Symbolic Goods as Media of Exchange
in Paul's Gift Economy

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I. Economies of Symbolic Goods

In the wake of Paul Veyne’s *Le Pain et le cirque* (1976), historians of Mediterranean antiquity have recognized that systems characterized by reciprocity served to reproduce forms of social and political order. This system operated according to the logic of exchange; gifts and favors, whether personal or political, obliged the recipient to respond with a gift or favor in return. Both gift and counter-gift could take various forms, including money, material goods, public honor and recognition, and access to social networks. Inasmuch as these gifts and counter-gifts consisted of exchanges in material goods and services involving human labor, their regular transmission functioned as an economic system. Gift exchange, however, was not conducted on a merchantile basis, according to fixed rates of exchange and dates of repayment. Neither the exact value of the reciprocal gift nor the date on which it would be presented was predetermined.

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reciprocity system served an economic function, albeit in accordance with non-merchantile principles.

This paper will argue that there also existed another type of exchangeable product within the reciprocity systems of Mediterranean antiquity. This type, the “religious symbolic good,” consists of benefits ostensibly mediated by the power of a divine being. Since this type involves non-material, linguistically mediated productions, it falls into the broader category of “symbolic goods” identified by sociologist Pierre Bourdieu. In his discussion of the economy of the Catholic Church, Bourdieu treats the “goods of salvation” (i.e., the bestowal of a beatific afterlife) as an exchangeable product, access to which is controlled by the monopoly of a clerical elite. Reciprocal systems in which symbolic productions play a constitutive role are designated “economies of symbolic goods.”

The argument to be developed in this paper proceeds in two steps. First, based on a treatise of Seneca the Younger, the paper outlines the main tenets of the system of reciprocity as it was practiced in Greco-Roman antiquity. A system of reciprocity is salutary for the operation of economies of symbolic goods, as it provides the conditions under which religious discourse may function as a product exchangeable with other products. Secondly, the paper considers one writer of this period, Paul of Tarsus, as a test case to determine whether religious economies of symbolic goods were operative in early Christian communities. Paul, I will argue, describes situations in which religious discourse, material goods, and services involving human labor are held to be exchangeable within the context of an ethic of reciprocity. Paul, in other words, operates

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within the framework of a religious economy of symbolic goods. Although other Pauline
texts are pertinent, in the interest of time only three will be briefly surveyed: Romans,
Second Corinthians, and Philemon.

II. Seneca on Systems of Reciprocity

During the latter half of the first century CE, the Roman rhetorician and statesman
Seneca wrote a sustained reflection on the theory and practice of gift-giving, *De
Beneficiis* (“On Benefits”). Seneca describes a system of reciprocity similar to those
which have been attested in a variety of cultural contexts. He outlines a simple principle:
a gift given elicits a return from the recipient. This principle is demonstrated in artistic
depictions of the Graces, who were often portrayed as three youthful sisters dressed in
loose, transparent veils and dancing hand in hand. Seneca interprets the picture
allegorically:

Why do the sisters hand in hand dance in a ring which returns upon itself?
For the reason that a benefit (*beneficium*) passing in its course from hand to
hand returns nevertheless to the giver (*ad dantem revertitur*); the beauty of
the whole is destroyed if the course is anywhere broken, and it has most
beauty if it is continuous and maintains an uninterrupted succession.

Gifts, ideally, pass “from hand to hand,” eventually returning to their giver. For the
system to operate successfully, it must “maintain an uninterrupted succession” (i.e., gifts

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6 Regions in which reciprocity systems have been described include the ancient
Mediterranean, Melanesia and Polynesia, southeast Asia, the Middle East, Europe, Latin
America, and the United States. These and other regions are discussed in Marcel Mauss’
seminal work on reciprocity, *The Gift: The Form and Reason for Exchange in Archaic
Societies* (New York and London: W. W. Norton, 1990); trans. by W. D. Halls of *Essai
sur le don, forme et raison de l’échange dans le sociétés archaïques* (Paris: Presses
Universitaires de France, 1950 [1925]) and Eisenstadt and Roniger, *Patrons, Clients, and
Friends*. Alvin Gouldner regards reciprocity as a universal norm, while recognizing that
its forms are culturally specific (“The Norm of Reciprocity: A Preliminary Statement” in
Steffen Schmidt, et al., eds., *Friends, Followers, and Factions: A Reader in Political
Clientelism* [Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London: University of California Press, 1977],
28–43). For an overview of Seneca’s views on reciprocity, see Miriam Griffin, “*De
Beneficiis* and Roman Society,” *JRS* 93 (2003), 92–113.

7 Translations from Seneca are those of J. W. Basore, *Seneca: Moral Essays* (3 vols.,
1964], 3:13, 15), in some cases slightly modified.
given must be reciprocated). Ingratitude, for Seneca, is the ultimate vice (1.1.2; 1.10.4; 3.1.1; 3.6.1–2), because it interrupts the pattern in which gift is followed by counter-gift. When there is no gratitude, no return is made; the ring of the Graces is broken.

Although Seneca defines a benefit (beneficium) as a gift concerning which the giver takes no thought of return (2.31.2; 1.1.9; 1.2.4), it is clear that, in his view, the receiver ought to have the thought of return uppermost in his mind: “The man who intends to be grateful, immediately, while he is receiving, should turn his thought to repaying” (2.25.3). There is a stark contrast between the (ideal) attitudes of giver and receiver: “[T]he one should be taught to make no record of the amount, the other to feel indebted for more than the amount” (1.4.2–4). Ingratitude, or the refusal to perceive oneself as indebted to a gift-giver, is the paradigmatic vice (1.1.2; 1.10.4; 3.1.1; 3.6.1–2). The giver is entitled to a return, above all in the form of gratitude (gratia) from the recipient, but also—as Seneca is at pains to point out—in the form of a material counter-gift (2.35.1). Although it is bad form for the giver to acknowledge his expectation of a return (1.2.3; 2.6.2; 2.10.4), nonetheless the reciprocity system demands that one be made. Giving a benefit is analogous to farming, writes Seneca, one must cultivate it—while avoiding the appearance of doing so—from the time of planting until harvest. Eventually, a well-cultivated benefit yields a healthy return (2.11.4).

The gift, in economic terms, is analogous to a loan. As with a loan, the giving of a gift places the recipient under a debt. Seneca muses on the sentiment aroused by being placed under such an obligation: “[S]ometimes, not merely after having received benefits, but because we have received them, we consider the givers our worst enemies” (3.1.1). Bourdieu notes a Kabyle proverb that expresses the same sentiment: “A gift is a misfortune,” the proverb goes, because it must be repaid.

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8 There are, however, distinctions to be made. Unlike loans, in the case of gifts, no written accounts are kept, no legal sanctions enforce a return, and no time limit is specified within which the return must take place. There is always a danger that, due to ingratitude, a gift may not be reciprocated.

However, the counter-gift need not be repaid with the same currency in which the original gift was made. While some types of reciprocity did proceed on the basis of an exchange of similar material goods, in other cases, a material gift was reciprocated in the form of social support or the bestowal of honor upon the gift-giver. Numerous inscriptions attest the bestowal of public honors in the form of proclamations, the production of statues, honorific inscriptions, and the like in return for public service or material benefits bestowed.¹⁰ Such forms of reciprocation, which do not consist of a return in kind (e.g., material good for material good), are nonetheless viewed as providing adequate recompense for the original donation.

Both ancient practice and modern scholarship have recognized that the system of reciprocity need not, and often does not, consist of exchanges in which the counter-gift represents a type of product identical with that of the original gift. This raises the questions: how does one determine which cultural products, in any given milieu, are accorded a value such that they might be traded within a system of reciprocal exchange, thus marking them as goods recognized within that system? Were the benefits posited by religious discourse, which existed not in material form, but in the non-material forms of discourse and imagination, accorded a value that enabled them to enter, as goods, into an economic system based on reciprocal exchange? To answer these questions, we consider three letters of Paul of Tarsus as test cases.

III. Test Cases: Pauline Epistles

Paul of Tarsus, I will argue, describes an economy of symbolic goods operative within early Christian communities. This economy was based on the ideals of reciprocity

¹⁰ The inscriptions assembled by Frederick W. Danker in Benefactor: Epigraphic Study of a Graeco-Roman and New Testament Semantic Field (St. Louis, MO: Clayton Publishing House, 1982) are illustrative. They attest to reciprocal interactions in which the return constitutes a medium of exchange different from that of the original donation. For example, public honors are bestowed in return for valued services of human labor (inscriptions #3, 9, 16, 21), public honors are bestowed in return for material benefaction and (in some cases) public service (#11, 12, 17, 20, 23, 24, 33, 35, 39), and divine honors (sacrifices, dedication of altars or statues in temples) are bestowed in return for military service (#30) or public benefaction (#31, 44). Compare also Saller, Personal Patronage, 29.
practiced throughout the Mediterranean region in antiquity. Paul’s own reliance on the ethic of reciprocity has been well established in several recent studies, including those of G. W. Peterman, Stephan Joubert, James Harrison, and Troels Engberg-Pedersen. What has not yet been explored is Paul’s use of religious symbolic goods within this system of exchange.

Paul assumes that not only monetary goods, but also symbolic goods are exchangeable within the reciprocity system. He treats religious symbolic goods (e.g., promises of an ameliorated afterlife) as exchangeable with other goods recognized within the system (i.e., currency, comestibles, the mobilization of human labor, etc.). In Paul’s system, the benefit (χάρις) ostensibly granted by the god of Israel is identified with the justification


of sinners resulting from Jesus’ crucifixion; previous transgressions against covenantal norms are pardoned (Gal 2:19–21; 2 Cor 5:21–6:1; Rom 3:24–26; 5:15, 17). This justification, Paul supposes, has stunning results, including acquittal at the god of Israel’s universal judgment, an event that Paul perceived as imminent (1 Thess 4:13–18), and a home in the heavens in a glorified, or luminous, and thus godlike, body (Rom 5:2; cf. 1 Cor 15:35–57). These non-material benefits, construed as the direct result of a χάρις bestowed by Israel’s god, exist only in symbolic form, in discourse and the imagination.

Paul, as we will see, accorded these discursive benefits a material exchange value.

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14 Although Paul describes reciprocal relationships in term of patronage, he also employs friendship *topoi* to describe such relationships. For use of friendship themes in Pauline literature, see the survey of Alan C. Mitchell, “‘Greet the Friends by Name’: New Testament Evidence for the Greco-Roman *Topos* on Friendship” in John T. Fitzgerald, ed., *Greco-Roman Perspectives on Friendship* (SBL Resources for Biblical Study 34; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1997), 225–262 and John T. Fitzgerald, “Paul and Friendship” in J. Paul Sampley, ed., *Paul in the Greco-Roman World: A Handbook* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 2003), 319–343. However, as Richard Saller points out, socially asymmetrical patron-client relationships were sometimes euphemized as instances of (ostensibly symmetrical) “friendship” in order to avoid shaming the inferior party by labeling him a client (“Patronage and Friendship,” 49–62; cf. also Griffin, “*De Beneficiis* and Roman Society,” 97, 109–112). Both patron-client and “friendship” relationships were governed by the principles of reciprocity outlined by Seneca.

15 That the divine benefits posited by Paul existed only in symbolic form is demonstrable. The postulated benefits rely on two false assumptions: 1) the imminence of the apocalyptic judgment (e.g., 1 Thess 4:13–18; Rom 2:5–7; 9:27–29; 12:19); and 2) a geocentric cosmological view, such that a heavenly world was construed as existing some finite distance above the surface of the earth (implied in the spatial language of 1 Thess 4:16–17; 2 Cor 12:1–4; Gal 4:25–26; Phil 1:9–10; 3:14, 20). On the importance of this cosmology for Hellenistic religions in general, see Luther H. Martin, *Hellenistic Religions: An Introduction* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987), 6–9; see also Ptolemy, *Tetrabiblos*; Cicero, *Republic* 6.17. The view is parodied in Lucian of Samosata’s *Icaromenippus*. 
IV. The Collection for the Jerusalem Church

In the context of a discussion of a collection of funds from Gentile churches to be delivered to the Jerusalem church, Paul formulates a principle of exchangeability between material and symbolic goods:

For [the churches in] Macedonia and Achaia were pleased to establish a certain fellowship with the poor among the saints who are in Jerusalem. They were pleased; indeed, they stand in debt to them (ṅφειλέται εἰςίν αὐτῶν), for if they (i.e., the Jerusalem church) have shared with the Gentiles their spiritual things (τὰ πνευματικά αὐτῶν), they (i.e., the Gentiles) are obligated (ṅφειλοῦσιν) to render service to them even in material things (ἐν τοῖς σάρκικοῖς; Rom 15:26–27).

According to this formulation, the members of the Jerusalem church have bestowed on the Gentiles their “spiritual things” (τὰ πνευματικα). This act of gift-giving obliges the recipient to return a gift. In Paul’s language, as the result of Jerusalem’s gift, the Gentiles “stand in debt” to them. This debt need not be repaid in kind (i.e., “spiritual things” for “spiritual things”); material goods (τὰ σάρκικα) constitute a suitable return. In Paul’s economy of symbolic goods, for which Rom 15:27 stands as an excellent summary, “spiritual things” and “material things” stand in a relationship of exchangeability. “Spiritual things” are accorded material value.

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16 There are several studies on Paul’s collection for Jerusalem, including Dieter Georgi, Remembering the Poor: The History of Paul’s Collection for Jerusalem (Nashville: Abingdon, 1992); Keith F. Nickle, The Collection: A Study in Paul’s Strategy (Studies in Biblical Theology 48; Naperville, IL: Allenson, 1966); Joubert, Paul as Benefactor; Steven J. Friesen, “Paul and Economics: The Jerusalem Collection as an Alternative to Patronage,” in Mark D. Given, ed., Paul Unbound: Other Perspectives on the Apostle (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2010), 27–54; and, most recently, Bruce W. Longenecker, Remember the Poor: Paul, Poverty, and the Greco-Roman World (Grand Rapids and Cambridge, UK: Eerdmans, 2010). Although David Downs views the collection as a response to an economic crisis, he himself notes that the extended time span during which the collection was undertaken rendered it unsuitable as a form of emergency relief (The Offering of the Gentiles, 25). Longenecker views the collection as an instance of an abiding early Christian concern that the economically advantaged should supply funding (i.e., alms) to the disadvantaged (Remember the Poor, 135–219).

17 The translation of Rom 15:26–27 is mine. All other translations of Pauline epistles used in this paper are those of the NRSV, in some cases slightly modified.
A year or two prior to penning his succinct formulation of the economy of symbolic goods in Rom 15:27, Paul treated the subject of the Gentile contribution to the Jerusalem church in the “Collection Letters” in 2 Cor 8–9. These letters, brought together in the canonical version of Second Corinthians, appeal to the congregations in Corinth and Achaia (esp. Cenchreae) to make a weekly contribution to a fund that Paul would eventually collect and deliver to the Jerusalem church (cf. 1 Cor 16:1–4; Rom 15:25–26). As in Rom 15:27, Paul formulates a vision in which material goods (in the form of currency) are viewed as exchangeable with symbolic goods. Second Corinthians 9:6–15 illustrates the point.

After giving notice that he has sent an unnamed “brother” to Achaia in order to ensure that regular contributions are being made to the collection in advance of his visit to retrieve the amassed sum, Paul assures the reader that, despite this precaution, the collection is not carried out under compulsion (9:7), nor as a pretext for personal greed.

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19 I favor the theory that 2 Cor 8–9 originally represented independent letters that were brought together with other letters in the canonical version of Second Corinthians. For overviews of various partition theories, see Margaret Thrall, The Second Epistle to the Corinthians (2 vols., ICC; Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1994, 2000) 1:1–49; Reimund Bieringer, “Teilungshypothesen zum 2. Korintherbrief. Ein Forschungsüberblick” in Reimund Bieringer and Jan Lambrecht, Studies on 2 Corinthians (BETL 112; Leuven: Leuven University Press, 1994), 67–105; Hans Dieter Betz, 2 Corinthians 8 and 9: A Commentary on Two Administrative Letters of the Apostle Paul (Hermeneia; Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1985), 3–36. None of the arguments advanced in this paper hinge on this partition theory, or on the order in which the various parts of Second Corinthians were written.

Rather, it is undertaken as a “good deed” (ἔργον ἀγαθόν) among the Achaian congregation. “God,” after all, “loves a cheerful giver,” Paul reminds his addressees (9:7, citing Prov. 22:8a LXX). But it is not only divine approval that is to motivate the Achaians’ gift to Jerusalem:

Paul describes the principle of reciprocity using an agrarian metaphor: he who sows abundantly reaps abundantly. It is incumbent upon the Achaians to “sow abundantly” (i.e., to contribute lavishly to Jerusalem), because the material goods that Achaia has obtained are themselves gifts from God, who “supplies seed to the sower and bread for food.” The Achaians’ gift will not go unrewarded: God will “increase the harvest of [their] righteousness”; they will be “enriched in every way.” The idea expressed in Paul’s agrarian metaphor parallels that of Seneca’s image of the dancing Graces: the system of reciprocity “has most beauty if it is continuous and maintains an uninterrupted succession.” In response to the divine benefaction of material goods, the Achaians are to donate material goods to those in Jerusalem, in response to which Israel’s god will provide further benefactions.

Bruce Longenecker observes that the related phrase, ἔργαζεσθαι το ἀγαθόν, which Paul uses in Gal 6:10, “is (virtually) technical terminology in the ancient world for bestowing material benefits on others” (Remember the Poor, 163).

On the background of the agrarian imagery, see the excursus of Hans Dieter Betz in 2 Corinthians 8 and 9, 98–100, where he notes that Paul construes Achaia’s gift to Jerusalem in a manner analogous to a sacrifice for a god: “The gift given to the divinity represents a thank-offering for gifts received, accompanied by the expectation of future blessings” (99).
The letter’s final thanksgiving, “Thanks be to God for his indescribable gift,” alludes to the Achaians’ generosity (ἀπλότης), itself construed as a divine gift, as well as the χάρις constituted by Jesus’ assumption of human form, to which allusion is made in 2 Cor 8:9 (cf. Phil 2:6–8), in order to mediate salvation from eschatological judgment (1 Thess 1:10; Rom 2:5). The material and symbolic benefactions ostensibly provided to the Achaians by the god of Israel are adequately recompensed by their material donations to Jerusalem; these, in turn, are rewarded with further spiritual (“the harvest of your righteousness”) and material (“enriched in every way”) benefits, to be provided by Paul’s god. Symbolic benefactions, which exist discursively in the form of promise and assurance, are treated as exchangeable with material donations.

V. Paul’s Letter to Philemon

Another of Paul’s letters in which an economy of symbolic goods comes into play is that to the slave owner Philemon, written in 55–56 or 62 CE. Paul’s letter to Philemon was occasioned by the departure of a slave, Onesimus, who had either been providing for his needs in prison or who, after having angered his master, had approached Paul in an attempt to persuade him to appeal to Philemon for clemency toward the slave. The letter is addressed to Onesimus’ owner, Philemon, with Aphia and Archippus, functionaries

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within the local house-church, perhaps in Colossae, named as co-addressees.\textsuperscript{25} During the time when Onesimus had been visiting him in prison, Paul had convinced the slave to become a convert to his religious views, thus constituting him as Onesimus’ spiritual “father” (v. 10). Paul’s letter, to be carried by Onesimus on his return trip, makes a request of Philemon, the exact nature of which is not specified:

For this reason, though I am bold enough to command you to do your duty, yet I would rather appeal to you on the basis of love… I am appealing to you for my child, Onesimus, whose father I have become during my imprisonment…. I am sending him, that is, my own heart, back to you. I wanted to keep him with me, so that he might be of service to me (ἵνα… μοι διακονῆι) in your place during my imprisonment for the gospel, but I preferred to do nothing without your consent, in order that your good deed might be voluntary and not something forced…. Confident of your obedience, I am writing to you, knowing that you will do even more than I say (vv. 8–14, 21).

It is clear that Paul wishes for Philemon to send Onesimus back to Paul while in prison.\textsuperscript{26} Whether he is asking for Philemon to manumit Onesimus or to send him back as a slave to serve Paul has been the subject of debate.\textsuperscript{27} Perhaps Paul intentionally framed his

\textsuperscript{25} The location of the addressees cannot be established with any certainty. The mention of Onesimus in Colossians 4:7 have led some to the conclusion that Onesimus and Philemon were located there. However, uncertainties about the authorship of Colossians render this evidence dubious (see Meeks and Fitzgerald, The Writings, 95–96; Roetzel, The Letters, 116–117).

\textsuperscript{26} Winter notes that the formula παρακαλῶν τινί περί τινος used in v. 10 can be construed as a request for Onesimus (i.e., that he be allowed serve Paul), the preposition περί signaling the object of the request (“Paul’s Letter,” 6–7). Scott S. Elliott (“‘Thanks but No Thanks’: Tact, Persuasion, and the Negotiation of Power in Paul’s Letter to Philemon,” \textit{NTS} 57 [2010], 51–74, citation p. 59) takes a contrary view, arguing that, in sending Onesimus back to Philemon, “Paul is returning a gift of patronage to his would-be patron, [and] his expressions of reluctance and the wish that he could keep Onesimus for himself can be read as a rather clever way of saying, ‘Thanks, but no thanks’” [i.e., he does not wish to retain Onesimus’ services]. Although I agree that Paul resists any implication that Philemon could be construed as his patron—in fact, Paul assumes the opposite (v. 19; cp. the use of the language of command and obedience in vv. 8 and 21, and the imperative of v. 22)—verses 13–14 imply that Paul wishes to retain the slave’s service in some capacity, but refuses to humiliate Philemon by commanding it.

\textsuperscript{27} For overviews, see Barth and Blanke, The Letter to Philemon, 200–224; Dunn, The Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon, 299–307; Thurston and Ryan, Philippians and Philemon, 181–182; Allen Dwight Callahan, Embassy of Onesimus: The Letter of
request ambiguously in order to leave to the judgment of Philemon how best to fulfill his request ("knowing that you will do even more than I say").

From the standpoint of Paul’s economy of symbolic goods, the most significant statements occur in vv. 18–20:

So, if you consider me your partner, welcome him as you would welcome me. If he has wronged you in any way, or owes you anything (ὀφείλει [σε]), charge that to my account (τοῦτο ἔμωι ἔλλόγα). I, Paul, am writing this with my own hand: I will repay it (ἐγὼ ἀποτίσω). I say nothing about your owing me even your own self (καὶ σεαυτόν μοι προσφέρεις). Yes, brother, let me have this benefit from you (ἐγὼ σου ὄναμα) in the Lord!

Paul uses the language of business transaction; both he and Philemon keep accounts in their dealings. Paul is willing to charge to his own account any debt incurred by Onesimus (v. 18). Paul indicates that he is creditworthy; he will repay the debt (v. 19). Philemon’s account, however, stands in the red, as he owes Paul an unrepayable debt: his own life, or “self” (v. 19). Paul alludes to one of the symbolic goods provided by his preaching. In his view, a positive response to his preaching saves one from the worldwide eschatological judgment of God, viewed as imminent (1Thess 1:10; 5:1–10; Rom 1:18; 2:5). Converted on the basis of this preaching, Philemon owes Paul his very life.28 Paul’s less than subtle reminder of Philemon’s indebtedness serves as the basis for his final appeal: “Confident in your obedience, I am writing to you, knowing that you will do even

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28 Dunn, The Epistles to Colossians and to Philemon, 340, writes, “It is universally inferred that the obligation referred to is Philemon’s conversion under Paul’s ministry (cf. Rom 15:27).” More recently, Douglas Moo, in The Letters to Colossians and Philemon (PNTC; Grand Rapids and Cambridge: Eerdmans, 2008), 430–431, writes, “What Paul means by saying that Philemon owes him his very “self” (seauton) is that Philemon is in debt to Paul for his eternal life. Paul was used by God in Philemon’s conversion. . . . In light of this infinite debt that Philemon owes to Paul, he should have no hesitation in accepting Paul’s offer to cover Onesimus’ debts.” It is clear, however, that the “benefit” for which Paul asks (employing the verb ὄναμα) in v. 20 refers to more than his offer to cover Onesimus’ debts. Paul’s reference to his “heart” (μου τὰ σπλάγχνα) in v. 20b recalls v. 12, where he referred to Onesimus in identical terms (τὰ ἐμὰ σπλάγχνα). By implicitly recalling his affection for Onesimus in v. 20, Paul reminds Philemon of his request that Onesimus, Paul’s “heart,” might be allowed to serve him during his imprisonment (v. 13).
more than I say.” Paul implies that, in view of his unrepayable debt, the least Philemon can do is to allow Onesimus to serve Paul for the duration of his stay in prison (cf. v. 13: “I wanted to keep him with me, so that he might be of service to me [ἵνα… μοι διάκονι] in your place during my imprisonment for the gospel…”).

Although Philemon owes him his very “self,” Paul will accept Onesimus’ presence as a substitute (v. 13: “that he might be of service to me in place of you…” [ὑπὲρ σοῦ]). Paul construes Philemon’s “self” as fungible with Onesimus’. Should Philemon allow Onesimus to serve Paul, it is implied, this service would in some measure begin to repay a debt that Philemon could never fully discharge. Paul’s logic rests on the principles of exchangeability and fungibility: Paul’s gift of a religious symbolic good (i.e., his claim to mediate salvation from eschatological judgment) indebts Philemon for his very life, or “self”; Onesimus’ life—or the labor value which that life embodies—may substitute for Philemon’s, and is credited toward discharging the latter’s unrepayable debt to Paul. Paul construes symbolic goods as exchangeable for the products of human labor.

VI. Conclusion

Taking Paul of Tarsus as a test case, this paper has shown that Bourdieu’s concept of the economy of symbolic goods, according to which not only material goods and services involving human labor, but also the symbolic goods described by religious discourse, function within the context of a broader system which, operating according to a logic of reciprocal exchange, may be characterized as a non-merchantile economy. Paul’s letters assume that non-material, discursive products, such as the promise of deliverance from an eschatological judgment imagined to be imminent, may be accorded a material exchange value. He draws attention to these imagined benefits in attempts to motivate, based on the principle of reciprocity, the transmission of material goods and labor services. In the absence of such imagined benefits, these transmissions presumably would fail to take

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29 BDAG, s.v. ὑπὲρ, A.1.c supports this rendering of the prepositional phrase (cp. also Harald Riesenfeld, TDNT 8:512–513). Daniel Wallace adduces ample evidence for the use of ὑπὲρ with the genitive as “bearing a substitutionary force” in Koine Greek. It encroaches on semantic territory reserved for the preposition ὑπὲρ in Attic Greek (Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics: An Exegetical Syntax of the New Testament [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996], 384–387).
place. These symbolic benefits, however, serve as more than a motive for exchange; they are rather a medium of it. Thus, Paul describes an economy in which symbolic goods played an integral part. There could be no better summary of the operation of this economy than that of Rom 15:26–27: if one imparts spiritual things to another, the former is entitled to a reciprocal gift consisting of material things. For Paul, such reciprocal interactions constitute the *sine qua non* of the spiritual enterprise.