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# READING PHILEMON WITH ONESIMUS IN THE POSTCOLONY: EXPLORING A POSTCOLONIAL RUNAWAY SLAVE HYPOTHESIS<sup>1</sup>

## ABSTRACT

For centuries, the Philemon narrative has been read as the story of a slave that ran away from his master and must now be reconciled to him, and continue their master-slave relationship. Reading the narrative through a postcolonial lens yields another form of interpretation: reading the text with the signified and not the signifiers, reading with the oppressed and not the oppressor, and reading with the marginalised and not the centre. This article argues that the letter of Philemon and indeed the narrative of slavery must be decolonised. Using the Philemon narrative, this article proposes a postcolonial runaway slave hypothesis that shifts from John Chrysostom's interpretation and those of many others after him significantly. The article argues that Onesimus was an intelligent person albeit a slave who sought to liberate himself using the very same system that oppressed him.

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<sup>1</sup> This article is based on the seventh chapter of my Masters' dissertation which proposed that an alternative hypothesis must be proposed from the already existing hypotheses which paints Onesimus in a bad light. The dissertation was published in March 2015 by the University of Kwa-Zulu Natal.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The Philemon narrative is one of the shortest letters in the Pauline corpus; yet it is one of the most problematic narratives in the New Testament. The narrative is about a slave named Onesimus and his master named Philemon. The letter contains a plea for Onesimus by Paul to Onesimus' master Philemon that he may be forgiven and accepted as a brother by Philemon. The letter has in the past been used to advance the notion that slavery was willed by God and that Paul sought to preserve it. In the postcolonial context, other interpretations of the letter are important and indeed necessary, as they may give rise to the downplayed characters in biblical texts. The letter to Philemon has been read, re-read, and continues, in this article, to be read through other lenses in order to offer an African runaway-slave hypothesis. I begin my argument by locating myself within the postcolonial framework and map out my methodology for reading this text. I will then present a brief history of the interpretation of the letter, naming it the traditional runaway-slave hypothesis and illustrate the oppositions that have arisen against it. In addition, I will present Onesimus as slave object in the ancient Mediterranean, by pointing out the plight of a slave. Thereafter, I will do a decolonising of the letter of Philemon in the postcolonial paradigm and posit an African runaway-slave hypothesis.

## 2. POSTCOLONIAL STUDIES

Following the arguments of Sugirtharajah, Segovia, Dube and Punt, I want to locate myself within the paradigm of postcolonial biblical criticism in reading the Philemon narrative. The postcolonial theory is a contemporary method that, among other things, studies social phenomena in light of the past and the present (Tiroyabone 2015:13). There are two main objectives of the postcolonial theory. First, to investigate the unequal relationship between coloniser and colonised in the colonial era and, secondly, to investigate the unequal relationship between the powerful and the powerless in the postcolonial era (Tiroyabone 2015:13). According to Segovia (2000:126), the reality of imperialism is structural and created a system of centre and margins where the empire occupied the political, economic and cultural centre, but left the conquered subordinated at the margins politically, economically, and culturally. Segovia (2000:126) argues that cultural, ideological, and hegemonic questions are crucial for postcolonial biblical criticism, because of such a heritage of imperialism. Postcolonial biblical criticism may be defined as a tool that investigates the hegemonic relations between centre and margins during the colonial and postcolonial eras in both the text and the contemporary context

(Tiroyabone 2015:14). Segovia (2000:126) notes that the postcolonial biblical critic seeks to discover, among other things, how the margins view a text and how it influences their thinking, but also how the centre views the world and life and, in turn, treats the margins.

Sugirtharajah (2002:12) notes that

postcolonial studies emerged as a way of engaging with the textual, historical and cultural articulations of societies disturbed and transformed by the historical reality of colonial presence ... The term 'postcolonial' is used to designate the cultural, economic and political contact of the coloniser and the colonised and the chain of reactions that it ignited.

For Dube (2001: 215), the term "postcolonial" admits to the "lasting effects of colonial contact". In this method, the main issues are first, to analyse the strategies used by the colonisers to construct images of the colonised (Sugirtharajah, 2002:12). Secondly, the method seeks to study how the colonised themselves used, and went beyond those strategies in order to present their identity, self-worth, and empowerment (Sugirtharajah 2002:12). The postcolonial method allows me to read the letter through the eyes of those who are oppressed in the text and elevate them not as the subjugated, but as notable characters. Reading Philemon with Onesimus affords the postcolonial reader an opportunity to interpret the letter with specific focus on Onesimus, the slave, and his character in order to bring out the positive and liberating aspects of Onesimus, instead of reading Onesimus as a bad slave who stole from his master and ran away, as traditional interpreters have held. To track what I call the colonial interpretation of the letter, I will now turn to the history of the interpretation of the Philemon narrative.

### 3. THE TRADITIONAL RUNAWAY-SLAVE HYPOTHESIS

Scholars such as John Chrysostom in the third century, John Knox in the sixteenth century, and E.J Goodspeed in the modern era have mostly held the runaway-slave hypothesis (Dunn 1996:308-309). According to this hypothesis, Onesimus fled from the household of Philemon to Rome or Ephesus after he stole from Philemon. He then met Paul and became converted. However, Paul sought to send him back to his master, bearing with him a letter pleading for his forgiveness (Dunn 1996:301-302; Barclay 1997:98; Garland 1998:295-296; Byron 2008:116-117; Kreitzer 2008:46-47).

However, this runaway-slave hypothesis has been challenged. The first of these challenges is a suggestion that Onesimus fled to Paul in Rome as an asylum seeker (Bruce 1977:399-400).<sup>2</sup> Bruce proposes that, since Roman law allowed that upon mistreatment of a slave by the master, the slave could approach a friend of the master and seek asylum, asking the friend to mediate between the slave and the master. Onesimus went to Rome to seek Paul in this regard (Bruce 1977:400). This position suggests that, at the time of leaving Colossae, Onesimus already knew that there was a man called Paul who had close links with his master Philemon; he went to Rome or Ephesus with the sole intent of meeting Paul (Tiroyabone 2015:75). This position was, however, opposed. Rapske (1991:193-194) led the opposition to this hypothesis, questioning whether Paul's place of imprisonment could qualify as a place for seeking asylum.

Winter (1984:1) also opposed the runaway-slave hypothesis, arguing that Onesimus, a Colossian Christian, was sent to assist Paul in his ministry on their behalf. For Winter (1984:1-2), the appeal of Paul to Philemon to receive Onesimus as a brother was actually to free him as an emancipated slave so that he can serve Paul freely in the ministry. Winter is convinced of this argument based on the author's words in verses 13-14:<sup>3</sup> *ὃν ἐγὼ ἐβουλόμην πρὸς ἑμαυτὸν κατέχειν, ἵνα ὑπὲρ σοῦ μοι διακονῇ ἐν τοῖς δεσμοῖς τοῦ εὐαγγελίου, χωρὶς δὲ τῆς σῆς γνώμης οὐδὲν ἠθέλησα ποιῆσαι, ἵνα μὴ ὡς κατὰ ἀνάγκην τὸ ἀγαθὸν σου ἢ ἀλλὰ κατὰ ἐκούσιον (I wanted to keep him with me, so that he might be of service to me in your place during my imprisonment for the gospel; but I preferred to do nothing without your consent, in order that your good deed might be voluntary and not something forced).* This position is much less plausible. If this had been the case, then it would mean that Onesimus and Philemon parted ways on good terms; however, the letter does not support that. It is clear that, when Onesimus left Colossae, it was not on pleasant terms, as there is mention of a debt to which Paul attaches himself.

Callahan also oppose the runaway-slave hypothesis. Callahan (1993:363-364) proposes that Onesimus was not a slave at all, or even a fugitive, but that he was rather a blood brother to Philemon. He had quarrelled with

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2 Briefly I explain the difference between a running away, asylum seeking and leaving in the following: A runaway slave is a slave who has run away from his master possibly with the intention of never being found and starting a life somewhere else. An asylum seeking slave is one who goes to another master or a patron of his master and seeks mediation between himself and his master. Leaving the slavery household is characteristic of manumission where the master has granted his slave the right to leave and be a freed person.

3 The Greek text used in the article is the 28<sup>th</sup> edition of Nestle Aland Novum Testamentum.

his brother Philemon and sought intervention from Paul. This argument also seems less plausible. The author of the letter refers to Onesimus as a slave (*οὐκέτι ὡς δοῦλον*) and only refers to him as a brother when he requests Philemon to accept him as a brother (*οὐκέτι ὡς δοῦλον ἀλλ' ὑπὲρ δοῦλον, ἀδελφὸν ἀγαπητόν*). This suggests that Onesimus was indeed a slave and it does not seem practical that Paul would refer to a Roman citizen as a slave.

Traditional and liberal interpreters have argued over these different hypotheses for a long time. Interpreters have either argued to preserve the standing position or to propose a new one. That Onesimus was simply a runaway slave appears to prevail in the traditional interpretation of the narrative. I contend that such is a colonial reading of the narrative and, when using a postcolonial lens, an interpreter can decolonise the narrative and propose a new hypothesis that is liberating and appropriate for the African context. Before proceeding to decolonising the narrative, I first wish to illustrate Onesimus' state of being a slave.

#### 4. ONESIMUS, THE SLAVE

The institution of slavery occasioned the meeting and relationship of Philemon and Onesimus. It is important to illustrate that Onesimus was like an object in the first-century Mediterranean world. His state of being a slave gave him no standing in society. Wiedemann (1981:17-18) observes that the basic definition of a slave may be a human being who does not belong to himself but to another as a piece of property to perform some duties. Kyrtatas (2011:93) argues that the Greek world viewed slaves as no equals of human beings. To them, slaves were morally inferior and to be likened to animals; they were barbarians and, by nature, were meant to serve the Greeks. Onesimus was part of that category. The system viewed him as less than a human being – a commodity, a property to be sold, bought, and put on the market (Tiroyabone 2015:81). His worth, I have argued, was not measured by his capacity to think, his standing as a person, his stature, his wisdom, his character or his nobility, but it was measured by his usefulness, how much his hands could do, and how much hard work he could endure in chains (Tiroyabone 2015:81). His future was not determined by how much he was willing to study or how far he was willing to go in order to advance in life; his future was already determined by the system. That system had already decided that he was to belong to another person; after all, he was not a Graeco-Roman citizen (Tiroyabone 2015:81).

According to Joshel (2010:38), Roman law regarded slaves as human, but distinguished them as human property other than ordinary property. In other words, slaves were human in part, because they could breathe, move

and talk, but not human enough. They still needed someone to think for them, decide when and what they would eat, and decide when and where they should go. Fitzmyer (2000:25) notes that, in ancient times, slavery was part of the fabric of society; hence slavery was not considered indecent or inhumane. For the Graeco-Roman world, it was acceptable to view a person as a tool. Onesimus was just that. Wiedemann (1981:17) notes that a slave is a tool. Like tools are needed to perform certain tasks, the property slave was also a tool bought to perform tasks in the household (Wiedemann 1981:17). The slaves together with their wives and children were included as part of the family household of their master (Fitzmyer 2000:25). Joshel (2010:132) notes that slaves were dressed in a tunic and wore simple shoes and they could easily be identified as slaves from what they were wearing. The slaves usually slept in one room and shared a bed with as many as three other people (Joshel 2010:137-138).

Some of the duties of a slave included sexual performance; a master could indulge himself with either his male or female slave, and the slave simply had to oblige (Joshel 2010:151). Glancy (2002:9) notes that masters had unrestricted sexual access to their slaves. This would suggest that the masters cared very little about the sexual orientations of their slaves or even if the slave was romantically involved with someone else. If a male master wanted to have sex with a male slave, it did not matter if the male slave was comfortable with that or not; if a female matron wanted to have sex with a male slave, it did not matter if the slave was comfortable with that or not. It all concerned the sexual satisfaction of the master or matron, regardless of its impact on the slave's personal relationships. Being the property of their masters, even in a sexual sense, one would argue that they were treated as sexual instruments, as vibrators (Tiroyabone 2015:82).

## 5. DECOLONISING THE LETTER OF PHILEMON

In postcolonial studies, we read for decolonisation. We realise the effect of colonialism on the natives and focus on undoing that effect by bringing out the colonised and giving them a voice in the narrative that talks about them without them. Johnson *et al.* (2012:1) point out that, in the letter of Philemon, Onesimus is spoken of, referenced and even discussed, but his presence is very subtle. Onesimus is quiet in the text. Johnson *et al.* (2012:1) comment that,

after all Onesimus was only a slave, was he not? Slaves have no power, no agency, they are socially dead, they are not given a voice.

They also note that Onesimus has remained silent in Paul's letter to Philemon, even though he is present; Philemon and Paul are talking, and Onesimus must simply keep quiet (Johnson *et al* 2012:1). As a postcolonial reader, I approach this text with a different view to that offered in the colonial era. I probe the importance of those who appear to be on the margins. Onesimus is on the margins; Paul and Philemon have taken the centre spot. They have occupied the centre and left Onesimus to wander in the margins. I read the letter of Philemon with a focus on those on the margins, bringing them to the fore and presenting their side of the story; giving them a voice in the interpretation process. The Philemon narrative tells of a slave, but does not involve the slave in the crafting of the narrative.

The narrative needs to be decolonised. The traditional reading of the narrative supposes that, because slaves are to obey their masters, Onesimus made a mistake by running away from his master Philemon. Due to Philemon's kindheartedness, Paul asks Philemon to forgive Onesimus and that the two resume their master-slave relationship. Such a reading is colonial in a sense that it assumes that Paul wanted the colonial master-slave relationships to prevail, even in Christian groups, and does not make room for the possibility that Paul would have wanted Onesimus released from the master-slave relationship. Decolonising the Philemon narrative means reading against the unequal sanctioning of power in favour of Philemon, and instead reverting the power into the hands of the colonial subject Onesimus by focusing on him and not on the masters Paul and Philemon (Tiroyabone 2015). Regarding this decolonising enterprise, I am positing a postcolonial runaway-slave hypothesis of the Philemon narrative.

## 6. A POSTCOLONIAL RUNAWAY-SLAVE HYPOTHESIS

Sugirtharajah (2012:14) points out that

postcolonial biblical criticism does not only look at the dynamics of colonial domination, but also at the capacity of the colonized to resist it, either openly or covertly.

I posit that Onesimus did, in fact, run away from Philemon's household, not with the intention of simply being a fugitive as traditional interpreters would hold, but with the intent of manumission in mind. I contend that Onesimus wanted manumission to be the end goal. Onesimus left to seek Paul with the aim of convincing Paul to plead for Onesimus' manumission. As a postcolonial biblical critic, I seek to discover and liberate the characters in the narrative that previous colonial interpretations would have downplayed. I submit that some of the scholars who opposed the

traditional runaway-slave hypothesis, by suggesting that Onesimus was either a worshipper in Colossae sent to assist Paul in his ministry, downplay the capacity of Onesimus as a colonial subject to escape from a slavery household. Moreover, the majority of scholars, who are proponents of the runaway-slave hypothesis, emphasise the opinion that Onesimus was a slave who made the bad choice of stealing from his master and running away. To put Onesimus in that light is to advance the thought of former colonisers that slaves had no mentality of their own and had to be thought for. The traditional runaway-slave hypothesis already poses Onesimus as a bad person who can only think of stealing from his master who has only been good to him.

I submit that these scholars write from the perspective of the beneficiaries of both the colonial and postcolonial eras. Their view keeps Onesimus at a lower level, as someone who only thinks of things that will benefit him now; they still represent him as a slave, one who cannot think appropriately for himself. However, I hold that Onesimus used the colonial domination system of slavery to resist it. A slave could approach a friend of his master and seek mediation between himself and his master (Dunn 1996:304). It was a system of mediation within the institution of slavery that Onesimus used to his own advantage in order to seek liberation for himself. Onesimus needs to be liberated from the traditional runaway-slave hypothesis; he has been misrepresented and needs to be called out as an intelligent person who was oppressed by a system of slavery and used that system to liberate himself from it. He may still have been a person of lower status outside Philemon's household, but he would have escaped being a slave in the household. Being manumitted would only have taken him to a patronage system, in which he would still be obligated to Philemon, but he would have had his freedom; he would be able to decide what he does, when he wants to.

The traditional runaway-slave hypothesis is still the most prevalent in the scholarly world. Those who are in the upper echelon of power and influence can only view Onesimus as a runaway slave to the extent that scholars still debate what Paul wanted Philemon to do and still arrive at the conclusion that Paul wanted Philemon and Onesimus to continue the master-slave relationship with a renewed attitude. Slaves and lower class citizens cannot continue to be the subjects of hegemonic structures; they need to be recognised as people who can think for themselves and use the systems at hand to seek liberation. Nzimande (2009:249) posits that the postcolonial reader must observe the powerlessness of the weak at the hands of the mighty. Interpreters in the postcolony are still dominated by the beneficiaries of the colonial and postcolonial eras. For this reason,

the traditional runaway-slave hypothesis remains prevalent: Onesimus remains a bad runaway slave and Philemon remains with the power over Onesimus' life.

Callahan (2009:330-331) correctly asserts that the traditional interpretation of the letter has been colonial where Onesimus has been read as simply a slave, a bad runaway slave, and this has been done by the beneficiaries of the colonial enterprise beginning with John Chrysostom to the present day. This position does not mean that all interpreters of the letter are colonial beneficiaries, but rather points out that such interpretation has been the dominating mode of interpretation throughout the history of the interpretation of Philemon (Tiroyabone 2015:86). Callahan (2009:333-334) argues that Onesimus was not a slave, but a brother to Philemon who went to Paul to seek mediation to a dispute encountered between himself and his brother. This position stems from the argument that reading Onesimus as a slave is colonial (Callahan 2009:333). I agree with Callahan in that the traditional reading of Onesimus is colonial and there is a need for an anti-colonial reading.

However, I do not agree with his brotherly mediation hypothesis. In fact, my postcolonial reading of Onesimus is reading against the previous suppression of his intelligence, worth, capacity to think, and importance. Traditional interpreters do not consider these elements when observing Onesimus, but place them solely in the hands of Paul and Philemon. Paul writes the letter with excellent rhetoric and tries to convince Philemon; Philemon has to consider the letter cautiously and act accordingly, but what about the slave? Has the slave no capacity to liberate himself? What is the role of the slave in the text? How is the powerless slave treated in the hands of the mighty master? A postcolonial reader must seek and emphasise the ignored worth of the colonised.

Bruce (1977:196) argues that it makes sense that it was in Paul's house arrest that Onesimus met him and Paul could send him to mission tasks while he remained in chains at his house. Dunn (1996:304-305) suggests that Onesimus could have gone to Rome with the sole intention of meeting Paul and asking for intervention, as it was common for a slave to seek out his master's friend as a third party. This position is worthy of serious consideration by the postcolonial reader. It suggests that Onesimus could have planned the whole affair. I argue that he knew that his master had been converted into the Christian faith, as the entire household was now taking part in worship at the house. He knew that the leader of the evangelistic movement was Paul and that he was in Rome. He then stole from Philemon, because he would not be able to reach Rome without any money to meet Paul. In my observation, Onesimus knew that the new faith

proposed new things that had been unheard of in their time. He wanted to be manumitted and, upon staying with Paul, he proved himself a good worker with the intention that Paul would recommend him for manumission.

A postcolonial reading of Philemon argues that Onesimus is not simply a slave; he is an intelligent person who uses the very system that oppresses him to liberate himself. He has worth; he is important. It is important to point out that Onesimus ran to Rome in an attempt to move away from the periphery to the centre. He had been in the margins for too long and he was determined to occupy the centre spot. Onesimus is not a lower class citizen; he is important in his own right and he emphasises that importance by moving into the centre. He defies the system of slavery that determined his future. He reworked it, creating his own narrative, his own future.

## 7. CONCLUSION

I began my argument by locating myself within the postcolonial framework, and mapped out my methodology for reading this text. I then presented a brief history of the interpretation of the letter, naming it the traditional runaway-slave hypothesis, and further illustrated the oppositions that arose against it. Moreover, I presented Onesimus as a slave object in the ancient Mediterranean, pointing out the plight of a slave. In addition, I did a decolonising of the letter of Philemon in the postcolonial paradigm and then posited a postcolonial runaway-slave hypothesis. I thus conclude that an African postcolonial runaway-slave hypothesis is a plausible one when interpreting the Philemon narrative, especially reading it with the oppressed and the marginalised.

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