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Patronage and People: Paul's Perspective in Philippians

Steve Walton

Introduction

Patronage was all-pervasive in the Roman Empire in the first century AD, whether in the emperor's power to appoint his preferred people to high office or, more locally, in the daily dependence of clients on their patrons for food and provision. In this essay, I shall sketch how the system of patronage worked, the impact it had on society and social relations and how the early Christians – and Paul in particular – responded to this widespread and important cultural reality. Patronage may not exist in the same form today, but relationships of power and dependence continue to be the daily experience of many of our fellow human beings. I am therefore aiming to provoke and stimulate reflection on the shape which Christian engagement and relationships might take today.

Patronage in the Roman world

The Roman Empire was home to a massive web of patronage, emanating outward from the emperor himself, so that just about every free person was someone's client and many were also someone's patron.¹ These relationships required reciprocal responsibilities: the patron provided for the client, often materially, and the client supported the patron, generally by rendering services and support for the patron in his (and it was normally *his*²) political and social ambitions. Such relationships were

¹ On patronage in general, see Gerald W. Peterman, *Paul's Gift from Philippi: Conventions of Gift-exchange and Christian Giving*, SNTSMS 92 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), ch. 3; Peter Lampe, 'Paul, Patrons and Clients', in *Paul in the Greco-Roman World: A Handbook*, ed. J. Paul Sampley (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 2003), 488–523; Lynn H. Cohick, *Women in the World of the Earliest Christians: Illuminating Ancient Ways of Life* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2009), 285–91; and, more fully, Richard P. Saller, *Personal Patronage under the Early Empire* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982); Andrew Wallace-Hadrill, ed., *Patronage in Ancient Society*, Leicester-Nottingham Studies in Ancient Society 1 (London: Routledge, 1989).

² For examples of female patronage, see Cohick, *Women*, 288. See also the examples of female power exercised (sometimes through influencing a husband) in Margaret Y. MacDonald, *Early Christian*

described as 'giving and receiving' (cf. Phil. 4.15): the client would express obsequious thanks for the patron's provision, and such thanks would put the patron under further obligation to continue to help the client.³

To be the greater giver placed a person in a position of social superiority – a patron was regarded as having honour, a key value in first-century Greek and Roman societies.⁴ Even to speak of 'friends' (Greek φίλοι *philoi*, Latin *amici*) – to a modern Western ear a relationship of equals – was to use a term which brought such a relationship of mutual obligation into play.⁵ There was an asymmetry, an imbalance of power, in such relationships, for the client was dependent on the patron for key things. These things could be as basic as food and shelter through the daily allowance known as a *sportula*,⁶ but might also include opportunities for development both individually and for the client's family, for example, through loans on favourable terms or the exercise of influence on the client's behalf.

As an example of this, Juvenal sends up the rush of patrons to be first to the morning greeting of the patron known as the *salutatio*, properly dressed in his toga:

And besides, not to flatter ourselves, what, value is there in a poor man's serving here in Rome, even if he be at pains to hurry along in his toga before daylight, seeing that the praetor is bidding the lictor to go full speed lest his colleague should be the first to salute. (*Satires* 3.119–20)

Wealthy people's houses were designed to facilitate such social exchanges, with reception areas built so that the patron could receive his clients' greetings each morning.⁷ Moreover, this area would be open to public view, so that those passing by would know of the power of the patron and the regard in which he was held by his clients.⁸

Although the relationship could be humiliating for clients, the patronage of a wealthier person could provide a route out of poverty. Juvenal goes on:

Women and Pagan Opinion: The Power of the Hysterical Woman (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 42–43.

³ S. C. Mott, 'The Power of Giving and Receiving: Reciprocity in Hellenistic Benevolence', in *Current Issues in Biblical and Patristic Interpretation: Studies in Honor of Merrill C. Tenney Presented by His Former Students*, ed. Gerald F. Hawthorne (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1975), 60–72, here 63; Peter Marshall, *Enmity in Corinth: Social Conventions in Paul's Relations with the Corinthians*, WUNT 2/23 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1987), 157–64.

⁴ Bruce J. Malina, *The New Testament World: Insights from Cultural Anthropology*, 3rd edn (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2001), 27–57; in relation to patronage, and with helpful analysis of gender differences in honour, see Cohick, *Women*, 288–89.

⁵ Saller, *Patronage*, 11–17; Cohick, *Women*, 289 n. 13 notes that *amici* 'friends' could be qualified in the case of a client as *amici minores* 'lesser/inferior friends', *amici pauperes* 'poor friends' (i.e. friends who are poor) or *amici inferiores* '(socially) lower friends'.

⁶ Lampe, 'Patrons', 491–92.

⁷ Bruce W. Winter, *Seek the Welfare of the City: Christians as Benefactors and Citizens* (Carlisle: Paternoster/Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1994), 46.

⁸ Carolyn Osiek, 'Archaeological and Architectural Issues and the Question of Demographic and Urban Forms', in *Handbook of Early Christianity: Social Science Approaches*, ed. Anthony J. Blasi, Paul-André Turcotte and Jean Duhaime (Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira, 2002), 83–103, here 89, 91, 92–93.

It is no easy matter, anywhere, for a man to rise when poverty stands the way of his merits: but nowhere is the effort harder than in Rome, where you must pay a big rent for a wretched lodging, a big sum to fill the bellies of your slaves, and buy a frugal dinner for yourself. You are ashamed to dine off delf; but you would see no shame in it if transported suddenly to a Marsian or Sabine table, where you would be pleased enough to wear a cape of coarse Venetian blue. (*Satires* 3.164–70)

Juvenal is portraying a man who gains the chance to be the client of a wealthy person and is thus able to eat and dress better in the expensive city of Rome. It is worth noting that the person Juvenal describes has his own slaves for whom he provides – the patronage system included clients who could be people of some means, but who nevertheless struggled to make financial ends meet.

Patronage was not simply about money or physical needs. The effect of patronage was to produce a hierarchical social structure, shaped by vertical divisions in which a patron would have clients who themselves might have clients, etc. There were possibilities for upward social mobility in such a situation, as a higher-up patron promoted the interests of clients by gaining preferment for them.⁹

Paul's receipt of financial support

Although Paul's general policy was to maintain financial independence,¹⁰ he does speak of Phoebe the deacon who carries his letter to the Romans from Corinth to Rome (Rom. 16.1–2) as his 'patron'.¹¹ Paul says she has been a προστάτις *prostatis* 'of many and also of me myself'. The term he uses is the feminine form of the masculine προστάτης *prostatēs*, which means 'patron'; its use suggests that Paul accepted hospitality at her home in Cenchrae, the port of Corinth. This feminine form is also found in a papyrus from 142 BC which speaks of a woman who is 'patron' to her fatherless son,¹² and in a third-century AD inscription from Aphrodisias in western Anatolia (modern Turkey), which mentions a Jewish woman, Jael, who is a 'patron' of the synagogue.¹³ It is thus

⁹ Lampe, 'Patrons', 492–3.

¹⁰ 1 Thess. 2.9; 1 Cor. 4.12; 2 Cor. 11.27; 12.14; cf. Acts 20.34. See Steve Walton, 'Paul, Patronage and Pay: What Do We Know about the Apostle's Financial Support?', in *Paul as Missionary: Identity, Activity, Theology, and Practice*, ed. Trevor J. Burke and Brian S. Rosner; LNTS 420 (London: T&T Clark, 2011), 220–33 esp. 221–5.

¹¹ On Phoebe, see recent discussions in Susan Mathew, *Women in the Greetings of Romans 16.1–16: A Study of Mutuality and Women's Ministry in the Letter to the Romans*, LNTS 471 (London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2013), 65–85; Cohick, *Women*, 301–7; Joan Cecelia Campbell, *Phoebe: Patron and Emissary* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical, 2009); Caroline F. Whelan, 'Amica Pauli: The Role of Phoebe in the Early Church', *JSNT* 49 (1993): 67–85.

¹² Edwin A. Judge, 'Cultural Conformity and Innovation in Paul: Some Clues from Contemporary Documents', *TynBul* 35 (1984): 3–24, here 20–1; see further Robert Jewett, *Romans*, Hermeneia (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2007), 946 n. 47.

¹³ Text and translation: Joyce Reynolds and Robert Tannenbaum, *Jews and God-fearers at Aphrodisias: Greek Inscriptions with Commentary*, Proceedings of the Cambridge Philological Society 12 (Cambridge: Cambridge Philological Society, 1987), 41. See also discussion of other examples of female patrons in Ramsay MacMullen, 'Women in Public in the Roman Empire', *Hist* 29 (1980): 208–18, here 211; Cohick, *Women*, 291–303; R. A. Kearsley, 'Women in Public Life in

surprising to find the translation ‘helper’ or ‘help’ in some English translations of Rom. 16.2 (TNIV, NRSV, NIV 1984; contrast NIV 2011, RSV); it is more likely that Phoebe is a woman of substance who contributed in cash and kind to Paul’s ministry¹⁴ and perhaps helped Paul with tricky relationships with city authorities (cf. his experience in Corinth, Acts 18.12-17). Paul is thus following in the footsteps of Jesus, who accepts financial support for his ministry and his band of followers from wealthy women (Lk. 8.1-3).

In Acts, when Paul is in Corinth, his style of activity changes when Silas and Timothy arrive: he is able to give himself fully to preaching and teaching (18.5),¹⁵ rather than ‘arguing in the synagogue’ only on sabbath days (18.4), and this implies that they arrive bearing gifts which free Paul from the necessity of working to support himself (18.2-3). Luke states that they arrived ‘from Macedonia’ (18.5). Paul had left them in Beroea when he had to flee to Athens (17.14). It is probable that these gifts are those mentioned in 2 Cor. 11.9 and Phil. 4.15, where Paul indicates that only the Philippian church helped him financially in his ministry in Corinth. If so, Paul’s letter to the Philippians would be expected to be a ‘thank you’ letter for their support, and we shall reflect on that letter shortly.

The point to notice here, in the light of these examples, is that the earliest Christians did not reject patronage outright; instead, they used the terminology and some of the practices associated with patronage in the service of Paul’s evangelistic and pastoral ministry. Paul was not entirely dependent on gifts from others, for he could and did work with his hands when necessary, as in the early part of his time in Corinth when he worked alongside Priscilla and Aquila (Acts 18.2-3). Indeed, Ronald Hock makes a cogent case that we should consider this Paul’s *normal* practice, suggesting that it lies behind Paul’s statements about his work and his calls to others to work (e.g. 1 Thess. 2.9; 1 Cor. 4.12; 2 Cor. 11.27; cf. 1 Thess. 5.14; 2 Thess. 3.6-13; Acts 20.34-35).¹⁶

Reading Philippians in the light of ancient patronage

Let us now return to Philippians and consider this letter, which some call a ‘thankless thanks’.¹⁷ As we noted earlier, there is clear evidence that Paul received gifts from the Philippian believers (4.15-16, 19), and yet the ‘I thank’ word group (εὐχαριστέω *eucharisteō*, etc.) is found only in this letter in thanks to God (1.3; 4.6). This surprises us,

the Roman East: Iulia Theodora, Claudia Metrodora and Phoebe, Benefactress of Paul’, *TynBul* 50 (1999): 189–211.

¹⁴ Jewett, *Romans*, 7; Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *Romans: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, AB 33 (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1993), 731; Gerd Theissen, *The Social Setting of Pauline Christianity*, SNTW (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1982), 73–96 esp. 94–5.

¹⁵ The imperfect συνείχετο *suneicheto* ‘devoted himself’ may well be inceptive, implying that Paul became fully occupied with proclamation and continued to do that (Richard N. Longenecker, *Acts*, The Expositor’s Bible Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1995), 278–9).

¹⁶ Ronald F. Hock, *The Social Context of Paul’s Ministry: Tentmaking and Apostleship* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1980).

¹⁷ Gerald W. Peterman, “‘Thankless Thanks.’ The Social-Epistolary Convention in Philippians 4.10–20”, *TynBul* 42 (1991): 261–70.

as modern people, but would be particularly surprising to Paul's first readers because of the conventions surrounding gift-giving and receiving which we noted earlier. For instance, Seneca writes,

Listen to the words of petitioners. No one of them fails to say that the memory of the benefit will live for ever in his heart; no one of them fails to declare himself your submissive and devoted slave, and, if he can find any more abject language in which to express his obligation, he uses it. (*Ben.* 3.5.2)

However, Gerald Peterman notes a letter from the physician Chairas, dated 29 August AD 58.¹⁸ He writes,

I may dispense with writing to you with a great show of thanks; for it is to those who are not friends that we must give thanks in words.

Γράφειν δὲ σοι μεγάλας εὐχαριστίας παρετέο(ν)· δεῖ γὰρ τοῖς μὴ φίλοις οὐσι διὰ λόγων εὐχαριστεῖν.

This suggests that Paul may be deliberately subverting the usual social conventions in the way he portrays his relationship with the Philippian believers. Let us examine Philippians further to see if we can learn more about this different perspective.

Early in the letter, Paul mentions the Philippians' 'partnership' (κοινωνία *koinōnia*) in the gospel from the first day until now' (1.5), and this is something for which he thanks God (1.3). 'Partnership' is a Pauline favourite word and refers to sharing in a common feature.¹⁹ Here, it very probably includes a reference to the converts' financial support of Paul's gospel mission,²⁰ especially because of the similar language and idea in 1.5-11 and 4.10-20,²¹ which show Paul 'bookending' the letter with the key theme of partnership in the gospel.²²

<i>Philippians 1</i>	<i>Philippians 4</i>
v. 3 'I give thanks to God' Εὐχαριστῶ τῷ θεῷ	v. 10a 'I rejoiced in the Lord' Ἐχάρην δὲ ἐν κυρίῳ
v. 3 'remembrance of you' μνεία ὑμῶν	v. 10a 'you renewed' ἀνεθάλετε
v. 4 'joy' χαρᾶς	v. 10a 'I rejoiced' Ἐχάρην

¹⁸ P. Mert. 12 lines 6-9; text and translation from H. Idris Bell and Colin H. Roberts, *A Descriptive Catalogue of the Greek Papyri in the Collection of Wilfred Merton* (London: Emery Walker, 1948), 50-52 (lines 5-9), cited in Peterman, *Gift*, 74-5, with discussion on 75-7.

¹⁹ BDAG 555 s.v.

²⁰ See fuller discussion in Walton, 'Patronage', 225-30.

²¹ The table is adapted from Peterman, *Gift*, 91-2; English translations are mine.

²² Gordon D. Fee, *Paul's Letter to the Philippians*, NICNT (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1995), 423.

<i>Philippians 1</i>	<i>Philippians 4</i>
v. 4 'request for you all' (understood of past habits) δεήσει μου ὑπὲρ πάντων ὑμῶν	v. 10c 'because you were concerned' ἐφ' ᾧ καὶ ἐφρονεῖτε
v. 5 'fellowship, participation' κοινωνία	v. 15 '[the church] participated' ἐκοινωνήσεν
v. 5 'gospel' εὐαγγέλιον	v. 15 '[of the] gospel' εὐαγγελίου
v. 5b 'from . . . until now' ἀπὸ . . . ἄχρι τοῦ νῦν	v. 15 'in the beginning' ἐν ἀρχῇ
v. 6 'the one who began a work in you' ὁ ἐναρξάμενος ἐν ὑμῖν ἔργον	v. 13 'the one who strengthens me' τῷ ἐνδυναμοῦντί με
v. 7a 'to be concerned concerning you all' φρονεῖν ὑπὲρ πάντων ὑμῶν	v. 10b 'to be concerned about me' τὸ ὑπὲρ ἐμοῦ φρονεῖν
v. 7b 'fellow-participants' συγκοινωνοὺς	v. 14 'being fellow-participants' συγκοινωνήσαντες
v. 7b 'chains' δεσμοῖς	v. 14 'suffering' θλίψει
v. 9 'overflow' περισσεύη	vv. 12, 18 '[to] overflow' περισεύειν, περισσεύω
v. 11 'having been filled' πεπληρωμένοι	vv. 18, 19 'I have been filled,' 'may [God] fill' πεπλήρωμαι, πληρώσει
v. 11a 'fruit' καρπὸν	v. 17 'fruit' καρπὸν
v. 11b 'Jesus Christ' Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ	v. 19 'Christ Jesus' Χριστῷ Ἰησοῦ
v. 11c 'glory. . . of God' δόξαν. . . θεοῦ	v. 20 'the glory to God' τῷ. . . θεῷ. . . ἡ δόξα

Interestingly, Paul is very diplomatic in the way he speaks, not explicitly mentioning money to a church of varied socio-economic status.²³

²³ See the superb imaginative reconstruction of how different people in Philippi would 'hear' Paul's letter on this theme in Peter Oakes, 'Jason and Penelope Hear Philippians 1.1–11,' in *Understanding, Studying and Reading: New Testament Essays in Honour of John Ashton*, ed. Christopher Rowland and Crispin H. T. Fletcher-Louis, JSNTSup 153 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1998), 155–64. Oakes provides the theoretical underpinning of his reconstruction in Peter Oakes, *Philippians: From People to Letter*, SNTSMS 110 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 55–76.

Turning to 4.10-20, we find several relevant points.²⁴ First, Paul three times expresses his pleasure at their gifts:²⁵ he rejoices in their concern which has been revived (v. 10a); he acknowledges their partnership with him ‘in the matter of giving and receiving’ (v. 15); and he is ‘fully satisfied’ (v. 18, NRSV) with their gifts. Thus, it is mistaken to present Philippians as a ‘thankless thanks’. However, each of these points is qualified in ways which subvert the common cultural understanding of relationships involving financial gifts, as we shall see.

Secondly, there is language here which is commonly used in the context of patronage relationships.²⁶ The language used appears regularly in discussions of friendship, which we noted earlier can denote patronage relationships. Friendship is about social relationships, and not just about money, of course.²⁷ Paul, however, uses this language in a way which undermines the usual asymmetrical view of patronage relationships. He qualifies his joy at their renewed concern by stating that he is not in need of their help, for he has learned contentment with what he has (vv. 11–13), thus correcting any view that life is about possessions and money – a corrective which would be important both for Philippian believers who had not been able to contribute to the gift for him because of their poverty and also for those who were well-off among the community.

Paul goes on to qualify his gratitude by placing himself and the Philippians in a relationship of ‘partnership’, using the verb ‘partner’ or ‘share’ (κοινωνέω *koinōneō*, v. 15), echoing the use of the cognate noun in 1.5. Paul does not stand in their debt as a client, but they are his partners in mission – they stand on level ground.²⁸ Their gifts to Paul are God’s provision for him, for through them Paul is strengthened by God to ‘do all things’ (v. 13), that is, to face all kinds of circumstances, whether good or bad (v. 12).

Paul then rules out the possible suggestion that he is hinting that he needs further help (v. 17) – bear in mind that thanksgiving in Paul’s culture(s) could be a moral lever to draw further gifts from the giver. Rather, he wants the Philippians to accumulate ‘profit’ for their ‘account’ (v. 17),²⁹ namely, experiencing God providing for them (v. 19).

Paul’s third statement of gratitude (v. 18) is qualified by a theocentric interpretation of their gifts. For sure they are ‘the things you sent’ (τὰ παρ’ ὑμῶν), but Paul receives them as a ‘sacrifice to God’. Thus, Paul is not in their debt, but rather, *the God to whom they have given* will satisfy their needs (v. 19). The glory therefore goes to God (v. 20). Paul is portraying himself and the Philippians as fellow clients of God, the supreme patron – so perhaps his description of God as ‘father’ is a deliberate choice, for the *paterfamilias* (‘father of the household’) was the patron of his own extended family.³⁰

²⁴ For what follows, see Peterman, *Gift*, 121–61; Peterman, ‘Thanks’; Stephen E. Fowl, ‘Know Your Context: Giving and Receiving Money in Philippians’, *Int* 56 (2002): 45–58; Stephen E. Fowl, *Philippians*, THNTC (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2005), 189–201.

²⁵ With Fee, *Philippians*, 425.

²⁶ Some also see it as ‘accountancy’ or business language: see Peter T. O’Brien, *The Epistle to the Philippians: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, NIGTC (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1991), 533–34, 538–40.

²⁷ See Peterman, *Gift*, 53–65, 125, 147; Marshall, *Enmity*, 157–64.

²⁸ Peterman, *Gift*, 159.

²⁹ καρπός *karpōs* is used in the sense of ‘profit’ (BDAG 510 s.v §2) and λόγος *logos* in the sense of ‘account’ (BDAG 601 s.v §2.b).

³⁰ See L. Michael White, ‘Paul and Pater Familias’, in *Paul in the Greco-Roman World: A Handbook*, ed. J. Paul Sampley (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 2003), 457–87.

The 'riches' of God come to the believers 'in Christ Jesus' (v. 19). Such a picture of the relationships of Paul and the Philippians with each other and with God is rooted in Jewish thought and Scripture.³¹ It is striking that Paul ends the letter by invoking the generous love ('grace', χάρις *charis*) of the Lord Jesus Christ for them (v. 23), a love which Paul has portrayed fully in the 'hymn' of 2.5-11.

The theocentric theme echoes the teaching of the Jewish Scriptures that giving to the needy pleases God (Prov. 19.17; cf. Sir. 35.2-3; 3.14-15; Heb. 13.16), and thus locates compassion and honouring God as motives for helping those in need (in this case, Paul). In the Greek and Roman worlds, helping the needy was motivated by gaining honour for oneself.³² By contrast here, the honour goes to God the giver, not God's human agents.

To sum up our discoveries from Philippians, we have seen Paul reimagining the nature of human relationships of giving and receiving in the light of God's generous love in Christ. This God provides for his people through each other – but Paul is clear that God is the source of what is given and should receive the glory for what is given and received.

Other evidence

To this brief study of Philippians, we can add a few other points more briefly.

Paul is in tune with his Jewish heritage in regarding material things and money as being held in stewardship by humans – they belong first and foremost to God, and humans have them on loan to use in service of God, humanity and God's world.³³ Paul thus writes, 'What do you have that you did not receive? And if you received it, why do you boast as if it were not a gift?' (1 Cor. 4.7), and that in a context where he is critiquing the Corinthian culture of competition for honour which the believers have bought into by having a hierarchy of Christian teachers and leaders (1 Cor. 3.1-4.7). Paul calls on them to stand out from that culture as different.

We have already noticed that Phoebe the deacon is presented as Paul's patron (Rom. 16.1-2). However, there is an ambiguity about the nature of the relationship, for Paul's mention of Phoebe is a commendation of her to the Roman believers, typically the action of a patron for a client. Hence, Lynn Cohick comments, 'Paul commends Phoebe's actions so that the Roman church might act similarly towards her. She is not to be their benefactor, even as Paul is not their benefactor. Rather the goal is reciprocity.'³⁴

Paul's little letter to Philemon sheds further light on our theme, for Paul asks Philemon to be ready to provide hospitality for him when he visits (v. 22), and such a request would place Paul in debt to Philemon. Paul speaks of Philemon in 'friendship'

³¹ See Peterman, *Gift*, 149, 152, 155–6; Lampe, 'Patrons', 505–7.

³² See Fiona J. R. Gregson, *Everything in Common? The Theology and Practice of the Sharing of Possessions in Community in the New Testament* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2017), 93–6, 106–8, 120, 191–2, 195.

³³ E.g. Gen. 1.26-28; Ps. 24.1; see Steve Walton, 'Primitive Communism in Acts? Does Acts Present the Community of Goods (2:44–45; 4:32–35) as Mistaken?', *EvQ* 80 (2008): 99–111, here 105.

³⁴ Cohick, *Women*, 305.

terms as ‘our beloved and co-worker’ (v. 1), language which is consistent with Philemon being patron to Paul’s client. Paul similarly asks that Philemon would ‘give [me] benefit’ (ὀνίνημι *oninēmi*, a patronage term, v. 20). However, Paul writes strongly and boldly to Philemon about his slave Onesimus, claiming that he could command Philemon, but chooses not to (vv. 8–9), and he writes of Philemon’s ‘obedience’ over this matter (ὑπακοή *hupakoē*, v. 21). Further, Paul claims that Philemon owes Paul his very life, again using patronage language, ‘you owe your very self to me’ (σεαυτὸν μοι προσοφείλεις, v. 19). There is thus a mixture of language which sometimes places Philemon in the place of patron and sometimes Paul.

As with Philippians, God is placed at the centre of the relationship – notice the eight references to Jesus or Christ in this short letter (vv. 1, 3, 5, 6, 8, 20, 23, 25) – and Paul is Philemon’s ‘partner’ (κοινωνός *koinōnos*, v. 17). Paul and Philemon – and Onesimus – are on level ground before God-in-Christ. That is why Paul does not *command* Philemon to accept Onesimus back, although he uses powerful rhetorical tools to persuade him to do so, for he is addressing a brother in Christ, not a subordinate.

Conclusion

We began by reflecting on patronage in the ancient world, which created and maintained asymmetrical power relationships of dependency. Having read Paul through this lens, we have seen an impressive shift of emphasis from cultural expectations of competing for honour and seeking one’s own interests. In their place, Paul puts both the example of Jesus, who gave himself to the point of death for needy humanity (Phil. 2.5–11; cf. 2 Cor. 8.9), and his own determination to be satisfied with what he has (Phil. 4.11–13) before the believing communities. Paul locates himself and the believers on a social map without human hierarchy, where humble dependence on the grace of God through Christ enables people to have different attitudes and thoughts concerning each other, and thus to act differently as the Spirit enables them to reproduce the humility of Christ in their relationships.