

# Captured by Christ Jesus: Paul as Christ's Trophy Slave in Philippians 3:12c

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## Abstract

Paul's autobiographical account of his Christian existence in Philippians 3 has been a source of immense encouragement to believers, as well as a subject of extensive academic debate. An aspect of this debate is the group of grammatical, conceptual, and theological problems presented by his transitional disclaimer in Philippians 3:12. Several proposals for resolving these questions have been made; but the full import of his cryptic statement in 3:12c, that he was *κατελήμφοθην ὑπὸ Χριστοῦ Ἰησοῦ* appears not to have received the attention it deserves. By examining Paul's self-understanding throughout the epistle, and pertinent data in the secondary literature on the Roman *triumphus*, during which prized captives of war were proudly paraded as the victor's trophy, this article argues that Paul describes himself in Philippians 3:12c as Christ's captive trophy slave. The merits of the proposal, including how it rebutted the arguments of Paul's opponents and how it helps elucidate the link between Philippians 3 and the rest of the epistle, are also discussed.

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<sup>1</sup> The views expressed herein are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the beliefs of the South African Theological Seminary.

## 1. Introduction

### 1.1. The problem

The challenges posed to the interpretation of Philippians 3:12, which in the NRSV reads, 'Not that I have already obtained this or have already reached the goal; but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own', are well known. They basically emanate from the ambiguities created by Paul's use of extensive paronomasia and punning on the Greek words of this three-part sentence. As eloquently put by Fee, the style results in the apostle saying 'some things in unusual ways which are very difficult to transfer into English (it's like trying to tell a joke in a second language' (1999:153; cf. Watson 1988:57–88).

These interpretive problems may be categorized into grammatical, conceptual, and theological ones.<sup>2</sup> Since the theological problem is dependent on the resolution of the grammatical and conceptual questions, its full discussion is not immediately germane to the present enquiry. Nevertheless, for completeness and to summarize, the theological problem relates to whether *τετελείωμαι*, a Pauline *hapax legomenon*, means

- (a) moral/spiritual perfection (so, NIV; KJV; ESV; AMP; NASB), thus feeding into the theological debate as to whether Paul deemed this type of 'perfection' to be achievable in this life and, if so, what was the specific socio-historical background to the disclaimer,<sup>3</sup> or,

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<sup>2</sup> The textual problem is directly related to the grammar, for details of which see O'Brien (1991:417–418).

<sup>3</sup> A number of interpreters who opt for this view further argue that Paul aimed *τετελείωμαι* at rebutting a Gnosticizing Judaism among his opponents in Philippi (e.g.

(b) is it an expression of the goal, end, or purpose of Christian maturation (so TNIV; NRSV)?<sup>4</sup>

The grammatical problems, on the other hand, derive from Paul's word play on the related verbs, ἔλαβον, καταλάβω, and κατελήμφθην, and are in three areas:

Firstly, the transitive verb ἔλαβον (to take and make a thing one's own, to obtain or attain), lacks an object, and raises the question as to whether what Paul had in mind was his ambition to 'know' or 'gain' Christ, which he expresses in the previous section of the chapter (3:7–11), or alternatively, the 'prize of the heavenly call' which he subsequently refers to in the following section (3:13–14).

Secondly, ἔλαβον in 3:12a is compounded into καταλάβω in 3:12b, thus introducing an element of active force or aggression in the manner in which Paul strives to obtain or overtake the object, whatever this object is taken to be. This idea of active seizure of an object is then reintroduced in 3:12c, but this time, it is turned passive into κατελήμφθην, thus placing Paul at the receiving end of Christ's equally forceful and aggressive action.<sup>5</sup>

Thirdly, the preposition ἐφ' ᾧ, which introduces 3:12c, may be translated either as a causal 'because', thus making 3:12c the reason or motivation behind Paul's expressed ambition in 3:12b (so, Fee

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Forestell 1956:123–136; Koester 1962:317–332; MacArthur 2001:242; O'Brien 1991:423; Watson 1988:75).

<sup>4</sup> Interpreters who opt for this more likely view stress the complex word play in the passage and how 3:15 definitely indicates the idea of maturity in growth rather than spiritual perfection (e.g. Fee 1999:154; 1995:344; Martin 1987:160; Pfitzner 1967:139)

<sup>5</sup> The idea of force or violence routinely accompanies the use of κατελήμφθην in the NT, e.g. in Mark 9:18; John 8:3–4; 12:35; 1 Thess 5:4.

1999:153; 1995:346 n.31; O'Brien 1991:425), or, as 'that for which', thus making 3:12c the immediate purpose of Paul's stated ambition in 3:12b (so, DeSilva 1994:49; Fitzmyer 1993:330).

As is often the case with exegetical conundrums like these, the key to the solution lies in ascertaining the controlling ideas in the verse and its surrounding passages. With regard to these ideas, interpreters generally agree that the verse serves as a disclaiming correction to prevent misinterpretation of the ambitions expressed in the preceding 3:7–11. However, this unanimity has not prevented disagreement on some of the details. The conceptual disagreements are in two areas:

Firstly, how much weight should be given to the fact that structurally, 3:12 is repeated by 3:13–14? In terms of structure, each of the two statements in 3:12–14 are made up of three clauses. In each, a negative disclaimer (i.e. that Paul has not yet achieved his goal) is followed by a positive statement pertaining to what Paul is doing to achieve that ambition, and then finishes with a third clause stating the motivation or purpose that drives this action towards the goal. If, as it appears evident, and most commentators agree (cf. Fee 1999:152; O'Brien 1991:418–419; Thurston and Ryan 2009:129), Paul meant the two statements in 3:12–14 to parallel each other, then the third clause of each statement should be considered as analogous. In that case, in what way should the idea of 'winning a prize' (clearly stated in 3:14) influence how 3:12c is interpreted? At least, this is the sense in which Paul uses the verb *καταλάβητε* in 1 Corinthians 9:24.

Secondly, is the governing imagery of 3:12 the commercial metaphor of gaining or owning something, which dominates the preceding section in

3:4–11,<sup>6</sup> or the athletic metaphor of racing to win a prize, which dominates the subsequent section of 3:13–14?<sup>7</sup> It is sometimes argued that Paul's use of διώκω in 3:12b and 3:14a definitely indicates a dominant athletic imagery in pursuit of a goal in 3:12 (e.g. Dupont 1970:180; Martin 2002:163; Thurston and Ryan 2009:126). But this interpretation is by no means certain, for διώκω also conveys the ideas of hunting down, striving, wrestling, or fighting to gain something. As rightly put by Pfitzner, the double occurrence of διώκω in 3:12b and 3:14a does 'not justify the conclusion that the [athletic] metaphor begins already in verse 12' (1967:139; cf. Caird 1976:141). Moreover, the ownership imagery is not completely lost in 3:11, but rather, it is reintroduced with κατελιηφέναι in 3:13a. These uncertainties heighten the ambiguities in 3:12, and make it impossible to categorically choose between the two candidate metaphors of ownership or prize winning at an athletic race, as its controlling imagery.

Put together, these problems illustrate the fact that Philippians 3:12 is a transitional verse, serving as a grammatical and conceptual turning-point, hinging the ideas of 3:4–11 and 3:13–14 together. Therefore, the ambiguities in 3:12 may have been deliberately aimed to serve Paul's rhetorical intentions. Accordingly, the best interpretations are those which retain these ambiguities by preserving the ideas of ownership, with a nuance of the aggressive manner through which this ownership is acquired (combined with the imagery of an athletic race and prize winning) which make this verse the suited turning point of Paul's argument. In addition, such interpretations must explain how 3:12 fits in the argumentative flow of the chapter, and the whole epistle.

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<sup>6</sup> Interpreters who believe the commercial metaphor continues in the verse include O'Brien 1991:422 and Hooker 2000:526–527.

<sup>7</sup> Interpreters, who believe the athletic imagery is the dominating metaphor, include Thurston and Ryan(2009:126), Watson (1988:75) and Martin (2002:163).

Since 3:12c provides the motivation or purpose for 3:12ab, it is also likely that a key step in addressing the problem is to identify the most suitable idea conveyed by κατελήμφθην in 3:12c. To put the problem in a more succinct manner, what is the best way of interpreting κατελήμφθην ὑπὸ Χριστοῦ Ἰησοῦ in 3:12c, so that the ambiguities of the verse are retained while, at the same time, unveiling its full rhetorical import?

## 1.2. Interpretations of κατελήμφθην ὑπὸ Χριστοῦ Ἰησοῦ

The wide semantic range<sup>8</sup> of κατελήμφθην has led to at least four different interpretations of 3:12c, some interpreters opting for more than one. These are: (a) overtaken by Christ, (b) understood by Christ, (c) taken or laid hold on by Christ, and (d) arrested or apprehended by Christ.

### 1.2.1. Overtaken by Christ

One group of interpreters opt for translating κατελήμφθην ὑπὸ Χριστοῦ Ἰησοῦ as *overtaken by Christ Jesus* (e.g. McReynolds 1990:715). In this approach, 3:12 is deemed to reiterate Paul's desire in 3:4–11 to imitate his Lord in his death and resurrection while, at the same time, starting the athletic metaphor, which becomes more prominent in the subsequent verses. So, according to this view in 3:12, Paul protests that he had not yet attained the ideal of imitating Christ. But, in a probably playful expression of his ambitions, he states that he presses on in this pursuit with the desire to *overtake* Christ [or the ideal set by Christ] towards 'the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus' (3:12–14).

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<sup>8</sup>Louw and Nida list ten different semantic meanings (1989).

The obvious advantage of this approach is that the athletic metaphor is retained, and the whole verse could be seen as setting forth the idea that Christ's achievements serve as the energizing motivation and standard of the Christian life.

However, there are at least two fatal flaws in this approach. Firstly, it completely removes the idea of ownership from 3:12, and so loses the deliberate ambiguity of the verse. Secondly, and more seriously, this interpretation introduces the unlikely scenario in which Christ Jesus is regarded as a fellow competitor with whom Paul competes in the race.

It is true that in its parallel in 1 Corinthians 9:24–26, Paul draws on the competitiveness of the foot race as a motivation for the believer to 'run in such a way that you may win it' (1 Cor 9:24). However, even if Paul sought to repeat this idea of competitiveness in Philippians 3, there is nevertheless no indication in the passage that Christ is a fellow competitor.<sup>9</sup> Rather, Christ is set forth as the channel through whom God issues the irresistible call from heaven toward which Paul is pulled to run (3:14). The best that can be said of Christ and the race in Philippians 3 then is that, if anything at all, he 'co-runs' or collaborates with Paul, rather than competes with the apostle (cf. Wiersbe 2001:88).

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<sup>9</sup> Interpreters who take Philippians 3:9 as expressing a 'faith *of* Christ' (e.g. Thurston and Ryan 2009:124) subjective genitive doctrine instead of the more likely objective genitive 'faith *in* Christ', may well also regard Jesus as Paul's fellow competitor in 3:12. I am, however, yet to encounter any argument in contemporary scholarship pursuing the interpretation of 3:12c in that direction. For a discussion of the role of Phil 3:9 in the *pistou Christou* debate, see O'Brien (1991:398–400) and Matlock (2007:173–203).

### 1.2.2. Understood by Christ

A second group of interpreters render κατελήμφθην ὑπὸ Χριστοῦ Ἰησοῦ as *understood* or *comprehended by Christ Jesus* (e.g. Hawthorne 1983:152; Moris:n.d.). So, the Wycliffe Translation reads, 'Not that now I have taken, or now am perfect; forsooth I follow, if on any manner I shall comprehend, in which thing also *I am comprehended of Christ Jesus.*'

There are sound grammatical bases for such a translation. For, κατελήμφθην may be legitimately translated as cognitive apprehension of a concept or idea. Moreover, in Job 5:13 (LXX), κατελήμφθην is used to describe God as outdoing, and so, subverting the wise in their craftiness. It is similarly used in Job 34:24 (LXX) to describe God as ὁ καταλαμβάνων ἀνεξιχνίαστα ἔνδοξα (the one who comprehends the incomprehensible). Thus, it may be justifiably argued that in Philippians 3:12, Paul restates his ambition to *know* Christ, which he outlined in 3:8–10 as the object towards which he strives. And in 3:12c, he cites the superlative degree to which Christ knows or comprehends him as the motivation for striving to achieve that goal.

A main difficulty with this approach, however, is that it makes knowledge or comprehension, *per se*, as the key purpose of Paul's Christian existence, rather than the knowledge *of* Christ. This would have undermined any attempt by Paul to rebut the arguments of his Gnosticizing opponents; if it is true that such a group existed in Philippi. Moreover, and as several interpreters have noted, Paul's emphasis on knowledge in Philippians 3 is based on the Old Testament concept of relational intimacy, and not cognitive apprehension (cf. Fee 1999:144; 1995:328–330; O'Brien 1991:401). Furthermore, the ideas of ownership and athletic prize winning in the surrounding passages are lost with this interpretation.



### 1.2.3. *Taken or laid hold on by Christ*

Most modern translations and commentaries render 3:12c as *taken or laid hold on by Christ* (e.g. NKJV; ASV; NASB; NIV; TNIV; YLT, NIV; HCSB). Some in this group make a number of nuanced variations. The Common English Bible, for example, translates 3:12c as '*Christ grabbed hold of me*', thus, hinting at the aggression in Christ's acquisition of Paul, even if the idea of ownership is understated. A few others state Christ's *de novo* ownership of Paul, without underlying the act by which the ownership is acquired, or the aggressiveness of the act. So, the New Living Translation, for example, renders 3:12c, '*Christ Jesus first possessed me*'.

Others combine the fact of the ownership with the act by which the ownership is obtained, even though the manner of acquisition explicitly lacks the aggressive force. So, for example, the NRSV renders 3:12c: '*Christ Jesus has made me his own*' (also, ESV; DBY; NCV). The Amplified Version emphasizes both the ownership and the manner, in which the acquisition is done, even though the aggression is still understated, thus, '*Christ Jesus has laid hold of me and made me His own*'.

The popularity of this approach is to some extent justified, especially in those translations which combine the ownership idea with the forceful manner in which Christ acquired ownership of Paul. As many commentators have observed, it is evident that, practically, what Paul had in mind in 3:12c was his conversion, at which Christ forcefully obtained him and made Paul his own (cf. Fee 1999:154; O'Brien 1991:425). No doubt, such an allusion to his conversion at this point of his autobiographical account of his Christian existence, would have rightly served as an enormous motivation to complete the race. The

'memory about one's beginnings in Christ can serve as the proper shot of adrenaline for the continuing race', so says Fee (1999:154).

All the same, what this approach lacks is the idea of prize winning, or of Paul as a trophy of Christ, which the structure of the passage indicates. The Good News Translation interestingly renders 3:12c as, '*Christ Jesus has already won me to himself*'. In so doing, the ownership and prize winning ideas are retained, but at the expense of not stating the aggressive manner by which Christ acquires the prize.

#### *1.2.4. Arrested or apprehended by Christ*

Typical of their literal approach to translation, the King James and Authorized versions render 3:12c as '*I am apprehended of Christ Jesus*'. This leaves the clause quite ambiguous, since the word 'apprehend' has several meanings and connotations. However, one of these meanings is 'to arrest' or 'to capture', which evidently underlines the aggression with which Christ acquires Paul. This interpretation certainly accords with how his conversion is narrated in Acts 9:1–19. On his way to 'hunt down' and arrest the Christians in Damascus, Christ Jesus intercepted, arrested, and took Paul captive. So, as put by O'Brien, 'the risen and exalted Lord Jesus had mightily arrested him and set his life in a new direction' (1991:425; cf. Fee 1999:154).

Thus, in this approach, Paul is understood to be describing his conversion as a miraculous intervention of Christ, in order to rebut the argument of the Judaizers and explain the motivation that energizes his Christian ambitions. He strives to grow towards the goal of his Christian calling, because of the inner compulsion of being arrested or captured by Jesus. Spurgeon's (1889) exposition of Philippians 3:12c is worth repeating at length, for its profoundly edifying value:

And almighty Grace arrested him! He fell to the earth at the first blow. He was blinded with the second. No, not so much by a blow as by the greatness of the light of God that shone round about him! And there he lay prostrate, broken in heart and blind in eyes—he had to be led into the city—and one of those poor men whom he had determined to haul to prison had to come and pray for him, that his eyes might be opened, that he might be baptized, and that he might thus make his confession of faith in Christ! He well says that he was “apprehended of Christ Jesus.” The King sent no sheriff’s officer to arrest him, but He came, Himself, and took him into divine custody, laid him by the heels for three days in the dark—and then let him out into glorious liberty, an altogether changed man—to go forth to preach that faith which before he had sought to destroy!

Clarke also combines the interpretation of *κατελήμφθην* in 3:12c as ‘apprehended’ or ‘arrested’, with the idea of athletic prize winning by commenting:

There is still an allusion here to the stadium, and exercises there: the apostle considers Christ as the *brabeus*, or judge in the games, who proclaimed the victor, and distributed the prizes; and he represents himself as being introduced by this very *brabeus*, or judge, into the contest; and this *brabeus* brought him in with the design to crown him, if he contended faithfully (2011).

In this otherwise helpful approach, Paul is ‘introduced’ by Christ; but, he is introduced as an athlete rather than as Christ’s prize. In other words, Christ is Paul’s coach, a not unlikely scenario, but far removed from the idea expressed by 3:12c. Moreover, the ownership idea is not accounted for by Clarke’s rendering.

All things considered, I favour the proposal that ‘arrest’ or ‘capture’, is the best rendering of *κατελήμφθην* in 3:12c, since it satisfies several of

the criteria set out in section 1.1 above. Crucially, Paul's consistent self-understanding as a prisoner *of* Christ in many of his letters<sup>10</sup> is a key factor that must be considered when interpreting any of his autobiographical accounts.

As several interpreters have pointed out (e.g. Houlden 1970:297; Mitton 1973:119; Wild 1984:284–298), Paul often used the self-description as Christ's prisoner with a double meaning. At one level, that designation is meant to indicate that he was in prison *for the sake of* Christ. Yet, on another level, Paul understood himself as specifically imprisoned *by* Christ. In other words, it is Christ who has bound him as his prisoner to serve his purposes. As he put it to the elders of Ephesus in Acts 20:22, 'as a *captive to the Spirit*, I am on my way to Jerusalem, not knowing what will happen to me there.' Thus, this self-understanding as a *captive of Christ* (and of the Spirit) served as a key motivation throughout his Christian life. It is therefore unsurprising that the idea should surface in his autobiographical account in Philippians 3, given that he wrote from prison.

On its own, however, the idea of Paul as a captive of Christ does not satisfy all the criteria for interpreting Philippians 3:12c. How does the ownership idea in the verse correlate with the captive metaphor? What of the idea of prize winning implied by the structure of the passage? Then also, in what specific way does the captive imagery relate to Paul's account of his Christian existence in Philippians 3 and his self-understanding in the whole epistle? A nuanced proposal is therefore needed.

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<sup>10</sup> For example, Ephesians 3:1; 4:1; 6:20; Philippians 1:7; 1:14–16; Colossians 4:3; 4:18; 2 Timothy 1:8–9; Philemon 1:1; 1:7–10; 1:13.

### 1.3. The Present Proposal: Paul the captive trophy slave

In what follows, I present a three stage argument, with supporting circumstantial evidence, to suggest that in Philippians 3:12c, Paul describes himself not just as a captured prisoner, but as a captured slave, who, by that virtue, is owned by Christ. And he is not just a captured slave, but specifically, a captive trophy slave, as if paraded by the triumphant Christ in the *Circus Maximus* during a Roman triumph, at which military successes were commemorated with athletic races. It is the pride with which Christ dotes on his captive trophy slave Paul in 3:12c, as well as the force of the capture, I propose, which energizes the apostle to race for the goal of completing his Christian race.<sup>11</sup>

The argument will proceed in the following fashion. Firstly, it will be demonstrated that, when Paul first introduces himself and Timothy at the beginning of the epistle in Phil 1:1 as δοῦλοι Χριστοῦ Ἰησοῦ (*slaves of Christ Jesus*), this was not just as a titular designation, but a functional description of his self-understanding as a slave of Christ. And, further, that this functional self-understanding is repeated and implied throughout the epistle.

Secondly, it will be argued that, specifically in Philippians 3:4–14, Paul sought to show that his Christian existence imitated 'the story of Christ', who in Philippians 2:6–11 is noted to have emptied himself to take on the status of a slave. Paul also, in 3:4–14, after counting his pre-Christian status and achievements as σκύβαλα, dung (or refuse),

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<sup>11</sup>Before proceeding to lay out the argument, it is personally satisfying to report that after establishing my findings, I located a contemporary but partial support for my proposal in how the Bible in Basic English Translation renders Philippians 3:12c, namely, '*that for which I was made the servant of Christ Jesus*'. This of course underscores the idea of ownership, and specifically, slavery, in the verse; but it does not satisfy all the criteria. It is nevertheless quite close to the present proposal.

became, like Christ, a slave; but a slave owned also by Christ. And just as in Philippians 2:6–11, God exalted Jesus to the highest place; Paul in Philippians 3 runs the race to receive the prize of God's call. The following suggestion will be made: in the context of the epistle, Paul is not just owned by Christ; but, by the triumphant and enthroned Christ (2:9–11), who therefore regards Paul as his captive trophy slave.

Lastly, secondary historical evidence will be presented to show that before and after the time of Paul, it was the common practice for triumphant military generals and emperors to parade their trophy captives as slaves during the Roman *triumphus*, which was sometimes marked with athletic celebrations in the *Circus Maximus*. In conclusion, then, it is this which is alluded to in Philippians 3:12c.

## 2. Paul as Slave of Christ in Philippians

A key component of the self-understanding of Paul in his letter to the Philippians is his self-regard as a 'slave of Christ'. This is evident on several levels, namely, (a) by his self-designation in Philippians 1:1, (b) by describing other Christian workers in Philippians with slavery terminology and idioms, (c) by using the slavery terminologies and ideas for himself, outside Philippians 3, and crucially, (d) by using slavery terminology and idioms of Christ.

### 2.1. Paul and Timothy as Slaves of Christ in Philippians 1:1

As it is with all his letters, Paul begins Philippians with a salutation in which he describes himself with a particular designation. The self-designation of Philippians 1:1 is, however, unique among his letters in a number of ways. It is the only one of Paul's epistles in which he

designates *both* himself and a colleague, Timothy,<sup>12</sup> as δοῦλοι Χριστοῦ Ἰησοῦ (*slaves of Christ Jesus*).

Paul designates himself as *a slave of Christ* as part of his salutations in Romans 1:1 and Titus 1:1. Yet, in both Romans and Titus, the slave of Christ self-designation applies to Paul alone, and is set in apposition to a further self-designation as *an apostle of Jesus Christ*. It is only in Philippians 1:1 that the *slave of Christ* self-designation stands on its own without the apostolic qualification and, further, includes Timothy along with Paul.

It is true that, elsewhere in the contents of his letters, Paul refers to other members of his team as 'slaves of Christ' (e.g. Epaphras Col 1:7; 4:12 and Tychicus Col 4:7). But Philippians 1:1 is unique in that it is the only self-designation which describes Paul and a colleague as δοῦλοι Χριστοῦ Ἰησοῦ. What is the significance of this uniqueness for interpreting the epistle to the Philippians? For, as many interpreters have pointed out, that in each of the salutations of his letters, Paul 'adapts his descriptions of himself and his credentials to the circumstances of each letter' (O'Brien 1991:44; cf. Asumang 2009:5; Esler 2003:271; Glad 1995:2; Hodge 2005:270–288; Keay 2005:151–155).

Regarding this question, a number of interpreters (e.g. Dunn 1988:57; Martin 1987:57; Ollrog 1979:184 n.108; Sass 1941:24–32) have insisted that Paul's use of the δοῦλοι Χριστοῦ Ἰησοῦ designation was largely based on the Jewish and Old Testament idea of servant of

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<sup>12</sup> Timothy is introduced along with Paul in six letters, namely, 2 Corinthians 1:1; Colossians 1:1; Philippians 1:1; 1 Thessalonians 1:1; 2 Thessalonians 1:1, and Philippians 1:1. The suggestion that in Philippians, Timothy functioned as amanuensis of Paul rather than co-writer (cf. Fee 1999:40; O'Brien 1991:44) as in Colossians may well be correct, since in the body of the letter, Paul refers only to himself as writing.

God,<sup>13</sup> rather than in the Greco-Roman functional sense of being owned by and serving as a slave of Jesus. In the Jewish sense, *slave of Christ* is understood to be a title of honour which, in the case of Philippians 1:1, would have served to underscore the honour and dignity of Timothy and Paul. Thus, the self-designation is taken to be a substitute for apostleship in which Paul's self-understanding was presented in the mould of the Old Testament prophets.

Evidently, this interpretation is not impossible in situations in which Paul's authority was at stake, (e.g. Gal 1:10). However, can the same be said of Philippians, in which Paul's authority *per se* was never an issue? On the contrary, in Philippians, whenever he expresses his relationship with the readers (as he frequently does throughout the epistle), Paul underscores his equality with them. No doubt, he presses them to act in certain moral ways and seeks to persuade them to adopt specific Christ honouring attitudes. But, these appeals to his first readers were based, not so much on his apostolic authority, as on his exemplary attitude, and the mutual affection, friendship,<sup>14</sup> and collegiality he shared with them (e.g. 1:7, 27, 2:2, 12, 16–17, 3:1, 15–17, 4:1, 8–9). Indeed, it is striking that the word ἀπόστολον (apostle or delegate, 2:25) is used only once in the letter, and that to describe the emissary function of Epaphroditus.

Therefore, the proposal that the '*slaves of Christ*' designation in Philippians 1:1 underlines Paul's apostolic authority is not convincing. Moreover, how does the Old Testament explanation of the designation apply to Timothy, who, though admittedly well known to the Philippians, had not encountered any problems of authority in Philippi?

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<sup>13</sup>Examples of such Old Testament usages are: Moses (Ex 14:31; Num 12:7; Neh 10:29; Ps 105:26), Joshua (24:29), David (Ps 89:20), Jeremiah (Jer 25:4), Daniel (Dan 9:6, 10) and Jonah (2 Kgs 14:25).

<sup>14</sup> For a review of Philippians as a letter of friendship, see Fee (1999:12–17).



It is for this (and other) reasons that the majority of interpreters in recent decades have rejected the purely Jewish interpretation of Pauline use of the slave of Christ designation in his letters (e.g. Bockmuehl 1997:50–51; Cassidy 2001; Fee 1995; Fowl 2005:16–17; Martin 1990; Wansink 1996). That designation, they argue, is significantly related to the Greco-Roman understanding of the slavery idea. This is especially so in letters addressed to predominantly Gentile churches, such as Philippians.

So, as expressed by Barrett who, although believes that Paul originally derived the idea from the Old Testament 'Servant of Yahweh' concept, nevertheless remarks, 'Something more is involved when the Apostle uses the phrase slave of Christ Jesus ... by it, Paul acknowledges his total submission to the will of Christ' (1971:50; cf. Martin 1990:32). In that case, Paul's self-understanding in the whole of Philippians is significantly influenced by a functional rendering of the designation in Philippians 1:1 of being a slave of Christ. This should be reflected in the interpretation of 3:12c.

## 2.2. Christian workers in Philippians as slaves of Christ

Another key reason why the *slaves of Christ* designation in Philippians 1:1 should influence the construction of Paul's self-understanding in Philippians 3:21c, is that in Philippians, the primary defining characteristic of Christian workers is service, in the manner in which slaves could be described as serving their master. So, in Philippians 2:22 for example, Timothy is described as, 'like a son with a father he has ἐδούλευσεν (literally translated, *he has slaved*) with me in the work of the gospel'. Epaphroditus is similarly described as a fellow worker who risked his life while making up for 'those *services* that you could not give me' (2:30).

In Philippians 4:3, Paul appeals to γνήσιεσὺζυγε, (i.e. legitimate yoke-fellow), most probably another itinerant Christian co-worker in Philippi, to help restore the relationship between two women Christian leaders. The characterization of this itinerant worker is evidently meant to underline the collegiality between him and Paul. But, it is no accident that Paul's specific choice of words for this person was as *yoke-fellow*. By implication, this Christian worker served shoulder-to-shoulder with Paul under the common *yoke* of Christ. The idea of slavery is not too far from this description.

Then also, in Philippians 4:3, Euodia and Syntyche (the women Christian leaders in question), along with Clement, are described as συνεργῶν (i.e. co-labourer or co-worker). Thus, Christian workers in Philippians are routinely depicted with slavery terminologies and idioms. This should have significance in how one would interpret Philippians 3:12c.

### 2.3. Paul as slave of Christ in Philippians 1, 2, and 4

This portrayal of Christian workers in Philippians also applies to Paul himself, outside of Philippians 3. On three occasions in Philippians 1, Paul reminds the Philippians of his chains (e.g. 1:7, 14, and 16). While this description does not explicitly relate to the *slaves of Christ* self-designation, it is linked and inseparable from the idea of slavery. The degradation, humiliation and shame of Paul's imprisonment, most likely in the company of many real slaves, would have made being a prisoner *of Christ* and a slave *of Christ* practically indistinguishable, both to Paul himself, and his first readers (MaGee 2008:338–353; cf. Fowl 2005:17). 'Roman law regarded a captured Roman as a slave, though the right of *postliminium* enabled him to recover citizenship retrospectively on his

return; if he died in captivity, however, he died a slave' (Fitzgerald 2000:90).

As already noted, in 2:22, Paul described his own work along with Timothy's as ἐδούλευσεν (slaving). This was after he had indicated, in 2:16, that his ministry involved ἐκοπίασα (i.e. labouring in a strenuous manner), a kind of description which would fit a slave. Paul's transmission of greetings from Christians in τῆς Καίσαρος οἰκίας (i.e. in the household of Caesar) at the end of the letter in Philippians 4:22, is another reminder of the functionality of the *slaves of Christ* idea. Many of the Christians of Caesar's household were slaves, as the list of some of the members in the church(es) of Rome<sup>15</sup> in Romans chapter 16 indicates (Brown 2001:723–737; Stowers 1994:76). It is not an exaggeration then to state that, in Philippians, the correct description of all Christian workers, in both title and function, and Paul included, is as *slaves of Christ*.<sup>16</sup>

## 2.4. Christ as a slave in Philippians 2

There is another key reason why the *slaves of Christ* designation in Philippians 1:1 should considerably affect how Paul's self-understanding in Philippians 3:12c is constructed. In Philippians 2:7, Paul designates Jesus also as δούλου (slave), thus putting Paul's self-

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<sup>15</sup> It has been estimated that by the end of the first century BC, 30–40 per cent of the population of Italy were slaves (Fitzgerald 2000:3). This proportion was the same in Rome itself and replicated in key provinces such as Philippi with very close Roman connections (see the chart in Oakes [2001:50] and the discussion in Kyrtatas [1987:45–46]). For a discussion on the 'Romanness' of first century Philippi as distinct from the other colonies in the Eastern Empire, see Hendrix (1992, vol. 5:315) and Levick (1967:161).

<sup>16</sup> Perhaps Paul's use of language of the 'body' in 1:20 and 3:21, and the 'abasement' described in 4:12 echo the slave allusions of the epistle.

understanding as a slave in significant perspective. Indeed, Perkins (1991:93–98) has argued that the Christ hymn of Philippians 2:6–11 serves as a governing metaphor for the whole epistle, making the slave idea one of the epistle's prominent features.

Even though Perkins overstates her case; the likely 'shock' to the Philippian readers of characterizing Jesus as slave would suggest that there is some merit in regarding the hymn as important for understanding the epistle. Certainly, and according to O'Brien, the emphasis on Christ's obedience as a slave is 'paradigmatic' for how Christian existence is portrayed in Philippians (1991:272–273; cf. Bloomquist 1993:164–165). It is not at all surprising, then, that Christian workers in Philippians (and Paul himself) should likewise be described as slaves.

As it is with the *slaves of Christ* title in Philippians 1:1, interpreters have debated whether the predominant background of the metaphor of Jesus as slave in Philippians 2:7 is, in the Jewish sense, derived from the 'Servant of Yahweh' idea in Isaiah (so, Fredriksen 2002:235–260; Kasemann 1980:5) or in the Greco-Roman sense (so, Byron 2003:164; Combes 1998:77–86; Fee 1999:95; O'Brien 1991:218–224). But such a choice is a false one. For, while the theological underpinnings of the slavery idea in Philippians 2:6–11 is in tandem with Isaiah chapter 53, the point Paul stresses in Philippians chapter 2, was Jesus' function as a metaphorical slave, namely, he 'emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death—even death on the cross' (Phil 2:7–8).

Moreover, Hellerman (2005) has convincingly shown that the Christ story of Philippians 2:6–11 was carefully designed by Paul to portray Jesus descending through the Roman social stratification of *corsus*

*pudorum* (course of ignominies). Paul's use of the slave metaphor for Jesus, therefore, was not merely designed to be in line with the Old Testament idea of Jesus as the Servant of Yahweh. More than that, it underscored it in the social and functional terms that the first Philippian readers, who were mostly Gentiles, would have understood it.

It is proposed that it is this consistently functional description in Philippians, of the incarnation of God in Christ as descent into slavery, and of Paul and his fellow co-workers as slaves of Christ, which the apostle employs in Philippians chapter 3. This is the focus of the next segment.

### **3. Paul as Slave of Christ in Philippians 3:4–14**

If throughout the epistle, Paul presents Christian workers as slaves of Christ, and Christ himself as slave of God, then we should not be surprised that in Philippians 3, he again expresses his self-understanding as a slave of Christ. This self-understanding is presented in 3:4–14 in three ways, namely, (a) by the manner in which Paul parallels his own Christian existence in 3:4–14 with Christ's kenotic story of 2:6–11, (b) by Paul's use of expressions in 3:4–14 describing himself as owned by Christ, and in the manner in which a slave could be said to be owned by his master, and (c) by Paul's description of himself in 3:12c as Christ's captive trophy slave.

#### **3.1. Paul's imitation of Christ in Philippians 3:4–14 and slavery**

Recent scholarship has rightly rejected the partition theory of Philippians and accepted that the letter was written and sent as one

integral unit,<sup>17</sup> for two reasons. Firstly, the key problem of Philippians 3:1 has now been convincingly explained based on the nature of friendship letters of the time (cf. Reed 1996:63–90). Secondly, many interpreters have identified interconnecting themes between Philippians 3 and the rest of the epistle, thus severely undermining the grounds for the partitioning theory (cf. Black, 1995:16–49; Bockmuehl 1995:57–88; Fowl 2005:12; Marchal 2006:18–19; Oakes 2001:141).

One such crossover of verbal and conceptual links between Philippians chapter 3 and the rest of the letter is the similarities between Paul's autobiographical account of his Christian existence (Phil 3:4–14), and 'the kenotic story of Christ' (Phil 2:6–11). Paul devotes Philippians 3 to give an account of his Christian existence with the dual rhetorical strategy of rebutting his opponents' arguments,<sup>18</sup> and, at the same time, encouraging his readers to imitate how he imitated Christ; the rebuttal serving as an excellent foil for achieving the latter aim (DeSilva 1995:52–53). As several interpreters have pointed out (e.g. Fee 1999:136; Hawthorne 1996:163–179; Kurz 1985:103–126), this autobiographical account is framed along the lines of the four-part movement of Jesus' kenotic story in 2:6–11.<sup>19</sup> In addition, Paul employs key resonating terminologies that represent him as imitating the kenosis of Christ.

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<sup>17</sup>For a recent analysis of the questions of the integrity of Philippians, see Thurston and Ryan (2009:34) and Reed (1996:63–90).

<sup>18</sup>Williams (2002:54–60) discusses eighteen different possible candidates for the identity of these opponents.

<sup>19</sup>It is more common for the movements of the *Carmen Christi* to be described as three, namely, self-emptying—obedience—exaltation. But this, in my view, fails to emphasize the pre-incarnation exalted status before the self-emptying as a crucial stage. For reviews of scholarship on the *Carmen Christi*, see Martin (1983) and MacLeod (2001:437–450).

The 'story of Christ' in Philippians 2:6–11 is narrated in four movements, namely, (a) the elevated status of Christ as being in the form of God is underlined in 2:6, followed by (b) Christ's voluntary self-emptying to become a slave in 2:7, then (c) Christ's obedience to death on the cross, at the time, a typical slave death (cf. Fitzgerald 2000:37; Hellerman 2003a:429; Hengel, 1977:62; O'Brien 1991:230), in 2:8, and then (d) Christ's resurrection and exaltation by God in 2:9–11.

<b>Christ (2:6–11)</b>		<b>Paul (3:4–14)</b>
High status as God (2:6)	↔	High status and achievement (3:4–6)
Self-emptying to become a slave (2:7)	↔	Self-emptying by counting all things as 'dung' (3:7–9)
Obedience unto slave's death (2:8)	↔	Desire for conformity to Christ's death (3:10–12)
Exaltation by God (2:9–11)	↔	Ambition to win prize from God (3:12–14)

*Table 1: Paul's Imitation of Christ in Philippians 3:4–14*

As shown in table 1, Paul's autobiographical account in Philippians 3:4–14 follows a similar and corresponding four movement pattern, namely, (a) Paul's elevated status and achievements are summarized with the seven accolades in 3:4–6, followed by (b) Paul's voluntary self-emptying of his high status and achievements, counting these as σκύβαλα (rubbish, refuse, dung) in 3:7–9, followed by (c) Paul's expression of his desire to be conformed to Christ, in his death and resurrection in 3:10–12, and then (d) Paul's expression of his ambition

to persist in this drive till he receives his prized exaltation from God in 3:12–14.<sup>20</sup>

It is clear from the above parallels that in Philippians chapter 3, Paul saw his current Christian existence at a similar stage as that of the story of Christ before exaltation: the stage of humility, self-abasement, obedience, and indeed, σκύβαλα (rubbish, refuse, or dung). Roman slaves in antiquity were routinely labelled as 'refuse', *katharma* in the colloquial Latin (Hopkins 1993:21). Paul's reckoning of his pre-Christian status and achievements as σκύβαλα would, therefore, have resonated well with his readers who were familiar with this characterization of slavery.

Furthermore, when he expresses his ambition in 3:8–11, his desire was to be conformed to Christ's death which he had previously stressed, was a 'death on a cross' (2:8). This undoubtedly underlined the slavery connotations. It is interesting to note the undeniable link between crucifixion and slavery in those times; the phrase *servile supplicium* (i.e. slaves' punishment) actually became the technical term for crucifixion, whether of slaves or the free. So, Sceledrus, a Roman slave character in one of Plautus' comedies, for example, immortalized this association with the words, 'I know the cross will be my tomb. There's where my ancestors rest—father, grandfather, great-grandfather, and great-great-grandfather' (Plautus, *Miles Gloriosus* 372). The slave of Christ idea is, therefore, not too far from the surface in Paul's expression of his desire to be conformed to Christ in life and death.

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<sup>20</sup> A number of interpreters have also found contrasting points between Christ's exaltation in 2:9–11 and the contemporary imperial cult of Philippi, as well as the description of the new citizenship of believers with the soon to appear Saviour in 3:20–21 (e.g. Oakes 2005:301–322; Perkins 1991).



The parallels between Paul's story (3:4–14), and that of Christ (2:6–11) go beyond the correspondences between the four stage movements to include direct verbal echoes. So, just as Jesus did not ἡγήσατο (count, 2:6) his equality with God something to exploit, so also Paul, on three occasions, ἡγημαί (counted, 3:7, 8) his high status and achievement as lost. Evidently, Paul's stress on his self-emptying in 3:7–11 is meant to correspond to Christ's post self-emptying status as slave (cf. Dalton 1979:100; DeSilva 1995:40; Garland, 1985: 157–159).

Accordingly, when Paul alludes to his conversion on the road to Damascus (3:12c), and he describes it as the point from which Christ forcefully captured and enslaved him. For people became slaves in the Greco-Roman context in one of three ways, namely, born to a slave parent, enslavement for the sake of a financial debt,<sup>21</sup> or through capture (cf. Combes 1998:30; Wiedemann 1987:22).

### 3.2. Paul is owned by Christ in Philippians 3:4–14

Another indication used by Paul to underline his post self-emptying status as a slave of Christ, is the manner in which he underscores in the passage that he was owned by Christ. A key characteristic of the Greco-Roman slave was that he was the property of his or her master (Combes 1998:24; Fitzgerald 2000:23–31; Philips 1985:6). As Aristotle pointed out, the slave is 'part of the master—he is, as it were, a part of his body, alive yet separated from it' (*Politics* 1255b). It is also for this reason

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<sup>21</sup> It is not impossible that the idea that Paul became Christ's slave through purchase would also faintly resonate in the passage, given the commercial language of 'profit', 'loss' and 'worth' used in 3:7–11. However, such a commercial interpretation of Paul's enslavement to Christ would diminish the stress on the aggressive manner of acquisition of Paul as Christ's slave in 3:12c.

that the slave was regarded as an extension, and the agent of the power and will of the master (Fitzgerald 200:13).

In that regard, Paul's description of himself as owned by Christ in 3:4–14 must be taken as reflecting his self-understanding as the slave of Christ. So, when he calls Jesus, Χριστοῦ Ἰησοῦ τοῦ κυρίου μου (*Christ Jesus my Lord*, 3:8), this is an explicit statement of his enslavement to Christ. As many interpreters have pointed out, this is the only place in all the Pauline letters in which the apostle uses the singular personal pronoun *my Lord*, to express his relationship with Christ (O'Brien 1991:389; Thurston and Ryan 2009:128). His preferred rendition is the plural, *our Lord*, which he uses on sixty occasions. Paul seeing himself as Christ's personal slave in Philippians 3:4–14 is, therefore, extremely important. As put by Fee, concerning the phrase 'my Lord', Paul's conversion, 'transformed the former persecutor of the church into Christ's *love slave* whose lifelong ambition is to know him in return' (1999:144, emphases added).

The language of 'knowing' and 'gaining' Christ (3:8–10), though not a natural expression of his enslavement to Jesus, is nevertheless indirectly related to that idea. This is especially so since they are used in close proximity to Paul's expression of being owned by Christ (cf. Black 1995:41; DeSilva 1995:42; Fee 1999:144). The expression indicates Paul's desire for a deep filial intimacy with Christ comparable to that between a father and his son.

In the context of the Paul-Christ relationship, this is of profound significance. The master-slave relationship in the Greco-Roman household was characterized by a fictive kinship which, by virtue of its flexibility and potential for continued development, was sometimes more intimate than the father-son relationship in the same household. The latter was not infrequently bedevilled with father-son rivalries,

jealousies, and other hostile emotions (cf. Fitzgerald 2000:78–80; Petterson 1982:19).

It is not that such negative emotions, and worse, did not exist in the master-slave relationship. They did. However, given the power that the master exerted over the slave, the tensions were usually much more controlled. The master-slave fictive kinship relationship, therefore, tended to be much more dynamic and characterised by continued development (Fitzgerald 2000:80).<sup>22</sup> Accordingly, and in the context of the 'slave of Christ' idea, the filial intimacy that Paul expresses in his desire to 'know' Christ should be seen in the positive manner that it represents, and therefore, should influence the interpretation of 3:12c.

### 3.3. Paul as captive trophy slave of Christ in Philippians 3:12c

When Paul comes to the point in his autobiographical account where he wished to state a disclaimer and declare his ambition to achieve the goal of his calling in 3:12–14, he has already established in the preceding verses that he is Christ's slave. Yet, in his desire to also present his autobiography in imitation of Christ, he needed to set forth his goals to achieve the prize, in parallel with the case of the triumphant Christ in the previous chapter. In consonant also with his strategy of rebutting the claims of his opponents, Paul wished to state that the achievement of the prize was not a matter that can be gained by 'confidence in the flesh' (3:3). The achievement was dependent on the power of Christ that worked in him.

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<sup>22</sup> It will constitute a profound anachronistic misinterpretation for Greco-Roman slavery, as represented in the New Testament, to be read through the prism of the recent chattel slavery of Africans to the Americas, especially with regard to the conditions of household slaves of the first century. See Combes 1998 and Byron 2003 for discussions of the implications of the differences.

The best way to represent these truths was to describe himself as Christ's captive trophy slave (3:12c). The idea of himself as Christ's trophy naturally follows not from just being owned by Christ, but also, that he was captured by the resurrected, triumphant, and exalted Christ (2:9–11). This presentation of himself as a captive trophy slave of Christ met his rhetorical requirements, and at the same time, underlined the basic theological fact that the power which drove him was from Christ, his master.

The question which now confronts us is this: what is the possible socio-historical background of the link between the athletic prize winning idea, and the metaphor of capture by the triumphant Christ to become his slave?

#### **4. Roman Triumph, the Circus, and Philippians 3:12c**

It is possible that in 3:12–14, the apostle transitioned from describing himself as a captive trophy slave in 3:12c, to an athlete in 3:13, without seeking to directly link the two metaphors. If so, that would not be a departure from the apostle's literary style. An example of this is Philippians 2:15–17; Paul transitions from a cosmological metaphor of stars, to the artificial light metaphor of torchlight, to the athletic metaphor of running, the menial metaphor of hard labour, ending with the cultic metaphors of sacrifice and libation, all in three verses.<sup>23</sup> This not uncommon Pauline literary phenomenon of the mixing of metaphors cautions against the temptation to seek to draw out his images in 3:12–14 into an extensive narrative.

In the present context, it suffices to observe that if Paul did not have a particular narrative in mind in 3:12–14, the present proposal is not in

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<sup>23</sup> For a recent analysis of Paul's use of metaphors, see Collins 2008.

any way weakened. The movement from a captive trophy slave metaphor in 3:12c, to an athletic arena in 3:13–14, would not be a strange departure from the apostle's literary style.

Even so, it will be at least interesting, and more likely, would have enhanced the rhetorical import of Paul's language in 3:12–14 to his first readers if a socio-historical precedent existed, in which the public presentation of a captive trophy slave coincided with an athletic event. Such a precedent would make sense of Paul's transition from 3:12c to 3:13, reflect the intermediary nature of 3:12, and so underscore the seamlessness and rhetorical effectiveness of his autobiographical account.

In that case, the ceremonies of *The Roman Triumph* would most likely have provided such a socio-historical precedent for Paul's transition in 3:12c to 3:13. The institution of the Roman triumph, 'the most famous procession in the Greco-Roman world' (Duff 1992:63), was routinely organized in Rome, apparently<sup>24</sup> from as far back as the time of Romulus (when the city was founded in 753 BC) until the fourth century AD. The triumph was celebrated in commemoration of a victory by a Roman general or emperor in foreign lands. And it served as a way of enhancing the status of the general or emperor, as well as uniting the people behind their warriors, while displaying Rome's culture (Beacham 1999; Beard 2009; Ramsay 1875: 1163–1167; Scullard 1969:213–218; Versnel 1970; Warren 1970:49–66).

The triumph consisted of a procession through the streets of Rome by the victorious general or emperor accompanied by pomp and pageantry to commemorate the conquest. The victorious general rode in a chariot,

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<sup>24</sup> Classicists are divided on the question of when the first triumph was held, for details of the argument of which, see Beard 2009:45–53.

wearing regalia that signified divine and king-like qualities. In front of him, and sometimes behind the carriage, would be a throng of his prized booty; captives, vanquished kings, generals, and slaves, some of whom would subsequently be executed, and others imprisoned or enslaved (cf. Beard 2009:107–125). The procession was followed by public sacrifices, festivals, and banquets throughout the city.

While not a permanent feature of all triumphs, for the scale of the celebrations was dependent on the degree and significance of the victory, some of the triumphs were accompanied by days of athletic games in the Circus Maximus of Rome. So, Titus Livy, for example, describes the games which formed part of Tarquin's triumph following the capture of Apiola during the war of Latini (*Livy* I.35). These games included chariot and horse racing, foot races, and wrestling. In some cases, the captured prisoners of war featured as athletes of the games (Beard 2009:264; Mommsen 1864–79:42–57).

The link between the *Ludi Romani*, the athletic games, and the triumph procession is, according to Versnel, 'the only facet of the triumph on which there is nearly full agreement' among classical historians (1970:3).<sup>25</sup> This is not surprising, since the games in the *Circus Maximus* were regarded as an entertainment for the gods, or representations and re-enactments of the victories of the battle (cf. Versel 1970:267 n.1).

If Paul was familiar with the Roman triumph, and 1 Corinthians 4:9 indicates that he was, then there is adequate circumstantial precedent to explain why Paul, writing from prison, may have transitioned from describing himself as Christ's captive trophy slave (3:12c), to

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<sup>25</sup> But see his argument in 1970:110–114 that the two did not necessarily originate together.

describing himself as an athlete in a race to win a prize (3:13). The military associations of Philippi would have made such an allusion quite resonant with the first readers (cf. Hellerman 2003b:327–328).

## Conclusion

The ambiguities in Philippians 3:12, it has been argued, are most likely deliberate and designed to achieve the maximum rhetorical strategy of setting forth Paul's case in his polemics against his opponents, whilst at the same time, encouraging his friends in Philippi to imitate his imitation of Christ. That being so, it was proposed that in Philippians 3:12c, Paul presents himself as Christ's captive trophy slave.

The argument was based on the grammar and concepts in the verse, the apostle's self-understanding as a slave of Christ in the whole epistle, the manner in which he portrays Christian workers in the epistle as slaves, and his presentation of Christ also as slave, with whom he parallels his autobiography in Philippians 3:4–14. This proposal also has the advantage of explaining how 3:12c belongs to both the preceding 3:4–12, which is conceptually dominated by the idea of ownership, and the subsequent 3:12–14, which is dominated by the athletic imagery. The socio-historical precedent for this proposal, it has been argued, is the Roman triumph which was sometimes celebrated with athletic games.

In terms of the relevance of the proposal for contemporary Christian praxis, the apostle's representation of enslavement to Christ as a defining characteristic of the Christian worker has immense significance for the construction of the functional self-image of Christian workers today. The increasingly common label, 'servant of Christ (or of God)', should be understood as going beyond an honorific description. More than that, it implies total submission to Christ as

Lord, and practical, strenuous, and humble hard labour on behalf of his people.

On the other hand, the same description draws on the immense power which emanates from the Lord, and which works through his 'slaves' as his agents to achieve his purposes. The pride with which Christ dotes on believers as his trophy slaves must certainly be an energizing motivation towards continued spiritual growth and fruitful labour.

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