Listen to things
More often than beings…¹

Humans have often been things, bought with a price. Sometimes they can escape this situation by buying their freedom or having it bought for them. This is true in our own day. We hear reports of slavery and sex trafficking. Reproductive industries functionally or explicitly buy and sell the human goods required to make future humans: a womb can be rented. Ethnographers report that the poor fear organ trafficking.² In each case, the human, the potential human (the ovum, uterus, and sperm that produce the human), or human body parts are bought, rented, exchanged, or sold, often in an unregulated market. We may also ask what would it mean to write history in light of a sliding scale of being in which distinctions not only between humans as persons and humans as commodities, but also between things, humans, animals, and other creatures, might not be clear.³

Our understanding of the concept of humans as things and commodities (slaves) or as former things and commodities (freedpersons) in Mediterranean antiquity is constrained by a lack of evidence in the literary and archaeological record and data that challenge attempts to quantify ancient slave populations, slave trade, and slave prices. Yet from the quantitative and qualitative data together, we glean an impression of a vast slave trade. Walter Scheidel concludes:

¹ Birago Diop “Spirits” 1989, l. 152. I am grateful to research assistants Katie Todd and Tyler Schwaller, and particularly grateful to the latter for allowing me to cite his unpublished work; to Katherine Shaner for her dissertation and for countless discussions of the topic; and to early readers Joan Branham, David Frankfurter, Andrew Jacobs, AnneMarie Luijendijk, Shelly Matthews, and Larry Wills.
During the millennium from the emergence of the Roman empire to its eventual decline, at least 100 million people – and possibly many more – were seized or sold as slaves throughout the Mediterranean and its hinterlands. In terms of duration and sheer numbers, this process dwarfs both the transatlantic slave trade of European powers and the Arabic slave trade in the Indian Ocean. . . . The modern observer must wonder how to do justice to the colossal scale of human suffering behind these bland observations.4

My chapter takes up the topic of slavery and manumission by focusing on three short sentences in 1 Corinthians. Twice in this letter, Paul and Sosthenes say to the ekklēsia (‘assembly’) of those in Christ at Corinth: “You were bought with a price” (1 Cor 6:20a; 7:23a). And 1 Cor 7:22a contains the only use within the New Testament canon of apeleutheros or its cognates, the technical Greek term for a freedperson: “For the person who is a slave at the time when s/he was called in the Lord is the freedperson of the Lord.” My analysis has three purposes. First, it argues that language of being bought and of being a freedperson would have been particularly significant at Corinth, a colony largely ruled by freedpersons. Second, it shows the complexity of freedperson status and the pricing of slaves in antiquity.5 Third, it seeks to shift New Testament scholarship away from the question of whether Paul advocated that slaves seek freedom or remain in slavery and toward the multiple ways in which those in the Corinthian assembly may have heard his injunctions.6

How would those who first received this letter have understood its use of terminology associated with slavery theologically and materially? We have no reason to assume that eschatological thought rendered Paul, his co-workers, and the ekklēsiai to which he wrote unconcerned about the reality of slavery – that their emphasis on an imminent end made them

4 Scheidel 2011, 309.
5 On historians’ avoidance of the topic of freedpersons and manumission, see Mouritsen 2011, 1–9. I am indebted to Dale Martin’s insistence that we interpret Paul’s language of slavery not only in terms of the idea of the Isaianic “servant/slave of the Lord” (Martin 1990, xiii–xxii; also Westermann 1948, 55–56), but also in light of epigraphic evidence regarding slaves in the Roman world (Martin 1990, 147). For Martin, Paul’s references to himself as slave of Christ are best interpreted in light of the upwardly mobile oikonomos or vilicus who helps to manage his master’s affairs.
6 Jennifer Glancy asks how slaves and others might have interpreted 1 Corinthian’s injunction that porneia (“prostitution, fornication”) must be excised from the community, when slaves could be forced into prostitution or be sexually used by their masters; Glancy 2002, 21–24; Marchal 2011, 749–70. For slavery in New Testament studies: Martin 1990; Harrill 2006; Brooten 2010; Glancy 2002; Briggs 2000 and 2004; Shaner 2012. On the significance of the earliest reception of Paul’s letters (rather than Paul’s intention): Johnson-DeBaufre and Nasrallah 2011; Wire 1990; Schüssler Fiorenza 1999; and Kittredge 2000.