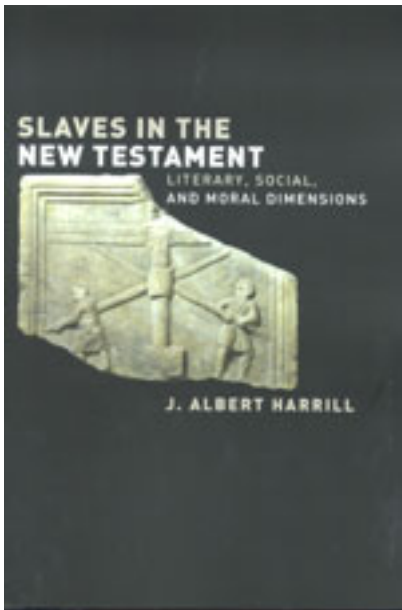


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**Harrill, J. Albert**

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

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Writing as a historian, Harrill rejects the old “biblical theology” approach to interpreting the Bible. The weakness of this approach was and is relying on a totalizing interpretive framework that established artificial cultural dichotomies and then accepted them as historical entities. Its purpose was to point out the distinctiveness of the biblical entity in contrast with its pagan environment. Instead, he studies Christianity as part of and fully integrated into the ancient world. His thesis is that early Christian writings are part and parcel of the literary imagination about slaves and the ideology of mastery that was widely known in the ancient Mediterranean world. Romans named this ideology of mastery *auctoritas*, the quality of actual power in a person granted by voluntary compliance of subordinates and by the esteem of one’s fellows. By ideology, Harrill understands language insofar as it informs the structures of authority and domination that a society employs to construct and maintain its social reality. Authors participate in this ideology even if unawares.

The book is organized around biblical passages arranged in approximate chronological order. In Harrill’s view, none of these passages speak to a “real-life” person or event. Each rather reflects a literary convention usually associated with a stock character type

created by ancient authors. In no case is there any argument against slavery as an ideology or institution in the ancient world.

Chapter 1 (“The Slave Self: Paul and the Discursive ‘I’”) focuses on Rom 7, in which Paul draws upon the persona of a captured war slave suffering an identity crisis because of alienation from its rightful owner. This character serves as a rhetorical device for Paul to think about community, social categorization, hierarchy, and one’s relation to the divine.

Chapter 2 (“The Slave Body: Physiognomics and Invective against Paul”) examines 2 Cor 10:10 as reflecting a view of the slave body held by Paul’s opponents. With that invective they sought to attack Paul’s character as a servile flatterer. Such is the rhetoric of Sophists. The invective is literary and not literal social description. It was widely used to contrast free men with slavish free men. Paul repeats but does not accept their invective. Instead, he demonstrates that relying on external appearances is misleading. This reflects Socratic rhetoric.

Chapter 3 (“The Comedy of Slavery in Story and Parable”) examines Rhoda (Acts 12:13–16) and the dishonest manager (Luke 16:1–8). Harrill concludes that neither of these pericopes crafted by Luke reports a real-life Mediterranean story. Each presents a literary characterization drawn from Roman slave comedy. Rhoda is a running slave (*serva currens*) who provides comic relief for the next scene, in which friends will meet Peter marvelously rescued from jail. In the dishonest manager story, Luke combines the parasite (*parasitus*) with the clever slave (*servus callidus*) to produce a farce. With this parable Luke exhorts his audience to play the burlesque of the dishonest manager in daily life. It was his way of presenting the social implications of rich patrons entering the congregation.

In Chapter 4 (“Subordinate to Another: Elite Slaves in the Agricultural Handbooks and the Household Codes”), Harrill challenges the notion promoted by some scholars that the household codes undermined the ideology and institution of slavery. He examines those codes that prescribe rules for masters and slaves (Colossians, Ephesians, *Didache*, the *Doctrina Apostolorum*, and the *Epistle of Barnabas*) and points out that believing masters should behave properly because they in turn are subordinate to God (slaves of God; slaves of Christ). The ancient handbook traditions shed light in their treatment of the *vilicus* (elite slave bailiff). Because he represented the estate owner, the *vilicus* had authority to command, but he was to exercise his authority with justice, accountability, and piety. Christian writers adopted these notions and identified the Lord as the absent *pater familias* and the Christian master as the *vilicus*. The household codes were the handbook from which the Christian master learned his role in the household of God.

Chapter 5 examines 1 Tim 1:9–10 (“The Vice of the Slave Trader”) from the perspective of another stock literary figure, the slave trader. The author of 1 Timothy attacked rival teachers by calling them “slave traders,” a metaphorical term of abuse. With this strategy, the sacred author sought to influence opinion in the congregation toward accepting his teachings and rejecting those of his rivals. Chapter 6 (“The Domestic Enemy: Household Slaves in Early Christian Apologies and Accounts of Martyrdom”) examines two notions: the ancient maxim “you have as many enemies as you have slaves” and its implications; and the stories concerning slaves in martyrdom accounts. The worst deed of a slave as domestic enemy was reporting his Christian owner to the authorities. But the evidence cuts both ways, for some slaves were described as unswervingly loyal (see Athenagoras), while others were accused of betraying their masters (see Tertullian and Justin Martyr). The reason for this difference of opinion is because the maxim can be inverted to suit one’s intention. Proverbial thinking about slaves is based on stock types. Regarding the second point, few martyrdom stories show slaves turning in their masters. They tend rather to favor the faithful-slave trope, except for pagans owned by Christians.

Finally, in chapter 7 Harrill discusses “The Use of the New Testament in the American Slave Controversy: A Case History in the Hermeneutical Tension between Biblical Criticism and Christian Moral Debate.” Antislavery sentiment was an early form of biblical criticism. It forced a movement away from a literal reading of the Bible and promoted an egalitarian reading of Jesus’ Golden Rule, in contrast to the patriarchal reading by the proslavery faction. But the Bible clearly did not always support this position, so radical abolitionists resorted to secular arguments from conscience. Eventually, some African Americans rejected white Christianity and opted for violence, relying on biblical typology and visions of apocalyptic eschatology. In contrast, the proslavery movement was impressed by the critical views of the Bible that supported their views. The result is that even to this day literalism and moral intuition remain at odds in American culture. Biblical criticism rarely succeeds in settling contemporary moral debate.

Though much of the material in this book has been published previously (beginning in 1999), the author has expanded, enriched, and refined his thinking. The book forms a comprehensive argument in support of his hypothesis, quite obviously a topic he has lived and wrestled with for a very long time. He admits that he utilizes an eclectic methodological approach, because slavery is a complex topic requiring diverse approaches. He relies on gender studies, cultural theory, literary approaches, social history, and rhetorical analysis, among other disciplines. Truly, the book presents an impressive wealth of information about the Greco-Roman world. Nevertheless, his interpretations often do not suit the circum-Mediterranean cultural values and practices he is describing.

In chapter 2 he argues from ancient physiognomics that the invective hurled at Paul in 2 Cor 10:10 is not a literal description of Paul. It rather describes a slave body, thereby questioning Paul's manhood. Twice in this chapter Harrill labels physiognomics a "pseudoscience" (37, 52). This is clearly an anachronistic and ethnocentric label erroneously and unfairly retrojected and imposed on a culture that was completely incapable of thinking in those terms. In the language of anthropology, his etic (outsider, Western) label ("pseudoscience") is entirely inappropriate for the emic (insider, Middle Eastern) situation. Indeed, the Bible itself clearly states the common circum-Mediterranean cultural conviction of that time. "for the LORD sees not as man sees; man looks on the outward appearance, but the LORD looks on the heart" (1 Sam 16:7). Circum-Mediterranean people of antiquity (and the present) were not only nonintrospective but outright anti-introspective. As the author of 1 Samuel indicates, only God possesses the ability "to look on the heart." This explains why physiognomic literature was so extensive in antiquity (or applications to Paul, see Bruce J. Malina and Jerome H. Neyrey, *Portraits of Paul: An Archaeology of Personality* [Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1996], esp. ch. 4: "Physiognomics and Personality: Looking at Paul in *The Acts of Paul*" [100–152]).

Of course, the ancients were quite aware of the deficiencies and inaccuracies of their cultural viewpoint. They were not stupid, but they were not Western. Even the ancients cited by Harrill who critiqued this perspective offered no better alternative (Seneca the Younger, Epictetus, Pliny the Elder, Cicero). The common circum-Mediterranean solution to this problem was a strategy of "making oneself out to be" other than what the other (the opponent) might perceive. This was the constant cultural preoccupation: How do I want others to perceive me? How can I achieve that? Jesus' question to his disciples, "Who do people say that I am?" (Mark 8:27), is not a "theology quiz" from someone who knew he was God. It is, rather, an attempt by a Mediterranean person to assess how well he "made himself out to be" other than his "true" self, an artisan from Nazareth. The disciples' answers indicate he was quite successful in his endeavor to make himself out to be "other" than he really was. His command to secrecy is not a "messianic secret" but rather a normal Middle Eastern strategy to hide any information that might change the flattering self-image and perception of self that one has created.

The same, of course, is true of Paul. Harrill proposes that Paul imitates the Socratic tradition and seeks to help his audience understand him. He uses self-deprecating irony (2 Cor 10:1) favored by philosophers in the Cynic-Socratic school to ridicule physiognomics and hopes that the judgment based on superficial appearances and stereotypes will backfire. While Paul may have been familiar with Greco-Roman philosophy (something this reviewer views with skepticism), the nagging cultural question is, How was Paul trying to make himself out to be in the face of invective? Since no one but God could read Paul's heart, it is possible Paul accepted the views of his

Corinthian opponents and tried to incorporate them into a positive presentation of himself, but in a way different than Harrill proposes. Even if the Socratics whom Harrill says Paul is emulating may not have approved of physiognomics, they did not offer an alternative other than denial, at least according to Harrill's evidence. Neither did Paul. The ancient circum-Mediterraneans had to deal with the stereotypical judgments that were thrown at them. The strategy was not a doubt about or rejection of stereotypical judgment, as Harrill argues. They were forced to massage the negative judgments into a positive image that they would want to project.

Finally, apart from the Mediterranean cultural flaws in Harrill's argument, he contributes a wealth of detail about literary tropes relative to slavery in the ancient world and throws down a strong critical challenge to biblical theology. While it may be appealing and satisfying to modern readers when an author weaves a "biblical theology" out of disparate passages in the Bible with little or no regard for historical and cultural detail (Harrill's strong point), the fact is that this theology is usually woefully deficient and simply inadequate. As the British exegete C. S. Rodd observes: "When it comes to looking for ethical guidance from the Bible, we all pick and choose" (*New Occasions Teach New Duties?* [Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1995], 5). "I simply state my own view that I cannot see how any book can form an absolute external authority for the individual. We have to choose what will be authoritative for us" (8 n. 1). Making this choice without appropriate Middle Eastern cultural sensitivity turns out to be quite simply anachronistic and ethnocentric—and in the final analysis absolutely useless.