Philemon: A Transformation of Social Orders

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Abstract

The central claim of this research is that the gospel has the capacity to transform the relationships between powerbrokers and the disenfranchised. It engages Philemon's history of interpretation from the early church to the present day, underlining how a society's understanding of slavery is inextricably linked to the ever-shifting events in front of the text. To interrogate the main thesis claim, an exegetical and theological inquiry of *Philemon* is undertaken through a combined analytic of social identity complexity and social-scientific criticism. After critically correlating the Graeco-Roman milieu with the Southern African context, via the auspices of a derived etic, the exegetical and theological findings are appropriated in the relationships between Christian employers and Christian domestic workers, heralding a transformation of social orders in Southern African households and society.

1. Introduction

Paul's letter to Philemon moves the intended reader, or hearer, from implied conflict to possible resolution (Achtemeier 1990, 16–17). This it does

by applying deliberative rhetoric to a fractured master-slave relationship (de Silva 2012, 106; Jordaan and Nolte, 2010). Deliberative rhetoric is a type of literature that compels the recipient, or reader, to decisive action (Arist. *Rhet* 1358a36 ff). In Philemon, this type of rhetoric explicates the salvific brokerage of grace to humanity (Brookins 2015; Dunn 1996, 299). In a world where the privileged were a minority that wielded much power, influence, and resources, social hierarchy and disparity were inevitable norms (Malina 1993, 28–60). Paul's rhetorical masterpiece (Witherington 2007, 6) speaks into this reality, advocating for a new symbolic universe where masters and slaves are potentially transformed into social equals through this eschatological therapeutic epistolary narrative (Jordaan and Nolte 2010; Lyons Sr 2006, 125; Lohse 1971, 188).

1.1 Early Christianity and the Haustafeln

The first-century growth of Christianity affected both the cultic and social tapestry of Asia Minor. As churches were established in households (cf. Rom 16:5; 1 Cor 1:16; 11:34, 14:35; 1 Tim 3:4–5; 2 Tim 1:16, 4:19; Tit 1:11) they came into contact with the *Haustafeln*, social orders with ancient roots in the Graeco-Roman world (Towner 1993, 417). A cursory reading of Paul demonstrates that the church in Philemon's household (Phlm 2b), was most probably governed within the parameters of such social orders. In this unit of social interaction, *Philemon* illuminates the social dynamics between a household head (*paterfamilias*) and one of his many slaves (δοῦλοι) in vivid vogue underscoring the nexuses between the orders of the state and those in the home.

Philemon[1] informs one of a particular instance, where social convention within a house church, and the institution of slavery in

1 I differentiate the person of Philemon from the letter by italicizing the latter.

the Graeco-Roman world collide dramatically, heralding the potential transformation of social orders through the reconciliatory force of the gospel (Wright 1986, 170)—and quite possibly the manumission of the enslaved (Barth and Blanke 2000, 1; Hamm 2013, 29–30).

1.2 The complexity of slavery in the Graeco-Roman world

Graeco-Roman slavery was widespread, multifaceted, and complex (Moo 2008, 371–372; Fergusion 2003, 59–61; Bartchy 1992, 66). The complexity of this order is seen in Harrill (2000, 1124) who says, "Slavery is remarkably the only case in the extant corpus of the Roman law in which the law of nations and the law of nature are in conflict." To understand slavery in *Philemon*, it is imperative that the tension between widespread slavery and the uniqueness of domestic slavery be appreciated (Barth and Blanke 2000, 9). Furthermore, slavery was not a function of racial prejudice (Barth and Blanke 2000, 4), but one of war, pirate kidnappings, birth, the giving of oneself into the institution, and debt bondage (Bartchy 1992, 66–67; Melick Jr 1991, 341).

It is, therefore, acknowledged that for the most part, a modern understanding of slavery departs mainly from the transatlantic slave trade of the seventeenth to nineteenth centuries, and not the classical slavery of the ancient world (Callahan 2012, 143). Admittedly, this has led to a measure of anachronistic interpretations when dealing with texts such as Philemon (Moo 2008, 371). It is, therefore, imperative that a bifurcation between the seventeenth- to nineteenth-century slave trade, and slavery in the Graeco-Roman society be established to aid a sincere exegetical enterprise. Chief among the reasons motivating such distinction is the legality of slavery in the ancient world (Saarinen 2008, 200).

2. Interpreting Philemon Across the Ages

Since the Patristic Age, interpretations of *Philemon* have traversed several watershed moments inclusive of canonization, the Reformation, *Aufklärung*, the history of religions, abolitionist inquiries, social-based readings, and ideological criticism.

In the Patristic Age, matters of canonization dominated discussions in which this Pauline letter was considered. Added to these debates was the polarizing acrimony between the Alexandrian and Antiochene schools; even though one may argue for less of a sharp dichotomy. During this time, *Philemon* did little to champion the cause of the disenfranchised. On this, Decock (2010, 3155–3156) provides context by saying, "the ultimate aim of reading the biblical text was not to obtain factual information, but to ensure that the readers would be moved and guided in their commitment to God." While matters of the letter's brevity, its perceived lack of doctrinal exposition, and its literary form, received due attention in the Patristic Age, an anti-enthusiastic attitude prevailed and was preserved by prominent figures such as Chrysostom and Jerome. During this period, *Philemon* did not serve as a clarion call to the transformation of social orders but was itself the subject of scrutiny up until the advent of the canon.

In the Middle Ages there was a multiplication of Bible reading methods together with Bible reading locations. Regarding the former, *Quadriga*, *postilla*, and *glossa ordinaria* came into the hermeneutical fray influencing the rise of scholasticism and the development of civic society. Regarding the latter, the Bible became the main literary feature in cathedral schools, medieval universities and in monasteries. Concerning the interpretation of *Philemon* during this period, two figures emerge: Lanfranc of Bec and Thomas Aquinas. Aquinas's redefinition of slavery within a feudal context is a feat demonstrating the aptitude of the man.

Nevertheless, concerning this project's first subsidiary question, Aquinas appears ambivalent as he propagates an interpretation of slavery anchored in patristic tendencies to moralize. This he does from the premise that ascribes the cause of slavery to the fall (following Augustine). While Aquinas recognizes the humanity of the servus, he is not motivated to read *Philemon* with an emancipatory leaning or in light of the transformation of social orders. In fact, he sees the usefulness of the institution and does not view it as opposing the natural order of creation. From both Lanfranc and Aquinas, one detects a nuanced interpretation of *Philemon*, typical of the age, arguably demonstrating how theological emphases are a product of one's socio-cultural conditioning.

During the Reformation, seeds that were planted during the Renaissance mushroomed into giant baobabs as the worlds of art, technology, the humanities, and science converged driven by the fall of Constantinople and the spirit of '*ad fontes*!' In the world of theology, Luther and Calvin were arguably the most prominent figures to deal with the biblical text conditioned by a historical-grammatical interpretive system. Regarding *Philemon*, one detects dichotomy in how both reformers dealt with the thorny issue of faith. On one hand, they both used the master-slave relationship as a paradigmatic metaphor for the relationship between God and the Christian, thereby inadvertently (or otherwise) legitimizing the institution of slavery. On the other hand, they employed the "two-kingdoms" approach that effectively gave credence to the moral and other worldly, and not society's orders per se. Thus, the Reformation serves as a monument to biting irony, where reformers fought to free people of faith from the excesses of Rome, yet the methodology employed fell shy of relegating slavery to the immoral—and rather embraced its ontological description of God and the Christian.

In the Classical and Modern Ages, *Philemon* was read in varying ways. For instance, the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries saw source material, juristic attention, and the continuation of the Reformation tenet of *sola Scriptura* all influencing the epistle's interpretation. With the rise of historical critical approaches in the centuries that followed, *Philemon* was read through lenses of suspicion, giving rise to new questions of authorship and occasion. However, on the matter of slavery, the spirit of the age was very much on display as imperial and industrialization forces drove the demand for cheap labor that led to a dehumanizing slave trade. Here, thousands of Africans were transported across the Atlantic to serve as laborers on plantations of sugar cane and cotton. *Philemon's* role in this industry was double-edged, to affirm and to abolish slavery, depending on the interpreter's location and relationship to the broader narrative. These types of readings brought about texts such as the *Negro Bible* where the canon was doctored to suit the economic and power intentions of the slave owners. Beyond the nineteenth century, this Pauline epistle was subject to various twentieth-century approaches ranging from the apocalyptic to the anthropological and social. Through these approaches the twentieth century experienced volatile upheaval affecting the way in which the epistle was appreciated. Arguably, this underscores that one's social location is a major factor in *how* one interprets the biblical text.

3. Investigating Philemon's Context and Occasion

Drawing from the letter's multiple addressees (Phlm 1–2, 23–24), Philemon was identified as the principal recipient, while Apphia, Archippus, and the church in Philemon's home were treated as secondary addressees. Secondly, the letter's historical context was investigated under three foci, namely: the ancient household, Graeco-Roman slavery, and first-century

social stratification. The section on the ancient household sought to locate *Philemon* in its *Sitz im Leben*, the rationale being that kinship vocabulary weighs heavily on interpretive agendas linked to the letter (Phlm 1, 2, 7, 10, 16, 20). Furthermore, with the ancient household being a microcosm of the empire, investigating household structures and relationships under a treatment of the *Haustafeln* was a major focus area (Towner 1993, 417; Westfall 2016, 13). The discussion on slavery underscored the complexity and diversity of the institution. Routes into slavery, statistics on slavery, and the relationships between masters and slaves were expounded to provide social background to the letter. What was demonstrated is that, although *Philemon* does not give clear voice to first-century societal realities, it is incumbent for an interpreter to grasp that which is not spelled out since such realities do influence the reading of the letter. Thirdly, launching from the premise that economics is not limited to the monetary, elements of social stratification were highlighted. The social mapping of the first-century Graeco-Roman world was discussed, leading to identification of Philemon's possible location on the poverty scale. Fourthly, a discussion on the letter's occasion covering the four dominant hypotheses was developed. The ADT,[2] EH,[3] and SH,[4] were found to be wanting in contrast to the traditional RSH.[5]

2 *Amicus Domini* Theory. This theory was first proposed by Peter Lampe in his 1985 article "Sklavenflucht" des Onesimus. *ZNW*. 76:135–137. According to this theory, Onesimus was not a social delinquent but a slave who had misunderstanding with his master. Knowing of Paul's relationship with Philemon, he approached the apostle for mediation. A secondary theory which categorizes Onesimus as an *erro* (a roaming slave) was motivated by Peter Arzt-Grabner in his 2001 work The Case of Onesimos: An Interpretation of Paul's Letter to Philemon Based on Documentary Papyri and Ostraca. *ASE*. 18(2):589–614.

Although Paul and his contemporaries did not consider slavery a moral issue, but simply the way things got done (Wright 2013, 32), this disposition did not condone the objectification and abuse of slaves. While Graeco-Roman distinctives, vis-à-vis slavery, are key to understanding Paul's world and worldview, the realities of brutality and debilitating dehumanization should not evade an interpreter's grasp. Yes, first-century Graeco-Roman slavery was not premised on racial prejudice. Yet, the spirit of this mode of slavery did grant impetus and justification to contemporaneous and later forms of dehumanization, and these conditioned various populations across the centuries. Thus, the reasoning that completely dissociates the morality of slavery from a later ethic can only hold when *Philemon*, and contemporary literature, is treated in callous historical isolation. With that said, it remains paramount to apply

3 Emissary Hypothesis. Proposed by John Knox in his 1935 [1959] monograph *Philemon among the Letters of Paul: A New View of Its Place and Importance*. revised ed. University of Chicago Press: Chicago. It was later championed by Sara C. Winter in her 1987 article titled 'Paul's Letter to Philemon'. *New Testament Studies*. 33(1):1–15. The hypothesis posits that Onesimus was sent to the imprisoned apostle by the house church in the Lycus valley. The slave then overstayed his visit and this created tension between Paul and Philemon.

4 Sibling Hypothesis. Made popular by the work of Allen Dwight Callahan who in 1993 published Paul's Epistle to Philemon: Toward an alternative argumentum. *Harvard Theological Review*. 86(4):357–376, in 1997 published *Embassy of Onesimus: The Letter of Paul to Philemon*. Trinity Press International: Valley Forge, and in 1998 published Slave Resistance in Classical Antiquity. Semeia. 83/84:133–152. The central cog of this hypothesis is that Onesimus and Philemon were biological brothers who had fallen-out due to something unspecified. The hypothesis assumes that Onesimus's mother was a slave and Philemon's mother was the previous *materfamilias* of the household. According to the hypothesis, Paul writes to Philemon to mediate between the (step-)brothers.

5 Runaway Slave Hypothesis. This is the traditional hypothesis. It posits that Onesimus was a runaway (*fugitivus*) who, prior to escaping, had stolen from his master, Philemon, or sabotaged some of his enterprises.

appropriate sequencing and weighting to any background related to first-century slavery since a responsible handling of the subject is less about dichotomies and binaries and more about nuance, hybrids, and hints.

4. Inductive Analyses of Philemon

This chapter demonstrated that the twenty-five verses known as *Philemon* are laden with relational complexity, cues to social transformation, and a fair share of ambiguity. Having identified this letter as a piece of deliberative rhetoric, the conventions that govern this type of literature were explicated. Paul's use of *pathos*, *logos*, and *ethos* was also identified and elucidated to inform the intention and occasion of the letter (cf. Arist. Rhet 1356a1–5). After demonstrating Paul's dependence on this rhetorical form, the methodologies of social-scientific criticism (SSC) and social identity complexity (SIC) were given fuller explanation. A translation of the text accompanied by textual notes was proffered before an exegetical and theological analysis of *Philemon* was undertaken. We found that while Paul did mimic deliberative rhetoric in the writing of his letter, this was not the only approach used to persuade Philemon to receive Onesimus back as if he were Paul himself (Phlm 17). Paronomasia, anaphora, chiasmus, and simple repetition were additional tools employed to successfully deliver the apostle's appeal.

Through the analytics of SSC and SIC, Paul, Philemon, and Onesimus's nested social identities were investigated. SSC was used to lay bare the cultural influences upon the text and its intersection with the central theoretical claim of the project which is: an exegetical and theological examination of *Philemon* indicates that the gospel transforms the relationship between power brokers and the disenfranchised. Social identity complexity was also used to show the interaction of identities

within the development of the narrative—in Philemon's home, and in the gospel-transformed society. Just like the discussions involving SSC, SIC attended to the central theoretical argument by evaluating and mapping the manifold identities in interaction within the letter. Finally, a triangulated map showing the relationships between Paul, Philemon, and Onesimus was drawn. Central to this representation were the figures of God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ (Phlm 3), demonstrating that transformed identities in the new society are anchored in the divine persons.

Following the exegetical analysis, four theological themes were collated for synthesis. These were redemption, reconciliation, brotherhood, and God and human dignity. All four were treated against the backdrop of the anthropological, cosmic, and eschatological elements of the gospel. A holistic appreciation of the gospel's influence was motivated showing that the transformation of Onesimus's identity was a catalyst to the transformation of social orders both in the *paterfamilias's* home and in the ἐκκλησία (church).

As a Bible interpreter reading *Philemon* from the Global South, specifically Southern Africa, I found that the implications of the exegesis and theological analysis are far reaching. I synthesized these implications under four headings relative to the project's discussion trajectories.

4.1 Implications for community

The first implication relates to community, in Philemon's home, in Christian groups across the ages, and in contemporary Southern Africa. Here, the role of the gospel-centric community as an accountability structure—one of the many public courts of reputation that police behavior in the letter—is discernible and translatable. Since all the actors in *Philemon* belong to the new society, there exists a shared ethos that defines and regulates

behavior among them. Strikingly, Paul invokes the community's witness to settle a relational dispute, demonstrating that in the church, disputes can negatively affect communities if handled unwisely. Furthermore, the democratic nature of the appeal where a slave and a *paterfamilias* are put on public 'trial' through the public reading of the letter demonstrates that in the church there should be no hierarchy that absolves the privileged and powerful from ethical scrutiny, as defined by the gospel. Both the slave and the *paterfamilias* are 'judged' by the same gospel, the same apostle, and the very same public courts of reputation underscoring the latent equity in the church of Jesus Christ.

From a Global South perspective, such implications are counter-cultural to the dominant ethos where social privilege and ethical absolution are indiscriminately awarded to persons who occupy positions of power and influence. Arguably, this has led to a spike in poor governance and maladministration in Southern Africa, evidenced in questionable church practices that champion unethical and bizarre forms of worship (See Banda 2019, 1–11). Associated with this is the rise in non-biblical and toxic prophetic claims that enslave the undiscerning, the desperate, and vulnerable (See Banda 2018, 55–69). Arguably, one could correlate this sad reality to impotent public courts of reputation that have done little to curtail gospel-deviant behavior while awarding honor to personality-based forms of leadership.

The community, as presented in *Philemon*, is neither static nor powerless. It is an arbiter, sentinel, and gatekeeper of gospel ethos. It follows, therefore, that for the church in Southern Africa to embody what Paul delineates as community functions, a decentralization of honor from the few who are enfranchised by gender and power will have to ensue to accommodate the participation of community members akin to Onesimus.

4.2 Implications of metanarrative

The second implication relates to the identity forming metanarrative of the gospel. Although unspoken and superficially referenced in *Philemon* (cf. Phlm 13), the metanarrative of God's redemption through the gracious self-sacrifice of his Son forms a central pillar that holds the super structure of the ἐκκλησία in *Philemon*. One may even argue that reading the letter without a deliberate and deep familiarity with this phenomenon is to enter the interpretive process with an irreversible handicap that relegates one to the bunkers of secondary strands of meaning, to the detriment of Paul's central appeal. Read through the triad of Paul–Philemon–Onesimus, the metanarrative of the gospel exudes different tones, all of which conglomerate into a mosaic of inestimable and irresistible diversity. Observable in this mosaic is the fact that both Philemon and Onesimus are grafted into the community of God's people in the Lycus valley, in the first-century Mediterranean world, and across all time and cultures. This phenomenal positioning of the slave in continuity with Israel, the church in history, and the church in the present and the future, is not just a measure of the slave's transformation on an identity level, but also a pointer to the universality and impact of the gospel's metanarrative on his person and milieu—even stretching beyond his epoch, culture, and status. Effectively, the gospel's metanarrative fundamentally affects the slave's origins narrative. Whether Onesimus was kidnapped into slavery, born into slavery, conquered into slavery, or sold into slavery, his 'origins narrative' is rendered near-obsolete through the gospel's impact on his station and person. Onesimus is transformed. No longer is the slave's identity regulated by the dehumanizing routes into slavery. Rather, like Paul's entry into Christ followership, which was marked by a post-natal encounter with the Christ (Acts 9:1–19), Onesimus's encounter with an imprisoned Paul marks his

naissance and entry into an irreversible reality where the slave is regarded as ἀδελφὸν ἀγαπητόν (beloved brother).

While *Philemon* speaks to an occasion in the first-century Mediterranean world, the application of its claims directly affects the Global South in varying measure. Arguably, the interface between the African metanarrative defined by *ubuntu*, finds both continuity and discontinuity when it encounters the gospel. Such complementarity calls for an appreciation of nuance in applying *Philemon* to the Majority world while underscoring the radical nature of the Christ event. It is this tension that Christians in the Majority world encounter when reading the epistle. Instead of rushing to resolve it, this project claims that appreciating the antinomy underscores the uniqueness of the gospel while critiquing Global South metanarratives that deviate from or try to augment the story of God's redemption.

4.3 Implications for power and privilege

The third implication relates to power and privilege. Evident in the exegetical and theological project was the deep influence of both phenomena. Both factors were seen in the social disparity between the three actors, a reality that was further complicated by the hybridity of their individual identities. Nevertheless, the gospel's reinterpretation of power, whereby weakness and servanthood stand as counter-cultural hallmarks in the new society, was embodied by Paul through his self-categorization as a prisoner and an old man (Phlm 9–10). By avoiding the moniker "apostle", Paul deliberately shows how power functions as a tool for service and not a chain of subjugation in the new society. Furthermore, the apostle's willingness to pay for Onesimus's debt demonstrates how power serves and reconciles estranged parties in the church (Phlm 17–19). Here, one notices a strong

correlation between the person of Paul and the person Christ as described in Philemon 2:5–11. Like Christ who adds humanity to his divinity—to serve humanity by dying on a cross—Paul adds imprisonment to his apostolic identity, becoming like a slave to reconcile a *paterfamilias* with a slave. Such a modelling of power shows how Christianity is defined by a radically distinct ethos, one whose ramifications challenge the hierarchical and minority-concentrated understanding of power and privilege, and which dominates the civic world and the church in the Global South.

4.4 Implications for mediation and reconciliation

The fourth implication has to do with mediation and reconciliation. Considered from the vantage point of the letter's occasion, these two factors frame part of the 'why' and the 'how' to *Philemon*. Though not elaborated on, Onesimus's separation from Philemon constitutes a divine and human impetus whose end is seen in mediation and probable reconciliation (Phlm 15–16). Paul's role as a mediator stands in continuity with that of Christ post-crucifixion ministry as High Priest (John 17; Heb 4:14–5:10, 7–8). The reconciliation that Paul garners for Onesimus and Philemon is at the apostle's expense (Phlm 18). Without Paul, Onesimus and Philemon would remain alienated; a very loud echo of Christ's reconciling work at the Cross where God and the deviant are brought back into relationship (Eph 2:11–22). From *Philemon*, mediation is underscored as a Christian ministry that mimics Christ's achievement. Like Matthew 5:9 (ESV) that predicts, "Blessed are peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God," mediating reconciliation is a gospel embedded identity that showcases belonging to the new society while transforming the social fabric between warring parties. Arguably, the work of the Truth and Reconciliation Committee, in South Africa, modelled the effectiveness of this principle. If the fruit of that

endeavor brought a deeply fractured nation to some semblance of healing,[6] it follows that a perpetual application of this principle in ecclesial and social settings, within the Global South, would accelerate the realization of the gospel as encapsulated in 1 Corinthians 12:12–13 and Galatians 3:28–29.

Since this researcher reads *Philemon* from the Global South —more specifically, Southern Africa—bridging the first-century world with twenty-first century Southern Africa is necessary. Here, the implications of the exegetical findings are considered within postcolonial milieu, with specific focus on the relationships between Christian employers and Christian domestic workers.

5. Incorporating Philemon in Southern Africa

5.1 Domestic work in postcolonial Southern Africa

Seldom has the suffix 'domestic worker' been attached to the line: "When I grow up, I want to be a …" While this may be the case, many enter domestic

6 The effectiveness of the Truth and Reconciliation Committee (TRC) is debated by some who view the present calls for decolonization as one of the inevitable consequences of the commission's limitations. This is captured by Shore (2009,141) who underlines the polarized views related to the commission's effectiveness by stating: "On the one hand, the commission stands as a monumental national success because it fostered a relatively peaceful transition from apartheid to democracy. On the other hand, the commission stands as a missed opportunity to mete out long-awaited justice in South Africa. For instance, the 'truth' component of the TRC has not yet yielded the promised socio-economic reparations. Moreover, some critics have charged that the authorisation of a Christian discourse of truth-telling actually impeded justice." While such claims are substantiated, absent from the critics' consideration is a clear elucidation of the radical nature of the gospel and its embodiment in Christ-followers (cf. 2 Cor 5:11–21). Therefore, while inherent weaknesses in the commission's methodology are notable, the fact that South Africa did not descend into full blown civil war after 1994 should partly be credited to the moral vision of the gospel and its embodiment in Archbishop Desmond Tutu and the TRC.

employment out of necessity and/or due to limited options and limited skills. In Southern Africa, there are a host of entry points into this industry, yet most remain connected to the imperial enterprise and/or situations related to it on a macro level. Quantitative evidence linking colonialism to domestic work in Southern Africa is superfluous because the pervasiveness of the industry within the Black African community renders it self-evident that the imperial project forms the foundation of the present-day sector (see Internationale Arbeitsorganisation 2013, 33). Furthermore, the evolution of the industry, vis-à-vis the rise of a Black Southern African middle class, betrays a continuity dependent on different actors who, while living in present day political freedom, now uphold historical social disparities by being passive beneficiaries of a business still shaped by colonial and apartheid paradigms.

From a high level of abstraction, the domestic worker industry is directly connected to regional geopolitical instability. With countries such as Zimbabwe, Mozambique, Malawi, Lesotho, and eSwatini performing badly on a plethora of international economic indices, the movement of their respective citizenry in search of better opportunities provides South Africa with cheap labor, even in the domestic space (African Development Bank 2019, 3). In this postcolonial/post-apartheid reality, struggling economies, poor governance, war, and institutional corruption can be equated with push factors displacing citizens from their respective countries to South Africa. Contrastingly, the relative strength of the South African economy, the ambiguity and ambivalence associated with the enforcement of immigration laws vis-à-vis low-skilled workers in South Africa (cf. Internationale Arbeitsorganisation 2013, 46–47), and the dependence of South African households on domestic labor could be regarded as pull factors. Here, the immigration status of domestic workers hailing from the

countries mentioned provides a point of contention, social dissonance, and social control which can be compared to Philemon's and Onesimus's experience in the first-century CE Mediterranean world.

The Southern African domestic industry is replete with tensions inclusive of xenophobia and competition (due to limited work). Facing limited work opportunities, low-skilled South Africans generally view foreigners with disdain, promulgating the narrative that these foreigners displace them from work opportunities.[7] It is this view that has led to several violent xenophobic attacks on foreigners living in high density areas in South Africa, over the last decade (Gordon 2018).[8] When viewed through the lens of 'illegal immigration,' the local low-skilled contingent (and those who share its ideology) weaponizes the status of undocumented foreign domestic workers by denying them access to legal recourse, union representation, health and police protection. This reality is alluded to by the ILO (2013, 46) which states:

> Domestic workers remain one of the least protected groups of workers under national labor legislation … [because] the labor legislation of a significant number of countries wholly or partly excludes domestic workers from its coverage, or that national laws

7 According to the African Development Bank (2019, 24–26), South Africa's unemployment stands at 26 percent. When this figure is juxtaposed with South Africa's measure on the Gini coefficient (65 to 70 percent) and the Palma ratio (6–6.5), South Africa records the highest measure of social inequality in the region. This disparity fuels a volatile situation characterised by intergroup tensions for people groups indigenous to South Africa and those who come from other countries within the region.

8 It is important to note that these xenophobic attacks were not limited to domestic workers but extended indiscriminately to all low skilled foreign workers in South Africa.

regulating domestic work provide for lower levels of protections than those available to other workers.

5.2 On deference and names

Associated with the factors mentioned, the behavioral disposition and the names given to domestic workers are areas worthy of discussion. Concerning deference, it is worthwhile drawing a distinction between a "performed submission" and genuine expressions of conviction. Griffin (2011, 92) captures this succinctly in stating, "The … domestic is most concerned with building and maintaining an image of herself as the diligent and subservient worker. This helps her to avoid confrontation and conflict, which could otherwise lead to dismissal." Based on this description, one notes how domestic workers (both foreign and local) inhabit multiple personalities while exuding deference to their employers. This deference expresses itself in excessive submission that works in tandem with an infantilized strategy. Typical of the latter, is the age insensitive use of names such as "boy" or "girl" for adults employed as domestic workers. Such monikers accomplish a couple of things. First, the domestic worker is removed from her place of honor and is controlled by 'anti-*ubuntu*' shaming that robs her of the dignity associated with her name and/or marital status. In calling a domestic worker "boy" or "girl" the employer effectively elevates utility as a point of transaction while subtly demanding submission from the domestic worker. Essentially, the one who names the other "boy" or "girl" holds all the power over the one who is named. Similar strategies aimed at inducing submission include calling the domestic worker by his/her first name, something that is taboo in *ubuntu*-shaped culture as it assumes a familiarity that is nowhere found in the family/communal structure. Customarily, a younger person refers to an older person as "Auntie," "Uncle," "Brother," or "Sister"

(followed by their name or surname).[9] Arguably, the deference used by domestic workers in Southern Africa is an embodiment of the intersection of historical and contemporary dehumanizing power paradigms, and through them the employee is rendered a perpetual dependent and infant (King 2007, 13–16).

Although age, kinship, and names function as powerful rhetorical motifs in Philemon (vv. 1–2, 7, 9–10, 16, 20), the comparison between the epistle's deference and that of the Southern African domestic worker does not easily equate. The key difference between the two is that, in *Philemon*, deference is not laced with a dehumanizing exploitative agenda characterized by the retention of a power hierarchy as is usually the case in Southern African domestic labor. While Paul does show some measure of deference towards Philemon (vv. 4–7; 17–18), he neither empties himself of apostolic authority, nor does he perpetuate a socio-religious subjugation of Onesimus. Instead, Paul's deference towards Philemon serves to challenge the *paterfamilias's* convictions without offending him. It is a deference with

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9 Some employers prefer being called by their first names. If the employer and domestic worker are addressing each other on first name bases, then that could be regarded as a retrieval of human dignity on the domestic worker's part—one in which employers abase themselves by ridding themselves of honorific titles such "'Madam," "Sir," and "Boss/Baas." While titles and names play a function, it would be naïve to adopt a reductionistic stance where names and titles are treated as the only matter needing address. Rather, a holistic approach in which the use of names is treated in tandem with a host of other strategies of subjugation that perpetuate the imposed hierarchy in the transactional relationship between employers and domestic workers, is necessary. Nevertheless, it is worth underlining that in Southern Africa, different cultures use different symbols and language to express respect. Thus, I propose that for the employer, part of retrieving the domestic worker's dignity may involve a deliberate, humble, and sincere journey into the culture of the employee, to learn the symbols of respect in that culture for the purpose of humanising the domestic worker in and beyond transactional experience.

a purpose, one enacted by a mediator and not a slave, a sharp difference from the abuses latent in parts of the Southern African domestic worker industry.

When compared to Paul's infantilizing of the slave Onesimus in Phlm 10a, παρακαλῶ σε περὶ τοῦ ἐμοῦ τέκνου (I appeal to you on behalf of my child), the Southern African domestic worker does not stand in linear continuity with the slave because Paul's use of ἐμου τέκνου (my child) is not informed by a subjugating strategy but by a newfound kinship. Thus, while Onesimus remains a child of Paul, he is not relegated to subjugation as is the case with many Southern African domestic workers who serve abusive employers. While some may contest this view based on Paul's use of τέκνον (child) in v. 10—arguing that υἱός (son) is more fitting to the argument based on the ambiguity of the legal status of a τέκνον—McKnight (2017, 86) refutes this ambiguity:

> More recent study of the papyri has conclusively shown that *teknon* [τέκνον] is not the term used for a slave as a "boy" or a slave as having non-legal manhood. Rather, when the non-legal standing of a male slave was in view the term *pais* [παῖς] was used. Hence, the term *teknon* [τέκνον] here describes Onesimus as a "spiritual son" or the "spiritual offspring" of Paul.

Based on the above, it becomes apparent that Paul does not infantilize Onesimus in a controlling way, even though the slave is neither heard from directly nor mentioned by name until v. 10 (see Tolmie 2019, 101–117). Instead, the apostle intercedes for the runaway slave while shielding him from the assault of the *paterfamilias*, as any responsible father would do for a vulnerable son. In mentioning Onesimus once, Paul limits focus on the wrongdoer while placating the offended party through a gospel-informed deliberative appeal. Thus, the infantilization of Onesimus and

that of abused Southern African domestic workers are not similar. They depart from different stations and are bound by divergent objectives. The former protects a slave from the wrath of a *paterfamilias* whereas the latter compounds a domestic worker's subservience to an abusive employer.
Having noted the difference between the two, there remains discursive convergence between Onesimus and the Southern African domestic worker. Paul's treatment of Onesimus as a "child" could be regarded as a prompt, cajoling Southern African employers to treat their domestic workers with dignity; dignity that is on par with the way they treat their own family members. Like Paul who does not make the slave's status the regulating social principle between Onesimus and Philemon, employers can retrieve and celebrate the dignity of their domestic workers by considering them fellow human beings as opposed to mere tools of utility. This may express itself in the names and titles chosen to address them. This project contends that monikers like "boy," "girl," and first names rob domestic workers of human dignity as they cut across the grain of *ubuntu* in a regressive way. I contend that this compounds the injustice faced by the domestic worker, by placing them at the intersection of two paradigms of power which are the historical colonial megastructure and the stratified socio-economic hierarchy that has emanated from the colonial project. The latter is acutely dependent on historical and contemporary racialized agendas that are entrenched in the very soul of the society, granting economic privilege and opportunities for upward social mobility to only a few (King 2007, 20).

Since the conditioning of names to fit a mold crafted by the colonial project is not unique to Southern Africa, the bridging point with the first-century CE world is made clear. Onesimus, like many domestic workers in our context, was named in the mold of the dual forces of power and profitability, as was shown in previous chapters. His name divorced

him from a social memory and a geographical location, and his ancestry rendered him nothing more than an animated tool. Likewise, a Southern African domestic worker who is named in the conventions of utility suffers a form of social death (Patterson 1982, sec. 1040 ff).

5.3 On clothing, family, and invisibility

Common across the Southern African domestic industry are uniforms worn by domestic workers when on duty. Although this garb is, to a degree, influenced by pragmatism, one cannot deny the colonial origins of the dress. It is, therefore, no surprise that the negative connotations associated with such dress inform social interactions in the typical Southern African home and in broader society. The uniforms in question comprise of a head covering and a dress with an apron, usually in the same bright color (Crous 2018). Ironically, the visual loudness of the domestic worker's uniform does not correlate with her social visibility in the typical Southern African home. Rather, an inverse reality in which the domestic worker is infantilized and muted pervades the context. Although physically removed, and relatively muted in conversation and social interaction, she remains visible as her uniform functions as a 'tracking device' alerting the employer of her whereabouts should greater output be required of her.

Most domestic workers, those who 'live-in,' those who migrate from elsewhere in the region, and those who migrate from rural to urban settings in the same country, have families of their own residing apart from them. While these women attend to other people's children, their own offspring receive limited attention from them, perpetuating a social ill whose effects is seen in the weakening of family solidarity for the disenfranchised. Often, the children of domestic workers are cared for by extended family. In such situations, the assurance of monetary support creates another layer of

transaction between the domestic worker and their family, in addition to the one that exists between the employer and the domestic worker. This triangulates the domestic worker's experience as follows: the domestic worker and her employer, the domestic worker and her child, and the domestic worker and her extended family. The psychological and social tensions that arise out of such triangulation, while not the primary focus of this project, have great impact on the domestic worker's utility and person, often leaving them with very little room to maneuver socially, as they are forced to go beyond the limits of what is humane for the sake of their children. Arguably, it is the domestic worker's child that suffers the negative forces of this triangulation, growing up without a parent (given that a considerable number of domestic workers are single parents and/or together with their partners leave their home countries to find work elsewhere). Thus, when invisibility is considered as a factor regulating a domestic worker's outputs and person, it is apparent that it is the unseen world of a domestic worker's dependents that directly contributes to her demeanor and utility in a context far removed.

5.4 On social inequality and remuneration

Based on both the Palma ratio and the Gini coefficient, South Africa—the strongest economy in the region—also boasts the highest levels of inequality. The entrenchment of this reality is underlined by the fact that Botswana and Namibia—the other stronger economies in the region—record coefficients of at least 60 per cent on the Gini index (cf. Oxfam International 2014, 38).

In November 2018, a national minimum wage of R3,500 per month ($230) was signed into law by the South African president (Reuters 2018) following an extensive consultation process with the National Minimum

Wage Panel (2016, 61–62). Although this move went through a lengthy discussion process, what was ratified falls short of the living wage of R5,000 per month ($330) set by the same panel (National Minimum Wage Panel 2016, 64–65). Alarmingly, domestic workers in South Africa are paid R2,500 per month on average, a figure that falls below the minimum wage and the proposed living wage. It follows, therefore, that to be a domestic worker in Southern Africa is to be poor and to be stationed at the disenfranchised pole of inequality.

When Onesimus and the Southern African domestic worker's earnings are correlated, there appears to be a similarity in the amounts both servants are awarded by their masters/employers. In Onesimus's context, this amount was so little and was often used to control a slave by drip feeding hope into an abyss of subjugation. Like the *peculium*, the Southern African domestic worker's income does not provide escape routes from poverty because the average income is considerably below both the minimum wage and the proposed living wage. Furthermore, each domestic worker has dependents and extended family that rely on her earnings for their basic survival. Thus, what is an extraordinarily small wage is rendered infinitesimal as it is divided up to meet the needs of immediate and extended family.

5.5 Domestic workers' social identity complexity

The infantilizing of the domestic worker in an abusive employer's home, when juxtaposed with the domestic worker's sacrifice, which involves leaving her children in the care of extended family, presents a complex distribution of power. Here, the domestic worker "becomes a child," accepts the taxonomy of "girl" (or "boy"), and endures outbursts of rage from their abusive employer, all for the sake of raising their children. Ally (2011, 2)

notes how these relationships are fused with contradiction, as violence and care cohabit in the interactions between employer and domestic worker. In such a context, the subservience of the domestic worker is tantamount to a relinquishing of matriarchal power, trading it for her children's survival. Ironically, this relinquishing of power for the sake of the children also involves a submission to another woman (employer) who often renders the domestic worker powerless through enforced behavior and controlled remuneration (Archer 2011, 67).

There is also the resocialization of the domestic worker to fit the conventions and expectations of the employer. Here, the domestic worker conforms and aligns her personality and convictions in a way that does not confront the proclivities of the employer, for fear of being reprimanded or dismissed. Added to this, the domestic worker sometimes adopts the political, social, and, at times, religious convictions of her employer, sacrificing previously held ideologies to ease her socialization into the employer's household. This strategy is often noticed by abusive White employers who treat Black African and/or Coloured domestic workers as a paragon of White enculturation, hailing any positive influence they have on the domestic worker as an antidote to Southern African social ills—communicated with an unhealthy dose of unabashed hubris. This is the White Savior Industrial Complex,[10] an offshoot of racism that promotes

10 The *White Saviour Industrial Complex*, also appearing as White Saviour Complex, was coined by the Nigerian-American author Teju Cole a novelist who won the 2012 PEN/Hemingway Award. The phrase appeared in its original form in a series of tweets that Cole (@tejucole) wrote in response to the uninformed activism and charity endeavours that followed Joseph Kony's and Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) 2012 terrorisation of the Ugandan populace in 2012. The LRA was responsible for abducting children and training them as child soldiers and exploiting them as sex slaves (see Lamb 2015).

the patronizing idea that people of color (POC) are perpetually in need of saving—a salvation that can only be enacted by a White person—as they (POC) do not have the necessary skill set and agency to save themselves (Schneider 2015, 8–9). Cole (2012) describes the White Savior Industrial Complex as "a valve for releasing the unbearable pressures that build in a system built on pillage," a fact that plays out in the enculturation of a domestic worker into Southern African White culture, ridding her of the fundamentals of her own cultural identity as she strives to function in the household of a White employer. Ironically, the notion of the domestic worker being regarded as paradigmatic of her ethnicity the more she enculturates into the employer's cultural matrix, is put into discursive dialogue with her active dissociation with individuals from her own people group. This creates an intra-group hierarchy where she occupies the top rung and functions as an arbiter against those who are not socially conditioned as she is. This vicious, toxic cycle dehumanizes and draws sharp new lines of injustice in already disenfranchised people groups. Sadly, many domestic workers draw a sense of comfort from this reality, appropriating the behavior of abusive employers in their own social circles and families.

The children of employers also influence the formation of the domestic worker's hybridized social identity. Unlike the previous factors that may remain static over time, the relationship between a Southern African domestic worker and their employer's children undergoes a dynamic transformation with the passage of time. Typically, in the children's infancy, the domestic worker often functions as a caregiver in some homes. When this is juxtaposed with the fact that many employers are middle-class mothers with full-time jobs, the role of the domestic worker is rendered invaluable in the nurturing of many middle-class infants and toddlers.

In their infancy through to their pre-pubescent years, the employer's children typically forge strong emotional bonds with the domestic worker, one that goes as far as the children learning words, values, and symbols from the domestic worker's own culture. The level of respect and trust awarded the domestic worker during this phase of the child's development is usually very high, regardless of the pressures and abuses she may face in other areas of her function in an exploitative employer's household. This reality is attested to by many White Southern Africans who recall the positive influence their domestic workers had on their pre-pubescent years. However, for many domestic workers, this bond suffers a disturbance that introduces a change in the relationship, as the children grow. In the case of exploitative homes, many children begin adopting the behavior of their parents, shedding the skin of innocence as they realize their place in the household. In some cases, the abusive employer even encourages her children to denigrate the domestic worker, following her example. Sadly, this severs pre-installed bonds of trust and respect, passing on the torch of injustice from one generation to another.

5.6 Christian domestic workers in the household and in the church

The nexus between the household and the church is underscored in *Philemon*, as proven by interchangeable nomenclature related to members belonging to both groups. From this overlap, it becomes difficult to discern where the ἐκκλησία and *domus* begin and end, respectively, as was shown in sections 3 and 4. These blended realities can also be seen in a typical Southern African home and church, where both employers and domestic workers assent to the lordship of Christ. It is for this reason that a shared faith between a domestic worker and an employer is not merely a matter of personal experience but a communal one, loaded with transformative

potential, as seen in the analogous reality in *Philemon*. While this claim is undergirded by Paul's argument in *Philemon*, the Southern African reality is rife with dissonance, as many employers compartmentalize their faith vis-à-vis their domestic workers, either remaining uninformed about the macro challenges faced by their workers, or perpetuating the injustices of old while claiming to be members of the new covenant community.

5.6.1 A gospel of salvation

When verse 10 of *Philemon* is read from a Southern African context, one may posit that Christian employers have a gospel-informed responsibility to be effective proclaimers and demonstrators of the gospel to their domestic workers. I suggest that this may entail explaining the metanarrative of God's redemptive plan in Christ and modelling it in daily living. It seems Paul's interaction with Onesimus was not just as an arbiter but also as a minister of the gospel that saves, which led to the transformation of Onesimus's identity. Christian employers may, therefore, make it a priority to expand their transactional relationships with their domestic workers to include clear, concerted, and sincere proclamations of the gospel and discipleship to those domestic workers outside of the Christian family.[11]

11 While this point flows from the contours of Paul's argument in *Philemon*, the activity proposed should not be heavy handed, neither should it be used as a performance indicator that may jeopardise a domestic worker's job security. Perhaps, creativity on the part of the Christian employer may help dispel a perception of a power axis. An employer could visit the domestic worker's home, or take the employee for a meal where such an activity could happen in a non-threating environment. While these are just suggestions, the point aims to show the nuance necessary to serve the disenfranchised with the gospel.

5.6.2 A gospel of forgiveness and reconciliation

In *Philemon* 17 and 18, Paul asks Philemon to charge Onesimus's outstanding debt to his account, after asking the *paterfamilias* to receive the slave as Paul himself. This Pauline injunction flows from the apostle's understanding of redemption, specifically the forgiveness of sin. Just as the criminalization of the slave served to maintain a hierarchy in the Graeco-Roman world, there is an analogous reality in which the Southern African domestic worker is criminalized in the psyche of an abusive employer, maintaining a social hierarchy of sorts. This often expresses itself in an excessive withholding of trust by the employer, a culture of blame where the domestic worker is lambasted for all that goes wrong within the home, and a culture of perfectionism where the domestic worker can never satisfy the employer's ever-shifting standards. While domestic workers are neither morally absolute nor perfect, the trajectory of Paul's argument in *Philemon* makes forgiveness and reconciliation hallmarks of social interaction within the new society. Straying from these standards, some Christian employers live a bifurcated life in which they hold a separate standard for the domestic worker (and those like her), and another for everyone else.

Since anthropological and ecclesiological dualism are not promoted by this project, church leaders may have a role to play in their preaching, where the plight of the Southern African domestic worker is mentioned in their teaching and preaching on the family. Like Apphia, Archippus, and the ἐκκλησία who function as part of a broader public court of reputation, church leaders and fellow community members may create a culture of mutual accountability where they provoke one another towards forgiveness and reconciliation. Christian domestic workers, like Onesimus, are full members of the Christian community and they deserve representation, advocacy, and agency, as demonstrated by Paul in *Philemon*.

Paul does not draw a line separating the affairs of the household from those of the church. Rather, he underlines a continuum between the two which allows him to reconcile the *paterfamilias* to the slave. The church in Southern Africa may benefit from doing likewise, and in doing so a new dimension of orthopraxy may result.

5.6.3 A gospel that elevates

In *Philemon* 16, Onesimus is named and introduced as a fully-fledged member of the new society. In one stroke of the pen, Paul recovers the slave's dignity and worth by calling him "a beloved brother." This elevation of status, although limited to the new society, creates a unique space in the Graeco-Roman milieu, where ontology is not primarily a function of utility but of union in the Messiah. It is important to note that in the letter, Onesimus is elevated to a place where he and Philemon stand on equal ground as brothers. While Philemon's journey in this realization may have been short, for Onesimus this was a voyage of great ontological transformation by the gospel. It is the implications of this epic journey, on the slave's part, that an underscoring of the Christian domestic worker's elevation should be based since she and Onesimus are both impacted by a multi-faceted gospel.

First, in recognizing the Christian domestic worker as kin, the Christian employer is faced with ethical and practical demands that traverse both the household and the church. Like Onesimus, the Christian domestic worker's primary social identity is with the community of faith, and other identities orbit around this marker. In this constellation, the home and the ἐκκλησία are placed on an elastic continuum in a manner consistent with the injunctions in passages such as 1 Timothy 3 and Titus 1:5–16. Thus, inherent in the elevation of the Christian domestic worker is

the potential for her to function as a full member of the household and, most importantly, as an agent of gospel ministration.

Second, elevation is both a function of ingroup status and the opportunities at one's disposal. Onesimus's welcome into the new society is layered since he functions as Paul's envoy and as a guest in Philemon's home (Phlm 12, 17). Here, the slave receives agency and authority to accompany his nested social identities. This multi-dimensional elevation is a potential cue for the Southern African domestic worker. Contextually, this may look like the Christian employer remunerating the Christian domestic worker at more than the living wage of R5, 000 per month. It may also entail an improvement of the Christian domestic worker's skill set. An example could be helping the Christian domestic worker with education. This is particularly important in South Africa where, historically, the education system was segregated along racial lines, a reality that was written into law through the Bantu Education Act of 1953. This act favored White South Africans, and compounded hierarchy and privilege based on a racist agenda. The effects of this act were not just localized to a single generation. Rather, it contributed to and maintained a system of privilege that Southern African domestic workers do not get easy access to, even in the post-apartheid era.

Another area that the Christian employer can be active in is in the impartation of financial skills ranging from basic budgets and savings, to opening retirement options and investment portfolios for the Christian domestic worker. However, instead of these being optional extras in their transactional relationship, I contend that these should be formalized by documentation inclusive of employment contracts, payslips, and skill improvement plans. Again, I contend, if the Christian employer expects and receives such in their work, the same expectation can be levied against them

for the sake of elevating the domestic worker. Additionally, if the access to good healthcare is a basic human right, I posit that part of the domestic worker's remuneration should serve as a premium to health insurance. It is therefore difficult to implement these proposals when one's starting point and frame of reference is an income below the minimum wage (R2,500). Although some may argue that the above is not important because they are already providing work to domestic workers, I would counter that the quality of work is also of great importance.

5.6.4 A gospel about the future

In *Philemon* 22, Paul signals his intention to visit Philemon upon his release from prison. This could be considered a quasi-apostolic parousia rich with imagery of Christ's second coming and final judgment. First, the ξενία (guest room) in v. 22 is not just a pragmatic piece of information transmitted to Philemon. Rather, its mention functions as a rhetorical goad, provoking Philemon to respond positively to Paul's letter, in the full awareness of the apostle's future visit. Secondly, the ξενία would have served as an ever-present sentinel, which may have tempered the *paterfamilias's* treatment of Onesimus in the interim period between the letter reading and Paul's arrival. When combined with the other public courts of reputation mentioned in the letter—the different persons in the house church and in the wider community—Paul seems to project a strong vision of the future in which Onesimus's transformation and participation in the new society is fully realized.

Read from a Southern African context, the reality of a domestic worker directly receiving representation from a broader organization can be seen in the auspices of the South African Domestic Service and Allied Workers Union and South African Domestic Workers Union. However,

since the Christian dynamic is this project's application focus, the role of the church in preserving a vision of the future—for both the Christian employer and the Christian domestic worker—is not a peripheral matter but a gospel injunction. Arguably, like Onesimus, the Christian domestic worker is both a worker and a guest in the employer's home. This opens avenues of inquiry around present rituals that have an eschatological fulfilment. For instance, domestic workers often prepare food for their employers, but seldom do they eat the same meal at the same table as the employer and their family. The inverse reality where the employer prepares the food also applies here. In such a case, the domestic worker is either given leftovers and eats alone, far removed from the table she cleans and sets up. Like 1 Corinthians 11:17–34, which underlines the Christocentric and eschatological nature of the Eucharist, one may argue that when a Christian domestic worker does not share a meal with their Christian employer based on the employer's elitist proclivities, then that stands analogous to the situation in 1 Corinthians 11:17ff. For Christians, hospitality and eating a meal together are fundamentally community-forming activities infused with a shared oneness in Christ, one that projects and anticipates the eschatological meal and relational warmth of the new heavens and new earth (Rev 7:9–17, 19:6–10, 21–22). It is, therefore, a claim of this project that Christian communities in Southern Africa, and beyond, should preach and model a gospel that anticipates this eschatological reality by actively sharing meals across class divides. This activity finds firm basis in *Philemon* and communicates the deeper and more central identity of a shared brotherhood in Christ.

6. Conclusion

The four elements of the gospel (salvation, forgiveness and reconciliation, elevation, and the future) show how *Philemon's* message has relevance in the relationship between Christian employers and Christian domestic workers in Southern Africa. While these injunctions were appropriated in the worker-employee relationship, one may posit that their realization depends on the active involvement of the church community. *Philemon* is written to a community; therefore, it requires a church community to apply its meaning in context. Like Onesimus whose identity morphed to that of kin, the Christian domestic worker is kin needing advocacy from a Paul-like figure and the public courts of reputation that give him relational and apostolic authority. As it was for Onesimus and Philemon, may it be between our sister/brother the domestic worker and the Christian employer. From this, may the church in Southern Africa be useful in healing an ailing society through the transformation of the household; the basic unit of society.

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