

and how those debates relate to the interpretation of the NT and the activities and beliefs of the earliest followers of Jesus.

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Slaves and Slavery in the Roman World

S. SCOTT BARTCHY

Orientation: How Slavery Fundamentally Shaped Roman Society and Culture

Sometime early in the history of human society, enslaving one's vanquished enemies became preferred to killing them in hand-to-hand combat. As slaves, these human beings were subjected to the absolute power of their owners and experienced a kind of "social death." They were separated from their families, tribes, identities, sense of honor and dignity, self-determination over their bodies and time, capacity to forge new kinship bonds through marriage alliance, and the legal protections enjoyed by free persons (see Patterson, *Slavery*, 17–76). The ancient Greeks and Romans independently transformed this long-established and widespread dehumanizing practice into the foundation for a genuine slave economy. That is, the large-scale employment of slave labor in both the countryside and the cities became absolutely essential to maintain Greco-Roman culture and society (see Finley, *Ancient Slavery*, 67–92).

In the patriarchal and highly stratified societies of ancient Greece and Rome, owning human beings who could be used as property (chattel slavery) became not only economically indispensable and elaborately regulated by law but also morally justified and regarded as normal. Slaves were owned not only by individuals and

families but also by various corporations, such as religious temples, voluntary associations, communities and municipalities, and even the state. The leisure the ancient Greeks exploited to create their greatly admired and imitated culture was made possible only by the labor of the enormous number of human beings they had enslaved, who bore the burden of the drudgery of daily life for everyone as well as produced a substantial surplus for commerce.

Aristotle had defined a Greek slave as "a living tool" and insisted that the robust anatomy of some human bodies made their enslavement appropriate, that is, they were "slaves by nature" (*Pol.* 1252a-55b). In contrast, Romans regarded slavery as contrary to nature but argued that every society they were aware of practiced it (*ius gentium*, a law common to all peoples); were slaves not the legitimate spoils of war? Slaves thus owed their entire existence to the victor who had saved them from death, which also explains why enslaved persons retained no rights even to their own names. Becoming a slave—by capture, birth, sale by impoverished parents, or self-sale—was usually simply the result of bad luck (see Seneca, *Dial.* 9.10.3; *Epist. mor.* 47).

In his essay *That Every Good Person Is Free*, Philo observes that the adverse blows of fortune could result in even the most virtuous freeborn person becoming enslaved, so that no one makes such slavery the subject of investigation (*Prob.* 18). As a slave, a human being was bodily and totally subjected to the practically unlimited power of an owner and the owner's heirs. As such, this slavery should be distinguished from other forms of exploitation of human labor or from dependence of any kind, financial or otherwise (e.g., day laborers, free gladiators, wagon drivers, contract workers, those paying off loans, and the like).

Ancient authors showed little interest in discussing slavery as a social institution. Even the first-century Stoic-Cynic philosopher Epictetus, who had been raised in slavery himself, seems to have regarded the existence of physical slavery as economically inevitable. He focused his concern rather on becoming free from mental and spiritual slavery—on "inner freedom" (*Diatr.* 4.1.1-5 LCL). For Epictetus, what made even a free person a spiritual slave was living with self-deception, fear, grief, envy, pity, and a lack of personal discipline, including nurturing desires for unattainable things. The result of this perspective is the fact that very little of our data comes from slaves themselves, and historians disagree on the most adequate ways to integrate what we do know from literature (written by and for the elite, i.e., slaveholders), various inscriptions, gravestones, and business documents (primarily papyri).

Historians estimate that as many as twelve million people were enslaved in the Roman Empire (16-20 percent of the entire population of at least sixty million) during the first century of our era (see Harris, "Slave Trade," 117-40; Joshel, *Slavery*, 7-9). An additional large percentage had been slaves earlier in their lives and had been made freedmen and freedwomen by their owners, who then became their patrons, usually with expectations that their new clients would continue to provide at least some of their former services (*obsequium* and *operae*, respectful

behavior and services). Huge numbers of slaves were used extensively in rural areas. For example, Caius Caecilius Isidorus, a freedman of a leading Roman family, could plow his huge farm (*latifundia*) with 3,600 pair of oxen because he owned 4,116 slaves (Pliny the Elder, *Nat. Hist.* 33.47; see Wiedemann, *Greek and Roman Slavery*, 99-100). The labor of field slaves provided their owners' primary income, supporting a large number of domestic slaves who were trained to provide a wide range of personal services. In the urban areas as well, the number and quality of slaves one owned were critical factors in determining the owner's reputation and social status; more than one senatorial household included more than four hundred slaves (see Pliny the Elder, *Nat. Hist.* 7.12; Apuleius, *Apol.* 93).

The children of slaves became slaves themselves at birth. It was not unusual for free parents—Greek, Roman, and Judean—to sell their older children into slavery because they could not support them, to pay pressing debts, or even to improve the child's future situation (see Philostratus, *Vit. Apol.* 8.7; *Code of Theodosius* 3.3.1). As Jewish historians have pointed out, creditors frequently forced Judean fathers to sell their (premenstrual) daughters.

Without question, Roman culture was shaped by the institution of slavery and the values that justified it. Rome was a warrior state that became an empire on the backs of its fearless soldiers and its hundreds of thousands of vanquished prisoners of war, who, as slaves, generated the wealth needed to fund an empire. Violence characterized Roman history: civil wars, riots, provincial revolts, and foreign conquests. Public rituals and massive monuments glorified war and the subjection of those the Romans defeated. Physical violence against slaves by their owners was regarded as right and proper. Slaves were subjected to beatings, torture, and death (by burning or crucifixion) to reinforce social hierarchy and to make clear that they did not belong to the fully human, rational community. Slaveholders routinely suspected that without fear of punishment their slaves would become lazy and disobedient, even rebellious. Pliny the Younger writes, "Slaves are ruined by their own evil natures" (*Ep.* 3.1). Seneca reports a common saying, "You have as many enemies as you have slaves" (*Epist. mor.* 47), to which he objects: "More correctly, by cruel and inhuman treatment, we make them enemies."

Yet slaves were usually regarded as valuable property (e.g., an unskilled adult male was worth about four tons of wheat) and were treated as such. Large-scale slave revolts took place between 140 and 70 BC, instigated by recent prisoners of war such as Spartacus, during a period of rapid Roman conquest and expansion. The goal of these rebels was to regain their identity as free men, not to challenge the institution of slavery as such. There were no significant rebellions in the early Roman Empire, although fear of possible revolts from within households influenced Roman attitudes and policy. Wiedemann concludes that, while many scholars continue to be fascinated by slave rebellions, "this emphasis on violent resistance runs the risk of masking the fact that most slaves, most of the time, accepted their situation" (*Slavery*, 44-45).

The Same and Not the Same: How to Avoid Anachronism

Historians identify five societies in world history that have had true slave economies: Greece, Rome, Brazil, the Caribbean Islands, and the southern United States. Most readers of this article bring some knowledge about slavery in the New World, which can be misleading if they assume that they are thus prepared to understand what slavery was like in the Roman Empire.

Perhaps the greatest challenge for the twenty-first-century reader is to learn about the inhumanity and aura of terror surrounding Roman slavery and at the same time to reflect on the apparent inability of anyone, including most NT writers, to imagine an economic and societal reality without slaves. Entering the everyday world of the Roman Empire is difficult not only because of the distance in time but also because of widespread admiration for the architectural, artistic, legal, and philosophical products of Greco-Roman culture.

To be sure, ancient and modern slavery are significantly similar in that slavery itself is defined by the "social death" of the enslaved person, whose owner enjoys total control over the slave's body, including practically unrestricted brutal treatment and sexual exploitation. Yet awareness of the differences will influence how the reader of the NT will interpret passages that directly or indirectly deal with slavery. Here, then, are some guidelines for comprehending this central aspect of life in the Roman Empire.

1. In radical contrast to slavery in the New World, neither skin color nor ethnic/racial origins indicated slave status in the population of the Roman Empire. Moreover, rarely could one identify a slave by distinctive clothing or other aspects of appearance (except if marked by a tattoo, or a collar—the evidence is primarily post-Constantinian—or branding as a "runaway").

2. Thus slaves who escaped from their owners could seek to make themselves "invisible" among urban crowds or in remote rural areas, while risking severe punishment if caught. In contrast to the situation in nineteenth-century America, there was no free North to which Roman slaves might flee. As Joshel notes, "What slaves knew of the world outside their households or farms helped or hindered them" (*Slavery*, 154).

Not infrequently, knowledgeable slaves left their owner's control temporarily to hide from an angry owner and wait for tempers to cool, perhaps hoping to find an advocate to intervene on the slave's behalf. Others took off to visit their mothers (*Dig.* 21.1.17.4–5). According to Proculus, the foremost Roman jurist in the early first century, such a slave emphatically did not become a *fugitivus* (*Dig.* 21.1.17.4). In light of this legal opinion, the fact that Philemon's slave Onesimus did not take off for parts unknown but rather fled to Paul in prison strongly suggests that it is incorrect to regard Onesimus as a runaway slave (see Byron, *Paul and Slavery*, 116–37).

3. Both the enslaved and their owners shared the dominant cultural values, social codes, and religious traditions, even when most slaves yearned to become their own masters—and then as freedmen and freedwomen to own their own slaves.

4. Indeed, even while they were slaves, they could own property, and some already owned their own slaves. They could accumulate a fund, called a *peculium*, which they might then use to purchase their own freedom (manumission) from their owners. On the other hand, the enslavement of debtors by their creditors was a well-known practice among Greeks and Romans as well as Judeans; it was the primary source of slaves in Israel in the Second Temple period.

5. Again in distinct contrast to New World slavery, the education of slaves was encouraged, which generally increased their value. Rescuing and educating children whose parents had abandoned ("exposed") them in public places could be a profitable business (note that Greco-Roman moralists do not seem to have commented on this practice, nor do any NT writers). Some slaves were better educated than their owners, who had purchased them to carry out important functions outside and inside the home, to educate the owner's children, and to add to the owner's public reputation. Rome's cultural leadership in its empire largely depended on educated non-Italians who had been enslaved.

6. Thus many slaves functioned in highly responsible and sensitive positions, such as managers of large farms, of households, of business enterprises and workshops, as well as physicians, accountants, personal secretaries, tutors, sea captains, and even municipal officials. An important minority among the slaves enjoyed considerable influence and social power, depending on the status of their owners, even over freeborn persons of lesser status than that of these slaves' owners. For example, powerful Roman landowners used bands of slaves to enforce the obedience of their free tenants (see Wiedemann, *Slavery*, 44–45).

Perhaps most surprising is the power exercised by the emperor's personal slaves and freedmen, the *familia Caesaris*, who were given top administrative positions, a practice that dismayed both Tacitus (*Ann.* 12) and Pliny the Younger (*Ep.* 8.6). Claudius drew from his more than twenty thousand slaves and freedmen to create an imperial bureaucracy. In Acts 8:27, we meet a high-ranking black eunuch from Nubia, just outside the Roman Empire, who was most likely Queen Candace's slave. Because of their extreme social marginality, having no offspring or romantic attachments, eunuchs were used by political rulers in highly sensitive positions as the "ultimate slaves" (see Patterson, *Slavery*, 315–31).

7. Although slave status was universally despised and slaves had no honor, slaves as a group were not at the bottom of the socioeconomic pyramid. Rather, impoverished free persons, who had to seek work as day laborers with no guarantee of being hired, made up the lowest level. Some of them actually sold themselves into slavery in order to obtain job security, food, clothing, and shelter. Some sold themselves into slavery to pay off debts (see Dio Chrysostom, *Or.* 15.23), to climb socially (into the household of a prestigious owner), or to obtain special governmental positions, usually with hope of future manumission.

For example, a certain Erastus, identified as the city treasurer of Corinth who had become a Christ-follower there (*Rom.* 16:23), most probably had to sell himself to the city (as a form of "bonding insurance"?) to be appointed to this responsible

position. Holding this office in a Roman provincial capital most likely made Erastus the most socially distinguished member of the congregation in Corinth. Also, in an action that displays some Christians' astonishing compassion, "many gave themselves into bondage that they might ransom others [from slavery]. Many sold themselves into slavery and provided food for others with the price they received for themselves" (1 Clem. 55.2).

8. Roman slaves, who came from a wide variety of ethnic, social, and educational backgrounds, had no consciousness of being a social class as such. Because they were owned by persons across a wide range of social and economic levels, they developed no sense of suffering a common plight. They usually derived their sense of identity from that of their respective owners, as the gravestones of freed slaves frequently testify. Thus, even though the Romans created an extensive body of law to regulate the institution of slavery, no laws were needed to hinder public assembly of slaves, such as were passed in the New World.

9. In contrast to lifelong slavery as practiced in the New World, a large number of domestic and urban slaves in the early Roman Empire could anticipate being set free, often by the age of thirty. The frequency with which slaveholders were manumitting slaves at the beginning of the empire provoked Augustus to set legal limits to the number of slaves who could be manumitted in a Roman citizen's will: half in a household of three to ten slaves; a third if more than ten and fewer than thirty; a quarter if more than thirty and fewer than a hundred; a fifth if more than a hundred, with a maximum of a hundred (see the *lex Fufia Caninia* of 2 BC).

Although some slaves were manumitted as a reward for good and faithful work or because a vain slave owner sought to become known for his generosity, the majority of slaves were freed because it served directly the owners' other personal, financial, and legal interests (see Bartchy, *Slavery*, 87–91). Innumerable ex-slaves throughout the empire were ample proof that enslavement was not a permanent condition (see Bradley, *Slaves*, 81–112). To be sure, condemned criminals who were sentenced as slaves of the state to work in the mines or on galley ships had no hope of manumission and were worked to death. Rural slaves also seem rarely to have been manumitted.

Manumission changed a slave's legal status to that of "freedman" or "freed-woman," which might either distinctly improve or sometimes decrease their actual social and economic position (see Patterson, *Slavery*, 209–96). Since the act of manumission was entirely in the hands of the slaveholder, slaves had no possibility of remaining in slavery against the will of the owner. Thus those translations of 1 Cor. 7:21 that read "even if you can gain your freedom, make use of your present condition more than ever" (so the NRSV) display ignorance of the actual options open to a manumitted slave (see Bartchy, *Slavery*, 96–98; Harrill, *Manumission*, 126–28, 194). Note also that the "synagogue of the Freedmen" mentioned in Acts 6:9 was apparently a congregation founded by former Roman slaves (perhaps captured by Pompey's forces during the Roman attack on Jerusalem in 63 BC) who had been able to move back to Jerusalem.

Quite often slaves of Roman citizens became full Roman citizens themselves when manumitted, a fact that astonished many ancient Greek commentators (see Dionysius of Halicarnassus, *Ant. rom.* 4.22.4–23.7). A high-status example of such a freedman is Marcus Antonius Felix (see Acts 23–25), the Roman governor of Judea (AD 52–58), who had been a slave until Antonia, the Emperor Claudius's mother, manumitted him (see Suetonius, *Claud.* 52; Tacitus, *Hist.* 5).

How Slaves Were Treated

The centralization of power as the Roman Republic became an empire resulted in the state taking control of slaveholders' treatment of their slaves, which had earlier been solely in the hands of individual owners and patrons. For example, in addition to his limiting the number of slaves an owner could manumit in his will, Augustus set the conditions for such manumission, including a minimum age of thirty, except in special circumstances (see the *lex Aelia Sentia* of AD 4). Augustus allowed freed slaves to gain honor by serving in the Roman navy as commanders and in the prestigious fire brigades in Rome, seven thousand freedmen strong. Financially successful freedmen attained honor by membership in the Augustales, religious and social associations, common in the cities of the western Roman Empire, dedicated to veneration of the emperor and to public improvement in their cities (Petronius, *Sat.* 30; see Joshel, *Slavery*, 69–72). Emperor Claudius I (AD 41–54) ordered that sick slaves abandoned by their owners be manumitted if they recovered (see Suetonius, *Claud.* 25).

Another law passed before AD 79 prohibited slaveholders from forcing their slaves to face death by wild beasts in the arena unless these owners had persuaded the local magistrate that such punishment was appropriate (*lex Petronia*). At the end of the first century, Domitian banned castrating slaves for commercial use, and several later emperors limited prostituting of female slaves. Early in the second century Hadrian (AD 117–138) prohibited the use of slave prisons (*ergastula*) and forbade the sale of slaves to pimps and gladiatorial suppliers and trainers, unless a judge approved such a punishment (see the *edictum perpetuum* Hadriani; Joshel, *Slavery*, 69–72).

Later in the second century, Antoninus Pius made slave owners liable for homicide if they killed any of their own slaves without just cause, just as they were guilty if they killed another person's slave (Gaius, *Inst.* 1.531). From the time of Augustus, these imperial limitations on an owner's absolute control of his or her slaves included encouraging slaves to inform against their owners not only in cases of treason (*maiestas*) but also in cases of adultery (*lex Julia de adulteris coercendis*; see Wiedemann, *Slavery*, 24).

These and other imperial protections of slaves influenced earlier historians to emphasize an increasing humanitarian concern for the enslaved. Yet, as more recent historians have stressed (see Finley, *Ancient Slavery*; Bradley, *Slaves*; Glancy,

Slavery), the benevolent legislation that various emperors ordered had little effect on improving the daily life of slaves. All these measures serve to highlight the inhumane treatment of slaves that had been taken for granted prior to such imperial proclamations. There is no evidence for any imperial interference with slaveholders' total physical domination of their slaves (even torture and killing were justified for sufficient cause) or with the owners' sexual use of their own slaves. An owner usually based good treatment of slaves on the desire to gain a reputation for generosity rather than on insight into a slave's inherent equality as a human being.

Conclusion

Without a solid knowledge about slavery in the Roman Empire, readers of the NT can make major errors in interpretation. A clear grasp of how one was made a slave, the wide range of responsibilities carried by slaves, how one was treated as a slave, and what hope those enslaved nurtured regarding their future freedom, provides insight into many NT passages that are otherwise quite puzzling. For example, in his letters, Paul of Tarsus not only refers to enslaved Christ-followers (see, e.g., 1 Cor. 1:14; 7:21; 16:15; Philemon) but also frequently employs metaphors taken directly from the experience of slavery in his world. Three keywords in Paul's vocabulary—"redemption," "justification," and "reconciliation"—draw directly on the process and results of manumission from slavery, which releases the believer from the slavery to sin and alienation (and from "social death," if a slave) and elevates the Christ-follower to the status of "son" or "daughter" and a "brother" or "sister" (see Patterson, *Slavery*, 70).

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14

Women, Children, and Families in the Greco-Roman World

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Families and Fathers in the Greco-Roman World

The family in the Greco-Roman world valued the community over the individual and promoted corporate honor and fortune. Those living in the *domus* ("home") included parents and children, and perhaps extended family, such as adult siblings, cousins, and grandparents, as well as slaves, freedmen, and freedwomen. Each individual had a specific status within the home, and each family member deemed the social status of the family, including its wealth and social prestige, as of equal or greater value than their personal happiness. Idealized portraits of the Roman family are preserved in artwork and public monuments. For example, domestic landscape paintings often depict a mother and daughter standing by the sea, presumably waiting for their husband and father to return. Most commonly, mothers and daughters are presented in a religious context, before an altar or shrine. Boys are never painted with their mother, unless they are quite young. Instead, they are shown with their father in public scenes, doing business, for example (Fuchs, "Ancient Landscape"). Public imperial art on monuments, columns, and coins conveys a similar theme. Roman families are designated with a father and his child (son or daughter). Non-Roman families are depicted as a mother and her children, without a father and in postures of submission. These scenes serve to