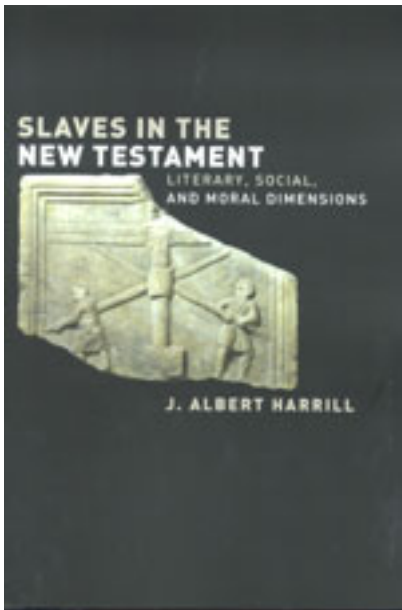


RBL 06/2006



**Harrill, J. Albert**

***Slaves in the New Testament: Literary, Social, and Moral Dimensions***

Minneapolis: Fortress, 2006. Pp. xiv + 322. Paper.  
\$25.00. ISBN 080063781X.

Joseph Verheyden  
University of Leuven  
Leuven Belgium, B-3001

The author of a previous book on slavery in the ancient world (*The Manumission of Slaves in Early Christianity*, 1995; 2d ed., 1998), J. Albert Harrill has continued his exploration of what the sources and documents, Christian and non-Christian, can tell us about the institution of slavery at the turn of the era and in the first decades of the rise of Christianity. Since the publication of that first volume, Harrill has broadened his approach and the goal of his research. On the one hand, he now proposes to focus much more on the literary aspects in the representation of slaves and slave characters in the sources: “How did the early Christians think about slaves? In this book, I argue that they did so through the literary artifice of conventional figures and stereotypes familiar from ancient literature, handbooks, and the theater” (1). In the New Testament, these literary characterizations are used to argue moral and social issues. On the other hand, Harrill shows a special interest in the way the New Testament evidence for how Christians incorporated slavery in their daily lives and in their religion has been used in the context of the late eighteenth- and nineteenth-century controversies on slavery in the United States. This second aspect leads Harrill into questions of methodology and biblical hermeneutics that go far beyond the scope of purely historical research and touch upon some of the most fundamental issues in biblical exegesis.

The present volume, containing an introduction and seven chapters, is to a large degree a collection of essays that were published over the past six years. Chapters 1 (“The Slave Self: Paul and the Discursive ‘I’”), 2 (“The Slave Body”), 5 (“The Vice of the Slave Holder”), 6 (“The Domestic Enemy: Household Slaves in Early Christian Apologies and Accounts of Martyrdom”), and 7 (“The Use of the New Testament in the American Slave Controversy”) are here reprinted with only very minor changes. Only part of the introduction; the second half of chapter 3 (“The Comedy of Slavery in Story and Parable”), on Luke 16:1–8; and chapter 4 (“Subordinate to Another: Elite Slaves in the Agricultural Handbooks and the Household Codes”) have not been published before.

In chapter 4 Harrill guides the reader through a number of so-called early Christian household codes, from Colossians (3:22–4:1) and Ephesians (6:5–9) to the synopsis in the *Epistle of Barnabas* (19.7), the *Didache* (4.10–11), and the *Doctrina Apostolorum* (4.10–11), and introduces the ancient handbook traditions—in particular, agricultural handbooks—that would constitute the background of these codes. This hypothesis has hardly retained the attention of biblical scholars so far (Harrill cites as an exception M. Gielen’s *Tradition und Theologie neutestamentlicher Haustafelnethik*, 1990). None of the Christian texts can be said to have been directly derived from the way the slave person who is responsible for the good management of the master’s property (the *vilicus*) is instructed in these handbooks, but it is obvious from these parallels that the Christian codes are less “unique” than biblical scholars have been willing to admit, often building on the codes to single out Christian resistance against Greco-Roman slave society. And I am afraid Harrill is right. Their primary purpose was to organize the life of the *familia* under the authority of the *pater familias*, which is also what the management handbooks are about. All the important features of the characterization of the master-slave relation, which Harrill subsumes under the triad of justice-accountability-piety, have their counterpart in the Christian codes. The comparison must have come easily and naturally to the authors of Colossians and Ephesians, who in a sense did nothing else but continue an approach and line of thought that had already been followed by Philo in some of his major commentaries on the Pentateuch for arguing that Jewish law was “in practical harmony with Gentile jurisprudence in Roman Egypt” (107). It is less certain, however, and in any case most difficult to prove, whether Christian authors also intended to include and address this “outsider” aspect.

The issue of (shrewd) stewardship is also the subject of the parable in Luke 16, which is discussed in the other new section in the book and which Harrill has connected with that on the slave girl Rhoda. Both are described as literary characters, “dramatic fictions of Roman slave comedy” (88). As for the purpose of such stories, Harrill draws a double conclusion: they are meant to entertain and to exhort. I can see the first point, certainly for Acts 12:13–16 but also for the parable. I can also see how the characters could raise

some goodwill or even sympathy, either for their clumsiness or their shrewdness, among a slave-owner readership, but I wonder whether Harrill's "it would have had persuasive power on a Roman audience to promote generous support of the poor" (83) is the best formulation. In what way would these stories carry the message of generously supporting the poor? Harrill's analysis of Rhoda as "a running cliché of Greco-Roman situation comedy" (60) is certainly again much closer to the truth than any of the variants of the "realistic" thesis, whether one wants to use the story to make Luke, or Rhoda herself, into an eyewitness or even to find in it an exemplary representation of how Christianity breaks down social barriers.

The final chapter on the use of slave texts in nineteenth-century American controversy no doubt constitutes the most disturbing section of the book, and the author makes no effort to take away the discomfort, plunging the reader right into it with an impossible citation from the Episcopal bishop J. H. Hopkins at the beginning of the book (vii) and a good deal more of the same in chapter 7. All these citations have in common an acute awareness that it is the authority of the Bible itself that is at stake; or, as one conservative pastor wrote targeting later president Thomas Jefferson's nuanced plea for abolition, such a person should "throw away his Bible as Mr. Jefferson did his.... Never disgrace the Bible by making Mr. Jefferson its expounder" (185). Harrill goes right to the heart of the matter when dealing with the hermeneutical implications of this dispute. Two of his conclusions say it all: "Most embarrassing for today's readers of the Bible, the proslavery spokesmen were holding the more defensible position from the perspective of historical criticism"; and "Biblical criticism is seldom able to settle contemporary moral debate, but contemporary moral debate can and does shape broad and influential trends in biblical criticism" (192). Harrill's book has the great merit to have pointed out this conclusion most rigorously on the basis of one of the most uncomfortable issues to be found in the New Testament writings.