

HOW NOAH, JESUS AND PAUL BECAME CAPTIVATING BIBLICAL  
FIGURES: THE SIDE EFFECTS OF THE CANONIZATION OF SLAVERY  
METAPHORS IN JEWISH AND CHRISTIAN TEXTS\*

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There are few issues on which the civilized world is more in agreement than the firm conviction that slavery is barbarism.<sup>1</sup> It is not only a breach of our most fundamental values, but constitutes a crime against humanity; slavery cannot be tolerated under any circumstances, nor upheld by any sustainable motivation. Even so, it only requires a quick look in the rearview mirror of history to establish that what we today consider abominable was a justifiable phenomenon considered quite in accordance with Christian values less than two centuries ago and a common occurrence throughout the Christian world. Thus Sheila Briggs notes that its sources from antiquity onwards have been transferred into later periods through an aqueduct that links antiquity with later centuries:

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1. On contemporary forms of slavery, see S. Miers, *Slavery in the Twentieth Century: The Evolution of a Global Problem* (Walnut Creek, CA: Altamira, 2003), pp. 415-44.

Christianity can claim the dubious honor of having flourished in two large—if not in fact the two largest—slave societies in human history: the Roman Empire and the American South.<sup>2</sup>

Slavery touches on the central tenets of the Christian faith in at least two ways. On one hand, an overwhelming majority of modern Christians consider slavery to be against the most fundamental of all Christian values. On the other hand, some of the most central Christian concepts stem from precisely the institution of slavery: (1) in his teaching, Jesus, it seems, often compared the relationship between God and human beings to that between a slave-owner and his slaves; and (2) Paul contentedly speaks of himself as ‘a slave of Christ’ (δοῦλος Χριστοῦ). To be a Christian means to belong to God as the slave belongs to his owner: ‘You were bought with a price; do not become slaves of human masters’ (1 Cor. 7.23).<sup>3</sup> It would be easy to give further examples, but these two indicate that a study of the connections between Christianity and slavery will be well worth the effort.<sup>4</sup>

In the debate on the role of the biblical Scriptures for Christian ethics it is sometimes suggested that the Hebrew Bible constitutes an obstacle to a sound ethical teaching. In other words, it is proposed that the most significant aspect of the good news of the New Testament is that it neutralizes the edicts in the Old Testament. Another often-advocated thesis is that the Pauline Epistles demonstrate that there was a kind of ‘fall’ in early Christian times. It is regularly suggested that the earliest form of Christianity was pristine—in the beginning it was all about (to use the

2. S. Briggs, ‘Slavery and Gender’, in J. Schaberg, A. Bach and E. Fuchs (eds.), *On the Cutting Edge: The Study of Women in Biblical Worlds: Essays in Honor of Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza* (New York and London: Continuum, 2003), pp. 171-92 (71).

3. In general, translations of biblical texts in this article follow the New Revised Standard Version.

4. For further examples, see J.G. Davies’s article, ‘Christianity: The Early Church’, in *The Concise Encyclopedia of Living Faiths*, referred to in O. Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death: A Comparative Study* (Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press, 1982), p. 70. For an influential study on the positive, soteriological use of slavery metaphors in Pauline discourse, see D. Martin, *Slavery as Salvation: The Metaphor of Slavery in Pauline Christianity* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1990).

French) *liberté, égalité* and *fraternité*—and that Paul represents the first phase and example of the subsequent ‘fallen’ Christianity.<sup>5</sup>

Among other things, this article intends to scrutinize these two suggestions by relating them to the issue of slavery: (1) is it correct to suggest that the texts in the Hebrew Bible have been used to defend slavery to a higher degree than have the New Testament texts? (2) Similarly, is it accurate to state that the Pauline Epistles de facto create more problems for emancipatory movements than do the Gospels? Before turning to the biblical texts, it is necessary to address the complex but crucial question of how slavery could and should be defined. It is only to be hoped for that those seasoned scholars who regret the lack of comprehensiveness in the following brief discussion on definitions will nevertheless consider it plausible and purposeful.

### *How Should Slavery Be Defined?*

It is of course difficult to define in only a few words a phenomenon that has been present in so many different types of societies and over such a long period of time. (1) A first group of definitions take as its starting-point *work*, that is, the fact that one person has the right to force another person to work (without compensation). This approach is indicated already in the Thirteenth Amendment to the Constitution of the United States of America, which was adopted on December 6, 1865:

Neither slavery nor involuntary servitude, except as a punishment for crime whereof the party shall have been duly convicted, shall exist within the United States, or any place subject to their jurisdiction.<sup>6</sup>

It is interesting to note in this context that the sentence given by a court of law in the USA in accordance with the Thirteenth Amendment is considered a form of slavery, namely the ‘involuntary servitude’ to

5. For a recent, critical and instructive examination of the hypothesis of an ‘unfallen’ early Christian community, see R. Williams, *Why Study the Past? The Quest for the Historical Church* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 2005), esp. pp. 2, 22-23. For an excellent study of the host of apologetic comparisons between paradisiacal Christianity and contemporary religions, see J.Z. Smith, *Drudgery Divine: On the Comparison of Early Christianity and the Religions of Late Antiquity* (London: School of Oriental and African Studies, 1990).

6. The Thirteenth Amendment, see *The Declaration of Independence and the Constitution of the United States with an Introduction by Pauline Maier* (New York: Bantam, 1998), p. 82.

which prison inmates may be subjected. The problem with this group of definitions is that it is focused exclusively on only one aspect of slavery. The most significant difference between a free person and a slave is hardly that the former receives compensation for his or her work. If it were only the case that no pecuniary compensation is paid to the person undertaking the work, all forms of voluntary work would of course have to be included in the concept of slavery. The definition must therefore focus on something other than the undertaking of work free of payment.

(2) Another group of definitions stresses *ownership*, that is, they take the fact that one person owns another as the starting-point. A well-known and frequently quoted formulation is the definition put forward by the League of Nations committee against slavery: ‘the status or condition of a person over whom any or all the powers attaching to the right of ownership are exercised’.<sup>7</sup> This view is better than the first, but even so, it has its shortfalls. An obvious problem arises from the fact that it tends to focus attention on the owner rather than on the person owned. Another difficulty stems from the fact that, throughout history, many agreements have been made about relationships between people, which relationships appear virtually like ownership. Many kings, queens and emperors throughout history would surely have considered their subjects in ways that would fit well into this category of definition. What is required, therefore, is that the starting-point for the definition should focus on the person owned, rather than on the owner.

(3) The third type of definition emphasizes, more than the first two, *the vulnerability of the slave*. The slave is not only someone who involuntarily carries out a piece of work, which could have been rewarded by some compensation; nor is it sufficient to note that one person owns another person. The third group of definitions claims instead that the slave has been reduced to something *less than*—and thus even to something *other than*—a human being, namely to *only* a body, which regularly can, may or even ought to be insulted, beaten and sexually abused. Demosthenes correctly argued that this is the principal difference between a free person and a slave:

καὶ μὴν εἰ ἐθέλοιτε σκέψασθαι τί δοῦλον ἢ ἐλεύθερον εἶναι διαφέρει, τοῦτο μέγιστον ἂν εὔροιτε, ὅτι τοῖς μὲν δούλοις τὸ σῶμα τῶν ἀδικημάτων ἀπάντων ὑπεύθυνόν ἐστι, τοῖς δ’ ἐλευθέροις, κἂν τὰ μέγιστ’ ἀτυχῶσιν, τοῦτο γ’ ἔνεστι σῶσαι.

7. Quoted in Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death*, p. 21.

Indeed, if you wanted to contrast the slave and the freedman, you would find the most important distinction in the fact that slaves are responsible in person for all offences, while freedmen, even in the most unfortunate circumstances, can protect their persons.<sup>8</sup>

Throughout history, slavery has often been the fate which prisoners of war have had to face. This observation is essential: the prisoners of war who have escaped death have normally been abducted as slaves. Their slavery should thus be considered comparable to death, or as an alternative death. In other words, slavery is another form of death, although it does not imply that the heart stops beating. *Slaves are dead, even though they live.*

Orlando Patterson, one of the greatest modern experts on slavery, belongs to those who believe that this third group of definitions is most suitable for an analysis of slavery, both in history and in the modern context. He considers the slave to be ‘a socially dead person’ and he has suggested the following definition: ‘*slavery is the permanent, violent domination of nataly alienated and generally dishonored persons*’.<sup>9</sup> It is the view enshrined in this third group of definitions that is of greatest significance for this article. A particular aspect is stressed here; that is, the significant difference between a free person and a slave, the fact that the latter is always exposed to the risk of being abused by the former. There have of course always been, and still are today, various forms of domestic violence in many societies, such as wife-beating and corporal punishment of children, but the proposal put forward here is that a definition of slavery must take into account that slavery is by nature a systematic, open and institutionalized form of violence against other people. In history, domestic violence has at times and in some places occurred so frequently that it has been the rule rather than the exception in the relationship both between spouses and between parents and children. Even so, presumably hardly anybody would claim that either marriage or childhood was constituted by violence.

8. Demosthenes, *Andr.* 55 (LCL). For further comments, see M.I. Finley, *Ancient Slavery and Modern Ideology* (ed. B.D. Shaw; Princeton: Markus Wiener, rev. edn, 1998), p. 161. See also J.A. Glancy, *Slavery in Early Christianity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), p. 128: ‘Perhaps the most prominent and consistent aspect of the parabolic construction of slavery is an emphasis on vulnerability of the enslaved body to violence, notably to brutal disciplinary practices’.

9. Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death*, pp. 5, 13.

In antiquity, slaves often held quite exalted positions. They could enjoy the general respect of others and even live quite comfortable lives—although they knew that they might at any moment be sold, abused or put to death. Patterson points out that there was nothing to stop slaves being punished ‘in the most degrading and painful manner possible’.<sup>10</sup> But maltreatment was not only associated with punishment; during court proceedings in antiquity, slaves were regularly tortured, since it was thought that otherwise they would not be able to free themselves from the emotional bonds between slave-owners and the slaves, that is, if they were not beaten they would not tell the truth to the court.

What is required is a form of definition that both takes the situation of the slave as its starting-point and allows for inclusion of institutionalized violence. The definition proposed here is thus that *slavery is by nature a systematic, open and institutionalized form of violence to which people are subjected whose social human status is eradicated*.

In this article, four aspects of the biblical material will be investigated, two from the Hebrew Bible and two from the New Testament: (1) the exodus motif, (2) Genesis 9, (3) the Gospels, particularly material from Matthew and Luke, and (4) the Pauline letters.

### 1. *The Exodus Motif*

Slavery appears in various forms in the texts of the Hebrew Bible: there is the story in Genesis 9 about Noah’s judgment on Canaan and his descendants, condemning them to slavery because of the deeds of Canaan’s father, Ham; there are texts about peoples being enslaved; there are a number of regulations relating to the treatment of slaves, and so on. There is also in this corpus of texts a significant use of metaphors of slavery: the relationship between the God of Israel and God’s Israel is compared to the relationship between a slave-owner and his slave. This metaphor is of immense significance, almost beyond evaluation, for the New Testament writers.

The exodus motif—from oppression to freedom—has been applied to innumerable events throughout history.<sup>11</sup> The most well-known example

10. Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death*, p. 303.

11. For the *Wirkungsgeschichte* of the exodus motif, see M. Walzer, *Exodus and Revolution* (New York: Basic Books, 1985), and J. Assmann, *Moses the Egyptian: The Memory of Egypt in Western Monotheism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997).

is doubtless the escape of the Israelites from their slavery in Egypt, which is described in the book of the Hebrew Bible that has lent its name to this phenomenon: *Exodus*, ‘the way out’ (ἐξ, ‘out’; ὁδός, ‘way’). In the Jewish faith and tradition, this exodus is very central. Every year, the world over, the Jewish Passover meal is celebrated in remembrance of the escape from Egypt, and this celebration should be conducted in such a way that the participants can experience it *as if* they themselves were present at the exodus. A reference to Exod. 13.8 is often included: ‘You shall tell your child on that day [that is, during the Jewish Passover], “It is because of what the LORD did *for me* when I came out of Egypt”’ (italics added).

The exodus motif includes not only liberation *from* slavery-servitude, but also the opportunity *to serve* God, to worship. Jon D. Levenson writes:

The point of the exodus is not freedom in the sense of self-determination, but service, the service of the loving, redeeming, and delivering God of Israel, rather than the state and its proud king.<sup>12</sup>

It is, in other words, a matter of being set free from one kind of service (the slavery under Pharaoh, which is negative) to the opportunity of rendering another kind of service (the service of the Lord, which is positive). They are *Bound for Freedom*, to use the felicitous title of Göran Larsson’s commentary on the book of Exodus.<sup>13</sup> The Israelites have thus been liberated from their destructive slavery in Egypt and they now belong to the Lord instead (Lev. 25.55):

For to me the people of Israel are servants, they are my servants whom I brought forth out of the land of Egypt: I am the LORD your God.

There is a widespread tradition of Bible translation that seeks to illustrate this dialectic of service by rendering the Hebrew עֶבֶד and the Greek δούλ-words by ‘slave’ and ‘slavery’ when the reference is to the negative service, and by ‘servant’ and ‘service’ when the reference is to

12. J.D. Levenson, *The Hebrew Bible, the Old Testament, and Historical Criticism: Jews and Christians in Biblical Studies* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1993), p. 144. See also the discussion of J.D. Levenson, G.V. Pixley and J.J. Collins in A.O. Bellis and J.S. Kaminsky (eds.), *Jews, Christians and the Theology of the Hebrew Scriptures* (Atlanta: SBL, 2000), pp. 215-75.

13. G. Larsson, *Bound for Freedom: The Book of Exodus in Jewish and Christian Traditions* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1999).

the opposite (compare, e.g., Exod. 20.1, Lk. 17.10, Romans 7, Galatians 4 and Phil. 2.22).

The Pentateuch provides clear instructions for when the Jewish Passover, *Pesach*, should be celebrated (e.g. Lev. 23.5). Nothing is, however, stated about the date for celebrating the Feast of Pentecost, the *Shavu'ot*, only that the Feast of Pentecost should be celebrated seven weeks after the Passover (e.g. Lev. 23.15-16 and Deut. 16.9). In other words, only the person who has experienced the Passover is capable of celebrating the Feast of Pentecost (Greek πεντηκοστή; 'fifty', that is, seven weeks of seven days, see Lev. 23.16 [LXX]: πενήκοντα ἡμέρας). Today the Jewish Feast of Pentecost is celebrated as a memorial of Moses' reception of the Torah on Mount Sinai (זמן מתן תורתנו, 'the time for the giving of our Torah').<sup>14</sup> The fact that Pentecost is not fixed in the calendar—except in relation to Passover—means that it can only be understood in relation to the Passover, the Feast of the Exodus. God has liberated the people of Israel so that they can serve God. The purpose of the exodus is not eccentric liberty but true service—worship—of God. The Passover points forward to Pentecost—the Feast of Pentecost cannot be understood without the Passover. They belong intrinsically and inseparably together.

In the Jewish tradition, the exodus motif also includes the opportunity to serve God. And according to the Jewish understanding, that divine service includes the study, interpretation and application of the revelation that Moses received on Mount Sinai. The Hebrew word *Torah* is sometimes translated 'Law', but we should use words such as 'teaching' or 'revelation' in order to understand just how positively this term should be perceived. There is only one letter different in the Latin words *lex* ('law') and *lux* ('light')—but what a difference in connotations for modern-day readers. For Jews, the term *Torah* has much more to do with 'light', 'gift', 'revelation' and 'glory' than with concepts like 'law', 'paragraphs', 'offence' and 'punishment'. In the words of Bart D. Ehrman: 'Jews as a rule did not consider this Law of God an onerous

14. On *Shavu'ot*, see, e.g., Larsson, *Bound for Freedom*, pp. 133-37. Note that Larsson argues that '[t]he background of Acts 2 is consequently Exod. 19-20 and the Jewish Pentecost, and not the story of the tower of Babel, which many contend' (p. 136).

burden. Quite the contrary, the Law was God's greatest gift to his people.'<sup>15</sup>

The comparison in the Hebrew Bible of the relationship of the people to God with that of a slave-owner to his slaves has been very significant for later Christian expositions and applications of the biblical texts. Many proponents of slavery have pointed out that slavery could hardly be a sin against both God and fellow human beings if Christian faith can be compared to slavery. In actual fact, they claim, a well-functioning slavery reflects the relationship between God and human beings. There will be good reason to return to this discussion below in the context of the study of both the teaching of Jesus and the Pauline Epistles.

## 2. *The Curse of Noah*

Beside the exodus motif, there is a specific text in the Hebrew Bible which has played a significant role in the debate about slavery, that is, Gen. 9.24-27.<sup>16</sup> Like no other text in the Hebrew Bible, this pericope has been used to legitimize the enslavement of people from Africa or with an

15. B.D. Ehrman, *The New Testament: A Historical Introduction to the Early Christian Writings* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 3rd edn, 2004), p. 37. For a Torah-centred piety, see Ps. 119, e.g., v. 20: 'My soul is consumed with longing for your ordinances at all times'.

16. In addition, Josh. 9.21-27 and Deut. 29.11 have been adduced as proof texts, but not as often as Gen. 9. Several books on the *Wirkungsgeschichte* of Noah's Curse have recently been published: D.M. Goldenberg, *The Curse of Ham: Race and Slavery in Early Judaism, Christianity, and Islam* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2003) is a thorough investigation of the interpretation of Gen. 9 in the three monotheistic traditions. S.R. Haynes, *Noah's Curse: The Biblical Justification of American Slavery* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002) concentrates on Benjamin M. Palmer's interpretation of Gen. 9. It should be pointed out that Haynes is not always reliable in details, e.g., the Jewish text *ha-Zohar* should not be dated to 'ca. second century C.E.' (p. 27). Haynes is not alone, however, in misunderstanding what the rabbis meant when they discussed in what way Ham sinned sexually on-board Noah's Ark (p. 25). For a correction, see Goldenberg, *Curse of Ham*, pp. 294-95 n. 75. In addition to investigating the *Wirkungsgeschichte* of Noah's Curse, S.A. Johnson, in *The Myth of Ham in Nineteenth-Century American Christianity: Race, Heathens, and the People of God* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), also critically examines in what ways the idea of a covenanted people has been used vis-à-vis certain peoples. For older studies on Gen. 9, see the bibliographies in these three recently published books.

African background.<sup>17</sup> This practice has even found a strange and mutual affirmation: *the Bible, on the one hand, has been taken as affirmation of slavery; and slavery, on the other hand, has been used as confirmation of the Bible*. Any question of the practice of slavery has been perceived as an attack on the message and the authority of the Bible. This is obvious in the book *Bible Defense of Slavery* by Josiah Priest, published in 1853:

The servitude of the race of Ham, to the latest era of mankind, is necessary to the veracity of God himself, as by it is fulfilled one of the oldest of the decrees of the Scriptures, namely, that of Noah, which placed the race as servants under other races.<sup>18</sup>

L. Richard Bradley notes that Priest's statement leads to the equal importance of biblical faith and slavocracy:

What Priest was really saying was that the truthfulness or infallibility of God's prophetic statements, as contained in Scripture, hinged upon the acceptance of Negro slavery as the necessary fulfilment of the curse of Ham. This had the effect of placing the truthfulness of God's self-revelation on the same level as acceptance of Negro slavery and white supremacy. Thus the institution of Negro slavery was justified.<sup>19</sup>

The final link of this chain of thought is that, on the issue of slavery, God would want to keep the *status quo*—and thus Christians of the right faith would also have to keep to the *status quo*. To instigate change would be to destroy, whereas to keep to the existing order would imply a defence of the Word of God. Slavery was instituted by God. In the words of David M. Goldenberg:

The curse of Ham, in its various forms, became a very powerful tool for maintaining the existing order in society. Its importance for explaining, and thus justifying, the enslavement of Blacks cannot be underestimated... The Curse made its most harmful appearance in America, and there can be no denying the central role it played in sustaining the slave system. It was

17. Goldenberg, *Curse of Ham*, p. 1: 'This biblical story has been the single greatest justification for Black slavery for more than a thousand years'. Thomas Peterson (referred to in Goldenberg, *Curse of Ham*, p. 176) argues that the curse myth was introduced in the USA in 1759 when Bishop Thomas Newton presented it in his book.

18. J. Priest, *Bible Defense of Slavery* (Glasgow, KY: Brown, 1853), quoted in L.R. Bradley, 'The Curse of Canaan and the American Negro', *CTM* 42 (1971), pp. 100-10 (103).

19. Bradley, 'Curse of Canaan and the American Negro', p. 103.

*the ideological cornerstone for the justification of Black slavery... The Curse of Ham myth legitimised and validated the social order by divine justification.*<sup>20</sup>

There is consequently every reason to study Gen. 9.24-27 in this article. According to the previous verses, Noah had drunk himself into a stupor and had fallen asleep naked in his tent. His son Ham arrived in the tent and found his father lying there uncovered. He went out and told his brothers (וירא חם אבי כנען את ערות אביו ויגד לשני־אחיו בחוץ, v. 22). When Noah had slept and woke up sober again, he heard what Ham had done and he pronounced a curse on Canaan, Ham's son:

‘Cursed be Canaan, lowest of slaves shall he be to his brothers’ (ארור (כנען עבד עבדים יהיה לאחיו). He also said: ‘Blessed by the LORD my God be Shem; and let Canaan be his slave (ויחי כנען עבד למו). May God make space for Japheth, and let him live in the tents of Shem; and let Canaan be his slave’ (ויחי כנען עבד למו).

The questions regarding this text—as it now stands—are many: (1) What is it actually that Ham did or did not do in his father's tent? (2) Why does the curse fall on Ham's son, Canaan, when it is Ham who has done wrong? (3) Why does it say in v. 24 that this story is about what Noah's *youngest* son has done—was not Japheth younger than his brothers Shem and Ham? They are mentioned five times in the order Shem, Ham and Japheth (5.32; 6.10; 7.13; 9.18; and 10.1).<sup>21</sup> In 10.21 it is explicitly stated that Shem is older than Japheth. Ham's name is always mentioned between the other two—is it not therefore reasonable to assume that Ham was the middle child? If so, why is it the actions of the youngest son that attract attention?

First of all we might ask what Ham had actually done to deserve such a dreadful curse on his descendants. No clear answer is given. Is he guilty of indecent voyeurism or does the seriousness of the charge arise from his telling the others ‘outside’ (בחוץ) or is the verb in v. 22 (‘and Ham saw’; וירא חם) a euphemism for something unspeakable?<sup>22</sup> Maybe it is in fact a reference to what is actually written; namely, that Ham's sin consists of his failure to cover his naked father. There are hints in

20. Goldenberg, *Curse of Ham*, pp. 175, 177.

21. However, see Gen. 25.9 and Josh. 24.4, where the sons are not mentioned according to age.

22. N.M. Sarna, *Genesis: The JPS Torah Commentary* (Philadelphia, New York and Jerusalem: Jewish Publication Society, 1989), p. 64.

rabbinic literature that something worse was written between the lines: maybe Ham castrated his father or maybe he engaged in incestuous sexual intercourse with his father—or maybe with his mother, who might also have been in the tent?<sup>23</sup> Quite obviously something happened, and this aroused Noah's anger to such an extent that he pronounced a hereditary curse on all Ham's descendants.

A possible answer to the second question might be that the name of Canaan was particularly suited to this curse. The verb כָּנַע in the *niphal* means 'be subdued', 'be humbled', 'humble oneself', and in the *hiphil*, 'humble'.<sup>24</sup> In favour of this proposal there is the fact that the names of Shem and Japheth are also interpreted in this passage: Shem's name means precisely 'name'. It is thus easy to understand how rabbinic literature has noted that the words about Shem contains a blessing of the God of Shem, that is, of the God of 'the Name' (v. 26). There may also be a reference in the name of Japheth to the words addressed to him. The verb פָּתַח means 'to increase', 'to grow': 'May God make space for Japheth' (v. 27).<sup>25</sup> It seems reasonable, therefore, to assume that Canaan's name enforces his subjection and humiliation.<sup>26</sup>

Some interpreters mention the possibility that Ham had already been blessed by Noah. There was therefore no possibility of cursing someone, who had already been blessed. The answer to the question why it is Canaan who is cursed would thus be that the one who had really committed a crime against Noah would go free, due to some technicality: he had already received an irrevocable blessing and was thus in possession of a kind of immunity against curses.

The traditional answer to the second and third questions is usually that the current form of the text has been constructed out of many different sources. Before the variously proposed reconstructions are presented it should perhaps be pointed out that this text—as it stands at present—

23. See M. Zlotowitz and N. Scherman, *Bereishis: Genesis: A New Translation with a Commentary Anthologized from Talmudic, Midrashic and Rabbinic Sources* (New York: Mesorah, 2nd edn, 1986), pp. 301-302.

24. W.L. Holladay, *A Concise Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament Based upon the Lexical Work of Ludwig Koehler and Walter Baumgartner* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1988), s.v.

25. G. von Rad, *Genesis: A Commentary* (London: SCM, rev. edn, 1972), p. 137, maintains that *patah* is used pejoratively in the Hebrew Bible and is not construed with the preposition *le-*.

26. See Sarna, *Genesis*, pp. 66-67.

actually may be meaningful. (1) The Hebrew text behind the translation ‘his youngest son’ (בְּנוֹ הַקָּטָן, literally ‘his son, the little one’) could mean that Ham, through his actions, has made himself small and contemptible. Thus it would not be a reference to his biological age, but a statement about his quality. (2) Another possibility is that this is a reference to Canaan, Ham’s youngest son (10.6). He is, of course, the grandson of Noah; the Hebrew בֶּן would then mean ‘descendant’, which is not impossible. (3) There is, however, a third interpretation: it is in fact quite possible that the expression בְּנוֹ הַקָּטָן is actually a reference to the youngest son, and that v. 24 thus refers to *Japheth*! In other words, when Noah learnt that Ham *had not* done what Japheth (and Shem) actually did do, he was upset. This reading answers another problem as well, namely, that it says that the youngest son actually *did do* something against, or with, or for his father (‘what his youngest son had done him’; אֲשֶׁר-עָשָׂה-לּוֹ בְּנוֹ הַקָּטָן), *but Ham does nothing at all in this text!* It is instead the youngest son, Japheth, who fulfils what his brother Ham ought to have done. In this case it is about praise for Japheth—rather than about a curse on Ham.<sup>27</sup>

It is not necessary to speculate much further about what Ham actually did do in that tent. In the current text, the point might be that ‘the little one’ (הַקָּטָן) did something good rather than emphasizing that the middle child did something prohibited—or simply failed to do what his younger brother actually did do.

It has already been mentioned that the traditional answer to the questions about the disparate features of this text has been that the current form of the text stems from a number of different sources. Many proposals for reconstructions have been put forward. What the truth really is, we will probably never know. There are, however, two main possibilities: the text was originally either about Ham or about Canaan. Could it be that an older story about three groups of people has been revised in order better to fit into the Israel vs. Canaan scheme? Or is it rather that the story was originally precisely about the Canaanites—and only later on did it come to be about the Hamites? According to the former alternative, the original version of this story was about Ham, and

27. In Jewish tradition, some interpreters maintain that the expression *beno ha-qatan* refers to Shem; see Zlotowitz and Scherman, *Bereishis*, p. 304: ‘Noah awoke from his wine and realized all the *goodness* his youngest son Shem had done on his behalf, and for this reason conferred upon him the choicest blessing [v. 26]’.

the name of Canaan was only inserted later in vv. 18 and 22.<sup>28</sup> Everyone will realize that the former verse in particular is not harmoniously constructed. The only question is what the more original text looked like.

The second alternative implies that, originally, the circumstances were the reverse. The Canaan-tradition would thus be the oldest. The following arguments speak in favour of this alternative as the more probable one. (1) It is more reasonable to assume that *the perspective has gradually been widened* rather than narrowed, that is, that the story was originally about local circumstances (the name of Canaan leads the reader to think of the Canaanites) and only later did it become a description of all the peoples of the world (the name of Ham is often associated with African people, see Gen. 10.6-20). (2) *When Canaan's name is mentioned, the name of Ham does not occur*, but every time that Ham is named, Canaan is also mentioned. It is thus possible to remove, without any difficulty, all references to Ham in this story, but it is considerably more difficult to do the opposite. (3) *The curse is addressed to Canaan*. We have already noted that previous generations of interpreters have found this strange, given that it was Ham who had committed an offence against his father and against the code of honour at the time. (4) *It is the actions of Noah's youngest son (חַמְוִי) that attracts attention*, but there is nothing in the current form of the text to indicate that Ham was younger than both his brothers. All this speaks in favour of the hypothesis that the Canaan version is the older of the two. The question of when and why the name of Ham was introduced is hard to answer—and maybe that is not necessary in this context. It is sufficient to note that, given the choice between Canaan and Ham, it is reasonable to assume that the Canaan tradition is the older one.

In his classic and influential commentary on the Book of Genesis, Gerhard von Rad argues that behind 'this *ecumenical* scheme of nations' (i.e. Shem, *Ham* and Japheth, 'from whom all the people of the whole earth have descended', v. 19) there is 'a much older and more limited *Palestinian* one' (i.e. the triad of Shem, Japheth and *Canaan*).<sup>29</sup> Originally, this was thus a story about three groups of people in the

28. See, e.g., R. Alter, *Genesis: Translation and Commentary* (New York and London: Norton, 1996), p. 40: 'Ham, the perpetrator of the act of violation, is mysteriously displaced in the curse by his son Canaan, and thus the whole story is made to justify the—merely hoped-for—subject status of the Canaanites in relation to the descendants of Shem, the Israelites'.

29. See von Rad, *Genesis*, p. 135.

Land and not about three ancestral fathers of all the peoples of the world. In order to adapt the story to the later tripartition, a redactor has twice inserted the phrase ‘Ham, his father’ (חַם הוּא אָבִי in v. 18 and חַם אָבִי in v. 22). The point argued here is thus that this was primarily a story about the misdeeds of Noah’s son *Canaan* who consequently was cursed by his father. Later on, it was considered desirable to adapt the story to the genealogies which assumes that the third son of Noah was called *Ham*.

The perspective has been gradually widened. To begin with, this story treated the origin of the local people and thereafter the origin of all the people known at the time.<sup>30</sup> This would mean that the text has been universalized through the little change of the name of one of Noah’s three sons: from Canaan (the ancestor of the Canaanites) to Ham (the ancestor of the Africans). However, this change could not be made without affecting the rhythm of the text, as can easily be seen in the version left to posterity. This is perhaps most obvious in 9.18-19, where *four* people’s names are mentioned even though the next verse assumes that only *three* have been listed.<sup>31</sup>

Thus, two traditions have been merged in the current text: first there was the story about Shem, Japheth and Canaan; then the narrative about the genealogies of Shem, Ham and Japheth was developed. The older narrative tells the story of how the youngest son offended against his father; the second triad is adapted to the genealogies in the following chapter. It is only when the two traditions have been edited together that in the younger narrative the African peoples have been loaded with guilt because of what Canaan did according to the older story.

Most commentators seem to agree that these are the main features in the pre-history of the current text. The problem that arises for those who have familiarized themselves with the *Wirkungsgeschichte* of this story is, however, that these ingenious reconstructions do nothing to help the Bible reader to deal with the problematical aspects of this text. Anyone who believes that ‘the more original, the better’ will soon realize that

30. See also H. Gunkel, *Genesis* (Macon: Mercer University Press, 1997), pp. 84-85: ‘He was originally a Syro-Canaanite figure, the first farmer and wine grower, progenitor of Syro-Canaanite humanity, then of all humanity, for this reason then made his way into the Babylonian Flood legend, which originally did not contain this name’.

31. C. Westermann, *Genesis: A Commentary* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Press, 1984), p. 486.

this text is still about some form of sanctioned slavery, although this time not for the Hamites but for the Canaanites. In the words of E.A. Speiser: ‘the moral of the story is actually aimed at Canaan and, by extension, at the Canaanites’.<sup>32</sup> Sadly, both these two main interpretations have appeared in the North American history of the function of this text: the Canaanite interpretation has been used against the original population (Native Americans) and the Hamite version against African Americans.

The typical exegetical commentary on this passage is as incomplete as the history of the function of this text is improper. Maybe there is no other biblical passage which so clearly demonstrates the shortcomings of many of the traditional exegetical approaches to analysis. In the history of its function, this text has been used to legitimize slavery, a fact which is discussed either very superficially or not at all in the commentaries. Thus an oppressive interpretation of the Bible is given almost entirely free range. This makes it essential to ensure that the history of the function of the biblical texts—their *Wirkungsgeschichte*—is integrated into commentaries to a rather higher degree than it is at present.

Which is the probable original context of this text? Two suggestions will be presented here. (1) Jon D. Levenson in *The Jewish Study Bible* suggests that ‘The cursing of Canaan may be intended, in part, to explain why non-Israelite slaves do not have to be emancipated’.<sup>33</sup> This would mean that it has functioned as an argument against those who pleaded for the liberation of all slaves. Put differently, in that case it is younger than the emancipatory movement, which is evidenced in the Hebrew Bible (see, e.g., Lev. 25.39-43). That means that the most original *Sitz im Leben* of this text is diametrically opposed to the nineteenth-century discussion in the USA. There it was claimed that the story in the Book of Genesis shows what happened once upon a time at the dawn of history, when slavery was brought into existence. According to the interpretation presented in *The Jewish Study Bible*, the opposition to some aspects of slavery is an *older* phenomenon than the texts and traditions that plead in favour of a partly realized slavery.

(2) Claus Westermann believes that, originally, this text did not claim to describe how slavery was introduced: ‘The curse decrees that the son who has dishonoured his father is to live in disgrace; it is the context of a

32. E.A. Speiser, *Genesis: Introduction, Translation and Notes* (New York: Doubleday, 1964), p. 62.

33. J.D. Levenson, ‘Genesis’, in A. Berlin and M.Z. Brettler (eds.), *The Jewish Study Bible* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), pp. 8-101 (26).

family event'.<sup>34</sup> The closest parallels can be found in Gen. 27.29 and 27.40, where it is described how Joseph's brothers should submit to him. 'It is to be seen in the perspective of the family where it is something unnatural and unheard of for a brother to become a slave of his brothers'.<sup>35</sup> Westermann believes that the author (called 'J') in three texts wants to touch on three shortcomings in family relations: between *men and women* (Gen. 2–3), between *siblings* (4.2-16) and between *parents and children* (9.20-27).<sup>36</sup>

The purpose of this article is not to determine what these texts once meant. Even so, it is hard not to reflect on the curious *Wirkungsgeschichte* of the curse of Noah. It would, for example, have been quite possible to claim that the main message of this text was to warn against the consequences of drunkenness, as in a modern Jewish commentary:

...intoxication can be so harmful that even the righteous Noah who saved the world was brought to curse his own grandchild due to wine-induced intoxication.<sup>37</sup>

Such an interpretation could have made all the difference, but historically it was a road not taken. The overwhelming majority have travelled by another road, claiming that this text says something about people's mutual superiority and subordination: Ham, Canaan, Hamites and Canaanites have condemned themselves to humiliation, oppression and slavery. If Ham had not done what(ever) he did or did not do in his father's tent there and then, his descendants would not have had to suffer here and now.

There are also reasons to remind ourselves of the dilemma of the early African American biblical hermeneutics seeking to expound this text. Those who claimed that 'the white race' was superior to all others thought that people whose origin was in Africa lacked human value and human rights, partly because they were not mentioned in the Bible. African Americans and those opposed to slavery claimed the opposite with reference to Genesis 9 and other places. The problem was, however, that while they won something, they lost something else: the price that Africans and African Americans had to pay to be part of the biblical history was high, indeed very high. Those who identified with

34. Westermann, *Genesis*, p. 492.

35. Westermann, *Genesis*, p. 492.

36. Westermann, *Genesis*, p. 494.

37. Zlotowitz and Scherman, *Bereishis*, p. 307.

the Hamites were perceived by their surroundings as people who deserved slavery. They were no longer invisible in history; they had instead been condemned by history. Not only were they left outside the community of the people of God; they were the very opposite of God's people. In the words of Sylvester A. Johnson:

The obvious difficulty, however, was that Ham represented the antithesis of being people of God. Claiming Hamitic identity meant accepting the significations of deviance and sin that were encoded upon Ham and Ham's descendants... The only way for American Negroes to avoid being historically invisible was to locate themselves in biblical history. Ham was the portal of entry into this world of historical visibility.<sup>38</sup>

An extensive report of how Ham came to be perceived as the representative of all the peoples of Africa is beyond the scope of this article. For that purpose, see the monographs on this subject by Stephen R. Haynes, by Sylvester A. Johnson and particularly by David M. Goldenberg.<sup>39</sup> The last-mentioned claims that there are *no* etymological reasons to link the name of Ham (חַם) with the adjectives 'black' and 'dark'.<sup>40</sup> During the biblical and talmudic periods, this connection did not exist. Goldenberg—and Bernard Lewis before him—believes that the oldest pieces of evidence for the view that there is a link between dark skin and slavery occur in seventh-century Arabia 'when the Black became strongly identified with the slave class in the Near East, after the Islamic conquest of Africa'.<sup>41</sup>

### *Conclusions*

There is of course more material of interest in the Hebrew Bible, not least the many rules that regulate the rights and duties of slaves. In this

38. Johnson, *Myth of Ham*, pp. 52, 67.

39. See Haynes, *Noah's Curse*; Johnson, *Myth of Ham*; and especially Goldenberg, *Curse of Ham*.

40. Goldenberg, *Curse of Ham*, pp. 149, 156. On p. 164 he suggests that the identification of Ham and 'black' is due to 'explanation, error, etymology, and environment'. For an examination of the symbolic usages of Egyptians, Ethiopians and Blacks in Christian antiquity, see G.L. Byron, *Symbolic Blackness and Ethnic Difference in Early Christian Literature* (London and New York: Routledge, 2002).

41. Goldenberg, *Curse of Ham*, pp. 170-71, referring to B. Lewis, *Race and Slavery in the Middle East: A Historical Enquiry* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), p. 41. See also H.J. Fischer, *Slavery in the History of Muslim Black Africa* (London: Hurst, 2001).

context, the focus has been partly on the exodus motif and partly on Genesis 9. The former has most certainly had a *Wirkungsgeschichte* that is entirely beyond a survey. The most essential aspect in this context is that the exodus motif does not only imply liberation *from* slavery. It also entails that the liberated person enters into a new form of service. The Jewish or Christian readers who adopt the exodus motif thus realize that they are called to a new form of service. A free person is to some extent still in service—and therefore a person may be considered as free, although he or she remains a slave. The exodus motif could be called a *theological* screen, which some Bible readers choose to apply to every biblical text that deals with slavery.

The second part of this investigation of the material from the Hebrew Bible has been dedicated to Genesis 9. Compared to the exodus motif, the interpretation of this text has been all the more *historical*. Not least in the USA, during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, was it perceived as paradigmatic, that is, the story was described as a historical event, which had enduring and serious consequences. Ham's actions were compared to *a second fall*. By his actions, he contracted for himself and for his descendants the curse of slavery. Now the time has come to study the New Testament texts. Which portions of those texts are particularly important for the discussion of slavery?

### 3. *The Evangelists' Portraits of the Teaching of Jesus*

The purpose here is, as the rubric indicates, to investigate the evangelists' pictures of the teaching of Jesus. Thus the task is not an attempt to determine the teaching of the historical Jesus, but rather to focus on how he was portrayed, how his teaching was shaped in the oldest layers of the Gospels.<sup>42</sup> How has his teaching been received and interpreted by the New Testament evangelists?

Slavery-related words (*δουλεύειν*, *δοῦλος*, *δούλη* and so on) occur particularly in the Matthean and Lukan parables, that is, in the traditional material which is normally deemed to go back to a common source known as Q (*Quelle*).<sup>43</sup> A full report on the metaphors of slavery in the

42. On the difficulties and possibilities of establishing the teaching of the historical Jesus, see, e.g., J. Svartvik, *Mark and Mission: Mk 7.1-23 in Its Narrative and Historical Contexts* (Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell, 2000), pp. 13-108.

43. Slavery metaphors are used not only in the parables; see, e.g., 'No one can serve two masters' (Mt. 6.24, Lk. 16.13, *Gos. Thom.* 47). For a study of Markan

Matthean and Lukan parables can certainly not be drawn up here; a summary of some of the most significant observations will have to suffice.<sup>44</sup> The contexts in which slaves only make the briefest appearance, or where they only play a subordinate role, have not been included in this investigation.<sup>45</sup>

It is in the parables that it becomes most obvious that the New Testament was written in a context in which slavery was taken for granted; we have in fact *no* examples to show that Jesus in his teaching—as interpreted and presented by the New Testament evangelists—ever dissociated himself from slavery. It is rather the case that the evangelists are happy to let him use the slavery metaphors in the parables. The fact that words associated with slavery occur some eighty times in the Gospels is in itself a clear sign that these texts have arisen in a world in which slavery was a normal aspect of everyday life. When C.H. Dodd explains what a parable is, he writes: ‘At its simplest, the parable is a metaphor or a simile drawn from nature or from ordinary daily life’.<sup>46</sup> Or, to put it differently, the parables move from what is familiar to what is unfamiliar; they seek to explain something that is hard to comprehend by way of referring to something that is easily understood. In the words of Keith Bradley, ‘if [the parable]...were to have been comprehensible when originally told the story must have had a recognizable basis in historical reality’.<sup>47</sup> The fact that slavery is used so frequently in the synoptic parables thus shows that it had such ‘a recognisable basis in

slavery language, see N.F. Santos, *Slave of All: The Paradox of Authority and Servanthood in the Gospel of Mark* (London and New York: Sheffield Academic Press, 2003).

44. For a thorough survey of the New Testament parables with slavery metaphors, see A. Weiser, *Die Knechtsgleichnisse der synoptischen Evangelien* (Munich: Kösel, 1971). See also I.A.H. Combes, *The Metaphor of Slavery in the Writings of the Early Church: From the New Testament to the Beginning of the Fifth Century* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1998), esp. pp. 68-75.

45. Since this survey focuses on the New Testament Gospels, the *Gospel of Thomas* will not be discussed. The word  $\delta\upsilon\lambda\omicron\varsigma$  (‘slave’) occurs eight times in the *Gospel of Thomas*, in three logia: 47 (once), 64 (three times) and 65 (four times). All three logia have parallels in the New Testament Gospels, and will therefore only be considered when they help us interpret the pericopes in the New Testament Gospels.

46. C.H. Dodd, *The Parables of the Kingdom* (Glasgow: Collins, 1978), p. 16.

47. K. Bradley, *Slaves and Masters in the Roman Empire: A Study in Social Control* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987), p. 48.

historical reality'; it was not fundamentally questioned, nor was it considered as deeply problematic—on the contrary.

What makes these texts so significant is both the fact that they have played a role quite beyond any comparison in the countries that have been influenced by Christianity, and partly that slavery-related expressions occur particularly in the *theo*-logical parables (the hyphen indicates that the parables are God-centred). The implication is that God is regularly compared to a slave-owner and human beings to the slaves of this slave-owner.

The slavery parables of course have been expounded in a whole range of different ways. Here only three ways should be mentioned. (1) There is first of all a *theological* tradition of interpretation. This implies that these texts have from the very beginning been perceived as theological, that is, it has been taken for granted that everyone involved immediately realizes that the reference to the slave-owner is a reference to God. It is therefore self-evident that the slave-owner *per definitionem* acts in a right and righteous manner in these parables. The many proponents of this interpretation are undoubtedly aware of the fact that the texts also focus on human responsibility, but the non-negotiable starting-point for the theocentric tradition of interpretation is that the slave-owner is perfect and infallible.

(2) The second tradition of interpretation could be called *existential*. That can be found, for example, in a book by Dan Otto Via, *The Parables: Their Literary and Existential Dimensions*.<sup>48</sup> In that book, the parables are also perceived as theological texts, but what Via emphasizes, to a higher degree than usual, is the dilemma of human beings, the choices facing them and the consequences of these choices. In this existential interpretation, it is thus the human being—that is, the slave—who is at the centre.

(3) In a number of articles, and in her book *Slavery in Early Christianity*, Jennifer A. Glancy approaches the slavery texts in a third way. Her interpretation is not so much either theological or existential as *socio-historical*, although not in the sense that she seeks to reconstruct what the historical Jesus actually said, but rather because she wants to find out what the texts reveal about the view of slaves and slavery at that time. She thus chooses to read the texts, not as testimony to

48. D.O. Via, *The Parables: Their Literary and Existential Dimensions* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1967).

theological or existential insights, but rather as windows opening on to the view of slaves and slavery embraced by the world of late antiquity.

These three approaches can hardly be entirely isolated from one another. The discussion that will now follow will use all these three perspectives, but it is the third model that will prove particularly useful. The reason is primarily that it brings a constructive and creative shift of focus: what did the listeners and the readers think when they came into contact with these parables? Even more important: what did the numerous slaves, who must very likely also have heard these parables, think? How did all those react, who continuously risked being maltreated because of their own omissions, or because their owner was in a bad mood?

The unholy alliance between the slave-owner in the parables and the slave-owners in history has most probably contributed to the sanction and preservation of oppressive social structures. Slave-owners in societies that embraced slavery would have identified themselves with the slave-owner in the parables. The earthly slave-owners have thus become an image of God; a hard, punishing slave-owner as a reflection of God's nature and will. The question is whether this has ever been more clearly expressed than in two works of the Apostolic Fathers:

*Didache* 4.11: But you slaves should submit to your lords as the image of God (ὡς τύπων θεοῦ) with reverence and fear.

*Epistle of Barnabas* 19.7: Submit to your lords as the image of God (ὡς τύπων θεοῦ) with reverence and fear.

What is required is more research into how those who suffered under these τύποι θεοῦ might have reacted the first time they came into contact with the parables. It is therefore urgent, not to interpret immediately the typical parable in a theocentric manner—and thus intuitively to wish to defend and explain the behaviour of the slave-owner—but to ‘hear the parable from a peasant point of view, from a stance which undermines centuries of Western, elitist accounts’.<sup>49</sup> That will be the focus in what follows. Unfortunately, not all the parables can be treated extensively. In the following discussion attention will be directed towards the function accorded in the parables to the slaves and the slave-owners

49. J.R. Wohlgenut, ‘Entrusted Money (Matthew 25.14-28): The Parable of the Talents/Pounds’, in V.G. Shillington (ed.), *Jesus and His Parables: Interpreting the Parables of Jesus Today* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1997), pp. 103-20 (104).

respectively. In short: *how are slaves described and treated in these parables?*

First of all, one can make a distinction between two main types of slavery parables: in the first group, the faithful, persevering and industrious slaves are rewarded for their efforts. The point is that whatever they sow, they will also reap, and they will be rewarded according to their actions. The dominant theme is the fairness of the slave-owner, who doles out a just reward to good slaves and appropriate punishment to bad ones. Luke 12.42-46, for example, belongs to this group of parables.

In the other main group, the situation is the reverse: something unexpected takes place. The perspectives have changed; the roles have been redistributed. Luke 12.36-38 belongs to this group. It is above all this second group of parables that has been taken by scholars of biblical exegesis and other interpreters as a warrant for the view that, in his parables, Jesus re-evaluated slavery, raised the value of slaves and relativized the power of the slave-owners. However, the question remains whether modern theology might not have read too much of this liberation paradigm into the parables. It seems better to draw a continuum from the reactionary to the revolutionary message: they both appear, side by side, in the New Testament Gospels. Below, five categories of parables, ranging from the most reactionary to the most revolutionary type, will be discussed.

#### a. *A Slave Has No Rights, Only Duties*

The feature, which marks the parable in Lk. 17.7-10 particularly, is its explicit address to slave-owners: ‘Who among you would say to your slave (τίς δὲ ἐξ ὑμῶν δοῦλον ἔχων...ἔρει αὐτῷ) who has just come in from plowing or tending sheep in the field...?’ At least someone in the intended audience must have been a slave-owner in order for the metaphor to work. That assumption makes this perhaps the most interesting of all the parables that the evangelists have ascribed to Jesus. The agreement (*tertium comparationis*) between the image (*Bild*) and the thing (*Sache*) is the view that a slave has no reason to expect any reward for good deeds: a slave has only duties and no rights.<sup>50</sup>

50. For an introduction to the legacy of A. Jülicher’s parable criticism, see B.B. Scott, *Hear Then the Parable: A Commentary on the Parables of Jesus* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1990), pp. 42-51. For a critique of Jülicher’s parable-allegory dichotomy, see M.I. Boucher, *The Parables* (Dublin: Veritas, 1981), esp. pp. 28-29.

It has been suggested that this Lukan text does not address the issue of slave-owners and slaves at all, but only Christian discipleship, since the three verbs, ‘to plow’ (ἀροτριᾶν), ‘to tend sheep’ (ποιμαίνειν), and ‘to serve at table’ (διακονεῖν) could be references to the various duties of religious leaders.<sup>51</sup> There are, however, no strong arguments in favour of such an understanding. What makes it a parable is the fact that it refers to actual slave-owners and slaves, and that it is only in a transferred sense that it functions as a reference to Christian discipleship. Hence, the parable contains valuable information about first-century slavery.

It was common for free men and women to consider slaves to be ‘useless’ (ἀχρεῖοι).<sup>52</sup> Even hard-working slaves were frequently considered by their owners as ‘lazy’, ‘slow’, ‘shy of work’, and so on. The parable can be read as enforcing this view; nothing in this parable is subversive. It is impossible to imagine that this parable, read in a society of slavery, could have made the reader aware of the vulnerability of either male or female slaves.

#### b. *No Respect for Slaves*

The parable about the tenants of the vineyard can be found in all the three Synoptic Gospels as well as in the *Gospel of Thomas* (Mk 12.1-11, Mt. 21.33-44, Lk. 20.9-18, *Gos. Thom.* 65). It has been expounded in various ways: (1) early on in the Christian history of interpretation, it came to be seen as an allegory, in which Jesus speaks of himself as ‘the son’, who would soon be killed by the malicious tenants. According to that view, the tenants would correspond to the Jewish people, who not only mismanage the vineyard, but who also maltreat the various messengers of the Lord, and who in the end murder the Beloved Son, Jesus of Nazareth. Aaron A. Milavec summarizes this tradition of interpretation in the words ‘the Jews had finally gone too far’.<sup>53</sup> The problem with this

51. J.A. Fitzmyer, *The Gospel According to Luke (X–XXIV): Introduction, Translation and Notes* (New York: Doubleday, 1985), p. 1145.

52. Fitzmyer, *Gospel According to Luke (X–XXIV)*, p. 1147, first mentions that ‘[i]t was often used of slaves’, but then suggests that the purpose here is to emphasize that ‘[n]o matter how much a person does in God’s service, there is a sense in which he/she is still “unprofitable”’. His opinion, however, does not affect the conclusion that ἀχρεῖος was often used to describe slaves.

53. A.A. Milavec, ‘A Fresh Analysis of the Parable of the Wicked Husbandmen in the Light of Jewish-Christian Dialogue’, in C. Thoma and M. Wyschogrod (eds.), *Parable and Story in Judaism and Christianity* (New York and Mahwah: Paulist Press, 1989), pp. 81-117 (81).

interpretation—besides its patently anti-Jewish *Wirkungsgeschichte*—is that the Jesus of the Gospels does not normally speak of himself and his future in the form of parables. (2) If Jesus does not speak of himself, the conclusion will be different. To whom then does ‘the son’ refer? Malcolm Lowe and David Stern have independently suggested that this parable was originally perceived as criticism of the treatment of John the Baptist; see, for example, Mk 11.27-33 and 12.12.<sup>54</sup> (3) The proposal made by Milavec himself, who was mentioned above, is that ‘the son’ does not refer to any particular person, but only marks the climax of this parable. This parable should therefore be understood as criticism of the religious leadership. They are, according to Milavec, poor managers of the vineyard; it is their fault that Israel (that is, the vineyard) does not yield as much fruit as it might have done, had it had better leaders.<sup>55</sup> (4) Logion 65 in the *Gospel of Thomas* can be interpreted in a fourth way, since the text has been damaged and must be reconstructed. The most common exegesis is to translate the opening of the parable as follows: ‘A good man owned a vineyard’. The Greek loanword at the top of page 45 in Codex II of the Nag Hammadi Library behind the translation ‘good’ (ΧΡΗCΤΟC) is, however, damaged.<sup>56</sup> It is therefore conceivable that it could have been ΧΡCΤΗC (‘usurer’). In that case, the introduction should be translated as follows: ‘An avaricious investor owned a vineyard’, which does of course give this narrative a very different tone. Boudewijn Dehandschutter has pointed out that logion 63 contains the related words ΧΡΗΜΑ (‘wealth’) and ΧΡΩ (‘to use’).<sup>57</sup> It is therefore possible that this parable was originally about an unjust owner of the vineyard who demanded far too much from his workers. Consequently, it seems careless of J.C. O’Neill to state that the *Gospel of Thomas*

54. M. Lowe, ‘From the Parable of the Vineyard to a Pre-Synoptic Source’, *NTS* 28 (1982), pp. 257-63 (257), and D. Stern, *Parables in Midrash: Narrative and Exegesis in Rabbinic Literature* (Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press, 1991), p. 194.

55. Milavec, ‘Fresh Analysis’, p. 106.

56. *The Facsimile Edition of the Nag Hammadi Codices Published under the Auspices of the Department of Antiquities of the Arab Republic of Egypt in Conjunction with the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization: Codex II* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1974), p. 55.

57. B. Dehandschutter, ‘La parabole des vigneronns homicides (Mc., XII, 1-12) et l’Évangile selon Thomas’, in M. Sabbe (ed.), *L’Évangile selon Marc: Tradition et rédaction: Nouvelle édition augmentée* (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 1988), pp. 203-220 (218).

‘specifically labels him a good man’.<sup>58</sup> According to Robert W. Funk and Roy W. Hoover this parable is characterized by ‘a basic realism about economic and social conditions in Galilee’.<sup>59</sup>

It is not probable that this text was, in its most original form, an allegory, that is, a story about the narrator himself. It is obvious that the allegorizing process was started already in the Synoptic Gospels. The *Gospel of Thomas*, however, does not show any corresponding tendency to allegorize: there are no explicit references to Isaiah 5 (which would not be expected, given the view of the *Gospel of Thomas* on the Hebrew Bible), nor does it state that the son was ‘beloved’, and so on. It is thus reasonable to assume that this parable was not originally perceived as a christological allegory, that is, in this case as a prediction about the death of Jesus. It was rather interpreted as a parable arising from everyday life. The fact that a parable, which might originally have depicted the protagonist as a *χρήστης*, eventually became a theological allegory says something both about the social structures of the contemporary world and about early Christian images of God.

The key word in this context is that the tenants of the vineyard would ‘respect’ (ἐντρέπειν) the son, as a free person, more than the slaves who had previously been sent to the vineyard.<sup>60</sup> The essential element in this story is that it is only when *the son* is maltreated that the anger of the slave-owner is aroused. Indeed, the point is that the son is expected to command greater respect than the slaves do. In other words, there is no subversive message in this parable with regard to the view of slaves. It rather reflects the contemporary view: why should anyone be upset because slaves were abused?

### c. *Crime and Punishment*

In the teaching on eschatology, slavery metaphors are frequently employed. God is compared to an earthly slave-owner, and human

58. J.C. O’Neill, ‘The Shocking Prospect of Killing the Messiah (Luke 20.9-19): The Parable of the Wicked Tenants’, in Shillington (ed.), *Jesus and His Parables*, pp. 165-76 (171).

59. R.W. Funk and R.W. Hoover, *The Five Gospels: The Search for the Authentic Words of Jesus* (New York: Scribner, 1996), p. 511.

60. The word *δμῶν* (‘slave’) is in the Coptic text furnished with *nomina sacra* markings. R. Valantasis, *The Gospel of Thomas* (London and New York: Routledge, 1997), p. 144, argues that this indicates that the ‘slaves’ were understood as divine heralds. See Svartvik, *Mark and Mission*, p. 217, for counterarguments.

beings are described as his slaves, whose task it is to stay awake until their master will one day return. An example of such metaphors can be found in the parable about the gatekeeper in Mk 13.33-37. The gatekeeper (ὁ θυρωρός) has been installed to watch at the gate until his master returns. Every slave should do his duty, but the gatekeeper in particular has the task of ‘watching’ (γρηγορεῖν). The eschatological context is obvious.

The material in Matthew and Luke also mention what happens to anyone who does not do his duties. The parable about the household manager (Mt. 24.45-51; Lk. 12.42-46) describes how the master put one slave in charge of (the rest of) his household. The manager who does not behave himself will be cut in pieces (literally ‘and he will cut him in two’; καὶ διχοτομήσει αὐτόν, Mt. 24.51; Lk. 12.46). The slave who knows his masters wishes but does nothing ‘will receive a severe beating’ (δαρήσεται πολλάς, Lk. 12.47); the slave who without knowing does what deserves a beating ‘will receive a light beating’ (δαρήσεται ὀλιγάς; Lk. 12.48). Nothing tells us that this is an exaggeration, applicable only in the world of parables. Slaves who were considered disobedient were punished severely in antiquity—as they were in later slave societies. There is thus a connection between maltreatment in the biblical text and actual maltreatment, justified precisely by reference to these violent biblical texts.

Originally, the theme of this parable ought to have been linked to the willingness to stay awake and wait for the arrival of the Lord (παρουσία), but as Christianity gradually became less eschatologically coloured, the interpretation of this type of parable also changed. The watch-and-wait-theme became, in the worst cases, a social manual for the discipline of slaves.

#### *d. Grace and Discipline*

Under this heading, two parables will be treated: (1) the parable about the talents/pounds (Mt. 25.14-30; Lk. 19.12-27) and (2) the parable about the unmerciful fellow servant (Mt. 18.23-28). In the Lukan parable about the pounds, the ten pounds are entrusted equally to ten servants, so that everyone receives one pound. It is a relatively small but equal amount distributed to each servant. Common to the Matthean parables is that the amounts are considerably larger and that the three servants are given an unequal number of talents. There is reason to assume that, given the smaller amounts, the Lukan version is the more original.

Matthew's purpose behind the parable of the talents was presumably to issue a warning about the coming day of judgment and to encourage his listeners and readers to be prepared to give their accounts. The Lukan parable about the ten pounds seems intended as a reminder of the need for patience and industriousness until the time that the kingdom of God will arrive. Luke 19.11 says that this parable was addressed to those who believed that they would already now (παραχρῆμα, 'immediately') see the arrival of the kingdom of God.<sup>61</sup> The unmerciful servant owed his master 10,000 talents—an almost unimaginable sum. The conclusion, which can be drawn from this, is that Matthew's talents, more clearly than Luke's pounds, lead the thoughts of the listeners and readers to the theological sphere. That the master in the first parable entrusts his talents to his servants, and that the master in the second parable remits an almost astronomical debt, shows that Matthew was thinking of different aspects of divine grace. No ordinary person would ever be able to repay a debt of 10,000 talents; the only way to become free of such a debt would be if the debt were cancelled; 'he would never escape them, for his debt was unimaginably great'.<sup>62</sup> It is thus the Matthean theology of grace that is the cause of this astronomical sum.<sup>63</sup>

However, these parables are not only about grace—they also express the view that the punishment is as inescapable as the grace is enormous. The evangelists seek to illustrate that by images from contemporary slavery. The sum of 10,000 talents—just like the divine grace according to Matthew—is unimaginably large, but the treatment of the slaves who had fallen into disgrace was neither unimaginable nor unrealistic. It was not at all uncommon that slave-owners, who did not want to maltreat their slaves themselves, handed them over to professional tormentors (βασανισταί), as happens in Mt. 18.34: 'And in anger his lord handed him over to be tortured until he would pay his entire debt'.<sup>64</sup> The theological conclusion comes in the following verse: 'That is how my

61. Wohlgenut, 'Entrusted Money (Matthew 25.14-28)', p. 104.

62. Via, *Parables*, p. 141.

63. W.D. Davies and D.C. Allison, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel according to Saint Matthew* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1994), II, pp. 796, 798: 'Matthew has greatly inflated the monetary amounts... Matthew may have greatly inflated the figure in order to magnify God's munificence.' Also Via, *Parables*, p. 144, emphasizes that it is matter of grace: 'tragedy results basically from the failure to respond appropriately to *grace*' (italics added).

64. The word βασανιστής is a New Testament *hapax legomenon*.

heavenly Father will deal with you, unless you each forgive your brother from your heart'. The Matthean Jesus takes it for granted that his audience is familiar with the practice of engaging tormentors.<sup>65</sup> Matthew must also have assumed that his audience would not instinctively reject the action of the slave-owner in the parable—since in that case the parable could not have functioned as an illustration of God's actions.

It is consequently essential to note that the servant, who had been entrusted with one talent, was afraid (φοβηθείς, Mt. 25.25) of his master, and that it was precisely this fear which paralysed him. In Glancy's words: 'the faithful slave is a by-product of the fear of corporal punishment'.<sup>66</sup> The slave says that he knew his master to be 'a harsh (σκληρός) man, reaping where [he]...did not sow and gathering where [he]...did not scatter seed'. It was this fear which made him powerless to act. On the other hand, the master calls his slave 'an evil and lazy servant' (πονηρὸν δοῦλε καὶ ὀκνηρὸν, v. 26); here he makes use of traditional slave clichés. It is obvious that the behaviour of the slave—or rather his lack of action—is explained in two different ways in the parable: the slave himself says that the reason was that he was afraid of his master's violent temper, the owner considers the slave as lazy, evil-minded and useless (see vv. 26 and 30). Any student of biblical images of God ought to be interested in these parables, since their ruthless master would in all probability exert an influence on the image of God perceived by its listeners and readers. And they most certainly also say something of the vulnerability—in the most literal sense of that word—of the slaves of that period. On the issue of the view of slavery these parables are hardly subversive—even in spite of the theology of grace propounded therein.

*e. At the Heavenly Banquet, the Master Himself Will Serve at Table*

Finally, the parable in which the relationship between the master and the slaves differs drastically from the contemporary pattern, Lk. 12.35-38, should be analyzed. Many people would probably consider this parable

65. J.A. Glancy, 'Slaves and Slavery in the Matthean Parables', *JBL* 119 (2000), pp. 67-90 (67): '[The Matthean] Jesus assumes that those who hear him are familiar with the idea that slave owners who want to punish their slaves can call on the services of the torturers'. Glancy has included some parts of this article in her book *Slavery in Early Christianity*, pp. 102-129. References will therefore sometimes be made to her article and sometimes to her book.

66. Glancy, 'Slaves and Slavery in the Matthean Parables', p. 79.

to be revolutionary with regard to the view of the relationship between slaves and their masters. To the immense surprise of the listeners and readers, the Lukan Jesus here says that, on his return, the master will hitch up his robes, let his slaves lie down at the table and then go round himself and serve them! Is not this parable a clear example of the revolutionary teaching of Jesus about the relationship between earthly masters and earthly slaves?

It is obvious that Lk. 12.35-38 differs radically from the general tendency in the presentation by the New Testament evangelists of the teaching of Jesus about, or with links to, slavery. It should, however, be mentioned immediately that this remarkable parable is both Lukan *Sondergut* and also responded to by Luke himself! It is laid down in Lk. 17.7-8 (referred to above) that no earthly slave could ever expect such treatment:

Who among you would say to your slave who has just come in from plowing or tending in the field, 'Come here at once and take your place at the table'? Would you not rather say to him, 'Prepare supper for me, put on your apron and serve me while I eat and drink...'?

The conclusion ought to be that the description of the behaviour of the heavenly master in Lk. 12.37 is so revolutionary that it could hardly be perceived as a specific piece of advice on how earthly slave-owners should treat their slaves. This text is thus so radically different that it could not have influenced the factual system of slavery. While awaiting the heavenly banquet, slavery could consequently continue without any changes.

### *Conclusions*

Five categories have been discussed here. The first four deal with slavery in various ways by comparing God to a traditional slave-master, who supervises and chastises his slaves. The fifth has such obvious heavenly overtones that it could hardly influence the view of earthly slavery. It is now time to summarize this analysis of the metaphors of slavery in the New Testament parables:

(1) *Metaphors of slavery*. In the parables of Jesus, slavery is a metaphor for the relationship between God and those who belong to God. The roots to this approach are most certainly to be found in the exodus metaphors in the Hebrew Bible. The God of Israel liberates God's Israel from slavery in Egypt, so that Israel may serve God instead: 'For to me the Israelites are servants, they are my servants' (Lev.

25.55). The problem is that these metaphors have become so well known, so central and so much appreciated by the readers of the New Testament throughout the ages that they have not always seen how the slaves are actually described and treated in the parables. Human beings are compared to slaves, God to a slave-owner, judgment to a slave-chastisement and the punishment of the slave to the judgment of God. By these *theo*-logical metaphors, slavery is conceived as saying something about God and slavery is considered as a reflection of the nature of God. There is hardly anything subversive in these parables *en masse*.

(2) *Punishment*. A recurring motif in the parables about slavery is the corporal punishment of poor slaves. It has also been noted that the slave who, according to his master, was lazy, evil and useless was paralyzed precisely because the master had the habit of maltreating his slaves. Wherever slaves appear in the parables, corporal punishment is never far away. This agrees with contemporary clichés: slaves should be punished—otherwise they will become lazy and they will mismanage their duties in various ways. A poor slave should therefore be disciplined; a good slave is good because of his fear of being punished (again). Modern readers tend to perceive all this corporal discipline symbolically, but listeners and readers in antiquity had every reason to perceive it literally. That was, after all, how slaves were usually disciplined. The evangelists thus actually *enforce* the view that the main difference between slaves and non-slaves was that the former could and ought regularly to receive *corporal punishment*, as Demosthenes also states (quoted above). In the synoptic parables, the vulnerability and the exposed position of slaves are stressed. It is not uncommon that slaves who have been given major responsibility are portrayed as autonomous individuals—but that they are and remain precisely slaves is often made clear towards the end of the parables when they are punished by their masters. Patterson writes, ‘they could be literally whipped into shape’.<sup>67</sup> The slave was and remained a body (σῶμα), which could and ought to be abused. The evangelist Matthew in particular—although Luke is hardly less acceptable—describes and treats slavery in his parables in accordance with contemporary praxis. The slave is not a person to use, but a body to abuse, to consume and to maltreat. There is of course a connection between the discourse of the anger and ferocious violence of the slave-owner and the continuous anxiety of the slave in the face of yet more

67. Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death*, p. 303.

maltreatment, to be received sooner rather than later. What are the consequences of all this for Christian images of God?

(3) *The image of God*. The connection between human maltreatment of one another and the image of God is made clear by the thought in the book of Proverbs and in the letter to the Hebrews: ‘for the Lord disciplines those whom he loves’.<sup>68</sup> Glancy reminds us that there is a text that shifts the sympathy of the reader from the perpetrator to the recipient of the maltreatment. In Phil. 2.7, Paul says that Jesus ‘took the form of a servant’ (μορφὴν δούλου λαβών). Glancy thinks that the interpretation by readers of the body of Jesus in the passion story ought to influence their view of other figures, who have the form of servants in the Bible:

A final counterline of inquiry into the parabolic ideology of slavery would ask whether the crucifixion of Jesus prompts us to reconsider our interpretations of the slaves, whose representations prefigure the Gospels’ climactic scenes of torture.<sup>69</sup>

(4) *Female slaves*. In the parables there are only male slave-masters and almost only male slaves. The only exception seems to be Lk. 12.42-48, where the slave after a while begins to beat his fellow slaves and slave-girls [τὰς παιδίσκας 12.45]). The word δουλή (‘female slave’) is only used in Lk. 1.38 and 48, and on both occasions it is the mother of Jesus, Mary, who describes herself as the handmaid of God. The particular problem of the vulnerability of female slaves is thus not touched upon at all in the Gospels. There will be reason to return to the situation of female slaves in the discussion of the Pauline letters.

(5) *Slavery is neither criticized nor questioned*. Parables are stories originating in nature or in daily life. If they were not, they would be unable to help viewers, listeners and readers to understand what the parables are designed to illuminate. What does it mean that God is compared to someone who maltreats his slaves? What were the practical consequences of this comparison? That such metaphors could have deeply penetrating consequences seems obvious. The argument that the parables are revolutionary can hardly be proved. The Matthean presentation of the parables of Jesus presupposes, builds on and develops traditional stereotypes about slaves: they are unreliable and lazy, they pilfer their masters’ property, and so on. The purpose of this part of the article

68. Prov. 3.11 and Heb. 12.6.

69. Glancy, *Slavery in Early Christianity*, p. 129.

has been to examine how the New Testament evangelists present the teaching of Jesus. Even so, there may be reason to point out, now that the material has been studied, that there are no indications that the *historical* Jesus condemned slavery in his teaching. On the contrary: in his parables he seems to have made use of the relationship between masters and slaves in order to illustrate the relationship between God and God's people. God is compared to a heavenly slave-master; human beings are compared to slaves.<sup>70</sup>

(6) *Is there a connection between eschatology and the discipline of slaves?* It is Matthew who is particularly interested in the corporal punishment of slaves. Surely we ought therefore to ask ourselves whether it is Matthew's interest in the judgment on the Last Day that leads him to these violent metaphors about slaves, or whether it is his interest in slavery that has influenced his eschatology. Even though the oldest of the Gospels is also apocalyptic, judgment and punishment, slavery and slave discipline, play a far more significant role for Matthew and Luke than for Mark.

Although hard to capture, there is, however, a connection between eschatology and slave discipline: on the one hand, it is obviously the case that Matthean eschatology stresses that the slaves must one day give an account of their actions before their master. This is the main reason why he is so frequently preoccupied by metaphors from slavery. He wants people to remember that, before God, they are just as exposed, just as subordinate and just as vulnerable as any earthly slave is before his master. On the other hand, the gradually diminishing stress on eschatology in Christian theology led to a strengthening of the view that slavery must of course be pleasing to God. Why would the master himself otherwise make such frequent uses of these motifs in his parables—without ever distancing himself from slavery? Proponents of slavery have made frequent use of this *argumentum e silentio*.

#### 4. *The Pauline Epistles*

Paul the apostle has become something of an unofficial patron saint for slave-owners, since it is his letters in particular that have been quoted or

70. J.A. Harrill, 'Slave', in D.N. Freedman, A.C. Myers and A.B. Beck (eds.), *Eerdmans Dictionary of the Bible* (Grand Rapids and Cambridge: Eerdmans, 2000), p. 1232: 'This allegorical use of slavery reveals that slavery was taken for granted in that period; no extant saying of Jesus condemns the institution as intrinsically evil'.

referred to whenever the need has arisen for Christians to defend various forms of slavery.<sup>71</sup> The main purpose in this paragraph is to seek to explore whether or not this is a legitimate conclusion. Is Paul really the one among the biblical authors who most clearly defends slavery?

An enormous amount has been written about Paul's views on slaves and slavery.<sup>72</sup> In this context, only three texts will be discussed: the letter to Philemon, 1 Thess. 4.4 and 1 Cor. 7.21. This short discussion cannot claim to be exhaustive but, hopefully, it may nevertheless point in the right direction.

#### a. *The Letter to Philemon*

According to the established exegesis, the letter to Philemon, the shortest of the authentic letters of Paul, is dedicated to the specific issue about how Christians should think and act when a slave has run away from his owner. This letter is certainly short, but a number of conclusions nevertheless have been drawn, based on studies of this text. According to the commonly-accepted reconstruction, the background is that the slave Onesimus had run away from his owner, Philemon, and when he met Paul, he became a Christian. Joseph Barber Lightfoot's presentation of Onesimus is almost infamous:

He was a thief and a runaway. His offence did not differ in any way, so far as we know, from the vulgar type of slave offences. He seems to have done just what the representative slave in the Roman comedy threatens to do, when he gets into trouble. He had 'packed up some goods and taken to his heels'. Rome was the natural cesspool for these offscourings of humanity. In the thronging crowds of the metropolis was his best hope of secrecy. In the dregs of the city rabble he would find the society of congenial spirits.<sup>73</sup>

71. A.D. Callahan, "'Brother Saul': An Ambivalent Witness to Freedom", in A.D. Callahan, R.A. Horsley and A. Smith (eds.), *Slavery in Text and Interpretation* (Semeia 83/84; Atlanta: SBL, 1998), pp. 235-30 (235): 'Thus Paul became, in the minds of slave and master alike, the patron saint of the master class'.

72. For references, see, e.g., the bibliographies in A.D. Callahan, *Embassy of Onesimus: The Letter of Paul to Philemon* (Valley Forge: Trinity Press International, 1997), pp. 84-89; Glancy, *Slavery in Early Christianity*, pp. 181-92; and J. Byron, *Slavery Metaphors in Early Judaism and Pauline Christianity: A Traditio-Historical and Exegetical Examination* (Tübingen: Mohr-Siebeck, 2003), pp. 265-80.

73. J.B. Lightfoot, *Saint Paul's Epistles to the Colossians and Philemon* (London: Macmillan, 1875), p. 310, is oft-quoted; see, e.g., Callahan, *Embassy of Onesimus*, p. 9.

It is obvious that it is the Christian slave-owner, Philemon, who has won Lightfoot's entire heart. Onesimus has behaved shamefully towards his master by having the impudence to escape from him. Lightfoot's statement is built on the views that slave-owners have always held in slavocracies: slaves are self-indulgent and shameless, and, because of their laziness, thefts or escapes, they will steal the property of their owners.<sup>74</sup> The slave who escapes—and even the one who has the audacity to die (!)—robs his owner of the work which that slave would have been expected to carry out for the benefit of his master. Or, to put it differently, whatever the slave did, except to work, was equal to theft from his master. It is essential to note that the traditional reconstruction is built on, and dependent on, the contemptuous and arrogant discourse which has marked the views of free people within slavocracies.

Lightfoot is far from alone in this. Just as in the traditional exposition of the Synoptic Gospels, many readers have sympathized with the Christian Philemon. He was probably a kind and generous man—why would Paul otherwise praise him so much in the introduction to the letter? The consequence is that the more the reader exalts Philemon, the more wretched, simple and evil-minded Onesimus must necessarily appear. How could he have the impudence to escape from Philemon? This is a fight within the reception history of this letter, of which Onesimus can have no hope of winning. The adherents of the mainstream interpretation seem to argue that there is no excuse for a slave to run away from his (Christian) master. On his side, Philemon has the entire slave mythology, which degrades slaves to wretched, evil, selfish and stupid objects. The pre-Christian Onesimus was thus evil, lazy and selfish—in short, he was 'useless' (ἄχρηστον, v. 11). It is only when he has become a Christian that he can be 'of good use' (εὐχρηστον, v. 11).

It seems better to choose another starting-point for the historical reconstruction than the introduction to the letter to Philemon, in which Paul praises the devotions of Philemon. It would be unwise to give so much attention to the *captatio benevolentiae*, which was part and parcel of epistolary introductions in antiquity. The most important question ought to be: *why did Onesimus choose to escape?* Did his master behave towards him as most slave-owners did; that is, did he regularly insult and maltreat his slaves? Is it altogether out of the question that his master was unusually ruthless? Hence, modern readers of this letter

74. For references, see K. Bradley, *Slavery and Society at Rome* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), p. 177 n. 5.

ought first of all to ask themselves why Onesimus chose to escape from his master. Runaway slaves who were found again could be quite certain about one thing: they would be severely punished. There must have been some reason that motivated Onesimus to escape nevertheless—in spite of the risk of being caught and beaten to pieces, either by his owner or by one of the professional torturers (βασανισταῖς, see the discussion above on Mt. 18.34).

Traditional commentaries on the letter to Philemon have concentrated on emphasizing Philemon's virtue and Onesimus's wretchedness; one of them being a Christian while the other had escaped and maybe even committed some theft. Most of the expositors have considered Onesimus a slave; a large majority even say that he was a fugitive, while some of them claim that he was also a thief. Given these conclusions, it is remarkable to note that the traditional interpretation (that is, a slave, a runaway and maybe even a thief) is nowadays strongly questioned. In the following review, three interpretations will be drawn upon, represented by articles and monographs by Peter Arzt-Grabner, Allan Dwight Callahan and John M.G. Barclay.

1. *Onesimus Was not a Fugitive Slave*. In his papyrological commentary from 2003 and in an article in a periodical in 2004, Peter Arzt-Grabner has analyzed the letter to Philemon by using some 1,900 papyrus fragments and *ostraca*.<sup>75</sup> He believes that these parallels prove that Onesimus was not a *fugitive* slave, who had once and for all abandoned his owner. He should rather be described as someone who was shy of work: 'Onesimos kann somit in der Vorgeschichte des Phlm am ehesten als notorischer Herumtreiber (*erro*) charakterisiert werden'.<sup>76</sup> This becomes clear, for example, in v. 15, where the expression ἐχωρίσθη πρὸς ὄραν shows that Onesimus had only temporarily departed from his owner.<sup>77</sup> Thus, according to Arzt-Grabner, Onesimus was not a *runaway* slave.

75. P. Arzt-Grabner, *Philemon* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2003), and 'Onesimus erro: Zur Vorgeschichte des Philemonbriefes', *ZNW* 95 (2004), pp. 131-43.

76. Arzt-Grabner, 'Onesimus erro', p. 143; ET: 'Onesimus can, therefore, in the pre-history of the letter of Philemon most easily be characterized as a notorious wanderer (*erro*)'.

77. Arzt-Grabner, 'Onesimus erro', pp. 136-140, esp. p. 139.

2. *Onesimus Was not even a Slave*. During the latest decade, Allen Dwight Callahan has vitalized this debate by claiming that this letter is not at all about a fugitive slave.<sup>78</sup> He believes that Paul is rather trying to settle a conflict between the two brothers Philemon and Onesimus.<sup>79</sup> He has presented his views both in the form of articles and in a commentary, *Embassy of Onesimus: The Letter of Paul to Philemon*. The criticism levelled by, among others, Margaret M. Mitchell has led Callahan to modify his thesis. To begin with, he thought that it was in the commentary of Chrysostom on the letter to Philemon (written 386–398) that the slave theory was first presented. Mitchell has shown that this cannot be substantiated. She has pointed out that Chrysostom's sermon on the letter to Philemon can hardly be the oldest evidence of the Onesimus-as-a-slave-thesis, *since Chrysostom himself takes this thesis for granted in his earlier texts!* The earliest evidence in the writings of Chrysostom is, according to Mitchell, *Ad Theodorum lapsus*, which was probably written between 378 and 385.<sup>80</sup>

In his commentary, Callahan claims instead that it was through the writings of Chrysostom that the slavery interpretation gained general acceptance—although there is evidence of this interpretation in earlier texts. This summary of Callahan's thesis is largely based on his later expositions (since he himself writes that his line of argument has improved, due to the critical views proffered by exegetical scholars and by historians of antiquity).

Callahan's observations are undoubtedly worthy of note. He claims (1) that this letter was marginalized and called into question during the first few centuries; (2) that slavery was a favourite subject of Chrysostom; and (3) that Chrysostom's vocabulary indicates that he is introducing a new interpretation, probably in order to clarify the relevance of this

78. A.D. Callahan, 'Paul's Epistle to Philemon: Toward an Alternative Argumentum', *HTR* 86 (1993), pp. 357-76, and *idem*, 'John Chrysostom on Philemon: A Response to Margaret M. Mitchell', *HTR* 88 (1995), pp. 149-56. Since the introductory chapter (pp. 1-19) in his commentary *Embassy of Onesimus* is principally a revision of his article from 1993, this summary will generally refer to his commentary. Although he has elaborated on the details of his hypothesis, he still argues that Onesimus was not Philemon's slave but his brother.

79. Callahan was not the first to suggest that Onesimus was not Philemon's slave; both abolitionists during the nineteenth century and biblical scholars have suggested similar interpretations, but no one has been as influential as has Callahan.

80. M.M. Mitchell, 'John Chrysostom on Philemon: A Second Look', *HTR* 88 (1995), pp. 135-48 (143-44).

letter. It has already been mentioned that Callahan has modified his stance on this point. Nowadays he would rather claim that Chrysostom is the champion of a minority view. Chrysostom's interpretation of the letter to Philemon can be summarized in three points:

(1) Chrysostom himself held the traditional view of slave-owners and slaves: on the one hand, he believes that Philemon belongs among praiseworthy and honourable people (Φιλήμων ἀνὴρ τις τῶν θαυμαστῶν καὶ γενναίων); on the other hand, this praiseworthy man had a slave called Onesimus (παῖδα τινα εἶχεν Ὀνήσιμον; παῖς literally means 'child' but it was often used in a transferred sense about slaves) who had been stealing from his master (οὗτος κλέψας τι παρὰ τοῦ δεσπότου, ἐδραπέτευσεν). This characterization leads the reader to take the side of the slave-master. The slave has offended against his owner.

(2) Chrysostom mentions that there are some who consider this letter irrelevant and who believe that it ought not to be included in the canon (τινὲς φασί, περιττὸν εἶναι τὸ καὶ ταύτην προσκεῖσθαι τὴν ἐπιστολήν). Chrysostom therefore wants to show that this letter is relevant.

(3) Chrysostom also mentions that there are some who believe that Christianity robs slave-owners of their slaves. It is this subversive argumentation that Chrysostom wants to counter. He claims that a slave who has the opportunity to gain his freedom ought rather to remain a slave (see below for further aspects of Chrysostom's interpretation of 1 Cor. 7.21). There are some people who seem to believe that Christianity is so subversive that it turns everything upside down (ἐπὶ ἀνατροπῇ τῶν παντῶν ὁ Χριστιανισμὸς εἰς τὸν βίον εἰσενήνεκται, τῶν δεσπότην ἀφαιρουμένων τοὺς οἰκέτας, καὶ βίας τὸ πρῶγμα ἐστίν). It is of course not easy to judge wherein this βία ('violence') consists, but Chrysostom obviously dislikes its consequences. He wants to show that ὁ Χριστιανισμὸς does not constitute any threat against the social order. Slave-owners ought rather to realize that *noblesse oblige*. On these three points, Callahan's analysis of Chrysostom is correct.

However, it is, as shown above, impossible to maintain that it is not until the commentary on the letter to Philemon that this interpretation is presented. Thus even the οὐτῶ μοι δοκεῖ argument, which he presents as an entirely new interpretation in this context, falls. Even so, it does seem likely that it was with Chrysostom that his interpretation gained general acceptance.

Callahan thus believes that there is nothing in the letter itself that forces us to draw the conclusion that Paul was writing to a slave-owner about how he ought to relate to his run-away slave. Callahan points out that the words *παῖς* ('child', i.e. 'slave'), *οἰκέτης* ('domestic slave') and *δραπέτης* ('fugitive') do not actually appear in the letter to Philemon. It only says that Philemon ought *not* to consider Onesimus 'as a slave' (*ὡς δοῦλον*) but 'as a beloved brother' (*ὡς...ἀδελφὸν ἀγαπητόν*).<sup>81</sup> It is true that Onesimus was a common name for slaves, but, as A.L. Connolly has pointed out in the article 'Onesimos' in *New Documents Illustrating Early Christianity*, it was not only slaves who had that name: 'the name Onesimos could be borne by free persons of no insignificant status...it is far from being a sure indication of servile status'.<sup>82</sup> Thus even people of fairly high rank might bear the name Onesimus.

If Callahan is right, one could say somewhat pointedly that for two thousand years biblical scholars have done precisely what Paul did *not* want, that is, they have considered Onesimus as a slave, rather than as Philemon's beloved brother.

3. *Paul Did Not Know What Advice to Give to Philemon*. John M.G. Barclay's article on the letter to Philemon offers great clarification, since he both summarizes with great insight the most common interpretations and anchors this text in its contemporary context of antiquity. Barclay believes that the Onesimus-as-a-runaway-slave-interpretation still remains the most probable one. *The crucial question that the exegete should ask is what Paul actually recommended Onesimus to do in this letter*.<sup>83</sup>

(1) The first possibility is that Paul intended to send the slave Onesimus back to his owner, Philemon. If so, he would offend against what is written in Deut. 23.15-16:

Slaves who have escaped to you from their owners shall not be given back to them. They shall reside with you, in your midst, in any place they choose in any one of your towns, wherever they please; you shall not oppress them.

81. Callahan, 'John Chrysostom on Philemon', p. 155.

82. A.L. Connolly, 'Onesimos', in G.H.R. Horsley (ed.), *New Documents Illustrating Early Christianity: A Review of the Greek Inscriptions and Papyri Published in 1979*, IV (North Ryde: Macquarie University, 1987), pp. 179-81 (180).

83. J.M.G. Barclay, 'Paul, Philemon and the Dilemma of Christian Slave-Ownership', *NTS* 37 (1991), pp. 161-86 (164, 170).

Biblical scholars often stress that Onesimus might have committed some theft, but they then forget that the escape *per se* was a theft, since the slave was the property of his owner!<sup>84</sup> Any slave who escaped and was caught could, as has already been pointed out, be quite sure that he would be punished severely and ruthlessly. The usual punishment was flogging and branding. Those who chose to escape from their owners knew that. Anyone who nevertheless did escape probably did so because the conditions of slaves in that particular household were unusually harsh—probably consisting of repeated humiliations, punishments and sexual abuse beyond normal expectation—or because there seemed to be no possibility of ever being set free (*manumissio*). The fact that Onesimus had chosen to escape in itself says something indirectly about the conditions that marked his existence as a slave in the Christian household of Philemon. We must thus read the words of Paul in the fifth verse of this letter in a different light: ‘I have heard of your love and faith’. This reading of the letter to Philemon implies that the conclusion will be the exact opposite of Lightfoot’s infamous statement about the wretchedness of Onesimus.

If Onesimus had been sent back to Philemon—how would the latter have treated him? Would Onesimus have had any special treatment? Could you be both a slave (δοῦλος) and a brother (ἀδελφός) without one or other of these concepts being undermined? In what manner should a free Christian treat a Christian slave? Barclay asks how the exhortations in Gal. 5.13 and 6.2—in which verses Christians are exhorted to be servants of one another (δουλεύετε ἀλλήλοις) and to bear one another’s burdens (ἀλλήλων τὰ βάρη βαστάζετε)—were interpreted. In one of the earliest texts in the New Testament, there are signs that there were some Christian slaves who did not show their masters proper respect and fear (1 Tim. 6.2):

Those who have believing masters must not be disrespectful to them on the ground that they are brothers (ὅτι ἀδελφοί εἰσιν); rather they must serve them all the more, since those who benefit by their service are believers and beloved.

This text shows that it was not an empty expression that the slave could consider his master as his ἀδελφός. The author of this Pastoral Epistle counters something that he considers an abuse, so there must have been some kind of realistic practice implied in the concept of brotherhood.

84. Barclay, ‘Paul, Philemon and the Dilemma’, p. 165 n. 15.

(2) Another possibility is that Paul would like Philemon to set Onesimus free. Although for modern people that may seem not only the obvious but indeed the right course of action, it would in antiquity most certainly seem most peculiar to treat an *escaped* slave in particular in that manner. *Manumissio* was a theoretic possibility designed to increase the working morale among the slaves, not to encourage their desire to escape. So why should this particular slave be set free? What effect would that have on the working morale and the desire to escape among other slaves? According to Chrysostom's interpretation, the entire household was Christian, so we must consider the possibility that the other slaves were also baptized. Would they continue to work as Christian slaves for their Christian master if Onesimus—who had escaped from his Christian owner—was set free? Should all *Christian* slaves be set free? Does baptism automatically lead to *manumissio*? There are good reasons to assume that such a practice would have influenced the baptismal statistics in the Roman Empire! We must also ask why Philemon should receive Onesimus as 'more than a slave' (v. 16: ὑπὲρ δοῦλον). Was it because *Philemon* was a Christian, or because *Onesimus* had now become a Christian, or was it because *Paul* so earnestly requested him to do it?

What is it that Paul suggests in his letter? Does Paul favour continued slave service for Philemon, or does he think that Onesimus should be set free? No one denies that the letter to Philemon is formulated with great rhetorical skill; Paul unites praise with exhortations and expectations. He would like Philemon to follow his advice—but it is nevertheless unclear what exactly his advice is, or, in Barclay's words, 'it is extremely unclear what precisely Paul is requesting'.<sup>85</sup> Barclay's conclusion is that this letter is deliberately unclear ('deliberately open-ended') because *Paul did not actually know what proposed action he should put before Philemon*.<sup>86</sup> The alternatives described above are both impossible. Paul realized this, and that insight led him to be unclear. He actually did not know what advice to give Philemon: 'Neither of the two main options—to manumit Onesimus or to retain him as a slave—were really satisfactory'.<sup>87</sup>

85. Barclay, 'Paul, Philemon and the Dilemma', p. 171.

86. Barclay, 'Paul, Philemon and the Dilemma', p. 175.

87. Barclay, 'Paul, Philemon and the Dilemma', p. 180.

*Conclusions*

This presentation of the ongoing scholarly conversation about the background and content of the letter to Philemon shows that the traditional interpretation is strongly questioned. Maybe Onesimus had not escaped (Arzt-Grabner), maybe he was not even a slave (Callahan), or maybe Paul was so unclear that neither he himself nor we really know what he actually recommends Philemon to do. It is thus quite possible either that his letter is not about an escaped slave, or that the advice of Paul is so vague that it cannot be made the foundation of any ‘Pauline’ or ‘New Testament’ view of slavery. Paul hesitates, or keeps silent, because he himself does not know what the right course of action would be.

This short review of the current scholarly debate draws attention to the difficulties that arise at the reading of texts that are so short, so personal, so old and so contextual.<sup>88</sup> What about other Pauline texts? Does anything emerge from them to indicate clearly what Paul thought about slavery? In the following paragraphs, two particularly interesting verses, 1 Thess. 4.4 and 1 Cor. 7.21, will be discussed.

*b. 1 Thessalonians 4.4*

Sources both from antiquity and from the modern period provide uncomfortably specific details about how slaves were regularly not only humiliated and maltreated, but also sexually abused.<sup>89</sup> Through institutionalized rapes, slave-owners received new generations of slaves—at no cost. There is nothing to suggest that circumstances were any different in the societies in which Christianity emerged than in their surroundings. The question must then arise about how the earliest leaders of Christianity, and Paul among them, judged and described the vulnerability of thousands upon thousands of slaves and slave-girls. So far, most interpreters have probably believed that, in his letters, Paul does not deal with this issue. Glancy has renewed the debate by suggesting that in 1 Thess.

88. Cf. Glancy, *Slavery in Early Christianity*, p. 92.

89. See, e.g., Plautus, *Curculio* 1.33-38 (LCL) in which the slave Palinarus gives his master Phaedromus a compendium in Roman sexual ethics: *dum ted abstineas nupta, vidua, virgine, iuventute et pueris liberis, ama quid lubet* (‘provided you keep away from married women, widows, virgins, young innocents, and children of respectable families, love anyone you want’). For additional comments, see R.O.A.M. Lyne, *The Latin Love Poets: From Catullus to Horace* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986), esp. pp. 1-18.

4.4 Paul actually does encourage Christian slave-owning men to have sexual intercourse with them instead of with free women other than their own wives—in order *not* to commit adultery:

Paul's advice could be construed as instruction to the male Thessalonian Christians to find morally neutral outlets for their sexual urges. And in the first century, domestic slaves were considered to be morally neutral outlets for sexual urges—vessels, we might say.<sup>90</sup>

This is a remarkable suggestion and it therefore deserves some attention and critical assessment. The next few pages will be dedicated to the interpretation of the phrase εἰδέναι ἕκαστον ὑμῶν τὸ ἑαυτοῦ σκεῦος κτᾶσθαι ἐν ἁγιασμῷ καὶ τιμῇ ('each one of you must learn to gain mastery over his σκεῦος to hallow and honour it'). The question is how that little word σκεῦος (usually 'container', 'vessel' or merely 'thing') should be interpreted in this verse. It can be expounded in an impressive number of ways in this context, five of which are reported here. (1) σκεῦος can refer to the genitals of the Christian male. The meaning is thus that he should control his sexual urges. (2) The word σκεῦος may refer not only to his genitals, but to his entire being. The meaning is almost the same as in the previous interpretation. And the conclusion is altogether the same: he should exercise self-control. (3) σκεῦος could refer to the wife of the Christian man. He should not commit adultery by having sexual intercourse with other women—but he should keep himself to his lawfully wedded wife and thereby keep her 'hallowed and in honour'. (4) The fourth possibility is, as Glancy claims, to understand σκεῦος as a reference to the domestic slave-girl. In order not to commit adultery, the Christian man should have sexual intercourse with the things (σκευή) which are around the household. To have sexual intercourse with them does not count as adultery, since they are only bodies (σώματα), and not free persons. The conclusion is thus that sexuality should be limited to the household. The problem is that it is hard to understand what the expression κτᾶσθαι ἐν ἁγιασμῷ καὶ τιμῇ might mean in that case. How could you keep your slave-girl (σκεῦος) hallowed and in honour by considering her as a σκεῦος? Is it not the idea that σκευή can be used precisely because they do not have to be honoured and respected? (5) Yet another possibility is therefore that Paul here exhorts the man to hold his spouse, his σκεῦος, in honour—by not visiting other men's women but only his own slave-girls. Thus, the word

90. Glancy, *Slavery in Early Christianity*, p. 60.

σκεῦος would then refer to the wife, but the consequence would be the same as in the immediately preceding suggestion. The advantage of this interpretation is that it solves the problem that arises under the fourth point, that is, it gives meaning to the exhortation that the man's σκεῦος (that is, his wife) should be 'hallowed and honoured'.

Which of these five suggestions seems the most reasonable? Does Paul really encourage the Christian Thessalonians to abuse their slave-girls rather than to commit adultery with *free* women? First of all it should be mentioned that there is something rather un-Greek about Paul's use of σκεῦος as a metaphor. It is certainly true that the historian Polybius uses an interesting expression, ὑπηρετικὸν...σκεῦος, about a person of low esteem who was a handy 'tool', but given the enormity of the Greek text corpus, this can hardly be called a frequently-used phrase.<sup>91</sup> It is, therefore, to Jewish and Christian texts that we should turn in order better to understand the use of σκεῦος as a *terminus technicus*.

Generally speaking, in the New Testament and in early Christian literature, σκεῦος is a term that has positive connotations. John of the Cells repeats a story about a prostitute (μία πόρνη) in Egypt who became a Christian 'and who became a chosen vessel' (καὶ γέγονε σκεῦος ἐκλογῆς).<sup>92</sup>

The word σκεῦος only appears five times in Paul's letters: three times in Rom. 9.21-23, once in 1 Cor. 4.7 and also here in 1 Thess. 4.4. In the first four cases, the usage is clearly semiticizing. It is therefore likely that Paul is using the word σκεῦος in a similar manner in this the fifth case as well. The next step should therefore be to investigate the Hebrew and/or Aramaic words, in this case the technical terms כלי (singular) and כלים (plural), that is, 'vessel'. There are some rabbinic parallels that support the interpretation that a wife could be compared to a כלי (see also 1 Pet. 3.7 and 1 Cor. 7.9), but the similarity between 1 Thess. 4.4 and a paragraph in one of the Qumran-texts is even more interesting. Torleif Elgvin believes that particularly the *4QInstruction* is of interest. There the expression כלי חיקכה ('the vessel of your bosom') occurs. In the light of this parallel, it is reasonable to assume that the reference in 1 Thess.

91. Polybius 13.5.7 (LCL). This parallel is cited in H.G. Liddell, R. Scott and H.S. Jones, *A Greek-English Lexicon* (with revised supplement; Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996), *s.v.*, and also in Henry Chadwick's review of Glancy's book in *English Historical Review* 118 (2003), p. 165. Chadwick concurs with Glancy that '*skeuos* is much more likely to be a slave girl than a wife'.

92. *PG* 65.233. Cf. Acts 9.15 and *PG* 65.396.

4.4 is to the genitals, that is, to accept the first interpretation above, or possibly the second. Elgvin notes that Franz Delitzsch in his translation to the Hebrew rendered 1 Thess. 4.4 by לשמור את כליו ('to care for one's vessel'). Elgvin therefore proposes the translation: 'that each one of you learn how to master your passions in sanctification and honour'<sup>93</sup> of this passage.

If this is correct, then 1 Thess. 4.4 does not explicitly discuss sexual relations between slave-owners and slaves. Thus, anyone seeking to reconstruct a Pauline understanding of slavery and sexuality has to rely on *argumenta e silentio*, on analogies and on implicit argumentation. These arguments are strong; sometimes silence speaks louder than words. The very absence in the *corpus paulinum* of a discussion of the exposed circumstances of slaves, and slave-girls in particular, means that Paul may *indirectly* be perceived as permitting slave-owners to commit sexual abuse against their slaves. It is, however, not probable that he gave any explicit exhortations to that in 1 Thess. 4.4.

The letter to Philemon has proved to be more difficult to interpret than most readers may have believed and realized. It is not likely that 1 Thess. 4.4 concerns sexual relation between slave-owners and slaves. The question that remains is whether or not he states his views on slavery more clearly in 1 Cor. 7.21.

#### *c. 1 Corinthians 7.21*

The last two words in 1 Cor. 7.21 (μᾶλλον χρῆσαι, literally 'rather choose') together constitute a well-known *crux interpretum* for New Testament scholars.<sup>94</sup> What, according to Paul, should that slave choose who has a chance 'to be set free' (δύνασαι ἐλεύθερος γενέσθαι)? A quick look at two Bible translations confirms that this verse is hard to interpret. The Commission behind the Revised Standard Version translated 'By all means, seize it!'. In other words, they thought that Paul here encouraged Christian slaves to seek to be set free, if they have the opportunity. The Commission behind the New Revised Standard Version, however, translated the verse in the opposite way: 'Even if you can

93. T. Elgvin, "'To Master His Own Vessel": 1 Thess. 4.4 in Light of New Qumran Evidence', *NTS* 43 (1997), pp. 604-19 (619).

94. For two influential and different studies, see S.S. Bartchy, *Μᾶλλον χρῆσαι: First-Century Slavery and the Interpretation of 1 Corinthians 7.21* (Eugene: Wipf & Stock, 2003), pp. 1-27; and J.A. Harrill, *The Manumission of Slaves in Early Christianity* (Tübingen: Mohr-Siebeck, 1995), pp. 68-128.

gain your freedom, make use of your present condition now more than ever'. The question is thus whether Paul is encouraging the Christian slaves to seek their freedom, or whether he expects that they will not do so. If the latter alternative is the more probable one, Paul certainly takes a reactionary stance.<sup>95</sup> His interpretation of Christianity might then be compared to that of Tertullian and Leo Tolstoy. Christianity is contra-cultural, or to use one of H. Richard Niebuhr's classical phrases, 'Christ [is] against culture'.<sup>96</sup>

One might argue that the incomplete sentence *per se* is as interesting as his actual advice. For a slave, the possibility to gain freedom might literally be a matter of life and death, and it was most certainly an issue of being spared from continuous humiliation and, to use Orlando Patterson's expression, of 'social death'—but Paul does not even conclude the sentence! Given the great importance that he usually attaches to sexual ethics, it is certainly most remarkable that the miserable circumstances of the sexually abused slaves and slave-girls never receive any comment in the Pauline letters preserved for posterity. Could his silence and vagueness possibly stem from the fact that he is as uncertain here in 1 Cor. 7.21 as Barclay claims that he was in the letter to Philemon?

A quick look at the early history of reception shows that even Greek-speaking Christians in antiquity did not consider this verse easy to interpret. John Chrysostom introduces a discussion of this passages by pointing out that some (τινες) interpret this verse as an exhortation to slaves to seek freedom, but he believes himself that this is contrary to Paul's theological argumentation (πολὸν δὲ ἀπεναντίας τῷ τρόπῳ τοῦ Παύλου τὸ ῥῆμα). He therefore proposes the thesis that Paul here exhorts the slave to remain a slave: "rather choose" would mean "rather serve as a slave" (μᾶλλον χρῆσαι· τουτέστι, μᾶλλον δούλευε). He also comments on this verse in his commentary on the letter to

95. R.A. Horsley, 'Paul and Slavery: A Critical Alternative to Recent Readings', in Callahan, Horsley and Smith (eds.), *Slavery in Text and Interpretation*, pp. 153-200 (185): 'it would have been utterly reactionary for Paul to have commended slaves who had a chance of manumission to remain in slavery'.

96. For the Christ-against-Culture model of Tertullian and Tolstoy, see H.R. Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture* (New York: Harper & Row, 1975), pp. 45-82. Niebuhr calls the other ethical models *Christ of Culture* (Abélard, Ritschl), *Christ above Culture* (Clement of Alexandria, Thomas Aquinas *et al.*), *Christ and Culture in Paradox* (Luther, Augustine, Kierkegaard, Troeltsch), and *Christ the Transformer of Culture* (Calvin).

Philemon: “rather choose” means “remain in slavery” (μᾶλλον χρῆσαι. τουτέστι, τῇ δουλείᾳ παραμένε).<sup>97</sup> The reason is that a slave has nothing to gain by being set free (ὅτι οὐδὲν πλεον γίνεται τῷ ἐλευθερῷ γενομένῳ).<sup>98</sup>

The major difference between the interpretations that are comparable to the RSV and those that are reminiscent of the NRSV shows that translators must always reach beyond the text in order to be able to interpret it. 1 Corinthians 7.21 is thus yet another Pauline text that is vague and whose message is elusive and difficult to capture.

So what is Paul’s probable recommendation to the Christian slaves in 1 Cor. 7.21? Should they aspire to freedom or should they actively choose to remain slaves, even if they might be set free?<sup>99</sup> The most likely interpretation here is that Paul claims (1) that it is *possible* to be a Christian and a slave at the same time (nowhere is it suggested that slaves could not be admitted to the Christian community), (2) that it is *not necessary* to be set free in order to remain a Christian, but (3) that slaves who are able to be set free are *not prohibited* to seek freedom. If the most likely interpretation had been that Paul had here actively forbidden the slave to become free, he would not only have been extremely reactionary, but he would also have been more preoccupied by slavery than he otherwise appears to be. Another verse in the same paragraph (1 Cor. 7.23) can be translated ‘do not become slaves of men’ (μὴ γίνεσθε δοῦλοι ἀνθρώπων), and even that verse may be an address to those who had the opportunity to become free: ‘do not *remain* slaves of men’.

Once more it is obvious that Paul is not particularly clear on the issue of slavery. Neither the letter to Philemon, 1 Thess. 4.4 nor 1 Cor. 7.21 are clear on this issue. A ‘Pauline’ view must therefore be built on other factors rather than on specific passages in the texts.

### *Conclusions*

Common to all reconstructions is that the Letter to Philemon cannot on its own form a foundation for a study of Paul’s view of slavery: according to Callahan, Onesimus was not a slave, according to Arzt-Grabner he was a slave, but he had not escaped, and according to Barclay, he was both a slave and a fugitive, but Paul does not know what course of

97. PG 62.704.

98. PG 61.156.

99. For a full and fair discussion, see D.E. Garland, *1 Corinthians* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2003), pp. 298-314.

action to advise Philemon. Either the interpretation proposed by Callahan is ‘a righteous misreading’ (Stanley K. Stowers’s felicitous phrase) or he is actually right.<sup>100</sup> There is more in favour of Callahan’s thesis than most readers might at first realize. If this letter does concern itself with a slave, it is hard to see exactly what Paul actually proposes.

Taking into account the text and the context of 1 Thessalonians, it does not seem likely that Paul in 4.4 actively exhorts Christian slave-owners to sexually abuse their slave-girls in order to avoid adultery. It is more probable that he exhorts them to exercise self-control. The implication is that Paul nowhere explicitly encourages the sexual abuse of slave-girls—but he does not explicitly forbid such behaviour, he simply ignores it. Pauline scholars will have to continue to ponder exactly how his silence should be interpreted: by saying nothing, he nevertheless says something.

Nor is an interpretation of 1 Cor. 7.21 without complications. It seems that he did not consider the emancipation of slaves an important issue. Anyone wanting to present a Pauline view of slavery could, in other words, only offer a meagre harvest. The texts that actually focus on slavery are not only few in number but exceedingly difficult to expound. It is, however, possible to take this lack of texts as the starting-point for a renewed discussion. Those who are interested in the issue of Paul’s views on slavery should take at least six aspects into account:

(1) First, a *feminist perspective* must be more clearly marked. There are occasions when Paul might surprise anyone who believes that he always represents a strictly patriarchal perspective. When, in 2 Cor. 6.18, he is about to quote a text from the Septuagint, he seems to think that it was not sufficiently inclusive in its vocabulary:

I will be a father to you, and you shall be my sons and daughters, says the Lord Almighty.

Paul has here chosen to add καὶ θυγατέρας (‘and daughters’) so that the biblical phrase includes both men and women. He can thus be appointed as the first Christian theologian who used inclusive language, since in this statement, he chooses an expression that neither makes invisible nor excludes people of one gender or the other.

100. S.K. Stowers, ‘Paul and Slavery: A Response’, in Callahan, Horsley and Smith (eds.), *Slavery in Text and Interpretation*, pp. 295-311 (310): ‘The debate will go on as to whether this is the historical Paul or a righteous misreading’.

One of the most frequently discussed verses in Paul's letters is Gal. 3.28: 'There is no longer Jew or Greek...slave or free...male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus'.<sup>101</sup> When Paul in 1 Cor. 12.13 returns to this thought, to the inclusive nature of the Christian faith, he repeats the conceptual pairs free–slave and Greek–Jew—but he omits man–woman. This indicates that he probably considered that dichotomy as more inevitable than the other two.<sup>102</sup> In the possibly deutero-Pauline letter to the Colossians, the pair 'man and woman' is also omitted (Col. 3.11).

To put this differently, Paul's silence in this respect says something of his priorities in his theological thinking, about his view of women, slaves, and slave-girls. In short, Paul seems to have thought less about gender than about slavery. He addressed the members of the churches as brothers (ἀδελφοί), and—if Philemon really is about a fugitive slave—he seems to think that a slave should be called 'brother'. The verse 2 Cor. 6.18 discussed above is interesting—but it marks an exception. Most of the time Paul did not concern himself with the issue of the complementarity of men and women. Paul was more sensitive to the harsh circumstances of male slaves than he was to the rights of free women. To put it bluntly, gender was not on his agenda (although 2 Cor. 6.18, quoted above, is interesting in this context). He was, in other words, more progressive when discussing slavery than gender. In a few verses in the *corpus paulinum* he does express his care for slaves. Where in the Pauline letters do we find a war cry for women's rights and privileges?

(2) Secondly, it is essential to consider *the Jewishness of early Christianity*. The first Christians related to such an extent to Jewish texts and theological concepts that it must be described as one of the contemporary interpretations of Judaism. A consequence of this statement is the advisability of considering the laws of the Hebrew Bible as relevant for early Christian thinkers to a much higher degree than modern theologians and exegetes have often realized. Luke's discussions in Acts 15, for example, should thus not be perceived as *questioning* the levitical laws, but as *enforcing* them.<sup>103</sup> An increasing number of scholars reject

101. For a recent and relevant discussion of Gal. 3.28, see Briggs, 'Slavery and Gender'.

102. P. Garnsey, *Ideas of Slavery from Aristotle to Augustine* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), pp. 187-88.

103. For a more exhaustive discussion, see Svartvik, *Mark and Mission*, pp. 119-28.

the view that early Christianity was in principle antinomistic, that is, that it rejected and opposed (ἀντί) the Jewish Law (νόμος) in principle.

Peter J. Tomson has pointed out that three statements must be correct for the early interpretation of Christianity (in this case the Pauline interpretation) to be deemed antinomistic: (a) *the centre of Paul's theological thinking is a polemic against the Jewish Law*. If that statement were correct, antinomistic statements should have been found in *all* his letters. Since that is not the case, it is impossible to claim that this was Paul's most central concern, let alone his *only* business. It is therefore necessary to raise the question whether 1 Thessalonians is less Pauline than, say, Galatians—since it does not have the same main theological concern. (b) *For the Christian Paul, the Law no longer had any practical significance*. There is much to indicate that, throughout his life, he worked on the relationship between what was given, that is, the Scriptures inherited from the fathers, and the new, that is, the Christ-kerygma. (c) *Early Jewish literature is of no importance for the interpretation of the letters of Paul*.<sup>104</sup> Any unanimous antinomistic interpretation of Paul must disregard the Jewish texts. There is no need to read more than very few pages of rabbinic literature in order to realize that in Jewish thinking, the Law (*ha-Torah*) is the most positive concept imaginable. In Jewish thought, 'Law' cannot therefore be set against 'gospel', since *the Law is the gospel*.

It is hardly possible to speak of any scholarly consensus with regard to Paul and the Law. Nowadays, most exegetes would probably claim that the Law played a much more significant role for Paul than what has been realized and believed in the past. The Law was important, even for Paul, the apostle of the Gentiles, and not only for Saul, the persecutor of the Christians.

An example can illustrate this statement: in 1 Cor. 5.1 Paul protests against a sexual relationship between a man and his stepmother (it might even be with his biological mother). Those who had embarked on this relationship were obviously of the view that Christianity had liberated them from the regulations in the Hebrew Bible, but Paul emphasizes that Lev. 18.8 still applies. This implies that the Pauline statement about

104. P.J. Tomson, *Paul and the Jewish Law: Halakha in the Letters of the Apostle to the Gentiles* (Assen and Maastricht: Van Gorcum; Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1990), p. 1.

Christ as the τέλος ('goal', 'purpose', 'climax') of the Law hardly can or should be interpreted as the 'end' of the Law.<sup>105</sup>

In order to understand the Pauline view of intimate relationships between slave-masters and slaves, one ought thus to *seek to determine the then contemporary Jewish view* on this matter. Levenson has pointed out that the interpretation of Christianity, which was antinomistic in terms of the rights of slaves, implied a step backwards:

For when the legislation of the Torah is thought to have been suspended through Christ, the substantial protections that it extends to Hebrew slaves also disappear, and the slaves have nothing more reliable to which to appeal than their masters' Christian love and whatever protection the law of the pagan state might happen to provide. Even the modest hope of emancipation in the seventh year could disappear—and did!<sup>106</sup>

In several insightful and well-researched articles, Catherine Hezser has analyzed what rabbinic authorities teach about sexual relations between slave-owners and slaves. Such relations were not forbidden ('not to be fined'), but they were held in contempt ('seen with disdain') and could be criticized ('at least some rabbis seem to have criticized men who gave in to their desires').<sup>107</sup> There is a significant difference between these conclusions and the view that Paul in 1 Thess. 4.4 *encourages* sexual intercourse with slaves.

(3) Thirdly, *Paul's combination of the Stoics' understanding of slavery and his emphasis on sexual renunciation* ought to be investigated.<sup>108</sup> In his classic work, *Slavery and Society at Rome*, Keith

105. E.P. Sanders, *Paul: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), pp. 124-25.

106. Levenson, *Hebrew Bible*, p. 135.

107. C. Hezser, 'The Impact of Household Slaves on the Jewish Family in Roman Palestine', *JSJ* 34 (2003), pp. 375-424 (417). See also *idem*, 'The Social Status of Slaves in the Talmud Yerushalmi and in Graeco-Roman Society', in P. Schäfer (ed.), *The Talmud Yerushalmi and Graeco-Roman Culture*, III (Tübingen: Mohr-Siebeck, 2002), pp. 91-137, esp. pp. 111-16; and *idem*, 'Slaves and Slavery in Rabbinic and Roman Law', in C. Hezser (ed.), *Rabbinic Law in its Roman and Near Eastern Context* (Tübingen: Mohr-Siebeck, 2003), pp. 133-76, esp. pp. 134-39.

108. For an exhaustive discussion of the interpretation of the Pauline letters and Stoic ethics, see T. Engberg-Pedersen, *Paul and the Stoics* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 2000). For the Stoics' stance on slavery, see Garnsey, *Ideas of Slavery from Aristotle to Augustine*, pp. 128-56. In the chapter on 'Paul' (pp. 173-88), Garnsey somewhat misleadingly discusses not only the Pauline letters

Bradley enumerates five ways of increasing the supply of slaves in the Roman Empire. Besides (a) taking prisoners of war, (b) taking care of abandoned children, (c) trading with other people and (d) exercising piracy, there was the possibility of (e) rearing slaves.<sup>109</sup> Children of female slaves were called *vernae*. As in other slave societies (consider, e.g., William Wells Brown's well known novel, *Clotel*, in which the fate of one of Thomas Jefferson's slave children is described),<sup>110</sup> the status of the child followed the mother, not the father. We can therefore imagine a family in which the *pater familias* had sexual intercourse with both his wife and his slave-girl. That could mean that two sons of the same age were born in the family: one will have the rights of a free man (and one day inherit his father's property), the other will be only a body, a σῶμα. They would both have the same father—but what a difference between those sons in terms of rights and duties!

This *vernae*-system was of decisive importance to secure new generations of slaves. Sexual relations between a slave-owner and female slaves were therefore not only a matter of the master's pleasure, but also of securing his profit. Once more, we are reminded that this industrialized and institutionalized form of rape was both permitted and encouraged in slave societies.

Glancy is quite right that it is very remarkable that Paul never comments on the practice of *vernae*. Why does he not address a word or two to these sexually-abused slaves—or to their owners? 'I find it surprising that Paul did not explicitly reinforce a prohibition on the sexual use of slaves, if he believed that Christianity demanded such a discipline'.<sup>111</sup> How should we interpret his silence?

The first observation is that Paul was obviously influenced by Stoic thinking in combination with the exodus motif in the Hebrew Bible. When Paul emphasizes that a person may be free in spite of slavery, and that a free person may in fact be a slave, he is clearly rooted in the Stoic tradition. This Stoic paradox underlines that the *real* slave is the one who is the slave of his or her passions. A person who is able to control himself or herself is no slave, regardless of regular insults, itching slave

but also the Pastoral Epistles and 1 Peter. See, however, his footnote on p. 173: 'For "Paul" read "Paul and some of his followers"'.<sup>111</sup>

109. Bradley, *Slavery and Society at Rome*, pp. 32-39.

110. His novel was published in 1853 and has been reprinted several times; see, e.g., W.W. Brown, *Clotel* (New York: Arno, 1969).

111. Glancy, *Slavery in Early Christianity*, p. 60.

fetters, sexual abuse and the fear-instilling branding-irons. In other words, most people are in fact slaves, although they may not be wearing actual fetters, and actual slaves may be free persons—although they may be regularly injured, beaten and sexually abused.

This line of thought can be found, not only in Stoic writings, but also in the Pauline letters (e.g. 1 Cor. 7.22). Thus slavery is interiorized and there is a shift from factual, external slavery to moral, internal slavery. Paul was neither the first nor the last to tread this path. Maybe the statement by Ambrose in his *Epistula* 7.22 is particularly clear: ‘Every one who receives Christ is wise, and whoever is wise is free; every Christian is therefore both wise and free’.<sup>112</sup>

(4) Besides this observation about Paul and Stoicism, another aspect of the Pauline parenthesis should be underlined, namely that he *favoured the celibate life-style*. In his influential study *The Body and Society*, Peter Brown has emphasized that the ascetic movement in early Christianity, favouring total sexual abstinence, hit hard against the very foundations of society in antiquity:

The pressure on the young women was inexorable. For the population of the Roman Empire to remain even stationary, it appears that each woman would have had to have produced an average of five children. Young girls were recruited early for their task. The median age of Roman girls at marriage may have been as low as fourteen. In North Africa, nearly 95 percent of the women recorded on gravestones had been married, over half of those before the age of twenty-three.<sup>113</sup>

In other words, not only slave rearing took place in the Roman Empire, but also the nurture of future soldiers, intended for service in the imperial army of Rome—and a consequent and ideological asceticism constituted a threat to slave rearing as well as to other dimensions of ordinary family life. In terms of family life, it may be particularly obvious that we have read the celibate ideals put forward in the authentic letters of Paul in the light—and thus also in the shadow—of the marriage education in the Pastoral Epistles. Paul’s lack of interest in ‘family values’

112. Quoted in Garnsey, *Ideas of Slavery from Aristotle to Augustine*, p. 200.

113. P. Brown, *The Body and Society: Men, Women and Sexual Renunciation in Early Christianity* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), p. 6. See also Stowers, ‘Paul and Slavery’, p. 309: ‘Thus even if Paul at some time owned slaves, the model life that he left in his letters structurally attacked slavery by attacking its social base, the household, and its continuity through inheritance from master to master’.

(to use the current political jargon) stems from his strong eschatological viewpoint. His advice to slaves and slave-owners should be read in the same light.

(5) As a fifth point, Paul's way of *combining the traditional exodus motif with his claim to authority* by employing metaphors from slavery should be reconsidered. It is obvious that Paul finds many useful concepts in the biblical tradition. Before him, many of the leaders of Israel had been described as God's *servants*. Jewish covenantal theology enforces that no servant can serve two masters: either Pharaoh or the God of Israel—but not both.

It has been suggested that Paul used the slavery metaphors in order to clarify his claim to authority and power. That Paul calls himself the slave of Christ (δοῦλος Χριστοῦ, Rom. 1.1; Gal. 1.10; Phil. 1.1) does not only mean that he states that he wants to obey and follow the commandments of God, it also means that he claims to represent Christ, to speak and act on his behalf. This is perhaps most obvious in Gal. 1.10, where he uses the expression Χριστοῦ δοῦλος in order to prove that he preaches the gospel of the Lord and not his own message.<sup>114</sup>

Pauline slavery metaphors thus have two aspects: he expresses the requirements of Jewish monotheism to serve only the one God, and he uses the slavery metaphors to underline his own authority.

(6) Finally, it should be mentioned that the *intended depth of the discourse on obedience* deserves attention. It is well known that the primary author of the Declaration of Independence, stating that 'all Men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights', himself was a slave-owner.<sup>115</sup> Hence, one must seek to establish the intended depth of the obedience discourse. Is this obedience unconditional—or is there, according to Paul, some ultimate limit to obedience? Slaves are mentioned in the New Testament, not only in the parables of Jesus and in passing in some verses in the Pauline letters; they also appear in the so-called *Haustafeln* (lists of regulations governing the various duties of men, women, slave-owners, slaves, parents and children). The most important requirement for a slave is that he or she should obey. This fact makes it urgent to ask whether or not this obedience knows any ultimate limits. Is there any occasion when it would be wrong to obey? It is not enough simply to point to those biblical pas-

114. For a discussion of slavery as a metaphor for spiritual leadership, see Martin, *Slavery as Salvation*, pp. 51-60.

115. See *Declaration of Independence*, p. 53.

sages that express the duty of the subordinate party to obey. It is, in other words, important to determine the intended depth of the discourse on obedience. For this purpose, an article by Barclay in the *Australian Biblical Review* is very helpful. He concentrates on the *Haustafel* in the letter to the Colossians. In this context, it is not essential to determine whether or not Paul is the author of this letter, since the discussion should focus on the New Testament texts *in toto*.

Two observations are of great importance: (1) one of the particular marks of the letter to the Colossians is the cosmic Christology, which stresses that Christ is the centre of the entire universe. In this letter, a christocentric cosmos is described. (2) Very little in these lists of household duties in the letter to the Colossians (3.8–4.1) express a particularly *Christian* lifestyle. It was hardly old-fashioned to compose lists of the duties of women, children and slaves in relation to those of higher rank. It is rather probable that most of these regulations would have been articulated and approved by both the Jewish and the non-Jewish Hellenistic traditions.<sup>116</sup> These two observations lead to a crucial question: to what extent are the lists of household duties in the letter to the Colossians marked by the christological cosmology of that letter?

This is a very appropriate question, since Col. 2.8 contrasts life ‘according to Christ’ (κατὰ Χριστόν) with life ‘according to human tradition, according to the cosmic powers’ (κατὰ τὴν παράδοσιν τῶν ἀνθρώπων, κατὰ τὰ στοιχεῖα τοῦ κόσμου). *How should these lists of household duties be interpreted and applied, given that they seem to express common human traditions?* The lists of household duties seem designed to legitimize, canonize and thereby petrify contemporary human traditions. It is thus essential to ask in what sense and to what extent these lists in the letter to the Colossians are marked by the overall christocentric theology of that letter—and even what conclusions may be drawn from this.

Barclay notes that these lists are marked by κύριος-language: the technical term ἐν κυρίῳ (‘in the Lord’) is used, and earthly lords are always spoken of in the plural (κατὰ σάρκα κύριοι). The letter to the Colossians is characterized by the view that all Christians are slaves of Christ. The question is, however, what the consequences of this view may be. Does this imply any facilitating of a development towards greater equality—or is it rather the case that existing social structures are legi-

116. J.M.G. Barclay, ‘Ordinary but Different: Colossians and Hidden Moral Identity’, *AusBR* 49 (2001), pp. 34-52 (38).

timized? The overall idea seems to be that the Christian should *always* serve the Lord. Sometimes this means that slaves are pleasing to their earthly lords (ἀνθρωπάρεσκοι), but sometimes not. The purpose is thus that the ordinary daily tasks, the duties, should all be subject to the Lordship of Christ:

It was his special concern to show that the one whom Christians confess as Lord/Master is not some local deity, or private cult hero, but the agent and rationale for all creation and all human existence.<sup>117</sup>

Barclay rightly notes that this theological strategy includes both radical and conservative elements. The lists of household duties certainly sanction the existent hierarchies in society, since they are all subject to the Lord Christ. But there is still a crucial difference between this perspective and that which emerges in the letter to Titus, 2.9-10:

Tell slaves to be submissive to their masters and to give satisfaction in every respect (ἐν παντί); they are not to talk back, not to pilfer, but to show complete and perfect fidelity, so that in everything they may be an ornament to the doctrine of God our Savior.

Is there any difference between, on the one hand, submitting to earthly masters, because they are the image of God (ὡς τύπων θεοῦ, see *Did.* 4.11 and *Barn.* 19.7) and, on the other hand, obeying *both* the earthly *and* the heavenly Lord?<sup>118</sup> According to the latter alternative, slaves are offered a reward in the world to come, not because they obey their earthly lords but because they obey Christ. There is here a latent conflict of interests which, under certain circumstances, could be activated. If the slaves realize that the earthly lords (κύριοι κατὰ σάρκα, Col. 3.22) want one thing, but Christ wants another, it would be his or her duty to obey God rather than men (cf. Acts 5.29). 1 Peter 2.18-25 exhorts Christian slaves to serve God and not to obey their earthly lords, and thus to risk suffering for the sake of righteousness. In the next paragraph the author exhorts married Christian women *both* to submit themselves to their husbands *and* to hold fast to their faith, in spite of the possible dislike of their husbands and maybe even in the face of threats (1 Pet.

117. Barclay, 'Ordinary but Different', p. 44.

118. In the letters of Ignatius of Antioch it is maintained that the bishop is the Vicar of Christ. Without the bishop there is no church; without him baptisms, eucharistic services and marriages are not valid. To subordinate oneself to the bishop is identical to obeying Christ; see, e.g., *Smyrn.* 8, *Trall.* 2, *Magn.* 7, and *Pol.* 4-5.

3.1-6). Slaves and wives should thus obey according to this model—*but only to a certain limit*.

The task here is thus to establish a certain difference between those texts that require unconditional obedience from the slave for his master in all things and the texts that claim that there may be occasions when it is right to obey God rather than men. According to the earliest Christian writings, the married woman should obey her husband, but not if she were forced to compromise or to completely abandon her faith. Slaves should obey their earthly masters, but they should fear Christ even more. This must imply that there are occasions when they must actually choose between their lords κατὰ σάρκα and the Lord of Heaven.

### *Summary and Conclusions*

No idea has had greater importance for the development and the cessation, the rise and fall, of slavery than the exodus motif. According to Michael Walzer, the exodus motif is

an idea of great presence and power in Western political thought, the idea of a deliverance from suffering and oppression: this-worldly redemption, liberation, revolution.<sup>119</sup>

On the one hand, the narratives recorded in the biblical book that has lent its name to the ‘exodus’ phenomenon is about how the Israelites were afforded the opportunity to leave their slavery behind. On the other hand, their relationship to God, whom they believe had liberated them, is also described as *service*, as divine service. Even the one who is free, is bound; even a slave may be internally free. This dialectic of service is the main reason why both the proponents and the opponents of slavery have turned to the same collection of books in order to find—and according to their own estimates, quite successfully—good arguments *for* as well as *against* slavery.

The exodus motif permeates the entire Bible, but the specific text in the Hebrew Bible, which has most frequently been called upon to legitimize slavery is Genesis 9, that is, the story of how Noah cursed his grandson Canaan because of what his father Ham has done. There has been a strange and sad interplay between Bible-sanctioned slavery and a slave-like way of reading the Bible, since the Bible has been thought to affirm slavery, while slavery in its turn has been seen as confirmation of

119. Walzer, *Exodus and Revolution*, p. ix.

the Bible. Questioning slavery has been perceived as an attack on the credibility of the Bible. *Status quo* was the creed of the advocates of slavocracy, as in the notorious minutes of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in the Confederate States of America from 1861:

We have assumed no new attitude. We stand exactly where the Church of God has always stood—from Abraham to Moses, from Moses to Christ, from Christ to the Reformers, and from the Reformers to ourselves. We stand upon the foundation of the Prophets and Apostles, Jesus Christ Himself being the Chief corner stone. Shall we be excluded from the fellowship of our brethren in other lands, because we dare not depart from the charter of our faith? Shall we be branded with the stigma of reproach, because we cannot consent to corrupt the word of God to suit the intuitions of an infidel philosophy? Shall our names be cast out as evil, and the finger of scorn pointed at us, because we utterly refuse to break our communion with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, with Moses, David and Isaiah, with Apostles, Prophets and Martyrs, with all the noble army of confessors who have gone to glory from slave-holding countries and from a slave-holding Church, and without ever having dreamed that they were living in mortal sin, by conniving at slavery in the midst of them? If so, we shall take consolation in the cheering consciousness that the Master has accepted us. We may be denounced, despised and cast out of the synagogues of our brethren. But while they are wrangling about the distinction of men according to the flesh, we shall go forward in our Divine work, and confidently anticipate that, in the great day, as the consequence of our humble labors, we shall meet millions of glorified spirits, who have come up from the bondage of earth to a nobler freedom than human philosophy ever dreamed of.<sup>120</sup>

The high priests of the slavocracy in the United States frequently and unreservedly referred to the Pauline letters. Paul might sometimes have been perceived, both by slaves and slave-owners, as the unofficial patron saint of the latter. Some space has been dedicated here to an investigation of whether or not he is a suitable candidate for that title. Paul is surprisingly unclear on the issue of slavery, both in the letter to Philemon (which may not even be about a fugitive slave) and in specific texts, such as 1 Cor. 7.21. Since Paul keeps silent, we must seek to interpret his silence—and that seems to confirm the overall theory put forward by

120. Quoted in R.R. Mathisen, *Critical Issues in American History: A Reader* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2001), pp. 247-48. For an anthology on the interplay of religion and slavery, see J.R. McKivigan and M. Snay (eds.), *Religion and the Antebellum Debate over Slavery* (Athens and London: University of Georgia Press, 1998).

Glancy. Paul does not pay any attention to the harsh circumstances of slave-girls any more than he seems to involve himself in depth with the rights of free Christian women; it was beyond his horizon.

Two questions were posed in the beginning of this article: first, to what extent is it correct to suggest that the texts in the Hebrew Bible have been used to defend slavery to a higher degree than have the New Testaments texts? Secondly, do the Pauline Epistles constitute a more substantial problem for emancipatory movements than do the Gospels?

First, it is correct that Genesis 9 has played an immensely important role in the pro-slavery discourse, but slave-owners understood that they could not be too dependent on the legislation of the Hebrew Bible, since the slaves in the *Good Book* were granted far more rights than they themselves were willing to bestow upon their own slaves. In other words, there is little to suggest that the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament should be presented as each others' opposites.

Secondly, in this article it has been argued that the Pauline Epistles are in fact less clear on the issue of slavery than is the synoptic portrait of Jesus, because of its employment of the slavery metaphors in the parables. It seems that Matthew in particular tends to make use of slavery metaphors in his teaching on eschatology. This observation ought to have consequences both for the understanding of God and of human beings—particularly if C.H. Dodd is right that 'The parables are perhaps the most characteristic element in the teaching of Jesus Christ as recorded in the Gospels'.<sup>121</sup> This article thus suggests that there may be more support *for* slavocracy in the Gospel material than there is in the Pauline letters. The proponent of slavery, who was also the Roman-Catholic Bishop of Charleston, John England, was not slow to observe and to refer to this fact:

In the New Testament we find instances of pious and good men having slaves, and in no case do we find the Saviour imputing it to them as a crime, or requiring their servants' emancipation... In many of his parables, the Saviour describes the master and his servants in a variety of ways, without any condemnation or censure of slavery.<sup>122</sup>

121. Dodd, *The Parables of the Kingdom*, p. 13.

122. *Letters of the Late Bishop England to the Hon. John Forsyth, on the Subject of Domestic Slavery*, published in 1844, quoted in Mathisen, *Critical Issues in American History*, pp. 234-36 (234).

The statement that the spread of Christianity led to the abolition of slavery is often heard. Nobody could claim that this took place at once, but maybe that it was Christian values that eventually proved victorious. There is some support for that view. In his book *For the Glory of God*, Rodney Stark has described how a particular kind of interpretation of Christianity frenetically opposed North-American slavocracy.<sup>123</sup>

It is, however, possible to reverse this reasoning. It may equally well be argued that Christianity, with its canonized metaphors of slavery, actually *delayed* the abolition of slavery by relativizing and idealizing it. Christians are encouraged to ‘serve one another’, faith in God is called ‘divine service’, Christians should consider themselves ‘servants of Christ’, and so on. Added to this are the paradoxes of the exodus motif, affirming that ‘even the one who is free may be enslaved’ and ‘whoever is a slave may still be internally free’.

It is thus most crucial to note that one and the same collection of books may be interpreted and applied in diametrically opposite ways. The holy texts may prove to be the Way of Life as well as the Way of Death—ובחרת בחיים, ‘then choose life’ (Deut. 30.19).<sup>124</sup>

123. R. Stark, *For the Glory of God: How Monotheism Led to Reformations, Science, Witch-Hunts and the End of Slavery* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2003), pp. 291-365.

124. For the motif of two ways, see, e.g., *Did.* 1–6 and *Barn.* 18–20.