

## Introduction

The title of this volume, *Onesimus Our Brother*, marks a significant and notable shift in interpretive perspective. In the long history of interpretation of Paul's letter "to Philemon" (so named, despite the fact that Archippus and Apphia are also addressed, not to mention the house-church of which they all are a part), either Paul (in most cases) or Philemon has taken center stage. Rarely, if at all, has the other central figure, regarding whom and about whom the letter was written—Onesimus—stepped out of the background. He has been mentioned, discussed, referenced; subtly present, but voiceless, powerless, hidden in the shadows and without agency. And why should it be otherwise? After all, Onesimus was only a slave, was he not? Slaves have no power, no agency. According to Orlando Patterson, slaves are socially dead or they experience "social death,"<sup>1</sup> and the socially dead are not given voice. So Onesimus has remained silent in Paul's letter to Philemon, though eerily present. Even while present, slaves should not speak in elite company: Paul and Philemon are speaking, so Onesimus must remain silent.

Whether we describe it as elite, conventional, traditional, or normative, biblical criticism in the West has assured and sustained Onesimus's silence and enslavement. How and why has it done this, even after slavery has ended? Should not Onesimus, too, have been set free, emancipated, manumitted? But if Onesimus is freed, given voice and agency, what will happen to the interpretive system that has kept him in thralldom? Why is Onesimus's freedom of agency and voice such a threat?

Although Philemon is the least commented upon of Paul's letters, from an African American perspective, it deserves as much attention as Romans, Galatians, and the Corinthian correspondences and should be situated within those letters' conceptual framework. This would enable scholars to appreciate better Paul's position on such issues as law and grace, faith and works, judgment and redemption that have unfortunately been construed through a Protestant exegetical lens as binary oppositions.

Philemon has suffered the fate of marginalization for a number of reasons, one of which is that it seems to contain little theological content and deals solely with the allegedly mundane matter of recommending Philemon to accept his slave's return without inflicting harm upon him. The other, more obvious reason for this letter's marginalization is that it raises the thorny and embarrassing issue of the compromises and complicity that Roman Catholic and Protestant churches have had with various historical forms of "unfreedom" that fall under the category of "slavery." Needless to say, Philemon interpretation in the United States could not help being affected by the problem of race that stemmed from slavery. The interpretations generated within this political economy were affected in no small degree

by the “whiteness” (a social-political and epistemological category) of those doing the interpretation. So too, African American interpreters have also had a jaundiced view of Philemon because they have read it through the lens of prior “white” misreading. This secondhand reading foreclosed an alternate reading wherein Paul could be seen as negotiating Onesimus’s humanity within the Christian church’s precarious presence in the Roman Empire.

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## Traditional Biblical Criticism

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Traditional biblical criticism is a product of Enlightenment thought and ideals, which gave rise to modernity in the West. This worldview attempted to describe the world in rational, empirical, and objective terms. It assumed that there was a truth to be uncovered, a way of obtaining absolute answers to the question posed by the modern human condition. While scholars tend to debate when exactly the “modern” period began, many generally agree that it began roughly in the middle of the eighteenth century. Some of the basic ideas of enlightenment and modernist thought that supplied a theoretical foundation to traditional Biblical criticism are the following:<sup>2</sup>

1. There is a stable, coherent, knowable self. This self is conscious, rational, autonomous, and *universal*: no physical conditions or differences substantially affect how this self operates.
2. This self knows itself and the world through reason, or rationality, posited as the highest and only *objective* form of mental functioning.
3. The mode of knowing produced by the objective, rational self is “science,” which can provide *universal truths* about the world, *regardless of the individual status of the knower*.
4. The knowledge produced by science is “truth,” and is eternal.
5. The knowledge/truth produced by science (which is to say as well, by the rational, objective, knowing self) will always lead toward progress and perfection. All human institutions and practices can be analyzed by science (by reason, by objectivity) and improved.
6. Science thus stands as the paradigm for any and all socially useful forms of knowledge. *Science is neutral and objective*; scientists, unbiased and rational, must be free to follow the laws of reason and must not be motivated by any other concerns, such as money or power, class or status, gender or nationality.

These fundamental premises of modernity served to justify and explain virtually all of our social structures and institutions, including democracy, law, science, ethics, aesthetics, and *biblical criticism*.

Armed with this new epistemological and theoretical paradigm, the biblical criticism that emerged in the early modern period sought to break itself free from the presumed theological constraints of church, creeds, and dogma. It saw itself at this time as a developing critical discipline comparable to the “natural sciences” and as a kind

of “liberation” movement from the past—from the church, from backwardness, from antiquity—simultaneously moving toward progress fostered by science. This newly developed self-conception of developing normative biblical criticism can be summarized in the following five points. These points can serve as a basic outline of traditional biblical criticism operating under the general umbrella of historical and literary criticism:<sup>3</sup>

1. The historical-critical paradigm approached the biblical text primarily as a means for gaining historical evidence from and for the time of composition. The meaning of the text resided either in the world presented by it, in the intention of the author, or both. *Only the original readers of the text were of any interest*, along with the original *theological* message and intention. The text was not regarded as an artistic, rhetorical, and ideological production in its own right.
2. The meaning of texts was regarded as *univocal* and *objective* and could be retrieved if the proper methodology, scientific in nature, was rigorously applied. Since the text was also historical, the path of history was likewise universal and objective in nature, and could be scientifically constructed as well.
3. Given the proposed scientific basis and approach, the discipline called for a very specific kind of reader—the reader as a *universal and informed critic*. This proposed critic assumed a position of *neutrality* and *impartiality* with regard to the text through a careful application of the proper methodological tools of the discipline; as a result, the critic brought nothing to the text in the process of interpretation. This paradigm, then, called for a dehumanized reader!
4. The paradigm was profoundly theological in orientation. The religious content and message of the texts (that is, biblical theology, the theological positions of groups reflected in the texts, their ecclesiastical conflicts, etc.) was an overriding concern. The meaning of the text, once uncovered, was *for all times and cultures*.
5. Finally, the historical-critical model presupposed and entailed a very specific and *universal pedagogical model*: all readers, regardless of theological persuasion or sociocultural moorings, could become such *informed and universal critics*.

To be sure, this paradigm was hegemonic, influencing religious studies programs and theological schools. The editors were formally trained within this interpretive paradigm and were taught neither to examine nor to be self-reflective regarding the presuppositions of the discipline. The paradigm of traditional biblical criticism reigned supreme until the early 1970s, when the rise of newer literary theories, along with other factors, paved the way for other reading perspectives coming mainly from the margins.

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### The Reorientation of Reader Perspectives: Reading “from the Margins”

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Several movements in the 1970s and 1980s, developed from different quarters, posed a challenge to the traditional biblical studies paradigm. A number of biblical scholars became increasingly interested in the ideologies at work in, and the political agendas

served by, biblical criticism.<sup>4</sup> The impetus came primarily, but not exclusively, from scholars who belonged to minority groups within Western culture or who lived in countries not considered part of the dominant culture of the West—Asia, Africa, and Latin America. The emergence of global social liberation movements and voices from marginalized groups in these countries, which provided the basis for outspoken social-political commitments and critical contextual reflection, opened the way for various groups to hear the Bible speaking “in their own language” (see Acts 2). Such developments have given rise to cultural and contextualized approaches and readings, which were intended to free the study of Scripture from Eurocentric interpretive limitations and interests. Now the coalescing of these new cultural-contextual and literary-interpretive perspectives has been integrated into biblical studies, providing new reading strategies. Many of these reading strategies have benefited from the development of postmodern thought, providing a self-critical theoretical paradigm.

Postmodern thought challenged the essential basis of modernity, which is fundamentally about order: about rationality and rationalization, creating order out of chaos. The modernist assumption is that rationality is conducive to creating order and that the more ordered a society is, the better it will function. Therefore, modern societies are constantly on guard against anything labeled as “disorder,” which might disrupt order. Thus a binary opposition between “order” and “disorder” is constantly constructed. In Western culture, this disorder becomes “the other,” defined in relation to other binary oppositions. Thus anything nonwhite, nonmale, nonheterosexual, impure, nonrational, becomes part of “disorder,” and has to be eliminated from the ordered, rational, pure modern society. The ways that modern societies go about creating categories labeled as “order” or “disorder” have to do with the effort to achieve stability. Stability and order are maintained in modern societies through the means of “grand narratives” or “master narratives,” which are stories that a culture constructs to explain its practices and beliefs. Every belief system or ideology has its grand narratives, thought of as a kind of meta-ideology—that is, an ideology that explains an ideology: a story that is told to explain the belief systems that exist. All aspects of modern societies, including science as the primary form of knowledge, depend on these grand narratives.

Postmodernism, however, critiques grand narratives with the awareness that such narratives serve to mask the contradictions and instabilities that are inherent in any social organization or practice. Thus every attempt to create “order” always demands the creation of an equal amount of “disorder.” But a “grand narrative” masks the constructedness of these categories by explaining that “disorder” *really is* chaotic and bad and that “order” *really is* rational and good. Postmodernism, in rejecting grand narratives, favors “mini-narratives,” stories that explain small practices, local events, rather than large-scale universal or global concepts. Postmodern “mini-narratives” are always situational, provisional, contingent, and temporary, making no claim to universality, ultimate truth, reason, or stability. These alternatives focus on thinking of any and all action (or social struggle) as necessarily local, limited, and partial—but nonetheless effective. For these reasons, postmodern thought (and other factors) has provided a theoretical basis for “other” marginalized groups not only to speak in tongues but also to hear scriptural texts and other texts “speaking in their own language.”

Many of these new interpretive possibilities surface in the reading strategies of Postcolonial (biblical) criticism, cultural studies, feminist biblical criticism, and African American biblical hermeneutics. These approaches do not represent a particular method but are reading strategies that seek to ask certain questions from their contextual situations about the relationship between rhetoric and power. In this regard, they can be seen as participating in an ideological approach of reading texts, which many “marginal” readings of the Bible share in common.

This brief overview of some newer approaches to biblical criticism may be summarized as follows:

1. They tend to adopt a postmodern theoretical perspective (whether voiced or unvoiced), challenging particularly traditional biblical criticism’s claims of objectivity and of producing “scientific knowledge” applicable to all time and all peoples.
2. They examine texts employing an ideological lens.
3. They do not utilize or propose an overarching methodological paradigm for examining texts and for producing “readings.”
4. The experience of individual groups are emphasized in the constructed “readings.”
5. These newer approaches tend to agree that
  - (a) articulations of universalism are a mask for Western or European ethnocentrism and culture;
  - (b) traditional biblical studies has been predominantly white, male, and clerical;
  - (c) traditional biblical studies have also stifled other voices (especially of women, blacks, and other subjected peoples); and
  - (d) traditional biblical studies has been in collusion with and in the service of empire and colonialism, which have included all kinds of oppressions—racism, sexism, classism, heterosexism, and so on.

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## Origins of the Present Volume

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It might appear from the preceding that what we intend in this volume is an exercise in postmodern or postcolonial reading. While this may be the case, we have no need to invoke such terms to legitimate our reading strategy, since the idea for this volume had a much humbler origin. When one of the editors, James A. Noel, was engaged in a discussion about Philemon with members of his congregation at a Wednesday night Bible study, one of the participants asked: “Pastor, what do you think would have happened if a runaway slave in America had carried this letter back to his master?” That question was the germ of the present volume. That church member had no knowledge of postmodern hermeneutics; he merely asked the question that, in an African American context, seemed obvious.

The African American context is not the only one wherein this sort of reading is relevant. In June 2009, James Noel had occasion to present the material in this volume to a

clergy retreat in South Korea. After returning to the United States, he received an email from the Rev. Sungcho Cho of Hanshin Presbyterian Church, which had sponsored the event. Pastor Cho, who serves as director of the World Mission Theological Seminary for Foreign Laborers, wrote in response to those lectures:

I agree with your opinion that emancipation is one of the key themes of the Bible. So we must learn to read the Book from the perspective of the poor, the enslaved, the marginalized. In Korea, Minjung theology attempts to recast Christianity by doing theology from the perspective of the poor, the “Minjung,” who are the protagonists in the kingdom of God. Unfortunately, slavery is still alive today. All over the world, Onesimus is still with us. Philemon is still with us, too. Most people in the Third World suffer from a common enemy of humankind, such as exploitative capitalism and neo-liberalism, with the rich getting richer and the poor getting poorer. The demonic power which threatens the peace and brings disorder to the cosmos should be defeated by the solidarity of Onesimus (Minjung).

Thank for your passion and friendship.

We are very encouraged by such a response to our African American reading of Paul’s letter to Philemon because it confirms our intuition that this sort of cultural biblical interpretation will resonate with communities beyond our own particularity. The universal can operate through the particular, and not always as a hegemonic episteme imposed from without upon nondominant groups. Modernity has not banished domination from human experience.

Therefore we can say that our reading is postmodern insofar as postmodernism critiques grand narratives and reveals how such narratives serve to mask the contradictions and instabilities that are inherent in any social organization or practice. This critique has always been present in African American biblical interpretation, however, and did not have to await the appearance of postmodern and postcolonial theory. African American biblical interpretation—in slave narratives, the spirituals, antebellum sermons, and so on—anticipated postmodern reading strategies from the locus of modernity’s underside. While modern historical criticism was emerging alongside and within the European Enlightenment project, African Americans were engaging in a form of biblical interpretation that functioned as the “critique of the Enlightenment critique.” We regard this volume as a continuation of that tradition and critique. It is congruent with postmodern reading strategies, postcolonial biblical criticism, cultural studies, and feminist biblical criticism in agreeing that

1. traditional biblical scholarship has been predominantly white and male;
2. it has also stifled other voices (especially of women, blacks and other; and subjects peoples); and
3. the Bible has been put into collusion with and in the service of empire and colonialism, which has included all kinds of oppressions—racism, sexism, classism, heterosexism, and so on.

It is for these reasons that the contributors to *Onesimus Our Brother* feel a new interpretation and reading of Philemon is justified and, indeed, long overdue. We are

interested in hearing from Onesimus and reading from his marginalized position and find that the newer reading perspectives give him voice and agency. However, these newer readings and interpretations will not traverse the same worn and tired territory that has kept Onesimus enslaved and silent. To liberate Onesimus, Paul's letter to Philemon must be read anew or reread from this totally different basis and perspective.

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## Overview of the Volume

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In chapter 1, Demetrius K. Williams, in exploring the interpretation history of Philemon, shows that it is much more convoluted than expected. He approaches the interpretation history through an ideological optic, noting that each segment of history engaged in a particular "reading" is suitable for its particular historical-contextual-political moment. These "readings" thus betray the socio-political commitments and sociocultural moorings of the readers. So Williams also carries out his own reading, which is situated in the *presumed* perspective of Onesimus, an enslaved and marginalized slave, and opts for a liberative reading of Philemon. In chapter 2, Mitzi Smith deals with the specificity of slavery in the New Testament period so as to do justice to the similarities and differences between this form of unfreedom in antiquity and racial slavery as experienced by African Americans at the beginning of modernity. In chapter 3, James A. Noel argues that Nat Turner's career represents the historical analogue to the psychoanalytic phenomenon that Sigmund Freud identified, in *Civilization and Its Discontents*, as the "return of the repressed." In the case of Nat Turner, however, we have the return of the *oppressed*. Hence, this chapter's title invokes the relationship that Herbert Marcuse established, in *Eros and Civilization*, between social oppression and psychological repression. So too, Carl Jung has shown that the oppressed, while rendered "invisible" (as in Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*) in the dominant society, occupy the terrain of the repressed in the oppressor's consciousness. For Hegel, this meant that the subject-object split in the Western psyche could only be overcome in the ultimate sense by resolving the "master-slave dialectic" via mutual "recognition" between the two parties. Noel focuses on Nat Turner's career in order to interpret Paul's letter to Philemon in light of the discourse of "repression" and "recognition."

In chapter 4, Matthew V. Johnson endeavors to allow Onesimus's voice to be heard through the letter by inverting Paul Ricoeur's notion of "body as text," instead treating the text of Philemon "as body." Johnson argues that this body speaks through the symptomatology of hysteria, the causality of which he traces to the contradiction between Paul's pleading for a quality of relationship between Onesimus and Philemon that must presuppose the former's freedom in order to be realized. Johnson shows further that Paul's pleading betrays a deeper *telos* ("goal") of the Christian faith—the liberation of the oppressed and their inclusion in the Beloved Community—that operates as the eschatological point of finality in Pauline thought. Thus, in diagnosing the text's hysteria, Johnson allows Onesimus's voice to be heard as the "groans and sighs too deep for words" of which Paul speaks in his letter to the Romans; he invokes as well the "trembling" references in the Negro spirituals.

In chapter 5, Margaret Wilkerson argues that “we do not have to exercise a great deal of imagination to situate ourselves inside Onesimus’s head upon his return.” While this statement is probably true for African American audiences and other oppressed audiences, it is not likely to apply to a white audience, for whom the question what Onesimus thought or felt simply will never occur. The main protagonists who exercise agency, and with whom white readers are therefore more likely to identify, are Paul and Philemon. Wilkerson also asks whether Paul expected Philemon to effectively make the past disappear by saying to Onesimus, “I’m sorry I enslaved you.” This is another way of raising the question Johnson raises about Onesimus’s voice: if he cannot articulate the anger and pain he endured in the past, this means he is being silenced in the present. Wilkerson pursues this line of questioning to probe the hard issue of what is required for real racial reconciliation to take place in America. She also examines the letter to Philemon through the lens of gender and thus brings the triangulated relationship between white men, black women, and white women into the discussion. Wilkerson creatively uses several modern plays and two documentary films in her analysis. She notes that in the United States, letters, narratives, and songs were the mode of slaves “returning” to their masters. They could not return in the flesh: *Koinonia* was not possible. One of the documentaries she discusses pertains to a town that banished all its African American residents through murder and intimidation during the Post-Reconstruction period. The African American filmmaker whose relatives were among those chased from that town encounters anger, secrecy, and silence when he returns to document the story. In deftly connecting this story with what is happening in Philemon, Wilkerson demonstrates its relevance to contemporary racial realities in the United States.

In chapter 6, James W. Perkinson shows that what is at stake in Philemon is the question of “the Bible slave”—referring not to the gospel embraced by those who were enslaved, but to the enslavement embraced by those who interpreted the text and were chained up inside an exegesis, or more accurately, inside the Bible as a text of mastery. Enslaved blacks took their bodies (that is, their social-historical and spiritual experience) “in hand” to judge the text. Masters took the text in hand to warp what their own bodies “said” in living out desire toward their slaves. Perkinson’s examination followed Allen D. Callahan’s exposition of Philemon, which countered the kind of readings over the last one and a half millennia that have cast Onesimus as fugitive and Paul as an advocate for the master’s embrace of the returning slave. Onesimus and Philemon, Callahan has argued, were brothers. Important also for Perkinson is the memoir of Charles Colcock Jones, a Presbyterian plantation minister who preached to the slaves from the text of Philemon. When they heard his message, they walked out. For Perkinson, those slave bodies stepped outside the text of preaching, making their own moving flesh a countertext of insistent revelation. When Jones’s congregation walked out on his Philemon sermon, they walked straight into the text of rebellion. By physically exiting Jones’s homily, the slaves re-entered their own blackness, becoming subliminally, for the white missionary and his master friends, anomalous and dangerous. They also thereby exited the gendered text of domesticity. Jones’s slave community alone offers the true emblem of freedom. They trusted the body’s desire for liberty as the final arbiter of Scripture,

even while still effectively “shackled.” White mastery over the black body was anchored ultimately in the mastery of Scripture over white identity.

In chapter 7, Allen D. Callahan addresses the overall contemporary African American assessment of Paul's literary legacy as essentially an antiemancipatory biblical witness. He argues that this skewed view of the apostle was mediated through antebellum proslavery advocates. The proslavery use of Paul, and especially Paul's letter to Philemon, which established the “Pauline Mandate” (to return runaway slaves), presented Paul as at best an “ambivalent” witness and source of freedom. However, when the African American religious tradition is mined, one discovers that there is a rich and revered tradition that offers an alternative view. Paul in this venerable tradition is appropriated and enlisted as a viable partner in the struggle for African American freedom. To be sure, in order to enlist Paul for the cause of freedom, the tradition had to read Paul against the grain of his canonical correspondence and also include his career as portrayed in the Acts of the Apostles.