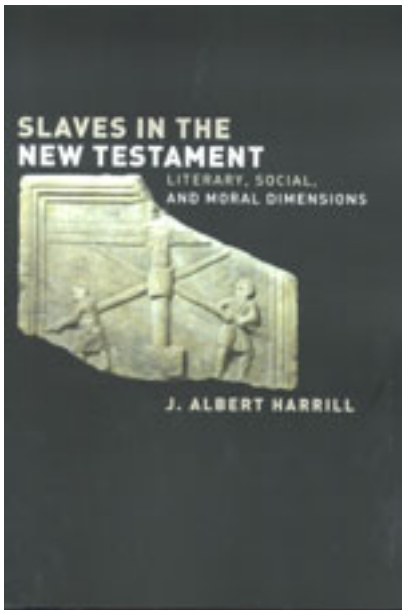


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Harrill, J. Albert

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

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As is well known, the anthropologist E. T. Hall lists the ancient Mediterranean as a region of high-context societies that produce sketchy and impressionistic texts, leaving much to the reader's or hearer's imagination. Since people believe few things have to be spelled out, few things are in fact spelled out. This is so because people have been socialized into widely shared, rather constant ways of perceiving and acting. Social roles and behaviors follow stereotyped pathways. Hence, much can be and is assumed. There simply is no need to spell out details as there is in low-context societies such as the United States. In high-context societies, little new information is necessary for meaning to be constant and clear. In order to read ancient Mediterranean documents considerably, we moderns need the details that ancient authors felt no need to specify. For Bible readers, slavery is one of those high-context behaviors that need definition and details.

Harrill, a long-time researcher into the area of ancient Mediterranean slavery, has composed this book from previously published articles to provide some of those details to assist the modern reader in making sense of one literary text (Philemon), four specific "text-segments," and one word in the New Testament writings dealing with slavery.

The introduction describes the author's position that "early Christianity" (meaning New Testament authors) shares the then-common cultural outlook about slaves and masters

and obviously supports this outlook. He speaks of “literary imagination” and its “ideology,” defined as a quality of language (“By ideology I mean language that colludes with, supports and makes sense of the current structures of authority and domination”) The second half of the introduction presents the major perspectives on reading Philemon, concluding with Artz-Grabner’s suggestion that the letter’s genre (style, contents, and function) is that of a “journeyman apprentice contract” in which “the letter asks Philemon to let Onesimus be apprenticed to Paul for service in the gospel.”

The first and second chapters deal with segments of Paul’s letters. Chapter 1 explains Rom 7:7–25 as an instance of *prosopopoiia*, “the introduction of a character whose speech represents not that of the author but that of another person or an invented persona.” In this case, the “I” of the passages “refers to a Gentile, and not a ‘universal’ self.” Further, the “I” has the persona of a slave self. Harrill makes no mention of Luise Schotroff, who in 1979 suggested the “I” in this passage was first that of a slave, then that of a possessed person.

Chapter 2 deals with the statement in 2 Cor 10:10 in which Paul cites his opponents’ charge of a weak bodily presence. Using ancient physiognomics, the author describes a slave body to draw out the quality of the insult directed at Paul. Ancient physiognomics was based on the belief that function follows form: the physical shape of a bird does not allow it to roar, and the physical shape of a lion does not allow it to chirp. The same was true of humans. The physical shape of a slave (slaves were slaves by nature, as a rule) derived from its “slave body,” a weak bodily presence.

Chapter 3 deals with the stereotype of the “running slave” Rhoda in Acts 12:13–16. In terms of Hellenism, aside from races, proper adults did not run (hence the anomaly in the Parable of the Prodigal Son [Luke 15:20] and the disciples in John 20:2.4). A further stereotype considered in this chapter is that of the “shrewd slave” manager in Luke 16:1–8.

Chapter 4 surveys fourth-generation Jesus-group domestic codes “that exhort believing slaves as moral agents and believing masters as subordinates of another Lord” (Col 3:22–4:1; Eph 6:5–9; *Barn.* 19.7; *Did.* 4.10–11). Harrill describes how these text-segments share the well-known household themes of justice, accountability, and piety diffused in ancient handbooks on agriculture. He underscores the role of the *villicus* (he uses the British term “bailiff” as translation), a managing slave who oversees an estate in place of the absentee estate owner (*pater familias*).

Chapter 5 is devoted to the study of the word *andrapodistes* (slave trader) in 1 Tim 1:10, while chapter 6 continues the study of slaves, this time in the stereotype of slave as either domestic enemy or faithful companion, specifically in early Jesus-group apologies and

martyrdom accounts. Finally, chapter 7 examines the use of the New Testament in the religious debate over legal slavery in antebellum America. What is lacking here is a consideration of the economic matrix of U.S. slavery, especially since the Civil War was essentially about maintaining the economic/political dominance of the northeast over the rest of the United States. As is well known, Lincoln came to office supporting slavery as an institution, affirming the return of fugitive slaves to their owners, pledging that he would not interfere with slavery, and supporting a constitutional amendment that protected slavery forever—an amendment expressly made irrevocable.

Be that as it may, Harrill's essays are well written and interesting. He describes the slave roles by utilizing literary *topoi*. He insists that these references are "literary not social." I find this distinction very confusing, since *topoi* are in fact social-system stereotypes typical of high-context societies. Meanings, including literary meanings, derive from social systems. In this sense all literary *topoi* express social stereotypes. I think that what Harrill wishes to say is that using literary (written? imaginary?) sources is no guarantee that real persons, living or dead, actually behaved that way. This, of course, reflects the nineteenth-century concern deriving from the invention of the distinction between fact and fiction. Such a concern did not exist in antiquity as a norm for assessing literary genre. Even today it is, in fact, very difficult to tell the difference between the imaginary and imaginative history, given the fact that history derives from the imagination of historians.

The book is extremely well documented and provides an abundance of valuable information. The data presented in the various chapters of the book should be incorporated into Boring, Berger, and Colpe's *Hellenistic Commentary to the New Testament*. Harrill's favored genre is that of social history as practiced predominantly by Yale-Harvard-Chicago graduates. To use the categories of Ralph Hochschild (*Sozialgeschichtliche Exegese*), the author places himself clearly in the perspective of *writing history based on the social-historical interpretation of data*. This sort of history is concerned with ordinary people in their ordinary daily lives. The shift is away from the elites and wars that characterize usual political history, previously called simply "history." Social history presents narrative descriptions of peasants, their families, behaviors, roles, and the like.

In Harrill's case, we find narrative descriptions of slaves in the Hellenistic world. These descriptions are invariably drawn up on the basis of the historian's *implicit* models of how the ancients thought their societies worked. When dealing with the New Testament period, this genre interweaves social topics with exegesis, leaving theological data in the background. Such history often makes intriguing and interesting reading, but at bottom it has heavy ethnocentric and anachronistic strains. The absence of a useful definition of

slavery in the work is symptomatic. Like the outcomes of social-scientific exegesis, however, social history describes persons who would be strange in the world of today, since living at some distance and in differing social circumstances.

Apart from “plain sense” fundamentalists, Harrill has a chosen foil for his essays, and that foil seems to be *those who do history based on a social-kerygmatic interpretation of data* (Hochschild’s category). This way of doing history and historically based exegesis crystallized in the early- and mid-twentieth-century methods known by the Germanic phrases: form criticism, tradition criticism, and redaction criticism. The units of literary analysis revealed by close analytic examination of ancient “texts” (really text-segments) require a social context that often looks very much like the social and churchly setting of the investigators. The results of such study were and are of immediate relevance to contemporary social and church concerns. Thus, social-kerygmatic outcomes were and are appropriated and recontextualized for ecclesiastical (church) purposes. In this perspective, theological interests dominate, and the New Testament was and is quite relevant to the contemporary scene. There is little concern about whether the descriptions and ideas in question are ethnocentric and/or anachronistic, so long as they are relevant to the present, thus appropriated and recontextualized for today.

Like Harrill, those using social-scientific approaches study the available sources with specific historical questions in mind, but they are concerned with locating the information generated by their questions within some historically and culturally appropriate theoretical and explicit framework of concepts and hypotheses to produce intelligibility and interpretations. Most historically oriented classicist and biblical scholars proceed in the same way,

but in practice there are two main differences. The first is that the historian’s conceptualization tends to be implicit, arbitrary, and unsystematic, whereas the social scientist’s is explicit and systematic. The second is the historian’s tendency, because his sources usually provide him with some sort of loose narrative pattern to which the facts can be related, to evade so far as possible the theoretical issues, and also to deal for [*sic*] preference less with the underlying structure than with events and personalities, which are usually far more sharply delineated in historical records than in the materials anthropologists and sociologists commonly use. (Geoffrey Barraclough, *Main Trends in History* [New York: Holmes & Meier, 1978], 50)

Harrill’s historical method of intuitively gathering presumably parallel passages to shed light on presumably related New Testament statements is useful. However, ordinary New

Testament readers do need larger cultural patterns to be the fair to the New Testament authors. As historian William H. McNeill has written:

To move from detail to perception of larger patterns is not achieved by accumulating more and more instances. Appropriate concepts are needed. Each change of scale requires its own vocabulary to direct attention to the critical thresholds and variables. Finding the right things to lump together and the right words to focus attention on critical transitions is the special work of human intelligence—whether applied to history or to everyday encounters with the world. (*Mythistory and Other Essays* [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986], 35)