



Onesimus: Finding the Significance of a Slave (Paul's Social Network: Brothers & Sisters in Faith)

Robert Atkins

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Human beings are embedded in a set of social relations. A social network is one way of conceiving that set of relations in terms of a number of persons connected to one another by varying degrees of relatedness. In the early Jesus group documents featuring Paul and coworkers, it takes little effort to envision the apostle's collection of friends and friends of friends that is the Pauline network. The persons who constituted that network are the focus of this set of brief books. For Christians of the Western tradition, these persons are significant ancestors in faith. While each of them is worth knowing by themselves, it is largely because of their standing within that web of social relations woven about and around Paul that they are of lasting interest. Through this series we hope to come to know those persons in ways befitting their first-century Mediterranean culture.

The story of Onesimus is one of the great stories of the Bible and of culture. His story impacts American life even today and played a significant role in American social history. Yet most American Christians would consider Onesimus the answer to a trivia question. What do we know about Onesimus? He knew Paul, of that much we are certain. But were Onesimus and Paul social equals, "brothers," as early followers of Christ? As a fictive "child" of Paul, was Onesimus a client in Paul's retinue, now Philemon's equal? As a slave in the household of another Christian leader, did Onesimus represent a problem for Paul to solve, a gift to be received, or both? These questions involve the social role and status of persons in the first century. Onesimus also opens a window into the nineteenth-century deliberations in the United States over the question of slavery and the social struggle for emancipation. Finally, Onesimus opens a window into conflicts over the meaning and method of biblical interpretation.

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