

ALEX HON HO IP

A Socio-Rhetorical Interpretation
of the Letter to Philemon
in Light of the
New Institutional Economics

*Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen
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Mohr Siebeck

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Alex Hon Ho Ip

A Socio-Rhetorical Interpretation
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New Institutional Economics

An Exhortation to Transform
a Master-Slave Economic Relationship
into a Brotherly Loving Relationship

Mohr Siebeck

ALEX HON HO IP, born 1973; 1995 B. Econ.; 1997 M. Econ.; 2010 M. Div.; 2014 PhD; since 2016 Assistant Professor in New Testament, Chung Chi Divinity School, Chinese University of Hong Kong.

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To my Lord Jesus Christ
who loves us so much to choose to take the image of a slave

To Liu Xiaobo Nobel Peace Prize winner
who loves his country so much to be imprisoned by his own country

To Lydia Lau
who loves me so much to be my wife and best friend in my life

Preface

This book is a slightly revised version of my doctoral dissertation, which was accepted by the faculty of the Cultural and Religious Studies Department of the Chinese University of Hong Kong in the summer of 2014. I generally skip the acknowledgments section when I read a book, but I will not do so after the completion of my own book. Completing a book seems miraculous to me. It could not have been achieved without the support of various significant parties in my life. The process of working on a thesis is not only a product of an academic pursuit but also the fruit of various blessings. I would like to take this opportunity to thank my wife, my best friend in life, and the greatest gift from God, Lydia Lau, who is always willing to share and bear my frustration and laughter in the process and support whatever decision I make. Without her, I am sure I could not have finished this work. There were times when I felt disappointed and saw no way to go; Lydia's prayer and support gave me the strength to walk again.

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Divinity School of Chung Chi College, Summer 2017

Alex Ip

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List of Abbreviations

AB	The Anchor Bible
ANTC	Abingdon New Testament Commentary
AYB	The Anchor Yale Bible
AYBD	<i>The Anchor Yale Bible Dictionary</i> . Edited by David Noel Freedman. 6 vols. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008–2009
BDAG	Frederick W. Danker, Walter Bauer, William F. Arndt, and F. Wilbur Gingrich. <i>A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature</i> . 3rd ed. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000
BZNW	Beihefte zur Zeitschrift für die neutestamentliche Wissenschaft
EGGNT	Exegetical Guide to the Greek New Testament
HTR	<i>Harvard Theological Review</i>
ICC	International Critical Commentary
IVPNTCS	The IVP New Testament Commentary Series
JBL	<i>Journal of Biblical Literature</i>
JEL	<i>Journal of Economic Literature</i>
JITE	<i>Journal of Institutional and Theoretical Economics</i>
JRS	<i>Journal of Roman Studies</i>
JSNT	<i>Journal for the Study of the New Testament</i>
KEK	Kritisch-exegetischer Kommentar über das Neue Testament
LCL	The Loeb Classical Library
NASB	New American Standard Bible
NIB	The New Interpreter's Bible
NICNT	New International Commentary on the New Testament
NIE	New Institutional Economics
NIGTC	The New International Greek Testament Commentary
NIV	New International Version
NIVAC	New International Version Application Commentary
NLT	New Living Translation
NRSV	New Revised Standard Version
NSBT	New Studies in Biblical Theology
NTL	New Testament Library
NTS	<i>New Testament Studies</i>
Phlm	Letter to Philemon
PNTC	Pillar New Testament Commentary
TDNT	<i>Theological Dictionary of New Testament</i> . Edited by Gerhard Kittel and Gerhard Friedrich. Translated by G. W. Bromiley. 10 vols. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964–1976
THKNT	Theologischer Handkommentar zum Neuen Testament

TNTC
USQR
WBC

Tyndale New Testament Commentaries
Union Seminary Quarterly Review
World Biblical Commentary

Chapter 1

Setting the Stage for Socio-Rhetorical Interpretation

1.1 Introduction

Jean Valjean, my brother, you no longer belong to evil but to good. It is your soul that I am buying for you; I am taking it away from black thoughts and from the spirit of perdition, and I am giving it to God.¹

This is one of the most beautiful scenes in the touching French novel *Les Misérables*, a scene in which the bishop speaks to Valjean and transforms him from a person who has trained himself to be detached from others into one who cares and is willing to suffer for others. It is true that it is not a law or a command that changes a person, but love manifested in a genuine relationship that transforms a person. In another scene describing the struggle within Valjean, the bishop addresses him as “my brother,” which touches Valjean’s heart and gives him the strength to break the bondages of hatred, and become a man who loves others as himself. The love shown in the bishop’s deed not only sets him free but also carries with it an expectation for him to be an honest man.

Paul, when writing the letter to Philemon (Phlm), may have had a similar thought in mind. He understood well that only love can transform one’s relationship and break the bondage in one’s mind. He also knew that only treating someone like a brother with love can really set him free given the Roman slavery. Therefore, he wrote Phlm in love and with love, with a purpose to transform the relationship between Onesimus and Philemon from an economic one into a loving relationship of brotherhood. Indeed, he tried to set two people free – namely Philemon (to be freed from the control of the prevailing values as a master) and Onesimus (to be freed from the control of the Roman slavery system).

Phlm, due to its short length, has long been interpreted by different kinds of hypotheses, among which the runaway hypothesis is the most widely held. The reason behind interpreters basing their interpretation on a hypothesis is the insufficient information provided by the text itself. This makes reliance

¹ Victor Hugo, *Les Misérables*, trans. Julie Rose (London: Vintage Books, 2010), 155.

on a hypothesis necessary. This does not imply that it is justified to adopt any hypothesis without enough argument and evidence for support.² The influence of the underlying hypothesis cannot be underestimated, as it will surely affect the direction of interpretation. One of the problems of previous studies is that they do not make it explicit how their hypotheses are established. Sometimes, one only focuses on how well the hypothesis can help fill the gap in interpreting the text. This method surely involves the risk of circular logic, in which the hypothesis is established to fill the gap and its validity is, in turn, judged by its applicability in explaining the text.

It must be emphasized at the beginning that my argument is not a commentary aimed at producing a verse-by-verse interpretation of every detail. Not every question concerning Phlm is discussed and answered. Some of the questions are discussed briefly, and it may not be necessary to have a definite answer in order to proceed in the interpretation process. Instead, by reexamining the inadequacy of previous studies and interpretations of Phlm, my argument seeks to establish an interpretation based on the socio-rhetorical³ framework, so that the hypothesis used to interpret Phlm can be more explicit, consistent with the entire Pauline thought, and evidence-based. Also, I would like to establish the view that the purpose of Paul in writing Phlm was to persuade Philemon to transform his relationship, which was dominated by economic motives, into a loving brotherhood one. In this direction, we can clearly read the rhetoric in the letter. It has to be emphasized that our claim does not assume that Paul is interested in economics but the impact of economy-driven institutions on the relationships between masters and slaves. Paul is not a pure theologian. He forms his theological thought in response to needs, or sometimes tensions, in different congregations. He addresses the wrong teaching on “works of law” from the rival missionaries in the letter to the Galatians.⁴ Therefore, it should not be surprising to see Paul addressing an economic relationship if we can successfully demonstrate that an economic relationship was indeed the barrier for Philemon’s acceptance of a slave as a loving brother in Christ.

There are six chapters, including this introduction, in this work. This chapter focuses on clearing the ground for further in-depth discussion based on the socio-rhetorical interpretation framework. Chapter 2 is the analysis of the

² Sara Winter, “Methodological Observations on a New Interpretation of Paul’s Letter to Philemon,” *USQR* 39, no. 3 (1984): 209–10.

³ Although Vernon Robbins uses “socio-rhetorical,” without a hyphen, there is no clear and significant difference between “socio-rhetorical” and “socio-rhetorical.” We choose to use the more common spelling of “socio-rhetorical” in this thesis.

⁴ Jouette M. Bassler, *Navigating Paul* (Louisville: John Knox, 2007), 18.

inner texture of Phlm aimed at looking for the possible focus of the letter by examining different layers of the text without assuming a specific hypothesis. The outcome is clear, and the relationship is the key issue addressed by Paul. This chapter not only provides some partial answers but also raises some new questions that require the analysis of the subsequent chapters. Chapter 3 analyzes the intertexture of Phlm. As will be explained later, the intertextual analysis focuses on the theological and ethical thoughts of Paul generated from the other six undisputed letters. The reason to focus on the theological and ethical thoughts of Paul is that, following the hints in Chapter 2, it provides the most relevant reference to understand the structure of thought and the main arguments beneath the text. Chapter 4 presents the analysis of the economic texture, which substitutes the socio-cultural and ideological textures in the original framework suggested by Robbins. The focus is on exploring the relationship in reality, which Paul tries to address in Phlm. The information we get from this chapter can help us project the barriers that prevent Philemon from accepting a slave as his brother; therefore, it helps us to read the corresponding rhetoric in the letter. In order to understand how the institutions of Roman slavery worked together to create a specific master–slave economic relationship, I employ the New Institutional Economics (NIE) theory; the justification for this method is provided in Chapter 4, which should help us understand that different institutions concerning Roman slavery were driven by economic motives. The master–slave relationship created in this way is called an economic relationship in subsequent chapters. Chapter 5 is a synthesis of the previous chapters. There are two main sections in this chapter. The first part will try to reconstruct the problem addressed by Paul in light of his theological and ethical thoughts and the economic texture. Having reconstructed the problem, I reinterpret the body of the letter in verses 8–21, those which contain the main part of Paul’s argument in the letter.

1.2 Thesis Statement

In Phlm, Paul deliberately wants the newly converted Onesimus to find a new, loving relationship with his master, who is also his brother in Christ. Developing his ethical thought of love, Paul argues rhetorically for a new, loving relationship, and against the barriers that exist because of the existing economic relationship. It is argued in this book that the economic relationship is not a simple relationship but a complicated one sustained by the different institutions of Roman slavery. The rhetoric of the letter, therefore, has to be read together with the economic texture.

1.3 The Value of this Research

This research makes a few contributions, which are as follows:

1. Methodologically, the use of economic texture opens a new horizon in biblical studies on how to incorporate economic theory and perspective in the interpreting process. This approach may not be the only way to incorporate economics in biblical research but, at least, this research rigorously shows a way to use the rich resources present in the knowledge of economics in biblical research.
2. Theologically, this thesis seeks to bring the relevant part of Paul's theological and ethical thoughts into the interpretation process. Although it is controversial to put forward "one" premise as Paul's theological and ethical thoughts, it is more important to try to discuss explicitly, rather than to accept unanimously that there is a coherent Pauline theology. The contribution, then, is to make one of the important assumptions in interpreting the letter explicitly. We can discuss not only the interpretation of Phlm but also the interpretative assumptions that were previously only asserted. Also, with reference to a consistent theological and ethical thought, this study can keep the interpretation process as Pauline as possible.
3. Contextually, the introduction of NIE in analyzing Roman slavery can help to understand the relationship between a master and his slave in a complicated, and sometimes, contradictory system. The Roman slavery system is agreed to be a very complex one. It was indeed an enormous task to manage such a huge number of slaves to do diverse jobs. It required different institutions working together to sustain such a complex system. Instead of just picking one aspect of the huge system as grounds for interpretation, NIE helps to explain how different institutions work together to serve the economic interests of the masters and the Empire as a whole. The institutions mattered, therefore, not only to the system but also to the economic relationship between a master and his slave.
4. Using a new interpretation framework, this book demonstrates a new way of understanding Phlm. It is a letter deliberately persuading Philemon to reconcile two conflicting relationships by using various rhetorical skills in addressing different characteristics of the economic relationship between a master and his slave.

1.4 Interpretation History of the Letter to Philemon

As briefly noted in the introductory section, the interpretation of Phlm has long been affected by the various hypotheses used. The key problem and inadequacy with them, as is shown later, are that some of them are not suffi-

ciently based on historical evidence nor are they consistent with the Pauline thought. Sara Winter rightly points out that “[a] given method has its own bias, it is intended and equipped to analyze only certain aspects of the text.”⁵ Even worse, interpreters are tempted to use a hypothesis just because it can help them fill the gaps in the letter. The following section seeks to review the hypotheses used in different points of discussion and hopes to show how the different hypotheses affect the interpretation of Phlm significantly. A new framework and explanation could provide an interpretation of Phlm that is more consistent with Paul’s theological thought. This framework should also be more historically based. The review is composed of three parts. First, I discuss the runaway hypothesis, which has dominated the interpretation of Phlm for a long time, hoping to show its insufficiency to give a comprehensive picture of the letter. John Knox’s challenge and contribution is also discussed in this section. Then, I introduce the new trend of research, one following Knox’s proposal, to show how new questions and interests are aroused after the dominance of the runaway hypothesis declined. Third, I synthesize the discussion up to the recent debate and try to make a short conclusion on possible new areas for research.

1.4.1 Development and Insufficiencies of the “Runaway Hypothesis”

We begin our discussion with the runaway hypothesis because it has had an enormous impact on the interpretative history of Phlm. It is not only a hypothesis regarding the story of Onesimus but it has served as a hermeneutical lens for the whole epistle. The reason is simple: if Onesimus was really a fugitive and did something wrong to Philemon, it would be natural, though not necessary, to infer that Paul’s purpose was to ask for forgiveness, and at the most, manumission for Onesimus which may be more than Paul asked for (verse 21). The hypothesis used to interpret the text and its result reinforced each other for a long period to sustain the dominance of the runaway hypothesis. The following section debates that the recent argument over the runaway hypothesis is not as solid as previously thought. I am not going to refute it completely, as it is not necessary to justify my thesis, but challenge the necessity of holding it and its subsequent effect on interpreting the text.

The origin of the runaway hypothesis can be traced back to John Chrysostom in the fourth century.⁶ The hypothesis suggests that Onesimus was a slave of Philemon, who ran away from his master after doing damage, theft, or some

⁵ Winter, “Observations,” 206.

⁶ Albert J. Harrill, *Slaves in the New Testament: Literary, Social, and Moral Dimensions* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2006), 6; Winter, “Observations,” 205. Margaret Mitchell does not agree with that and suggests the runaway hypothesis has been held by scholars before the fourth century. Margaret M. Mitchell, “John Chrysostom on Philemon: A Second Look,” *HTR* 88 (1995): 135–48.

other wrong.⁷ Winter describes the taking of the hypothesis as a bias.⁸ She specifically highlights the problem of considering the traditional hypothesis: it causes one to overlook Paul's intention, which I agree is very important, in making use of many social roles in the letter. She invites the reader to reconsider the rich resources with respect to the relationship between the social roles mentioned in the letter and the social setting, and to take Paul's use of commercial languages seriously.⁹ Similar views are also held by Markus Barth and Helmut Blanke, who propose that the interpretations of Onesimus as a runaway slave who did something wrong to Philemon are biased by the interpreters.¹⁰ They further point out that most of these interpreters are established church leaders or scholars who may easily choose to stand on the side of the slave master to explain the letter. These criticisms are supported by the findings of Peter Garnsey, suggesting that the proposer of the runaway hypothesis, John Chrysostom, showed the same bias toward slaves as other thinkers during the same period. Garnsey finds, "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."¹¹ Chrysostom once used slavery as a metaphor to explain why God needs to chastise people. He explained to his audience (most of them were slaveholders) that sinners were similar to slaves and that "rebellious and anti-social slaves, like criminals, should be punished."¹² This thinking follows the natural slave theory proposed by Aristotle, which still prevailed during Chrysostom's time. It is, therefore, not difficult to understand that the runaway hypothesis was formed in a period when there was a strong prejudice against slaves. This bias makes us overlook the importance of Paul's mentioning of so many roles and assuming that Onesimus wronged Philemon. However, showing that the hypothesis arose in a historically biased context cannot prove that it is wrong; we need to further show that the other arguments for this hypothesis cannot stand under critical examination as well.

⁷ Modern commentators supporting the traditional hypothesis include Joseph B. Lightfoot, John M. G. Barclay, John Nordling, Peter O'Brien, and Norman Petersen.

⁸ Winter, "Observations," 206.

⁹ Paul's use of commercial language was first introduced by Clarice J. Martin, "The Rhetorical Function of Commercial Language in Paul's Letter to Philemon," in *Persuasive Artistry: Studies in New Testament Rhetoric in Honor of George A. Kennedy* (ed. Duane F. Watson; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1991), 328–35.

¹⁰ Markus Barth and Helmut Blanke, *The Letter to Philemon* (Cambridge: Eerdmans, 2000), 226–27.

¹¹ Peter Garnsey, *Ideas of Slavery from Aristotle to Augustine* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 74.

¹² Chris L. De Wet, "Honour Discourse in John Chrysostom's Exegesis of the Letter to Philemon," in *Philemon in Perspective: Interpreting a Pauline Letter*, BZNTW 169 (ed. D. Francois Tolmie; Berlin: De Gruyter, 2010), 327.

The runaway hypothesis is supported mainly by two lines of reasoning. Textually, supporters use verse 11 to demonstrate the slave's previous unsatisfactory services and verse 18 for the damage and loss done to his master. This is not a strong argument, as the interpretation of these two verses does not express an explicit meaning that supports the runaway hypothesis. The detailed interpretation of these verses is discussed in later chapters. Historically, one of the justifications of the runaway hypothesis comes from using Pliny the Younger's letter to Sabinianus as evidence to support Paul's letter as a similar type.¹³ Pliny the Younger's letter to Sabinianus is often quoted to support the view that Phlm belonged to the same epistolary genre, the one asking for forgiveness. John Knox was one of the earliest commentators who challenged this traditional runaway hypothesis, although he mentioned he was not the first to criticize the traditional view.¹⁴ He describes the unconditional acceptance of the hypothesis as "taking quite too much for granted."¹⁵ He argues that, on the one hand, the letter does not explicitly give any information for us to determine that Onesimus was a runaway slave. On the other hand, he claims that the use of the letter of Pliny the Younger cannot help in supporting the hypothesis. The reason he gives is that in the letter, Pliny had explicitly asked for forgiveness on behalf of the freedman, whereas Paul did not write one word asking for forgiveness for Onesimus.¹⁶ Although Knox's interpretation is not generally accepted, it is worth taking a closer look at his argument.

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

¹³ Joseph Fitzmyer, *The Letter to Philemon* (AB 34C; New York: Doubleday, 2000), 17.

¹⁴ John Knox, *Philemon among the Letters of Paul* (New York: Abingdon, 1959), 38–47.

¹⁵ John Knox, *The Interpreter's Bible* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1990), 11:556.

¹⁶ Knox, *Philemon*, 70. Knox's whole theory has not found popularity, not because his argument is not convincing but probably because he assumed that the letter was directed to Philemon, who had his residence in Laodicea, not in Colossae. He further argued that the ultimate addressee was Archippus, who was the true master of Onesimus, not Philemon.

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 be granted, provided only that it is fitting for me to request it, and for you to grant it. Farewell.¹⁷

Stanley Stowers categorizes Pliny's letter and that of Paul to Philemon as letters of mediation. He defines it as one in which "one person makes a request to another person on behalf of a third party."¹⁸ This categorization, however, is far from being specific. Also, Stowers' categorization is based on an assumption that Phlm was "an intercessory letter on behalf of the runaway slave Onesimus."¹⁹ Although I am not against Stowers' categorization, I think it provides little help in analyzing these two letters. A closer look into the two letters would ensure significant differences between them.

First, Pliny's letter to Sabinianus clearly conveys the freedman's regret for his own wrongdoing, whereas Paul's letter does not. In Pliny's letter, the author wrote explicitly that "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." The wrongdoing is the main cause of anger of Sabinianus. However, in Phlm, Paul only said (Phlm 18), "If he has wronged (*ἠδίκησεν*) you in any way, or owes (*ὀφείλει*) you anything, charge that to my account." Paul used a conditional sentence that implies the protasis in the sentence is uncertain or may only be a possibility that is not fixed in reality.²⁰ This phrase may also be a rhetorical skill to acknowledge Philemon's feeling that he was wronged by Onesimus, which is discussed thoroughly in Chapter 5. Given the uncertainty in the meaning of verse 18, the interpretation of the exact wrong committed by Onesimus to Philemon depends on different assumptions. Barth explains that if one assumes Onesimus is a runaway slave, then he may have done something worse than running away, such as stealing Philemon's money. However, if one takes the hypothesis proposed by Winter that Onesimus was not a fugitive but was sent to Paul by Philemon, the possible interpretation of "wronged" (*ἠδίκησεν*) and "owes" (*ὀφείλει*) could be the loss brought about by his extended stay with Paul.²¹ No matter which interpretation we accept, we can draw a conclusion to mark its difference from Pliny's letter: Phlm

¹⁷ Pliny, *Ep.* 9.21 (*Complete Letters of Pliny the Younger*, trans. Peter G. Walsh [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006], 227).

¹⁸ Stanley K. Stowers, *Letter Writing in Greco-Roman Antiquity* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1989), 153.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 155.

²⁰ Barth and Blanke, *Letter to Philemon*, 480; James D. G. Dunn, *The Epistles to the Colossians and Philemon: A Commentary on the Greek Text* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 338; Peter O'Brian, *Colossians-Philemon*, WBC 44 (Dallas: Thomas Nelson, 1998), 300.

²¹ Barth and Blanke, *Letter to Philemon*, 481.