

Article

# Epigraphy and New Testament Exegesis

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**Abstract:** Within the diverse paths of New Testament exegesis, a new approach is presented here, namely, interpretation against the background of epigraphic sources. Although this approach has a prehistory in the 19th and 20th centuries, it is only now being taken up again with the project of an Epigraphical Commentary on the New Testament (ECNT). The article briefly describes the more precise procedure for compiling such a commentary and presents three examples from different areas of the New Testament to illustrate the types of insights that can be gained from inscriptions: on κατὰ κριμα (Rom 5:15, 18; 8:1); on the statement that someone is bound or in bonds (Phlm); and on the meaning of δικαιοσύνη as a virtuous quality in inscriptions, which influences interpretation of 1Tim, Mt, and Luke-Acts. The authors argue for recognizing the critically important role inscriptions in particular can play in illuminating the language and culture of the Mediterranean in the first century, and thus also of early Christian texts.

**Keywords:** epigraphy; Romans; Philemon; righteousness



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## 1. Introduction

Within any discipline, original ideas or methodologies arise that can open new areas of research or challenge long-held assumptions. The study of the New Testament is no different: there have been various movements and developments throughout its history that have steered exegesis in new directions. While these new approaches did not occur in isolation from each other or the history of the discipline, we can nevertheless identify specific types of moments that sparked change.

First, there were general philosophical and ideological movements following the Enlightenment that have naturally made their impact upon New Testament studies, including dialectical philosophy, feminism, and post-colonialism, among others.

Second, theological and ecclesiastical reorientations have also affected exegesis. The major turning point of the Protestant Reformation drastically changed how scholars and pastors studied and reflected upon the New Testament texts. In response to the Reformation, albeit with great delay, Roman Catholic scholars (especially following Vatican II) developed a renewed interaction with the New Testament. More recent movements, such as Christian revivalism or liberation theology have influenced New Testament theology as well.

Thirdly, some methodological approaches from the humanities or other disciplines have been applied to New Testament studies. Of course, the most widely employed approach remains the historical-critical method, which forms the foundation for most exegetical work today. Others include hermeneutical approaches, literary criticism, deconstruction, the history of reception, Wirkungsgeschichte, and many more. These varying approaches sometimes complement each other, but they have often been combined in sharp contrast to one another.

Ultimately, however—and this is the point of this brief introduction—the discovery of new primary sources contemporary to the New Testament texts has caused research into the writings of early Christianity to pivot drastically. In this context, most people might think immediately of the discovery of texts at Qumran, which began in 1947 and revealed

an unexpected wideness of Palestinian Judaism. Others might remember the discovery of thirteen codices of mostly early Christian texts in Nag Hammadi in 1945.

However, Johann Jakob Wettstein's "Novum Testamentum Graece" of 1751/52, which represents the high point of the "observational literature" of the 17th and 18th centuries, demonstrated the extent to which external contemporary sources were crucial for the understanding of the New Testament texts themselves. Wettstein focused mainly upon the literary testimonies of antiquity, because they could immerse the reader in the mindset of the time and region in which the New Testament was first read<sup>1</sup>. Unfortunately, Wettstein did not include the steadily growing number of editions of inscriptions and papyri that were beginning to be published in the 18th century.

The Renaissance had seen a growth in interest in inscriptions, with a few early collections published independently. The 19th century saw a renewed effort in organizing large numbers of Greek and Latin inscriptions in more systematic formats<sup>2</sup>. Papyrology, which was given a particular boost by the discoveries at the Villa Ercolanese dei Papiri in Herculaneum in 1752, developed into an extremely popular discipline between archaeology and philology as a result of the "discovery" of Egypt from the 19th century onwards. Its source base consists of an enormous wealth of ancient material scattered in public and private collections all over the world. New Testament textual criticism has benefited enormously from these finds. However, these two types of sources<sup>3</sup> have been surprisingly overlooked in the study of the New Testament.

## 2. The First Wave

Primary sources that were newly discovered or rediscovered in the 18th and 19th centuries aided the "Religionsgeschichtliche Schule" in its search for continuity and discontinuity between ancient Judaism and early Christianity, or between both and the non-monotheistic cultures around them<sup>4</sup>. However, because this initial approach was mostly interested in myths, textual forms, and the history of ideas, it overlooked the possibility of conducting a systematic treatment of the lexical aspects affecting both Greco-Roman antiquity and early Christian writings.

Nevertheless, by the end of the 19th century, some scholars from both English- and German-speaking contexts embarked in cooperation upon a more intensive study of the linguistic world of antiquity<sup>5</sup>. Two British scholars focused particularly upon the relevance of papyrological sources for understanding the language of the New Testament. In 1929, James Hope Moulton (1863–1917) and George Milligan (1860–1934) published their book, "The Vocabulary of the Greek Testament Illustrated from the Papyri and Other Non-literary Sources", which remains unparalleled in its scope and relevance even today.<sup>6</sup>

First from Heidelberg and then Berlin, the New Testament scholar Gustav Adolf Deissmann (1866–1937) similarly devoted himself to the study of primary sources, particularly inscriptions, for the exegesis of the New Testament.<sup>7</sup> Deissmann integrated the results of papyrological and epigraphical research into his *Bibelstudien* (Deissmann 1895) and *Neue Bibelstudien* (Deissmann 1897) as well as his famous *Licht vom Osten* (1908; 4th ed., Deissmann 1923).<sup>8</sup> He was convinced that early Christian texts, as well as the Septuagint, were written not in some kind of spiritualized "biblical language", rather they developed consistently out of the everyday language of their environment.<sup>9</sup> Thus, they could be best accessed by consistently consulting documentary sources. At the end of "Light from the Ancient East", he formulates it boldly (p. 394):

Some day, when yet stronger waves of light come flooding over to us from the East, it will be recognised that the restoration of the New Testament to its native home, its own age and social level, means something more than the mere repatriation of our sacred Book. It brings with it new life and depth to all our conceptions of Primitive Christianity. But already perhaps we may say that when theologians engage in the study of inscriptions, papyri, and ostraca of the Imperial period, their work is not the pastime of cranks, but is justified by the imperious demands of the present state of scholarship.

However, Deissmann's dream remained unfulfilled. Due to professional challenges and the First World War, he was unable to complete his project to publish the epigraphical evidence for the New Testament lexemes in a dictionary. Thus, the first wave of epigraphically informed exegesis of the New Testament ebbed away.<sup>10</sup>

### 3. The Second Wave

The sources found at Qumran and Nag Hammadi generated intensive study of the historical context of Jesus' ministry and the late New Testament period. In contrast, the discovery of papyrological and epigraphical texts continued to grow immensely throughout the 20th century, but remained virtually unnoticed by most, although not all, New Testament scholars.<sup>11</sup>

Finally, during the last quarter of the 20th century in Australia, G.H.R. Horsley and S.R. Llewelyn compiled collections of papyrological and epigraphical sources. These gave rise to the volumes of "New Documents Illustrating Early Christianity" (New Docs), which were published in the period from 1976 to 1998, and tried to make new publications of papyri and inscriptions from around the world accessible to New Testament scholars. Following a respite, publication resumed in 2015, now under the leadership of J.R. Harrison and L.L. Welborn and with a local historical focus given to each volume.<sup>12</sup>

In the 1990s, Peter Arzt-Grabner at the University of Salzburg began to use papyrological texts for a commentary on the New Testament (PKNT).<sup>13</sup> In the first volume of PKNT, Arzt-Grabner notes that since the 1970s there has been a somewhat increased interest in papyrology (Arzt-Grabner 2003, p. 42), but he emphasizes that the increased interest had not yet led to a work on the comprehensive scale of PKNT. The four published volumes of this papyrological commentary series have brought comparisons with other ancient primary sources that have pioneered new insights into the linguistic, conceptual, and cultural world of the first readers of the New Testament. However, a correspondingly comprehensive analysis of the epigraphic findings has yet to be carried out.

Even so, the digital tools of the 21st century have now made the study of epigraphy more accessible for all scholars in a way that was impossible one hundred years ago during the initial enthusiasm of the "first wave". For those outside the field of epigraphy, for whom the varied regional printed corpora of Greek inscriptions pose an insurmountable obstacle, databases such as those of the Packard Humanities Institute, the Supplementum Epigraphicum Graecum and Inscriptiones Graecae, among others, provide more open access to a wide range of genres of inscribed texts. In addition, their digital format enables systematic searches for specific lexemes which would previously have been either impossible or prohibitively time-consuming. Though classic historians have long had access to these resources, very few have applied them to wider range semantic research. A treasure trove of primary sources awaits scholars of early Christianity (see Corsten et al. 2016; Verheyden et al. 2018). The time is ripe for a systematic epigraphical commentary on the New Testament to set to work unearthing this treasure.

### 4. The Epigraphical Commentary on the New Testament

Together with Joseph Verheyden, Thomas Corsten and—at a later date—Riet van Bremen, Markus Oehler developed a project dedicated to repositioning epigraphy as an essential component of New Testament exegesis (see Corsten et al. 2016; Verheyden et al. 2018). Initial collaboration at two conferences led to Julien Ogereau's work on an epigraphical commentary on the First Epistle to the Thessalonians between 2019 and 2024.<sup>14</sup> This first volume of the series articulates the project's methodological framework and establishes a template upon which future commentaries will be based.

In view of such overabundant sources, developing specific research criteria has been crucial for guiding the project towards understanding the New Testament and its first audience. The most decisive consideration is thus: the closer an inscription is to the author and to the recipients of the letter in terms of time, space, and/or language, then the greater its potential relevance and comparative value will be. In detail, it looks like this:

### 1. Temporal criteria

Although inscriptions are notoriously difficult to date precisely since they do not always contain chronological information, they can generally be ascribed to particularly periods (e.g., Classical, Hellenistic, Roman, or Byzantine) based on paleographic grounds, monumental features, linguistic or textual clues, or the archaeological context.

Following the principle of proximity, precedence should be given, whenever possible, to inscriptions that can be dated fairly confidently to the first century CE. Material dating from the Hellenistic or even Classical eras should also be surveyed, since they remained within public space. However, these inscriptions will only be included on a case-by-case basis, to the degree that they can illustrate the preservation of certain terms or social-cultural conventions that are particularly relevant to the text under scrutiny. Since the production of inscriptions was particularly widespread in the late 2nd and 3rd centuries CE (see [MacMullen 1982](#); [Meyer 1990](#); [Ameling 2009](#)) and these texts originated to some degree from the linguistic and conceptual world of the 1st and early 2nd centuries, texts from these following centuries definitely deserve analysis.<sup>15</sup>

### 2. Linguistic criteria

Since all New Testament writings are written in Koine Greek, Greek inscriptions are evidently of primary significance.<sup>16</sup> However, searching Latin inscriptions as well as texts in eastern languages will at times also provide fruitful insight into the socio-cultural world of the New Testament and the Judaeans/Semitic background of some early Christian traditions.

### 3. Spatial criteria

Broadly speaking, greater weight should be given to texts from the eastern Mediterranean, that is, from the Aegean, central and eastern Asia Minor, Syria-Palestine, and Egypt, not least because linguistic homogeneity persisted despite regional diversities.<sup>17</sup> Greek inscriptions from the city of Rome should also be considered, since Greek was widely used in the city of Rome, especially among migrants and early Christians. More specifically, the respective places of composition and reception must be determined for each individual New Testament writing as best as possible. Inscriptions from these localities and routes to and from them will be given the highest priority in interpretation. In cases where these locations cannot be decided definitively, then inscriptions from all theorized locations should be considered. Of course, inscriptions located geographically closer to the author or the first readers were more likely to be part of their linguistic and imaginative world than those from more distant regions. Wider flung inscriptions, from north Africa, Europe, or Mesopotamia should only be considered in the absence of geographically closer examples.

Following the collection and review of relevant inscriptions based on the criteria above, commenters will consult various editions of each inscription as found in epigraphical corpora and journals such as *L'Année épigraphique* (AE) and of the *Bulletin épigraphique* (BE) to continue to understand the context for each text. After summarizing and analyzing the primary source data with an eye towards the linguistic and cultural worlds of the eastern Mediterranean in the first century, commentators will discuss the New Testament texts in light of these epigraphically gained insights.

Thus, an epigraphical commentary will not seek to replace traditional exegetical commentaries or to repeat conventional historical, linguistic, and literary exposition of the texts. Rather, an epigraphical commentary will focus on new observations into the linguistic and socio-cultural aspects of the New Testament that derive expressly from inscriptions. Such systematic engagement with this treasure trove of newly accessible primary sources can be expected to open wide the field of New Testament studies in compelling ways. Since inscriptions are closer to the linguistic usage of everyday antiquity than the literary texts of the elite, they should also be used accordingly for the interpretation of the New Testament. Together with the documentary papyri, they do not, of course, capture all the possible connotations of a lexeme, but inscriptions do provide an essential clue as to how words were understood by an authors' contemporaries. To ignore them or to use them as a mere supplement to already established literary evidence does not do justice to their significance.

Accordingly, the epigraphical commentary aims to introduce the testimony of inscriptions into exegetical discussion after centuries of inadequate consideration.

We would therefore like to expressly state: inscriptions and papyri are by no means asserted here as the only relevant background for the semantics of the lexemes used in the New Testament. This would be erroneous alone for the reason that numerous words do not appear at all in the documentary sources. Nor is the aim to apply the denotations that can be recognized from inscriptions without regard to the context in which the words are used in New Testament writings. The concern is rather to take the everyday language sources into greater account. Even where other or perhaps even specifically Christian meanings can be recognized from the New Testament textual contexts, it must be borne in mind that these texts were written in a diverse linguistic and social world, which is particularly evident in the documentary sources. Determining the relationship between, on the one hand, the semantic range of lexemes in papyri, inscriptions, and the literary testimonies of antiquity and, on the other hand, their use in the New Testament texts is part of the daily work of New Testament exegesis, which, however, usually regarded the documentary sources as *adiaphoron*, not as an integral part of this challenging task.

## 5. Examples

Myriads of possibilities exist for interacting with epigraphical sources, but space allows mention of only a few brief examples here. However, these brief, unrelated samples should serve to illustrate the incalculable value gained from applying epigraphy to the study of the New Testament.<sup>18</sup>

### 5.1. *Condemnation or Punishment—κατάκριμα in Romans*

Neither the LXX nor other Jewish literature contain any parallels to the term *κατάκριμα*, which Paul uses prominently in his letter to the Romans (Romans 5:16, 18; 8:1). In fact, the term is mainly found in papyri.<sup>19</sup> There it always denotes penalties or unspecific levies. In literature, the term only appears twice in Dionysius Halicarnassus (Ant. rom. 6.61.2; 13.5.1), and even there it has no other meaning. Until now, exegetes have overlooked an inscriptional occurrence (see Wolter [2014] 2019, I 353 n. 52.), despite the fact that it was published as far back as 1905.<sup>20</sup>

The inscription is the copy of a decree by the Egyptian prefect Tiberius Julius Alexander, who was the nephew of Philon of Alexandria, dating from the year 68 CE:

ταῦτα δὲ καὶ τὰ τοιαῦτα κατακρίματ[α ο]ὐκ ἐπὶ τὴν Θηβαίδα μόνη[ν.εὔρον  
ἐκτεινόμενα] [οὐ]δὲ ἐπὶ τοὺς πόρρωι νομοὺς τῆς κάτω χώρας, ἀλλ<λ>ᾶ ...

But these and similar charges I have found do not extend to the Thebais alone, and the nomes of the lower regions, but ...

As in the papyri, *κατάκριμα* refers here to payments that were imposed on local landowners but were no longer to be collected. Thus, each genre of sources external to the New Testament confirms a financial context for *κατάκριμα*.

Regarding *κατάκριμα* in Romans, Paul clearly borrows once again a term from the “world of money”.<sup>21</sup> At the same time, however, it can be seen that a translation that renders *κατάκριμα* as an amplification of *κρίμα* in the sense of “condemnation” is unfounded. Obviously, Paul understood it as an indication of a kind of “punishment” to be endured, analogous to the context of everyday language. While in Rom 5:18 this punishment is (eternal) death, this is quite different in Rom 8:1: according to this reading, there is no punishment for believers, although there will be a judgment for them too (2Cor 5:10). They have been set free (Rom 8:2) and freed from all punishment. Read from the perspective of inscriptions and papyri, an understanding of *κατάκριμα* as an expression for an imposed punishment that is lifted for believers by God, who imposed it in the first place, is therefore suggestive. Interpreting it as a “condemnation”, as is usually done,<sup>22</sup> does not do justice to this observation and cannot be based on literary sources.



### 5.2. In Chains (Philemon)

Words from the root δεσμ- occur four times in Philemon, twice as δέσμιος and twice as δεσμός. The phrase δέσμιος Χριστοῦ Ἰησοῦ is used to describe Paul as a prisoner (1, 9).<sup>23</sup> The related noun δεσμός, both times in the dative phrase ἐν τοῖς δεσμοῖς (Phm 10, 13), describes Paul's imprisonment as being "in chains/bonds/fetters".<sup>24</sup>

Only one inscription legibly uses the word δέσμιος, confirming its translation as "prisoner" or "captive"<sup>25</sup> in all of its New Testament occurrences.

Moving on, δεσμός occurs 17 times in the New Testament, with 15 of those occurrences referring to captivity or bondage.<sup>26</sup> Acts and Jude use δεσμός to refer literally to the bonds upon humans (or angels) that keep them captive (Acts 16:23, 26:29; Jude 6). The rest of the twelve instances of δεσμός in the New Testament (three more in Acts, one in Hebrews, and eight in Paul)<sup>27</sup> refer in literal and semi-figurative ways to the chains/bonds/fetters that Paul would and did wear, as well as to his general state of captivity. For this reason, many of these instances are often translated in English as "in prison" or "imprisonment".<sup>28</sup>

In inscriptions, δεσμός occurs frequently either in its normal masculine form, or in the plural neuter δεσμά. Both forms can refer literally to "a band, bond, anything for tying and fastening; such as a halter/mooring cable/door-latch/yoke-strap".<sup>29</sup> For several centuries throughout the ancient world, δεσμός was employed in reference to domesticated animals (as a kind of leash for sacrificial animals) or to jewelry (as a setting for precious stones) and in architecture (as any kind of connection point between two separate support structures).

Most inscriptional occurrences originate from Greece and the Aegean islands and deal with architectural contexts. However, whenever δεσμός is used in connection to a human being, the context of bondage always indicates some kind of captivity or slavery, which are related situations.<sup>30</sup>

A conditional manumission inscription from Delphi dated to 50–60 BCE (CID V.2.946) clearly outlines consequences for three manumitted women, should they fail to offer unquestioning obedience to their former mistress Menekrateia:

εἰ δέ τι τῶν προγεγραμμένων σωμάτων μὴ πειθαρχέ[οι]/[ἤ]μη ποιέοι τὸ εὖπι [τασσ]όμενον ἐπὶ Μενεκρατείας, ἐξουσίαν ἔχέτω Μενεκράτεια εἴτε κα θέλη πωλεῖν τῶν προγ[εγ]ραμμένων τι σωμάτων [πωλέουσα εἴτε κολάζουσα καὶ πλαγαῖς] καὶ [δ]εσμοῖς καθὼς κα θέλη.

"If any of the aforementioned bodies fail to observe or perform the duties imposed by Menakrateia, Menekrateia has the power either to sell any of the aforementioned bodies if she wishes, or to punish them with both beatings and bonds if she wishes".

The latter could decide to sell the three women—typically called σώματα—or "[punish them with blows] and with bonds/chains/fetters as she wished".

A fragmented inscription written on a previously broken limestone tablet that was found in an excavated rubbish heap at Marisa (Tell Sandahanna) in Palestine (SEG 8:245, 2nd cent. CE) appears to be the first person testimony of a man who is under constraint. Several times he mentions a bond or a chain, one that he deserves and that he shares with another: δεσμ[ὸ]ν/ἀπὸ βίας ἔχω τοῦτον ἐγώ. Another fragmented inscription, this time from Lydia, records a petition from free but poor tenants on an imperial estate (either in 193–217 or 244–249 CE), requesting that the emperor should intervene to prevent malefactors from taking some of them from the estate ἐν τοῖς δεσμοῖς (TAM V, 3 1418, Philadelphia).

The figurative use of δεσμός tends to occur against the background of bound captivity, especially lifelong slavery, because of the ubiquitous visibility of such bondage in the ancient world, and as a way of depicting a lasting connection or constraint. An epitaph from Kos dated to the first century BCE has the deceased poetically exclaiming (IG XII, 4 3:2950):

[αἰ]αῖ πανδαμάτωρ μ' Ἄδης δεσμῶι <ἀ>πεδήσας/[ἤ]γαγεν εἰς νυχίους Φερσεφ ὄνης θαλάμ[ου]ς.

“Alas, all-subduing Hades, having bound me in a chain, he led me into the gloomy chambers of Persephone”.

The use of δεσμῶι evokes how the deceased is now made captive, enslaved to death, never to return to the freedom of life. Other inscriptions describe a figurative bond other than the bondage of death: in one example, an individual in Rome considers his vow to be a strong bond, from which the votive inscription now shows himself to be free: δεσμὸς ὅπως κρατε-/ρὸς θυμὰ θεοῖς παρέχοι (IGUR I, 109, second half of 2nd cent. CE).<sup>31</sup>

One category of figurative use overlaps with literal use and tends to involve not only δεσμὸς but also other derivative words—especially δέω, (κατα)δεσμεύω, and κατάδεσμος—in curse tablets. An undated tablet from Attica reads on one side (IG III App. 108):

δήσω ἐγὼ Σωσικλείαν κα[ὶ κ]τήματα/καὶ μέγα κῦδος | καὶ πράξιν καὶ νοῦν,  
ἐ-/χθρὰ δὲ φίλοισι γένοιτο. | δήσω ἐγὼ κ-/εἴνην ὑπὸ Τάρταρον ἀερόεντ  
[α]/δεσμοῖς ἀργαλείοις σὺν θ' Ἐκάτ<η>ι χθο-/νίαι./Βιττώ/καὶ Ἐρινύσιν ἡλιθ  
ώναις.

“I will bind Sosikleia and her belongings and her great honor and her doings and thinking, she shall be hated by her friends. I will bind her into the dark Tartaros with painful chains and together with the underworld Hekate, Bitto and the confusing Erinyes”.

The use of δεσμοῖς ἀργαλείοις with the repeated verb δήσω makes explicit the connection between physical bondage and magical bondage that the inscriber is hoping to enact.<sup>32</sup> Curse tablets proliferated between opponents of three different kinds of conflict or contest: prosecution and defense in legal trials, combatants in chariot races or other athletic games, and between hopeful lovers and the object of their desire or scorn. The person commissioning a curse tablet desired to dominate the other person, reducing them figuratively to the powerlessness of captives and slaves.

A fascinating inscription<sup>33</sup> from Pamphylia bears similar witness to the connection between literal bonds and spiritual or metaphorical subjugation. An oracle responds to the petition of the Πάμφυλοι Συεδρῆες, prescribing a plan to free them from continual raids along their shoreline of merciless pirates. They are told to construct a symbol or statue of Ares in the middle of their city, in which he is held in “iron chains of Hermes” (δεσμοῖς Ἑρμείαο σιδηρεῖοις μιν ἔχοντ<ο>ς), while on the other side, Dike rules justly. This inscription clearly illustrates the connection between literal, physical bondage and a kind of magical binding to force another person to do one’s will. It is as though the inscriber (or here, the villagers putting chains on a statue of Ares) believe that a power differential akin to that found with slavery will be theirs if they can magically bind the other person to do their will.<sup>34</sup> The mere existence of such magical forms of binding shows the perceived power inherent in the system of slavery, and the effect of the ubiquitous sight of humans kept on a leash. Thus, the figurative use of a δεσμὸς in relation to human beings on epitaphs, votive inscriptions, oracle prescriptions, and in ritualized curse texts evokes themes of duration, constraint, or powerlessness that derived from captivity and ultimately from the common reality of lifelong slavery.

In addition to the literal and figurative, the semi-figurative use of δεσμὸς, usually in its plural forms, refers not just to the bond holding a person, but to some other related issue, such as the labor of an enslaved person, the market price of an enslaved person, or the general state of bondage or captivity. An inscription from Aeolian Kyme dated to the 1st cent. BCE (IK Kyme 41) quotes another inscription located on a stele in Memphis, by way of dedication to Isis.<sup>35</sup> The Egyptian text appears in the first person, imagining Isis proclaiming a long list of her accomplishments. Towards the bottom of the list, she is seen to proclaim: ἐγὼ τοὺς ἐν δεσμοῖς λύωι.<sup>36</sup> She frees the ones in chains/bonds/fetters. Here, Isis could be claiming that she literally unchains those who are physically bound, or that she frees the enslaved from their otherwise lifelong condemnation to slavery, or both.

An earlier decree declares friendship between two Antiochean cities, which is to be celebrated by honoring Athena Magarsia and Homonoia. For the festivities: “there will be a

truce and a wearing of garlands/crowns, and all released from ‘works’ and ‘bonds’—εἶναι δὲ/καὶ ἔχεχειρίαν καὶ στεφανηφορίαν καὶ ἔργων καὶ δεσμῶν ἀφεῖσθαι πάντας (lines 12–14, SEG 12:511, Magarsos-Antiocheia, c. 140 BCE). These two nouns in the genitive seem to suggest that all work will cease—both free laborers and the enslaved will get a day off in order to celebrate the feast. Here δεσμῶν is used figuratively of a kind of labor or kinds of workers, whose defining quality derives from the literal chains/bonds/fetters that first enslaved them (or that might continue to constrain them) and forced them to work for the benefit of another.

Going back in time, a long inscription from Troas along the Skamander River from about 281 BCE details honors to be awarded to an unnamed hero of democracy in Iliion (IMT Skamander/Nebentäler 182). One of the benefits appears to be that a severe penalty will be meted out by the community upon any person who in the future will try to capture the hero forcibly. The enslaver will be fined double the value of the bonds as well as double restitution for any damages he has done to the hero: ἐὰν δὲ δεθῆι ἢ ἐρχθῆι [ῆ] φεύγηι, δεσμῶν τιμὰς/διπλασίας ὀφείλει[ν κ]αὶ ὅτι ἂν βλαβῆι διπλάσιον. (Side 3, lines 92–93). Here, δεσμῶν refers to the value of the person enslaved in bonds (lit. “the value of the bonds”), which the community would like to retrieve. Rather than say explicitly that the hypothetical perpetrator would be required to pay double the market value placed on the sale of the hero’s body, the inscription alludes almost euphemistically to the value of “the bonds”. The age of this inscription shows that the literal and semi-figurative use of δεσμός has a long history.

To sum up, the semi-figurative use of δεσμός is euphemistic: the word “bond”, usually in the plural, stands in for a related word, either for the enslaved person or for the state of bondage itself. This euphemism allowed those in power to distance themselves from the distasteful reality that slavery involved the degradation of other human beings.<sup>37</sup>

Returning to the text of the Letter to Philemon, the phrase δέσμιος Χριστοῦ Ἰησοῦ (Phlm 1, 9) can be interpreted in two ways: on the one hand, it makes clear that Paul is a prisoner of his Kyrios Jesus Christ. Despite the suffering of being bound under the watchful eye of a guard, Paul interprets his bondage in a figurative and positive way. Christ Jesus is Paul’s true captor, having bound him with an unbreakable fetter of love to lead a life of complete and total service to him (see also Eph 3:1; 4:1; 2Tim 1:8, 2Cor 2:14)<sup>38</sup>. In this respect, the apostle’s self-designation as δοῦλος Χριστοῦ Ἰησοῦ (Rom 1:1; Gal 1:10; Phil 1:1; cf. Col 4:12; 2Tim 2:24; Tit 1:1) is a telling parallel<sup>39</sup>. The fact that Paul does not refer to himself as a δοῦλος of Christ in the letter to Philemon, but instead uses δέσμιος Χριστοῦ Ἰησοῦ (1, 9), might be intended to emphasize the physical character of these bonds and the parallelism with the restraints of the slave Onesimus. On the other hand, the genitive can also mean that Paul considered himself a prisoner because of or for Christ<sup>40</sup>.

Onesimos, his child, begotten while in chains (ἐν τοῖς δεσμοῖς, 10), is practically in the same situation as his spiritual father. His (re-)birth happened under Paul’s influence during the time he was held captive awaiting trial. Both are ἐν τοῖς δεσμοῖς: Paul wears literal but hopefully temporary fetters for the gospel (13, cf. Phil 1:7); Onesimos wears the invisible bond of chattel slavery that could last his whole life, but both have now become spiritually bound to (or for) Christ Jesus<sup>41</sup>. Paul seems to reinforce this image repeatedly throughout this short letter, perhaps because he hopes to engage Philemon’s compassion for Onesimos by identifying himself with the disgraced slave. Thus, a closer examination of the use of δεσμ- vocabulary in inscriptions helps clarify with greater precision our understanding of Paul’s empathy with Onesimus.

Epigraphical research into the use of δεσμ- sheds light on the nuanced meaning of the word, while also revealing ancient cultural practices regarding the nature of captivity and enslavement. Inscriptions bear witness to the ubiquitous nature of bondage in the ancient world, to the thin line separating the free from the captive, and even to voices of the enslaved or captured that are not otherwise heard through classical literature written by the educated elite.



### 5.3. δικαιοσύνη as a Virtue

When inscriptions speak of δικαιοσύνη, it is usually in connection with virtues displayed by an honored or deceased person. Therefore, it describes not a state of being righteous or justified, let alone an undeserved gift, but rather a behavior someone has shown throughout his life. A number of other virtues are combined with δικαιοσύνη, which I have listed below, albeit not exhaustively. Because of the vast number of pairings of virtues with δικαιοσύνη, I have limited myself for the sake of this example to a sampling, focusing primarily but not exclusively upon texts from Asia Minor:

- ἀγνότης: IG IV 588 (Argeia, 172–180 CE): ... δικαιοσύνης ἔνεκεν καὶ ἀγνότητος τὸν ἑαυτῆς εὐεργέτην (“because of the righteousness and integrity for her own benefactor”). The term ἀγνότης should perhaps be translated here as integrity, since this fits best with the righteousness that the honoree had shown.
- ἀρετή: Commonly combined with διακαιοσύνη, this word indicates that the honoree has behaved well in all areas of his activities. When it says, e.g., in IG V,1 483 (Sparta, early 2nd cent. CE) that someone is honored because of his δικαιοσύνη καὶ τᾶς ἄλλας ἀρετᾶς, it becomes clear that the collective term summarizes all the good qualities that a person could have<sup>42</sup>.
- ἐπιμέλεια: An inscription from Priene honors an unknown person, whose righteousness is mentioned together with his thoroughness and due diligence (I.Priene 87; date unclear).
- εὐνοία: A man named Euergetes was praised in an inscription from Carian Keramos on the south-western coast of Asia Minor for his righteousness and this rather imprecise virtue of a good disposition (Varinlioglu (1986), I. Keramos 7).
- εὐσέβεια: Piety is also frequently mentioned together with justice, e.g., in an inscription from Carian Alabanda (the “Carian Antioch”; Laumonier (1934), BCH 58, pp. 300–03; 27 BCE/14 CE): [A]ristogenes Meniskou, priest of Hygieia and of the Soteria of the Emperor and of Helios is praised as ἄνδρα μεγαλόφρονα καὶ εὐσεβῆα καὶ δικαιοσύνη διαφέροντα καὶ εὐεργέτην τῆς πόλεω[ς] (“a man who distinguished himself by his great character, piety and righteousness and as a benefactor of the city”).
- εὐταξία: Proper conduct can also be combined with δικαιοσύνη, e.g., together with εὐνοία and φιλοδοξία (“love of glory”) in an inscription from Phrygia: [ὁ δῆ]μος ἐτ[ε]ίμησεν [Δη]μήτριον Μενελάου [ἀ]ρετῆς ἔνεκεν καὶ εὐνοίας καὶ εὐταξίας καὶ δικαιοσύνης καὶ φιλοδοξίας τῆς εἰς αὐτόν (“The people honored Demetrios, son of Menelaos, because of virtue, proper conduct, good disposition, righteousness and love of glory which he had (shown) to it”; MAMA IV 159, Apollonia/Phrygia, II-I BCE).
- καλοκαγαθία: In an inscription from the island Aigina (IG IV 1, 158–144 BCE) it says: διὰ τε δὴ ταῦτα καὶ διὰ τὸ εἰς τὰ τοῦ βασιλέως πράγματα [καλῶς] καὶ δικαίως ἀνεστράφθαι, [ὄσπ]ε[ρ καὶ] [ἐ]ν τοῖς ἄλλοις π[ᾶ]σιν, μετὰ] καλοκάγαθίας καὶ δικαιοσύνης (“because he had behaved in these things and in the things of the king well and righteously, as well as in everything else, with nobility of character and righteousness”). Note that both virtues, for which the honored Cleon, a confidant of Attalus II, is praised, are expressed both adverbially and with the corresponding nouns. This construction clearly confirms the behavioral dimension of δικαιοσύνη, as opposed to a legal state.
- ὁμόνοια: An association of sacred boundary-keepers of the temple of Aphrodite and Apollo Didymeus name concord (concordia) as a co-virtue to δικαιοσύνη for one Athenagoras Paioniou (... μετ[ὰ] πάσης [ὁ]μον[ο]ίας καὶ [δι]κα[ι]οσύνης; I.Didyma 486; 188/187 BCE).
- πίστις: “Faithfulness” is one of the qualities that an upright citizen should possess<sup>43</sup>. In an inscription from Herakleia Salbace in Caria, it is combined with δικαιοσύνη and an appropriate lifestyle: Archelaos, the son of Euneikos, is praised for having shown “faithfulness and moderation and righteousness” through his whole life (... πίστει καὶ σωφροσύνῃ κ[αὶ] δικαιοσύνῃ καὶ τῇ π[ᾶ]ρ’ ὄλον τὸν βίον ἀναστροφῆι διαφέροντα ...; Robert, La Carie II no. 70B; undated).

- **φιλανθρωπία:** In addition to πίστις, ἀρετή, and δικαιοσύνη, benevolence (lit. “love of people”) can also be mentioned, here together with modesty and gentleness (SEG 57–1198; Maionia/Lydia, 17/16 BCE): πίστι τε γὰρ καὶ δικαιοσύνη καὶ φιλανθρωπία καὶ καταστολή πραύτητος καὶ τὸ κεφάλαιον οἷς ἂν ἡ φύς(ις) φιλοτιμουμένη τελήσῃ τινα πρό[ς] τὰγαθὰ ἅπασιν ἤρτισται [ν] κἄν πλήρονα το[ύ]-των μαρτυρῶμεν αὐτῷ, πρὸς τὴν ὑπεροχὴν τῶν ἔργων ἀκμὴν τοῦς λόγους ἐνλιπεῖν. (“For he is endowed with honesty and righteousness and benevolence and decency of gentleness and—to sum it all up—with all qualities by which the soul in its ambition contributes to welfare. And if we wished to testify him more than this, words would soon fail us in view of the very highest quality of his achievements”). (Translation by [Hermann and Malay \(2007, p. 86\)](#)).
- **φιλοτιμία:** The “love of honor” motivates an honoree to donate to his community and accompanies δικαιοσύνη relatively often. An inscription from Smyrna (I.Kaunos 17 = I.Smyrna II,1 579) praises the demos of the city Kaunos, but, above all, their judges, who proved to be honorable and demonstrated this in their judicial actions: ἐπὶ τῶν κριτῶν δὲ καὶ τοὺς παραγενομένους δικαστὰς Ἀντιγένην Ἀπολλωνίου, Αἰνέαν Ἀρτεμιδώρου, Τιμοῦχον Εὐάρχου ἐπὶ τῇ αἰρέσει τε καὶ δικαιοσύνῃ καὶ φιλοτιμίαι ἦν ἐπο[ι]ήσα[ν]το περὶ τὰς κρίσεις καὶ ἐπὶ τῷ ἐνδημῆσαι ἀξίως ἀμφοτέρων τῶν πόλεων καὶ στεφανῶσαι ἕκαστον αὐτῶν χρυσῷ στεφάνῳ ἐν τοῖς πρώτοις Διονυσίοις τραγωδῶν τῷ ἀγῶνι ἀρετῆς ἔνεκεν καὶ δικαιοσύνης ἣς ἔχοντες διετέλουσαν ἐν ταῖς κρίσεσιν. (“But the judges who have arrived, Antigene son of Apollonios, Aineas son of Artemidoros, Timuchos son of Euarchos, should also be praised for their just attitude and the zeal with which they have applied decisions, and because they have stayed here in both cities in a dignified manner; and each of them should be crowned with a golden wreath during the next Dionysia at the tragedy competition because of the accuracy and justice they constantly showed in their decisions”)<sup>44</sup>. The “justice” with which the judges acted is emphasized twice, although a translation as “righteousness” is also possible.

This list demonstrates principles of action, and the combination of these dynamic virtues with δικαιοσύνη ought to inform our understanding of this lexeme. Rather than translating δικαιοσύνη with abstract “justice”, the epigraphical evidence indicates that an active “righteousness” or “sense of justice” approaches more precisely the meaning used by ancient communicators. δικαιοσύνη serves to describe broadly a life lived in orientation to legal or social requirements, without needing to enumerate those ideals in more detail.

δικαιοσύνη famously plays a central role in the texts of early Christianity, especially in Paul. Thus, the correct translation of this term is crucial for drawing theological inferences from these texts.

Read from the perspective of the inscriptions, central Pauline statements on God’s and man’s δικαιοσύνη can be readily understood. They can only be presented briefly here. It is clear that Paul speaks of ethical justice with regard to human behavior and at the same time denies it for everyone (Rom 3:10–20). No human being is just, and this also applies, in a sense, to those honored by the demoi of Greek cities.

God’s justice, or more precisely his just actions, are beyond question for Paul. It is revealed in (or through) the gospel. God praises the one who keeps the law and punishes the one who breaks it: there is no respect of persons with God, the upright judge; all are equal before him (Rom 2:9–11). God is not unjust (Rom 3:5), but proves his justice, as evidenced by the fact that he grants to all equally to be just on the basis of pistis (Rom 3:21–26). Just as a city honors a deserving citizen by highlighting his δικαιοσύνη, so does God: He proclaims the δικαιοσύνη of believers—not because of their behavior, but because of Christ’s death on the cross.

In my opinion, this fits in well with an understanding of justice as it is found in large parts of the Old Testament, where the roots of Paul’s statements are very often seen<sup>45</sup>. This should not be disputed here. Even if one arrives at a somewhat different interpretation of “justice” in Paul—for example an apocalyptically oriented one<sup>46</sup>—contrasts can be

recognized from the findings of the inscriptions, which at least the first readers—but probably also Paul himself—were in all probability aware of.

The significance of an ethical understanding of δικαιοσύνη, as can be seen from the inscriptions, is evident in other parts of the New Testament. In 1Tim 6:11 and 2Tim 2:22, δικαιοσύνη is used in connection with virtues such as piety (εὐσέβεια), trust/faithfulness (πίστις), love (ἀγάπη), patience (ὑπομονή), gentleness (πραΰπαθία), and peace (εἰρήνη). This compilation alone should make it clear that here δικαιοσύνη does not refer to justice in the sense of a status granted by God, but to the righteousness that believers in Christ—like all people—should demonstrate<sup>47</sup>. The same naturally applies to the other virtues mentioned, of which only ἀγάπη has a higher prominence in Christian texts<sup>48</sup>.

Some occurrences of δικαιοσύνη in Matthew's Gospel underscore its identification with the virtue of "righteousness" instead of a state of "justice". In chapter 5, those persecuted because of the righteousness they display are considered blessed (Mt 5:10; see 1 Peter 3:14), and that same righteousness (of the disciples) must surpass that of the scribes and Pharisees (Mt 5:20). This dynamic form of righteousness, which causes offense and surpasses that of the religious leaders, suggests specific behavior<sup>49</sup>. Just a few verses later, this active reading is explicitly confirmed: those who practice the virtue of righteousness must do so in secret (Mt 6:1), unlike Jesus' opponents and unlike the countless individuals whose δικαιοσύνη is praised in honorific inscriptions.

Other passages that deal with character traits must be re-examined in light of the use of δικαιοσύνη in inscriptions. Zechariah sings in the Benedictus that people should lead their lives ἐν ὁσιότητι καὶ δικαιοσύνῃ, that is, in piety and righteousness (Luke 1:75, cf. Eph 4:24)<sup>50</sup>. In his sermon at the house of Cornelius, Peter states that there are people who fear God and "do" δικαιοσύνη in every nation (Acts 10:35, cf. also Acts 24:25); yet, the Jewish magician Elymas is an enemy of all righteousness (Acts 13:10), and God's judgment will take place through the Risen One in justice (Acts 17:31). Paul identifies virtues from the list above as his own characteristics, as part of his apostolic commendation in 2Cor 6:6–7: purity, knowledge, patience, benevolence, love, truthful speech, being equipped with the holy spirit and the power of God, and having the swords of justice in both hands<sup>51</sup>. According to the epigraphical evidence, ὁδὸς δικαιοσύνης in 2 Peter 2:21 translates as the "way in righteousness". In 1 John, the active nature of this righteousness is undeniable, acknowledged several times as something to be done or practiced as an emblematic virtue of the Christian life (1Jn 2:29; 3:7.10). Thus, the epigraphical occurrence of δικαιοσύνη paired with other active virtues in honorific inscriptions ought to recalibrate our understanding of its use in New Testament texts.

## 6. Epilogue

For too long, New Testament exegesis has relied almost exclusively upon comparison with classic Greek literature, while overlooking the greater proximity between the everyday language of papyri and inscriptions with early Christian texts. We hope that the three examples above have demonstrated the critically important role that inscriptions in particular can play in illuminating the language and culture of the Mediterranean in the first century. Researching inscriptions with an eye towards the New Testament could provide continually fresh insight, but requires scholars willing to go outside of their comfort zone to study previously unfamiliar primary sources. May this short introduction serve as an invitation—and a challenge!—to let the "Light from the Ancient East" shine once again upon the world of the New Testament.

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## Notes

- 1 [Wettstein \(Wettstein 1751/1752\)](#), vol. II, 878: “transfer te cogitatione in illud tempus & in illam regionem, ubi primi lecti sunt”.
- 2 In 1815, the Royal Prussian Academy of Sciences decided to collect and publish Greek and Latin inscriptions in corpora. The *Corpus Inscriptionum Graecarum* (CIG) was published between 1825 and 1859 with around 10,000 inscriptions, from which the collection *Inscriptiones Graecae* (IG) emerged, which is still being continued today. The first volume of the *Corpus Inscriptionum Latinarum* (CIL) was published in 1863 and, like the IG, is now under the aegis of the Berlin-Brandenburg Academy of Sciences and Humanities.
- 3 The field of epigraphy includes other realia in addition to stone inscriptions, namely: ostraca, graffiti, instrumentum domesticum, stamps, dipinti, curse tablets, “glandes” (inscribed projectiles), tickets, tokens, lead pipes, and roof tiles, as well as some lettered numismatics, gems, and mosaics. One major difference between papyri and inscriptions lies in the fact that inscriptions exist because some other artifact exists. In other words, the meaning of the text must be taken into consideration with its context, i.e., the building, monument, statue, gem, vase or wall upon which the text was written.
- 4 On the history and idea of the “Religionsgeschichtliche Schule” see a.o. [Lüdemann \(1996\)](#); [Seelig \(2001\)](#).
- 5 On the relationship between J. H. Moulton and A. G. Deissmann see [Gerber \(2010\)](#), p. 30).
- 6 The book was published by Hodder & Stoughton in London. The desire for a “New Moulton & Milligan” has been voiced several times, see, e.g., [Hemer \(1982\)](#); [Horsley and Lee \(1997\)](#); [Lee and Horsley \(1998\)](#); [Horsley \(1998\)](#); [Horsley \(2001\)](#).
- 7 On Deissmann’s philological work and biography in general cf. [Gerber \(2010\)](#). For older approaches to using inscriptions for the study of the New Testament by J.E.I. Walch, F. Münter, J.B. Lightfoot, and E. Masson, cf. [Gerber \(2010\)](#), pp. 28–29).
- 8 [Deissmann \(1895\)](#); [Deissmann \(1897\)](#); [Deissmann \(1923\)](#); English as [Deissmann \(1927\)](#).
- 9 See [Du Toit \(2019\)](#), p. 54): “Die Beobachtungen zielen in erster Linie darauf, für einzelne Wörter bzw. Syntagmen den Nachweis zu führen, dass sie nicht auf das Neue Testament (und die Septuaginta) beschränkt sind und somit nicht als Belege für ein besonderes ‘biblisches’ Griechisch herhalten können”.
- 10 However, most of the evidence cited in Deissmann’s books found its way into the dictionary of [Bauer and Preuschen \(1928\)](#). It is the basis for the dictionary by Frederick W. Danker, among others: [Danker \(2021\)](#).
- 11 This statement pertains to the “secular” finds, since the discovery of new manuscripts and papyri fragments of the New Testament have always generated immediate interest among scholars.
- 12 [Harrison and Welborn \(Harrison and Welborn 2015–2022\)](#). A mainly thematically oriented treatment of inscriptions can be found, for example, in [Peres \(2003\)](#); [Kloppenborg and Ascough \(2011\)](#); [Harland \(2014\)](#); [Kloppenborg \(2020\)](#); [Harrison \(2011\)](#).
- 13 So far four volumes have been published: [Arzt-Grabner \(2003\)](#); [Arzt-Grabner et al. \(2006\)](#); [Kreinecker \(2010\)](#); [Arzt-Grabner and Kritzner \(2014\)](#).
- 14 Financed from 2019–2023 by the Austrian Science Fund (P 31343). The publication of the commentary is scheduled for 2025.
- 15 Inscriptions from late antiquity (i.e., fourth–sixth century), however, are generally less pertinent. They could be useful in illustrating how New Testament themes and lexemes were appropriated in later Christian traditions.
- 16 Indeed, the Greek inscribed throughout the eastern Mediterranean in particular bears a much closer resemblance to the Koine of the New Testament than either bear to the classical Greek of Homer and the Greek dramas.
- 17 Incidentally, this is also one of the essential prerequisites for the relevance of the papyrological material, most of which comes from Egypt; cf. [Arzt-Grabner \(2003\)](#), pp. 50–56).
- 18 For corresponding examples, see also [Burnett \(2020\)](#).
- 19 A search in the database Papyri.info (<https://papyri.info>, accessed on 11 September 2024) yields 34 hits for κατάκριμα, almost all from the first century CE. Cf. [Kruse \(1999\)](#).
- 20 First published by W. Dittenberger in *Orientis graeci inscriptiones selectae* ([Dittenberger 1903](#), no. 669). The edition I use is the one by [White and Oliver \(1938\)](#), pp. 23–45).
- 21 For a different example, cf., e.g., [Arzt-Grabner \(2011\)](#).
- 22 See e.g., [Wolter \(Wolter \[2014\] 2019\)](#), I 472 n. 7), who sees the word as encompassing both the process of condemnation and its result.
- 23 The lexeme δέσμιος occurs fifteen total times in the New Testament, where it always refers to prisoners or captives, including Paul; see Eph 3:1; 4:1; 2Tim 1:8; Hebr 10:34; 13:3; Acts 16:25, 27; 23:18; 25:14, 27; Matt 27:15; Mark 15:6.
- 24 Both nouns derive from the related verbs δέω and δεσμεύω. Both verbs can describe the action of binding something or someone, but δεσμεύω tends to refer specifically to the fettering of humans.
- 25 This inscription from Mysia (IMT Kyzikene, Kapu Dağ 1724, [Barth and Stauber 1980–1983](#)) is undated but could be as late as the 4th cent. CE and describes the actions of two brothers, Amphion and Zethus, who take revenge upon Dirce for keeping their mother Antiope as a prisoner out of jealousy—δέσμιον ἦν πάρος εἶχε διὰ ζηλήμονα μῆνιν.
- 26 In the Gospels, δεσμός is twice used for an ailment in need of healing (Mark 7:35, a muted tongue; Luke 13:16, a bent back).



- 27 In Phil 1:7, 13, 14, 17 Paul emphasizes his status “in bonds” with particular intensity (see also Col 4:18). The Acts of the Apostles depicts Paul telling the Ephesian elders that the Holy Spirit has warned him that δεσμά and hardship await him in every city (Acts 20:23). Twice, Roman authorities declare that Paul was guilty of no accusation worthy of death or “chains/bonds/fetters”: μηδὲν δὲ ἄξιον θανάτου ἢ δεσμῶν ἔχοντα ἐγκλημα (said by the military tribune in Acts 23:29) and οὐδὲν θανάτου ἢ δεσμῶν ἄξιον (said by King Agrippa, Bernice, and governor Festus to each other in 26:31). The author of Hebrews includes “even chains/bonds/fetters and (being) guarded”—ἔτι δὲ δεσμῶν καὶ φυλακῆς—as hardships endured by the heroes of faith in Hebr 11:36.
- 28 RSV, NRSV, NASB, ESV, and NLT all translate δεσμοῖς as “imprisonment”.
- 29 Liddell et al. (1985, s.v. 380); see also Montanari et al. (2018), s.v. δεσμός “that which serves to bind: string, rope, cable, strap, chain; pl. bindings, chains, prison, sg. imprisonment”.
- 30 On archaeological remains of such restraints see Thompson (2003, pp. 217–44). War captives and those captured through kidnapping or piracy usually became slaves unless they were somehow ransomed. Those incarcerated and awaiting trial (like Paul) could end up receiving a sentence of enslavement. δεσμός referred to the literal bond preventing escape in both situations.
- 31 A group of people in Kaunos are advised to worship Phoebos Apollo and Zeus, and their fame will be bound forever with insoluble bonds: ὕμμι κλέος δεσμοῖς ἀλύτοις ἀραρισκετ’ ἐ[ς αἰεί] (Merkelbach 1970, p. 48; also I. Kaunos 50, Caria).
- 32 See also IG III App. 45, where the inscriber wishes to bind Εὐάνδρον... ἐν δεσμ[ῶι] μολυβ[δίν]ωι—in a chain of lead.
- 33 EA 27 (1996) 30, 15, 1st c. BCE; Bean and Mitford (1965, pp. 21, 26), 1st c. BCE. This magical binding of Ares was important enough to the Suedrians that they minted coins with its illustration during this era.
- 34 Another layer of symbolism lies in the likely fact that pirates’ most precious booty was the human cargo that they captured in their raids. By binding the personification of War itself, the Suedrians believed that they and their loved ones would be freed from the fear of relentless abduction and enslavement.
- 35 Another inscription from Andros dated to the reign of Augustus contains a similar first person declaration of Isis: δεσμῶν δ’ ἀέκουσαν <ἀν>ἀγκαν/ἀνλύω (IG XII, 5 739 Cyclades, Andros).
- 36 A similar promise is made of Pallas Athena, within a cluster of dice inscriptions from Phrygia in the 2nd–3rd cent. CE. Stanza 47 promises that if the thrown dice fall in a certain pattern, and the thrower honors the goddess, she will release from bonds and heal the one who is sick: λύσει δὲ ἐκ δεσμῶν καὶ τὸν νοσέοντα. δὲ σώσει (Tam III 134, Pisidia). Here, this semi-figurative use of δεσμῶν is shown to persist over a hundred years after the writing of Philemon.
- 37 Another euphemism employed universally was to refer to enslaved persons as σώματα, as seen above in CID V.2.946 from Delphi, as well as in most manumission inscriptions.
- 38 Barth and Blanke (2000, p. 245), “In verse 1, as much as in verse 9; Eph. 3:1, cf. 2 Tim. 1:8, Paul rejects the idea that at present he might be no more than Caesar’s prisoner. He is in bondage to the ‘King of the Jews’,”. Moo (2008) also understands Paul to be a prisoner of Christ Jesus, rather than a “prisoner of Caesar:” “he is in prison because of, and at the direction of, Christ” (380). So too Müller (2012, p. 87), who adds that this designation constitutes a renunciation of worldly authority while establishing a counter-cultural Christian authority based on humility.
- 39 The designation of believers as δοῦλοι Χριστοῦ (1Cor 7:22; cf. Eph 6:6) also points in this direction.
- 40 Fitzmyer (2000), prefers this sense, noting: “Paul does not mean thereby that he has been imprisoned by Christ...but rather that he is imprisoned because of his relation to Christ Jesus”, (83–84). So too, Dunn (1996, pp. 310–11), among many others.
- 41 This image of being bound permanently to Christ gains evocative power based on the primary means of constraint in the ancient world. δέσμιος and δεσμός refer to prisoners based on the “bond/tie/rope/chain/fetters” keeping them from running away. The English word for prisoner also derives from the primary form of constraint in a more modern context: a secure building that prevents freedom of movement. Paul’s image as a δέσμιος Χριστοῦ Ἰησοῦ loses evocative power if we envision him merely languishing in prison.
- 42 Cf. also IG V,1 488 (Sparta, late 1st/early 2nd cent. CE); I.Olympia 327 (98 BCE) and many more.
- 43 On πίστις in antiquity see Morgan (2015).
- 44 For the edition and translation see G. Petzl in I.Smyrna II/1 579.
- 45 See e.g., Longenecker (2016, p. 169): “It must always be asked how this complex of δικαί-words was used by authors before Paul and by other writers and translators of his day—not only as can be determined from a study of its use in classical Greek literature, but more particularly by its use in the LXX translation of the OT, the writings or early Judaism, and other NT authors”. However, I doubt that his intended readers were aware of these connections.
- 46 See e.g., Gaventa (2024, p. 51): “God’s righteousness is being revealed apocalyptically”.
- 47 For a different view see e.g., Roloff (1988, p. 347), who mentions the combination of δικαιοσύνη and εὐσέβεια in inscriptions, but nevertheless interprets it in a Christian sense. See Witherington III (2006, p. 292): “*dikaïosynē* here has a moral sense rather than a forensic one”. A compilation of πίστις, ἀρετή, δικαιοσύνη and εὐσέβεια can be found in an honorific inscription from Kyzikene (OGIS 438; 98–88 BCE): ἐτίμησαν Ἡρόστρατον Δορκαλίωνος ἄνδρα ἀγαθὸν γενόμενον καὶ διενέγκαντα πίστει καὶ ἀρετῇ καὶ δ[ικ]αιοσύνηι καὶ εὐσεβείαι (“... they honored Herostratos, son of Dorkalion, who has been a good man living in loyalty, virtue, righteousness and piety...”); see already Deissmann (1923, p. 270).



- <sup>48</sup> However, it also occurs much more frequently in inscriptions than is often assumed; see Ogereau (2022, pp. 467–83).
- <sup>49</sup> The ethical orientation of δικαιοσύνη in the Gospel of Matthew can also be translated as “justice”, but it always carries a different tone. Konradt (2020, pp. 67–68), interprets “righteousness” as “the requirements of God’s Law for the humans”.
- <sup>50</sup> In IG II2 1009 (Attica, 116/115 BCE), the two virtues are found together, albeit ὁσιότης is partially supplemented. However, ὁσιότης is often mentioned in inscriptions as a virtue of an honored person; e.g., IG II2 1028 (Attica; 100/99 BCE); IG IV2,1 568 (Epidaurus, 1st cent. BCE).
- <sup>51</sup> In this context, δικαιοσύνη is about his qualities, not God’s; see Schmeller (2010, p. 355). On δικαιοσύνη as an attribute of God, cf. Rom 1:17; 3:5.21–22.25–26 and many more. In many of these passages, it is plausible against the background of the inscriptions to interpret δικαιοσύνη θεοῦ as the “justice of God”.

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