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GRANT SLAVES EQUALITY

RE-EXAMINING THE TRANSLATION OF COLOSSIANS 4:1

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Summary

This essay offers a fresh challenge to the widely accepted translation of Colossians 4:1. Though ἰσότης normally means ‘equality’, most scholars insist that in Colossians 4:1 the term must instead mean ‘fairness’, for the author evidently assumes the continuation of slavery in the Christian community. Thus English versions render the command ‘Masters, treat your slaves justly and fairly’ (RSV). In support of this translation, scholars routinely cite a handful of texts that are purported to demonstrate that the term ἰσότης could mean ‘fairness’ instead of ‘equality’. In this essay, I challenge such an interpretation of these texts. Furthermore, by demonstrating that a first-century moralist could exhort masters to treat their slaves as equals without thereby recommending the abolition of slavery, I challenge the assertion that the context of Colossians 4:1 requires a meaning of ἰσότης other than the one well attested in the extant Greek literature. I conclude that Colossians 4:1 should be rendered as follows: ‘Masters, grant slaves justice and equality.’ This conclusion has important implications not only for Bible translators, but also for scholars attempting to reconstruct the situation at Colossae or describe early Christian attitudes towards slavery.

1. Introduction

In Colossians 4:1 masters are commanded to grant their slaves τὸ δίκαιον καὶ τὴν ἰσότητα. Though the word ἰσότης normally means ‘equality’, most scholars insist that in Colossians 4:1 ἰσότης means

‘equity’ or ‘fairness’.¹ Lexicographers cite a handful of passages from secular Greek literature that are purported to attest this ‘extension of meaning’.² Furthermore, scholars argue that *ισότης* cannot mean true ‘equality’ in Colossians 4:1 since the *Haustafel* (household code) assumes the continuation of slavery.³ Thus the Revised Standard Version renders the command ‘Masters, treat your slaves justly and fairly.’ Likewise, the more woodenly literal New American Standard Bible reads ‘Masters, grant to your slaves justice and fairness.’⁴ Those scholars who prefer the translation ‘equality’ in Colossians 4:1 merely note that this is the normal meaning of *ισότης*. They have not challenged the evidence compiled by lexicographers, nor have they provided a satisfactory answer to the objection voiced above concerning the specific context of Colossians 4:1.⁵

This essay offers a fresh challenge to the majority view. I first review the evidence for interpreting *ισότης* as ‘equality’. Next, I

¹ Joseph Barber Lightfoot, *Saint Paul's Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 1959): 230; Eduard Lohse, *Colossians and Philemon* (Hermeneia; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1971; tr. from German, 1968): 162; Peter Thomas O'Brien, *Colossians, Philemon* (WBC, 44; Waco, Texas: Word, 1982): 232; Markus Barth and Helmut Blanke, *Colossians: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (AB, 34B; New York: Doubleday, 1994; tr. from German): 450-51; Ceslas Spicq, ‘*ισότης*’, *TLNT*: 223-31, esp. 231; James D. G. Dunn, *The Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon: A Commentary on the Greek Text* (NIGTC; Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1996): 260. See also notes 2 and 3 below.

² Danker et al., ‘*ισότης*’, *BDAG*, 481. So also Stählin, ‘*ισότης*’, *TDNT*, 354-55; Henry Liddell, Robert Scott, and Henry Jones, ‘*ισότης*’, *LSJ*, 840; James H. Moulton and George Milligan, ‘*ισότης*’, *MM*, 307. However, note that only ‘equality’ and not ‘fairness’ is given as a meaning of *ισότης* in Geoffrey W. H. Lampe, ‘*ισότης*’, *PGL*, 677.

³ Margaret Y. MacDonald, ‘Slavery, Sexuality and House Churches: A Reassessment of Colossians 3.18–4.1 in Light of New Research on the Roman Family’, *NTS* 53.01 (2007): 94-113, esp. 106; Robert McL. Wilson, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Colossians and Philemon* (ICC; London: T. & T. Clark, 2005): 287. See also Dunn, *Colossians and Philemon*, 260.

⁴ All major English translations understand *ισότης* as fairness or equity.

⁵ Heinrich August Wilhelm Meyer, *Critical and Exegetical Hand-Book to the Epistles to the Philippians and Colossians and to Philemon* (New York: Funk & Wagnalls, 1885; tr. from German): 377-78; Jerry L. Sumney, *Colossians: A Commentary* (NLT; Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox, 2008): 252-54; Laura L. Sanders, ‘Equality and a Request for the Manumission of Onesimus’, *ResQ* 46.2 (2004): 109-14, esp. 112-13; Angela Standhartinger, ‘The Origin and Intention of the Household Code in the Letter to the Colossians’, *JSNT* 23.79 (2001): 117-30, esp. 128-129. See also Ben Witherington, *The Letters to Philemon, the Colossians, and the Ephesians: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary on the Captivity Epistles* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 2007): 195-96.

examine the six passages cited by the lexicographers. I conclude that none of these passages support the translation of ἰσότης as ‘fairness’. On the contrary, these passages merely provide further support for the translation ‘equality’. Finally, I address the objection that ἰσότης cannot mean ‘equality’ in the specific context of Colossians 4:1. By comparing Colossians with Seneca’s forty-seventh epistle, I demonstrate that this objection is based on a false dichotomy. I conclude that Colossians 4:1 should be translated as follows: ‘Masters, grant slaves justice and equality.’

2. The Evidence for Ἰσότης as ‘Equality’

The term ἰσότης is common in the extant Greek literature and appears twice elsewhere in the Pauline corpus (2 Cor. 8:13-14). Here I will simply highlight a few passages in which ἰσότης occurs in the context of slavery. In a treatise attributed to Aristotle, the author explains that ἰσότης is not applicable to the master/slave relationship. Furthermore, the author draws a sharp distinction between ἰσότης and the fair treatment of slaves.

In the first place, men speak of a Justice (δικαιοσύνη) between slave and master, and between son and father. But Justice in these relationships would seem identical only in name with social Justice ... The latter consists chiefly in equality (ἰσότης) ... The son may be regarded as a part of his father, until he is separated from him by attaining manhood. Not till then is he his father’s equal [lit: ‘in equality (ἰσότης) with the father’] ... Similarly, and for the same reason, Justice does not operate between slave and master; for the slave is a chattel of his lord. Even if we grant that he has some right in Justice, it is Justice of the domestic or household kind. Not this, however, but social Justice is the object of our research; for this latter appears to consist in equality (ἰσότης). (*Mag. mor.* 1:33:15-17 [Tredennick and Armstrong, LCL])

In describing the customs of the Indians, Diodorus Siculus also presents ἰσότης in antithesis to slavery: ‘The law has ordained that under no circumstances shall anyone among them be a slave, but that all shall be free and respect the principle of equality (ἰσότης) in all persons’ (*Lib. Hist.* 2:39:5 [Oldfather, LCL]). Likewise, using language very similar to Colossians 4:1, Plutarch explains that ‘granting equality’ (ἰσότητα παρεχόντων) to poor citizens is pointless if they are still ‘enslaved’ to the rich through debts (*Comp. Sol. Publ.* 3:1).

Philo uses ἰσότης several times in the context of slavery.⁶ In a discussion of the Sabbath, he explains that slaves are allowed the day off, and masters are consequently required to temporarily perform the duties of the slave. He notes that this reversal thus reminds both of ἰσότης (*Spec. Laws* 2:68). Philo is not referring to fair treatment, but to a fundamental equality that is obscured by the master/slave relationship. He explains that in contrast to cattle ‘Servants are free by nature, no man being naturally a slave’ (2:69 [Colson, LCL]). Furthermore, in describing the Essenes (*Good Person* 79), Philo states that they do not own slaves, but rather condemn masters as ‘unjust’ (ἄδικος) because they destroy ‘equality’ (ἰσότης). Likewise, in describing the Therapeutae (*Contempl. Life* 70), Philo states that they do not have slaves, knowing that slavery is the result of the ‘injustice’ (ἄδικία) of those who sought ‘inequality’ (ἀνισότης). Note that in these passages, as in Colossians 4:1, ἰσότης is used in conjunction with ‘justice’ language.

3. The Evidence for Ἰσότης as ‘Fairness’

As demonstrated above, ἰσότης was routinely used to mean ‘equality’ in a sense fundamentally incompatible with the notion of slavery. Nevertheless, is there evidence that ἰσότης was also used to mean merely ‘fairness’? Citing only the entry in the *Greek–English Lexicon of the New Testament* (BDAG), Douglas Moo claims that ἰσότης had

developed the sense of ‘fairness,’ and this is *the way it is normally used* when it occurs in conjunction with ‘right’ (*dikaios*) language. Moreover, *this word was used in secular Greek to refer to the appropriate treatment of slaves*, in the sense of giving them what was ‘due’ them.⁷

However, the evidence compiled by lexicographers simply does not support these assertions.

Before examining this evidence, we must consider what precisely one must demonstrate in order to support the translation of ἰσότης as ‘fairness’ instead of ‘equality’. The concept of ‘equality’ is closely related to the concept of ‘fairness’; thus discussions of fair conduct will

⁶ For a comparison of Jewish and Graeco-Roman slavery, see Catherine Hezser, *Jewish Slavery in Antiquity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005).

⁷ Douglas J. Moo, *The Letters to the Colossians and to Philemon* (Pillar New Testament Commentary; Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 2008): 316-17. Emphasis mine.

often include references to equality. In order to support the claim that *ισότης* may mean only ‘fairness’ as distinct from full ‘equality’, one must therefore do more than produce examples in which *ισότης* is discussed in the context of fair conduct. One must produce examples in which the translation ‘fairness’ is a better fit contextually than the translation ‘equality’. Lexicographers, however, have not done this.

First, lexicographers cite the following line from Menander: ‘Honour equality (*ισότης*) and defraud no one’ (*Mon.* 259).⁸ Of course, Menander is here recommending fair conduct, so the translation ‘Honour fairness and defraud no one’ gets his point across reasonably well. However, this is only because the concept of ‘fairness’ is closely related to the concept of ‘equality’. There is nothing in this passage to indicate that *ισότης* means anything less than ‘equality’. On the contrary, the verb *πλεονεκτέω*, which I have rendered ‘defraud’ for the sake of smooth English, means more specifically ‘have or claim more than one’s due’ and is related to the nouns *πλεονέκτης* (‘greedy person’) and *πλεονεξία* (‘greediness’).⁹ This passage thus illustrates a dichotomy that occurs rather frequently in Graeco-Roman literature between the ideal of equality and the vice of greed.¹⁰ For example, in his discourse on *πλεονεξία*, Dio Chrysostom complains ‘Not one man refrains from it or is willing to have equality of possessions with his neighbour.’ Dio then cites Euripides: ‘At greed, the worst of deities, my son, Why graspest thou? ... ’tis best to venerate Equality’ (*Avar.* 6–9 [Cohoon; LCL]). Additional examples of this dichotomy may be found in Seneca’s ninetieth epistle (esp. 90:19,36–41), Lucian’s *Saturnalia* (esp. 19–24) and Philo’s description of the Essenes (esp. *Good Person* 76–86; *Hypothetica* 11:4–11), all of which contrast the equal sharing of possessions with the vice of greed. Therefore, instead of providing an example of *ισότης* as ‘fairness’, Menander’s statement is yet one more example of the well-attested use of *ισότης* as ‘equality’.

Second, lexicographers cite the following passage from Polybius:

One could not find a political system and principle so favorable to equality (*ισηγορία*) and freedom of speech, in a word so sincerely

⁸ Liddell, Scott and Jones, *LSJ*, 840; Moulton and Milligan, *MM*, 307; Danker et al., *BDAG*, 481. The translation is mine.

⁹ Liddell, Scott and Jones, ‘*πλεονεκτέω*’, *LSJ*, 1416.

¹⁰ For more on this dichotomy, see Murray Vasser, ‘Sell Your Possessions: Luke 12:33 and the Greco-Roman Utopian Ideal’, *Southeastern Theological Review* 8.1 (2017): 19–37, esp. 28–32.

democratic, as that of the Achaean league ... For by reserving no special privileges (πλεονέκτημα) for original members, and putting all new adherents exactly on the same footing [lit. ‘and making all equal (ἴσος)’], it soon attained the aim it had set itself, being aided by two very powerful coadjutors, equality (ισότης) and humanity. (*Hist.* 2:38:6-9 [Paton, LCL])¹¹

Of course, the system Polybius describes is indeed fair, so the translation ‘fairness and humanity’ gets his point across reasonably well. Once again, however, this is only because the concept of fairness is closely related to the concept of equality. The reference to ἰσηγορία, which means ‘equal right of speech’ or ‘political equality’, and the explicit statement ‘making all equal (ἴσος)’ indicate that ἰσότης here means ‘equality’.¹² Note also how, a few paragraphs later, Polybius restates what he said earlier: ‘What I asserted was that the Achaeans always followed one single policy, ever attracting others by the offer of their own equality (ἰσηγορία) and liberty and ever making war on and crushing those who either themselves or through the kings attempted to enslave their native cities’ (2:42:3). Thus the ἰσότης referenced previously by Polybius is presented in contrast to the state of slavery.

Third, lexicographers cite the following passage from Diodorus Siculus: ‘[Zeus] visited practically the entire inhabited earth, putting to death robbers and impious men and introducing equality (ισότης) and democracy; and it was in this connection, they say, that he slew the Giants’ (*Lib. Hist.* 5:71:2 [Oldfather, LCL]).¹³ Here the context is vague enough to permit the translation ‘fairness’, but the translation ‘equality’ works just as well. Nothing in the context commends the translation ‘fairness’ over the normal translation, ‘equality’. Furthermore, a few lines later, Diodorus states, ‘Now the Giants were punished by Zeus because they had treated the rest of mankind in a lawless fashion and, confiding in their bodily superiority and strength, had enslaved their neighbours’ (5:71:5). Thus, as in the passage from Polybius cited above, the ἰσότης described by Diodorus Siculus is presented in contrast to the state of slavery.

Fourth, lexicographers inexplicably cite the phrase ἰσότητα ποιεῖν (‘to make equality’) by the astrologer Vettius Valens (*Anthologies*

¹¹ Liddell, Scott and Jones, ‘ἰσότης’, *LSJ*, 840; Danker et al., *BDAG*, 481.

¹² Liddell, Scott and Jones, ‘ἰσηγορία’, *LSJ*, 836.

¹³ Danker et al., *BDAG*, 481.

9:2:43).¹⁴ This phrase, when read in context, has nothing to do with fair conduct. It appears in a discussion of astronomical measurements, and is rendered by Mark Riley ‘To measure off an equal distance.’¹⁵

Fifth, lexicographers cite Philo’s statement ‘The mother of justice (δικαιοσύνη) is equality (ισότης)’ (*Spec. Laws* 4:231 [Colson, LCL]).¹⁶ However, the translation ‘the mother of justice is fairness’ obscures Philo’s logic. Of course, Philo believes justice entails fairness, but here he is arguing that just conduct is rooted in the fundamental principle of equality that pervades nature. He explains, ‘All things in heaven and earth have been ordered aright by equality (ισότης) under immovable laws and statutes’ (4:232). To support this assertion, Philo points to the ‘equality’ (ισότης) in the length of day and night during the equinoxes, as well as the ‘equality’ (ισότης) in the time span of the waxing and waning of the moon (4:232-34). Once again, therefore, the cited passage merely provides further evidence that *ισότης* means ‘equality’.

Finally, lexicographers cite the following passage by Diogenes Laertius:

Each of the other virtues is concerned with its own proper sphere. To wisdom are subordinate good counsel and understanding; to temperance, good discipline and orderliness; to justice (δικαιοσύνη), equality (ισότης) and fair-mindedness (εὐγνώμοσύνη); to courage, constancy and vigour. (*Lives* 7:126 [Hicks, LCL])¹⁷

Here, as in the passage from Diodorus Siculus cited above, the context is vague enough to permit the translation ‘fairness’. Once again, however, the translation ‘equality’ works just as well.

In conclusion, in none of the passages cited by the lexicographers is the translation of *ισότης* as ‘fairness’ to be preferred over the normal translation, ‘equality’. By way of contrast, consider the related term *ἴσος*. For this term, lexicographers have identified multiple passages in which the translation ‘fair’ is clearly superior to the normal translation,

¹⁴ Danker et al., BDAG, 481. The lexicographers cite this text by the page and line number of W. Kroll’s edition (332.34). W. Kroll, ed., *Vettii Valentis Anthologiarum Libri* (Berlin: Apud Weidmannos, 1908).

¹⁵ Mark Riley, *Vettius Valens: Anthologies* (<http://www.csus.edu/indiv/r/rileymt/vettius%20valens%20entire.pdf>, accessed 4 March 2017): 26. Note that *ισότης* occurs in one other passage in Vettius Valens, where it is also used in the context of measuring equal distances (*Anthologies* 2.3.5).

¹⁶ Stählin, *TDNT*, 354; Danker et al., BDAG, 481. Stählin cites several other passages in Philo that express a similar relationship between δικαιοσύνη (*dikaiosyné*) and *ισότης* (*Planting* 122; *Heir* 163; *Embassy* 85).

¹⁷ Stählin, *TDNT*, 354; Danker et al., BDAG, 481.

‘equal’. For example, lexicographers cite the following passage from Polybius: ‘They begged the legates themselves to act as fair (ἴσος) and just judges in the matter’ (*Hist.* 24:15:3 [Paton, LCL]).¹⁸ Concerning ἰσότης, however, lexicographers have failed to produce any such text. When their cited passages are carefully examined in context, the translation ‘fairness’ is never found superior to the normal translation, ‘equality’. On the contrary, while two of the texts are vague enough to permit either translation (Diodorus Siculus, *Lib. Hist.* 5:71:2; Diogenes Laertius, *Lives* 7:126), in four of the texts the context indicates that ἰσότης means ‘equality’ instead of merely ‘fairness’ (Menander, *Mon.* 259; Philo, *Spec. Laws* 4:231; Polybius, *Hist.* 2:38:8; Vettius Valens, *Anthologies* 9:2:43). Furthermore, the only two passages that reference slavery contrast that state with ἰσότης (Diodorus Siculus, *Lib. Hist.* 5:71:2; Polybius, *Hist.* 2:38:8). Thus, contrary to Moo, lexicographers have certainly not demonstrated that ἰσότης ‘was used in secular Greek to refer to the fair treatment of slaves’.¹⁹

4. The Context of Colossians 4:1

As demonstrated above, the evidence of the extant Greek literature supports the translation of ἰσότης as ‘equality’. Nevertheless, does the specific context of Colossians 4:1 preclude such an understanding of the term? Margaret MacDonald argues ‘Given the context of Colossians 3:18–4:1 where slavery is clearly not abolished, the term is more likely to refer to equity in the treatment of slaves than to true equality.’²⁰

The problem with this argument is seen when one examines the contemporaneous exhortations of Seneca. In his forty-seventh epistle to Lucilius, Seneca challenges those who view slaves with disdain:

‘They are slaves,’ people declare. Nay, rather they are men. ‘Slaves!’ No, comrades. ‘Slaves!’ No, they are unpretentious friends. ‘Slaves!’ No, they are our fellow-slaves, if one reflects that Fortune has equal rights over slaves and free men alike ... He whom you call your slave sprang from the same stock, is smiled upon by the same skies, and on equal terms with yourself breathes, lives, and dies. (*Ep.* 47:1,10 [Gummere, LCL])

¹⁸ Stählin, *TDNT*, 354; Liddell, Scott, and Jones, ‘ἴσος’, *LSJ*, 839.

¹⁹ Moo, *Colossians and to Philemon*, 316-17.

²⁰ MacDonald, ‘Slavery, Sexuality and House Churches’, 106.

Seneca argues further that there is no intrinsic difference between a slave and a free person, for through the vicissitudes of fortune the master may one day become a slave (47:12; see also 9-10). Moreover, the ‘free’ person may already be enslaved to his or her passions, while the soul of the ‘slave’ may be free (47:17).²¹

Based on this conception of equality, Seneca exhorts masters to do more than treat their slaves fairly. In a discussion on the proper treatment of slaves, Plato gives the following advice:

We ought to punish slaves justly, and not to make them conceited by merely admonishing them as we would free men. An address to a servant should be mostly a simple command: there should be no jesting with servants, either male or female, for by a course of excessively foolish indulgence in their treatment of their slaves, masters often make life harder both for themselves, as rulers, and for their slaves, as subject to rule. (*Leg.* 6:777d-e [Bury, LCL])

In contrast to such advice, Seneca urges masters to dine with their slaves and treat them as friends.

Associate with your slave on kindly, even on affable, terms; let him talk with you, plan with you, live with you ... You need not ... hunt for friends only in the forum or in the Senate-house; if you are careful and attentive, you will find them at home also. (47:13-16)

This is particularly striking, given Seneca’s previous advice to Lucilius concerning friendship:

Ponder for a long time whether you shall admit a given person to your friendship; but when you have decided to admit him, welcome him with all your heart and soul. Speak as boldly with him as with yourself ... Why need I keep back any words in the presence of my friend? Why should I not regard myself as alone when in his company? (3:2-3)

Furthermore, in the epistle immediately following his epistle on slavery, Seneca reminds Lucilius ‘I am not your friend unless whatever is at issue concerning you is my concern also. Friendship produces between us a partnership in all our interests’ (48:2).

²¹ Epictetus, a former slave and younger contemporary of Seneca, makes a similar argument while urging masters ‘to refrain from anger and not to explode’ when their slaves commit some negligence. Addressing masters, Epictetus states ‘Slave, will you not bear with your own brother, who has Zeus as his progenitor and is, as it were, a son born of the same seed as yourself and of the same sowing from above ... Do you not remember what you are, and over whom you rule – that they are kinsmen, that they are brothers by nature, that they are the offspring of Zeus?’ (*Diatr.* 1.13 [Oldfather, LCL]). This passage was brought to my attention by Peter Garnsey, *Ideas of Slavery from Aristotle to Augustine* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996): 143.

In urging masters to associate with their slaves, Seneca holds up the custom of the Saturnalia as a model for regular behaviour (47:14). During the Saturnalia, the most popular Roman festival, slaves were allowed to dine with their masters and speak their opinions openly.²² As Plutarch explains, this custom was understood by many as ‘a reminder of the equality which characterized the famous Saturnian age, when there was neither slave nor master, but all were regarded as kinsmen and equals’ (*Comp. Lyc. Num.* 1:5 [Perrin, LCL]).²³

Now, of course, the modern reader will immediately spot an inconsistency here. If all people are equal, as Seneca argues, then the whole system of slavery is undone. Masters should not merely befriend their slaves – they should liberate them. Nevertheless, as inconsistent as Seneca’s epistle may be, here it stands. Seneca is clearly calling for something more radical than the fair treatment of slaves – he is calling for slaves to be treated as equals. MacDonald’s argument is thus based on a false dichotomy. Even if ἰσότης in Colossians 4:1 does not entail the abolition of slavery, one cannot conclude that ἰσότης involves nothing more than fair treatment. At the very least, we must consider the possibility that Colossians 4:1 calls for the same sort of equality envisioned by Seneca.

Furthermore, Colossians contains hints that the ‘equality’ envisioned in 4:1 is even more radical than the behaviour described by Seneca. First, nothing in Seneca’s epistle is quite as strong as the declaration ‘Here there cannot be Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave, free man’ (3:11, RSV). Second, while Seneca urges the master to be as a benevolent ‘father’ to his slaves (47:14), Colossians, in accord with the rest of the NT, routinely describes Christians as ‘brothers’ (1:1,2; 4:7,9,15). Third, immediately after the stunning declaration of 3:11, the author gives the following exhortation:

Put on ... compassion, kindness, lowliness, meekness, and patience, forbearing one another and, if one has a complaint against another, forgiving each other; as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. And above all these put on love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony. (3:12-14, RSV)

²² On the popularity of the Saturnalia, see Plutarch, *Quaest. rom.* 34; Seneca, *Ep.* 18.1; Pliny, *Ep.* 17.24. On the temporary liberties granted to slaves, see Ausonius, *Eclogues* 23.15-16; Horace, *Sat.* 2.7.4-5; Dio Cassius, *Roman History* 60.19.3; Lucian, *Sat.* 5; etc.

²³ See also Lucian, *Sat.* 7; Justinus, *Epitome* 43.1.3-4; Macrobius, *Saturnalia* 1.7.26.

While Seneca advises masters not to be ‘proudly superior’ (47:17) these commands, particularly the command to put on ‘lowliness’, go somewhat further.

To be clear, I am not suggesting that the author of Colossians is demanding the abolition of slavery.²⁴ However, the author does appear to envision a community in which Christian masters treat their slaves as equals. We should note here that one countercultural behaviour recommended by Seneca was already a regular feature of Christian gatherings: masters and slaves evidently shared a meal together. In discussing Paul’s invective against divisions in the Lord’s Supper (1 Cor. 11:17-34), Gerd Theissen points to Pliny’s encounter with a wealthy host who served meaner fare to those of lower social standing.²⁵ Pliny objects to such a practice, stating: ‘I serve the same to everyone, for when I invite guests it is for a meal, not to make class distinctions; I have brought them as equals to the same table, so I give them the same treatment in everything.’ At this point, Pliny’s interlocutor asks, ‘Even the freedmen?’ Pliny replies, ‘Of course, for then they are my fellow diners, not freedmen’ (*Ep.* 2:6:3-4 [Radice, LCL]). The Christian community, however, exceeded even Pliny’s ideals, for the wealthy evidently ate not only with freedmen, but also with slaves (two of whom were tortured by this same Pliny [*Ep.* 10:96:7-8]).

In summary, given the theology expressed in Colossians and the regular table fellowship practised by the Christian community, we have no reason to suppose that the author of Colossians had a view of slavery that was any less enlightened than the view expressed by Seneca. Thus we have no reason to suppose that the author of Colossians could not have, like Seneca, exhorted masters to treat their slaves as equals. Of course, modern readers may find such sentiments condescending, inauthentic, or inadequate, but all such judgements are irrelevant to the translation of Colossians 4:1.

²⁴ For a survey of scholarship on the nature of Graeco-Roman slavery and Paul’s attitude towards the institution, see John Byron, *Recent Research on Paul and Slavery* (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix, 2008).

²⁵ Gerd Theissen, *The Social Setting of Pauline Christianity: Essays on Corinth* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1982): 156-57.

5. Conclusion and Implications

The well-attested term *ισότης* means ‘equality’. When examined in context, those passages that are purported to attest an alternate meaning are found to do no such thing. Furthermore, Seneca’s forty-seventh epistle demonstrates that an enlightened first-century moralist could call for masters to treat slaves as equals without thereby demanding the abolition of slavery. The context of the Colossian *Haustafel* thus provides no basis for rejecting the evidence of the extant Greek literature and translating *ισότης* as ‘fairness’. Colossians 4:1 should be translated as follows: ‘Masters, grant slaves justice and equality.’

This conclusion has important implications not only for Bible translators but also for scholars attempting to reconstruct the situation at Colossae. In a study entitled *The Origin and Intention of the Colossian Haustafel*, James E. Crouch concludes that the authors of the *Haustafel* were responding to Christian slaves who took the theology of Galatians 3:28 too literally. ‘It is one thing for a Christian slave to act equal in the gathering of the church,’ Crouch explains. ‘It is quite another situation, however, when the same slave asserts his equality in society.’ Thus Crouch suggests that the *Haustafel* was ‘a weapon created for use by “orthodox” Christianity in its struggle with enthusiastic heresies’.²⁶ However, our findings call into serious question the thesis that this text was composed by an author whose intent was to *suppress* equality between master and slave.

Furthermore, our findings have important implications for scholars attempting to describe early Christian attitudes towards slavery. In a study entitled *Slavery in Early Christianity*, Jennifer A. Glancy argues that ‘from the perspective of wider Greco-Roman culture’ beating slaves for sub-standard work or even using slaves as objects of sexual gratification ‘falls easily within the parameters of “just and fair” behavior’. Thus, in reference to Colossians 4:1, Glancy concludes, ‘Without specification of what [the author] meant by “just and fair” conduct, his readers would have resorted to the codes of behavior with which they had lived all their lives.’²⁷ Wayne A. Meeks, J. Albert Harrill, and Hector Avalos also conclude that the NT *Haustafeln* do not

²⁶ James Ensign Crouch, *The Origin and Intention of the Colossian Haustafel* (FRLANT, 109; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1972): 150-51.

²⁷ Jennifer A. Glancy, *Slavery in Early Christianity* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2006): 143-44. So also James Albert Harrill, *Slaves in the New Testament: Literary, Social, and Moral Dimensions* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2006): 105-109.

offer any significant challenge to first-century norms.²⁸ However, our findings indicate that those who first heard τὸ δίκαιον καὶ τὴν ἰσότητα τοῖς δούλοις παρέχεσθε would have found the words more provocative and countercultural than Glancy suggests.

²⁸ Wayne A. Meeks, 'The "Haustafeln" and American Slavery: A Hermeneutical Challenge', in *Theology and Ethics in Paul and His Interpreters: Essays in Honor of Victor Paul Furnish* (Nashville, Tennessee: Abingdon, 1996): 232-53; Harrill, *Slaves in the New Testament*, 85-117; Hector Avalos, *Slavery, Abolitionism, and the Ethics of Biblical Scholarship* (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix, 2011): 96-138.