman society?

In Greco-Roman thoughts, slavery was “the status or condition of a person over whom any or all powers attaching to the right of ownership are exercised” (Finley, 1998). Slavery was a legal matter, instead of ethnicity or race. The status of the slave as a property or an asset ultimately left the owner in possession of virtually unlimited rights of exploitation and the slave with only the flimsiest and often only theoretical guard against abuses from the owner. What distinguished Greco-Roman slavery from other forms of subordination and exploitation is that the personhood of the slave was the legal property of the master; the slave’s will was subjected to the owner’s authority, and he or she was obliged to serve in any way the master deemed fit without any right to objection (Combes, 1998). Roman law expresses the complex relations in the slavery institution with crystalline sharpness. The master was called *dominus*.

His power, (i.e., *dominium*) to use, abuse, and sell slaves was virtually absolute and exclusive. Slaves were the living dead. Legal status was absolute: all humans were either slaves or free (*Digest*, 1.5.3).

Bartchy (1973) provides some vital information about slavery in the antique world. He writes, “Throughout history, a large number of societies have chosen not to kill their vanquished enemies but to force them to serve as slaves, subjecting them to a ‘social death,’ separated from blood kin, from homeland and legal protections enjoyed by free persons” (Bartchy, 1973, p. 12). However, the Greeks and Romans independently changed such enslavement into something original, ‘namely, an institutionalized system of large-scale employment of slave labour in both the countryside and the cities’ (Finley, 1998). Rome was incomparable in exploiting slaves. Enslavement for debt was the primary means by which Rome acquired slaves in the Republic’s early days. However, the expansion of the Empire corresponded with the influx of slaves into Rome. To both masters and slaves, slavery was seen as an inevitable and unavertable condition of life.

From Roman law and ideologies, a slave was conceived as a person with a definite financial value under the ownership of another person. One became a slave, due to circumstances that the law regulated. He or she was a chattel or property of the owner and served the household as an alienated member. Even his or her social movement was connected to the master’s household. The slaves had to follow their owners’ orders without any exception (Patterson, 1982). Slaves were handled like objects; they had no rights. They did not even possess the right to life (Justinian *Digesta* 1.6.1.1). Ste. Croix (1981, p. 22) defined the



word “slave” as “the status or condition of a person over whom all the powers attached to the right of ownership are exercised.”

Therefore, the relation between master and slave was appropriately defined by “the slave being called the master’s possession or property.” Every slave had a master/mistress to whom he/she was subjected. Moreover, this domination was of a peculiar kind. Unlike the authority one freeman sometimes has over another, the master’s power over the slave was unrestricted.

Secondly, slaves were in a lower condition as compared to freemen. In the ordinary sense of the word, a slave is a person who is the property of another, politically and socially at a lower level than the mass of the people and performing compulsory labour. Slaves are in unqualified servitude and are the absolute properties of their masters. The slave is not regarded as a person but as a lifeless article, left to the discretion of the master. Slavery is characterised by human persons being as an object of possession by another. In a sociological sense, it is an organ in the social body performing a particular role. The social function of slavery is compulsory labour that absorbs the whole personality of the forced labourer.

These features of ancient slavery underlie Patterson’s conceptualisation of (ancient) slavery as “the permanent violent domination of natively alienated and generally dishonoured persons” (p. 13). Moreover, this permanent and rootless alienation of slaves in the family or society within which they function was a fairly distributed feature of all slaves, irrespective of the cruelty or kindness with which they may be treated. Therefore, slavery was the reality of the slave as a legal item or property of another and bound to serve him/her in every capacity desired by the master/mistress.

Slavery must be distinguished from associated phenomena like children and wives subjected to the head of the family. In *primaeval* eras, the condition of children in the early phases of social life was understood to be one of complete subjection to the head of the family, the *pater familias*, who had over them unrestricted power, extending to the power of life and death. Wives were the absolute property of the husband.

However, other social organs somewhat resembled slavery since they relatively performed virtually the same function. For instance, a debtor may pawn one of the members of his family or himself. The central fact is that the pawn is in bondage, however temporarily, that he has to serve his master. Therefore, so long as the debt remains unpaid, the pawn was equivalent to a slave. He had to serve the master without any limit; the master's control over him/her was therefore unlimited. Thus, practices such as debt slavery, household and domestic debt slaves, agricultural debt slaves, child trafficking, forced (child) labour, and serfdom are analogous to slavery or bear resemblance to slavery in some of their effects. Sadly, the number of people affected by these practices is much more significant at present than that resulting from crude slavery.

The Greco-Roman empire is considered a slave society in terms of the structural location of slavery: prominent groups relied to a significant degree on slave labour to produce surplus and sustain their position of power (de Ste Croix, 1981; Finley, 1998; Hopkins, 1978; Patterson, 1982). In important areas, slaves were not merely present but supported what has been termed a 'slave mode of production,' a mode that rested both on an integrated system of enslavement, slave trade, and slave employment in production, and on "the

systematic subjection of slaves to the control of their masters in the process of production and reproduction (Lovejoy, 2000, p. 10)

Slaves were being used in an enormous variety of activities: they functioned as estate managers, field hands, shepherds, hunters, domestic servants, artisans, construction workers, retailers, miners, clerks, teachers, doctors, midwives, wetnurses, textile workers, potters, and entertainers. In addition to private-sector employment, they served in public administration and military units.

Also, slaves belonged to private individuals as well as the state, communities, temples, and partnerships. Some were put at the disposal of fellow slaves. Their obligations ranged from the most basic tasks of footmen and water carriers to the complex duties of stewards and business managers. Slaves could be kept in chains or placed in positions of trust, resided in their owners' homes or were apprenticed or rented out. They were found in every part of the Empire. Emancipated slaves were active in a similarly wide range of occupations, and in addition, rose into the most senior echelons of private and public administration (Bradley, 1998).

### **Forms of slavery in Greco-Roman 1st Century CE**

Different forms of slavery coexisted side by side or were mixed in those decades. For example, some slaves worked in the household (domestic slaves), farmland or agricultural field slaves, and others were confined to the mines or quarry sites. The severity of one's enslavement was roughly related to one's location or field of work. However, in theory, all slaves found themselves on the margins of society, with no legal right to inheritance (Bradley, 2011).

Domestic slaves were in urban households as cooks, butlers, wet nurses, errand slaves or personal attendants, physicians or a combination of these roles. They lived a relatively comfortable life. Some domestic slaves had much better living conditions than some poor free persons and hence saw themselves as privileged. Nevertheless, the domestic slave was in no way exempted from abuses. Since they were always in the purview of the master, these slaves suffered anxiety, fear and terrible abuses.

There were those slaves committed to the mines or fields. Generally, they had little or no hope for freedom nor an improvement in health because the task was miserable and led to a slow death. A slave in other social sphere locations could be transferred to the mining site when the master felt dissatisfied, displeased, or betrayed by the slave. Thus, rebel slaves, arrested fugitives, and those accused of misconduct such as insubordination or treachery were often confined to the mines as an alternative punishment for them to toil till death. Unless ransomed by relatives or pardoned by the master, the slave condemned to the mines had death as the only sure hope for the rest of the miserable life. Some of the rural slaves worked in agricultural fields. Jesus' parable of the tenants mimics this type of rural setting. Usually, the slaves work under a freedman or another slave to produce economic wealth for the master. Even though the task of slaves in the farmlands was tedious, it was comparatively better off than those condemned to the mines.

Between the relatively 'privileged' domestic slaves and those practically exposed to a slow and painful death stood what might be called 'a slave middle class', consisting of skilled craftsmen such as artisans, masons, carpenters, bricklayers, administrators, secretaries, tax-collectors, educators, and nurses. In

the Greco-Roman era, some highly intelligent and well-trained slaves who did public work had chances of being manumitted and or of marrying into the owner's household or that of another free person (Garnsey & Saller, 2014).

Irrespective of where the slave is located, his/her treatment largely depended on the character and status of the owner and his family. Existing laws on slavery were not automatically enforced or applied in practical matters on slavery (Garnsey, 1999). There is a considerable notion among scholars that Onesimus is a domestic slave of his master Philemon. There is no hint about the slave's professional status in *Philemon*.

#### **Ways into Slavery in the Greco-Roman world**

Entering into slavery in Greco-Roman communities could happen in various ways. The most frequent way into slavery was through warfare. Just as in the famous ancient Near Eastern empires of Babylonia, Assyria, Egypt, and Israel, so in Greece and Rome prisoners of war were condemned to servitude unless they were instantly ransomed. Waging war ultimately meant "who would have the power to enslave whom" (Braund, 2011, p. 115). Though they usually made sure to have legitimate motives for instigating war, the possibility of enslaving their opponents and seizing their goods was an important incentive that prompted the launching of many military campaigns. Notable individuals in Greco-Roman society derived their wealth from the booty of wars.

In Greco-Roman communities, slaves could also be acquired from traders at marketplaces. "Slaves were captured and then sold to small scale dealers who took care of distribution" (Braund, 2011, p. 113). Some were experts in this form of business, but on the whole, everyone could purchase and sell slaves. There is evidence of an important slave market in the Roman empire.

There were open-slave markets in the Greek cities of Athens and Corinth, in the Near East of Tyre and Ephesus (where Paul was imprisoned) and in the West, Rome. In the times of Cicero, the price of an able-bodied adult equated to the yearly income of a free artisan (Strabo 14.5.5). Usually, the buyer was responsible for the payment of private debts the slave might have incurred under his former owner. Slaves were bought by states, cities, temples, shop owners, and other private citizens. The Aegean island of Delos was allegedly able to export 10,000 slaves per day (Strabo, 1960). This high number leads one to think that Strabo (1960) might have been employing hyperbolic language when making his statement. However, it reflects that by 166 B.C., this island was thought to be a major site for slave trading, where slave traders and pirates could take down the merchandise. Also, pirates or human hunters indiscriminately caught people to either extract ransom money from relatives or be sold on the market.

Another way of becoming a slave was debt-bondage. Privation and famine compel one to accept terms of service and maintenance from other(s) to which under normal circumstances he/she would never submit. In some situations, the desperately needy person offers himself “security to his creditor until the debt was repaid” (Gardener, 2011, p. 415). This form of debt-bondage did not take away the debtor’s freedom and dignity but afforded a grace period where he could find the resource or repay his creditor with his labour. The main reasons for self-sale should be located in the instinctual desire of human beings to survive or stay alive at all costs. People, therefore, surrendered their lives to harsh and even unimaginable conditions in exchange just for life. If the debtor defaulted to square his/her debt, he/she could be sold abroad (Gardener, 2011).

Even though debt bondage was made illegal by the Roman emperors, it was still a valid form of servitude that continued throughout the empire.

The exposure of infants is a well-attested practice in Greco-Roman communities. People would usually get rid of the baby in the first ten days of life, before the baby had gone through the purification rituals and formally been received into the family (Grubbs, 2013; Patterson, 1982). This phenomenon appears to have been deemed a lesser evil since the methods of contraception and abortion were unreliable and dangerous. The surviving baby would then be taken by a family that would most likely use the child or sell him/her as a slave.

One could also become a slave through house birth. After the end of the great Roman wars of expansion, an increasing proportion of slaves in the Graeco-Roman world were born and raised in the households of slave owners. Some house-born slaves were begotten by the master and borne by female slaves. Others also stemmed from voluntary or enforced breeding between male and female slaves. Slave breeding was more economical and desirable than slave buying unless a bought slave was a skilled artisan, a businessman, or a teacher. At the time of Paul, most slaves had never tasted freedom because they were house born. Perhaps, this phenomenon of house-born slaves made classical theorists like Aristotle theorise that slavery had its foundations in nature. In *Politics*, Aristotle observes that “from the hour of their birth, some (persons) are marked out for subjection, others for rule...Some persons are by nature free, and others are slaves, and ... for this latter, slavery is both expedient and right.”

To sum up, one becomes a slave in the Greco-Roman context as a result of captivity by war, condemnation of a court, birth from a slave mother, child exposure, and debt bondage.

### **The runaway slave (*fugitivus servus*)**

In the ancient world, runaway or fugitive slaves were outlaws. People shunned them out of fear of the consequences of harbouring them. Keeping a fugitive slave was prohibited by Roman law in both the East and West.

Flights took different forms and were spurred by varied motives. The natural yearning for freedom, desire to return to one's family, fear of master's threats, the experience of unjustifiable cruel treatment, a consciousness of some misdeed, and hope for a better life elsewhere could individually or collectively count as reasons underlying slave flight. Among these, it was most often assumed that flights were prompted when the violence and abuse of masters became unbearable. In other words, the wicked or harsh master often turned his slaves into runaways. As a result, slaves often fled the flogging master. However, the numerous legislations on slave flight coupled with the uncertain future for the runaway slave and the terrible punishment for recaptured slaves scared many slaves from risking running away. Thus, not all slaves who suffered daily abuses in the form of beating, maiming, or torture chose to flee.

The runaway slave was “an outlaw who could be caught, starved, beaten, raped, and killed by anyone met anywhere” (Bradley, 1988, p. 49). Survival for the fugitives was highly uncertain because, before the flight, civil legislation did not exist in their favour. The fear of possible recapture may compel the slave to put the largest possible distance away from the master even though that never assured safety. The runaway's name, accent, language and conduct could betray them and cause them not to be accepted by the local population. The risk of being identified was highly critical to the fugitive. They were often hungry and exposed to the elements.



Furthermore, if he could find a job, the fugitive's wages would be below the minimum wage because of the many unemployed free persons and freedmen who lived in poverty in the Empire. A fugitive would always feel hunted either by his master, the state or local police or professional slave catchers. The runaway would always be worried about capture.

The master of a runaway slave usually issues a search warrant, and whoever turns over such a person to the irate owner is richly rewarded. The Roman law prohibited any conduct relating to harbouring a fugitive slave, and so anyone found culprit would incur heavy penalties. In some earlier cultures, aiding and abetting the flight of a slave attracted capital punishment as enshrined in the Codex Hammurabi, dated in the 8th Century B.C.E. (Barth & Blanke, 2000).

A master would chain his fugitive slave to impair his mobility. The fugitive could expect to be "thrashed with the whip, imprisonment and crucifixion and every type of punishment" (Barth & Blanke, 2000, p. 108). In addition, the master could tattoo the forehead of the fugitive to present future episodes of flights. One of the basic inscriptions marked on the fugitive's forehead is 'retain me lest I flee' (Harper, 2011, p. 257).

However, despite these precarious circumstances, there were a couple of ways in which the fugitive's flight could be successful. First of all, the slave could seek asylum in the house of a free high standing person (usually, a friend of the master) seeking intercession or go to the precincts of a shrine recognised to offer refuge. In the late empire, the slave could also flee to a Christian church.

By the late 4th Century CE, the imperial state endorsed and reinforced the church's role as a place of temporary asylum. These two options are related

to the situation with Onesimus in *Philem*. The asylum giver would be innocent of a crime if he examined the complaints of the slave and sent him back to the legitimate owner or master usually with a written request or recommendation on how the prodigal or slave should be treated. However, the convention excluded seeking asylum at the home of a free person not befriending the slave's master (Nordling, 1991). Two letters of Pliny the Younger wrote in favour of a freedman who had run away from his patron also typify this form. However, if the asylum giver wanted to keep the fugitive, then the former must offer compensation subject to the owner's approval and keep the slave for lifelong service, even though afterwards the asylum giver can sell the slave on the market. Thus, fleeing for asylum in the house of a free person did not automatically guarantee freedom. It was mostly an act meant to bring about a 'change of master' with no guaranteed lasting and better treatment.

An alternative option for the fugitive was to seek refuge in a temple. Other monuments, such as statues of Roman emperors, later assumed a protective function. However, the protection these sanctuaries or monuments offered was temporary. After that, the priest would either reconcile with the master or follow customary provisions and sell the slave to a new patron (Harrill, 1995).

Not all masters probably adopted a pessimistic attitude and swallowed the loss and remained inactive. Even though the search for a runaway slave could prove futile in many cases, in order to deter other slaves from making the same, intensive efforts had to be made for retrieving every fugitive, and there were promises of reward for giving helpful hints or for catching the escaped person. The master could solicit the support of other slave owners or the city's

or state's intelligence or even employ professional slave catchers to aid him trace and restore the runaway slave. There were also potential traitors in every part of the empire who were ready to give tip-offs when the fugitive's owner had published a warrant of apprehension and a reward for capture. Irrespective of what caused or who facilitated the returned slave, his fate depended mainly on the master. The returned slave might be whipped or beaten until he becomes a cripple. He might also be branded on any part of the body the master wishes to: the skin under his feet might be burnt off by glowing iron plates. Alternatively, a metallic collar with his name address might be fixed around his neck; he might even be killed to serve as a deterrent to himself and his fellow slaves.

However, if the fugitive slave had found refuge with a benevolent and wealthy or high standing friend of their master's house and voluntarily returned carrying an intercessory letter, there was a distinct possibility of a gracious and kind reception by the owner. A similar picture is painted in *Philem* where Paul intercedes on behalf of Philemon's runaway slave, Onesimus.

In some instances, if the returned slave was a house slave, the master may decide to sell him off to the mines. However, an escaped slave who returned with an intercessory letter from a good and high-standing friend of the master had a higher possibility of a benevolent or a hearty reception. Usually, the intercessor would combine emotional, moral, utilitarian, financial, selfish or altruistic, and rhetorical ploys to support his plea. Sometimes he may put the master under some urgent pressure, yet the final decision over what happens to the slave depended exclusively on the master (Barth & Blanke, 2000). Thus,

much of Paul's persuasion in *Philem* seems to have been highly influenced by the customary ways of handling problems between masters and their slaves.

### Classical Philosophers and the Subject of Slavery

The subject of slavery is given mixed consideration by philosophers and great thinkers of first-century C.E. By incorporating ideas from Plato, Aristotle (*Pol.*1.5.1254b) stated that "some human beings were, by their nature, meant for slavery because of the lack of intellectual capacities that are essential for an autonomous life." Hence, to Aristotle, slavery was a just and good thing for the intrinsic benefit of the slave (*Pol.*1254a-1255a). Furthermore, he contended that 'slavery is both expedient and just' for those who are not free by nature because one part of humanity should rule and others be ruled. He claims that the division of humans into the inferior and superior binary originates from "the constitution of the universe, the predestined rule of the soul over the body" (1254a). Slavery then reveals "the moral superiority of the soul over the body" and rationalises the subjugation of the barbarians to the Greeks. Thus, Aristotle considered enslavement righteous, moral and profitable since it is an actual reflection and application of the constitution of the universe.

However, this literary expression of Aristotle contradicted the teachings on nature by the Sophists. They had earlier taught that human laws are not a true reflection of nature. To them, by the good ordering of nature, all humans are created equal. However, the law made by human beings is a tyrant that enforces many things such as inequality, contrary to nature. It is nature's will that all humans relate as relatives, members of the same household, and citizens of the universe endowed with the same inalienable rights. Differentiations in status, sophists argue, are an artificial imposition on humankind by the superior power

only. Hence, they sought to evaluate slavery as an unjust product of human decisions, power relations and anatural actions (Barth & Blanke, 2000).

Even though Sophists such as Antiphon and Xenophon were vehement in their protest against slavery as an injustice committed by the strong against the weak, their call was not heeded in the fifth and fourth centuries B.C.E.

Centuries later, Stoics philosophers like Euripides and Seneca, condemned slavery in a similar radical spirit.

In Sophocles, Euripides said that the body could be enslaved but not the mind. For him, natural laws are not fixed or absolute; even when someone is of bad birth, the most important is a virtue; the name does make no difference; the same birth by nature is noble and ignoble. Status is pride given by law, but reason and understanding, which are true nobility, are given by God, not by riches. It is clear that Euripides was concerned more about the difference between good and evil persons rather than the question of the institution itself. For him, slavery is not the ultimate threat to humanity because true freedom as a peaceful state of mind was available to all humans, not only to free persons. Other Stoic philosophers such as Zeno express the conviction that ‘only the wise are free; bad people are slaves.’

Some of the Stoics also evaluated Aristotle’s views in *Politics* (i.e., 1.125a; 1259b-1260b) and connected the ‘dots’ to support their stance on the humanity of slaves. For instance, the slave though ‘an animated instrument,’ can learn human qualities such as temperance, courage, and justice, and thus could become a ‘perfect slave.’ Younger Stoics such as Cicero, Seneca, Epictetus, Dio Chrysostom, and Emperor Marcus Aurelius also championed similar fundamental principles on freedom and slavery.

Barth and Blanke (2000) have captured some of these teachings. Stoics believe that slaves are human beings not things, cattle, and mere objects and instruments, because they have souls, an inner life, and are capable of virtues. The differentiation between Greeks and barbarians is invalid; by nature, both slaves are children of Zeus and are as free as their masters. Freedom is not a socio-political status under the law; instead, it is identified with moral conduct. True freedom is inner freedom; a slave may be a better person than a master, as exemplified by the imprisoned Socrates (Barth & Blanke, 2000).

One of the outstanding contemporary Stoics on slavery is Seneca. In *Epistle 47*, Seneca teaches that ‘a slave is not just a slave but first of all a human being, begotten the same way as free person, living under the same sky, breathing the same air dying as a free person dies.’ He also reiterates that ‘fortune has equal rights over the slave and free so much that today’s slave may be free tomorrow and vice versa’ hence ‘a master should value and judge his slaves by their moral entity as humans, not by the servant work to which they are assigned.’ They must associate with slaves on kindly and affable terms and seek friends among them. A master ought to treat his inferiors as he would like to be treated by his betters, making them respect and love rather than only fear him. Seneca also gives counsel to slaves to ‘arise and make themselves worthy of the deity and also be patient, and submit to the inevitable.’

As consolatory as these Stoics philosophers sounded, their dualistic view on the body and soul and redefinition of freedom were only idealistic. It would not be surprising that Seneca encouraged prudent masters to address their slaves as brothers or treat them as such but nothing beyond this admonition. These philosophers seem not to have made it their explicit or prime goal to

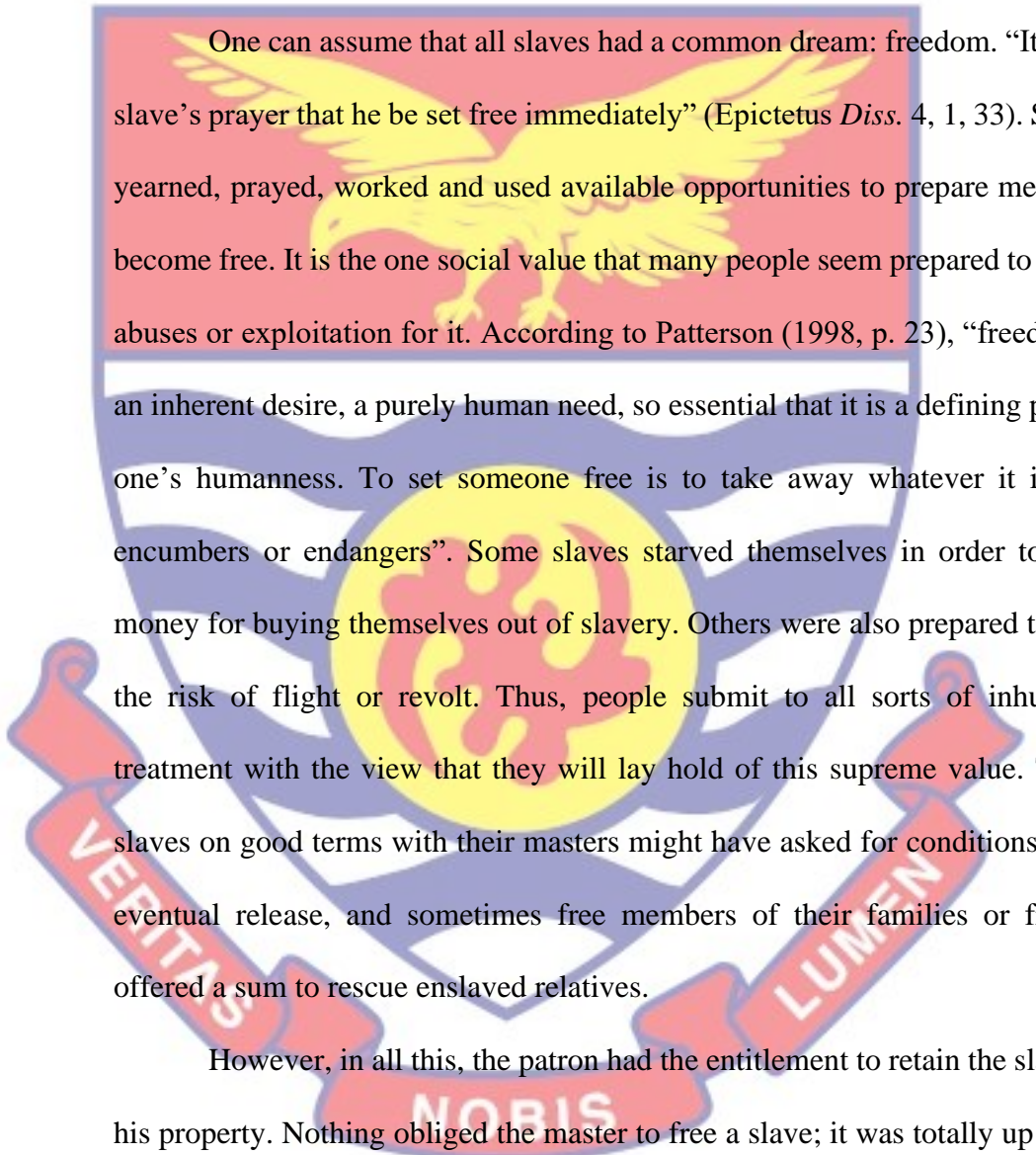
advocate the legal, social and economic emancipation of slaves. As Barth and Blanke (200) have observed, the changing or radically uprooting of the ancient institution of slavery was not given the primacy of importance in their philosophising. Hence, some have doubted whether these teachings and exhortations really offered any substantial consolation to slaves. However, slaveowners who tended to exercise some humanity in their dealings with their slaves would have embraced the teachings of the Stoics.

Also, years later, some Stoic thoughts were considered in Roman law. For instance, in *Digesta* 1.5.4.1., Florentinus states that ‘slavery is a domination of other people according to the laws of nations, but against nature’ and Ulpian ruled in *Digesta* 1.1.4, that ‘all people are equal by nature.’ Thus, one is right to argue that the Stoics’ teachings on the subject partly influenced Paul’s teachings on slavery, especially the household code of Christian slaves and their masters (Col. 3:22-4:1).

### **Manumission/Liberation and Freedom**

The act or process of releasing a person from slavery was a regular and integral part of Roman slavery. It was pretty distinct from emancipation, an Eighteenth-century Enlightenment coinage expressing a moral and political conviction that slavery – both as an institution and ideology – is repugnant to the aims of all enlightened and just societies of human beings. By manumission, the ex-slave became a freedman or freedwoman but with certain obligations towards the former master in a patron-client relationship. The manumitted slave remains with and serves the ex-master until the master passes away. A *libertus ingratus* (i.e., an ungrateful freed person) faced a potential punitive punishment such as relegation or banishment out of the patron’s house. When Paul exhorted slaves

and their possible liberation in 1 Corinthians 7:21, he spoke of the first-century context. In that context, liberation opportunities for a slave would mean one of the conventional manumission practices and not abolition in the modern sense of these terms. Thus, Paul's encouragement of manumission for slaves cannot be taken as his aversion to slavery as an institution or ideology.



One can assume that all slaves had a common dream: freedom. “It is the slave’s prayer that he be set free immediately” (Epictetus *Diss.* 4, 1, 33). Slaves yearned, prayed, worked and used available opportunities to prepare means to become free. It is the one social value that many people seem prepared to suffer abuses or exploitation for it. According to Patterson (1998, p. 23), “freedom is an inherent desire, a purely human need, so essential that it is a defining part of one’s humanness. To set someone free is to take away whatever it is that encumbers or endangers”. Some slaves starved themselves in order to save money for buying themselves out of slavery. Others were also prepared to take the risk of flight or revolt. Thus, people submit to all sorts of inhumane treatment with the view that they will lay hold of this supreme value. Those slaves on good terms with their masters might have asked for conditions of an eventual release, and sometimes free members of their families or friends offered a sum to rescue enslaved relatives.

However, in all this, the patron had the entitlement to retain the slave as his property. Nothing obliged the master to free a slave; it was totally up to the master’s benevolence. The Roman laws made no room for slaves to negotiate or appeal to a court in their interest. It is suggested by some NT scholars that slaves were usually manumitted after age thirty (30) or six years of servitude. However, other classical evidence points to the contrary. For instance, Roman



senator Cicero, who rhetorically argued for a fixed age for the emancipation of slaves, refused to manumit his personal domestic slave, Tiro, until the slave's golden birth anniversary (Harrill, 2006). This and other related evidence have caused some scholars to evaluate Roman manumission as a slavery ideology that served the master's interest and reinforced the institution itself.

There were multiple motives behind manumission in Roman society. Kindness could be assumed as a factor. Some masters also consolidated their honour (*dignitas*) with the number of freedmen clients and proteges in their households. Again, the emancipated could legally represent the master as an agent in the master's business transactions. Finally, when a master judges it to be economically advantageous or relatively cheaper and less risky to employ free labour than to give, especially in bad years, shelter, food, clothing or medical care to a slave, not to mention the problems of discipline and flight, he may release some of his slaves, especially those judged to be useless, lazy and troublesome.

Also, debt slaves who have finished serving the given period, usually up to when the debts and expenses incurred for maintenance had been repaid, could be set free by their masters. A slave owner could reward a slave with a manumission, especially when the slave had done some good work and had proven faithful. A master could also give freedom to slaves who have become indispensable members of the household or the neighbourhood, sometimes by marriage with a son or daughter or friend of the house. Sometimes too, a master's motive for manumitting a slave would be purely his desire to be admired by the community for his magnanimity. It was an act that could bring honour to the master in his community and among his friends. Despite all these

possible reasons for which a master would release a slave, neither a promise of nor an official manumission was a guarantee for lasting freedom (Barth & Blanke, 2000). The manumission of slaves was mainly not an act of altruism.

Generally, there were two main forms of manumission in the Greco-Roman communities: legal and sacral manumission. During Paul's days even though, Roman laws passed under the emperors were supposed to determine all that was to be considered legal throughout the Empire, much older Greek, Roman and Eastern traditions or conventions were still applied in their daily lives (Barth & Blanke, 2000). In Greece, the difference between a freed person and a slave was less conspicuous. Those freed could still be called 'slaves,' and there was no bestowal of citizenship. As far back as the 5th Century B.C.E., the act of manumission in Greece was not a private nor an informal ceremony that took place in the frame of the master's home. Instead, laws prescribed that it be ascertained by testament, called out in the street, in the theatre or before an altar. In addition, there was to be an inscription on a stone or vessel to confirm the validity of the manumission.

In Rome, the patron originally retained some rights over the slave who had been set free, a provision enshrined in the Twelve Table Law of the 5th Century B.C.E. Informal manumission was made either by giving a testament to the slave or by the simple gesture of inviting the slave to share in a table or festival community or in the circle of friends who served as a witness. This act, however, did not confer Roman citizenship on the freedman. Only the formally manumitted slaves through either *manumissio testamento* or *manumissio vindicta* received citizenship (Finley, 1998). In the former, the letter had to contain the conventional formula, but in the latter, a high Roman official had to

give his consent to the master's wish and touch the slave with a staff to declare him free in the presence of the master. This conferred Roman citizenship on the freedman but not in an absolute sense of it. For instance, they had no access to the courts and had no franchise. Theoretically, ex-slaves were much the same as 'free servants', but in practice, many continued to endure physical punishments, sexual abuse, economic exploitation, severe restrictions on movement, social discrimination, and fragile family relationships.

The sacral manumission was a kind of self-redemption by the slave mediated through clerical temple personnel. The famous Delphi inscriptions of the early third century B.C.E. are classic examples of this form of slave emancipation. The temple offered asylum to flight slaves. Since the slave could not legally and commercially act on his or her own behalf, the attending priest (on behalf of Apollo) would normally mediate by negotiating with the slave's legitimate owner and slave to work out an agreement after which was engraved on a stone. Some have described this form as an 'instrument sale.' It is because a fee is paid to the temple by the slave and (or) the patron. Besides that, the slave never becomes the slave of Apollo but would instead enjoy greater freedom than he would have enjoyed if manumitted through the informal, formal or state manumission (Wiedemann, 2005). A sacrally freed slave had access to court and could own private property without fear that the former master would seize it.

There was also a *manumissio censu* which existed until 50 C.E. and was valid during the eighteenth months within every five years. In this situation, a slave could become free and had the right of a Roman citizen if he or she could justify his or her claim to have been born a free citizen and that he or she was

supported by his master in his or her desire to be free, and was accepted by the civil authorities for inscription in the voter's register. During Paul's days, the safest way to grant and receive freedom was either by testament or by a letter written to the slave, who lived in another place than his owner. This letter had to have a proper formula meaning that the wording could not be "I wish to be free" but rather "so and so is free" or "I order that he be free."

*Manumissio vindicta* occurred when a high Roman state official gave his consent to the master's wish and would have to touch the slave with a staff and declare him free in the presence of the master. There had to be a contract with a patron, which required specific payments as well as the listed works of the slave being manumitted. This contract had to be signed and required a tax to be paid. The freedman would receive Roman citizenship in this instance but in a limited sense of it. However, the patron would remain the manumitted slave's protector and representative during major litigations but did not possess the power of the freedman's life. The manumitted slave would often adopt the name of his former master in order not to call attention to his former status as a slave

There were many opportunities for the freedman. Even though some slipped into far worse conditions, others climbed upward on the social ladder. Some were knighted and given higher positions in the Roman imperial civil administration; some were married into noble families while several others became famous philosophers, poets, teachers or artists. In most cases, the upward progress of a freed to a level comparable to that of a freeborn citizen depended mainly on the position of the manumitting patron. In some cases of manumission rites, there is the signing of a contract (*pactum*) by which the slave

assumed some obligation to live and work on the master's property like a hired servant for some time or forever (Bradley, 1998). Skilled slaves could be made to pay rent or deliver part of their gains to their master and still served their patron's order. Thus, for the rest of their lives, the manumitted slave remained 'freedman' or freedwoman' of the patron.

Those who did not find a job in the administration or agricultural work or other job or the protection of a rich or noble free person shared the fate of the unfortunate, homeless fugitive slaves. Thus, they became part of the poorest who were exploited during occasional hiring. Some end up as beggars or thieves whilst the younger ones sell themselves into prostitution. For some, the liberty gained turns out to be the freedom to die in utter despair of hunger and disease.

Barth and Blanke (2000) have intimated that "manumission meant access to liberty fettered so much with many strings and having its wings so drastically clipped that its effect was highly ambiguous, if not thoroughly undesirable, unpleasant, and miserable" (p.53). The freedom that emancipation was meant to offer at best could turn out to be a disguised form of enslavement in the Roman empire. In fact, enfranchisement could at best turn out to be a slightly milder form of slavery in the East and the West. The concrete termination of the ancient forms of institutional slavery was prompted by economic, political, juridical and ideological changes.

### **The welfare of slaves in Greco-Roman societies**

In every slave society, the most vulnerable to physical abuse and violence are the slaves. Some domestic slaves suffered rape and other forms of harm; dissident slaves were chained up in prisons and left to starve or condemned to the mines and quarries to toil unto death. Questioning of slaves at courts

involved torture, flogging, and racking of the body. Nevertheless, despite these cruelties in Greco-Roman slavery, one cannot overlook the few shades of humanity towards slaves.

The condition of the slave was not always considered inhumane or degrading, for slavery formed a regular part of many societies and cultures and was an integral element of their economic structures. For example, along with husbands, wives, sons, and daughters, male and female slaves were integral household members in the Roman world. This can be seen clearly from the Pauline corpus itself. In Colossians 3:18-4:1 and Ephesians 5:22-6:9, Paul gives counselling on the appropriate ways household members should conduct themselves and relate. Manumitted slaves could become businessmen or occupy high office. They could marry anyone except a senator and, for a time, could serve in the navy (Meltzer, 1993).

In the elite household, some slaves became confidants and personal assistants to the master and mistress. Slaves and freedmen were significant in managing family property. When playing the role of a financial manager or steward, the slave or freedman assumed a sensitive position of great responsibility and hence was trusted within the household. Their job was supported by a cadre of record-keepers, accountants, secretaries, shorthand note-takers and treasurers. The owners of such trusted slaves (or freedmen) treated them with much greater deference than the less skilled slaves lower down the social hierarchy.

Slaves were not segregated from free people in most professions. On the contrary, they were integrated into all levels of the ancient economy. Unlike American slavery, where slave illiteracy was by law, slaves in the Greco-Roman

empire received training and served as engineers, artisans, professional poets, physicians, shopkeepers, architects, artists, prophets, philosophers, teachers, and financial secretaries (Bradley, 1998). In addition, most urban slaves accumulated and administered *peculium* in assets like money, tools, land, goods, and even slaves. While the *peculium* technically belonged to the master, it often offered a means of bargaining for manumission.

Despite this opportunity for high status or manumission, many slaves lived and died under the slavery system that never interrogated the morality of enslaving fellow humans. Another practice that safeguarded the welfare of slaves was the architecture of Roman houses. Unlike the American antebellum South, where slaves lived in separate “slave quarters” outside the master’s house, ancient slaves lived under the same roof as their owners. Such close living arrangements heightened familial relations in Roman households.

A slave could, in many cases, enter into business for himself, give a portion of his earnings to his master or mistress and keep the rest as his *peculium*, a ‘little money’ peculiarly his own. With such wages, or by faithful or exceptional service, or by personal attractiveness, a slave could usually attain freedom in six years.

### **Spirituality and Religious Liberty of Slaves**

The religious life of Greco-Roman slaves obliged participation in the routine rituals of the household cult, which centred on the family guardian spirits that embodied the ancestral spirit of the *pater familias*. In other words, most masters integrated their slaves into the family cult or faith practised by the master. During imperial rites like the *Capitalia* (i.e., the January rite), the slave was not exempted. For example, the master of the household hung a woollen

ball for his/her slaves but represented the free members with a male or female doll according to sexes.

Again, the Saturnalia festival celebrated every December provided an occasion for slaves to assume mastery roles in the household for the period. One can say that the unrestricted access to cults, gods, or religious rites that slaves had in the Roman empire helped them to cope with the negative sides of their situation. The cohesion that emerged among household slaves afforded them much needed spiritual support in what was commonly a dangerous and precarious position, where the worth of their lives depended on their owners' impulses.

Moreover, the domestic religious rites and ceremonies gave occasions for communal celebrations. Thus, although the manner in which they were represented made them visibly different from the freeborn and stripped them of any human or gendered identity, slaves were still considered significant enough to be included in a family's offerings in a public cult intimately linked to the household.

### **Conclusion**

Master-slave relationships constituted the bedrock of the social structure in the Greco-Roman communities of the 1st century. Unlike the trans-Atlantic slave trade, slavery in the Greco-Roman context was not based on any prejudice they had on skin colour. The slaves were denied legal rights to their own self-autonomy or free will as well as, ownership of their own bodies, intellect and labour. The legal system rendered slaves as commodities as a means to whatever masters conceived as pleasurable ends. Benevolence to slaves was not normative. Charitable treatments of slaves usually served the ultimate purpose



of masters because they were counted as part of the *paterfamilias* assets. A slave may occupy a salient position in the household of the master, yet such roles did not exempt them from contemptuous treatment as they could be sold anytime the master felt so. Nevertheless, most slaves accepted their social position and roles in society and served their masters with honour.

Freedom or manumission was undoubtedly the dream cherished by most slaves. Even though a master may manumit a slave out of gratitude or desire to marry the slave among other reasons, many instances of manumission were inspired by the master's desire to be recognised in society as a benefactor or by his economic interest in accruing a profitable manumission price. As Barclay (1991) has observed, "the terms of manumission were solely determined by the slave-owner." The master often retained some services of the former slave. It implies that there was no absolute freedom as the freedman was often caught in a web of continuing obligations.

In Greco-Roman societies, the Stoics are often credited for cultivating a positive stance toward slaves by arguing for tolerable treatment of slaves. However, it has been pointed out that Stoic thinkers like Seneca were not first and foremost interested in the welfare of the slaves, but in the dangerous effects that slavery could potentially have on masters, for instance, insurrection. In theory, there were some minimal checks against the cruel treatment of slaves, yet there is not a single piece of evidence attesting to any punishment on masters by the Law. Although it reflects a level of concern for the welfare of slaves, the Justinian Law clearly favoured the *paterfamilias* as having unrestricted authority to implicit their own sense of justice in actual situations by flogging the slave or at least confining him/her to imprisonment.

It is notable that the master-slave relationship in the first century, and probably beyond, were characterised by fear. Masters resorted to cruel actions, especially when they perceived that their slaves wronged them. From Seneca's essay on anger, we learn that slaves were often disciplined by being flogged or having their legs broken. Also, torture was recommended as a common way to discipline slaves, especially when they were being interrogated.

Fugitive slaves posed a serious problem to their masters in terms of loss of property and services. Though the harsh treatment by the *Domini* caused slaves to flee, the masters often punished them with much cruelty when found or brought back. Extreme violence was employed to deter slaves from running away. In the event of slave desertion, the master could employ the services of slave-catchers or publish a 'wanted' notice to oblige anyone to help find and return the slave to his owner. There is a second Century papyrus evidence that accorded slave-catchers full authority to chastise and imprison the fugitive slave when found. If masters disciplined common slaves with cruelty, it is reasonable to argue that there was practically no limit for a master to express anger toward the *servus fugitivus* (the runaway slave).

It is within the above-delineated context of the Greco-Roman community that *Philem* can best be situated and interpreted. The letter reveals some insightful notions about the ownership and treatment of slaves. For instance, there are conventional notions that Philemon legally owns Onesimus as his slave. However, the slave has resented and ran away and is now being returned to the owner. Onesimus could realistically only hope for severe punishment from the master, a certainty no one could deny in that era. Thus, Paul's plea to Philemon can best be appreciated against the reconstruction of

the historical realities and complexities involved in a master's dealing with a runaway slave. How does Paul's letter mitigate Onesimus' problem? What rhetorical techniques does Paul employ to convey his demands or request to Philemon? How does Paul's appeal radically subvert Greco-Roman slavery ideologies and sow the seed for the ultimate transformation of master-slave relationships? The close reading of the text in the next chapter provides answers to these questions.



## CHAPTER THREE

### DISTANCIATION: AN EXEGETICAL ANALYSIS OF *PHILEM*

#### Introduction

The chapter is the distanciation phase of the study, where we set out to analyse the textual context of the text. The first section of the analysis unearths the salient elements in the text's structure and how they gear toward the persuasive effects of the letter's appeals. The form of the text yields exegetical benefits for a fuller comprehension of what Paul did say in the letter.

The second part employs the five-step model of Kennedy (1984) for rhetorical criticism to provide a complete understanding of the letter's function, specifically regarding the argumentation and the rhetorical power of the argumentation. The reading model entails: (a) isolating the rhetorical unit, (b) establishing the rhetorical situation, (c) determining the rhetorical genus and the stasis, (d) analysing the rhetorical structure of the discourse, and (e) evaluating the persuasiveness of the rhetorical discourse. The analysis aims to expose Paul's intentional deployment of language and emotive symbols to induce Philemon to act, believe, or feel the way the Apostle desired in the rhetorical situation before him. The chapter ends with some critical labels deducible from the reading of the text.

#### Translation of the text

The researcher has carefully read and rendered the Greek text of *Philem* in Aland *et. al.* (2012) into English to highlight the rhetorical style, elements, syntax and emotive diction vividly, and figures of speech that permeate Paul's intercessory appeal to Philemon. Moreover, the literal translation is structured

into ‘utterance units’ of six putative paragraph items, giving a sense of its apparent proclamatory structure and style (Wendland, 2008).

1 Παῦλος δέσμιος Χριστοῦ Ἰησοῦ  
καὶ Τιμόθεος ὁ ἀδελφός  
Φιλήμονι τῷ ἀγαπητῷ καὶ συνεργῷ ἡμῶν

2 καὶ Ἀπφία τῇ ἀδελφῇ  
καὶ Ἀρχίππῳ τῷ συστρατιώτῃ ἡμῶν

καὶ τῇ κατ’ οἶκόν σου ἐκκλησίᾳ,  
3 χάρις ὑμῖν καὶ εἰρήνη  
ἀπὸ θεοῦ πατρὸς ἡμῶν  
καὶ κυρίου Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ.

4 Εὐχαριστῶ τῷ θεῷ μου πάντοτε

μνεῖαν σου ποιούμενος ἐπὶ τῶν  
προσευχῶν μου,

5 ἀκούων σου τὴν ἀγάπην καὶ τὴν πίστιν,

ἣν ἔχεις πρὸς τὸν κύριον Ἰησοῦν

καὶ εἰς πάντας τοὺς ἁγίους,

6 ὅπως ἡ κοινωνία τῆς πίστεώς σου

ἐνεργῆς γένηται ἐν ἐπιγνώσει παντὸς  
ἀγαθοῦ

τοῦ ἐν ἡμῖν εἰς Χριστόν.

7 χαρὰν γὰρ πολλὴν ἔσχον

καὶ παράκλησιν ἐπὶ τῇ ἀγάπῃ σου,  
ὅτι τὰ σπλάγχνα τῶν ἁγίων

ἀναπέπαιναν διὰ σοῦ,  
ἀδελφέ.

8 Διὸ πολλὴν ἐν Χριστῷ παρρησίαν ἔχων

ἐπιτάσσειν σοι τὸ ἀνήκον

9 διὰ τὴν ἀγάπην μᾶλλον παρακαλῶ,

τοιούτου ὢν ὡς Παῦλος πρεσβύτης

νυνὶ δὲ καὶ δέσμιος Χριστοῦ Ἰησοῦ·

1 Paul, a prisoner for Christ Jesus,  
and Timothy our brother,  
to Philemon our beloved fellow  
worker

2 and to Apphia our sister  
and to Archippus our fellow  
soldier,

and to the church at your house,  
3 Grace to you (all) and peace  
from God our Father  
and the Lord Jesus Christ.

4 I give thanks to my God at all  
times

when I make mention of you in  
my prayers,

5 because I hear that the love and  
the faith

which you have toward the Lord  
Jesus

and for all the holy ones,

6 so that the fellowship of your  
faithfulness

may become effectual in the  
knowledge of every good  
that is in us for Christ.

7 For I have experienced an  
abundant joy

and comfort from your love,  
because the hearts of the holy  
ones

have been refreshed through you,  
[my] brother.

8 So, although I have much  
boldness in Christ

to order you to do what is  
befitting/required

9 instead, for the sake of love, I  
earnestly appeal you,

I, Paul, being such as an  
ambassador,

but now, a prisoner too for Christ  
Jesus.

10 παρακαλῶ σε περὶ τοῦ ἐμοῦ τέκνου,  
ὃν ἐγέννησα ἐν τοῖς δεσμοῖς,

Ὀνήσιμον,

11 τὸν ποτέ σοι ἄχρηστον

νυνὶ δὲ [καὶ] σοὶ καὶ ἐμοὶ εὐχρηστον,

12 ὃν ἀνέπεμψά σοι, αὐτόν,  
τοῦτ' ἔστιν τὰ ἐμὰ σπλάγχνα·

13 ὃν ἐγὼ ἐβουλόμην πρὸς ἐμαυτὸν  
κατέχειν,

ἵνα ὑπὲρ σοῦ μοι διακονῇ

ἐν τοῖς δεσμοῖς τοῦ εὐαγγελίου,

14 χωρὶς δὲ τῆς σῆς γνώμης  
οὐδὲν ἠθέλησα ποιῆσαι,

ἵνα μὴ ὡς κατὰ ἀνάγκην τὸ ἀγαθόν σου ἦ

ἀλλὰ κατὰ ἐκούσιον·

15 Τάχα γὰρ διὰ τοῦτο ἐχωρίσθη πρὸς  
ὄραν,

ἵνα αἰώνιον αὐτὸν ἀπέχῃς,

16 οὐκέτι ὡς δοῦλον  
ἀλλ' ὑπὲρ δοῦλον,  
ἀδελφὸν ἀγαπητόν,  
μάλιστα ἐμοί,

πόσῳ δὲ μᾶλλον σοὶ

καὶ ἐν σαρκὶ καὶ ἐν κυρίῳ·

17 εἰ οὖν με ἔχεις κοινωνόν,

προσλαβοῦ αὐτὸν ὡς ἐμέ.

18 εἰ δέ τι ἠδίκησέν σε

ἢ ὀφείλει,

τοῦτο ἐμοὶ ἐλλόγα.

10 I earnestly appeal to you  
concerning my child,  
whom I have begotten in my  
imprisonment,

Onesimus.

11 whom in time past was  
unprofitable (useless) you,  
but now, at this very moment is  
indeed profitable (useful) to you  
and to me.

12 whom I have sent back to you,  
this one who is my own viscera.

13 I would have preferred to keep  
him here with me,

so that in your stead, he might  
attend on me

in my imprisonment for the  
gospel;

14 but without your consent  
I resolved/determined to do  
nothing

in order that your goodness  
might not be necessitated by  
compulsion/force  
instead of by your own volition.

15 For perhaps this is why he was  
parted from you for a short time  
(a moment)

in order that you might have him  
back for all the time (eternally),

16 no more as a slave,  
but more than a slave,  
a beloved brother,  
especially to me

but how much greater and even  
more certainly to you,  
both in the flesh and in the Lord

17 Consequently, if you  
have/hold me dearly as your  
fellow-partner,

[then] receive him in the same  
way as me.

18 Now, if he has acted unjustly  
towards you in some way,

or owes you anything,  
charge that to my account.

19 ἐγὼ Παῦλος ἔγραψα τῇ ἐμῇ χειρὶ,

ἐγὼ ἀποτίσω·

ἵνα μὴ λέγω σοι

ὅτι καὶ σεαυτὸν μοι προσοφείλεις·

20 ναὶ ἀδελφέ,

ἐγὼ σου ὀναίμην ἐν κυρίῳ·

ἀνάπασόν μου τὰ σπλάγχνα ἐν Χριστῷ.

21 Πειποθῶς τῇ ὑπακοῇ σου ἔγραψά σοι,

εἰδὼς ὅτι καὶ ὑπὲρ ἃ λέγω ποιήσεις.

22 ἅμα δὲ καὶ ἐτοίμαζέ μοι ξενίαν·

ἐλπίζω γὰρ ὅτι διὰ τῶν προσευχῶν ὑμῶν

χαρισθήσομαι ὑμῖν.

23 Ἀσπάζεται σε Ἐπαφρᾶς

ὁ συναχμαλώτός μου ἐν Χριστῷ Ἰησοῦ,

24 Μάρκος, Ἀρίσταρχος, Δημᾶς, Λουκᾶς,

οἱ συνεργοί μου.

25 Ἡ χάρις τοῦ κυρίου Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ

μετὰ τοῦ πνεύματος ὑμῶν.

19 I Paul write this with my own hand,

I will repay it –

not to mention that you

owe me even your own self

20 Yes, brother!

may I receive profit (benefit) from you in the Lord,

Refresh my viscera in Christ!

21 [Having perfect] Confident in your obedience, I write to you, knowing that you will do even more than what I ask.

22 At the same time also, make a guest room ready for me, for I hope that through your earnest prayers

I may be graciously restored to you (all).

23 Epaphras sends greetings to you,

my fellow prisoner in Christ Jesus,

24 so do Mark, Aristarchus, Demas, and Luke, my fellow workers.

25 The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ

be with the spirit of you all!

Figure 3: A putative division of *Philem* (Adapted from Wendland, 2008)

### *Philem* as a discrete literary unit

The text of *Philem* undoubtedly establishes a single complete discourse enclosed by an epistolary prologue (vv. 1-3) and epilogue (vv. 23-25). No partition thesis has been advanced regarding *Philem*, and by all reflections, “it is a complete communicative act in a self-contained epistolary” (Weima, 2010, p. 30). Verses 1-3 form an *inclusio* with verses 23-25 with the reiteration of vital descriptive terms such as ‘prisoner’ (v. 1, 23), ‘fellow-worker’ (v. 1, 2, 24) and ‘grace’ (v. 3, 25). There is a compelling linguistic and semantic consistency in the text. Tsibu (2021) remarks,

statements, phrases or words in one section of the letter either anticipated or formed the basis for appeals made in other sections of the letter. These elements serve as a common thread weaving the significant sections of the discourse to give it a holistic outlook to the audience. (p. 47).

The letter's rhetoric could be best understood when the sections, paragraphs, phrases, verses or punctuations are interpreted as integrally connected to another. For this reason, this exegesis considers *Philem* in its totality as a single rhetorical piece.

### **The rhetorical situation of *Philem***

Paul's epistles are situational materials prompted by certain distressing matters and delivered to an audience who were immediately affected by the situation. *Philem* is, therefore an occasional letter written in response to exigency. The letter's historical situatedness informs the content.

The situation appears to have been this: Paul, currently in prison in (probably) Ephesus, has fallen in with a fugitive slave named Onesimus and catechised him. The slave is being returned to his master, Philemon, accompanied by the present letter, thus stating that Paul has found the slave useful; he desires to use him in his gospel ministry but will not assume to retain him apart from Philemon's own free consent. However, Philemon should receive Onesimus back as a "brother" (vv. 16-17) and prepare Paul a guest room if he should soon arrive (v. 22). Except for the fact that Paul states, quite ambiguously, his confidence that Philemon will do "more" than he asks (v. 21), he makes no further appeal overt, not liberation from slavery (Olson, 1985).

There is little consensus among scholars about the exact details of the situation summarised above. Part of the difficulty is the letter's ambiguous silence on how Paul and Onesimus met in the same prison cell. Was Onesimus



sent by the Christian community at Philemon's house to attend on Apostle (just like the Philippians sent off Epaphroditus)? Or was Onesimus a runaway slave who got apprehended and thrown into the cell Paul was confined in? Or did Onesimus leave the master's house with the deliberate intention of going to search for Paul to mediate on his behalf? We proceed with the conjecture that

Onesimus and Paul's encounter in the prison cell was orchestrated by divine will since Onesimus, who was on the run, most probably neither set out to go and look for Paul for anything nor was sent as an emissary to Paul from the Church at Philemon's house.

The exigence of this letter is related to the harsh treatment and punishment which might have been awaiting Onesimus in the house of Philemon. This exigence is partly prompted by Onesimus' unlawful act of running away from his master and thus giving his master full legal right to pronounce any imaginable punishment(s) to deter him and the other slaves from doing the same. In the context of Greco-Roman honour and shame ideology, the act of Onesimus constitutes shame to the master, and so Philemon would do everything to maintain his full authority over the slave to shield his honour.

The other side of the exigence is that the slave, while on the run, encountered Paul (in the same prison cell) and got catechised by the same teachings that his master embraced to become a Christian. Thus, both Onesimus, Philemon, and Paul – the slave, the master and their apostle – are common fellows in the Christian partnership. Again, this relates to the exigence because the now-Christian slave, Onesimus, faces a potentially dangerous situation that might result in maiming or branding or even condemnation to the mines as a possible treatment from his master, the Christian fellow-worker Philemon.

Besides, Paul has discovered that Onesimus—by virtue of being a human being—is a truly useful creature who must be accorded all dignity and humane treatment despite his (mis)deeds.

The exigence is heightened by the fact that any mistreatment or sheer lack of clemency and love would discredit the values of the Christian community in which Philemon is actively involved. Also, Paul has developed an intimate concern for Onesimus's dignity as a human being to the extent that he refers to him as 'my own viscera.' Moreover, he wants Philemon to demonstrate love towards Onesimus as if he (i.e., Onesimus) were Paul.

Paul's chief audience is Philemon, the paterfamilias and legal owner of Onesimus and, at the same time, a key figure in the Christian community that gathers in his house. He reserves absolute power or authority to bring the favourable modification communicated by the discourse of the letter. But, again, the co-hearers—who were gathered at Philemon's house—put some rhetorical pressure on Philemon to change or modify the exigence.

The major constraint Paul brings to bear in *Philemon* is demanding Philemon to extend his good deeds to the returned slave. The tradition of receiving an apostle or his agent with great hospitality was cherished, and so to deny Onesimus—who embodies the apostle—such special treatment is to neglect such a Christian duty. By expressing the belief that Onesimus's separation was an 'act of God,' Paul tackles any resentment Philemon might be having. Since he perceives that there is a financial or economic value at stake and that it may cause Philemon to resent to comply with the appeal, Paul pledges to offer financial restitution in an effort to mitigate this side of the constraints. Again, Paul's confidence formula and trustworthy character highlighted

throughout the discourse are valuable resources that mitigate those factors that may constitute additional constraints about the situation before him.

### **The rhetorical species and stasis of *Philem***

The form of rhetoric a rhetor chooses for a given discourse has implications for interpreting the rhetor's message. Therefore, the determining species or type helps to discover the unique emphases of the piece and the author's objectives. Aristotle, in his theory of rhetoric, discourses into three categories: judicial, deliberative and epideictic rhetoric. However, Kennedy (1984) avers that a discourse typically has one overriding rhetorical genre, which manifests the author's principal intent in writing or speaking.

Of the three classical genres, *Philem* is judged to be fundamentally a deliberative discourse with minor judicial and epideictic nuances. The discourse reveals four characteristics of deliberative argumentation as identified by Mitchell (1991), although a slight alteration can be found in the letter. First, there is an emphasis on future time as the theme of deliberation, employing a set of appeals, argumentative proofs from exemplars, and suitable subjects for deliberation. There is a future-directed language in the discourse. Verse 21 of the letter indicates that Paul was expecting something to happen in the future. What is more? Paul's use of the future indicative *poiēseis* shows his expectation of Philemon's future action.

Secondly, the appeal is clearly shown in verse 9, which reads, "instead, I prefer to appeal to you on the basis of love." It is clear that *agapēn* (i.e., love) forms the roots of Paul's appeal. Thirdly, concerning the proof of examples, the discourse exhorts Philemon to imitate the paradigm that Paul implicitly intimates in verse 14: "but without your consent, I preferred to do nothing so

that the good you do might not be compulsion but comes from free will.” Paul specifically emphasizes the importance of “free will and not compulsion” because he is addressing the coercive and manipulating slave-master relationship. In this sense, the verse conveys, by demonstration, a counterexample for Philemon.

Again, as noted by Church (1978), the argumentation of *Philem* is underlined by the deliberative motives for advantageous action (*utilitas*) and honour (*honestas*). Philemon is being persuaded to recognise the advantages of showing generosity to Onesimus and handling him with respectability. Church (1978) explicates

in deliberative rhetoric, “the key is to demonstrate love or friendship, and to induce sympathy or goodwill, in order to dispose the hearer favourably to the merits of one’s case” (p. 97).

Nonetheless, the exordium in *Philem* (vv. 4-7) is nuanced with epideictic rhetoric, which extols Philemon’s adherence to the honourable value of generosity he already holds. The praises showered on Philemon anticipate a future duty because Paul prays that “Philemon’s faith may continue to become effective in the promotion of all the good that is ours in Christ.” In another sense, the rhetor appears to be pleading for the defence of Onesimus before the master, thus giving the discourse a forensic outlook. It is as if the slave stands accused of fleeing from legal bondage, with no justifiable explanation or power to defend himself. In this scenario, Paul, whom the slave miraculously encountered, comes in here to intercede for him.

The rhetor pleads that secular justice should be transformed by divine mercy and love. Why? This is because the master, the slave, the attorney, and the gathered spectators share a common identity in their fellowship in Christ.

While the ethics of this religious group discourage slaves from disrespecting their masters, it also preaches mercy and love over secular justice when slaves fault in their domestic obligations. In this forensic sense, the discourse of *Philem* could be seen as a defence for a runaway slave in the legal system of slavery. *Philem* is, therefore, an excellent example of how the three genres of rhetoric

rely upon one another and that epideictic and deliberative are akin in that the virtue which epideictic praises, deliberative advises.

As a characteristic of deliberative, the *stasis* or focal points of the discourse of *Philem* is one of quality. That is, it concerns the essential quality of the controversial social issue of slavery. Paul takes a master-slave relationship as a *de facto* social reality. Also, the issue is not about the conceptual definition of what constitutes slavery. The cause of Paul's worry here, however, was the point around which arguments are to be settled. The driving question probably was: what advantageous course of action must a Christian master pursue in events like this?

Simultaneously, the rhetor is both praising and beseeching a line of action based on its expediency and advantageous nature. Therefore, good treatment or hospitality should be extended to the slave Onesimus since this is the most fitting duty required by the Christian love ethic (Tsibu, 2021). As with the stasis of quality, the rhetor Paul implies that this deed of hospitality is a necessity that must flow naturally from love instead of compulsion. However, failure to receive and treat Onesimus properly would be tantamount to refusing to refresh the *viscera* of the imprisoned apostle, and it would be an utter disregard of the commons of relationship (*koinonia*) existing between Paul and Philemon, the co-worker (v. 17) and the entire ecclesia.

Paul shifts the controversy from the broader Greco-Roman context to the specific ecclesial context. Relationships in the broader Greco-Roman world were hierarchical, with slaves at the bottom. Again, Roman law grants masters the full right to dominate and rule over their slaves (Glancy, 2006). It was considered normal for masters to use their slaves as living tools and exploit their labour to expand their socio-economic and political statuses. Such an entrenched ideology was obviously a major hindrance to Paul in this matter. However, he must find an expedient way to transform the colonial mentality behind master-slave relations in the lives of the Christians. Consequently, he invents a discourse to subvert existing ideologies to bring a radical change. He draws on the Christian ideology of love in order to persuade Philemon to handle the returned slave on the basis of Christian love instead of the selfish and imperfect economic system of the world.

In brief, it is arguably evident that *Philem* conforms to the structure of deliberative rhetoric and can be identified with many of its rhetorical elements. This shows that “Paul is purposefully persuading or moving Philemon, the prime addressee, and his household church to do something new – to make a difference” (Tsibu, 2021, p. 48). It is also clear that the new activity he targets is related to handling complicated aspects of human relationships in the domestic *oikos*, and his argument is based on love and *koinonia*.

#### **Analysis of the Structure of *Philem***

Since *Philem* is an epistle by genre, it is appropriate to clarify the epistolary nature before proceeding to examine the rhetorical structure discernible in the text.

### The epistolary structure of the text

*Philem* conforms to a typical Hellenistic letter with the conventional tripartite structure. However (as we will shortly see), Paul modified the conventional structure in all his letters to match his chosen communicative goals on a particular occasion. Interpreters are divided where the body section ends, and the concluding section begins. Bible translations such as NRSV take verse 21 as the end of Paul's appeal for Onesimus, but the NEB extends the appeal to verse 22. Fitzmyer (2000) and Wilson (2014), for instance, argue for verses 21-25 as a plausible conclusion of *Philem*. They contend that verse 21 looks like the appropriate point for the beginning of the conclusion because there is no linking particle in verse 21 that links it with what precedes it (i.e., v. 20). This is taken as a break and a fresh start, with the *egrapso* also evidencing the opening of the final autograph section. However, the autograph of verse 21 and the request for a "guest room" to be made ready for his eminent visit (v. 22) should not be interpreted in isolation from the earlier appeals Paul has advanced. It adds more urgency to move Philemon to grant the focal request for Onesimus. Hence, I consider verses 21 and 22 as part of the body of the letter with only verses 23-25 as the postscript (Dunn, 1996; Lohse, 1971; Jeal, 2015; McKnight, 2017). Thus, the epistolary structure of *Philem* could be summarised as this:

- I. The opening section (vv. 1-7)
  - Prescript (vv. 1-3)
  - Thanksgiving and prayer (vv. 4-7)
- II. The body section (vv. 8-22)
- III. The concluding section (vv. 23-25)
  - Postscript (vv. 23-24)
  - Benediction (v. 25)

This epistolary structure fits the putative paragraphing adapted from Wendland (2009). It gives a glimpse of the oral performance or delivery of the letter as a written speech. The opening section (vv. 1-7) establishes or enhances personal correspondence with the addressee(s) through an implicit persuasive intent. It also specifies the kind of relationship between Paul and the audience.

Moreover, the prescript draws lines around the conversation being carried on by the letter. Paul uses the opening section to place himself and his hearers into a unique and trustworthy relationship which serves to further the rhetorical purpose of the letter. One notices a smooth transition from the opening section to the body section (vv. 8-22), where Paul develops the thesis alluded to earlier. Finally, he 'signs out' with an adapted closing salutation (vv. 23-24) and a benediction (v. 25). What rhetorical structure could be discerned from the above epistolary of *Philem*? The next sub-section establishes the rhetorical structure upon which the text of *Philem* would be analysed to highlight their persuasive functions.

#### **Rhetorical structure of *Philem***

The basic structure of oratory consists of an *exordium*, followed by the main body or arguments, technically referred to as 'the *proof*,' and the concluding remarks asserted in the epilogue or *peroration*. Church (1978) labelled Paul's use of rhetoric in *Philem* with the following structure: Introduction (vv. 1-3), Exordium (vv. 4-7), Proof (vv. 8-16), Peroration (vv. 17-22), and concluding greetings (vv. 23-25). However, a case could be made for modifying Church's structure to include, *insinuatio*, *propositio*, and *probatio*.

A careful look at the text reveals that verses 8-9 are *insinuatio*, after the exordium in verses 4-7. Considering the rhetorically delicate nature of the



exigency of the speech, Paul is seen applying the indirect rhetorical method known as an insinuation. He does not mention the delicate problem immediately while he is trying to establish further rapport with Philemon so that he can then make a difficult request in the *propositio*. In other words, it sets the stage for the *propositio* (Lausberg, 1998). It stipulates the concerns for which the exordium has striven to acquire (i.e., Philemon’s attention, receptivity and goodwill).

Verse 10 functions as the *propositio*, where Paul not only clarifies what is at issue but also, lays the main statement about the subject of the appeal. Verses 11 through 16 constitute the proof or *probatio* of the letter. It is the part of the speech where the rhetorician put forth arguments to illustrate why a course of action is better, more just or more praiseworthy than another. Finally, verses 17-22 is the *peroratio* section of Paul’s plea. The table summarises the structure of the text of *Philem*.

<i>Epistolary structure</i>	<i>Rhetorical structure</i>
I. The opening section (vv. 1-7) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Prescript (vv. 1-3)</li> <li>• Thanksgiving (vv. 4-7)</li> </ul>	* Epistolary Introduction (vv. 1-3) I. <i>Exordium</i> (vv. 4-7)
II. The body section (vv. 8-22) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Body-opening (vv. 8-10)</li> <li>• Body-middle (vv. 11-16)</li> <li>• Body-ending (vv. 17-22)</li> </ul>	II. Proof (vv. 8-16) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a) <i>Insinuatio</i> (vv. 8-9)</li> <li>b) <i>Propositio</i> (v. 10)</li> <li>c) <i>Probatio</i> (vv. 11-16)</li> </ul> III. <i>Peroratio</i> (vv. 17-22)
III. The concluding section (vv. 23-25) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Postscript (vv. 23-24)</li> <li>• Benediction (v. 25)</li> </ul>	* Epistolary conclusion (vv. 23-25)

These two structures of *Philem* intersect in significant respects. Under the rhetorical structure section, the “Introduction” and “Final Greetings” are not part of a traditional rhetorical structure, but one must not forget that *Philem* is basically an epistle and not an oral speech. Nonetheless, the adjectives and figures referenced in the greeting sections have rhetorical value in the overall assessment of the discourse. From the table, verses 4-7, which is the epistolary proem or thanksgiving, correlate with *exordium* from the perspective of rhetorical study. The remaining rhetorical elements of *Philem*'s discourse (*insinuatio*, *propositio*, *probatio* and *peroratio*) are located in the letter-body (vv. 8-22).

#### ***Epistolary introduction (vv. 1-3)***

*Philem* begins with an expanded customary three-part prescript of classical letters (i.e., A = sender; B = Addressee[s] and C = *chairen*). The prescript we have here not only communicates the typical background of the author(s) and the addressee(s), but more significantly, “it sets the tone for the rhetorical goal of the content that will follow” (Tsibu, 2021, p. 47).

In the source section, Paul remarkably labels himself as *desmios Christou Iēsou* (prisoner of Christ Jesus) with Timothy beside him (as co-sender) to begin his appeal on a note of sympathy with Onesimus. Why does Paul put aside the customary title “apostle” and choose no other customary designation (such as “*doulos Christou Iēsou*” as in Phil 1:1; Rom 1:1; Tit. 1:1) than “*desmios Christou Iēsou*”? to make his present incarceration a vital setting to his entire plea? The apostle finds himself in a terrible condition, not unsure of what would happen to him the next moment. Nevertheless, he lifts himself up to make an emotional appeal on behalf of a traumatised slave. Obviously,

Paul's reference to his incarceration was undoubtedly to induce an empathy that would inevitably influence his plea for Onesimus.

The citing of Timothy as a co-sender could suggest that the addressees know him and have some level of respect for him. By designating him as 'a brother,' Paul alludes to the dependability of Timothy and the indispensable services he renders to God (Phil 2:19-24). Nevertheless, more significantly, it implies that Timothy knows about the situation at hand, and he offers his full support to Paul's intercessory plea. Fitzmyer (2000, p. 85) conjectures that "presumably, Timothy had already made the acquaintance of Philemon, perhaps at the time of the latter's conversion in Ephesus, and that is why he is mentioned as a co-sender." Since Paul was most probably unknown to Philemon in person, the inclusion of Timothy's name was probably meant to project him as a co-supporter of the apostle's appeal. However, both are not coauthors in the modern sense of authorship. Though he mentions Timothy as a co-sender, Paul writes the thanksgiving in the singular, "I give thanks," indicating that the thought composition of the letter is solely his.

The numerical order of the persons in the addressee section indicates that Philemon is the paterfamilias and the primary recipient, with the others as co-addressees. We can see that the persuasive pressure exacted by the mention of Timothy in the sender suggests that the same motive may lie behind the mention of Apphia, Archippus and house-church as co-hearers of the letter. Tsibu (2021) concludes that Paul deliberately expanded the primary recipient's name in a subtle but significant way to strengthen the persuasive force of the appeal that would be made in the body of the letter.

Philemon is designated as *tō agapētō* (our beloved brother). This is a concept that indicates mutual love for one another in the Christian community. This portrayal induces Philemon to consider that he belongs to a community instituted on shared love. Paul strategically uses the adjective *agapētos* to insinuate his appeal in the body section of the letter that Philemon welcomes Onesimus back in the same *agape* (love) which sets Christians apart from the rest of the people in the world.

Archaeological discoveries indicate that Philemon's name was relatively common in Phrygia in the first century C. E. From its root (*philein*, "love"), the Greek name *Philēmōn* probably meant kind-heartedness, loving, or worthy of love. Fitzmyer (2000) narrates a Greek myth to throw further light on the name. In this legend, Zeus and Hermes concealed their identities and incarnated on earth to assess the virtue of human beings, but all denied them hospitality, but only a country-dweller couple, Philemon and Baucis, welcomed them. Astounded by this hospitable care, the gods disclosed their real identity and instructed Philemon and Baucis to climb a mountain to save themselves from impending flooding that would annihilate the land. Afterwards, Philemon and Baucis were transformed into a priest and priestess of the gods.

Fitzmyer (2000) insightfully suggests that Paul was plausibly punning the meaning of 'Philemon' with the adjective *agapēthos*. In this letter, Philemon may be conceived as a relatively wealthy figure, "owner of a house large enough to host a house church and to have, in addition, at least one guest room available for a visitor" (Barth & Blanke, 2000, p. 137). He bears the honour as a great patron of the "saints." Philemon is also portrayed as a committed and zealous Christian in his benevolent activities. Paul's description of Philemon as *tō*

*agapētō* projects him as a Christian figure who has lived true to his name by displaying great generosity to friends, family, and the saints. The situation of Onesimus, a household slave of Philemon, presented an occasion for Paul to raise the paterfamilias' consciousness and sensitivity to treat the vulnerable or the marginalised with dignity without resorting to the mundane social constructions at the time.

Secondly, Philemon is also described as *sunergō ēmōn* (our fellow worker) like Timothy (Romans 16:21; 1Thessalonians. 3:2), Prisca and Aquila (Rom. 16:3), Titus (2Cor. 1:19, 1Thess. 3:2), Euodia and Syntyche (Phil. 4:2-3); Epaphroditus (Phil. 2:25), Aristarchus, Mark, Demas and Luke (*Philemon* 24), and Jesus Justus (Col. 4:11) who personally and actively participated in Paul's missionary activity in various places. One could say that the title 'fellow-worker' was a dignified title seldom used for extraordinary personalities who have contributed immensely towards the advancement of the gospel and growth of the Christian brotherhood. It suggests that Philemon might have participated (at least, in terms of sponsorship) in getting the gospel rooted in the region he was dwelling. Dunn (1996) entertains the possibility that Philemon used his means as a successful businessman to convert several people into the faith and also lead the church which met in his house.

*Synergos* evokes the common bond between Paul and Philemon, which would be invoked more directly at the climax of the appeal. The designations bestowed on Philemon by inference pull him extremely into the rhetorical circle Paul envisioned. Sooner or later, Philemon would be set up in a situation that would require him to behave as 'a beloved co-worker.' Tsibu (2021) notes,

Philemon would be compelled to perform a crucially arduous but fitting activity that would revitalise the viscera of a person whose

name he would not want to hear yet whose viscera has become interconnected with that of brother Paul, the imprisoned apostle of Christ (p. 50).

Apphia is distinguished as *adelphē* (a sister), but some readers such as Chrysostom, Lightfoot, Gnilka (1982) and Lohse (1971) have interpreted that she was the wife of Philemon (Fitzmyer, 2000) However, there is no evidence for the precise relationship of these addressees. If she was the ‘wife’ of Philemon or Archippus, as Knox (1963) contends, her roles as *materfamilias* would include the daily management of the household slaves. There is also an alternative suggestion that she was Philemon’s biological sister. However, had Paul meant genetic sister, he would have removed any ambiguity by writing “*tē adelphē sou*” (Wilson, 2014). The more plausible status of Apphia is that of a leader in the house-church like Euodia and Syntyche in the Thessalonian house-church. From an ancient inscription, the name Apphia is a Phrygian name, an indication that she was a native of Colossae.

Archippus bears an envious title, *systratiōtēs tō hēmōn* (our fellow-soldier). In the whole NT, it is only Archippus and Epaphroditus who were described with this designation. The term evokes the virtue of loyalty, discipline and courage in the face of opponents. From Paul’s usage of the verb form *systemusthai* (serve as a soldier) in 2Corinthians 10:3, the term is employed in a metaphorical way to describe the laborious missionary struggle of Christians. Fitzmyer (2000) has conjectured that biologically Archippus was the son of Apphia and Philemon.

In an entirely different way, Knox (1963) and Winter (1987) contend that he was the direct recipient of the letter. It is also posited that he was the founder and first bishop of the church in Colossae (Martin, 1991). None of these

views is backed by any evidence from the text before us. I agree with McKnight (2017) that these speculations are inaccurate because it is implausible that Paul would address a letter to a single household of husband, wife, and son. We should probably consider that these individuals were different leaders in the Church at Colossae from different households. The inclusion of the co-hearers makes *Philem* a public personal letter instead of a private personal letter. The mentioning of co-hearers implies that the letter was meant to be read aloud in their presence. This public performance of the letter heightened the letter's rhetorical goal. It makes the motive of the letter transcends private correspondence.

Paul deliberately makes his appeal a public matter by including these local leaders in the recipient formula, thus giving the letter an added persuasive urge. Petersen (1985, p. 99) observes that “social pressure on Philemon is secured most conspicuously by Paul’s addressing his letter not only to Philemon but also to Apphia, Archippus, and the entire church that meets in Philemon’s house.” The same point is emphasised in Barth and Blanke’s (2000, p. 19) commentary that everybody else mentioned in the letter is “charged and enabled to exert some pressure on the slave owner if he would ever prove reluctant in fulfilling Paul’s expectations.”

Finally, *tē kat’ oikou sou ekklēsia* is the last segment of the addressee formula of the letter. The word *oikos* is ambiguous in this phrase. It could mean “(according to your) household,” (i.e., the church made up of members of the household or family of Philemon), or the physical “house,” in which the family and other Colossian Christians met for liturgical and social services, (i.e., a house-church). The latter makes much sense because early Christians did not

have separate edifices for worship but rather met regularly in private houses (Acts 12:12). The inclusion of the church in the recipient formula reveals Paul's intention to expect the letter to be performed or delivered aloud in the presence of the entire church at Philemon's house. Fitzmyer (2000, p. 81) remarks, "[T]he letter was not intended to be read silently by those addressed, but to be read aloud to an assembled group of Christians." The holy ones at Philemon's house should also show concern for the object of Paul's appeal. The setting prompts Philemon to consider that the situation Paul is pleading to him about could tarnish his fine reputation.

The third part of the prescript formulae is the conventional epistolary greeting, *chairien* which Paul modifies in all his writings (1Thess 1:1; Gal. 1:3, Rom. 1:7. Phil. 1:2, etc.) Paul greets the entire body of addressees that they will have a share in God's favour and the peace (*eirēnē*) that is derived from it (Fitzmyer, 2000). The Greek word *charis* emphasises God's unmerited gift of salvation and life to Philemon and the co-hearers. Similarly, "peace" connotes the fullness of God's gracious abundance as expressed in the priestly blessing in the Old Testament (Num. 6:24-26). Paul's prayer wish is that God the Father and the Lord Jesus will bestow this gift of blessing upon Philemon and the co-hearers. By qualifying God as *patros humōn* (our father), Paul affirms their common identity in God. In the same vein, Paul stresses the Lordship of Jesus over all the addressees, including free persons, freedmen and women, slaves (*douloi*) and their masters (*kyrioi*), the earthly ruler and the ruled, etc.

The prescript clearly reveals that Paul modified the epistolary convention in such a way to foreshadow the explicit and implicit requests of the letter and also to put considerable pressure on Philemon to acquiesce to Paul's



requests. The letter comes from an imprisoned apostle of Christ to a beloved fellow worker of the gospel, Philemon. All the descriptive terms and personalities mentioned in the prescript heighten the persuasive goals of appeal to be made later on.

*The exordium (vv. 4-7)*

The exordium creates empathetic contact with the audience, invents the author's character, and conveys a forecast of what is to ensue. It is like the web which draws the audience into the speech or discourse. Usually, the rhetor "would introduce the subject at hand and include material that would make the audience both attentive and receptive to the argument" (Witherington III, 2007, p. 28).

In this way, the exordium functions like an "overture in which each of the themes to be later heard in different, perhaps more specific context, is given an anticipatory hearing" (Knox, 1963, p. 15). According to Aristotle (*Rhet. 1.2.3*), the effort to appeal to deep-seated emotions such as empathetic love and create pathos in the hearer is a premeditated move to put the hearer into a particular receptive frame of mind.

Misericordiam arguments may influence a person to the degree that strong logical reasoning will not. It exemplifies love and friendship for the hearer in order to induce benevolence and render him disposed to act as entreated. Paul, therefore, uses praises to build a trustworthy character and goodwill between himself and Philemon, the primary addressee. He causes Philemon to feel exceedingly important and respected. In the ancient Greco-Roman world, giving and receiving favours were underlined by the virtue of gratitude. One was expected to always express gratitude by willingly returning a favour to the person from whom the favour was received. Expressing such an

intentional appreciation was a way of continuing the mutual exchange of goodwill or favours.

There is a controversial emergency before Paul, which has possibly alienated the compassion of the main addressee about listening to the address. At the very least, there is a grave betrayal of trust, a serious infraction of the law, as well as a contempt for Philemon's social status. Thus, before Paul advances his actual plea, he must, from the outset, assuage not only the aggrieved *paterfamilias* but also allude to certain key concepts upon which he would press forward his argumentative plea. This would make Philemon become attentive, responsive, and sympathetic towards the rhetor and give a consideration to the rest of the communication.

The professional lector who was delivering the message to the audience knew when to maintain regular eye contact with Philemon for added emphasis to the appeal. Tsibu (2021, p. 51) conjectures that "if Paul were to deliver orally in person in the congregation, he (i.e., Paul) would be looking straight at Philemon with everyone observing." By proclaiming that "I always remember you in my prayers," Paul secures a trustworthy character from the addressee(s). He intentionally introduces himself as a person who has directly profited from Philemon's compassionate deeds. Thus, Paul is hearty in approbation and lavish in his praise of Philemon.

The present tense verb, *eucharistō* (I give thanks) used together with the present tense participle *poioumenos* (every time I mention you), indicates the present and ongoing nature of his prayers (Fitzmyer, 2000). The singular "you" (*sou*) refers directly to Philemon, even though the letter has been addressed to others as well.

The causal reason for Paul's intercessory prayer is because he has repeatedly received reports about 'the faith and the love' of Philemon (v. 5). Paul expresses a prayerful hope that Philemon's participation in the faith may be oriented around the realisation of every good deed that Christ is accomplishing among the saints. This thoughtfully structured prayer-wish was

to broaden the horizon of Philemon's understanding to contemplate "every good thing" in Christ. In Galatians 6:10, Paul imperatively exhorts the Christians: "let us do good to all people." Also, in Ephesians 2:10, Paul makes the expression, "created in Christ Jesus to do good works."

Paul emphasises his special affectionate joy (*chara*) and encouragement (*paraklēsis*) because of Philemon's lovely deeds. Philemon's love and generosity toward the saints in various forms have produced *paraklēsis* (comfort) for Paul. Consequently, the saints' *splanchna* (viscera, intestines) are refreshed (*anapauō*). The word '*splanchna*' literally refers to one's bowels, innards or entrails where deepest feelings are located. There is no direct word in English that could be used to translate *splanchna*. However, NRSV's usage of "hearts" for *splanchna* does not bring out the whole meaning and sense of the Greek word. Actually, *splanchna* is a more emotive term than the common *kardia* (i.e., heart). Philemon is being portrayed as a compassionate figure who provides the innermost desires of the saints with impressive sensitivity. The verb *anapauō* denotes "causing someone to become physically refreshed as the result of resting from work" (Louw & Nida, 1989). The vocative *adelphē* (brother!) is strategically placed at the end of the construction for rhetorical emphasis and relational warmth (Dunn, 1996).

In sum, verses 4-7 prepare the direct recipient beforehand for an undisclosed appeal by stimulating him of his generous deeds towards God's children. Paul composes admirable tributes for the furtherance of the intercessory plea by highlighting those traits and virtues of Philemon upon which its outcome rests. He deliberately introduces the themes of "love", "good", "partnership", and "brotherhood" in a manner that redounds Philemon's praise (Church, 1987). Having incited Philemon's emotions "to render him biased in the preferred direction, Paul moves on to communicate the actual demand of the appeal with both logical and emotive argumentative proofs" (Tsibu, 2021, p. 51).

***The insinuatō (vv. 8-9).***

Having eulogised admirations and appreciation to Philemon for his love towards the saints in the *exordium*, Paul the rhetor dwells on the same eulogy to put before Philemon a rhetorical exigency and implores him to display a similar level of love for which he had been highly praised. In doing so, Paul employs *insnuatio*, "an address which, by dissimulation (*dissimulatio*) and circumlocution (*circumitio*), secretly steals into the mind of the hearer" (Cicero, 1.17.24). This subtle device lies somewhere in mid-continuum between transparency and falsehood—and within that range not quite confession, on the one hand, or denial on the other. In *De inventione*, Cicero elaborates on how rhetor may exemplify *insinuation* in these words:

If the scandalous nature of the case occasions offence, it is necessary to substitute for the person at whom offence is taken another who is favoured, or for a thing at which offence is taken, another which is approved, or a person for a thing or a thing for a person, in order that the attention of the auditor may be shifted from what he hates to what he favours. Also, you must conceal your intention of defending the point which you are expected to defend. After that, when the audience has

now become more tractable, approach the defence little by little and say that the things which displease your opponents are also displeasing to you. Next, after pacifying the audience, show that none of these charges apply to you and assert that you will say nothing about your opponents, neither this nor that, so as not openly to attack those who are favoured, and yet, by working imperceptibly, as far as possible to win the goodwill of the audience away from your opponents. Also, you may offer a decision or opinion of some authorities in a similar case as worthy of imitation; then show that in the present case the same question is to be decided, or one like it or one of greater or less importance (Cicero, 1.17.24).

The use of *insnuatio* by Paul is strategic since the case to be argued might appear shocking to Philemon's sense of justice in relation to the object represented. According to Tsibu (2021), "the rhetorical crescendo of Paul's appeal builds up from statement to statement throughout the rest of the letter." Paul sets off with cleverly composed words to underscore his own ethos and Philemon's empathic love, using the literary device of tautologous parallelism (Tsibu, 2021). One can see this in the verses below.

**8** *So, although in Christ I am bold enough to command you to do what is proper,*

**9a** *instead I prefer to appeal to you out of love*

**9b** *I, Paul, an ambassador*

**9c** *and now a prisoner too for Christ Jesus,*

The double or tautological parallel rhetoric of Paul is clearly seen when one observes how he contrasts "I am bold enough to command you" with "I prefer to appeal to you out of love." Just next to this, Paul erects another one: "I Paul, an ambassador" but now "a prisoner for Christ." Thus, an apostle with a divine commission of Christ is now begging on the basis of love. As if that is not enough, the famous ambassador of Christ moves further to plead based on his imprisonment condition.

With tacit insinuation to his apostolic influence, Paul declares forcefully, *echōn pollen parrēsian* ("I could be bold, or I have strong boldness

to order you [Philemon]”) to *anēkon* (to do what is expected of you, the right thing). However, immediately after stressing his legitimate authority ‘to command’ (*epitassein*), Paul swiftly renounces from giving an authoritative order to beseeching (*parakalō*) Philemon on empathy terms.

Stated differently, Paul willingly puts aside his credible authority or absolute power in Christ (*en Christō*) and entreats Philemon in ‘the most excellent way,’ the way of love. He paints a clear-cut parallel between using ‘authority to coerce’ and ‘love to pray’ and paradigmatically moulds his intercessory plea on the Christian principles of love. Tsibu (2021, p. 51) argues that “the rhetor’s decision to appeal by terms of love instead of by authority was a carefully planned rhetorical move because he had already extolled Philemon for his unparalleled reputation of love and faith in the exordium.” The inferential article *dio* (so, therefore or whence) in verse 8 connects the prospective appeal to what thematic statements made in verses 1-7.

Furthermore, Paul employs the oratorical device of *antiphrasis* in the tautologous parallelism formed by verses 9b and 9c to buttress the theme of love. Antiphrasis is a literary technique where the speaker abandons an obviously strong line of argument. Cicero writes, “I will not plead against you according to the rigour of the law, I will not press the point which I should perhaps be able to make good” (*De Or.* 2.80.325). Therefore, Paul deliberately renounces his power as both ‘Christ’s ambassador’ and ‘now his prisoner’ to count on the willing compliance of Philemon to his demand. This is an additional persuasive tactic for launching a stronger argument to strengthen the real plea in a more definite sense.

At this stage of performance (i.e., vv. 9b-9c), “the lector plausibly looked into the eyes of Philemon who likewise stared at the reader and visualised Paul himself” (McKnight, 2017, p. 80). This visualisation becomes more intense in verse 9b, which announces: *toioutos hōs Paulos nuni presbutēs nuni de kai desmios Christou Iēsou* (“none other than I Paul, an ambassador and now also as a prisoner of Christ Jesus”). The verse compellingly produces an image of the present condition of Paul as an older man in his mid-fifties under bondage in a dungeon and sharing (*koinonia*) in the weaknesses and humiliation of Christ. Undoubtedly the highlighted condition of Paul serves to induce emotions of reverence and compassion. Also, for a persuasive effect, Paul might have drawn attention to his old age to evoke respect and privileges naturally accorded to the elderly in antiquity. Again, the reiteration of the verb *parakelō*, functions as an appeal to pity. “It pulls the heartstrings of Philemon not once but twice” (Church, 1978, p. 29).

#### ***The propositio (v. 10)***

The *propositio* provides an abridgment of what one is about to speak on or concisely puts forth a case or premise for examination. It is a statement or a proposition that “sets forth the principal subject, theme or thesis for public view or discussion.” In oratory, the *propositio* is immediately followed by proofs or reasons. After the double-stated appeal through *insinuatio*, Paul ultimately presents the subject of the intercessory plea (v. 10). When the modern reader visualises himself or herself into the house of Philemon, the exact setting where God’s saints have assembled to hear the letter read aloud, one sees Onesimus the letter carrier and the lector stand upright with all the influence of Paul (White, 2017). The man is the subject of Paul’s rhetorical plea.

However, immediately the subject of the appeal's name is disclosed, Paul formulates the ground cleverly with an affectionate designation, 'to *emon teknon es tois desmois mou*' (my child, whom I have begotten in my chains). The biological concept '*teknon*' does not signify a physical birth but a metaphoric relationship after Onesimus' conversion. Onesimus has been catechised into the Christian faith through the instrumentality of Paul. The Greek word 'Onesimus'<sup>1</sup>—which means 'useful'—was a common slave name in the region of Ephesus.

Even the postponement of the subject's name till this point is a rhetorical move. Because Paul knew a simple disclosure of the slave's name might stir the master's annoyance, "he deliberately withheld the name of Onesimus up to this point after he had fully described the transformations that have taken effect in the subject's life" (Tsibu, 2021, p. 52).

### ***The probatio (vv. 11-16)***

The *probatio* is the part of a speech or written composition that sets out the arguments in support of a thesis and refutes the opponent's claims. From verses 11-16, Paul offers propositions to corroborate his argument and provides reasons, details, illustrations, and examples in support of the main theme of the plea. In the first place, Paul creates a pun on the name 'Onesimus' to enhance his petition immediately after he announced the name<sup>2</sup>. This punning

<sup>1</sup> Similar nomenclatures such as *chresimos* (useful), *karpos* (fruitful), and *chrestos* (good, profitable) were borne by contemporary slave of Rome. Onesimus was a house slave of Philemon. However, the concrete role of the slave in that house is unidentified. He could have been a household manager, a chef, a *padagogus* for Philemon's son, an administrator, a personal attendant or a sexual slave. Regardless of any crucial function Onesimus was serving in the household, he still remained *pias* (a boy), 'a social death' with no right to ownership and could not seek justice or personal adventures.

<sup>2</sup> *Onēsimon*, who formerly was *achrēston* (useless) to you, but now has become *euchrēston* (useful) indeed, to you and me.



establishes the motive of utility (*utilitas*) in the fundamental worth or utility of every human person. It thus functions to revolutionise Philemon's perception of the slave. As a result, Paul is stimulating Philemon's consciousness to cause him to evaluate his slave with a Christian worldview.

The juxtaposition of *achrēston* and *euchrēston* in a close proximity suggests that Paul was employing the technique of *paranomasia* – a figure of speech formed when the same word stem reappears in close propinquity. Again, the sequence of the words *Onēsimon*, *achrēston* and *euchrēston* with the same accusative case and similar terminations constitute what is called *homoeoptoton* (v. 10). Some readers argue that the punning is suggesting that Onesimus became 'useless' either by running away or having caused his master some monetary loss.

Lohse (1971) and Winter (1987) claim that Onesimus was 'useless' in the otherworldly sense since he was a non-Christian but now is "useful" (spiritually) for he has undergone a transformation and has become born-again in Christ. Glancy (2006) also conjectures that "useless" and "useful," like "disposable," are sets of utility concepts in the world of slaveholders. Similarly, Marchal (2011, p. 92) contends that the punning characterisation of Onesimus sheds light on his sexual utility (*chrēsis*) as previously "'useless' or 'not-useful' but currently 'good-for-use,' 'well-used,' or even 'easy-to-use.'" Nevertheless, Tsibu (2021) asserts that

the wider setting of the utility binary of *achēston/euchēston* in the text does not indicate that Paul is inferring the view that 'Onesimus is 'good-for-use' as a slave, and thus 'easy-to-use' sexually, for Philemon, for the community of holy ones, and also even for Paul himself (p. 52).

The punning echoes the deep-rooted stereotypical notion about (Phrygian) slaves. This is underscored by the popular Roman proverbial saying, “a useless Phrygian slave becomes better by whipping.” Paul’s portrayal of the slave is not due to any alleged theft case or economic loss. Instead, Paul says something like, “I have experienced Onesimus as a useful person, and so I suppose you (in

Christ) will see him as well.” Thus, Paul would like Philemon to understand that Onesimus’ intrinsic worth surpasses the secular conception which labels slaves as paradoxically unprofitable creatures. Onesimus is an intrinsically useful creature.

In verses 12-14, Paul provides another reason using the motive of honour (*honestas*). He sets an ingenious example of the virtue of honour, and based on it, entreats Philemon to imitate it faithfully and willingly.

**12** ... *I have sent back to you, this one who is my very own heart.*

**13** *I would have preferred to keep him here with me, so that he might serve me on your behalf during my imprisonment for the gospel;*

**14** *but without your consent, I preferred to do nothing in order that the good you do might not be by compulsion but come of your own free will*

In verse 12, Paul acknowledges the legality of slavery (and right of ownership) and cooperates with civil authorities in sending back Onesimus to the lawful owner. However, uncertain about how Philemon the master would treat the slave, Paul had to escort the slave with this intercessory letter so that it evokes gracious handling. The epistle gives Philemon an occasion to model himself on the good deed illustrated by Paul.

Onesimus has turned out to be Paul’s child in incarceration. Because of his partnership with an apostle, Philemon is being implored to accept Onesimus as Paul’s own innermost self, ‘entrails’ or ‘viscera.’ Paul not only engenders

empathetic moods in Philemon but more significantly, he recommends that he chooses the most expedient choice in the deliberative equivalence. Koester (1982) observes, “it is as if Paul, embodied in the runaway slave, came to Philemon in person with his request to be treated kindly” (p. 135). Quintilian recommends that sometimes the advocate must assume close intimacy with his client to arrest the heart and emotions of the audience (*Quintilian*. 6.1.24-5). Paul thus connects himself to Onesimus by using the evocative term *splanchna*, which is the equivalent graphic vocabulary used to designate Philemon’s kindness and refreshment to the saints in verse 7.

Paul purposefully talks of himself out of a dear relationship with both the slave and his master. In verse 13, Paul articulates a dear thought or desire (*eboulomēn*) of keeping (*kaechein*) Onesimus for useful service in the gospel. The word *diakoeō* comprises a range of activities extending from domestic chores (Mk. 22:31; Acts 6: 6-11; 1Cor. 16:15) to gospel and church service (Col. 1:7; 4:7; 2Cor. 11:23; 1Tim. 3:8, 12). There is an implied demand requesting Philemon to send Onesimus back as the master’s representative. However, in verse 14, Paul kindly recognises the lawful dominion of masters over their slaves and instead pleads to the voluntary will or consent (*gnōmē*) of Philemon. Essentially, he does not want Philemon’s decision or choice to be forced or coerced (*anankē*); instead, he wants Philemon’s decision to be *hekousion* (voluntary).

Some interpreters have wondered why Paul did not go further to seek the total manumission of Onesimus. Fitzmyer (2000, p. 112) rightly surmises, “the good that humans do must come from them spontaneously and of their own free will and not because of any necessity or constraint. That is the essence of

being human.” Paul keeps Philemon from saying “No” to any of the statements of appeal. He had learnt the value of conditioning a person in the affirmative direction. Hence, it sets the psychological process of moving Philemon in the affirmative direction. Paul honestly tries to see things from Philemon’s point of view. Wanting to win Philemon to his side of thinking, Paul tried to be very sympathetic to Philemon’s desires and ideas – sympathy is something that the human species crave universally.

Verses 15-16 culminate the *probatio* with an argumentative proof from the divine. Over and above earlier reasons advanced, Paul now calls on Philemon to fathom the entire event from the supernatural viewpoint. This is the clear intention behind Paul’s usage of the passive voice of *echōrithē*. The active verb form means “to divide or separate” and the passive, “to separate more generally to be taken away or depart” (Act 1:4; 18:1). Paul diplomatically describes the parting of Onesimus with a theological passive to suggest that the initiative belonged to God. In other words, the “separation” was an event that happened to Onesimus rather than something he proactively initiated. According to McKnight (2017, p. 94), it “explains the act, not from its outset, iteration, travel, or result but as a whole.” The persuasive intent of imagining Onesimus’ flight as part of God’s divine plan was to suggest that any rejection of Paul’s request would be tantamount to not a mere rejection of the human Paul but a rejection of the divine God and his all-knowing purpose.

Onesimus and Philemon have been mystically parted *pros horan* (for an hour/ a while), but the newfound relationship will endure infinitely. The adjective, *ainōnion* (forever or eternally), stands in stark contrast to the temporal phrase *pros hōran* (for an hour or a while). Different from suggesting that the

slave has come back for everlasting servitude, Paul is referring to their shared relationship as Christian brothers, who are connected everlastingly; not even death could put them apart (Fitzmyer, 2000). Paul constructs an intercessory appeal that raises the slave from the ground to Philemon's dining table. In essence, Philemon would welcome Onesimus back unreservedly and ad infinitum.

Verse 16 brings the plea to a climax. While the word *doulos* appears only here, it should not be read without the antecedent particle, *hōs* (as), which is introduced as subjective reality and not just an objective portrayal. The phrase, "as a slave" contrasts "more than a slave, as a beloved brother" through the usage of the conjunction "*alla*" (but). Philemon is no longer (*ouketi*) to consider Onesimus as though he is only a slave. Instead, he should regard him as a beloved brother, irrespective of whether or not Onesimus would remain his slave forever. This "no longer" resonances with John 15:15, "I no longer call you *doulos* ... I have called you friends." Paul employs the "no longer" statement in Romans 14:15 to exhort Christians to show affectionate consideration towards one another.

Actually, Onesimus's present social status is that of a domestic slave. However, Paul attempts to get Philemon to appreciate much more about Onesimus beyond the socio-cultural status of slavery. He persuades the Christian master to "have him back" (*apechien*) "no longer as a slave but more than a slave, as a beloved brother" (*hōs doulon alla huper doulon, adephon agapēton*). The phrase, *en sarki kai en kuriō* (in the flesh and the Lord) in verse 16b, in turn, both broadens and qualifies the reality of the transformed

relationship that Paul is requesting. This reality comprises all spheres of human existence.

There are differing views on Philemon's decision because of the vagueness of the request in verse 16. Lohse (1971), Nordling (1991), as cited in McKnight (2017), opines that Philemon must take back Onesimus, reinstate him to the household and permit him to do his job in a safe and healthy environment. However, Koester (1982), Lohmeyer (1964) and Fitzmyer (2000) understand verse 16 as a clue of Paul's desire for Onesimus to be manumitted immediately and be returned back to Paul to serve in the Christian evangelism mission.

The second view is extremely implausible in the immediate socio-cultural context of the letter. An instant liberation of a *fugitivus* from slavery would have injured Philemon's honour and reputation, considering that the master-slave relationship was a key social component of the Greco-Roman world. Thus, it sounds anachronistic for one to read verse 16 as Paul's expectation for the immediate abolition of the master-slave relationship. Neither the historic slave revolts nor the stoic philosophy envisioned the end of master-slave relationships. Richard Horsely (1997, p. 72) rightly observes, "slavery was such an essential part of the socio-economic and religiopolitical structures of the empire in such a complex manner that it was impossible to imagine a society without master-slave relationships." Paul tackled pragmatics problems in the master-slave relations instead of a total manumission of slaves. He operated within the constraints of the situation so that he would appear liberating and culturally sensitive concurrently.

Nonetheless, there is no clause in the letter forbidding Philemon from releasing Onesimus from enslavement. If the letter's appeal is not primarily

meant for the immediate manumission of Onesimus, then how should Philemon behave as a Christian towards his *fugitivus servus*, who has also become a Christian? Paul's vague request is that Philemon should make some adjustments for Onesimus in the household. As a Christian, Philemon should let the Christian virtue of tenderness, mercy, love, justice, sacrifice, and respect affect every secular and socio-economic relationship with Onesimus.

In the same verse (i.e., v. 16), Paul climaxes the relationship between Onesimus and Philemon with the plea that Philemon should demonstrate to Onesimus a degree of love that surpasses his (i.e., Paul's) own. The word employed here, *malista* is a superlative form of *mallon*. It means "a very high point on a scale of extent, exceptionally, very much, particularly, and immensely." Moule (1948) remarks that *malista* "must necessarily be used in an elative sense because the succeeding *posō de mallon* precludes being literally a superlative" (p. 148).

The proximity of *en sarki* and *en kuriō* is distinctive to Paul's plea in *Philem*, although the two parts appear individually in other Pauline letters. The word *sarki* denotes "the flesh which covers the bones of a body or the body itself or a person of flesh and blood." Thus, in a transference sense, it refers to human nature with its imperfections. The use of *en sarki*<sup>3</sup> for Onesimus underscores the common human nature he shares with both Paul and Philemon while *en kuriō* depicts his new status in Christ. Paul declares this absolute aspect of Onesimus' existence. Although Onesimus' former and legal status remains,

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<sup>3</sup> Callahan infers from the phrase, 'in the flesh,' that Philemon and Onesimus are blood brothers. However, this reading is less credible in view of the plain use of 'doulos' to label Onesimus in the same verse.

he is transformed by a life of spiritual dedication and obligation to the Lord (*en kyriō*).

In both realms of material relationship (*en sarki*) and Christian relationship (*en kyriō*), Onesimus is a valuable being, esteemed by Paul. Earlier in the salutation formulae, Paul has designated Philemon as *agapēton*; now, he requests Philemon to esteem Onesimus as *adep̄hon agapēton* (i.e., a beloved brother). This is because the slave has become one of the saints. After all, he has accepted the gospel of Christ. Just like Philemon himself and the gathered audience, Onesimus is an adopted child of God (Gal. 4:5). Initiated through the baptismal rite, Onesimus must be received at the Lord's table. Paul has set before Philemon the advantages or social capital he would accumulate if he (Philemon) receives Onesimus back favourably. Equally, Paul would indicate to him shortly the losses or disadvantages Philemon would suffer if he persists in penalising Onesimus or refuses to welcome him with compassion.

While Paul has not made his appeal overtly clear, he has communicated his expectations poignantly in the portrayal of Onesimus. This builds up a suspenseful climax for the audience. What does Paul want Philemon to do? In the *peroratio* section, Paul authoritatively compels Philemon to embark on advantageous activities.

#### ***The peroratio* (vv. 17-22)**

The *peroratio* serves as a reiteration of the *probatio*. It “draws together the entire argument and includes material designed to compel the audience to think or act in a way consonant with the central argument” (Winter, 1987, p. 45) Quintilian affirms, “it is the peroration, if anywhere, that we must let loose the whole torrent of our eloquence” (*Inst. Or.* 6.1.52). Tsibu (2021, p. 54) also



observes that this is the section where “Paul recapitulates his appeal (v. 17), intensifies it (vv. 18-19), sets Philemon in an emotional frame of mind (v. 20); requests for an ostensible favour (v. 22).” Again, the usage of the indicative imperatives, *proslambou* (receive/welcome/accept) in verse 17, *elloga* (charge) in verse 18, and *anapauson* (refresh) in verse 20 puts the force of the argument mainly on Paul’s deep concern with Onesimus’ welfare or wellbeing.

At the start of the communication, in the exordium, Paul expresses a prayer wish that the sharing (*koinonia*) of Philemon’s faith may become operative. In the *peroratio* section too, Paul challenges Philemon to prove his sense of effective partnership (*koinonia*) by welcoming Onesimus as if he were receiving Paul himself. Thus, the demands in verses 17-22 emphasise the importance of improving the master-slave relationship. Paul’s appeal seeks to redefine the standards of Greco-Roman slavery in Philemon’s household around the Christian values and moral principles located in Christ.

The antecedent of verse 17a, *ei sun me echeis koinōnon*, (if you hold me dearly as your fellow partner), establishes an undisputable clause for Paul to get his appeal through. Paul grounds his main appeal on the mutually reciprocating life of love, active fellowship and reconciliation in the ministry or kingdom of Christ. All Christians are *koinōnous* (fellows/partners) who share common duties towards one another in a new socio-ecclesial reality. The noun *koinōnos* means ‘one who takes part in something with someone,’ for instance, in business pursuit or commercial endeavour. It also refers to a person who shares one’s life and has a common interest. In the light of this, some interpret the *konōnos* as ‘business partner’ to imply that Paul was urging, albeit indirectly, to make Onesimus a business partner (Barth & Blanke, 2000). More

correctly, Paul is speaking about the bond of (spiritual) friendship of a common faith.

Verse 17b is the consequent statement that launches the actual plea. This apodosis ends with the imperative *prolambou*. It is the first direct command which bids Philemon to receive Onesimus as the virtual embodiment of Paul himself (Fitzmyer, 2000). The term *proslambaō* is the middle voice often employed to describe God's or Christ's activity of welcoming the believer. In the letter of Romans, Paul encourages *oi dunatoi* (the strong) in faith to welcome (*prolambanō*) *ta asthenōmata* (the weak) in faith because God has received both (Rom. 14:1, 3; 15:7). Also, the residents of Malta displayed rare compassion to Paul and the shipmates when 'they kindled a fire and welcomed (*proselabonto*) all of them' (Acts 28:2). This suggestively indicates the unity of Christians in Christ (Gal. 3:27-28). The forceful pronoun *eme* highlights that Philemon must not only accept Onesimus, but he should welcome him as if it were Paul himself standing before him. As an ambassador of Christ for transformation between God and humans in the *ekklesia*, Paul invites his fellow friend (*koinōnos*) to demonstrate himself by contributing to the transformation mission for Onesimus, first by receiving him uniquely. McKnight (2017, p. 102) adds, "[To] give the term social purchase, we might imagine Philemon washing the feet of Onesimus." A messenger embodies the sender party. In other words, a person's representative is like the person himself. Thus, to receive Onesimus is to welcome Paul. In contrast, turning away Onesimus or treating him unfavourably is tantamount to a rejection of Paul himself.

Paul's conditional clause in verse 18 tactfully establishes the *prima facie* that a slave's flight (in itself) is a legal offence or financial injury to the master.

Lokkesmoe (2015, p. 46) rightly comments that “slaves like Onesimus were legally considered thieves of themselves and the value of their ongoing services when they ran from their masters.” By utilising the amplification device, *anticipation* Paul offers to compensate Philemon for any wrongful act or debt Onesimus may have caused. With this literary device, a rhetor perceives the complaints that could be raised against his argument and brushes them aside. Paul forcefully proclaims that he will make reparation for anything Philemon has lost due to Onesimus’ flight.

Thus, Paul incarnationally presents himself to Philemon on behalf of Onesimus. He orders (*elloga*) Philemon to reckon Onesimus’ debt to his own account. The aorist tense, *edikēsen* (wronged) is contrasted by the present tense, *ophelei* (owes), to imply a single wrong deed in the past with a continuous grievance in the present due to that wrong. Concepts such as *adikein* (to ‘wrong’ someone), *opheilein* (to owe) and *ellogein* (to charge to someone’s account) are business-related and judicial jargons employed by Paul to take Philemon’s focus off from Onesimus and place it squarely on himself (Lokkesmoe, 2015).

In verse 19a, Paul gives a conventionally written acknowledgement of the debt owed to Philemon. The phrase, *tē emē cheri* theatrically shows that Paul grasped the pen from his amanuensis to write these words to assure Philemon that he (Paul) will pay (*apotisō*) for any damages he (Philemon) has suffered because of Onesimus. This further underlines how critical Paul takes the matter and indicates to Philemon that the letter is not a fabricated piece. The language of debt and Paul’s emphatic vow in guaranteeing for Onesimus have led many interpreters to suggest that the kind of injustice entailed financial loss (Nordling,

1991). The emphasis on making compensation (*apopinō*) is evoked by *egō* (I), which precedes his own name.

Immediately after the promise of reimbursement, Paul attaches to the ‘I OWE YOU’ signature in verse 19 with a counter proposition. Employing this ironic tact of ‘passing over,’ Paul deliberately mentions what he does not want to say. The rhetor is seen to be enacting *paralipsis*, a figure of speech that permits an orator to speak to a subject that he/she ostensibly claims does not need to be addressed. McKnight (2017, pp. 105-106) renders the verse as “I could mention that you owe me your life, and I won’t, but I have gone ahead and said it. Now I would like you to factor this into your decision in welcoming back Onesimus.” Thus, Paul radically changes Philemon’s status from creditor to debtor and, in so doing, places him under an immeasurable moral duty to concede to Paul’s biddings.

Yet, the problem is, in what sense does Philemon “owe” Paul his “very self.” Contextually, what is in view here is the debt of gratitude and other duties that come with one’s conversion or gift of salvation in Christ. Paul cheerfully catechised Philemon into the faith, and so Philemon owes it to him; he must also share with him every earthly blessing. Put differently, Philemon converted to Christianity through Paul’s evangelisation and catechism. Philemon is therefore obligated to his spiritual father from that angle because his debt is far huger than whatever Onesimus may possibly owe him. Tsibu (2021, p. 55) observes that “if one compares the material debt that Onesimus might owe Philemon with the spiritual debt that Philemon does owe Paul, it is a fair deal for Philemon to comply with Paul’s terms of entreaty.” The rhetor has competently used commercial language to formulate a compelling syllogistic argument to re-align

the will of the audience to his own. Thus, verse 19b brings into focus “the binding duty that a gift imposes on the one who received the gift – the obligation to respond in kind, in gratitude and reciprocal munificence willingly” (Tsibu, 2021, p. 57).

Having pressured Philemon to shift Onesimus’ debt to him with the firm pledge of settlement, he follows up proximately with an indefinable prayer wish in verse 20. Again, the prayer wish is affixed with a soft imperative, *anapauson mou ta splanchna* (refresh my heart!) *en christō*. It is noteworthy to remark that, here, Paul uses the same emotive concept (i.e., *splanchna*) he utilised in verse 7, where he praises God because Philemon has refreshed the viscera or innards of God’s people. Paul reverts to a more affectionate tone and designates Philemon once more as *adelphē*, a reiteration of the same label used in verse 7. The adverb *nai* (yes, *indeed*) as the first word of the verse has a strong reinforcing function whereas the optative mood of the verb, *onaimēn* creates an assurance of an attainable wish *en kyriō* (in the Lord). This verb is the source for the noun ‘Onesimus.’ Interestingly, *onaimēn* forms punning with ‘*Onesimon*’ since both have a similar sound and meaning.

Paul euphemistically presents Onesimus as his own *splanchna* and implores Philemon to consider his plea in the realm of *Christos*. In verses 17 and 18, Paul has persuaded Philemon to welcome Onesimus back as a beloved brother; however, if for any reason he remains unconvinced, he imperatively enjoins him to do so (v. 20). It is “in the Lord” and “in Christ” where all this fellowship is to be located. The Lord bids Christians to be united *en Christō* and deal with each other in a spirit of love, forbearance and reconciliation. The logical flow of Paul’s plea could be reduced to the deductive argument below:

**Premise 1:** Philemon is highly esteemed as a generous figure who refreshes the viscera of God's people (v. 7).

**Premise 2:** Onesimus stands before Philemon as Paul's very own viscera; he has also become a member of God's people (v. 12)

**Conclusion:** Therefore, Philemon's own personality and Onesimus' fresh identity as a Christian and euphemistic viscera of Paul sufficiently implicate Philemon to welcome Onesimus as Paul's incarnate (v. 20).

The above syllogistic argument—which is constructed around the threefold repetition of the word *splanchna*—is the cornerstone of Paul's plea. If Philemon refreshes the hearts of the saints (v. 7), and if Onesimus is Saint Paul's very own heart (v. 12), then, to refresh Paul's very heart, Philemon must refresh Onesimus (v. 20).

Some readers have reasoned that the benefits Paul is seeking were an official appeal for Onesimus to be sent back to serve with him in mission work. Others argue that Paul (in his capacity as *amicus domini*) is beseeching forgiveness and reconciliation on behalf of Onesimus and his ultimate release from servitude. The validity of these interpretations depends on the chosen hypothesis on factors leading to the separation of Onesimus and Philemon.

My position is that the major 'benefit' and 'refreshment' Paul is asking for pertains to the transformation of social dealings between the powerful (masters) and the powerless (slaves). In other words, what would bring relief (i.e., a refreshment) to the bowels (*splanchna*) of Paul is when Philemon re-orientes himself towards Onesimus and interacts with him in a spirit of kind-heartedness, respect and sensitivity to open enough ways for him to maximise his humanness in all aspects of life. Paul leaves the actual appropriations of the intercessory plea to Philemon's own conscience and moral judgement.

Paul goes on further to place total confidence in Philemon's obedience and goodwill. An expression of confidence typically tends to serve a persuasive purpose. Quintilian (6.1.24-5) advises that "when a rhetor accentuates his confidence in the integrity of the audience and justice of the cause, he maximises persuasion on the audience who may have special reasons for being hostile or ill-disposed to the cause one is advancing."

The Greek expression in verse 21a could be translated as "I, confident as I am in your obedience, write to you." The perfect participle, *pepoithōs* makes Paul's confidence more striking to Philemon. Paul regularly uses this perfect tense to express his solid confidence in his audience (2Cor. 2:3; Gal. 5:10; Phil. 1:6; 25). Derived from the verb, *peithō* is employed with a present meaning as "lean on, put one's confidence in, trust in." It expresses Paul's confidence, grounded on Christ, is that Philemon will surely acquiesce to his request in the spirit in which that request is placed, due to Philemon's generous character and conduct. The emotions behind this statement serve to undergird the letter's appeal by constructing a sense of obligation through praise (Olson, 1985).

As a deliberate gesture of 'worshipping' Philemon in advance with the confidence formula, Paul basically urges and obligates him to perform the requests. It is a positive reinforcement tactic projected to induce more of the good deeds Philemon has displayed in the past. Paul often uses the term *hupakoē* to express 'commitment or obedience of Christian faith' (Rom 1:5; 16:26) or 'response to apostolic authority' (2Cor. 7:15; 10:5-6). Paul is less likely to assert confidence in his own authority (as an apostle) since he allegedly declines in verse 8 to do so. More conceivably, the lack of a direct object to *hupakoē* implies

that Paul is affirming his confidence in Philemon's commitment to Christ (Gal. 6:2).

In verse 21, Paul throws one more vague challenge at Philemon: "you will do even more than I request." He deliberately refuses to spell out what he means by "more." Many readers reckon that if the "more" in verse 16 is less likely a hint for the legal release of Onesimus, then the "more" in verse 21, albeit indefinite, is reasonably suggesting manumission. According to Petersen (1988), the "even more" apparently requires Philemon to harmonise "the legal aspect of his worldly relationship with Onesimus with the social structural ground of their new churchly relationship by freeing Onesimus" (Tsibu, 2021, p. 59).

Other interpreters such as Wright (1986), Harris (1991) and Moo (2008) have inferred from Colossians and argued that Philemon fathomed the "more" as Paul's request for the legal liberation of Onesimus to become a fellow-worker of Paul (Col. 4:7-9). This notion may depict how Philemon concretely expressed *agape* to the returned slave even though there is no single word in *Philemon* devoted to the question of whether the slave should be granted his freedom. What is understandable, however, is that the "more than I say" gives room for Philemon to handle Onesimus as a brother by receiving him home and transforming the household relationship to reflect the all-embracing unity in Christ that replaces the secular social boundaries among people (Gal. 3:28; 1Cor 12:13; Col. 3:11).

Paul wraps up with a future visit to Colossae and staying in Philemon's household immediately after being released from prison. He also demands Philemon to have a guest room ready in advance. This verse (i.e., v. 22) appears



like an aside than an extension of the plea. Nevertheless, and more appropriately, the verse offers unspecified stress to the request for Onesimus. The term *xenia* (guest room) appears only twice in the NT (*Philem.* 22; Acts 28:23). It takes on the sense of ‘hospitality’ and the provision of a bedroom that Paul needed during his visits to the churches.

This official visit would permit Paul to ascertain how Philemon responded to the message of the epistle. As Lohse (1971, p. 206) puts it, “for he will come and see for himself how things have gone.” Consequently, the demand for *xenia* (a guestroom) and the notification of apostolic *parousia* act as negative reinforcers or indirect threats, forewarning Philemon about any unchristian action he might take against the slave. With these final demands, Paul closes the peroration of the whole dialogue compellingly.

#### ***Epistolary Conclusion (vv. 23-25)***

Just as Paul acknowledges the presence of other Christians at Philemon’s house, he also incorporates the greetings of five people who were with him during the letter’s composition. Epaphras, Mark, Aristarchus, Demas and Luke know the contentious domestic issue and, thus, anticipate Philemon’s response. Beyond the conventional courtesy involved, these greetings are also calculated to bring further pressure on Philemon (Moo, 2008). The situation in Philemon’s household is not a private matter that affects him alone. How Philemon treats the issue would have an extensive consequence on both Christians and non-Christians in the community.

Citing the “holy ones” in the closing benediction and the plural “you” (*sou*) is an indication that the epistle was to be performed at a time when the church had gathered in Philemon’s house. Everyone would be present to hear

the delivery of the letter; they would look forward to how Philemon reacts to it, whether he will reverse the apostle's plea or penalise the slave.

There is a general notion that people find it harder to turn down a request made in a public space than one made in private. In public, one's honour is at stake, and the least thing one does will amount to shame. Such a rhetorical setting and strategic time definitely added extra influence on Philemon to grant 'even more than' what Paul has asked for. He couches the address in a public context so as to cajole Philemon before the public. How does one evaluate the summative outcome of Paul's intercessory plea, taking a holistic view of all the rhetorical acrobatics contained in the letter? The next section attempts to respond to the question.

### **Evaluating the rhetoric of *Philem***

The effectiveness of a persuasive piece partly rests on factors outside its content. For example, the willingness of the audience to consent to a new opinion, the body expression or postures of the lector, and the social setting in which the speech is performed, can all affect the persuasiveness of a piece. Factually, the question of whether or not the epistle turned out well in persuading Philemon to welcome Onesimus positively cannot be answered with sufficient historical evidence. Nevertheless, the very fact that *Philem* survived and became part of the Christian canon signifies that Philemon submitted to Paul's request.

Invented with deliberative conventions and objects, *Philem* should be effectively convincing to its audience from the viewpoint of the same conventions. Certainly, the desire to avoid social humiliation pressured Philemon heavily. Tsibu (2021) argues that

when one pictures the occasion of the initial performance of the letter, – what really took place when the letter was delivered to not only Philemon, but the Christian community assembled in his house; how the lector animated Paul’s request; and the atmosphere in the room where Philemon was now presented with the slave, the latter seeking mercy, with the gathered saints looking on at the response of the former, – it can be assumed to a large extent that *Philem* achieved its desired outcome (p. 57).

One may draw a general conclusion that Paul succeeded to place Philemon in a position in which giving in to the request put across was the only way out for him — to maintain an honourable partnership with Paul and the saints.

Plausibly, the desire to avoid social shame pressed heavily on Philemon (Russell, 1998; Jeal, 2015). At least, this may suggest that he welcomed Onesimus with thoughtful compassion and love, without any vindictive mindset. At a maximum, it may imply that Philemon manumitted Onesimus as a result of Paul’s plea. Early Church tradition has it that there was a 2nd Century C.E. bishop of Ephesus known as ‘Onesimus.’ Ignatius cites this Onesimus in an epistle he wrote to the Ephesians somewhere in the mid of Trajan’s rule (98-117 CE). In that epistle, as quoted by Holmes (1999), Ignatius wrote:

Since, therefore, I have received in God’s name your whole congregation in the person of Onesimus, a man of inexpressible love who is also your earthly bishop, I pray that you will love him in accordance with the standard set by Jesus Christ and that all of you will be like him (p. 186).

It is uncertain that this Onesimus is the same Onesimus who is the subject of Paul’s plea in *Philem*. Since Paul composed *Philem* in the early ‘60s of the 1st Century, Onesimus would have had to be relatively young at the time of his flight and relatively old at the time of Ignatius’ writing to be the same person. What is conceivable, however, is that Ignatius was deliberately alluding to *Philem*. When he described Onesimus to the Ephesians as ‘earthly bishop,’

Ignatius used *pērase en sarki episkopō* (i.e., your bishop “in the flesh”). One can observe a pragmatic contextualisation of the crucial verse 16 in *Philem*, in which Paul exhorts Philemon to receive Onesimus back as a beloved brother “both in the flesh and in the Lord” (*en sarki kai en kuriō*). On this issue, Tsibu (2021, p. 58) remarks, “if the same figure in *Philem* eventually assumed the

office of bishop in the Ephesus Church, then this usage of *en sarki* was Ignatius’ way of inventively connecting him to that letter which had become noteworthy in Christian communities.” Whether or not the 2nd Century bishop of Ephesus was the Onesimus of *Philem*, it is still remarkable that a person with a slave label, ‘Onesimus’, rose to the position of the bishop of a metropolitan town like Ephesus. This also indicates the persuasive plea in *Philem* was truthfully transformative in both its primary and subsequent contexts.

Paul’s intercessory plea promotes counter-cultural grace in a context that conceptualised slaves as objects of domination, where fugitive slaves were regularly killed or brutally reprimanded. He urges Philemon to consider and deal with Onesimus as a brother in Christ. His appeal created a circle of observers at both ends of the discourse to reflect on the message that one’s identity as Christians surpasses all other social identifiers and divisions of social status. Paul was not in charge of the political powers of his world; he could not all alone have uprooted the heinous institution of human enslavement. However, he used his ecclesial authority and rhetorical prowess to cast a new vision for what the Christian community should look like. With *Philem*, Paul exhorts Christ-followers like Philemon and Onesimus to live in counter-cultural harmony.

### Core Labels from the Reading of *Philem*

From the above analysis, we can deduce the following categories from the text:

#### 1. Communal fellowship and partnership with the slave

The concept “fellowship/sharing/partnership” (Greek: *koinonia*) appears twice in the text. The first occurrence is located at verse 6 in the *exordium* section, and another usage is found at verse 17 in the *peroratio* section. In verse 6, Paul makes a passionate plea (to God) that Philemon’s sense of *koinōnia* would be deepened in the knowledge of every good deed incumbent on those in Christ.

The text reveals that the faith (i.e., Christianity) has drawn Paul and Philemon, Archippus, Apphia, and the entire members of the local church at Philemon’s house into a common group of relationship that was supposed to be characterised by mutual love, respect, and good treatment for one another. In verse 17, Paul appeals to this bond of friendship or partnership of a common faith (i.e., Christianity) to secure an unusual reception for a newfound brother of the faith – Onesimus, the slave of Philemon. In fact, this letter was conceived and written based on Christian *koinonia* partnered with Paul and Philemon, so is the central appeal of the letter. It suggests that the idea of *koinonia* was very fundamental in many aspects of the Greco-Roman communities.

As a Greco-Roman practise, fellows of a shared relationship fend for each other; they act in the interest and welfare of their partners. Ideally, they come out to support or defend a member when outsiders are mistreating him/her. If Philemon do otherwise, then it would put his bond of fellowship with Paul and the entire saints into disrepute. Fellows are obliged to demonstrate their sense of effective partnership by adhering to their defining principles. In principle, fellows cultivate a sense of respect for each other. Moreover, it was

repugnant for one member to use his/her powers to mistreat another fellow. Such happenings amount to an aberration of the assumed principles of the fellowship.

Philemon's effective *koinonia* with Paul implicated him to respond positively to the requests placed before him. We share the tradition of the Church that Philemon acquiesced to Paul's plea. Most certainly, he could not have resisted Paul's rhetorical coercion when the letter was performed: his freedom to decide was restricted by Paul's calculated manipulations. At that instant, Philemon prioritised his value for Christian *koinonia*. However, how did the newly established 'trinitarian' *koinonia* comprising Paul (the spiritual father), Philemon (the slave-owner) and Onesimus (the owned slave) operate? Some exegetes and commentators have suggested that Philemon manumitted Onesimus and sent him off to assist their spiritual father, Paul the apostle, in mission work. If indeed Philemon took such a bold decision, what might have prompted it? Among other reasons, can one also argue that perhaps he started feeling uncomfortable having physical fellowship with his slave? If Onesimus was not sent off as some interpreters would have us believe, how effective was the binitarian Christian *koinonia* between him and the Christian master? Could there have been frictions both encountered as a result of the common fellowship? There are no historically reliable sources to formulate precise answers to these questions. Nevertheless, contextualisation of the text from the patristic era would help us appreciate how the Philemon-Onesimus story has been (mis)used in other contexts.

## 2. Conversion, catechism and baptism of the slave

The conversion of slaves into the faith was a common phenomenon during the earlier centuries of Christianity. Usually, when a *pater* of a household comes to faith in Christ, the entire members of the household would be baptised alongside (e.g., Acts 10:1-44). The primary goal of conversion and catechism was purely religious: to bring one to faith in Christ and not change one's prior social status. The metaphoric clause at *Philem* verse 10, *peri tou emou teknou, hon egennēsa* (concerning my child, whom I have begotten), suggests Onesimus' catechism and baptism into the Christian faith and community. Did the catechised and baptised Onesimus face some hindrances regarding his integration into the fellowship? We cannot tease out a concrete answer to this pertinent question, but it is worth asking. Other salient questions to consider include: Why was Onesimus not a Christian in a household of Christians before the encounter with Paul? Could it have been that Philemon, the Christian master was not comfortable with the idea of his slave(s) becoming Christians and thereby partaking in common gatherings and rituals?

## 3. The humanity of the slave

The analysis of the rhetoric of *Philem* indicates the strong emphasis Paul attaches to the humanity of slaves, especially how they are to be treated. Throughout his appeal, Paul uses familial language and metaphors to drive home his view about the inherent worth of slaves as human beings. First and foremost, he describes Onesimus as 'his own viscera' and pleads to Philemon to receive the slave as if he were Paul the apostle himself. In this regard, Paul exemplifies compassion, sympathy, love, care and respect for vulnerable people of society. Paul's explicit demand to Philemon to welcome Onesimus and give

him rest implies that, at all points in time, the Christian has an unavoidable duty to respect the humanity of one's subordinates.

The larger Greco-Roman culture refers to slaves as 'bodies' or animated tools incapable of reasoning, hence only useful for subjugation. However, Paul reverses this inhumane conception of slaves. He labels Onesimus as his 'child,' begotten in prison. The apostle also endorses the inherent usefulness of Onesimus through the literary device of pun. In fact, he also exemplifies affectionate bonding for the slave when he tells Philemon that 'sending Onesimus is like sending his dear self (i.e., heart).' Again, he offered to assume every cost Onesimus owes the master. In sum, it can be said that despite the rugged and shameful state of Onesimus, his beingness as a human person never eluded Paul. His faith produced in him the knowledge to see the image of God in Onesimus despite the latter's social location. It was the same insight Paul wished for Philemon at the proem section of the appeal.

### **3. The welfare of the slave**

In most ancient cultures, master-slave relationships were characterised by exploiting those in a weaker position to enhance one's social and political status. Kings oppressed their vassal states for constant food supply and labour. Estate owners or household lords also put their slaves into all manner of tasks to grow wealth and consolidate their fame. Usually, the masters did not prioritise the genuine welfare of the subjects. As pointed out in Chapter Two, keeping slaves was first and foremost an economic venture: masters were primarily particular about their profits instead of the personal growth or mobility of their slaves. Despite the prominent position Philemon occupied in the Church, there is the likelihood that he did not really take any genuine interest in the welfare of his



slaves. If he did otherwise, Paul would not have hammered the need for a humane reception for Onesimus.

Paul carefully presents an appeal that respects the economic rights of Philemon. At the same time, there is both implicit and deliberate emphasis on the welfare of Onesimus. Our analysis indicated that how Philemon would receive and treat Onesimus proves the authenticity of his faith. He risks his share in the Christian *koinonia* if he disregards Paul's appeal and terrorises Onesimus with threats and punishments.

Another way the concept of welfare plays out in the text is the payment of Onesimus' debts. Paul the prisoner literary 'begs' Philemon to 'refresh his heart in Christ' by receiving Onesimus honourably. Paul implores him to make adjustments to enable the slave to serve faithfully in the household. Although Paul does not locate the welfare of the slave in manumission, he unequivocally states that the Christian master should not treat Onesimus as a mere slave; instead, he must create room to enhance the welfare and growth (both spiritual and social) of Onesimus. The persuasive plea of Paul aims to secure physical safety and psycho-social security for Onesimus. There are no specifications as to the forms these should take. Philemon must discern the necessary adjustments he ought to make so that his free will would not be infringed.

The welfare of Onesimus is linked to accepting him back without punishment or maltreatment. Therefore, every treatment meted out to Onesimus should cause him to see himself as a beloved brother of the master, not a useless slave. This brotherly treatment is to be characterised by "love, clemency, forbearance, encouragement, gentle rebuke and corrections, compassion,

feeling of acceptance, fellowshiping, reconciliation and opportunities for improving one's talents.”

#### 4. Spirituality

Another essential label highlighted in the text of *Philemon* is spirituality. Paul himself expresses a great sense of spirituality by the greeting formula of the letter: ‘peace from God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ’ to reign supreme in the lives of the brethren gathered at Philemon’s house. The recipients are to search for peace, think about it and allow it to take precedence in every matter.

Again, Paul’s initial prayer request for Philemon is that Philemon’s sense of sharing or partnership in the faith may be deepened in the knowledge of every good deed that ought to be accomplished in Christ. As Jeal (2015) puts it, ‘Paul asks for maturity and a mature spirit’ for Philemon. The frequent usages of familial or kinship concepts give currency to the spiritual brotherhood among Christians. Philemon is addressed as ‘a beloved fellow-worker’ (v. 2) and ‘my brother’ (v. 7, v. 20). Paul exemplifies the essence of spirituality by accepting the depressed and traumatic fugitive; he also pulls the heartstrings to activate Philemon’s sense of spiritual duty towards his slave. Without some adjustment by his master, Onesimus cannot have the freedom, time or space to participate or engage in those activities that could enhance his spiritual life

Nearly all humans have some innate yearnings to connect or identify their ‘souls’ with a higher being or nature so as to attain meaning or wholeness in life. Spiritual growth endows the person with the strength and emotional endurance to handle the challenges of life. Sadly, most slaveholders overlooked the spiritual development of their slaves. Therefore, Paul requests that Onesimus be received as a ‘brother’ to imply that the slave would be welcomed

into the Church and be allowed to participate in all Christian rituals and activities.

### 5. Clemency and reconciliation

Strangely, there is no Greek word or concept in *Philemon* which translates as ‘forgive (ness). Paul makes no direct plea for forgiveness on behalf of Onesimus. However, ‘forgiveness’ is a forceful theme in the text. Our exegesis establishes that Onesimus’ flight alone constitutes a *prima facie* offence to the master, not to mention the shame the master might have suffered in the community due to the incidence. As pointed out in Chapter Two, the Greco-Roman culture did not entertain infidel slaves: they were punished harshly to forewarn other slaves of the fate that would befall them should they fall out as infidels. Philemon, therefore, had every right within the ambits of Roman law to punish Onesimus severely and/or dispose of him from the household forever. However, his membership in the Christian *koinonia* requires him to act in the reverse form: to embrace the slave, reinstate him and make necessary adjustments for the slave to feel like one of them – a brother *en Christō*.

There is also a manifestation of clemency and reconciliation in the text. For Christian parents, fictive children and maids to experience intimate fellowship, both members, especially the dominants, must be ready and willing to forgive subordinates for their failings. However, the dominant must develop a mature mindset to ‘put the past behind’ and ‘live in the present’ without vindictiveness. Paul’s appeal challenges Philemon, the Christian parent and master, to ‘let go’ of the pain, financial loss, frustrations, and troubles caused by Onesimus. Although Philemon had a natural feeling to turn away the disloyal slave or punish him severely, he was exhorted to remember his

Christian identity to discern the most excellent way to react to the slave's conduct.

Again, there is a display of other religious values such as hospitality and restoration. It is conjectured that Philemon consented to Paul's plea and restored Onesimus. This implies he compassionately forgave the slave without subjecting the contemptuous deed to the details of Greco-Roman slave regulations. He might have revived his Christian honour before the saints by carrying out an activity considered shameful in Greco-Roman judgement (i.e., welcoming a notorious slave with a kind of hospitality reserved for those who have proven themselves worthy of it either by birth or personal accomplishments).

#### **6. Fellowshiping together in the ecclesia**

The book of Acts paints a utopian picture where the Early Christian community comprise people from different social ladder stations—freeborn, slave, freedmen and freedwomen, wealthy patrons, poor and other social outcasts—fellowshipped together. These varied people met together regularly to listen to the readings of scriptures and teachings of the apostles and partook in common meals and the Lord's supper. However, in the same Acts, we learn that the inclusive community was suddenly plagued with discrimination on racial and other social grounds.

Paul's plea in *Philemon* also highlights his desire for an inclusive community that would enable Onesimus to fellowship together with the saints as a brother, both in the physical and spiritual spheres of life since the slave has now become one of them – converted and effectively catechised (by the apostle himself). Assuming Onesimus was accepted back to the household of the

master, what was life like for the slave and the master in the succeeding days regarding Christian fellowship (ping)? Indeed, it would not be wrong to presume that both might have suffered some psychological discomforts or uneasiness.

Precisely, it is not known how Philemon felt or would feel about the idea of worshipping with his slave in the same congregation. The inverse is equally valid. It is curious to know how long it might have taken for Onesimus to be accepted into the sheepfold and the roles he might have been assigned to play. The question is: was Onesimus readily welcome to sit at the same table and 'to break bread together with the lord' during church gatherings? If there were roles reversals where Onesimus was attended on like a master or a guest of the master, how would have Philemon and other freeborn at the scene felt about it? Would it not have sounded very absurd for a wealthy Roman patron to feast together with his slaves in public where his honour and respect are at stake? Indeed, it is inconceivable to visualise masters assuming the role of slaves in the presence of their slaves/former slaves during such gatherings. Obviously, Christian fellowship might have presented many difficulties to both masters and slaves. It would be interesting to find out how Christians in subsequent generations contextualised *Philem*, as the next chapter explores that.

### **7. Freedom/liberation and equality of the slave**

*Philem* does not overtly plead for Onesimus' legal emancipation or freedom, even though a summative deduction of all the various indirection insinuations may point to such a conclusion. How would Onesimus feel inwardly regarding equality and freedom, granted he was welcomed 'as' Paul, with unique hospitality? How would have been his sense of joy and fulfilment when having

effective fellowship with his master and the congregation? What about the idea of (spiritual) liberation as he frequently listens to the word of God read aloud and the communal benedictions?

Granted that the slave was given the right of entry to Christian fellowship, he might have internalised certain scriptural quotations and cultic activities for his own upliftment to enable him to cope with the realities of his life. Furthermore, especially if he were allowed to share fully in the *koinonia*, the slave would undoubtedly derive great joy and a sense of spiritual and social fulfilment from sharing in the *koinōnia en chistō*. Finally, the very act of worshipping with masters, freedmen and women and colleague slaves in a tension-free atmosphere might have also given Onesimus some sense of spiritual equality. At least, during moments of cultic fellowship, their social, racial, and physical differences were transcended (Gal 3:28).

Finally, supposing Onesimus just played the role of a servant (*diakonos*) during congregational worship (which is highly plausible), he might have, nonetheless, derive joy from doing it for the Lord in heaven. From whatever angle we look at it, Onesimus stood the chance of benefiting from at least a sense of temporary freedom (from secular household obligations). This would have made him feel some sense of equality or egalitarian oneness with the master (and the entire congregants) throughout worship.

On the side of Philemon, it is informative to reflect on his sense of dilemma regarding the decisions he had to make. Most of the activities enjoined on him by the letter would somehow blur the social boundaries between him and his slave(s). What were the fears and uncertainties of Philemon regarding the adjustments Paul asks him to undertake to enhance Onesimus' life? How

might those adjustments affect Philemon's social status and honour, and economic motives in the Greco-Roman worldview? Would he have felt indifferent or irritated upon perceiving that his slave Onesimus is entertaining the thought that he is equal with/to the master during Christian gatherings and rituals, albeit the differences in roles? Supposing Philemon did not release

Onesimus of his legal obligation (a very high plausibility), did it still cross the mind that Onesimus would (someday) take advantage of their *koinonia* to demand legal manumission? If yes, was Philemon prepared to continue giving Onesimus access to Christian fellowship and teachings? John Chrysostom complained bitterly that Christian masters were not prepared to expose their slaves to Christian teachings.

### Conclusion

The chapter sought to analyse the rhetoric of *Philemon* using Kennedy's (1984) model of rhetorical study as a guide. The exegetical analysis reveals that Paul appropriated Greco-Roman standards of oratory to mould his intercessory plea for Onesimus. The discourse is carefully crafted in order to persuade the *paterfamilias* to grant Paul's request. Paul deliberately addresses Philemon in the context of the entire congregation of the Church located in the house of Philemon (vv. 1-2). By setting Philemon up in a difficult exigency before the Christians gathering in the house-church, Paul cunningly relativises the cultural expectation of the *paterfamilias*. Paul uses intentional praises, concealed intimidations, and emotive argumentation to pressure Philemon to handle the issue about Onesimus as a matter of one's identity in the community of faith. Even though he does not handle the institution of slavery itself, Paul transformed the master-slave relationship between Philemon and Onesimus

according to Christ's lordship and drastically destabilised the core of slavery from within. Paul's deliberative goal was to influence Philemon to act out his faith-relationship in Christ by accepting Onesimus as a Christian brother in every sense of it.

Drawing an implication from the conventional ways runaway slaves were treated in the Greco-Roman 1st Century world, I stand to argue that Paul's request to Philemon had a strong subversive and transformative tone. It would have been uncomfortable for a Roman *paterfamilias* to treat his slave as a brother. Therefore, one can visualise how radical and subversive it would have been for Philemon to receive and treat Onesimus, his errant slave, as a beloved brother (White, 2017).

Some exegetes have concluded that Paul's decision not to confront the institution of slavery directly by explicitly demanding the manumission of Onesimus implied his indifference towards the social realities of master-slave relationships. Such a conclusion seems erroneous and shows no regard for the historical context within which Paul was operating. In the specific exigency of Onesimus being a runaway slave, the urgent solution Paul put up in *Philemon* was probably to secure the immediate welfare of all parties. Thus, Paul persuades Philemon to accept that Onesimus is truly a human being (who has become a follower of Christ), forgive him and treat him as a fellow worker in the gospel of Christ. In return, Philemon consolidates his honour as a great benefactor of saints and also confirms his priority to his shares (partnership) in the gospel of Christ.

The message of *Philemon* humanises the master-slave relationship in a 1st-century Christian community. It replaces Caesar-centric values—characterised



by dominance, exploitative motives and cruelty—with Christo-centric values which highlight the dignity of all persons, brotherhood, and sensitivity to the dilemmas of the weak and marginalised. Undeniably, the transformative character of *Philem* has played crucial roles in endeavours that eventually split the rocks of slavery in times past. Again, *Philem* offers a solid message that

could be sowed into social struggles confronting contemporary communities – child slavery and exploitation, displaced/stranded refugees and immigrants, human trafficking and a variety of troubles facing fictive children and parents. The next chapter looks at the various meanings people put on *Philem* in their peculiar contexts.



## CHAPTER FOUR

### CONTEXTUALISATIONS OF *PHILEM*

#### Introduction

This chapter explores the various meanings people assign to *Philem* in their context and situations. It looks at how *Philem* was contextualised in the St. Thomas community in the West Indies Island during the 18th century and further explores how specific labels in the text are understood in Christian households in the Ghanaian community. It aims to point out people's encounters with the text within their respective contexts and how specific critical labels play out. First, I give a brief introduction to the Moravian mission activities in the Caribbean West Indies. Secondly, I discuss attitudes regarding slavery in the West Indies context under the various labels derived from the text of *Philem*.

The choice to explore the contextualisation of the letter in the West Indies context is premised on the historic connection between the Ghanaian and West Indies contexts regarding the propagation of the Christian gospel and values to enslaved people and 'heathens.' In one breadth, the link centres around the personality and experiences of the Moravian missionary, Christian Jacob Protten, an 18th century African with a Ghanaian mother and Danish father. Although Protten was not a slave, his 'Odysseus' experiences at Copenhagen (Denmark), Elmina, Christiansborg (Gold Coast), Herrnhut (Germany) and at the island of Saint Thomas in the West Indies – in his independent evangelism mission to the 'heathens' of Africa – opens a conversation on enslavement practices in Christian communities.

In the middle of 1746, Christian Protten got married to mulatress and a former slave, Rebecca Freundlich in Herrnhut, Germany. Even though the

Prottens were baptised Christians with legal status as free people, they suffered mistreatment and abuse in the Christian communities they worked. They never felt welcomed by the Christian brethren in Herrnhut and St. Thomas. Another related factor that informs our decision to explore the contextualisation of the letter in the West Indies is the fact that master-slavery practices among Christians are well attested to in the pioneering Christian community, which later sent missionaries to Ghana and other sub-regions of Africa.

The Caribbean presence of the Moravian mission reveals their active participation in the transformation of slavery in the West Indies. Furthermore, their ambivalent attitude towards slavery during the 18th Century is an apt context for critical analysis in this study. The researcher dwells mainly on the research studies of two scholars. They are Jon. F. Sensbach (2005), the author of *“Rebecca’s Revival: Creating Black Christianity in the Atlantic World,”* and Katharine R. Gerbner (2018), the author of *“Christianity and race in the Protestant Atlantic world.”*

### **The Moravian missionary group**

The Moravians traced their spiritual origins back to the Czech reformer, Jan Hus (1369–1415). Several researchers of Caribbean history and culture have emphasised the British Caribbean as the critical indeterminate space for examining the Christian missions and slavery in the 18th Century. The Moravian mission developed to be one of the fundamental building blocks for black Christianity and black protest culture soon after establishing their presence on the islands. Early-Eighteenth Century Moravians’ evangelicalism equipped many colonised persons with a new belief system to reckon with their suppression. They set themselves up to bring the gospel to “heathen” in the West

Indies plantations through literacy classes since they were operating during the Enlightenment period. Their global missionary activities started with the Caribbean mission in the Danish West Indies in 1732 under Count Ludwig von Zinzendorf's guardianship and patronage. Their first missionary batch to St. Thomas was Leonard Dober and David Nitschmann. Before their arrival, the

brethren were warned that

white people would have a challenging time talking with or teaching the slaves, and if someone really wanted to do that, he would have to live among them and become a slave like them, so that he would be able to be among them and have the opportunity to instruct them (Gerbner, 2018, p. 24).

Given this, the two missionaries decided to sell themselves into slavery soon after they arrived in order to get access to the enslaved black Caribbeans for evangelism. Unfortunately, they were not successful because the land conventions did not permit white people to be slaves. However, their enthusiasm to labour among the unfree was a major indication of their firm idea that only Christian conversion could bring about true liberty.

Despite the hostilities between the white planters and the working class, Dober and Nitschmann gained the trust of the enslaved black Caribbeans. Two years later, Friedrich Martin and Matthaus Freundlich joined the Moravian mission in the Danes West Indies and expanded the mission to the island of St. John. Later in the same year, 18 additional Moravians (fourteen men and four women) arrived and went to the island of St. Croix to start a mission among the enslaved people. However, the Moravians had to wrestle with terrific poverty, physical abuse and unfavourable climate situations in all the islands – factors leading to a remarkably high mortality rate among their members.

The Moravian community adopted a method of spirituality that made them distinctive in modern Christianity. Communal fellowship consciously was emphasized and sustained through diverse and deeply meaningful spiritual traditions. Through regular fellowshipping in the community's religious rituals, the conviction of members about their involvement in Christ's mission to the world took shape. They set up ministries to provide education for children, and secure shelter and charity to non-believers during times of intimidation. Again, medical support to the neighbouring community was a part of its multidimensional mission. The Moravian missionaries regularly visited with the catechised slaves in the slaves' neighbourhoods, distributing their own food with the slaves and dining with them. Although today, they would be judged as kinds of humanitarian aid to the Moravians of Bethlehem, these were altogether spiritual activities of the gospel mission.

However, Moravians' pietist type of Christianity irritated leaders and planters of the predominantly Lutheran and Dutch Reformed settlements in the New World. What were seen to be extreme ministry endeavours sometimes provoked an unpleasant response from outsiders. White planters and most Christian slaveowners violently defended their churches and their religious rituals from non-white outsiders and discouraged the efforts of the missionaries to convert the enslaved population. Slave conversion was perceived as a danger to the social order of the plantation culture. According to Gerber (2018), the planters tended to associate Christianity with liberty and feared that transformed slaves would be entitled to manumission.

There were two categories of slave masters in the 18th century West Indies. The first group were white plantation owners, most of the English

Church who did not want to interfere with the work of their slaves with Christian instruction. They were the earliest Protestant planters to settle down in the Caribbean, and they redefined Christianity as a restricted racial label retained for the master class. Contrasting “Christians” and “negros,” they kept their religious identities as a testimony of their dominance. Over the 17th century CE,

“these planters established religious and political institutions which were connected to their patronage of the plantocracy and their characterization of Afro-Caribbeans as hereditary heathens” (Sensbach, 2009, p. 221). These Christian planters found it uneasy about allowing their slave to be instructed in religion because it would absorb too much of their time and eventually cause the masters some loss of labour and profits.

They were, therefore, not ready to interfere with the routine tasks of their slaves on the plantations. The farmstead structure needed constant and manual labour directed in regular duties, and the slave masters were not prepared to let instructional periods of the negros interfere with the constant operation of the system. A Jamaican newspaper cited by Sensbach reports a fierce objection of a plantation officer to slave conversion in the following words:

I will not tolerate your plans till you prove to us they are safe and necessary; I will not suffer you to enlighten our slaves, who are by law our property, till you demonstrate that, when they are made religious and knowing, they will still continue to be my slaves. (Sensbach, 2005, p. 97).

His conviction, which undoubtedly was shared by many co-planters, was this: to allow the missionaries to establish a group of reading, moral, church-going slaves would amount to committing a tragic mistake. The same notion was shared by the long-established English Church on these plantations (i.e., Anglicanism). The Anglican rectors were not just disinterested in the

conversion of slaves but also opposed other missionary groups who came to the islands simply to evangelise to the enslaved negros. For instance, in Antigua, an Anglican rector dragged a Moravian missionary to court for catechizing and baptising negros into Christianity. Masters were not prepared to give slaves their freedom instantly after baptism. The few ones that received baptism were still kept as serfs by their masters.

The second group consisted of a few white plantation owners and Moravian Christian masters who permitted the slaves to attend bible studies and cell meetings during and after working hours. They presented a new conceptualisation of Christian slavery that comprised both the slaveholder and the enslaved. Their view was that introducing Christianity to the slaves would make them better servants to their masters and more valuable members of society.

However, scholarship on Moravian reveals that the missionaries of later decades were sharing the sentiments of plantation owners more than the plights of the enslaved people. They seemed to have abandoned their commitment to remain neutral as much as possible politically so as not to endanger their missionary work. Although they also purchased slaves for the subsistence farms which they needed for their economic existence and never granted their slaves legitimate liberation, the early 18th Century CE Moravian mission shook the racial hierarchies between the enslaved and freed Africans in the West Indies. Their missionaries had the conviction and practice of equalitarianism and respect for every individual in the ecclesial community.

The policy paved the way for “African members not only to learn to read and write – indeed with the primary goal of studying Holy Scripture – but also

to hold a variety of administrative and theological positions in their congregations” (Sensbach, 2005, p. 45). Slaves were ordained as deacons, elders and co-workers in multi-race communities. It can be said that the Moravian culture afforded the enslaved Africans loopholes “to steal their bodies out of slavery by the performance of such expressive acts of freedom.” The enslaved Africans refused to be possessed as slaves, fugitives, and commodities but as human beings by these acts. One would not be wrong to assume that Paul’s teachings about the management of slaves, especially as we find them in *Philem*, provided some impetus for their stance on the subject.

Against the backdrop of the above overview of the Moravian mission, I will proceed to apply the categories developed from the organic analyses of the *Philem* to the West Indies’ setting. By doing so, I endeavour to draw attention to how the people of St. Thomas—the white planters, Moravian missionaries, Afro-Caribbean Christians and enslaved blacks—tended to contextualise issues raised in our reading of the *Philem*.

### **Opportunity for slaves to develop themselves in St. Thomas**

Moravian history mentions an Afro-Caribbean mulatto named Alton Ulrich, who performed influential roles in the coming of the Moravian group to St. Thomas. His letter of invitation to Zinzendorf highlighted some of the miserable positions enslaved black people found themselves in the West Indies. In the early 18th century St Thomas context, typical white planters abhorred any initiative that would bring personal development to their slaves. Literacy and books, for instance, were restricted to only the white class. They feared that it was risky to expose slaves to reading and writing since that would afford them intellectual power to agitate for equality.



More importantly, the white planters were intimidated “by the idea that Christian slaves would be able to give testimony in court” upon receiving literacy and scriptural education (Gerbner, 2018). An anonymous planter approached the Moravian missionary, Spangenberg and said to him, “if the negroes were told that all men were the same before God, it would weaken their respect for the whites. And our lives would not be safe.” (Gerbner, 2018, p.

173). In British Jamaica, for instance, the Baptist sect was accused of having produced in the minds of the Slaves a belief that they could not serve both a Spiritual and a Temporal master; thereby occasioning them to resist the lawful authority of their Temporal, under the delusion of rendering themselves more acceptable to a Spiritual Master (Gerbner, 2018, p. 173).

However, the Moravian missionaries still taught their slaves literacy and numeracy skills. According to Pietist notions, a person must read the Bible by himself/herself to work actively with scripture and continually engage with different parts of the text in small weekly discussion groups. They tried to convince the plantation owners that the negroes would become more servile when they can read for themselves how the Lord Jesus want them to behave towards their masters. Few of the white Christian planters treated their slaves kindly. An example was the master and mistress of Rebecca Protten. Born in 1718 to a European father and African mother on the Island of Antigua, the mixed-race Rebecca was kidnapped and auctioned into enslavement at the age of six to Lucas van Beverhout, a famous plantation owner on the Dutch island of St. Thomas. However, they freed Rebecca from slavery at a very tender age after teaching her reading and writing and Christian instruction. The Beverhouts were pietistic Christians and soon became uncomfortable with the idea of maintaining a slave.

In fact, the Moravian bishop, August Spangenberg was surprised by the mercilessness of slavery on the plantations when he visited the islands in 1736. He wholeheartedly resolved to support the initiative of merging Christian instructions with teaching slaves to read and write. According to Gerbner (2018), Spangenberg argued that “when they learn to read the testimony of the

Scriptures, the negroes can see for themselves how to avoid the false teachings and wicked life of the so-called Christians under whom they live” (p. 91). The Moravian brethren did not underestimate the inspiring value of literacy to bonded individuals. In a late 19th Century CE text, Frederick Douglass, a former slave, attested to slaves’ own understanding of the emancipation that reading could offer. He once exclaimed, “[The] more I read, the more I was led to abhor and detest my enslavers” (Gerbner, 2018, p. 98).

Interestingly, the diaries and letters of the missionaries reveal that some slaves seemed only to be attending Christian meetings only for literacy purposes.

They were not willing to sit still and listen when they learn about the blood that Christ sacrificed for them, it is reported but instead seemed to want to hurry the missionaries up to get to the part where they teach them how to spell (Gerbner, 2018, p. 99).

According to Gerbner (2018), the missionaries regularly express worry in their reports that several slaves seem to take advantage of them. Whereas the missionaries showed sincere efforts to teach reading and writing in the context of spiritual matters, the slaves were, on the other hand, eager to separate these two ideas from each other. As a result, the enslaved Africans discovered a clever way of acquiring literacy through Moravian religious instructions.

The ‘opportunistic’ tendencies exhibited by the enslaved black people caused Nitschmann’s objection to a resolution of Princess Hedwig and the

Senior Chamberlain von Plessen in Copenhagen that converted slaves would be granted liberty. Nitschmann's resolve that the slaves should firmly not be manumitted upon baptism was an essential doctrinal adaptation to West Indian slave society influenced by their belief that Onesimus continued to serve in his earthly station as Philemon's slave despite both being Christian brothers. Seeing that "the Negroes [had] the ability to take on the appearance of being Christian quite easily without any true transformation of the heart," Nitschmann showed both his firm resolve toward pietistic development and his consciousness that blacks could take advantage of a religious prospect to enhance their own social condition (Gerbner, 2018). Thus, he concluded that Christianity should be separated from emancipation to check both dishonest conversions and planters' resentment. With strong determination to promote genuine slave conversion, the missionaries championed the entrenched position that slaves would continue to be servitude even after they are freed from their "spiritual" bondage.

### **Fellowshipping among enslaved, freed and free Christians in the West Indies**

For Nicolaus Zinzendorf, the ecclesial community stood for communion. He considered that the notion of Christian fellowship was essential to the nature of the church. Zinzendorf once confessed, "I acknowledge no Christianity without fellowship." Sensbach (2005) argues that the baptism of blacks and their zealotry for Christ never gave them immunity from mistreatment and segregation. The case of Rebecca Proten vividly illustrates the conditions of black Christians among the white planters and Christian brethren. Although baptised and emancipated at a tender age, Rebecca continued to suffer many tribulations and their consequences. Her mulatto status bestowed privileges as

well as obligations so much so that she had to move carefully and sympathetically among many civilizations. In her odysseys between Denmark, Germany, and the Gold Coast, Rebecca and the second husband (i.e., Christian Protten, an African mulatto) never felt entirely accepted in any place or among any group of people.

The white Brethren regarded them as different, not quite one of them, despite their profession of spirituality and equality among the godly. Christian Protten, for instance, was called ‘an African wild savage and Moorish,’ a very derogatory category at the time (Sensbach, 2005, p. 169). He struggled consistently to reconcile his African and European identities. Thus, Christianity was the only thing left to these uprooted children of the slave trade. Nevertheless, for Christian Protten, faith was not always the panacea as it was for his wife, Rebecca, who found fortitude in the gospel and used it as a vehicle for expressing her tenaciously strong will. The belief that she had a heavenly fate, strengthened by her incarceration and trial years earlier, remained with her for life. The dilemmatic experiences caused Christian Protten to feel that he will be better off in Africa among his own types, mulattoes in Ghana.

### **Baptism and its impacts on social boundaries between slaves and slaveowners**

The baptism and evangelisation of slaves were not encouraged or enforced in the Protestant group of St. Thomas. It was left to the discretion of slave masters, but the majority of them avoided or outrightly declined the view that their human ‘articles’ should or could be transformed to Christianity. The slave owners were predisposed to regard conversion as a subverting and erratic force. Only a few masters permitted their slaves to be baptised. Favoured slaves were

granted baptism. If the enslaved individual showed himself or herself to be worthy, then baptism and freedom would perhaps follow.

Again, planters complained that “making the slave a Christian tended to break down that sense of inferiority, which helped keep the Negro docile” (Sensbach, 2009, p. 56). The white planters were troubled that allowing their slaves to become Christians would disrupt the social order and deprive them of their most enslaved labourers. They had conceptualised the categories ‘being a Christian’ and ‘being a slave’ as diametrically opposite. Psychologically, the slaveholders were not prepared to share a common status (i.e., Christians) with their slaves.

The fear was that baptismal and communion rituals would place the enslaved on equal social levels with the white planter. Rightly so, some converted and baptised slaves began to appeal to the common baptism they share with their masters for equal rights and treatment. For instance, on one occasion at St. Thomas, the slave brother Petrus talked back to his master, saying that “he was no longer obliged to serve his master since he was no less a baptized Christian than they were” (Sensbach, 2005, p. 143). Petrus contextualised baptism as a rite that takes away differences in status between masters and their slaves. He argued from scripture “that Onesimus no longer became a slave to Philemon” following his conversion and baptism.

To the slaveowners, the proper demeanour of slaves to their superiors was one of respect and panic, not a mindset acknowledging that “we are all miserable sinners.” Consequently, they sought legal provisions to ensure that conversion would not imply freedom. That is, no slave was to be freed by becoming Christians. The Moravian’s emphasis on the equality of all humans

before God and the innate sinful human rendered their Christian education suspicious to the planter-class. The white planters persistently forced them to align their theology to the social order of the time. This made the Moravians theologise that conversion and baptism events do not guarantee physical freedom from earthly servitude. According to Zinzendorf,

earthly stations were fixed and ordained by God. The coming to faith in Christianity brings spiritual freedom and equips the slave with the inner strength to endure his/her earthly station in life. A heathen must have no other motive for conversion than to believe in Jesus (Sensbach, 2005, p. 178).

In the process of adapting their theology in such a way that the planters would not feel threatened by their mission works, the Moravians unconsciously became champions of the idea of Christian slavery, which theorised that “Protestantism and slavery could sustain and reinforce each other.”

The Protestant thinker Nitschmann highlighted the insignificance of “outer” slavery to Christian conversion. “The freedom of Christ”, he asserted, “does not mean freedom from the yoke of actual slavery.” He stressed that long working hours did not conflict with the Christian practice of the enslaved and free blacks. Nitschmann argued that “genuinely concerned about [their] salvation” would find that “Jesus will bless the little time that you have at your disposal.” He urged them to “remain obedient to your masters and mistresses, your overseers” and asked them to “perform all your work with as much love and diligence as if you were working for yourselves” (Gerbner, 2018, p. 106).

There is a recorded conversation between a Moravian missionary, Christian Heinrich Rauch and Mathew, a slave driver on the St. Thomas estate in May 1760. Mathew visited the missionary Brother Gandrup and discussed Paul and Onesimus’s story regarding the baptism of slaves. This story, from *Philem*, recounts Onesimus’s flight to Rome, where he met Paul in prison and

received his baptism. Another story they debated was the story of Philip and the Ethiopian recorded at Acts 8:26-40, which recounts Philip's journey to Ethiopia, where he met and baptised an Ethiopian eunuch. Sensbach has commented that "the missionaries were not fond of both stories because they indicated that the gospel should be spread to Africans as well as Europeans. Mathew, nevertheless, had another understanding of the stories" (p. 201). After listening to them, he approached the missionaries to make a case for his own baptism. However, the missionary denied him what Philip had granted to the Ethiopian. Re-enacting the character traits of the Ethiopian and Onesimus, Mathew declared that he "believed that [his] creator is the Lord who redeemed [him] with his blood" and demanded immediate baptism. Sensbach (2005, p. 62) remarks, "while Mathew did not win this discussion immediately, his argument cut to the heart of debates within Christian communities about what it meant to be a true Christian."

However, the moment enslaved individuals started pursuing and obtaining baptism for themselves and their children, the white planters were compelled to re-evaluate the relationship between freedom and Protestantism. "Could slaves become Christians, should all Christians be free, could free black Christians become citizens with the same rights and liberties as European colonists?" These are some of the questions posed by the Christian planters. Protestant missionaries, especially the Moravians answered these by emphasising "whiteness," rather than Christian identity, as the basic marker of dominance on the island. Planters kept forbidding all but their most favourite slaves from Christian rites, and they opposed the missionary works through the 18th Century CE.

Moravian baptism gave the privilege to black women to become an effective instrument for connecting with black slaves on the West Indies islands. For instance, when the German Moravian missionary Freidrich Martin fortuitously met Rebecca, he identified her great potential for mission among the enslaved blacks on the plantations, so he quickly ordained Rebecca and welcomed her into the Moravian community at St Thomas. According to Sensbach, Rebecca's role in the mission served as an illustration of the inclusion of blacks into the cultural space of European whites. As a result, Rebecca excelled as the principal motivator in the Moravian mission in St. Thomas during the mid-1730s (Sensbach, 2005). This can be related to Paul's baptism of Onesimus and his plea for an unconditional welcome for the erred slave.

The experience of Rebecca among the Moravian brethren shows that blacks experienced segregation, humiliation, and inferiority from their white counterparts. The white authority of St. Thomas was less sympathetic to Moravian activities and detained Rebecca in its castle. Her "crime" was wedding Matthaus Freundlich, a white Moravian. A Dutch Reformed pastor resented that none of Rebecca's rites was legitimate under Danish rule. It was considered not fitting for Rebecca the Afro-Caribbean mulatto Christian to marry a white Christian brother. Their common baptism did not nullify any social barrier between the former slave and the European missionary. On more than one occasion, Rebecca was tagged with an allegation of minor stealing, all part of insensitive moves by Christian masters to restraint religious passion of enslaved persons. She and her husband were persecuted beginning in 1738 and eventually landed themselves in prison. As the antagonism and discrimination



grew so severe, they were finally exiled to Herrnhut, where her husband died two years after their daughter's demise.

Later on, Rebecca got wedded to an Afro-European mulatto from Christiansborg, Christian Protten, an African mulatto brought to Herrnhut by Zinzendorf to be trained as a missionary to Africa. Despite the difficulties of life for the Afro-Caribbean Rebecca, she is regarded as “the model for the spread of evangelical religion through New World slave communities” (Sensbach, p. 240). She encouraged enslaved blacks to place their trust in an ultimate reality that had not forsaken humankind but pursued justice and clemency to liberate the entire globe. Many slaves and freedmen came to embrace the Christian faith with a keener sense of its enduring meanings than many of their owners displayed. Thus, Christian baptism afforded enslaved Africans as many privileges for developing their spirituality as challenges in the forms of discrimination and bitter treatment at the hands of white Christians and masters.

### **Treatment of slaves in the West Indies Islands: The White planters and the Moravians**

The Moravians inferred from *Philem* and other household codes that Paul did not rule against the keeping of slaves. They argued that Onesimus was not only returned to the master but was also commended as a reformed slave for the master's profitable use. The Moravians maintained slave estates themselves. When Frederick Martin came to St. Thomas, he bought an estate with the slaves to provide himself with land on which to build a church, labour to provide an income to free himself from mission work, and indeed, slaves at hand whom he could convert. Martin conceived the idea that if many slaves belonged to the

mission, it would provide the mission with a good opportunity for converting them, without interference from masters who might not be so sympathetic to the use of daylight hours for instruction.

Also, Zinzendorf directly bought back for the St. Thomas stations some of the slaves who had been sold away to other islands but whose conversion had made them valuable as helpers to the mission. The difference between mission plantations and already existing white plantations was that slaves who worked on the mission farms were allowed time off for instruction in reading and writing. The whole principle of the Moravian mission in the West Indies was to work within the framework of society as they found it, not to revolutionise it nor meddle in its affairs.

Despite a deliberate alignment of Protestant mission and economic ideology of the white planters in the New World, Sensbach (2005) believes that “the Moravian Brethren offered a more visceral and ritualistic Christianity than most other Protestants, and some of their symbols and traditions” (especially their emphasis on blood and their regular singing) appealed to the cultural heritages of the Afro-Caribbeans. For instance, Martin demanded that bibles be made available to the slaves on the plantation. Even though slave owners were not so happy with it because they felt such a development, the enslaved blacks revered the bible as a magical formula – a book with potent powers to transform their situations.

The former Afro-Caribbean slave, Alton Ulrich, worked with the Moravian mission as one of their overseers in the St. Thomas Moravian community. Ulrich believed that since Moravians had initially offered a chance for travel and companionship, they would support the members of his family

who were still imprisoned in West Indian slavery. Later on, he also purchased a plantation and a slave. As a former slave of the same island and now a converted Christian, Ulrich treated his slave differently: he granted the slave opportunity to develop his spirituality. For Ulrich, being a Christian was significantly connected to improving one's societal position (Sensbach, 2005, p. 187).

### **The welfare of Slaves in 18th Century West Indies**

The Moravians were straightforwardly critical of the slaveholding class when they first landed in the West Indies. These missionaries inspired converted slaves to use Christianity to reverse the established power structures on the farms. Their interpretation of *Philem* was that masters could keep their own slaves as domestic servants with close personal ties to them. As noted earlier, the Moravians purchased slaves to work for them, but they hardly saw themselves as slaveowners. To them, buying a slave was the best way to "rescue" him or her from some desperate plight. Thus, they continued to keep domestic slaves until the day of emancipation was upon them.

The enslaved Christians of the white planters complained about the contradictions between the beliefs and habits of those who oppressed them. Sensbach remarks,

[If] slaves had to judge Christianity only by their white masters, few might have become Christians voluntarily. They were well aware of the shortcomings of their owners, whose faith was often merely a Sunday profession, ignored during the rough week (Sensbach, 2005, p. 114).

Some of the slaves who acquired the power of literacy began to appropriate portions of scriptures to defend their Christian freedom and equality. When the slave Anthony Burns had been excommunicated in *absentia* for running away,

he penned to the Baptist congregation in Virginia that “God created me a man - not a slave and gave me the same right to myself that he gave the man who stole me to himself.” He further argued from *Philem* that “St. Paul sent Onesimus back to Philemon not as a slave but as a brother beloved-both in the flesh and the Lord,” as “both a brother-man and a brother-Christian” (Sensbach, 2005, p.

46).

### **The spirituality of slaves in the West Indies**

Generally, white planters were not primed to see the potential for the spiritual salvation of their slaves. Only a few quietly introduced their favoured slaves to Christianity, taught them to read and sometimes granted them manumission after baptism in the traditional church. Most ‘elite’ slaves often experienced this rare privilege. The Moravians considered social standing as unimportant to spiritual salvation. Despite their notion that conversion and baptism do not confer freedom from physical domination, the Moravian missionaries tried to practice their cardinal doctrine in Galatians 3:28, “There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.” They interpreted the text to mean ‘divine equality’, which cancels all forms of social boundaries in the ecclesia.

In keeping to this doctrine of divine equality, they elected women and black people as deacons, helpers, elders and bishops. They were the first Church to provide equality for women and statuses of spiritual leadership designated to black individuals. As a result of this emphasis on spiritual equality, Rebecca Protten had spiritual power and authority over white women folk. She became the first black woman ordained in Western Christianity when she was made a deaconess in 1746 at St. Thomas.

In *Philem*, Paul was first and foremost keen on the spiritual freedom of Onesimus. Therefore, he catechised and commended the slave to the master to support him with brotherly affection to help him grow in the newfound faith. However, the apostle refused to make any direct demands for the manumission of Onesimus because he knew that was against the ownership rights of Philemon. Based on this understanding, the Moravians argued that Christianity did not ensure manumission and that “true freedom could be found only in conversion.” Essentially, the Moravians took this stance to please the farm owners who feared losing their human property if their slaves embraced Christianity. Informed by these theological positions on slavery, Dober and Nitschmann returned to Europe with bought slaves. Nitschmann landed in Copenhagen with a slave named Jupiter while Dober brought back Oly-Carmel; both were minor males. Each had his slave baptism at a tender age, yet they refused to manumit them.

At least, there is little evidence suggesting that the early Moravian missionaries in the British West Indies transferred Paul’s spiritual statement of equality in Galatians 3: 26-28 to the secular realm as well. For instance, at St. Thomas, they frequently interacted with Afro-Moravian members during the night. While, in all probability, these gatherings were meant for Christian worship and lessons, the planters regarded the night activities also as possibly rebellious pursuits on the island.

Relating their action to what Paul says in *Philem* 16, it could be inferred that the missionaries understood their brotherhood with the slaves both in the spiritual and secular contexts. Not only did Paul catechise Onesimus; he also

cared for the slave by pleading to the master to attend to all his needs: both spiritual and social.

Again, the “invisible church” developed as a safe place for slaves to express their concerns. The Christian faith gave the slaves a unique identity and character that reality seemed to belie: they are sons and daughters of a God who

genuinely cares and loves them. According to Sensbach,

the enslaved blacks revered the bible as a magical formula – a book with potent powers to transform their situations. Although the enslaved Africans were pressed up against the wall by slavery’s vast assault upon their humanity, the tragic circumstance compelled them to discover in the religion of their white oppressors a faith whose depths few of the latter had ever suspected, enabling both enslaved and freed Black Christians to reconcile suffering and hope, guilt and forgiveness, tyranny and spiritual freedom, self-hate and divine acceptance. In that faith, some of them found the strength to throw off their bonds, and many others the dignity, when once emancipated, to stand up free. (Sensbach, 2005, p. 176).

These traumatised Christian slaves came to use the Bible as ‘a coded incantation, ‘a talisman’ to declare their particular value in the face of abuse and mistreatments by their masters and mistresses. The Moravians emphasised inner freedom by assuring the black Christians “that they could ascend to Christ if they reformed their ways and experienced a true heart conversion” (Sensbach, 2005, p. 176).

#### **Pleading to a higher authority**

The enslaved blacks who mastered the art of reading and writing took formal steps to register their complaints to higher authorities for intervention and redress. In one instance, seven slaves wrote a letter in 1739 with the support of 650 learned black adherents of Jesus Christ to the Danish king, Christian VI, a figure who held the largest share in the Dutch West Indian cooperation. In that

letter, these slaves registered a protest about plantation owners' continual "mistreatment of the Moravian missionaries who were working among the slaves; along with recounting how plantation owners have burned the slaves' spelling books and how some slaves have even had their ears and feet cut off as a punishment for reading the Bible" (Sensbach, 2005, p. 106). Also, the seven

slaves explicitly opposed the incarceration of two white missionaries and asked the king to display his mercy and grace (Sensbach, 2005). The action taken by the slaves could be related to Paul's intercessory letter (i.e., *Philem*) concerning the treatment of the slave.

In some breadth, it is interpreted that the slave Onesimus expressly set out to seek Paul to plead on his behalf before his master. According to scholars who subscribe to *the Amicus Domini* theory, Paul was the most influential figure that came to Onesimus' mind at the time. However, Paul wielded no political powers at the time, except within the ecclesia. In the West Indies context, however, the Moravian slaves did not plead to Zinzendorf, the patron of the Moravian mission. Instead, they wrote to the king. The enslaved black Christians probably thought that Zinzendorf's neutral stance on slavery could not permit him to instruct or command the white planters to stop the abuse of their slaves. Besides, the Count did not have a secular or spiritual partnership with the white planters that he could exploit to address the grievances of the embittered enslaved Africans. However, King Christian IV did and came to their intervention.

## Freedom/manumission of the slave in the 18th Century Moravian theology

As already noted, the white planters and landowners were reluctantly exposing their slaves to Christianity because they felt the faith would empower their enslaved properties to agitate for physical freedom. Thus, the planters were not

ready to risk their business by allowing the enslaved workers to be taught Christian instructions. The Moravians understood the concerns of the plantation owners and assured them that the conversion, baptism and instruction of their slaves in Christianity would not affect their physical status on the island.

Zinzendorf is said to have admonished the slaves at St. Thomas in the following words:

That by all means you [slaves] may be subject & faithful to your Masters and Mistresses and them that have Authority over you and may do your Work with Love and Quietness, as if it was your own; for you must know that Jesus himself helps us his Children in the Labour: For the Lord has admitted everything, King, Lord, Servant & Slave. Everyone is to abide in the State & Condition, the Lord has set him in, to be satisfied with his wise Council. For the Lord has ordained Death as a Punishment for all Men, the Children of God must die also, but it is only a Sleep for them, they cheerfully go with their Body into their Grave and with the Soul to their Saviour. So God having punished the first Negroes with Slavery, their souls' salvation now makes their Bodies not free, but only takes away that Stubbornness Laziness Unfaithfulness and Ill which made their Slavery so hard. For our Lord himself when being in the World gave himself to be a Servant and Workman till the last two years before he went out of the World, which is written in his word for an Example to all Servants (Gerbner, 2018, p. 113)

The Count theologised the belief that the enslavement of black people is a necessary condition for the salvation of their souls. Again, he explicitly stated to the enslaved people that their acceptance of the Christian catechism and baptism does not guarantee freedom from physical bondage. To a large extent, Zinzendorf's exhortation implies that the Moravians in the Caribbean mission



field and their fellow community members in Herrnhut grappled with the concept of slavery. With the view that any direct demonstration would jeopardise their mission, “the Moravians settled, at least officially, for the division between physical slavery on earth and spiritual slavery in eternity” (Gerbner, 2018, p. 98).

The Moravian missionaries focused on the inner freedom or salvation of the enslaved Africans. They were not so concerned with the emancipation of the negroes. To them, Paul was categorically clear about the spiritual fellowship of Onesimus and brotherly status over and above everything else. They understood Paul’s admonition to Philemon only in the spiritual sense. Philemon was required to make necessary adjustments for Onesimus to deepen his faith through regular fellowship, listening to the public reading of the scriptures and making him focus on the freedom of his soul.

Moravian evangelists like Dober and Nitschmann adjusted themselves to Caribbean society and concluded that “outer” enslavement was of little consequence. “Whether in bondage or not,” the missionaries reasoned, “Afro-Caribbeans could become free by embracing Christ, not by receiving their free papers” (Sensbach, 2005, p. 126). Thus, they insisted that slaves could continue to be slaves even when they have become Christians. Instead of suggesting liberation, Dober and Nitschmann emphasised the consequence of ‘inner slavery’ to the small number of converts who expressed interest in them. They maintained that anybody who participated in non-Christian conduct was a “slave of the devil, regardless of whether that person was physically free or bonded.” Thus, when Anton Ulrich’s sister Anna paid them a visit on January 17, 1733, with the grievance that the manager abused her inhospitably, the

proselytisers declined to console her or take any transformative activity on her part, telling her that “this could be a great opportunity to truly call on God so that she could be freed from her inner slavery since her outward slavery was of little consequence.” True freedom was explained as a behavioural and spiritual category. It meant “sincere conversion—not emancipation, a position that was most likely resented by blacks who either hoped to or had—earned their freedom after conversion” (Sensbach, 2005, p. 145). Rebecca Proppen, for instance, was not troubled with personal freedom because she was emancipated by her owners while still young. Nevertheless, spiritual freedom, as Rebecca understood it, was more challenging to come by.

In conclusion, one can observe that perhaps there was a ‘Philemon ethical dilemma’ in handling slavery in Christian households. On the one hand, there was the feeling that God ordained slavery and that slave masters were to maintain that convention and use the proceeds for the good of humanity. However, on the other hand, there is the issue of justice and equal treatment of humanity.

The next sub-section gives an overview of modern slavery in the Ghanaian context and proceeds to examine how Ghanaian Christian parents and employers as well as fictive children and maids relate to the text of *Philemon* and the message they derive from it.

### **Modern slavery: An Overview of the Ghanaian Context**

Modern forms of slavery constitute a global phenomenon that, one way or another, affects each country in the world. Governments, civil society and development partners of every continent have expressed grave concerns about the devastating impacts of slavery on human dignity. A research project

undertaken by ILO and Walk Free in 2017 revealed that over 40 million individuals live in enslavement currently, “21 million forced labour, 15 million forced marriage, four million sexual exploitation, 71% were women and girls, 25% were children, 23% were in Africa” (ILO, 2018). Ghana is no exception to the global challenge of modern slavery, as “it remains to be a source, transit and destination country for human trafficking, child labour, forced labour, debt bondage or bonded labour, domestic servitude, descent-based slavery, child slavery and forced or early marriage” (TIP Report, 2019).

The abusive use of humans, particularly children, within Ghana is more prevalent than transnational modern slavery. Ghanaian youth are exposed to forced labour, such as in fishing, domestic service, street hawking, begging, portering (*‘Kayaye’*) child trafficking in illegal mining (*‘Galamsey’*), quarrying, herding, and agriculture. In 2017, the Ghanaian government was briefly downgraded to the lowest tier 3 category by the US State Department following their annual Trafficking in Persons (TIP) report.

The majority of modern slavery cases in Ghana involve the vulnerable, excluded and poor people who are tricked, exploited and trapped. They usually have very appalling and unfavourable external circumstances that lead them to succumb to the inhumane fate of their modern slave masters as a way to fend for themselves, their dependents and their families. There are cases where young people from the northern part of Ghana travel south and to some bordering countries to work as farm bonded labourers. In most situations, these young people work a whole year on plantations and large farms but are remunerated with old motorbikes while some return home without anything. Other factors

accounting for menace include naivety, family separation and neglect, weak law enforcement and poor policy implementations. In other instances,

Ghanaian women and children are recruited and sent to the Middle East, West Africa, and Europe for forced labour and sex trafficking. Licensed and unlicensed recruitment agencies recruit young Ghanaian women for domestic service or hospitality industry jobs in Gulf countries. After their return, many of them report being deceived, overworked, starved, abused, molested, and/ or forced into prostitution. Ghanaian men were also recruited under false pretences to go to the Middle East where they were subjected to domestic servitude and forced prostitution” (Trafficking in Persons Report 2016, United States Department of State).

Successive governments have introduced policies to build an enabling environment that can support children and youths for a better future. One can mention Free SHS, School Feeding Program, Youth Employment Programs (YEA), National Health Insurance, and the LEAP. Yet poor management and supervisions plague the operations of these interventions and as a result, are not able to offer sustainable solutions to the menace.

In the year 2019, the Government of Ghana (GoG) celebrated the famous “Year of Return in remembrance of the 400 years since the first enslaved Africans landed in the United States.” The initiative intends to restore the lost past of 400 years, boost investment in Ghana from the African diaspora and African Americans, as well as “make the country a vital travel destination for the diaspora.” Interestingly, despite the historic memory of the ordeals of the African fathers, Ghana continues to witness worse forms of modern slavery. It is cogent to argue that initiatives against the inhumane treatment of Africans in the past can hardly achieve anything meaningful when modern forms of slavery still confront the people.

### Contextualisation of *Philem* in the Ghanaian Domestic Milieu

The empirical respondents of the study were sampled from two discrete groups of people: Christian parents, guardians, or foster parents constituted the first Group (A); the adopted children, maids, and house servants formed the second Group (B). In all, ten (10) maids and fictive children and ten (10)

Christian parents/couples in Christian households were sampled and interviewed. The researcher did not bring together maids, fictive children and bonded labourers to form one big group for the interview. Instead, each Christian parent or employer sampled for the study was interviewed separately. This was done to ensure that each participant was not intimidated by the presence of another figure. It afforded both foster children, maids and Christian parents a trusted environment to express themselves as they wished.

Most respondents of the first Group (A) were related to those in the second Group (B) in an ongoing master-servant relationship. In such instances, the researcher sought permission to interview the Christian parent before the foster child of the same household. I verified information offered by both respondents of the same household or connected in a master-servant relationship. Salient revelations and information given by a respondent of the First Group (A) were noted for verification; questions were posed around such information to the fictive parent or employer of the fictive child/maid or employee in question. In the same breath, I sought corroborations on the information of Christian parents and employers from their fictive children.

The researcher assumed that *Philem* is somehow an unfamiliar text to most Ghanaian Christians. The following measures were taken to ensure that the respondent has acquainted himself or herself with the text.

First, I asked the respondent if he/she knows there is such a book in the Christian Scripture as Philemon; and whether he/she had read it before or heard it read in any context or understand what the text is about. Then, again, I asked whether he/she has heard any portion of it or characters in the letter cited or referenced in any conversation before. Each respondent's oral responses to the preliminary questions helped me to determine whether he/she 'knows' something about the background of the text or the narrative contained therein before I proceeded with the actual interview instruments. Next, I offered them an opportunity to hear the text read aloud to them in their mother tongue for those unfamiliar with the text. Finally, for those with literacy skills, I asked them to read the text themselves. For each respondent, I allowed time intervals to reflect on the text before I proceeded with the main questions of the interview. Their responses indicated the various meanings they put to the text regarding particular labels or topical issues.

***1. What is your general knowledge about the letter to Philemon?***

The first respondent of Group A expressed that Paul wrote the letter to a Christian slave owner in Colossae to beseech him to forgive the stubborn slave, Onesimus. He added, "I doubt Philemon just accepted the slave back without some corrective punishment to deter him from repeating the act." Another foster parent also said that Paul was in prison and received news from Timothy that brother Philemon's slave has run away. The slave eventually came to Paul in prison. And Paul converted him into Christianity and asked him to go back to his master and serve him because that is God's will. The same respondent added that Paul 'did not only encourage Onesimus to be strong in his slaver situation but also commanded the master to be a good master for the church's good

name.’ The fourth Christian parent said that Paul is praising a generous man for using his resources to meet the needs of Christians. However, Paul is also asking him not to be cruel towards the slave who is coming back to serve him because both are equal human beings in the Lord.

The fifth respondent of Group A said that Philemon was a kind Christian master but had a slave who was a lazy, gluttonous thief. Despite Philemon’s caring treatment for his slaves, Onesimus stole some properties and ran away. Philemon was worried and angry that he would punish the slave mercilessly when found. However, Paul wrote this letter to plead with Philemon to forgive the slave and treat him better. The same participant added, “if you wholeheartedly do good to someone who does not deserve such treatment and yet the person later betrays your kindness, it is very frustrating and unfair. I think Philemon was very nice toward his slave, but the slave was not appreciative and instead stole the master’s precious items and ran away with them.” The last but one Christian foster parent said that keeping slaves was allowed in ancient societies; punishing bad slaves was also a conventional practice in those societies. However, Paul wrote this letter to plead to Philemon to exercise restraints and allow Christian virtues of love, forgiveness, and acceptance to reign supreme in the matter. The tenth Christian parent interviewed said, “being a Christian and keeping slaves was acceptable that is why Paul was sending back Onesimus to the rightful master.” Paul thought it was not good to separate slaves from their masters and advised the slave to return home. She added, “it is not good to have wicked Christian masters in the church, so Paul wanted the master to use his authority over his slaves to show him some love and good treatment.”

From Group B, the first maid of the Christian household interrogated indicated that the letter was written to Philemon to tell him that it is unchristian to keep someone's child as a slave and so he must accept Onesimus back and stop treating him as 'an *akoa*' (i.e., a slave). The second respondent of Group B, a foster child, said that letter is about a mistreated slave who ran away from the cruel treatment of his master for safety somewhere even though he knew it would be dangerous when caught. Another one added that the slave was initially disappointed in Paul when the apostle said he must be returned to the owner.

Another fictive child expressed an earlier view that Onesimus suffered continuous mistreatment in the master's house, so he ran away for his life. The last respondent from Group B said the letter addresses a dicey situation in a Christian household: a generous Christian with slaves in his household; one of the slaves who ran away from duty was being returned to him. Paul was saying to this Christian slave master to show mercy and kindness towards both the slaves in the household, especially the one who just returned because he has accepted Jesus as his Lord and personal saviour.

The responses of the two groups reveal that each group of participants was using their current experiences to convey the sense they make of the letter. For example, fictive Christian parents articulate the perceived insubordination of the slave in the narrative despite the generosity of the Christian master. On the other hand, most of the fictive children and maids were using their situation to question why Philemon, albeit a good Christian, was bent on treating the erred slave cruelly had it not been Paul's intercessory appeal.



a) What meaning(s) do you make from *Philemon* regarding the welfare and personal development of slaves?

The first respondent from Group A said that a Christian must treat the slave as a brother or sister. According to her, ‘the master must respect the slave; he should be there always for the slave in times of trouble and care for the basic and emotional needs of the slave; he must promote the ultimate interest of the slave which is freedom.’ The second respondent expressed that Philemon must exercise brotherly virtues towards his slave. ‘He must relate to the slave as true brothers relate towards one another. He must listen to the concerns of the slave and refrain from treating him as a stock character.’ The same respondent added that ‘Philemon should give room for the slave to acquire skills and knowledge that would help the slave be independent when he acquires his freedom.

The third interviewee of Group A concluded that Paul set an example by sharing the gospel with Onesimus, which led to the slave’s conversion. That is what it means to say that you care for a person’s welfare and growth. He added, “what Paul did for Onesimus indicates that he cared for Onesimus’ spiritual welfare which had implications on other aspects of his life.”

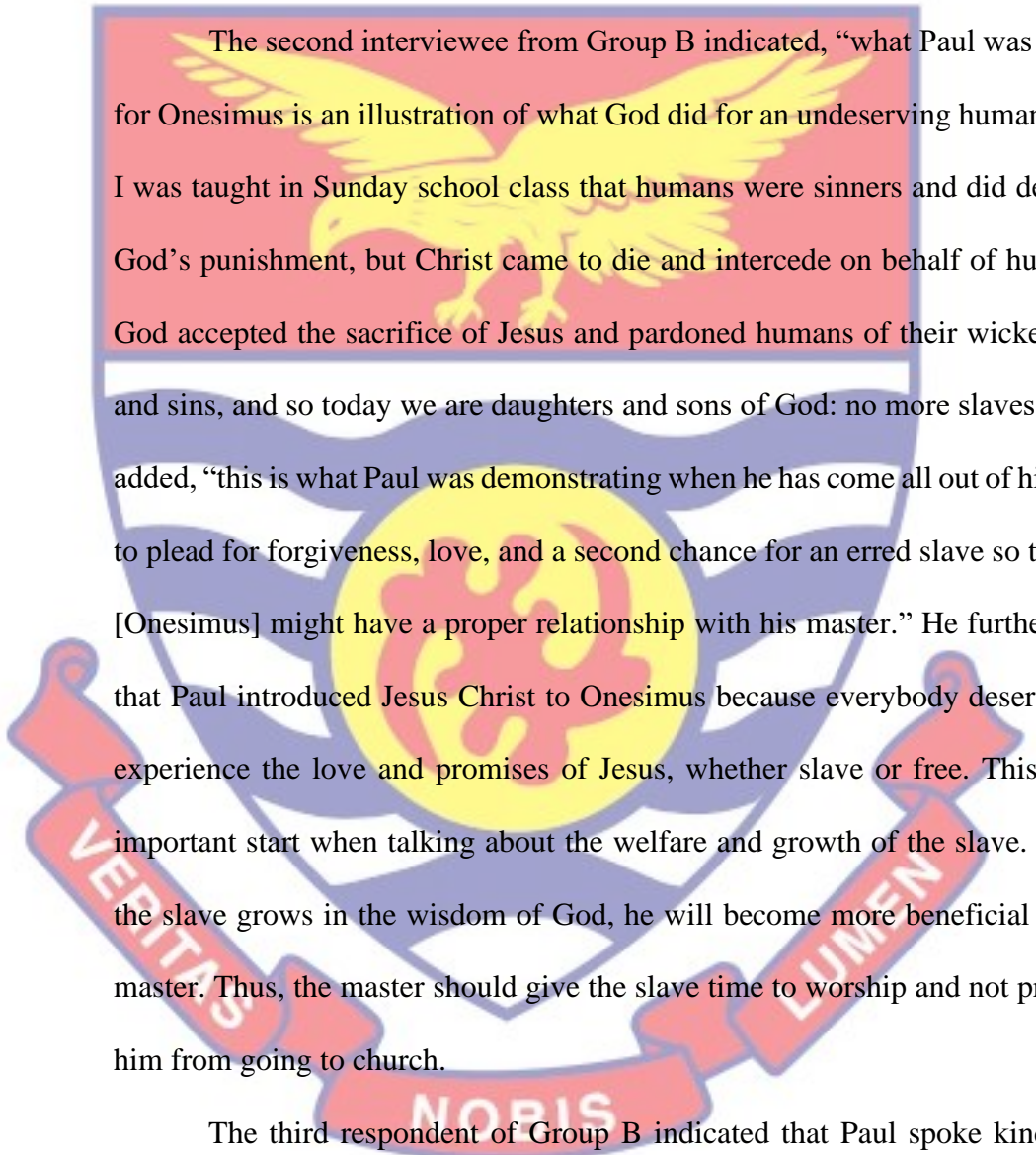
The fourth Christian parent made an interesting analysis of the text. According to him, there are two influential figures in the narrative: Paul and Philemon. Paul has used his location and power to introduce Onesimus to the gospel. Now the slave is not just an ordinary slave; he has become a Christian slave in both senses of the phrase. Philemon is thus expected to use his authority as a slave master for good works by forgiving the slave of his mistakes and giving him fair wages. He reasoned further, “I think what Paul means by ‘more than a slave, but a brother’ is that Philemon should be a fair and kind master to

Onesimus.” He must not cheat the slave of his due wages or rewards and other incentives. Even more, he must acknowledge the services of Onesimus and reward him more than he deserves. The spirit of love that characterises his charitable deeds to the saints should be evident or explicit in his relationship with the slave. There should be a time that Onesimus cannot help but praise the master for his constant encouragements, gifts, and other forms of underserving support he has enjoyed from his relationship with the master.”

The sixth respondent of Group A also expressed a view similar to the fifth interviewee. Paul took an express interest in Onesimus’ situation. He did not regard him as an unimportant person or a useless slave who does not deserve love and attention. Despite Paul’s circumstances, he embraced the slave with uncommon love and affection. He taught him the Christian teachings and referred to him as ‘my child, my innermost being, my heart’ in the letter he wrote to the master to seek forgiveness and acceptance for him. He added, “Paul also referenced other Christian brethren to support Onesimus with their influence to ensure that the slave is not mistreated anymore by the master. What Paul did for Onesimus and what he asked Philemon to do for the slave together constitute points to the welfare of the slave.”

The ninth respondent of Group A held that ‘Philemon was supposed to think about Onesimus and treat him in the same manner he would have done for the apostle.’ Philemon was generous towards Paul and the other Christians. He supported the growth of the Church with his resources, influence, and prayers. Paul’s asked him to extend the same generosity to the slave Onesimus, no matter how least and underserving he appears.

In Group B, the following responses were offered by the maids and fictive children that were interviewed. The first maid said that “Philemon must correct or rebuke the slave in love. He must refrain from physical and psychological abuse. His utterances can break the spirit of the slave. He must be decent in words and deeds towards him.”

The logo of the University of Cape Coast is a watermark in the background. It features a shield with a yellow eagle at the top, a yellow sun in the center, and a red banner at the bottom with the Latin motto "VERITAS NOBIS LUMEN".

The second interviewee from Group B indicated, “what Paul was doing for Onesimus is an illustration of what God did for an undeserving human race. I was taught in Sunday school class that humans were sinners and did deserve God’s punishment, but Christ came to die and intercede on behalf of humans. God accepted the sacrifice of Jesus and pardoned humans of their wickedness and sins, and so today we are daughters and sons of God: no more slaves.” She added, “this is what Paul was demonstrating when he has come all out of himself to plead for forgiveness, love, and a second chance for an erred slave so that he [Onesimus] might have a proper relationship with his master.” He further said that Paul introduced Jesus Christ to Onesimus because everybody deserves to experience the love and promises of Jesus, whether slave or free. This is an important start when talking about the welfare and growth of the slave. When the slave grows in the wisdom of God, he will become more beneficial to the master. Thus, the master should give the slave time to worship and not prevent him from going to church.

The third respondent of Group B indicated that Paul spoke kindly of Onesimus even though he knew what the slave did was not the right thing. “Paul is different from other people; he sees Onesimus as a useful person to God, the church and the household.” Perception is an essential aspect of welfare and growth. Philemon was being asked ‘to think of the slave as a human being like

himself, capable of good works in an environment characterized by love, patience, and forgiveness’ Another fictive child re-echoed the views of the third respondent. Paul is gentle towards Onesimus and Philemon even though he has more power over them. He does not coerce or threaten them to do what is harmful to their lives. Based on Paul’s example, “Philemon is being asked to remove the threats of punishment to allow the Onesimus to feel secure and at ease to do his work in the household.”

The fourth fictive child who doubles as a domestic servant responded that Philemon should not overburden the slave’s task in the household and on the field. He must consider that Onesimus is also a human being and not ‘a beast of burden’ and so should not be made to perform unreasonable tasks. By Christian consideration, Philemon should find out the state of the slave and whether his strength or wellbeing at a material moment could permit him to perform some challenging tasks. He added, “for me, if I were the slave Onesimus, I would feel well treated, as a brother, when my master speaks to me with a friendly tone and humane words or jargons. If he calls me with derogatory or ridiculing terms like *akoa*, (i.e., a servant) as if I don’t have a name and shouts or yells at me with the least mistake I make, then I will not feel that I am being treated as a human being.”

The final maid interviewed expressed that the mental picture you have about someone, or an object determines how you treat such a person or the object. The text is inviting Philemon to re-imagine Onesimus as, first and foremost, a human being despite the present social location of being a slave. That is what Paul meant when he said, “more than a slave, a brother” in verse 16). She added, “a human being should be accorded human treatment: not

overworking her; no mistreatment, exploitation, and inhumane punishments. Genuine brothers or sisters think of each other's interests. They scratch each other's back. Onesimus services, in many capacities, make life comfortable or get certain things done in Philemon's household. Philemon should reciprocate it by pursuing the slave's interest. Anything that would make the slave's condition improve and enhance his work, the master should make provision for them."

**b) How was Philemon expected to demonstrate clemency and reconciliation toward the erred slave?**

Group A's first respondent said that Paul expected Philemon not to act on impulse. Instead, he wanted him to give careful thought to his identity in Christ and the fellowship in the Church before he takes any action regarding the returned slave. The second respondent of Group A answered that Philemon was required to remember that his faith in Christ equips him with spiritual power to exercise forgiveness towards those who wrong him, regardless of the person's wrongdoing.

The third interviewee from Group A expressed that Philemon was expected to make a public utterance suggesting that he has forgiven the slave. However, he added, "I don't think Paul was expecting Philemon to dramatize his anger or fury against the slave; instead, he was required to respond with words like 'Onesimus, you're forgiven, don't let this repeat.'" Therefore, instead of revenge, Philemon must show forgiveness and affection.

The fifth Christian parent indicated that the best way Philemon was expected to show forgiveness and decide to relate to Onesimus on a new page: he was to relate to Onesimus as a new being by resisting the natural temptation

of playing the gallery. However, Onesimus was still his slave, and therefore, Philemon must trust the slave again, even better than before and allow the slave to attend to him as he used to.

The eighth Christian fictive parent interviewed said that one of the core values of Christian living is letting go of others' mistakes and reconciling with them for peace to prevail in the community or the house. She added, "it is not easy to forgive a betrayer or an ungrateful person. I think Onesimus was an impatient slave who did not want things done the master's way. If he acknowledged before Philemon and everyone present that he is sorry for what happened and promised that it would not happen again, then Philemon was bounded by Christian teachings to publicly tell them that 'for Christ's sake, I have let go of your offence.'"

The first maid responded that forgiveness is a process that must start from the inside. Philemon must decidedly forgive the slave in the heart and refrain from emotional revenge. The second fictive child demanded that Philemon forgive in both words and deeds. He added, "Onesimus himself must experience the power of forgiveness through the ways the master relates towards him and the observers" over time, others must come to testify that the relationship between the master and the slave has improved for the better. The third fictive child said that the master was expected to reinstate the slave to his former position before he fled away and rectify those factors that might have caused him to flee.

The fourth maid gave the opinion that Philemon should temper revenge with underserving mercy. "It is said that two wrongs do not make right," said the respondent. Again, she added, "punishing the slave would instil fear in him

and certainly caution the other slaves from running away, but that is only a temporary solution to the situation. However, the more excellent yet unusual response was to show the returned slave mercy, forgiveness and love. This would make a lasting impression on the returned slave; it will cause all the slaves in the household to have a positive orientation towards the master. Love is stronger and more effective potent than all mechanisms of controlling others combined.”

The last respondent of Group B reacted that some masters refuse to see the face of a defaulted servant anymore. Thus, he would prefer to sell him off to another (often a harsh) master or terrible condition to learn their lessons. He retorted, “I think that an option Philemon was contemplated when Onesimus was brought before him. Generally, masters fear disloyal slaves because there is the notion that such persons can incite or infest the minds of other slaves in the household. Therefore, he could have said, ‘I have forgiven you, but I cannot admit you into my house anymore.’ However, that is not the response Paul was asking for. The apostle wanted the slave to be spared every punitive punishment. Besides, he wanted Onesimus to be reinstated to work for the master. Indeed, Paul is asking Philemon to give Onesimus another chance to serve him. So Philemon should react positively to every service Onesimus is going to render in the household.

**c) From the text, what steps were Philemon expected to implement to promote the spirituality of his slave Onesimus?**

The first respondent from Group A expressed that Philemon should give Onesimus a free period to worship with fellow Christians. The master must not overlook the slave’s spiritual needs. She added that since Onesimus has become

a Christian, Philemon should engage in Christian discourse or conversation with him for mutual edification and praise of God. The second Christian parent added to the earlier view that Philemon, being the patron of the house-church, should allow Onesimus to use his talents and skills to serve God in the vineyard. Another Christian parent said Onesimus can develop his spirituality if he is not discriminated against or made to feel inferior during fellowshiping because he is a slave

The third respondent believes that there would be possible conflicting situations, especially when Onesimus is supposed to accomplish some tasks for the master but where at the same time, the slave would like to join believers to worship God. In such circumstances, the master should make an adjustment for the slave to perform his domestic duties without missing the opportunity to fellowship with believers.

The first maid said that if Onesimus is allowed the privilege to read the bible and listen to bible readings and sermons, his spirituality will improve significantly. He should be made to feel welcomed among the brethren. He added, “during weekly meetings, the master should allow the slave the freedom to freely express his desires and wishes before God. I think Onesimus would still perform petty tasks at church: arranging chairs, setting the table for the master and his friends, washing their feet, and attending on them as when necessary.” Especially in such a holy setting, the master should not make his work tedious. They should allow him time also to enjoy the ceremonies. The third fictive child interviewed expressed the opinion that the master should support Onesimus to achieve his spiritual aspirations. Supposing Onesimus



wants to go and work with Paul as a discipline, the master should make a costly sacrifice by allowing him to go.

Another interviewee from Group B suggested that “the slave should be allowed to put off the apron or slave’s garment during a church gathering. The master should allow the slave to wear a garment to make the slave feel different from his mundane status.” She explained, “I am not saying that he wears the same cloth but at least something different from the usual slave garment. Philemon should also permit him to put on footwear and keep his hair in order not to appear odd in the gatherings of the saints.”

Also, the fourth interviewee from Group B maintained that meaningful brotherhood starts with spiritual exercises such as fellowshiping together and partaking in common rituals. He added further, “Philemon should remove every perceived hindrance that could inhibit Onesimus, who has become a Christian, to meet and interact with other Christians, both free and enslaved.”

The last fictive child suggested that “Philemon must not deliberately send Onesimus on errands on the Lord’s Day where Christians meet and worship.” Again, Philemon should ensure that the slave is not given an extended and exhausting task that would occupy the slave’s time the whole day, making it impossible for him to attend religious meetings. In short, the respondent was saying is that Philemon must ensure there are no stumbling blocks to Onesimus’ desire to worship God and fellowship with the saints.

- d) **What intimate terms and practices exhibited or recommended by Paul paved the way for Onesimus to realise his true freedom and dignity? Moreover, what aspects of Philemon’s character could have helped Onesimus to realise his freedom?**

In Group A, three respondents identified key familial and emotional metaphors Paul used the slave: ‘my child,’ ‘begotten under pain of physical imprisonment,’ ‘brother,’ ‘my viscera,’ etc. One of them indicated that Paul’s deliberate decision to share Christ’s message of grace was the true beginning of Onesimus’ freedom. “In the Christian worldview,” she argued, “true freedom begins with receiving the message of Christ; it finds its truest expression in Christian rituals and living.” Thus, Paul’s baptism of Onesimus is the supreme expression of Paul’s wish for Onesimus to be a truly free person. Another one cited John 8: 36 to draw the inference that ‘the freedom granted by Christ is the true freedom. All earthly statutes do not really count in Christ.’

In addition, another Christian parent indicated that “Paul used the message of the Cross to set Onesimus free from all earthly concerns like manumission, wealth, power and status.” She also reasoned that Paul’s interaction with Onesimus fortified him with spiritual strength to cope with his earthly conditions.

The sixth Christian parent mentioned that Philemon had good a name in the community and the church. It would have been unwise for him to allow the wrong deed of his slave to destroy his hard-earned reputation. The urgency to safeguard or consolidate his image presented a strong call on Philemon to show mercy to the newfound Christian. Our elders say, ‘good name is better than riches’ (*din pa ye sene ahonya*).

The final Christian parent employed the story of Peter and John about the lame man at the Beautiful Gate in Acts 3: 1-10 to draw a beautiful analogy. He said, “It is like the cripple man at the entrance. This man just asked for temporary alms [money], but Peter and John surprised him with something greater and lasting than what he had requested (i.e., the enablement or ability to

walk and praise God freely). “In a similar manner,” she continued, “I think Onesimus looked at Paul’s status and concluded that the apostle could secure for him earthly freedom. However, Paul had a bigger vision for Onesimus’ holistic wellbeing and dignity. He rather secured for the slave everlasting freedom in the Lord, a spiritual freedom which eventually brought him every form of earthly dignity and freedom he never dreamt of securing by his own efforts.”

Regarding Group B, the first maid wondered why Philemon is praised as a generous Christian yet had a ran away slave. She added, “some people are generous in public contexts, but they lack a good name in their own homes. They love to be praised in the social groups as philanthropists and patrons, yet they do little for the welfare of their workers and housemaids. I do not think Philemon was such a Christian benefactor. However, if he was a mean and exploitative master, then the letter sought to convict him with word of God to change from such an inconsistent attitude.”

However, the second respondent of Group B explored the possibility that Philemon was a kind Christian towards all and sundry, including his slaves. The slave’s bad attitude brought the master so much pain and disappointment that he probably resolved to stop treating slaves kindly. Paul’s letter came in to encourage him not to stop the good works he had started. “He should continue

to extend equal kindness towards his slaves because whatever good we do, we will receive the same again from the Lord.” Another respondent expressed that Philemon should refrain from threatening the slaves with his earthy power and authority because both have the same master in heaven.

The final interviewee from Group B responded that if there were anything that could have caused Philemon to show mercy and pursue the dignity of his slave, then it was the Christianity of the man. Paul’s appeal is built on Christian beliefs and values supposed to be shared by anyone who calls himself/herself a Christian. He added, “Paul mentions that Philemon was a man of hospitality, kindness, love and compassion. The problem was that Philemon was kind towards only selected people who, in his judgment, deserved such hospitalities. He neglected his workers and servants in every act of generosity. However, Paul’s letter exhorts him to extend this very Christian deed unto everyone within his horizon, including the underserving slave, Onesimus.” This Christian character, already demonstrated by Philemon, could help Onesimus’ personality improve.

I noticed that Christian parents, maids, and fictive children explain the *Philemon* in their specific circumstances. Thus, it clearly establishes how they understand the text concerning the questions posed. In our next chapter, we will find out how *Philemon* is used in various household contexts regarding the treatment of maidservants and fictive children.

### **Conclusion**

From the dialogic discussion in Chapter Four, it is apparent that the same bible is understood differently by many Christian masters and their servants. Some interpret it to justify the keeping of slaves, maids, and unequal treatment. Other

parents and masters, however, have the conviction that Christianity is against the keeping of slaves, unequal treatment for one's slaves or servants and maids. In the St. Thomas context, the white planters were not prepared to set their slaves free because they needed slave labour in their homes and on the plantations. Furthermore, they distrusted the missionary work of the Moravians because they felt these missionaries have come to the Islands to set the enslaved negroes free with the gospel of Christ, to make their slaves equal to them.

In those dilemmas, the Moravians adapted their message and interpreted texts like *Philem* to suit their situation. Zinzendorf assured the plantation owners that Christian conversion and baptism does not bring about emancipation; their slaves will continue to serve as Christian slaves. Also, the conditions at St. Thomas were such that it was difficult and more expensive to hire the services of free negroes. This forced the Moravians to buy and keep slaves for economic activities for their survival. However, they decided to treat them as servants and also minister the gospel to them. Unlike the white planters who were also Christians, the Moravians understood the text as making a case for the spirituality of enslaved negroes. They had the view that a spiritual slave is likely to become a better servant to the master. The planters rebuffed the idea of exposing slaves to practices that would promote their spirituality and welfare because that would soon bury the boundaries between a master and slave. Their view was that Paul does not command or ask Philemon to release the slave; instead, he promised him the slave would become a more valuable slave.

Some pietistic Christians like Beverhouts set Rebecca Proppen free and taught her reading and writing because they interpreted Christianity as a culture that does not support keeping others as slaves. Interestingly those few negroes

that acquired their freedom due to the Christian convictions of their masters never experienced genuine fellowship in the religious ceremonies and meetings. Some never felt welcome by white Christians. An example was Rebecca and Christian Protten

Again, the text was explained to negro slaves that inner freedom is more important than outer freedom and that one must not strive for liberation; instead, they should focus on the liberation of their souls from bondage to sin and wickedness. However, many who became Christians sought to use the same scripture and biblical stories to argue for equality with the masters and physical liberation from enslavement. Therefore, they began exploiting any available opportunity presented by Christianity to acquire literacy skills and a deeper understanding of scripture to make a case for their freedom. They interpreted *Philem* according to their present location and predicaments, fears, anxieties, hopes, and interests in such desperate situations.

In the Ghana context, most Christian parents or employers understand the text in their peculiar situations. Their experiences inform their understandings of the text with maids, feelings, interests, and Christian convictions. Similarly, the fictive child/maid/labourer puts himself/herself in similar situations to Onesimus and evaluates the text in terms of their past or current experiences. It sets the stage for examining the actual appropriations people make from their understanding of the text in concrete situations. As Gadamer says, the text seizes to be autonomous because every reader sow and reaps subjective meanings in tandem with one's historical situatedness.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### APPROPRIATIONS OF *PHILEM*

#### Introduction

This chapter seeks to present various proactive usages people make of the text and the tensions arising from it. In both St. Thomas and the Ghanaian contexts, Christians have appropriated and subverted portions of *Philem* to resonate with their contextual needs without a full grasp of the historical and literary meanings of the text. Finally, the chapter deduces implications from the practical usage of the text.

#### Pragmatic usages of *Philem* in St. Thomas, 18th Century West Indian context

The Christina planters and their slaves in the West Indies faced tensions regarding what the Bible says about freedom and enslavement. One group of people (i.e., the white planters, mainly of the established English Church) used the Bible to keep their servants as slaves. The other group (i.e., Moravian missionaries, a German Evangelical mission) employed the same book to make their servants develop completely different orientations about life without completely releasing them from slavery.

Some white planters did not have problems allowing their slaves to participate in religious gatherings in the evenings. However, the dilemma they faced was when the slaves were not returning home on agreed time because church programs were delayed into mid-nights. After such programs, the slaves appeared tired and could not work efficiently because of insufficient sleep. Christian masters who felt they were not getting enough labour banned their slaves from participating in those evening church meetings. These masters did

not see why plantation work should be interfered with by the religious activities of their slaves.

The enslaved negroes argued that the bible is the common source by which all people can relate to one another as brothers and sisters. They interpreted *Philem* as a message of freedom, and so they sought to free themselves from their enslavement to white planters. However, for the white Christian planters, the bible does not rule against having a slave or a servant. The planters who freed their slaves, like Rebecca's masters, felt that the negroes can still work under them as free servants. The Moravian missionaries embraced a similar position. Zinzendorf held the view that negroes can be Christians while serving as servants on the plantation of their masters.

In the West Indies, the plantation owners interpreted the text to suit their economic interests: Paul endorses a slave's status; hence it is biblical to keep slaves. On the other hand, the slaves also appealed to the bible to say that in the kingdom of God, there are no slaves, we are all sons and daughters of God' and hence it was wrong/against scripture to continue serving as slaves. The negroes resorted to the bible to reclaim their dignity and worth from white planters' dominations. For instance, it is reported that in 1737, an enslaved woman at St. Thomas pulled out the bible – as a spiritual weapon – and read it to a plantation overseer who was about to violate her sexually. The woman courageously read to the man about his sins and the divine punishment he would receive from God. The application of *Philem* and the scriptural declaration of “you are all one in Christ” by the Moravians paved the way for slaves to experience “first white people who were paying respect to the negroes” (Sensbach, 2005, p. 165). This and other usages of the bible by the Moravian Caribbean mission encouraged



many enslaved people to start forming ideas of their own empowerment and humanity in the Caribbean world.

One also notices that the same Moravian missionaries also bought a whole sugar plantation together with the slaves on them. Their understanding was that the black slaves would be working for them, but they would not treat them as slaves. They ensured that their slaves were not over-worked, abused, or mistreated like other planters were doing to their slaves. The gentle treatment of slaves stemmed from their understanding of what Paul says in *Philem*, that ‘Onesimus should be treated as a brother.’ In Moravian theology, treating a slave as a brother did not imply abrogation of the master-slave relationship altogether but instead being sensitive to the interest of the slave so that both will have a win-win situation. With this understanding, the Moravians exposed their negroes to reading and writing and the gospel’s teachings. They invested in the holistic development of their slaves. Zinzendorf took their welfare and spirituality into consideration and paved ways for the slaves to improve, yet the master-slave boundary was maintained. In return, Zinzendorf and the Christian planters expected their slaves to perform their assigned obligations with diligence and wholeheartedness (Sensbach, 2005).

Unfortunately, the Moravians did not always enjoy or experience a ‘win-win’ situation despite brotherly attention paid to their slaves’ conditions. They were not ready to release them from the legal bondage of slavery, yet they were determined to make the slaves have different thinking about life. Later on, many black slaves discovered opportunities to argue for equality and freedom. However, the dilemma of Zinzendorf and the missionaries was that most well-treated slaves became lazy, unproductive, and difficult to control. Because of

this, the Moravians decided to hire slaves from other white planters instead of buying and managing them.

Before discussing how Ghanaian Christian parents are appropriating the message of *Philem*, it is important to situate the conversation within the legal, social and cultural context of the country. It is legitimate to interrogate the state of Ghana's constitution on modern slavery and which institutions are working to eliminate the heinous practice from the social lives of Ghanaians? The answer to this question could be gleaned from the description of modern slavery in Ghana's legal system as well as efforts being made by the government in curbing the menace.

### **Modern slavery and the Legal System of Ghana**

All forms of modern slavery are unlawful in the republic of Ghana. However, the concern has been that the legal systems of the country do not work as enshrined in books. The lag in the legal system frustrates the efforts of NGOs that are partnering with the Government to stop modern slavery. If suspected perpetrators are identified yet independent investigations are not carried out for prosecution, then people will be incentivised to engage in the illegal practice.

### **Ghana Government's efforts at curbing modern slavery**

Nation-states bear a prime obligation under international human rights law to enforce human rights standards. This obligation is assumed by states through the signatory and endorsement of international human rights instruments. In the recent past, there have been collective efforts to recognise and tackle the phenomenon of contemporary slavery in Ghana.

To address the challenges of all forms of modern slavery, Ghana's government has made effort in executing policies, legislation, and programmes. These are aimed at addressing the concerns of victims and bringing perpetrators to book. These measures seek to address the root causes of trafficking and provide an inclusive approach to tackling human trafficking in Ghana. The 1992

constitution of the Republic of Ghana proscribes slavery and forced labour (section 16) and indicates that it is the basic right of any individual "to work under satisfactory, safe and healthy conditions" (section 24). Section 28 guarantees children "the right to be protected from engaging in work that constitutes a threat to ...(their) health, education or development."

Since children are the most vulnerable group in society when it comes to modern slavery, the GoG has reinforced the protection of children by passing the Ghana Children's Act (Act 560) in 1998. This Act bans abusive child labour, defined as "labour that deprives children of health, education and development."

Ghana has approved the ILO Minimum Age Convention., which is: "13 years is set for light work, 15 for employment and apprenticeship, and 18 years for hazardous work." The catalogue of dangerous work includes "going to sea, mining and quarrying, carrying heavy loads, working in manufacturing industries where chemicals are produced or used, and working in places such as bars, hotels and places of entertainment where children may be exposed to immoral behaviour" (Parliament of the Republic of Ghana, 1998). Furthermore, Ghana forms part the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child of the African Union. The Charter states that "every child should be protected from all forms of economic exploitation and from performing any work that is likely

to be hazardous or to interfere with the child's physical, mental, spiritual, moral or social development" (Organization of African Unity, 1999).

Another initiative is the enactment of the Human Trafficking Act, 2005 (Act 694), which stipulates a lawful outline for contending human trafficking by seeking "to stop and suppress trafficking, penalise persons complicit and initiate interventions to promote the protection and welfare of victims." After this was the establishment of the Human Trafficking Secretariat (HTS), which is managed by a thirteen-member management board. The overall goal of the Secretariat is "to provide sensitisation to the public, reduce overall instances of trafficking and create a conducive environment for the acceleration of national development by eliminating TIP, which serves to impede development gains" (Human Trafficking Secretariat, 2017).

Additional programmes include the establishment of the Anti-Human Trafficking Unit (AHTU) of the Ghana Police Service, which "conducts investigations into allegations of human trafficking and seeks to prosecute offenders," as well as the establishment of the Anti-Human Smuggling and Trafficking in Persons Unit (AHSTIP) of the Ghana Immigration Service, "an operational unit set up to investigate and arrest human trafficking and smuggling offenders, while also building the capacity of immigration officials to detect cases of trafficking and smuggling" (GIS, 2020).

In the year 2015, the Government of Ghana and the United States of America signed up the Child Protection Compact (CPC) Partnership, "a four-year joint initiative aimed at addressing child trafficking in Ghana by strengthening the government's capacity to identify child trafficking cases, care for and reintegrate victims, effectively investigate and prosecute traffickers, and

prevent trafficking from occurring” (Westat 2016 Baseline Assessment of the Child Protection Compact Partnership). In the same year, the Human Trafficking Prohibition Regulations were adopted as an approach to facilitate the successful execution of the Human Trafficking Act.

Also in November 2016, Ghana and La Cote d’Ivoire entered into an agreement to create an official base of collaboration between the two countries in the combat against ‘cross-border child trafficking and the Worst Forms of Child Labour (WFCL).’ The GoG has also improved its efforts to meet the bare minimum requirements as stipulated in the United States Trafficking Victims Protection Act (TVPA) (2000). Recent measures include supporting efforts to increase criminal prosecutions as illustrated by two human trafficking convictions at the beginning of 2017; and the donation of vehicles to the police Anti-Human Trafficking Unit to provide support and ease some of their logistical challenges, to more effectively aid their work; additionally, as a measure to provide enhanced care and support to victims, an equipped facility has been designated as a victims shelter.

Again, Ghana has initiated policies geared toward combating modern slavery. In 2000, the government signed an MoU with the ILO “to eliminate child labour by strengthening national capacities for addressing the problem. Between 2003 and 2006, Ghana participated in the West African Cocoa and Commercial Agriculture Programme to combat hazardous and exploitative child labour (WACAP).” WACAP was established to minimise and uproot hazardous child labour in the cocoa and other agricultural sub-sectors in Ghana, Cameroon, Côte d’Ivoire, Guinea, and Nigeria. The project was funded by ILO/IPEC and the United States Department of Labour.

In 2017, the Ministry of Gender, Children and Social Protection, with support from UNICEF developed “a five-year national plan of action for the elimination of human trafficking.” The aim was to eliminate or drastically lessen the menace of human trafficking, increase care to victims and enhance perpetrator accountability. The ministry consulted and teamed up with other institutions and organisations such as the Employment and Labour Ministry, the Fisheries and Aquaculture Development Ministry, Social Welfare Department, Ghana Police and Immigration Services, UNICEF, and the Human Trafficking Secretariat.

One limitation I find with the ‘National Plan of Action’ is that the Gender Ministry does not consider the influential position of religious leaders in the community. There is no reference to religious leaders strengthening “Ghana’s capabilities along with the holistic ‘4 P’s’” (i.e., prevention, protection, prosecution, and partnership). Meanwhile, religious leaders are better positioned to increase consciousness and promote a deep understanding of dignity, liberty, and trafficking issues. If the provision of improved care and security to victims is the collective duty of vital groups and shareholders, then religious bodies and leaders cannot be left out in this journey. By virtue of their vocation, men and women of God can draw on sacred texts to provide psychological support to victims in rehabilitation.

In spite of these efforts, corporate Ghana has to set out specific ways to address the idiosyncratic challenges that the citizens and residents face. The majority of Ghanaian firms have neither instituted internal systems to mitigate modern slavery, nor do they report on modern slavery across their value chain. For these issues to be so scant despite many corporate social responsibility

discussions, it is clear that corporate Ghana is yet to address the main social problems that affect its internal and external stakeholders.

### *Domestic Violence and Victims Support Unit (DOVVSU)*

DOVVSU of the Ghana Police Service was instituted in October 1998 as a specialised unit in response to the swelling number of reported cases of abuse and violence against women and children. The legal frameworks which inform and guide the Unit include the 1992 Constitution of Ghana; the Criminal Offences Act (Act 29) 1960; the Criminal Code (Amended) Act, 1998 (Act 554); the Children's Act, 1998 (Act 560); the Juvenile Justice Act, 2003 (Act 653); and the Domestic Violence Act, 2007 (Act 732). The overall vision of DOVVSU is to "create an environment where domestic violence and other forms of abuse would be freely reported and to collaborate with stakeholders to provide coordinated timely responses to victims." It also has the mission "to prevent, protect, apprehend and prosecute perpetrators of domestic violence and child abuse." In terms of functions, DOVVSU seeks to:

(a) protect the rights of the vulnerable against all forms of abuse be it physical, sexual, emotional, socio-economic, or harmful cultural practices; (b) establish an effective database for crime detection, prevention and prosecution; (c) treat victims/complainants and their families with respect and courtesy; (d) professionally take statements; (e) provide victims with information on their cases as well as details of the investigations; (f) provide advice on crime prevention at homes, in schools, churches and markets. The Unit also refers victims for medical services and specialized help to clinical psychologists; social workers from the Department of Social Welfare and counsellors attached to the Unit. DOVVSU in addition is expected to collaborate with NGOs and other civil society organizations that may be able to aid victims in need of necessary support services (Ghana Police Service, 2017).

Although not explicitly stated in their mission and vision statements, modern slavery (i.e., human trafficking, child labour, and exploitation, etc) constitutes an inherent context for the operations of DOVVSU. Hence,

DOVVSU counts as one of the governmental departments for addressing modern slavery. It partners with other agencies to meet the needs of survivors of abuse through the building of support networks for an effective protection system.

### ***Commission on Human Rights and Administrative Justice (CHRAJ)***

CHRAJ is a human rights institution in Ghana authorised under chapter 18 of the 1992 Constitution to examine grievances of essential rights and freedoms of all persons in Ghana. It serves as an ombudsman and an anti-corruption agency of the country. CHRAJ is in all the regional capitals of the country, and it has over one hundred district offices throughout the country.

It is entrusted with the authority, among others, “to investigate complaints of violations of fundamental rights and freedoms, carry out special investigations into systemic human rights abuses, and investigate any other human rights violations brought to the Commission’s attention.” CHRAJ also educates the community on their human rights and “how and where persons whose rights have been violated could seek redress” (CHRAJ, 2022). Any individual, group of people or organisation can lodge a complaint with the CHRAJ. An individual is permitted to petition the institution in the event where their human rights are violated, or they are denied the enjoyment of a right to which they are entitled” (CHRAJ, 2022).

### ***Roles of religious bodies in combating modern slavery***

In August 2021, Ghana hosted African faith leaders for the first African declaration against modern slavery. This joint action signifies a pan-African alliance of ethical leaders to confront an inequality that affects more than 40



million people worldwide. The Declaration ratification was facilitated by the Global Freedom Network, the faith wing of the international human rights group Walk Free which is dedicated to hastening the end of modern slavery. It was the eighth adoption since 2014 when Pope Francis and Grand Ayatollah Mohammad Taqi al-Modarresi united other faith leaders from many of the world's great religions in asserting that contemporary slavery must be eliminated.

In the words of Sheikh Armiyawo Shaibu, the representative for Ghana's national chief Imam, "faith leaders have a very special position in Ghanaian society." He underscored that religious leaders are uniquely placed to help identify and support victims by putting them in touch with professionals who can help track down the perpetrators. I agree with Sheikh Armiyawo that faith leaders can perceive manifestations in people that would elude others. Again, faith leaders appreciate what poverty and harassment can do to men, women and children. Hence, faith leaders should begin to exploit their unique position in society to detect and challenge instances of modern slavery in their societies. This is especially so in Ghana, where faith is embedded in communities and the prevalence of modern slavery is high.

Faith leaders can make impacts where government and businesses cannot. Thus, religious leaders in Ghana should work as community leaders to demand for improved legal reforms and to provide moral guidance and education in their congregations. Despite the signing event, many religious leaders in the rural areas are either not aware or equipped with training and resources to help the fight in their communities.

A subsidiary contribution of faith leaders towards the eradication of modern slavery is through the “Faith for Freedom app,” a mobile software was developed in collaboration with a panel of faith leaders to create an information bridge between those who may witness human trafficking and those in authority who can take action. Faith leaders who are aware of the app can use it to access applied guidance on how to recognise, evaluate and take action on cases of modern slavery, and how to team up with congregations on this topic.

### *Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) and modern slavery*

The upsetting prevalence of modern forms of slavery constitutes a great problem for every citizen of the country. Hence, Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) have devised some measures to root out the problem.

NGOs team up with governmental institutions such as the Police Service and DOVVSU to embark on rescue operations to reintegrate trafficked children with their families. These organisations have devoted effort to exposing modern slavery, educating the populace, rescuing victims, and prosecuting perpetrators of modern slavery. These include ActionAid Ghana, End Modern Slavery (EMS), Engage Now Africa (ENA) In a recent media report, a team from ENA together with DOVVSU, the Ghana Police Service, and the Department of Social Welfare rescued fourteen (14) children from trafficking and reunited with their families. The operation was carried out in the Eastern and Greater Accra Regions

In the year 2018, ActionAid Ghana held a workshop for three districts in the Northern and Savannah Regions to improve the knowledge of individuals and communities on enslavement practices so they can act to stop such practices and eradicate the involvement of child labour in agriculture plantations under

circumstances of servitude. The awareness creation of these NGOs reveals that modern slavery combat requires the help of everyone, especially, those in the recruitment communities.

In all, the ‘exegesis’ of the contemporary Ghanaian context reveals clear legislations against both direct and indirect forms of slavery. There are definitions and laws concerning child labour and child rights as well as various institutions for controlling and denouncing abuses.

### **Appropriation of *Philem* in Ghanaian Christian households**

Contemporary Ghanaian Christian parents do experience ‘the Philemon dilemma’ in their household or business enterprises. A Christian parent may sometimes feel that he/she is not profiting from the partnership or the maid is not working as expected despite all the care and provisions provided to him/her. One parent indicated, “I provide the maid basic need; I pay her more than she deserves and provides her with other numerous incentives and privileges. However, the maid’s service is lacking. She sleeps on comfortable beds and eats good food, yet she refuses to help me wholeheartedly. She is always murmuring and complaining to outsiders that I overwork her. Meanwhile, it is the basic chores we ask her to do. I am really confused. If she continues like this and does not change, I will have no option but to send her back to the village.”

The Christian parent’s challenge is that one can have a genuine reason for showing kindness, sensitivity, and love towards the maid, yet the maid would not recognize it or intentionally decide to take advantage of the master/mistress’ Christian generosity. What option is left to Philemon if the slave refuses to play his part or roles as expected? This was the response from another Christian parent: “Paul did not literary ask Philemon to become ‘a slave’

to his own slave” and so if Onesimus forgets his place in the household and becomes arrogant, disrespectful or lazy, he must be corrected accordingly. However, she added, “reverting troublesome maids and fictive children who are not ready to serve back to their former condition is not against Christian values. No one goes into a lose-win venture; hence masters are justified to sack lazy maidservants.”

Indeed, the household instructions in the Deutero-Pauline letters require both masters and slaves to do something for the common interest of each party. More importantly, how do maids or fictive children who work as maids reconcile their status or situation in the household of their masters or fictive homes with their understanding that ‘they also are children of God’? The researcher adopted interviews as the tool for gathering information about how Christians in the Ghanaian contexts appropriate *Philem* vis-à-vis four important labels that were deduced from the organic reading of the text: (a) welfare and educational opportunities of maids/fictive children (b) clemency for and reconciliation with fictive children and maids in complex situations; (c) their spirituality and fellowship; (d) freedom and dignity of maids and fictive children in the Ghanaian Christian households. Fictive children, maids, and employees of Christian figures were also interviewed to know their impressions about how their masters used the text of *Philem*. The following open-ended questions were used to find out how Christian parents/employers and maids/employees appropriate *Philem* in the household or workplace:

- a) Are there some adjustment measures in your household or business activity that ensure/promote the welfare and education of the maids or fictive children? If yes, what ethical challenges do such adjustments

pose to your foremost reason for adopting or employing the fictive child or maid? Do you think the people you are serving prioritise your material and educational welfare? *(The last one was directed to the fictive child/maid/labourer).*

b) How do you react to the mistakes, wrong deeds, or mischievousness of

a fictive child or maid as a Christian parent or business person? How do you make peace with yourself, the maid, and God? How are/were you treated in a problematic situation believed to have been orchestrated by your own misdeed or wrongdoing? *(The last one was directed to the fictive child/maid/labourer).*

c) Is the spirituality of maids/fictive children emphasized and promoted in your household/enterprise? Do you see your spirituality taken into consideration by your fictive parent/Christian employer in this household? *(The second question was directed to the fictive child/maid/labourer).*

d) Do you have the feeling your freedom and dignity are respected or trampled upon by the Christian fictive parent or employer? *(This was directed to the fictive child/maid/labourer).*

### **Welfare and educational opportunities for maids/fictive children**

Some Christian parents disclosed to the researcher that the manifest reason for adopting fictive children from their extended family was to offer a supportive atmosphere for such less privileged children to get education, social skills and values to improve their conditions. The excerpt below shows the emphasis one of such Christian parents puts on the education and empowerment of the fictive child or maid.

I brought my sister's daughter from the village to stay with me so that she could get better educational training to maximise her chances of succeeding in life. Because of their deprived condition, I felt I should help raise at least one of her children. The girl was in stage three at the time I brought her to stay with me. Today, she has completed JHS and is ready to continue with her secondary education.

Another Christian parent recounted that she adopted an extended family member to the city not because she really needed assistance with domestic activities in the household. Instead, she disclosed, "I considered that when she is with me in the city, I can find her a trade to learn instead of staying in the village and not doing anything meaningful." This respondent said she was able to find the fictive child hairdressing trade to learn. Again, a respondent told me that he had four children in the house: two were biological, and the other two were fictive or adopted children from the immediate extended family. He indicated that the adopted children were not reduced to house servants: "I ensured that they had equal educational opportunities and labour in the household with my biological children. For example, every person was responsible for washing his/her own clothes and dishes; I provided equally for their educational, emotional and physical needs with equity and equality."

However, others also indicated that regarding house helps, maids, and workers, their original reason for bringing them into the household was for them to work or complement the labour force in the household as captured in the given response below:

I started a provision store two years ago [in our residential area] but my household duties and office duties made it difficult for me to balance my time. There were several times I had to close the store because I was not available; I was either at Church, at work or in the house. The pressure became too much for me. I, therefore, decided to go in for a small girl from the village to assist me when am not around. With the help of a church member, I got a 13year old girl from her hometown to come and stay with me. Even though I desperately needed her service at the

provision store most of the time, I had to think of her education and future so I put her in a nearby school. But I made it clear to her that she will sit at the store after school and on every weekend.

Again, a Christian Cocoa plantation owner responded to the question from traditional practice in his household and farming practices. This man owns about 40 acres of cocoa plantation with fifteen (15) contractual labourers. Seven of the labourers have been working for the man for the past nine years. I inquired from the man what has sustained the master-servant relationship on his plantation over decades. Here is what he had to say:

First of all, I try my best to treat my labourers as human beings like myself, created in the image of God. I accord them much respect and I ask my wife and children to do the same. The fact is, I need them probably more than they need me, because if they wake up one day and leave, I alone cannot work on the various cocoa plantations I own. My farming will collapse and all the loans I have secured would put me into big trouble. Thus, I don't deal with them strictly based on the contract. For instance, I remember a fourteen (14) year old boy from Burkina Faso who came along with his countrymen to work as labourers but looking at the age of the boy, I imagined whether I would be okay for allowing my son to be toiling on the cocoa farm at such an age. I did not turn him off; instead, I spoke with his brothers that I want to put him into school and allow him to perform minor tasks in the house and on the farm. At the end of every year, I also organize a get together for my household and allow the labourers to invite their friends from other villages for a celebration. Normally, it is on such occasions that I pay their annual wages and express my appreciation to them. Thus, there is always something to look forward to at the end of the year, if you're my labourer. The usual challenge I encounter is dealing with those workers who seem to be taking advantage of the situation.

He added, if Christians are labourers of Jesus, then we must treat our own physical labourers well so that Jesus would also bless us." He concluded that the secret to his prosperity in cocoa farming is that he is tender, just, fair and considerate towards his labourers. Wrong manipulation and coercion are options but certainly not the best ones when dealing with those upon whom your business's success depends. When asked about the annual salary of a labourer, he said that mature and experienced labourers are given 1,800 GH Cedis

annually whilst new ones are paid 1,600 GH Cedis. According to him, he provides them with shelter, food and working tools but not hospital bills. Besides that, they occasionally get free periods to take up private daily contracts from other people in the village.

Another cocoa plantation owner frankly told me about his principles for dealing with farm labourers. The man owns about 25 acres of cocoa farms scattered across different villages. Apparently, he inherited most of the farms from his father, but he has expanded the plantation. He hires contractual labourers who come from Burkina, Togo, Benin and the Northern part of Ghana. Unlike the other farmer, the annual rate he pays each worker is GH1,500 Cedis together with shelter, food and Health Insurance Card. He revealed that he was a strict type of master. The labourers are fond of giving excuses for illnesses, so regular excuses given affect one's annual salary. He also indicated that he could terminate one's contract upon realising that the labourers are lazy and full of excuses. In another instance, he mentioned that he caused the arrest of two labourers who stole a bag of cocoa. After serving their jail terms, they came back to complete their contracts for payment. Even though he is a Christian, business is less about Christianity because "if you become soft with your employees, they will collapse your many years of hardworking." Relating his views to the situation in *Philem*, the Christian cocoa farmer said that he would have put Christianity aside and showed Onesimus his rightful place. "The slave should pay for his wrong deeds to serve as a deterrent to others. For him, accepting the slave back without punishing him would not put fear in them, and they would take you for granted because you're soft, the Christian man added." When asked whether he is exploiting the labourers, he answered negation. This



is a standard practice in many cocoa planting villages, and the workers themselves need employment because, within a space of about five years, they can accumulate a reasonable sum of money to return to their country. It is considered a reciprocated transaction: 'they work for us and we pay them the agreed fee, provide them food, shelter and freedom to take up some daily contracts.'

In varying respects, most Christian parents provide room for the advancement of their maids/fictive children or employees. Some consider profit beyond the progress or welfare of the servant, but others too consider the worth of the person before anything else. Either way, there are consequences on the Christianity of the Christian parent. Therefore, let us consider the views of fictive children and maids/workers in Christian households.

While fictive children's responses establish that their educational needs are provided in the Christian home, some complained about discriminatory treatments. This was peculiar to those who double as domestic servants. One of them said:

There is no single day that I woke myself up! I could sleep like a log because of the heavy workload. The house had upper and downstairs rooms. They owned two personal cars which they used every day. A casual worker could come once a week to help wash clothes, but the household chores were more than I could bear!

A 17year SHS student who was a foster child in a Christian household-related her traumatising experience:

My [adopted] parents refused to give me pocket money to school for two weeks, as my punishment for failing to sweep the compound. Actually, I was very exhausted the previous day's work and I couldn't wake up early to do all the all chores before going to school. In addition, I was starved during school hours. So, I took a bowl from the house for SCHOOL FEEDING meals. That one too, when my [foster] mom discovered the bowl in my school bag, she condemned me for stealing.

She beat me mercilessly and stepped on my stomach severally with her heavy legs.

When I asked about her status in the household, the respondent told me she has an ambiguous status in the household since she adopted a child but sees herself to be more of a maid in the household. Another fictive child also recounted her challenging experience as depicted below:

I live with a pastor's wife. She asked [my mother] that she should allow me to come and live with her in Accra and she would send me to school. It was a little difficult because she has a provision store, so immediately after school, I went to the store and opened it for business. I usually close from school at 1:30 p.m., go to the store to sell till 4 p.m. then go to the house to cook supper which will be ready by 7 p.m. After cooking, I go to wash the dishes then go to remove all the dirty clothes in the house and wash. By 10 p.m. I would be finished with the washing... [then] I have to make ice cream and ice water ready for the next day's sale. After doing all these I become drained so I do not get time to study. [16yr girl: personal interview, 2020]

In a study conducted by Kuyini *et al.* (2009), abusive treatment of orphans emerged as a frequent theme. Two of the interviewees who were double orphan boys living with their uncles were distinctive in assessing their situations unfavourably with the Christian parents' genetic children:

My friends opened the term last month, but I am failing to go because I do not have my provisions and my uncle told me just to wait a bit. [...] Honestly speaking, the treatment that a fostered child receives is different from biological children. [...] In most instances I have to raise my own money for transport because my guardian only gives me money for soap and other provisions. [18y boy: Kuyini *et al.* (2009, p. 19)]

My uncle is very cruel to me. [...] He did not want me to stay in his house and complete some work for him with school time. Meanwhile, his own children attend school regularly. They have their real father who provides for them so they lack nothing. [14yr boy: Kuyini *et al.* (2009, p. 19)]

The few instances cited above reveal some challenges such as deprivation, neglect and verbal abuse faced by fictive children in a Christian environment. Another respondent from the cocoa farming community-related

his experience with a Christian cocoa plantation owner who hires only minors to avoid paying adult labourer's rate. The farmer is noted for preying on hungry and needy or desperate teens who need money to support themselves in their education. According to the respondent, he was once a victim of the man's cruel treatment. Together with two JSS mates, they were employed to go and weed at the man's cocoa farm for a daily wage. They used three weekends to complete the work, yet they were paid two days' wages. According to the interviewee, everybody in the community perceives the man as a wicked and exploitative person. People work for him at their own risk; many people turn down his job offers because of what others say about him.

Another worker of a Christian household described his Christian employer, an elder of a Church, as the ideal type of a cocoa plantation employer. The interviewee confessed that he had worked on different plantations of Christian personalities, but this one is entirely different. He said, "My master treats us with genuine respect, patience, honesty, kindness and sacrifices. Sometimes, he knows we are lying to him about why a job was not completed on time, but he overlooks petty stubbornness and pursues those things that would unite us with him to achieve our set goals for the month. When one of us is unwell, our master becomes so sad and sorry for the person not because of the labour he had lost but the pain the employee would be going through. He has never allowed any of us to pay his own hospital bill nor deducted those days from one's payment. Again, he knows some of us are in this situation not by a simple choice. So, he encourages us to develop a saving habit and be focused in life so that we do not work as labourers throughout our lives. He often encourages the most mature among to think of marrying. Every Sunday, the

wife and grown-up girls prepare fufu and good soup for us to enjoy. Although he is a committed member of Pentecost, the master does not force on us his religious beliefs and practices. Among his twelve (12) labourers, only five (5) of us attend church with him; some attend different churches; others too do not attend at all. “Our master has not got many acres of cocoa land as compared to

other masters in the villages I have worked, but I can tell you he harvests more cocoa than many of those people with vast plantations. It is because” the interviewee argued, “his labourers work from the heart; they give off their best whether the master is present or absent on the farms.” He added that he had already stayed with the man for four (4) years. There is no restriction on movement; we can visit colleagues on other plantations. This planter disclosed to the researcher that he and his colleagues have made it their goal to help the master expand his plantation for more harvest.

The data reveals that some maids and fictive children are fortunate to find themselves in a master-servant relationship where their interests and welfare are prioritised. Their personal growth and education are given needed attention by the Christian parent. Some have personally experienced tremendous improvement in their condition whilst others have received support to complete their formal educations. On the other hand, some fictive parents have had terrible experiences with maids or workers who are having bad character. This has caused many Christian parents to be changing maids or fictive children regularly. Some maids/fictive children have experienced various forms of abuse from their caregivers or employers. It cannot be over-emphasised that all the negative experiences from deprivation, neglect and verbal abuse affect the child’s emotional and psychological development.

### **Clemency and reconciliation in Christian households**

This question sought to discover how Christian parents exercise clemency towards their maid or fictive children in scandalous or controversial situations that put one's Christianity to a hard test. The first Christian parent said, "my previous maid was troublesome; she was lazy and disrespectful, she was never ready to comply with simple instructions." Many of them are not used to tough city life. You would have to wake up as early as 4 am and assist me to bake bread and distribute them before 6:30 am, but many of these workers cannot stand it. According to the same respondent, she had good intentions to help the maid acquire a hair-dressing trade. She put the maid into a trade to learn, but immediately afterwards, her attitude towards her primary duty in the house changed: "the maid would not want to do any house chore duties again – the usual cleaning, washing and cooking. However, the same maid would go to her madam's house to perform the same tasks she would not do in our house. She would leave Saturday and return Sunday evening. "I tolerated the headache for six (6) months, but subsequently, I could not take it anymore; I sent her back to the village for my peace of mind."

The second Christian parent narrated his experience with a fictive child he adopted at a tender age from the extended family. He enrolled her into University Practice school at Class One. "One day," the respondent recounted with sad emotions, "I was there when this girl came to me to tell me that she wants to go back to her mother; she preferred to stay with the mother than to be here with me." At this time, the respondent's biological child was just around 3years old. Every effort to convince the suddenly moody Class Five girl to stay did not yield a good result; she refused the counsel of her class teachers and

wife and colleagues. Finally, the uncle returned her biological mother to the village, but after four months with her mother, the girl changed her mind to go back to the uncle because the two contexts were utterly different. According to the respondent, it was difficult for him and the wife to take the girl back because they felt the little girl would cause them trouble again. What he said was that

“we gave consideration to the future of the girl and had to accept her back into the household once more.”

The third Christian respondent said that she pardoned the maid on a couple of occasions when she discovered that the boy was pilfering money from the store. The Christian mother recounted: “The boy would steal the money and hide them in unsuspected places, and when he goes to school, he will buy food and sweets for his friends. I talked to him, withdrew certain privileges, reprimanded him and even resorted to physical punishment, yet he would not stop this bad habit. At some point, I even suspected that it was the doing of evil spirits or witches in the village who does not want him to succeed. I was really confused; so, I decided to send him back because I could not allow a stranger from nowhere to collapse my business” Another reason she offered was the fear that the boy would have a bad influence on her children that is why she sent the boy back to the village and refused to accept the routine apology rendered by the boy’s parents.

Another respondent from Group A narrated that she brought a local girl from the village to support housework, yet anytime she assigned tasks (washing, cleaning, errands,) the girl becomes moody and starts giving attitudes, “meanwhile it was because I needed help that is why I came in for you.” According to the fictive parent, the housemaid makes an unnecessary

comparison with the other children, refusing to notice that they are not the same. She had problems helping me wash the dirty dresses of my children and husband and cleaning bowls after dining. The maid once raised the issue of partial treatment during a family meeting but the fictive mother told her that each person in the house must perform so that comparison would not help. The mother explained, “I am the one providing food, paying utilities and school fees, and footing all other bills, but I have not complained, so why should you too complain when you’re playing your assigned duties?” After she completed JHS, I realized her behaviour had changed entirely, so I gave her the option to return to her parents if that is what she wished rather than staying here and feeling that she is a ‘house slave.’

The same question was rephrased to solicit the views or experiences of fictive children and maids on the theme of forgiveness and gentle response when they go wrong things in the household. The first maid interviewed pointed out that she constantly experiences harsh rebukes before forgiveness. For example, she mistakenly broke a mug, but her fictive mother insulted her that she is a careless and wicked person. The second respondent, a fictive child, said that any little incidence or mistake in the house, her fictive parents would call the mother in the village to report and exaggerate things. They have threatened to send her back to the village, but she has been begging them not to. She also recounted another experience. He was sent to go and convert coins into notes. In a circumstance the girl could still not fathom it up to today, the coins were short by 200cedis [Old currency, the year 2000). The mother concluded she has stolen the money and threatened to burn her hands. “She tied my hands together,

poured kerosene on it, and nearly lighted a fire to it, had it not been a neighbour who came to my rescue,” the respondent added.

Another local maid said added, “as for me, they always insult me as a useless and good for nothing person, so insult has become a normal thing to me; whatever I do, they will rain insults on me.” She also revealed that the fictive mother never appreciates her works. The next fictive child also narrated his experience regarding forgiveness in these words: “One day after school, I followed friends to watch a play and so I returned home late, around 7 pm. My fictive parents refused to allow me to enter the house; he dismissed me to return to where I had been since I closed school. I knew I was at fault, but she did not even listen to my explanation. Without food, I slept outside for the whole night; I will never forget that treatment.”

A third respondent, a labourer in a cocoa plantation village, related an incident between him and his former Christian master. He was bonded to work as a labourer on the farms of a work Christian cocoa farmer. In the traditional arrangement, the labourer could not work for any other person or travel without the master’s approval. However, six (6) months into their contract, the labourer’s biological father passed away in his hometown of Burkina Faso. This sad incident caused the labourer to request permission to attend the father’s funeral at his hometown, but unfortunately, the date of the burial ceremony coincided with vital farm activities – plugging, gathering, and cracking of cocoa pods. The master did not grant him leave to go home, but he couldn’t comply with the master’s order. Considering the value attached to funeral traditions among his cultural folks, the respondent decided to attend the funeral. He spent eight (8) days before returning to the master. The master got furious with him.



The labourer begged the master and tried to explain things to him but then his master refused to take him back. According to the employee, he invited two elderly members of the village to intercede for him; however, the master did not accept their plea. Instead, the master terminated the contract without giving him the wages for the six months he had worked before he left for the funeral.

Relating his personal experience to the situation of Onesimus in *Philem*, the labourer wondered whether Onesimus left without leave of absence because his unsympathetic master refused to allow him to attend to the urgent private issue.

The fourth maid said that the Christian parents warned her never to talk back when speaking to her on any issue. “But on two tensed occasions,” she continued,” mummy was saying things to me that were untrue. I could not control my anger and talked back to her that what she was saying was not what actually happened. She took offence, insulted me mercilessly and, on top of it, asked me to pack and leave her house. I did not have anywhere to pack, so I told her to send me back to my parents because she came to pick me up. The following day, I went to Daddy to convey my apology to mummy. All that I was told was, ‘get your things ready, we are taking you back to the village’, and indeed they sent me to my parents.” The fourth respondent indicated that he was very troublesome, both at home and at school. He once fought and injured a classmate; the boy was hospitalised. School authorities invited the guardians to school. He added, “both parents and teachers went to the hospital to see the boy; and to take care of the bills. I was so scared about what they would do to me when I return home. However, when I got home, they did not punish me as I expected; instead, I was advised not to engage in such violent behaviour again.

This made a great impression on me, and their attitude towards me in that circumstance remains my number one experience of true forgiveness and love.”

Another maid relates that she works at the store of a Christian woman. The woman is very kind towards her and understands her. Sometimes when she fails to attend work on time or makes a mistake at the workplace, the woman does not rebuke her in the presence of customers; she would wait until everyone is gone then she would advise her on what happened. According to her, the mum has a saying that ‘everyone makes a mistake so there is no need to be so mad at the mistake of others.’ She added, ‘that woman taught me the power of forgiveness and gentle rebuke; it inspires one to give off the best.

The last maid interviewed on this question or theme revealed that his fictive parents are very strict and firm towards everyone in the household; they do not treat anyone special. If you do the wrong thing, he will correct you in the same way he corrects his biological children’s mistakes. They would punish you today and relate to you the following day as if nothing happened the previous day. That side of them makes me not feel odd when I am being punished or corrected. They never make certain extreme utterances to me; they rather teach us to be considerate in our choice of words when angry. They owe many businesses in the city and have many workers. The workers hardly say bad things about Mummy and Daddy.

From their response, I notice that some fictive children variously experienced the Christian touch their Christian parents reacted to their faults and failings in character. These maids and fictive children experienced the virtue of love, forgiveness and acceptance in difficult moments of their lives when they thought they would be punished severely or be thrown out of the

house. On the other extreme, some fictive children suffered spontaneous reactions from their caregivers or employers in situations where the subordinate was wrong.

### **Spirituality of maids/fictive children/labourers**

This question sought to establish how the spiritual welfare of the fictive or maid/worker is emphasised by the Christian parent or employer. The first respondent, a Christian mother, expressed the opinion that regular church attendance and activities have failed to transform the worrisome attitudes of their twenty-six-year-old maid. She described the moral and spiritual life of the housemaid as very worse. The maid does not stay at home on weekends; she leaves the house to unpermitted places for ‘chilling’ and returns home on Sunday afternoon. Every effort to get her to change from that lifestyle has failed. However, she performs her primary duties effectively, and so the Christian parent looked not too bothered. “Whether she will attend church regularly is her own decision,” the Christian parent added. They considered her mature enough to take on certain responsibilities in her own life. The respondent jokingly said, “even if the Pope comes here to advise her to change, I am not sure this lady would not listen.”

According to the second Christian parent interviewed, there is a normal incidence of criminal activities in their residential area. Those thieves monitor when the environment is quiet before embarking on their criminal operations. Thieves once broke into their house when everybody had left for Church service. Thus, the family has decided that there should be at least one person at home anytime the household leaves for church activity or an outdoor event. In this situation, she usually asks the fictive child to stay behind and watch over

the house. For the safety of the house, the spiritual growth or needs of the child is sacrificed. The Christian parent added that it was a challenging and controversial choice to which there was no other way.

Another respondent also mentioned the difficult decision she had to make regarding the spiritual life of a store assistant she works with. The shop assistant is preoccupied with various church activities. He attends church programs thrice a week (i.e., youth meeting every Tuesday; music rehearsal every Saturday at 4 pm; and a prayer meeting every Thursday at 4 pm). Each of these weekly programs usually lasts for 3 hours, and so he returns home after 8:30 pm. That puts much pressure on the Christian employer at the store because she is often left alone to attend to numerous customers. Initially, she did not want to interfere in his religious activities because he was very committed and hardworking. However, when matters worsened because the store's pressure increased, the Christian employer asked the assistant to stop the weekly meetings to focus on his core duties. According to her, she felt like she was interfering with the spiritual development of her employee.

The sixth respondent indicated that he prioritises the spiritual needs of every child in the household just as their physical and emotional welfare. He ensures that all the children are provided with dresses, footwear, bibles and other items they need for church services. He encourages them to participate in Sunday school and other church activities. Again, he has established that no child stays home on Sundays. During the weekdays, the house tradition is 'no Bible Study, no Breakfast.'

Another thing he does is that he assigns bible readings and allocates responsibility evenly to everyone. There is no discrimination, no excuses, no

shyness; everybody performs a role during family fellowships. Thus, he concluded that the two fictive children do not feel discriminated against nor left out in the spiritual side of the family, and there are equal opportunities for everyone to grow his or her spirituality. Commenting on Paul's plea to Philemon that he should treat Onesimus as a brother, this Christian parent inferred that Philemon should not discriminate against Onesimus because he is a slave; he must provide him with every necessary freedom and resources for the slave's spirituality and welfare to improve, just like the free-born children in the household.

In a similar breadth, a Christian Cocoa plantation owner responded that he does not prevent Christian missionaries who visit the village from sharing the gospel with his employed workers. Instead, he allows every group to interact with the workers, be they Jehovah Witness, Adventists, Pentecost or members of the newly established churches. Out of such evangelism, two of his faithful workers converted and became Jehovah Witness members. This development made him adjust their working times on Tuesdays and Saturdays to suit their kingdom meeting schedules.

The last Christian parent responded that their household has a tradition where everyone in the house observes a fast till mid-day every Sunday morning. Nobody goes to the kitchen to cook or serve another person before the forenoon Church service. Moreover, no one is excluded except the very young children. The fictive child brought from the village to keep the store is encouraged to participate. According to her, the enthusiasm with which everybody in the house observes the fast indicates that there is a strong unity among them. On special occasions at church, she sews a common dress for all the children to

make it difficult for outsiders to distinguish among them. She also added that equal opportunity is provided for all the children to join their Sunday school classes to go for church camps and fun games. Even though his absence puts much pressure on her (because she would have to combine house chores with the keeping of the store), the Christian mother indicated that the spiritual welfare of every child under her parentage is equally essential.

There were also responses from fictive children, maids and employees on their spiritual welfare. The first respondent indicated that her fictive mother provides what everyone needs for Church service on Sunday. You cannot stay in the house and refuse to go to church; whether you like it or not, you have to attend Methodist church with her. Again, she also encourages us to read our Bible and devotional books.

The second respondent, a maid, also indicated that she used not to attend church before meeting a particular Christian employer. At the time, she was just a 17-year-old secondary school graduate. The employer invited her to church service and encouraged her to be consistent. Through that encouragement, she gave her life to Christ. According to the respondent, what motivated her to take her spirituality seriously was the kind of treatment her employer gave to her. The woman is really a good Christian and mother: she is always encouraging me to serve God well; she taught me to speak the truth, be prayerful, and serve genuinely from the heart because God rewards people according to the heart with which they serve. To her surprise, her employer looked for financial support to enable her to continue her education.

Another maid revealed that she does not get the opportunity to attend church services with her employer's family because she has many house chores

to perform on weekends. From washing, and scrubbing to cooking, she becomes more exhausted on Sundays than the ordinary days. Her entire life is preoccupied with multiple duties; there is no time for her to attend Church. Domestic activities start at 4A.M. when she assists the mother to prepare breakfast and lunch for the children to take to school; it continues at the clothing shop at Kejetia market, and they usually get back home late. She is not permitted to leave the workplace or postpone the house duties for any private event, be it religious or social.

Another fictive child disclosed to me that she is taken to church by her fictive parents, but she does not get the opportunity to sit with her colleagues at the Junior Youth (JY) or participate in their service because her mum frequently requests her to come and look after the little siblings. Sometimes, she can be called out of the JY room about ten times during their service to attend to a crying daughter or carry the dozing boy at her back. These distractions cause her to miss many teachings vital to her spiritual growth. The same fictive child disclosed that during festive occasions like First Fruits or drama Sunday, the fictive mother refuses to give her items to participate in the activities effectively. Meanwhile, the biological daughter is provided with everything she would need for the same event at Church. She also indicated that she only has two clothes for church service, yet the little sister, the biological one, is bought or sewn new dresses regularly. These instances largely affected her understanding of the themes such as God's equal love for all people, irrespective of status and background. Without further probing, this respondent revealed that some fictive children or maids are taken to Church simply because their services would be

needed. Their presence at church is to serve, run errands for the parents or take care of their minor children.

The last respondent was a bonded labourer on a cocoa plantation. He indicated that their master gives them Sundays as the traditional resting day and other sacred days (*nnabone*) where one is not expected to do rigorous activities on the land. Because there is no church on the farm, the master allows them to use the tricycle (*aboboyaa*) on the farm to attend a nearby church of their choice. According to him, the master usually prays with them during meetings; he also shares one or two words of God with them on such occasions. This interviewee lacked reading ability but he enjoys hearing the scripture read to him. He indicated that one portion of church activity he enjoys most is the scripture reading moment.

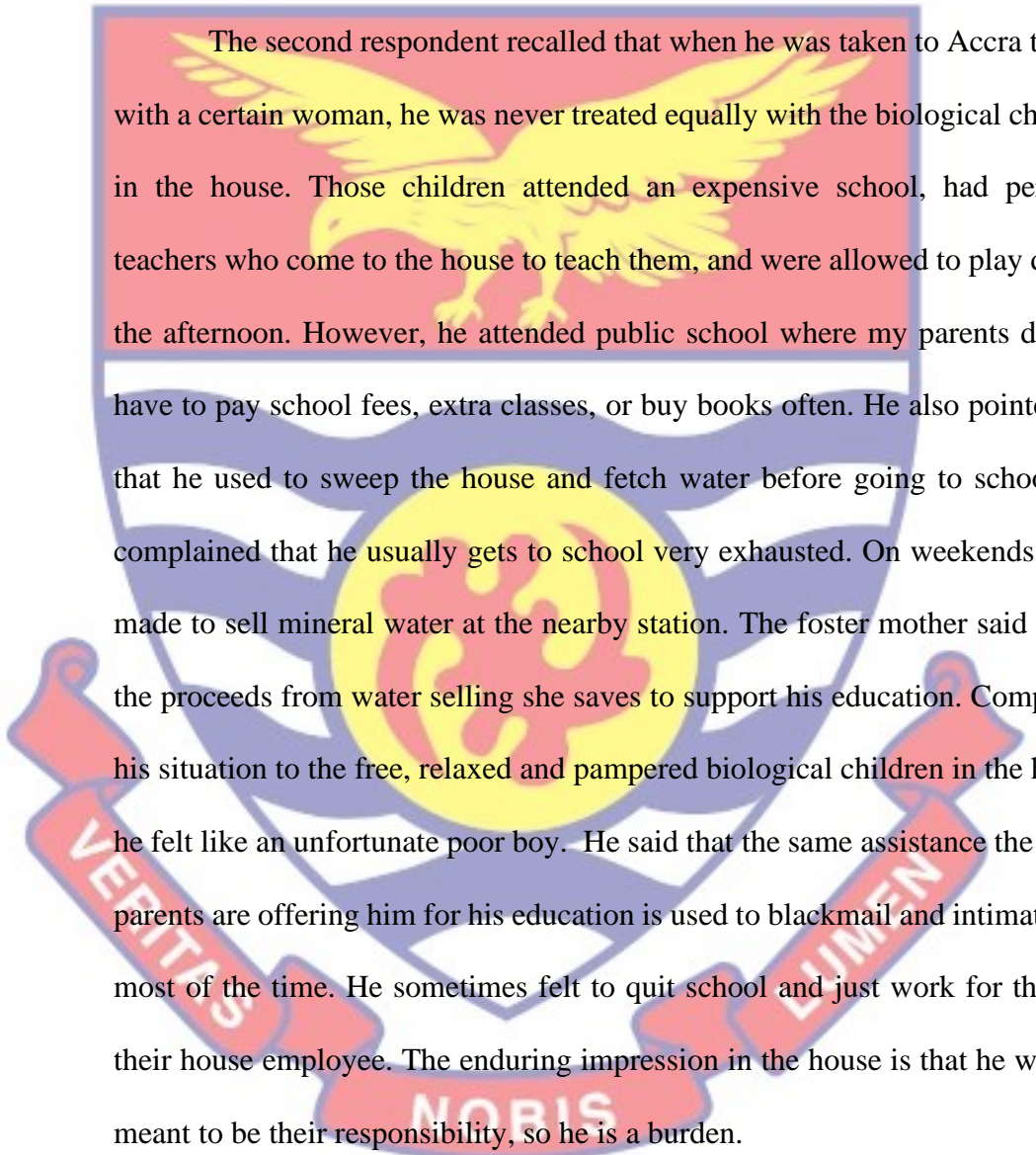
It can be established that some Christian parents and employers are very concerned about the spiritual welfare of their maids/fictive children and workers. They make the necessary arrangement and provide the needed materials and encouragement to support them grow spiritually. Some parents see it as a Christian duty to expose their workers to the knowledge of Christian God and sacred scripture. Most of the maids, fictive children and employees interviewed also attested that their caregivers or employers seem to show interest in their religious life.

### **Freedom and dignity of fictive children/maids/labourers**

The question sought to find out how fictive children/maids or employees feel in the workplace or homes of the Christian employer or parent. Is the environment friendly or hostile to the well-being of the maid/fictive child? The first respondent, a 17year old fictive teenager, said the foster parents respected



and treated her nicely. She receives rebuke and moderate insults only when she commits a wrong deed. The restriction on movement does apply to every child in the house. She added, “I am not overworked; whenever I am tired, she allows me to take some rest. I am happy staying with them. There are plenty of works to do, yet the condition of service is better than staying in the village.”



The second respondent recalled that when he was taken to Accra to stay with a certain woman, he was never treated equally with the biological children in the house. Those children attended an expensive school, had personal teachers who come to the house to teach them, and were allowed to play during the afternoon. However, he attended public school where my parents did not have to pay school fees, extra classes, or buy books often. He also pointed out that he used to sweep the house and fetch water before going to school. He complained that he usually gets to school very exhausted. On weekends, he is made to sell mineral water at the nearby station. The foster mother said it was the proceeds from water selling she saves to support his education. Comparing his situation to the free, relaxed and pampered biological children in the house, he felt like an unfortunate poor boy. He said that the same assistance the foster parents are offering him for his education is used to blackmail and intimate him most of the time. He sometimes felt to quit school and just work for them as their house employee. The enduring impression in the house is that he was not meant to be their responsibility, so he is a burden.

Another maid who was put into a hairdressing trade indicated that her Christian mother and employer continually reminded her that she was doing her a favour. There is also a respondent who said she performs all the ‘slave works’ in the house. She runs errands for every person in the house; even during

mealtime, she could be called and sent outside. These events affected her self-understanding as being a lowly status person in the house. She wondered rhetorically, ‘if I am the maid, should I be treated so disdainfully or be made to feel to feel negative about my condition’? She felt that most of the ill-treatments are deliberate things the fictive mother does to her.

The final respondent was a provision store attendant. He mentioned that the employer respects his dignity and freedom. He is paid fairly and promptly. The employer does not dictate unreasonable orders nor coerce him. He could freely go to her and discuss issues that are affecting his work. The Christian woman listens to him and does not rubbishes his suggestions on the way things should be done at the workplace. He feels significant to the woman’s business. It is established that some Christian parents appropriate the text to enhance the condition of the maid/fictive child in their household. However, the experiences of some fictive children and maids also show that there are Christian parents who make no extra effort to incorporate them into the household fully.

Christian status or orientation does not nullify master-servant relationships in the home and the workplace. The maid or employee of a Christian household should not and cannot downplay her primary status as a help. The religious practices can only improve the maids’ working conditions but do not negate the serving roles one has been employed to perform in the household.

Sometimes too, the very adjustments or actions taken by fictive parents to improve the condition of the maid or fictive child make the child unavailable when his/her service is needed urgently in the household. For some fictive parents, the primary motive for hiring a maid or adopting a fictive child is for

extra labour force or a helping hand to get specific tasks completed in the household. Hence when the child is being well catered for but refuses to give off his/her best or is inhibited by certain factors to serve as expected, the employer or fictive parent becomes frustrated and cheated. This aspect of the master-slave relationship also poses a severe dilemma to some Christian parents.

It often happens to Christian parents who put their maids into trades for an apprenticeship or school for formal education. While at work or school, the maid or fictive child cannot offer help on prompt. Sometimes, the time to be at school or work conflicts with the time to perform certain chores in the house. In some situations, the maid prioritises trade learning or schooling over his primary duties in the household.

Another critical issue coming out is that the Christian parent should eschew the win-lose mentality. The interest of parents should not disregard the humanity of the maids. On the contrary, their welfare should be paramount to the Christian parent. That is what Paul implied when he told Philemon to “treat Onesimus like a brother, and not just a slave.” It is, therefore, unchristian for a Christian parent to lord over the maids, overwork them, and treat them as disposables.

The message of Paul to Philemon draws attention to the ‘boss mentality’ which often results in power-play in the household. Philemon was urged to restrain his mastery ego over Onesimus. The message is relevant for Christian couples, especially those wives who displace anger on the maids or overwork them just because their utility value is ‘service.’ The maid should be given time to ‘breathe,’ to take in some uninterrupted rest or to pursue some personal

ambitions. Christian couples or employers must not have the notion that they are offering maids and employees ‘some underserving favour’ and hence use that to abuse them.

The ‘good’ that some Christian parents are offering maids or underprivileged children turn to be machinations for further exploitation, abuse and domination. The Christian parent should therefore eschew the win-lose mentality. The interest of parents should not contemptuously disregard the humanity of the maids. On the contrary, their welfare should be paramount to the Christian parent. That is what Paul implied when he told Philemon to “treat Onesimus like a brother, and not just a slave.” It is, therefore, unchristian for a Christian parent to lord over the maids, overwork them, and treat them as disposable objects.

In almost every home, the woman or wife takes charge of the domestic affairs – cooking, cleaning, supervision of maids, and the day-to-day running of household activities. Maids are directly under the control or supervision of the woman. In my interviews with a Christian couple, I established that some wives deliberately displace their troubles and anger on maids. They use the maids as a ‘safe outlet’ for every anger and frustration faced in their marriage. In a separate conversation with a certain husband, the man indicated that sometimes he feels sorry for the quantity of work the wife asks the maid to do. He said, “This little girl is made to scrub, wash dishes, pound fufu, sell at the store, as well as do errands for every member of the house. My wife does not see anything wrong with burdening the little girl because she is her maid. It is pathetic, yet wives are in charge of domestic affairs, so there is little I can do when I am not at home.”

Some Christian employers or tradesmen/women give too many tasks to the apprentice without thinking about their welfare. For example, one Christian parent said she took her fictive daughter to a Christian seamstress to learn sewing. According to the respondent, the Christian friend overburdened the daughter unreasonably just because she was her apprentice. The master “drained every energy out of the girl. Apart from closing her at a late hour, the Madam would give her take-home tasks unrelated to the trade the girl had come to learn. She would not even allow my daughter a break time to find something to eat. Eventually, I made her stop attending the apprenticeship because I felt the woman was abusing my girl.” In such a scenario, one can clearly see a win-lose situation in a master-apprentice partnership.

Again, some Christian employers have adopted secular and exploitative business principles. In their bid to cut down on the cost of production and make more profit, they underpay and mistreat their workers. Moreover, some of these Christian figures have established their churches where they serve as pastors or patrons. Others are into Christian charity and sponsoring priests and Christian institutions. However, their own grassroots workers are embittered by the sort of treatment they experience from these well-known generous figures of society.

These top-notch Christian business people believe that they are doing the employees a favour because these individuals would have remained unemployed without them. Hence, they see nothing wrong with underpaying their workers. Meanwhile, their employers are well-known Christian patrons and philanthropists. These problematic issues of exploitation are an affront to Christian ethics. Unfortunately, many maids and employees who find

themselves working for Christian parents/employers are confronted daily with such win-lose situations.

### **Implications of the Dialogic Encounter Between Text and Context**

An engagement between the biblical and African contexts is an essential assumption of African biblical scholarship. Reading the Scripture is not a disinterested exercise; it is a dialogue between text and readers in their respective cultural contexts (Loba-Mkole, 2008). People's context and culture determine the way they interpret and use the text. Therefore, interpretation of scripture is pursued to transform human society.

Although people's context and culture determine how they interpret and use the text, sometimes their contextualization and appropriation go haywire. Therefore, it is essential to bridge the gap between distancing and appropriation. Against this backdrop, this section engages 'the call to action' which emerges from the distancing, contextualisation and appropriation of *Philem*. It invites believing community into a dispassionate 'face to face' dialogue capable of transforming their horizons and making them reflect their 'true nature' as the image and likeness of God. From their unique contexts, the Christian parent and fictive child deduce diverse meanings from the text. Nonetheless, the following suggestions may prove helpful for addressing complexities arising from master-servant arrangements in Christian households.

Primarily, *Philem* communicates a categorical appeal to parents and employers about the importance to give precedence to the welfare and spirituality of subordinates in the home. The quality of the relationship between Christian masters and their subordinates, to a large extent, reveals masters' adherence to the fundamental socio-religious values of Christianity. In pursuits

of economic growth and comfortable living, the Christian master must not abuse their domestic workers. The *Philem* text recognises the social norms of the 1st Century Greco-Roman cultural environment concerning rights of ownership. Yet, the epistle states unambiguously that the Christian master should not be malevolent towards the slave.

In this regard, the Christian masters must always discover fitting means of addressing the psycho-social and spiritual needs of their workers or servants, particularly when a controversial dilemma ensues. Domestic activities and interactions should be anchored on Christian values and principles such as respect, forgiveness, kindness, forbearance, empathy, encouragement, gentle rebuke and corrections, sharing or fellowshiping, and reconciliation. Notwithstanding any conceivable defects in their character or habit, Christian maids or fictive children should be more loved and encouraged; they must not be traumatised and abused.

The maid or fictive child should also not lose awareness of his/her status and role in the household as a servant whose primary duty is serving. He/she must learn to submit to the authority of the master and mistress because diligent service naturally attracts good treatment or appraisal.

Again, most persons by nature have certain innate desires to connect their 'souls' with a supernatural entity to realise the purpose of life. Spiritual activities provide strength and emotional endurance for dealing with the challenges of life. However, data from West Indies and Ghanaian contexts reveal that most masters disregard the otherworldly dimension of their servants and maids. *Philem* makes a good case for the participation of slaves in fellowshiping activities. This implies that Christian parents or employers

should provide a conducive environment for the less privileged maid or servant to obtain education, skills and values essential for meaningful living.

According to Christian theology, true freedom begins with receiving the message of Christ and allowing it to find the most authentic expression in one's life. The Christian instruction Paul imparted to Onesimus liberated the latter from earthly values – manumission, wealth, power, status, etc. He was further equipped with 'fruits of the spirit' to coping his earthly conditions for eventual victory over them. By inference, maids and fictive children in Christian households should identify and emulate the good values exhibited by Onesimus. They should also accept Christian catechism to develop endurance, tenacity, and positive self-concept in their existing conditions. It is their faithful commitment to God that would produce spiritual strength for true freedom and transformation. Severing One's God and one's earthly master genuinely could yield inconceivable goodwill and progress. According to Church tradition, Onesimus' faithful service to both the heavenly Lord and earthly master after his conversion led to his ultimate manumission. In other words, the service Onesimus rendered in both the ecclesial and mundane space bought him honour and eternal identity in Christian history and tradition. Thus, domestic maids must note that the Christian principle does not nullify master-servant relationships in the home and workplace. One should not look down on his/her primary roles in the house. In this way, there would be a win-win situation in the domestic partnership.

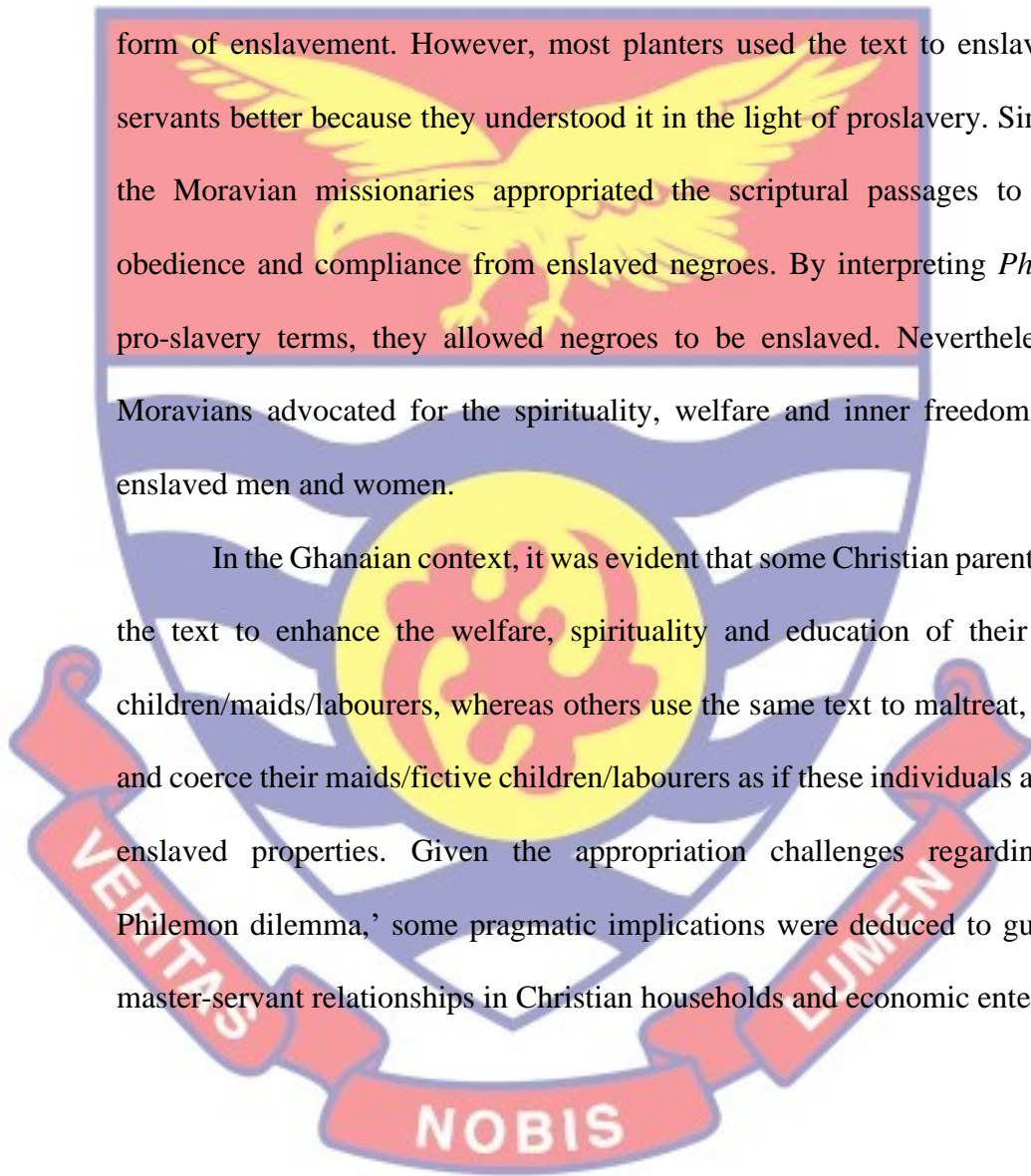
### **Conclusion**

The chapter sought to establish the various appropriations Christian parents, employers, fictive children, and maids/labourers make from their understanding



of *Philem* in their own contexts. Some Christian masters in the West Indies Island of St. Thomas used the text to free their slaves and give them better treatment. Rebecca Proppen was a slave of Christian masters who experienced freedom and exposure to Christian teachings at a tender age. Those that their masters freed eventually came to use the bible as power for freedom from every form of enslavement. However, most planters used the text to enslave their servants better because they understood it in the light of proslavery. Similarly, the Moravian missionaries appropriated the scriptural passages to induce obedience and compliance from enslaved negroes. By interpreting *Philem* in pro-slavery terms, they allowed negroes to be enslaved. Nevertheless, the Moravians advocated for the spirituality, welfare and inner freedom of the enslaved men and women.

In the Ghanaian context, it was evident that some Christian parents apply the text to enhance the welfare, spirituality and education of their fictive children/maids/labourers, whereas others use the same text to maltreat, exploit and coerce their maids/fictive children/labourers as if these individuals are their enslaved properties. Given the appropriation challenges regarding 'the Philemon dilemma,' some pragmatic implications were deduced to guide the master-servant relationships in Christian households and economic enterprises.



## CHAPTER SIX

### SUMMARY, CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

#### Introduction

This chapter recaps the entire study giving particular attention to the various matters raised in the previous chapters. The chapter is partitioned into four sub-sections. The first recapitulates all the chapters and the conclusion drawn in each chapter. Section two considers the study's major findings. The third presents conclusions of the entire study based on the underpinning objectives; the fourth section offers some recommendations for further research and effective Christian practice.

#### Summary

The general thread which ties the separate parts of the study together is the transformative message of *Philem* and how it can be used to evaluate the complex relationships between Christian parents, employers, fictive children and maids in the domestic context. The study set out to interpret *Philem* against the backdrop of master-slave arrangements in the 1st-century Greco-Roman community. It was developed on the desire to appreciate Paul's innovative way of using the gospel of Christ to address a delicate matter between a traumatised slave and an offended Christian master.

Specifically, the study was designed to examine how Paul's rhetoric in *Philem* works to persuade Philemon, a Christian householder, to let his Christian faith inform the way and manner he would treat his erred slave, Onesimus. This necessitated the need to examine the historical context of the epistle and identify the persuasive effectiveness of the text in addressing the exigencies that occasioned its writing. The goal was to draw significant

implications from the letter's message for contemporary Christian householders in handling the complexities of keeping housemaids or fictive children.

Chapter One set the grounds for the research study. It considered the background of the research and statement of the problem to highlight the diverse views on the occasion of the letter and the theological uneasiness in the text regarding Paul's seeming endorsement of slavery. The research questions functioned as a guide to achieving the research objectives. The tri-polar contextual reading model of Draper (which itself shares Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics) was adopted for interpreting the text of *Philem*. Gadamer (1975) regards comprehension as a matter of ongoing dialogue between oneself and one's partner in the hermeneutical conversation about the matter at issue. Thus, meaning is conceptualised as a subjective interplay between text, reader and context.

The researcher's resolve to closely study the text dialogically from the perspective of 1st Century Greco-Roman slavery conventions and later, from the perspective of Ghanaian Christian household involving maids and fictive children, was influenced by Draper's (2015) argument that "the context of the text and the context of the reader are the two decisive elements in the production of meaning" (p. 7). Thus, interpretation of the bible is undertaken to actualise the meaning of a text for personal and societal transformation. The chapter also explored scholarly interpretations of major themes of the research study. This helped sharpen the focus of the research.

Every literary text is a historically situated piece. Texts are rooted in the cultural assumptions and historical experiences of their own world. Gadamer (1975) refers to the historical horizon as its 'effective historical consciousness.'

Because the rhetorical situation of the *Philem* was prompted by the master-slave relationship exigence between the main object and subject of the letter's appeal, Chapter Two explored the culture of Greco-Roman slavery in the 1st Century. It provided insights into the conceptualisation of slaves, forms of slavery, ways into slavery, opportunities for liberation and the issue of slave flight and diverse thoughts of philosophers on slavery.

The chapter concluded that slavery was a conventional institution deeply entrenched in the fabrics of Greco-Roman culture. The societal laws safeguarded masters' dominion over their slaves and obliged slaves to offer absolute service to their masters. The Roman society was structured in such a way that both masters and slaves needed each other. Despite its exploitative nature and inherent abuses, slavery was not openly subjected to ethical discourse.

No NT material or figure set out to deal with the broad topic of enslavement with the explicit aim of ending the social practice. *Philem* is a specific letter addressed to resolve some difficulties or challenges between a particular slave and his master. The letter was not a treaty or a premeditated propagandistic piece addressed to state authorities to stop slavery practices or to incite a revolution against the practice. The chapter provided a broader background context to Paul's plea for Onesimus, who was a ran away slave. It served to acquaint readers with slavery practices and conventions of the 1st Century Greco-Roman era and prepared them for the actual exegetical study of *Philem*.

Chapter Three was captioned, 'Distanciation: An Exegetical Analysis of *Philem*.' The exegetical study highlighted the rhetorical design, structural

elements and persuasive intent of the letter. To do this effectively, Kennedy's model for the rhetorical study of a textual piece proved helpful in this endeavour. The text of *Philem* was allowed to be "other" to speak differently to 'us' from its historical and literary contexts.

The chapter established the situatedness of *Philem* as a typical 1st Century Christian letter written to respond to a concrete issue that occasioned its writing. Specifically, *Philem* is a private personal letter imploring Philemon to receive the returned slave without punishing him but instead making adjustments that would enhance the humanness of the slave in the household. The delicate nature of the controversial issue made Paul employ a highly subtle argumentation to put across his appeal. Paul makes a passionate appeal for 'love in action.' He understands well that only love can transform an impaired relationship into one that provides opportunities and privileges for each party to thrive. Paul also knows that treating one as a brother—with love, patience, forgiveness, tolerance, and compassion—is a fundamental duty of the believer. Therefore, he wrote the letter to introduce transformative values into the mundane socio-economic relationship between Onesimus and Philemon. Indeed, he tries to transform the perspectives of Philemon (to make him appreciate Christian values of mastery) and Onesimus (to make him embrace the Christian idea of service).

Paul's petition to Philemon is worded in a deliberative fashion albeit modified to conform to epistolary structure and style. The thanksgiving or proem (vv. 4-7) functions as the *exordium*, the main body (vv. 8-16) serves as argumentative proofs, and the body-ending (vv. 17-22) acts as the peroration of the deliberative plea. The rhetorical acrobatics of Paul reveals the gravity of the

offence Onesimus might have done. Paul complimented Philemon, postponed negative material about Onesimus, spiritualised the socio-economic relationship between Philemon and Onesimus, made concealed threats, and evaluated the episode of Onesimus' departure from the supernatural viewpoint. This extreme display of diplomacy and advocacy implies that Philemon was in a frantic state at the time of receiving the letter.

The analysis isolated the types of arguments and the rhetorical techniques utilised to enrich the message of the letter. Non-artistic proofs such as *argumentum ad miscercordium* and appealing to past experiences and shared truth, exemplary paradigms as well as mutual indebtedness were applied to decorate the appeal. Also, rhetorical techniques such as emotive concepts, distributive adjectives, repetition, euphemism, irony, word plays, words placement, paronomasia, parenthesis as well as syntactic arrangements contributed to the impact of the communication. For instance, Paul plays with words on the Greek name 'Onesimon' which means "useful" when he writes, "I am appealing to you for my child, Onesimus, whose father I have become during my imprisonment. Formerly he was useless to you, but now he is indeed useful both to you and to me" (v. 10). In the same verse, the emphasis on Paul's current state as *desmios Christou Iēsou* engenders sympathy and attention to his plea. Where Paul tells Philemon, "I owe you," suggesting reparation for Onesimus' debts, he wittily adds, "I say nothing about your owing me even your own self" (v. 19). Again, Paul appeals to the best instincts of Philemon, in these words, "Confident of your obedience, I write to you, knowing you will do even more than I say" (v. 21). In the event Philemon planned to do less, Paul appends one more request, asking him to prepare a visitor's room since he will likely be

coming to visit him soon (v. 22). These clearly shows the artistic clandestine of the actual appeal to Philemon.

The analysis also established that while Paul seems to be ostensibly appealing to Philemon's sense of faithfulness in Christ and love towards God's people to voluntarily consider his Christian sense of duty in the matter put before him, he rhetorically leaves no room for the *paterfamilias* to do otherwise. At the *peroratio*, Paul indirectly coerces Philemon to demonstrate his sense of common partnership in the faith and the gospel business. He also threatens Philemon with an (un)announced visit to verify how the *paterfamilias* responded to his plea.

Constructed to be read aloud during the congregation of the saints, *Philem* puts an inordinate amount of pressure on Philemon. The highly revered *honestas* of Philemon as a generous Christian benefactor is rhetorically put on the spot because every single member of the saints who had heard to the ecclesial delivery of the apostle Paul's epistle watched attentively to see how he would respond to the plea. Thus, Philemon is being compelled to an extreme degree to defend his *dignitas* before everyone, including the imprisoned Paul and his co-workers as well as the Lord Jesus Christ who is watching the scene from above. Philemon was challenged to remember or acknowledge his *koinonia* in the body of Christ and to prioritise his Christian honour as beloved brother and benefactor in the Lord Jesus.

In a perplexing situation of fear, confusion and hopelessness, Onesimus found true comfort and love of God through Paul; he got his perspective renewed – through the Christian catechism imparted unto him by Paul – to take up his current role as a domestic slave and serve the master meaningfully as he

would serve the Lord Jesus himself. From our analysis of the rhetorical density of the letter's structure and argumentation, it was established that Paul's plea for Onesimus worked out to achieve its primary intended purpose. It was hypothesised that the erring Onesimus was definitely spared of the unimaginable wrath and punitive punishment deserving deserted slaves because Paul's intercessory appeal fashioned rhetorically on Christian ethical ideals made a gracious way for him. The researcher generated specific labels from the exegesis of the text to examine the text's contextualisation and appropriations.

Chapter Four discussed the various meanings people put on the *Philem* in their contexts. First of all, the researcher explored the contextualisation of *Philem* in the 18th Century West Indies' Island of St. Thomas, where both white planters and Moravian missionaries lived out their Christian convictions amidst the enslavement of black peoples. The white planters, predominantly from the English Church, understood *Philem's* message as one which does not forbid the enslavement of negroes. However, the Moravians derived meanings that made them champion the welfare, religiosity, and spiritual (and in some cases, physical) freedom of enslaved Afro-Caribbean people. These pietistic Christians arrived at the understanding that Christianity is incompatible with keeping house slaves. The Beverhouts, for instance, took a genuine interest in the welfare of Shelly (who later became baptised as Rebecca); they educated her in reading and writing and later granted her her freedom at a very tender age. Rebecca grew up to become the first ordained black women evangelist in black Christianity. Nicholas Count Zinzendorf, who sponsored the mission to black negroes on St. Thomas, did not regard the physical station of the slaves as important as their spiritual enslavement to the devil. He explained that there



could be spiritual brotherhood between slaves and masters, although spiritual equality does not alter the slave's earthly location in life.'

The white planters of Dutch and English established Church interpreted *Philem* to support their economic ventures in the West Indies and were unready to entertain any other interpretation that would cause them to risk their economic power over the enslaved negroes. On the other hand, the Moravians contextualised *Philem* to support the enslavement of negroes but emphasized the need to expose enslaved persons to the lights of the gospel. Finally, the Chapter sought to find out the meaning Ghanaian Christians make of the labels derived from the exegetical reading of *Philem* in Chapter Three. Both domestic maids and Christian parents explained the text from the perspective of their social location and experiences in the household or business environment.

Chapter Five looked at pragmatic usages people make from *Philem* following their contextualisation of the text and the tensions involved in handling master-servant relationships. White planters at St. Thomas resisted catechism and religious meetings of slaves because they often conflicted with slaves' productivity or work output on the plantations. They were uncomfortable with the perceived consequences of Christian conversion on the existing social order of the plantation culture. However, the pious Christian planters gave liberty to their slaves out of the understanding that a true Christian cannot hold others in servitude and still maintain his/her position as a true believer in the gospel of Christ. Zinzendorf appropriated *Philem* to instruct slaves to focus on spiritual freedom instead of earthly liberty. He and the Moravian missionaries like Martins championed the Christianisation of negroes on the Caribbeans.

In the process, the black people also seized an opportunity to improve themselves in literacy and reading. This created constant conflicts between Christian slaves and their masters. Each side drew on scriptural passages like *Philem* to pursue their interest and convictions. The enlightened Afro-Caribbean negroes felt that they were equal to their masters in Christ; hence it was improper to submit as a slave to a fellow Christian. Even within the Moravian community of believers, the Afro-Caribbean Christians like Rebecca Protten were not always welcomed as equal to the white brethren; they faced constant discrimination and abuse from both white brethren and planters. The white people opposed Rebecca and exiled her to Herrnhut did so simply because they were not comfortable with the reality of sharing equal status with those they deemed as slaves and subordinates.

Using the categories developed from the reading of the text, I presented and analysed gathered data from fictive children, maids and store assistants/attendants in the Ghanaian context. Christian parents have diverse experiences with maids and fictive children. Some revealed the frustration and difficulties involved in keeping maids and house helps. The study established that some of the maids and fictive children (who were adopted to serve as maids) either did not understand their social status in their new challenging environments or viewed their domestic service roles in negative terms. Whereas some fictive parents genuinely worked out a mutually profitable relationship with the housemaids or fictive children, it came out that others were very exploitative and did nothing to help them improve or acquire skills, education and spiritual development. Some maids were tagged as problematic, ungrateful, lazy and unwilling to accept their role as maids in the master-servant contracts.

Some cocoa plantation owners interviewed have unchristian principles regarding how they treat their hired labourers: poor wages and harsh conditions of service. Nonetheless, some maids also attested to kind and gentle treatment from their Christian employers and parents. They were given opportunities for self-improvement, education and spirituality. These Christian masters felt it as their obligation to make room for their maids or subordinates to become better persons knowing very well that would cost them financially or create inevitable tensions in the household.

The dialogue between the text and the context brought out some transformative lessons for Ghanaian Christian households. Maids and fictive children were challenged to view 'service' in positive terms and serve their masters or employers wholeheartedly since it is through service, God would give them the opportunity for self-realisation and personal development. Likewise, Christian parents and employers were challenged to demonstrate Christian faith and love toward their maids and fictive children. Desmond Tutu (1983) captures it vividly by saying:

The life of every human person is inviolable as a gift from God. And since this person is created in the image of God and is also God carrier, we should have a deep reverence for that person. To treat such persons as if they were less than this, to oppress them, to trample their dignity underfoot, is not just evil as it surely must be; it is not just painful as it frequently must be for the victims of injustice and oppression. It is positively blasphemous, for it is tantamount to spitting in the face of God (p. 161).

The Christian is called to action to continually make adjustments for their maids and fictive children to experience the love, tenderness and refreshment of God. Equally, maids and fictive children are invited to interpret their roles as servants in the light of the gospel; learn to submit and work with diligence and

wholeheartedness, knowing that God will emancipate them through their dedicated service and patience.

Chapter Six summarised all the essential components of the thesis. This made it possible for the researcher to outline the major issues that emerged out of the study to deduce conclusions and offer suggestions for further research and transformation of Ghanaian society.

### **Findings**

In line with the specific research objectives, the study came out with the following findings.

#### **Nature of slavery in 1st Century Greco-Roman context**

The study established that:

- The master-slave relationship was an entrenched social arrangement that affected every aspect of life in the Greco-Roman world – religion, politics, education, economy, marriage, family and law.
- Masters had the legal and absolute right of ownership over their slaves; slaves owed their very existence to masters, even the breath they draw from the air.
- The Greco-Roman slave was a commodified person with a definite economic or financial value in the possession and control of another person. The institution served the interest of masters more than slaves.
- There were severe forms of abuse, exploitation and extreme domination in Greco-Roman slavery; the laws on slavery were not strictly enforced; slaves were thus, left at the mercy of their masters.
- Slaves performed different roles ranging from domestic services – cleaners, midwives, water carriers, attendants, etc. – to complex or more

dignified services of stewards, business managers, administrators, and teachers.

- Greco-Roman slavery was not tied to racist tendencies – slaves were allowed education and participation in the religious traditions of their owners; they were not tied to the bottom of socio-economic pyramids.

Furthermore, there was no segregation of free and unfree in most professions.

- There were stringent laws on slave flights; those who managed to escape were often recaptured and returned to their lawful owners to continue their servitude. While on the run, the fugitive could seek asylum at the residence of a friend of the master or religious sanctuary.

- Manumission was an integral part of Greco-Roman slavery; however, the freed person continued to serve the former master in a patron-client relationship.

### **The rhetorical strategies employed by Paul to persuade or move Philemon to comply with his deliberative appeal**

Draper's contextual reading model allowed the researcher to subject the text to a rigorous exegetical study. Regarding the rhetorical strategies and argumentations of Paul in *Philem*, the study established the following in the reading:

- Paul applied his knowledge of rhetorical categories of the time to decorate his appeal to Philemon. Having learnt the art of persuasion through training and observation of oratorical performances, Paul modelled the effective way of placing a request in such a controversial but sensitive circumstance. When Onesimus' situation confronted him,

Paul drew from his depth of knowledge in rhetoric to fashion compelling arguments in epistolary format to make intercession for him. He carefully constructed argumentations that would arrest the mind, heart and all other external senses of Philemon to cause him to grant Paul's request – primarily. The returned slave is to be received without threats of punishment or any vindictiveness.

- In terms of structure, Paul strategically adapted the conventional epistolary sections (prescript, proem or thanksgiving and postscript) of *Philemon* to enhance the rhetorical goal. He structured the body section into argumentative proofs (vv. 8-16) and *peroratio* (vv. 17-21), offered emotive and theological arguments for his appeal and recapitulated them with imperative demands respectively.
- The appeal of the letter was carefully and intentionally constructed. It parallels classical conventions governing intercessory speech in difficult or scandalous circumstances. It reveals that a straightforward or unpremeditated appeal would have less likely yielded the desired effect. Paul, therefore, advanced an indirect yet forceful appeal with different literary and artistic ornaments.
- The letter displays the power of dramatization. Paul does not just make a revolutionary appeal for Onesimus; he sets Philemon before the entire Church; he embodies the slave as himself – his own *splanghna*; he dramatically moves Philemon to refresh his heart; and finally, he reinforces his appeal by the dramatic request for a guest room regarding an impending visit. All this dramatic touch influenced Philemon to react favourably to Paul's appeal.

- In the exordium section of the letter, Paul located core Christian values of Philemon (i.e., his faith towards the Lord Jesus, [the source of] his love towards God’s people); he lavished incomparable praises on Philemon’s honour and social prestige as the generous benefactor of the saints (vv.4-5, 7); and he finally offered a solemn intercessory prayer for him (v.6).

- The deliberate adaptation of the letter’s proem functioned to arrest the ears, heart and mind of Philemon and induced him to be receptive to the discourse. Expressing gratitude is conceived as a powerful approach to sustaining the reciprocal exchange of gifts (Aristotle *Rhet. 1.2.3*). Again, the exordium prefigured key motives (i.e., the theme of *agape*, *koinonia* or *splangchna* and *adelphē*) that were later employed even more emotionally by Paul to present his ultimate plea. The prayer-wish at verse 6 ostensibly prompted Philemon to perceive (*epignōsis*) every good thing (*pantos agatheo*) he ought to carry out for Christ. The same observation was made about the joy-expression in the exordium: it was fashioned to influence Philemon to continue his benevolent activity of refreshing the hearts of saints. People are prepared to give off more of themselves when their relevant past good deeds are singled out and well acknowledged.

- He deliberately started the intercessory plea on the note of empathetic love, but he underscored his credible apostolic authority to order Philemon to undertake the “the right thing.” At the *peroratio* section, however, Paul coerced Philemon to demonstrate his obligation to the common partnership among them in Christ or to suffer the consequence.

- Paul set forth propositions that exemplified his own practical love and affection for the subject of the appeal. He described the subject as “my child,” “begotten in prison bondage” (v. 10).
- Also, he made deliberate moves to evoke feelings of respect and sympathy for his current state as an imprisoned ambassador of Christ (v. 9). He also amplified the key concept *parakelō* twice to pull the heartstrings before mentioning the subject of his intercession: Onesimus.
- The suspension of the subject’s name was rhetorical (v. 10a). Even so was punning on the name: *Onēsimon*, who previously was *achrēston* (unprofitable) to you, but presently has become *euchrēston* (profitable) indeed, to you and me (v. 11). By this literary device, Paul established the motif of utility (*utilitas*) in the inherent usefulness of Onesimus as a human person. He also used his own *splanghna* (entrails or bowels) as an emotive metaphor for Onesimus in order to arrest the heart and emotions of Philemon.
- Paul showed high regard for Philemon’s legal ownership over Onesimus (v. 14). He willingly supported the convention of returning a runaway slave back to the legitimate master. Nonetheless, there was an implicit appeal to the willing consent of the slaveowner.
- Paul adapted the argument from design to fashion his actual intercessory plea. This persuasive strategy influenced Philemon, firstly, to acknowledge the supreme sovereignty of God over human affairs, and secondly, to discern what was God’s will for him in that challenging situation. The argument from design was a deliberate attempt by Paul to



influence Philemon's sense-making of Onesimus' flight (v. 15). God superintended the fleeing Onesimus for a divine reason: to transform the slave's understanding of 'servanthood' and cause him to serve better and meaningfully. Paul persuaded Philemon to make adjustments for Onesimus to serve him better by receiving him and treating him as a brother.

- Paul framed his intercessory appeal by way of highlighting the enormous benefits awaiting Philemon should he willingly accede and take back Onesimus, who, in theological terms, had been temporarily separated from the master (v. 16). Implicitly, Paul persuaded Philemon to take back his erred slave unto himself and make all necessary adjustments for the slave to experience brotherly affection and humane treatment in both human affairs and sacred contexts.
- At the *peroratio*, Paul emphatically recapitulated his intercessory plea with a hypothetical imperative statement that carries veiled coercion. The conditional statement mounted pressure on Philemon to prove his sense of *koinonia* (fellowship) to *proslambaō* (welcome) Onesimus as the 'incarnation' of Paul, the *konōnos*. This carefully constructed statement added rhetorical force to the plea (v. 17).
- The promissory note meant to guarantee financial restitution to Philemon for any conceivable financial debt he had incurred following the temporary absence of his slave was just another rhetorical tactic cleverly used by Paul to dismantle any anticipated objection the slaveowner was holding against the runaway slave (v 18).

- The literary device known as *paralipsis* was applied to indirectly expose the enormous debts of gratitude Philemon owed for his salvation in Christ. Such a rhetorical manoeuvre also served to implicate Philemon to consider the substance of Paul's appeal (v. 19).
- Paul incorporated a mild imperative to persistently implore Philemon to accede to his plea on behalf of Onesimus. He euphemistically presented Onesimus as his (i.e., Paul's) own *splanchna* in urgent need of brother Philemon's benevolent refreshment (v. 20).
- The discourse painted a vivid visual motion that caused Philemon to imagine Paul himself standing before him, speaking the very words: *Nai, adelphe, ego sou onaimēn en Kurio. Anapauson mou ta splanchna en Christō* [Yes, brother, let me have this benefit from you in the Lord! Refresh my heart in Christ!] (v. 20).
- The confident formula in verse 21 was deliberately asserted to maximise the peace of Philemon finally. It created a sense of obligation in Philemon through praise. In other words, this confidence declaration tended to elicit more of the good conduct Philemon had displayed in the past – benevolent refreshment of the *splanchna* God's people.
- The advanced request for *xenia* and declaration of apostolic visit served to remind Philemon that Paul would eventually come to see how he reacted to his intercessory plea for Onesimus (v. 22). That statement also puts no small amount of pressure on Philemon to think carefully about how he treated the slave. Philemon, along with his house-church friends, was driven to visualise Paul travelling to Philemon's house and staying

there in the lodging provided and to visualise brother Onesimus there at the same time.

- The mode of delivery of the intercessory plea was argumentative as well as strategically persuasive (Olinger, 1977). The context of the reading or oral performance of the discourse was during the worship of the congregated saints at Philemon's house, where the paterfamilias usually receives praises and admiration for his hospitality. Paul staged his appeal in such a sacral context, in the public gathering where every member of the house-church was present. The reference to "holy ones" in the benediction and the inclusive "you" (vv. 22-25) indicate clearly that *Philem* was to be performed when the church had gathered at Philemon's residence. At such a solemn assembly of God's people (of which the returned slave has become a member), Paul calls on Philemon to do what he does best – to refresh the viscera of Paul deliberately embodied in the being of Onesimus, to be received hospitably and treated with kindness and sensitivity like a brother instead of as a mere (disappointing or disloyal) slave.
- Thus, it is prudent for Christian counsellors, leaders and parents to apply themselves to their indigenous methods of persuasion when addressing complex challenges confronting fellow Christian parents, employers and their housemaids (Perbi, 2004).

### **Christocentric values in *Philem* for subverting [secular norms of] slavery in the 1<sup>st</sup> Century Christian households**

*Philem* indeed cannot be said to be a Pauline mandate against enslavement practices of the 1st Century Greco-Roman Christians. However, Paul's plea in

the letter clearly derives from some core Christocentric values capable of subverting and transforming the master-slave relationships with a concrete difficult situation.

The apostle was not indifferent to the specific realities of slavery in the communities he lived and worked. Even though he does not set forth an outright decree in the Christian *oikos* to stop slavery, Paul unequivocally spelt out the ethics that must govern slaves and masters in their social dealings. Wilson (1992) underscores that the fact of their fellowship in and common allegiance to Christ makes a very great difference in the master-slave relationship. Paul had to live in the realities of slavery as an institution. Though slavery formed an inherent aspect of the very fabric of the Greco-Roman worldview, Paul relativised the dehumanizing and exploitative features of the master-slave relationship in the Christian community. On the above research objective, the study established the following points:

- Compassionate love and altruistic interest in the welfare of those in need or trouble are two crucial virtues apparent in *Philem*. Upon meeting Onesimus and listening to his story, especially the impending danger awaiting him at the master's household, Paul was moved by uncommon compassion to write an irresistible emotive appeal to Philemon and plea for mercy for the erred slave. Paul's sincere affection for Onesimus challenged the unsympathetic condemnations of erred slaves at the time. By adapting the conventional practice of making an intercessory plea on behalf of erred slave/freeman, Paul demanded radical adjustments to be made for the slave to serve meaningfully as a human being, as a brother (both in Christ and in the flesh).

Even though Paul does not overtly challenge the social phenomenon of enslavement, he radically transformed the master-slave relationship between slaves and masters according to Christ's lordship and also subverted the core of the institution from within. Furthermore, by putting Philemon before fellow-Christians to scrutiny and judgement,

Paul skilfully relativises the cultural roles and values of slavery. He exhorts that Onesimus' issue should be addressed as a matter pertaining to one's identity in the community of faith (Turner, 2007).

Paul's expectation for a radical transformation in conventions of slavery is far more profound than manumission. What Paul requests from Philemon effectually weakened the collectivist, repressive values of Greco-Roman society. Paul displaced replaced the relationship between 'owner' and 'owned' in the Roman legal system with a relationship of indebtedness.

- Paul's subtle use of naming demonstrates the possibility of changing deeply ingrained patterns of domination in a world where it is difficult to see "the outsider" as a "beloved sister or brother."

- The study also established that Paul incarnationally identified himself with both the slave and the master to understand their feelings and empathise with their concrete experiences and emotions. He intentionally spoke of himself out of an intimate relationship with both.

The plea presents Onesimus as Paul's begotten child, begotten prison cell. It also eulogises Philemon as a fellow-worker in the gospel business. This Christo-centric theme of incarnation injected a sense of

sensitivity, compassion, sympathy and humanness into slavery practices in the Greco-Roman communities.

- Paul's appeal alludes to a fundamental Christian notion which states that there is no condemnation but only redemption for those who are in Christ Jesus (Rom. 8:1). Indeed, Onesimus was a captured runaway slave who was going to face the full rigour of the law. Nevertheless, Paul's timely appeal subverted this natural aspect of the slavery convention. Paul refused to centre his appeal on the condemnation of Onesimus' wrongful deed(s). This is in sharp contrast to the appeal Pliny rendered on behalf of Sabinianus's freedman. Again, Paul refused to condemn Philemon for any perceived unchristian or harsh treatment that might have caused the slave to flee. No energy was to condemn Onesimus or Philemon for whatever wrong each might have committed against the other. Instead, the appeal focused on the goodness in both the subject and object of the letter. Paul reminded Philemon about how much he could impact another person's life through his usual benevolence conduct. Equally, he pointed out the goodness in Onesimus as a useful person whose horizon about serving has been transformed. Whilst Christians were sinners, Christ took them, catechised and transformed them into sons and daughters of the kingdom of God.

Paul exemplified this theology of gracious adoption in the practical situation concerning Onesimus, the runaway slave. Just as Christ voluntarily put his life, glory and kingdom on the line just to demonstrate the supreme expression of love for humanity, Paul too vividly depicts unusual compassion and interest in the welfare of

Onesimus by putting his fellowship with Philemon on the line. As if that was not enough, he vowed to pay (or atone for) the debts of Onesimus, just to have him ‘received and treated as a human being, as a brother and not an animated object. Thus, Paul’s emotive but sincere description of the erred slave as his own *splangchna*, and his readiness to pay off Onesimus’ debt to enable the slave to maximise his humanness, irrespective of his social location, is no less a subversive message to the conventions of slavery in 1st Century Greco-Roman era.

The Christocentric value of sharing in the suffering of others or going the extra mile to intervene in their dilemmatic life – situations as an advocate or surety, vividly characterised Paul’s plea for Onesimus and subverted the typical way of treating erred slaves.

- It was established that the Christian principle of love and brotherhood employed by Paul to fashion his appeal had subversive intents. By inference from the way runaway slaves were treated, it was argued that Paul’s request to Philemon had a strong subversive quality. The letter’s request redefined inhumane slavery conventions in Philemon’s household with values found in Christ. The profound use of familial language regarding Onesimus indicated that whereas Philemon could still maintain the master-slave relationship with Onesimus, the social institution was to be anchored primarily on their shared brotherhood in Christ. Indeed, it would have been counter-cultural for a Roman *paterfamilias* to take his own slave as a brother in the 1st Century world.

It was extremely radical and subversive on the part of Paul in demanding Philemon to accept and consider Onesimus, his runaway

slave, as ‘a beloved brother.’ Paul addressed Onesimus’ situation in such a way that it was synchronously redemptive and culturally sensitive. He neither endorsed the exploitative and cruel ideology of Greco-Roman slavery nor presented a direct confrontation with Roman state laws. While Paul still confirms the slavery status of Onesimus, he makes a case against the inhumane treatment of slaves.

- The study established that Paul adopted the ecclesial setting to summon Philemon before the congregation and demanded him to demonstrate or prove his faith in Christ and partnership with the saints in the matter concerning his erred slave. Unlike the secular context where slaveholders seem unaccountable to anyone and may treat their erred slaves in whatever manner they want, Philemon, a Christian slaveholder, was challenged to carefully discern the appropriate way to react to the shortcomings of his slave. In the household code of Ephesians, the Pauline writer charges slave masters to forbear threatening their slaves because both have a common divine master in heaven to whom they shall render an account. Paul’s strategy of using the larger community of believers to judge whether or not Philemon is following the apostle’s advice relativised the secular legal system of dealing with slavery issues.

### **Contextualisation of *Philem* in West Indies St. Thomas and Ghanaian communities**

Concerning the contextual meanings put on *Philem*, the study established the following findings:

- Most white planters interpreted slavery as a phenomenon supported by Scripture; they did not tolerate groups seeking to bring the gospel to the



enslaved negroes. Their dilemma was that Christianity, with its promise of freedom, would make it uneasy for them to continue to keep their slaves in servitude.

- Given ‘the Philemon mastery dilemma’ faced by Christian planters, Nicolaus Zinzendorf, the patron of the Moravian mission, interpreted

*Philem* and other texts on slavery in the Bible to teach that Christian conversion and baptism do not guarantee freedom of the enslaved. Zinzendorf interpreted that Onesimus continued to serve in the household of Philemon as a Christian servant. Philemon provided an enabling environment for Onesimus to improve and serve God.

- With this interpretation, the Moravians championed welfare, education, spirituality, and improved condition of service for enslaved people. In their model communities and plantations, the Moravians pursued the interests of slaves by allowing them the freedom to religious meetings, and to learn reading and writing. However, there was also the impression that God ordained slavery and that slave masters were to engage in the practice and use the proceeds for the good of humanity.

- However, many enslaved people who had the opportunity to receive Christian instruction, baptism and participation in fellowships would use scriptures like *Philem* to make a case for freedom and equality. Thus, there was contradictory contextualisation on the islands: slave masters were using the scripture to protect their economic ventures, which included slaves and whilst the slaves were ardently using scripture to assert their liberation from enslavement.

- The issue of justice and equal treatment of humanity caused some Christian masters to set their slaves free after exposing them to Christian instruction in reading and writing. The conscience of such pietistic Christian planters did not allow them to keep slaves due to the ethical dilemma often posed by master-slave relationships.

- The majority of Ghanaian Christian parents interpret *Philem* as a text that does not prohibit housemaids or servants. A master-servant contract is a social arrangement that does not contradict God's teachings. Thus, Christian parents in Ghana appropriate or subvert portions of *Philem* to resonate with their contextual needs without a complete comprehension of the historical and literary meanings of the scriptural text.

#### **Significant insights from the dialogic encounter between text and context**

Concerning this objective, the study made the following deductions:

- The engagement of maids or adopting fictive children in domestic service is not a moral issue; however, their treatment is morally called into question. The text inculcates a new attitude among slaves and masters – a spirit of charity since all are “slaves” of the same Lord. It is deducible from the dialogic encounter of text and context that slaves and domestic servants or employees are to be treated not as mere surrogate bodies or animated tools useful for domination and exploitation. Hence, the Ghanaian Christian is challenged to make necessary adjustments for the maid/or fictive child to maximise his/her humanness and hidden talents.

- Christians' attitude toward domestic workers or fictive children speaks the loudest about the authenticity of one's faith and obedience to the demands of the gospel in Christendom.
- Irrespective of the failings of domestic workers, the Christian parent is always required to discern the 'Christian way' to respond to the problems posed by such social arrangements. In the text, the offended master was implored to resist any vindictive feelings toward the slave but rather respond to the challenging situation with unparalleled love, hospitality and forgiveness. Similarly, the Christian parents in the Ghanaian household are challenged to live out the insights of Paul's plea to Philemon in concrete life situations when their maids or fictive children push them to act in a manner that, by comparison to the essence of Paul's appeal, would be unchristian.
- Just as the text challenges Christian employers to make adjustments, domestic servants and employees should also have renewed understanding about 'serving' and serve their masters meaningfully. One could improve on his/her social status by first accepting the current status and meaningfully working bottom-up. They are implored to have the mental and emotional fortitude to cope with the realities of their present circumstances.

### Conclusions

This sub-section summarises the central ideas of the thesis to bring the study to a holistic closure. These emerging ideas are employed to offer an overall value judgement of *Philemon* and domestic workers based on the laid down objectives and findings of the study.

The overriding purpose of this thesis has been to interpret *Philemon* contextually as a rhetorical discourse carefully prepared by Paul to fashion an urgent plea to Philemon in the matter involving the erring slave, Onesimus, and to draw significant inferences for contemporary Christians who are involved in keeping housemaids or other domestic workers and fictive children. The work gives a relevant contribution to ABH. It creatively employed Draper's model and was able to overcome what represents the limits of the method: excessive focus on the context with the risk to manipulate the text to suit the context and/or producing pseudo-biblical theology. The integration of the tri-polar method has resulted in an approach respectful of the text and context.

*Philemon* is not a carefully thought-out Christian treatise on the question of slavery in the 1st Century community. Indeed, none of the NT materials was. Instead, the letter is an occasional text prompted by a concrete matter involving a slave who had become a Christian and his master, a famous benefactor of a Christian congregation in Colossae. The study aimed at highlighting the rhetorical skills and tactics that Paul brings to bear in writing to Philemon about such a controversial issue concerning the latter's slave, Onesimus. It can be concluded that Paul did so in a manner that sincerely considered the social dynamics and subtleties of the 1st Century CE world.

The Greco-Roman world was a slaveholding society where 'the master-slave relationship' influenced every sector of life. Although it was built to favour masters, the Roman slave system made few provisions for the welfare and upward mobility of slaves. However, not many slaves experienced cordiality, warmth and acceptance in their servitude, especially erring slaves. The harsh conditions of slavery usually prompted philosophical essays from

thinkers who condemned the inhumane abuses and practical complexities or tensions associated with slavery. Thus, *Philem* should be understood as a Christian response to tensions from the slavery institution in a Christian community.

It is a mind-stimulating exercise when peeling through the layers of rhetoric which Paul employed to persuade, petition, commend and command the slave owner and leader of a house church. Paul handled Onesimus' situation in such a way that was both synchronously redemptive and culturally sensitive, that is, in a way that neither endorsed the exploitative and cruel ideology of Greco-Roman slavery nor presented a confrontation with Roman state laws. Instead, the rhetorical force is aimed directly at Philemon to bring about a new disposition of mind that is socially formative. The rhetoric moves Philemon to put his love and faith into complete practical application. It lays principles to draw disparate people or socially diverse and antagonistic people together. Thus, *Philem* presents a new morality to the believing community of the Mediterranean basin.

The plea of Paul empties the slaveholding ethos of its power. It emphasises how believers from different social levels relate to one another. This theme raises questions about how Ghanaian Christian parents conduct their lives, individually and collectively, in the light of Paul's message in *Philem*.

Paul's affection towards Onesimus and respect for his dignity send a solid message to Christians to display sensitivity and recognition for the humanness of maids or servants. The familial concepts and other emotive metaphors that Paul employs to describe his relationship with the alien slave set up an exemplary standard for Christians to emulate. Hence, it is the Christian

way of living to demonstrate genuine affection, respect, empathy and love in one's relationship with persons at the base of the social mobility hierarchy, like maids.

Also, the urgency and importance that Paul attaches to the situation of a common slave he encountered in the prison cell are noteworthy. It continues to baffle the minds of many readers why Paul felt obliged to respond to a secular domestic matter with the same sense of duty he applied to theological issues that occasioned the other letters. By *Philem*, Paul makes a succinct and clear point that Christian living has everything to do with one's relationship with maids and fictive children in the household. There is an inclusive and explicit vision of social relationships concerning slaves. The stratified and hierarchical arrangement of Greco-Roman society is resisted and replaced.

In the Christian believing community, slaves are more than mere slaves; they are familial members. It was this emerging Christian ethics that Paul aimed to impress on Philemon's mind. Thus, *Philem* sowed seeds that were expected later to bloom and transform slavery relationships for the better in societies. At its core, *Philem* is an authoritative literary piece about discerning God's will and making his will shape the living structures of this world.

The contextualisation and appropriation of *Philem* brought transformation to the conditions of enslaved blacks in the Caribbean islands. Aside from informing the missionary strategies of Zinzendorf and his group, *Philem* also empowered enslaved negroes to assert their freedom, dignity and equality on the plantations. Many freed slaves like Rebecca Protten – who was set free by her master – used their previous experiences and current Christian

statuses to reach out to many enslaved Africans: they encouraged these blacks to embrace the true spiritual freedom brought by the gospel of Christ.

### Recommendations

The complexities facing Christian employers, maids and fictive children is an issue that bothers many households worldwide. This study has been an attempt to garner insights into the subject through a contextual reading of *Philem*. However, it did not specifically touch on the household codes in Colossians, Ephesians, 1 & 2 Timothy and Titus. Therefore, there is the possibility of another study that focuses on the household codes in the Pauline corpus for additional resources to promote understanding and transformation of domestic relationships in Christian households. It is also recommended that child labour and modern slavery activists and social workers collaborate with transformative readers of religious texts such as the bible to come up with an appealing message to mitigate the menace of modern slavery and abuse in our communities.

In sociological studies, it is crucial to assess the number of domestic workers who have been assisted in developing themselves through education and business (Hampshire, *et. al.*, 2015). In addition, other African contextual reading models such as liberation and transformative hermeneutics could be applied to this text to help generate new meanings which can assist deal with challenges confronting Christian parents, employers, maids and fictive children.

The thesis has examined the complex dimensions of master-servant complexities in the household whilst arguing for a win-win situation. The DOVSU, Social Welfare Departments, Ministry Women, Gender and Children Affairs, and Youth ministries and Women fellowships in the Christian

congregations may consider organising workshops or talks for Christian parents and business people on the Christian way of handling maids and workers. These forums or talks must tackle the *“I am your master; you are my servant”* mentality some Christian parents use to coerce and maltreat their workers. Also, the notion of *“I am doing them a favour”* and the excessive use of power or control over the maids or workers should be critically watched because it can make the Christian parent or employer heartless and over-demanding. Indeed, when Christian parents attend workshops or seminars that talk about themes such as ‘maintaining a win-win relationship with house-helps and maids,’ they would be convinced or encouraged to go back to implement principles that would transform challenges in the household.

The study also calls on Ghanaian contemporary churches to employ advocacy to denounce any hidden forms of modern slavery in the community as part of their socio-religious responsibility. The biblical texts in spite of its liberation objects, usually contains unstated transcripts or grey areas that people exploit and dominate others, especially the uninformed and weak people in the community (Scott, 1990). Faith leaders should actively help in creating a just and friendly environment for every human person to thrive. Inability to transform faith in action is a problematic attitude that needs to be addressed theologically and pastorally if Ghanaian Christianity wants to be relevant and transformative. The church leaders should adopt diplomacy to exert persistent pressure on Christian employers or parents who are noted for infringing on the human dignity of their workers. Leaders of God’s kingdom should not allow their prophetic tongues to be silenced by the financial contributions of business people in their congregations but must tactfully use the values of Christianity as



exemplified in *Philem* to confront, convict and reform such influential patrons of the church.

The research study also invites leaders of various religious bodies in Ghana to take up the responsibility to organise workshops to educate members and the general populace on modern slavery: its meaning, forms, and effects on human dignity. The Church must partner with the international community by using the pulpit to educate believers on the issue. Also, leaders of the church can schedule talks on modern slavery as part of activities marking festive occasions in the religious community. Surprisingly, there are people in the Church who have never given a thought to this heinous practice in their community. Those who have given it thought might even think that contemporary slavery is about strangers getting to a community to purchase others and transport them to another geographical place. A lot of people are not simply aware that modern slavery lives in the homes and workplaces. Workshops become an effective means of educating members of the community about it and empowering them with the requisite knowledge so that they neither become victims nor perpetrators of the menace. Again, such workshops and talks could afford victims space to share real stories of modern slavery. Equally, it provides space for Christian parents and employers to learn the best practices so as not to disrespect or abuse the subordinates working for them.

Furthermore, the Church and Christians should prayerfully reflect on their actions and inactions which enforce modern slavery. It is time that the Christian bodies began posing critical questions to themselves. What is the condition of individuals working in the Church? Where do Christians locate themselves in the supply and demand chain of modern slavery? What measures

can they take to minimise their participation in the menace? As part of their social services, Christian bodies (or denominations and congregations as well as personalities) should draw up a program to help in identifying and saving victims and supporting them through rehabilitation. Paul's intervention for the traumatised Onesimus is a 'prophetic' reminder to Christian bodies about their obligation toward victims of modern slavery. If Paul did not take off his eyes but was prepared to stake his life to secure a dignified restoration for Onesimus, then *Philem* calls on Christian bodies to think and act as Paul towards 'the Onesimuses' in our communities.

Ecclesial accountability in the Christian community is yet another recommendation for handling master-slave tensions. In *Philem*, Paul deliberately puts Philemon before the Christian congregation and demands him to do the fitting thing. Philemon's honour in the community depended on how he reacted towards Onesimus. This is a Christian culture that can be nurtured in the Ghanaian religious landscape. Christian parents and employers should be made to be accountable in their community. Christian leaders should be particularly interested in how Christian parents or employers treat their subordinates in the community. They should not praise them just for their financial contribution or activeness in the fellowships; instead, Christian neighbours should monitor their activities and influence them to do what brings dignity and respect to the subordinates in the households and workplace. Whilst secular institutions work to expose persons and groups engaging in the trafficking of persons, the believers should also serve as watchdogs to their fellow Christians.

Also, reputable bodies such as Ghana's Peace Council, the Council of States, Ghana Pentecostal and charismatic council of churches, the Islamic council and the Ghana Bishop council should organise inter-faith community

discussions to help split taboos surrounding modern slavery and trafficking in Ghana. The dialogue-based approach of these bodies would proffer some concrete solutions to problems that might otherwise seem insurmountable.

In carving a new National Plan of Action for combating modern slavery, the Government of Ghana should involve leaders of major faith communities in the country. The unique positions and influence of these leaders make them imperatively useful in developing the mind and hearts of the people on the evils inherent in modern slavery. There should be legislative instruments to acknowledge certain key religious leaders as part of the frontline staff on modern slavery.

Christian owners of business enterprises should respect inalienable labour rights and international norms as spelt in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, and the ILO's declarations. They should be mindful of the fact that the nature and context of their businesses – especially their supply chain – expose them to the possible risk of instances of modern slavery. Awareness of this nature can help them assess the extent of these risks in order to take action to ensure that modern forms of slavery are weeded out from their businesses and supply chain.

Religious charity should not be limited to acts of love for people in need; another dimension is political love. Political goodwill spurs individuals to build more sound institutions, more just laws, and more compassionate structures to strive to organise and structure society so that one's neighbour will not find himself or herself improvised. Christian communities and individuals should exercise moral, intellectual and social humility to admit the evils of modern slavery for reconciliation and abolition.

Finally, identified perpetrators of modern slavery (be they institutions, firms or business people) should be forced to make necessary reparations to their victims. In other words, perpetrators who abuse victims by denying them acceptable remunerations, or healthy working conditions should be charged and made to repay with interests. In addition, the costs of treating psychological traumas or physical illnesses suffered by victims must be paid by the perpetrators. Properties or wealth of organisations or persons noted for engaging in modern slavery should be confiscated by the Judicial arm of the Government. Such wealth could be used to finance carefully planned social projects and educative workshops for combating modern slavery.



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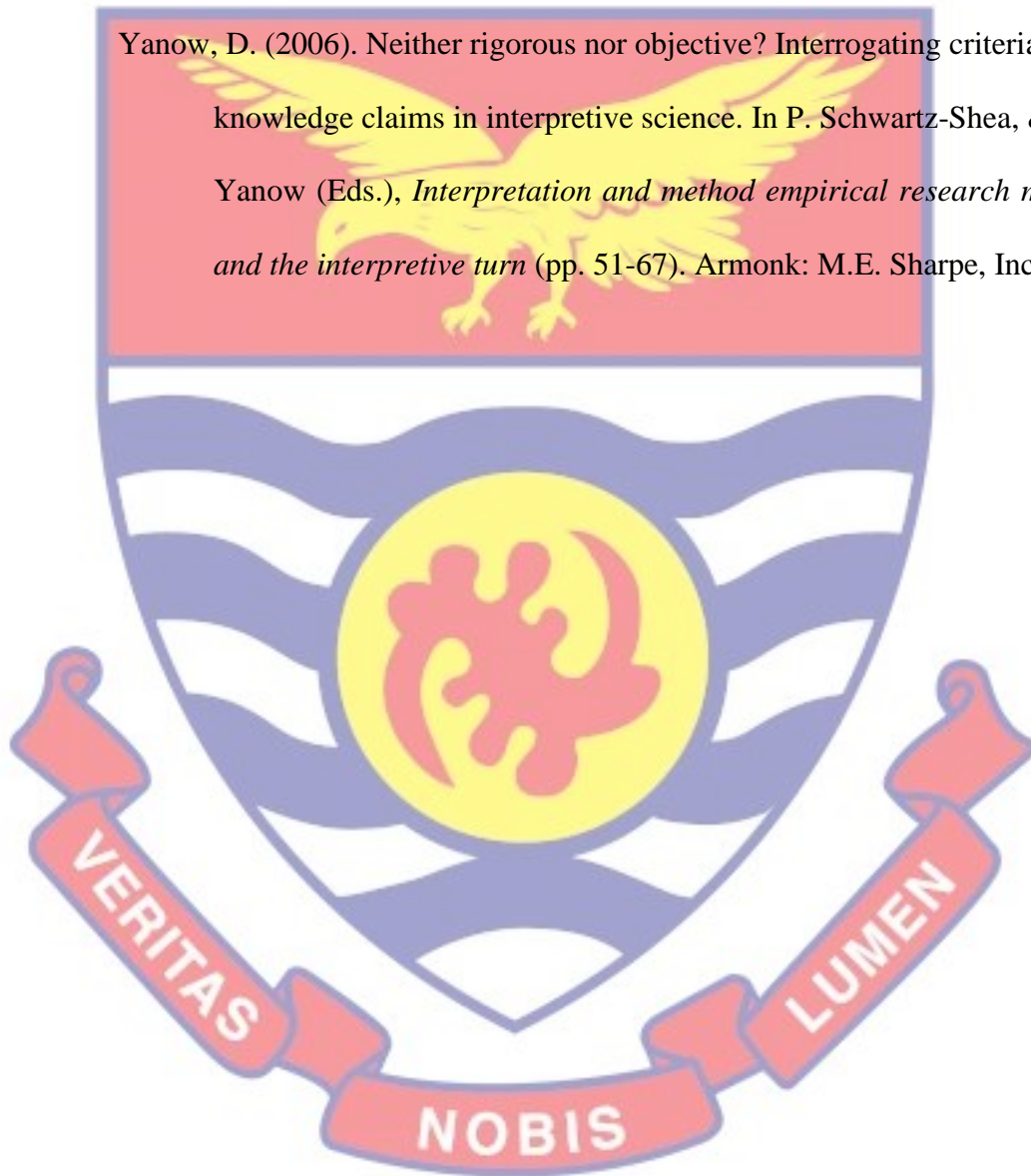
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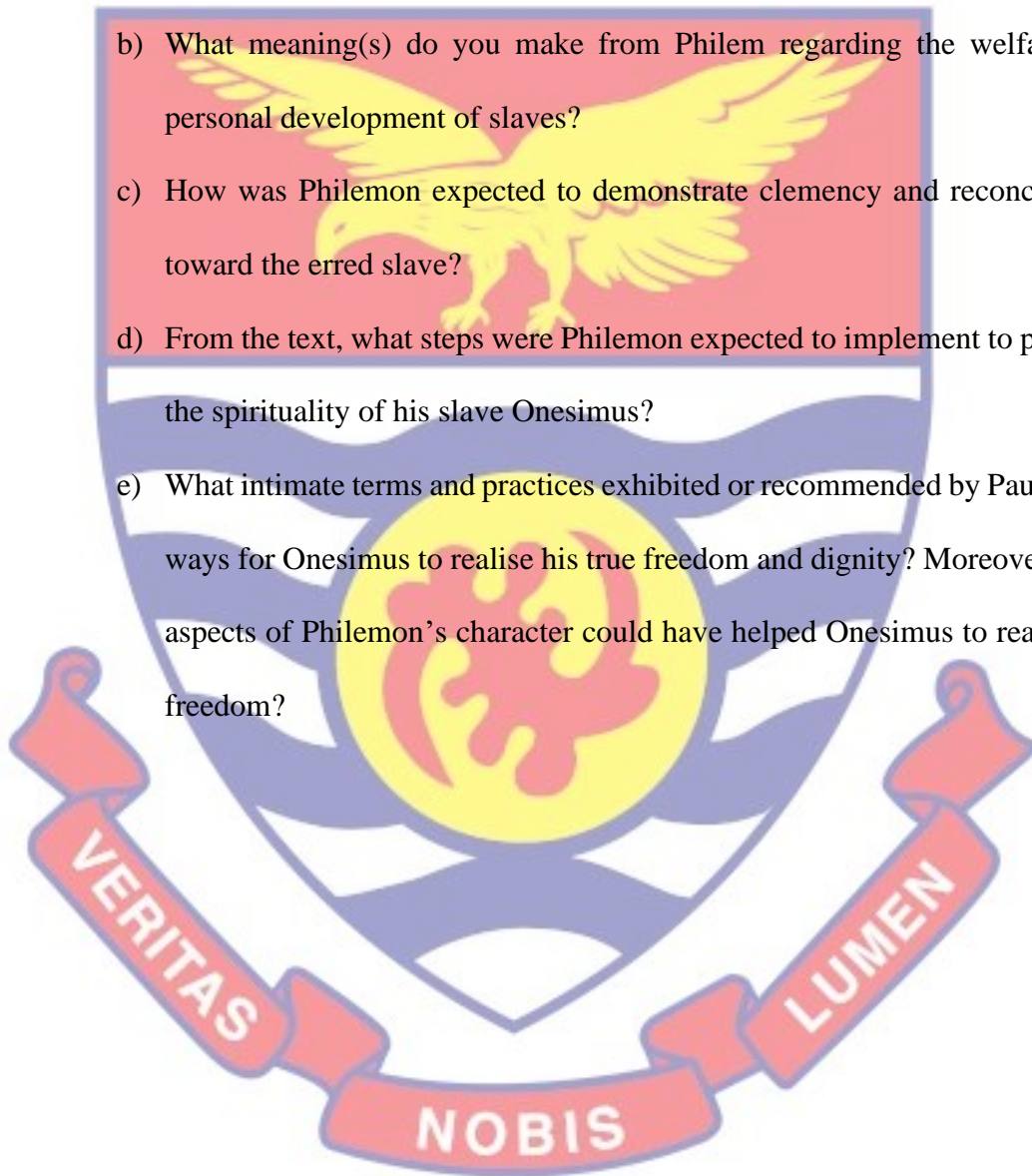


## APPENDICES

### APPENDIX A

#### Interview Guide for Ghanaian Christian parents, employers, fictive children and maids on the meaning they make of *Philem*

- a) What is your general knowledge about the letter to Philemon?
- b) What meaning(s) do you make from Philem regarding the welfare and personal development of slaves?
- c) How was Philemon expected to demonstrate clemency and reconciliation toward the erred slave?
- d) From the text, what steps were Philemon expected to implement to promote the spirituality of his slave Onesimus?
- e) What intimate terms and practices exhibited or recommended by Paul paved ways for Onesimus to realise his true freedom and dignity? Moreover, what aspects of Philemon's character could have helped Onesimus to realise his freedom?



## APPENDIX B

### Interview Guide for Ghanaian Christian parents, employers, fictive children and maids on the pragmatic application they make of Philem in their contexts.

a) Are there some adjustment measures in your household or business

activity that promote the welfare and education of the maids or fictive children? If yes, what ethical challenges do such adjustments pose to your foremost reason for adopting or employing the fictive child or maid? Do the people you are staying with prioritise your material and educational welfare? *(The last one was directed to the fictive child/maid/labourer)*

b) How do you react to the mistakes, wrong deeds, or mischievousness of a fictive-child or maid as a Christian parent or business person? How do you make peace with yourself, the maid, and God? How are/were you treated in a problematic situation believed to have been brought by your misdeed or wrongdoing? *(The last one was directed to the fictive child/maid/labourer).*

c) Is the spirituality of maids/fictive children emphasized and promoted in your household/enterprise? Do you see your spirituality taken into consideration by your fictive parent/Christian employer in this household? *(The second question was directed to the fictive child/maid/labourer)*

d) Do you feel that your freedom and dignity are respected or trampled upon by the people you're staying with? *(This was directed to the fictive child/maid/labourer)*

APPENDIX C

Introductory Letter

UNIVERSITY OF CAPE COAST  
COLLEGE OF HUMANITIES AND LEGAL STUDIES  
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University Post Office,  
Cape Coast, Ghana.

Our Ref: RHV/I/8/

15<sup>th</sup> February, 2019

TO WHOM IT MAY CONCERN

LETTER OF INTRODUCTION

Mr. Maxwell Kojo Tsibu, with registration number AR/RHD/17/0004, is a PhD candidate of our department.

He is currently working on his thesis on the topic; **Slavery and Community in the 1<sup>st</sup> Century C. E.: A Reading of the Philemon and its Contextual Implications.**

Kindly grant him the assistance he requires.

Thank you.

Yours faithfully

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'Abigail Boateng Ofori'.

Miss Abigail Boateng Ofori  
(Principal Administrator)