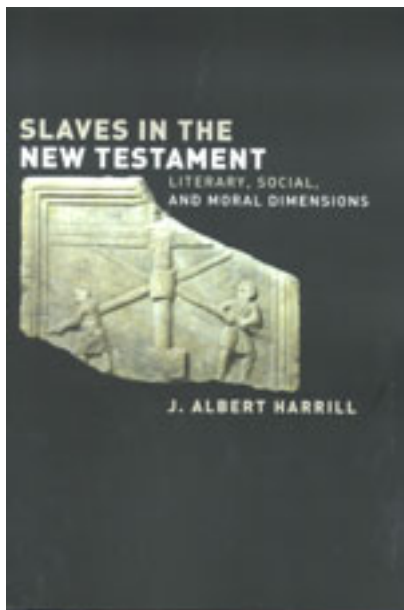


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Harrill, J. Albert

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

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The history of slavery is without doubt one of the best investigated subjects in the field of historical research. This also applies to slavery in the context of Christianity. Already in 2003 the bibliography of the Akademie der Wissenschaften und der Literatur Mainz/Germany (Heinz Bellen et al., eds., *Bibliographie zur antiken Sklaverei* [Stuttgart: Steiner, 2003]) listed roughly 225 titles on slavery in an early Christian context, most of which deal with the New Testament era, and added approximately 140 titles that refer to the topic partially. The book under review, however, is quite different. J. Albert Harrill, Associate Professor of Religious Studies and Director of the Ancient Studies Program at Indiana University, does not seek to provide another factual compendium on slavery or an encyclopedic inventory of all references to slavery in the New Testament, nor is his investigation interested in special aspects of slavery (as in Harrill's *Manumission of Slaves in Early Christianity* [Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1995]). Harrill's aim is to prove that the New Testament authors reflected and promoted the ancient literary ideas about slaves as well as the Roman ideology of *auctoritas* because they made use of Greco-Roman literary figures and specific language for their self-definition. According to this book, which derives in part from earlier essays by Harrill, the ancient stereotypes and stock characters were used as a basis to describe the early Christian community.

Therefore, Harrill believes that most slaves mentioned in the New Testament and early Christian literature were rather literary products.

The volume is organized into seven chapters. Chapters 1–5 focus on particular New Testament texts. The first chapter investigates how an ancient audience would have understood the first sentence of Paul’s letter to the Romans, where the author defines himself as a slave of Jesus Christ. To understand this self-definition, Harrill looks at some controversial passages in Rom 7. In this context he undertakes an exegetical study of the Pauline use of the technique of speech-in-character (*prosopopoiia*). In his view, Paul incorporates the Roman ideology of slaveholding into his explanation on baptism (Rom 6:6–14). Harrill points out that Paul uses the specific Roman ideas about slavery as an image to illustrate to his audience the status of a human being before and after the ritual of baptism. Harrill suggests that Paul thus juxtaposes the bad enslavement under the domination of sin and the good enslavement under the *auctoritas* of God. The latter resembles the relation of the faithful slave to a good master.

In chapter 2 Harrill refers to the accusation mentioned in 2 Cor 10:10, where the weak bodily presence of the apostle Paul is documented. Harrill argues that Paul uses an ancient literal convention, since a physiognomic description of that kind literally characterized a slave in ancient Mediterranean culture. To prove this thesis, he analyzes several slave-descriptions of pagan sources, for example, of Aristotle and ancient drama, and contrasts them with the Greek and Roman rhetoric of free manhood. He tries to demonstrate a dichotomy of servile and free-looking physiognomy and suggests that Paul adopted the slave schema for a self-description. Harrill bases this idea on the older thesis of Malherbe (A. J. Malherbe, “Antisthenes and Odysseus, and Paul at War,” in idem, *Paul and the Popular Philosophers* [Philadelphia: Fortress, 1998], 91–119), who believes that Paul’s strategy referred to a well-known tradition described in Homer’s *Odyssey*. According to this narration (*Od.* 4.240–250), Odysseus adopted the schema of a slave to score a military victory, which, in the eyes of some philosophers (e.g., Antisthenes) proved him to be a good warrior. Harrill, following Malherbe, supposes that Paul refers to this narration to counter accusations that deny his courage or strength.

Chapter 3 investigates two stories from Luke-Acts. Harrill’s starting point is the observation that in ancient comedies the fictional portrayal of slaves often mocks the whole social group. In contrast to recent scholarship, Harrill interprets Rhoda, the slave maid in Acts 12:13–16, not as an example for the authenticity of Luke’s narrative but as an artificial stock figure as it was used in Roman comedy. Harrill conceives Rhoda as the figure of *servus currens* (running slave), whose function is to let the subsequent action seem more real, as Harrill demonstrates by quoting several passages from Plautus and Terence. Harrill assumes that Luke’s aim in using this figure was to heighten anticipation

in his audience for a more realistic effect in the following scene, the miraculous rescue of the apostle Peter. The dishonest manager of Luke 16:1–8 is interpreted as the figure of *parasitus* (parasite) playing the *servus callidus* (clever slave). In Harrill’s view, the parable of the Dishonest Manager is part of a narrative sequence leading to the story of the Rich Man and Lazarus (Luke 16:19–31). Harrill believes that both stories form a literary diptych that contrasts two complementary modes of ancient comedy, the farcical and the naturalistic.

In chapter 4 Harrill surveys the deutero-Pauline domestic codes. Harrill assumes that the themes of justice, accountability, and piety were widely diffused in the classical literature on household management. The early Christian domestic codes on those topics correspond best with the ancient handbook tradition on agriculture. He suggests that in the Christian household codes the Christian master is presented like an elite slave (*vilicus*) whose owner is absent and has entrusted his slave with overseeing the estate.

In chapter 5 Harrill explores the cultural stereotypes about the slave-trading profession in classical antiquity. First he takes a look at the use of these stereotypes by several ancient authors, such as Isocrates, Aristophanes, and Plutarch, and then stresses the parallels in 1 Timothy. Thereafter he quotes several ancient sources to emphasize several stereotypes about ancient slave dealing, such as the lawless way of acquiring slaves or the untrustworthiness of slave dealers. Harrill also points to the fact that Greek and Roman religion denounced the dishonest ways in which slave dealers often acted, as unholy. He then highlights Philo’s characterization of slave dealers as lawless and of slave trading as a violation of Jewish law. After that, he refers again to 1 Timothy (esp. 1 Tim 1:10). In Harrill’s view, the passage does not point to actual slave dealers but uses the stereotype of evil slave dealers to demonstrate something else. Harrill suggests that the author turns his rhetoric against leaders of heretical groups, who “steal” believers from his community like dishonest slave traders steal family members from their rightful households.

The two following chapters address the legacy of the New Testament. In chapter 6 Harrill analyzes early Christian apologies and acts of martyrs, which, in his view, condemn the ordinary household slave as an investigator of family corruption and domestic enemy par excellence. On the other side, the author finds a number of examples that characterize the slave as a faithful companion. As before, this is not interpreted as social history but as a literary artifice. Harrill nevertheless admits that the stories can help to reconstruct slavery life in general. Hence, chapter 6 first surveys the physical environment of the ancient house and the integration of slaves into ancient work, religion, and family relation. Harrill then explores the literary functions of early Christian apologies and investigates the stories about slaves in the acts of the martyrs in the light of the moral exempla of domestic slave fidelity. Against the background of recent scholarship, which sees the

martyrdom stories as a discourse that undermined ancient ideologies of the family, Harrill emphasizes that the acts of the martyrs did not contest the prevailing ideology of the family with regard to slavery, as it did with regard to the status of women. In fact, the early Christian accounts of martyrdoms tend to favor the ancient image of a faithful slave. Therefore, Harrill concludes, early Christian discourses participated in the Roman family ideology, which they simultaneously—so Harrill believes—were trying to subvert.

The last chapter shifts to the modern era and examines the use of the New Testament in the nineteenth-century American slave controversy. It also offers several hermeneutical reflections referring to previous chapters, evincing first of all how modern ideology affects historical interpretations. Harrill traces patterns in nineteenth-century exegesis that illumine the opposing ways of reading the Bible in the moral debate about slavery. While the abolitionist exegesis constituted an early form of biblical criticism, the proslavery writers upheld a simple and straightforward hermeneutic of plain sense. In this very interesting chapter the author shows firmly how abolitionists and the proslavery party used the question of exegetical approach as a second theater of war for the moral debate about slavery. Harrill's aim is to illustrate the complicated relationship between the historical-critical interpretation of the Bible and Christian debate over moral issues.

In his epilogue Harrill emphasizes his view that the complexity of moral reasoning as well as of biblical interpretation should prevent one from appealing solely to Scripture to settle Christian moral debates. If Harrill is correct in stating that the New Testament writings participate strongly in ancient stereotypes, which functioned to dehumanize slaves, his deduction that the Christian moral debates should move beyond a simple biblicism is certainly right. However, not every reader will agree with Harrill's thesis. Further, although Harrill's attack on biblicistic argumentation regarding traditional family values in the closing sentence of this volume (196) is, from the book's point of view, understandable, it is still problematic for methodical reasons, since the book investigates only slavery, not families as a whole. Obviously, if one agrees with Harrill, the results of this book should lead to another investigation on family values in the New Testament.

The large appendix is remarkable. The notes (201–69) register Harrill's sources and give many useful and interesting reading suggestions. The bibliography (271–312) is extensive and up to date. The book closes with a short index of names and subjects and with an index of ancient sources.

Harrill doubtlessly has a good knowledge of the ancient literature and is thus able to illustrate the New Testament texts by pagan parallels. He also has a keen sense of hermeneutical questions. He is aware of the problem that the *corpus iuris civilis* emerged

over a large period of time, which is only partly simultaneous to the New Testament era. He also realizes that juridical texts do not always reflect historical reality.

On the other hand, the reader must face some difficult aspects of the book. As Harrill emphasizes, a topic such as slavery requires a diversity of interpretative approaches. The author calls his own approach eclectic, which is principally correct but which cannot belie the fact that he uses a literary approach most of the time. Furthermore, one cannot help but get the impression that, besides his hermeneutical understanding, Harrill uses the ancient sources to circumstantiate his thesis regardless of the diachronic aspects. Further, the title of the book is somewhat misleading, since the literary aspect dominates the whole study. In chapters 1 and 2, for example, the reader learns much about the literary work of Paul but nothing about slavery in its historical occurrence.

All in all, the book is worthwhile reading for all those concerned with the use of literary patterns in the New Testament, even if they may not agree with each of Harris's theses. Those who are interested in historical aspects of slavery in the New Testament, however, should not place this book on the prime position of their reading list.