



TRUTH APPLICATIONS

Class Notes

Slavery in the Greco-Roman World

Philemon: Background

David Anguish

Introduction

1. Notice these general ideas in preparation for a study of the text of Philemon.
 - a. Philemon is the third shortest of four one-chapter NT books: 335 Greek words.¹
 - b. It is connected to Colossians (we'll note the specifics later).
 - c. It “concerns an issue of broad social concern in the ancient world” (Fitzmeyer 2000, 12).
 - d. To understand it best, we need a general knowledge of slavery in the Greco-Roman world.

A General Orientation to First Century Slavery

2. Summary statement: “There was no action or belief or institution in the ancient world that was not one way or another affected by the possibility that someone involved might be a slave” (Finley 1980).²
3. Scott Bartchy elaborates on slavery's importance in the Roman Empire: “Among a variety of institutions for maintaining dominance and dependence characteristic of the early Roman Empire, slavery was an especially important form of compulsory labor in which part of the population legally owned other human beings as property; it was practiced in all cultures relevant to the writing of the documents of the NT” [i.e., Roman, Greek, and Jewish] (Bartchy 1992, 65–66).
 - a. Slavery was not unique to the Greco-Roman world—it was practiced in most (but not all) cultures from as far back as records have been found—but “ancient Greece and Rome are two of only five societies in world history which seem to have been based on slavery” (Bartchy 1992, 66).
 - b. In the Empire, slavery was “an institutionalized system of large-scale employment,” woven into the economy and integral to its function—“in both the countryside and the cities” (Finley 1980, 67).
 - c. By the first century AD, the slave population made up “at least a third of the inhabitants of most major urban centers” (Bartchy 1992, 67).³
4. It's important to know that differences existed in the way slavery was practiced in the three traditions relevant to the NT text (Jewish, Greek, and Roman), but some things were generally true of all.
 - a. People in slavery did not “constitute a social or economic class.”
 - b. Rather, the individual honor, social status, and economic opportunities depended entirely on the

status of their respective owners.

- c. Some were treated horribly, e.g., “those who had been enslaved by the courts as convicted criminals had no hope of manumission; rather, they could count on being worked to death in the mines and on galley ships or on fighting to the death as gladiators” (Bartchy 1992, 70).
- d. But most urban slaves could realistically anticipate that they would be emancipated and granted Roman citizenship (if owned by a Roman), although that was not guaranteed.
- e. So, slaves “developed no recognizable consciousness of being a group or of suffering a common plight. For this reason, any such call as ‘slaves of the world unite!’ would have fallen on completely deaf ears” (Bartchy 1992, 66).

Different from 17th-19th Century New World Slavery

5. Summary statement: “It must be stressed that for the most part knowledge of slavery as practiced in the New World in the 17th-19th centuries has hindered more than helped achieving an appropriate, historical understanding of social-economic life in the Mediterranean world of the 1st century, knowledge which is essential for a sound exegesis of those NT texts dealing with slaves and their owners or using slave-related metaphors” (Bartchy 1992, 66).
6. For study of the NT text, that means two things.
 - a. The Greek term δοῦλος (*doulos*) should generally be translated “slave.” That is an accurate rendering of the legally regulated position of those people in the biblical world.
 - b. But translators face a challenge in rendering the word “slave” because in practice the word included nuances of practical servitude in the legal-social contexts of the first century that people in our culture do not appreciate.
7. Central features of Greco-Roman slavery that differ from what was later practiced in the 17th-19th century New World include the following (Bartchy 1992, 66).
 - a. Racial factors played no role.
 - b. Education was greatly encouraged (some slaves were better educated than their owners) and enhanced a slave’s value.
 - c. Many slaves carried out sensitive and highly responsible social functions.
 - d. Slaves could own property (including other slaves).
 - e. Their religious and cultural traditions were the same as those of the freeborn.
 - f. No laws prohibited public assembly of slaves.
 - g. The majority of urban and domestic slaves could legitimately anticipate being emancipated by the age of 30.⁴
8. Some additional features are also worthy of note.
 - a. Slaves were used for a large variety of functions in very different circumstances, “some of which when compared to New World slavery seem astonishingly responsible”: doctors, teachers, writers, accountants, agents, bailiffs, overseers, secretaries, and sea-captains (Bartchy 1992, 69).
 - b. Following practices already established by the Greeks, the Romans took steps to ensure their slave system functioned well (Bartchy 1992, 70).
 - 1) Providing slaves with the security of room and board.
 - 2) Granting them the privilege of owning property, including their own slaves.
 - 3) Giving them the right to make contracts, and in some cases, share in the profits and receipt

of wages.

- c. Because the opportunity existed for people to sell themselves into slavery with the anticipation of manumission, slavery “was regarded as the most direct means to be integrated into Greek and Roman society. For many this was the quickest way to climb socially and financially ... in stark contrast to New World slavery” (Bartchy 1992, 70).

As We Prepare for Philemon

9. Other features also deserve our attention, including the household structure and expectations for owners. We’ll take some note of them as we study the text of Philemon

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Works Cited

- Bartchy, S. Scott. 1992. “Slavery–New Testament.” *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*. ed. David Noel Freedman. Vol 6, 65–73. Doubleday.
- Finley, M. I. 1980. *Ancient Slavery and Modern Ideology*. New York. In Bartchy 1992.
- Fitzmeyer, Joseph A. 2000. *The Letter to Philemon: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*. The Anchor Yale Bible. Yale University Press.

Notes

¹ From shortest to longest, the other three are: 3 John, 218 words; 2 John, 245 words; Jude, 458 words.

² We get a sense of its pervasiveness from the various texts where slavery is mentioned: δοῦλος, *doulos* – 1 Cor 7.21–22; Gal 3.28; 4.1; Eph 6.5–9; Col 3.11; 4.1; 1 Tim 6.1; Tit 2.9; οἰκέτης; *oiketēs* – Acts 10.7; Rom 14.14; 1 Pet 2.18–25.

³ The 2026 population of Searcy, AR is 24,632; by the Greco-Roman ratio, ca. 8,210 would be slaves. (*World Population Review*; <https://worldpopulationreview.com/us-cities/arkansas/searcy>). In 2020, the estimated population for the Central Arkansas metropolitan statistical area (Little Rock, plus surrounding areas, including White County), was 748,031; ca. 249,343 would be slaves (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Central_Arkansas). Websites accessed July 16, 2026.

⁴ Elsewhere in his article, Bartchy notes that manumission was generally regarded as a reward for faithful work and “functioned as an important safety valve, especially for Roman society in which so many capable and educated persons were enslaved. *Substantial inscriptional evidence strongly suggests that persons in domestic slavery under Roman law in the 1st century C.E. could generally expect to be set free by age 30.*” Note re: the last point that some dissent, contending that the inscriptions represent an ideal, not standard practice (Bartchy 1992, 70; emphasis mine).