

Slaves and early Christianity

Serving God rather than human masters

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Περίληψη: Το άρθρο αυτό ασχολείται με τη θέση των δούλων στις πρώτες χριστιανικές κοινότητες και τις αντιλήψεις των πρώτων χριστιανών γύρω από τον θεσμό της δουλείας. Προσκομίζει μαρτυρίες που δείχνουν ότι μολονότι οι χριστιανοί δεν επέδειξαν ιδιαίτερο ζήλο στον προσηλυτισμό των δούλων και δεν υποστήριξαν τη χειραφέτησή τους, υπήρχαν αρκετοί δούλοι στις πρώτες χριστιανικές κοινότητες που αφοσιώθηκαν στη νέα τους θρησκεία, αποδεχόμενοι ακόμα και τον μαρτυρικό θάνατο σε περιόδους διωγμών.

Summary: This paper deals with the position of slaves within the early Christian communities and the views of the early Christians in respect to slavery as an institution. The testimonies produced suggest that although Christians did not give any priority to the conversion of slaves and did not promote their emancipation, there were several slave in the early Christian communities devoted to their new religion, that went as far as accepting martyrdom.

Λέξεις κλειδιά: δούλοι, δουλεία, χειραφέτηση, μαρτύριο

Key words: slaves, slavery, emancipation, martyrdom

The early Christians were not happy with the world they lived in. Besides rejecting the religious beliefs and practices of their contemporaries, they were critical about the predominant morals and their social consequences, and about the use of wealth and the way power was exercised. They were also sensitive to human suffering and distress. Although most of them, especial in the earliest days, were not particularly wealthy, they offered their help, as best as they could, to those in need: to the poor and the sick, to prisoners and captives, to widows and orphans. Collecting and

distributing alms became an obligation to them, an essential part of their religious duties. Nevertheless, although surrounded by slaves, they were never particularly concerned with slavery as an institution, and never felt obliged to condemn it as unjust. They neither advocated its abolishment, nor encouraged the general emancipation of slaves.¹

¹ See D. J. Kyrtatas, *The Social Structure of the Early Christian Communities*, Verso, London and New York 1987, pp. 25-54.

Many Christians living in the first three centuries expected that the world would end soon, within their own life-time or the life-time of their children. They were thus mostly concerned with urgent matters, such as repentance from former sins, the spread of the good news they had received and the amelioration of their behaviour. Since salvation was considered as a very personal issue, it required a change of heart, not a change of the world. Reforming the world in a radical manner was beyond their aspirations and even beyond their imagination. Besides, questioning a universally accepted institution, such as slavery, would be considered subversive. It could create disturbances and discontent, diverting attention from religious to social matters. The idea was to win over whole households and, if possible, entire communities – and, above all, to convince rulers that Christianity was the religion best suited to the whole empire and even humanity at large.

Slaves make their appearance in the Gospels as a matter of course. They serve their masters and perform the tasks expected of them without provoking any protests from Jesus or his disciples. In the New Testament epistles they are admonished to obey their masters, not only those who were kind and reasonable but also those who were harsh (1 Pet. 2:18). By exhibiting unqualified respect for their masters, slaves could ensure that the name of God and the teaching of Christians would not be brought into disrepute (1 Tim. 6:1). Indeed, serving their masters sincerely was their moral obligation. They should respect them, not only when they were being watched, but wholeheartedly, doing the will of God from their heart (Eph. 6:5-6). It was thus expected that complete honesty and absolute obedience on their part, without argument, would add credit to Christian teaching (Tit. 2:9-10).

Paul went so far as to advise slaves to accept their lot, even if they were given the opportunity to gain their freedom. It was to their advantage to make full use of their servile condition. Everyone should remain in whatever

social status he found himself when he was called (1 Cor. 7:20-21). Masters should remain masters, while slaves should remain slaves. This notion was repeated by several Church Fathers.

While in prison, Paul received, at some point, the services of a runaway slave named Onesimus. Although wishing to keep him as a personal servant, Paul felt obliged to send him back to his lawful Christian owner, as was socially proper. But since the slave had been converted to the new faith, Paul pleaded on his behalf. He should be forgiven for his unacceptable behaviour and not punished severely, as was common in such cases. But he would obviously remain in his servile condition (Philem.).

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Roman slavery was actually a very complex institution. There was hardly any human activity that did not involve the use of slaves. Slaves were plentiful in both cities and the countryside; in households as servants, and in the fields as labourers. They could be put to work as tradesmen, artisans, bankers, civil servants or instructors. But they could also find themselves working under exceedingly harsh conditions in mines, in quarries or in infamous institutions.

Agricultural slaves were numerous in the Roman world. Most of them worked on large farms of wealthy landowners and were often kept chained in barracks. They were supervised by stewards or overseers, who were either slaves themselves or freedmen, enjoying the trust of their masters or patrons. Their living conditions were tough, and the treatment they received was often cruel. Such slaves normally enjoyed some kind of religious life, participating in some of the established and common pagan feasts. But they hardly had the opportunity to make their own choices. There is no hint in the surviving evidence that Christian missionaries ever made any attempt to convert them. On the contrary, there is evidence that even Christian masters rarely attempted to

interfere with the traditional rural celebrations and rituals of their slaves.

Most slave miners were exploited in extreme ways. They worked throughout the day, and their bodies wasted away, for as long as they would last. They were considered more or less as dispensable. Such slaves make their appearance in our sources only when they were already Christians themselves, convicted during the persecutions. Otherwise, almost nothing was said about them. So, although offering aid to Christian convicts was part of the new faith's programme, converting pagan miners was practically out of the question.

Many slaves, both male and female, were often sexually exploited. When they were confined to brothels, their conditions of living could be very unhealthy and unpleasant, but occasionally some female slaves became mistresses and even concubines of wealthy men, even princes or emperors. In such cases they could live in luxury and were even able to exercise some power.

Christian preachers had much to say against prostitution, but they were almost exclusively concerned with the moral issues involved. Consequently, prostitutes were seen as a temptation that should be avoided, not as victims that needed protection. Nevertheless, a few Christian concubines make an appearance in the extant literature, the most conspicuous of whom was Marcia, who was favoured by the emperor Commodus – and who was eventually involved in his assassination.

The bulk of Jesus' followers were originally peasants. On a normal working day, they were expected to be out in the fields if they were men, or grinding at the mill if they were women (Matt 24:40-1). Some, perhaps most, owned at least one servant of servile status, who assisted them in their agricultural and household labours. In the Gospels, ploughing and tending sheep were clearly thought to be typical tasks of slaves (Lk 17:7).

However, as soon as the movement of Jesus began to spread beyond Palestine, it underwent a fundamental change. Whereas the Gospels insist that Jesus preached almost exclusively in rural areas, avoiding even those towns that were on his way, after the Pentecost, Christian missionaries, such as Paul or Barnabas, are found visiting only the important towns of the empire. The originally rural movement of Jesus was quickly transformed into a city-based religion.²

After the transformation of Christianity into an urban religion, we hear little if anything about villagers, shepherds or fishermen. Peasants and farmers, often mentioned in the Gospels, are almost completely forgotten in the rest of the New Testament and almost all subsequent Christian literature. By the second and early third centuries, the new converts were drawn from all social strata of the urban population.

Some Christians in the new urban communities were artisans – like Paul, Aquila and his wife, Priscilla, who were tentmakers (Acts 18:1-3), or like Lydia of Thyatira, who was a dealer in purple cloth (Acts 16:14).³ Craftsmen are frequently mentioned in the early Christian literature (*Didache* 12.3), but most Christians were probably city-dwellers, attending daily to their nearby fields. It was taken for granted that a typical urban Christian community could offer its leaders the “first fruit of the produce of the winepress and of the threshing floor and of oxen and sheep” (*Didache* 13.3).

From the late second century onwards, Christianity attracted members of the local upper classes as well. A few converts could also be

² See G. E. M. de Ste. Croix, “Early Christian Attitudes to Property and Slavery”, in *Christian Persecution, Martyrdom, and Orthodoxy*, OUP, Oxford and New York 2006, pp. 328-71.

³ See Gerd Theissen, *The Social Setting of Pauline Christianity*, T. and T. Clark, Edinburgh 1982; Wayne A. Meeks, *The First Urban Christians: The Social World of the Apostle Paul*, Yale University Press, New Haven and London 1983.

found among the Roman elite, including members of the equestrian class, though not of the senatorial rank. There is much evidence to substantiate this estimate, but we may safely rely upon the opinion of the church historian Eusebius, who argued that from the time of Commodus (A.D. 180-192) “the word of salvation began to lead every soul of every race of men to pious worship of the God of the universe, so that many of those who at Rome were famous for wealth and family turned to their own salvation with all their house and with all their kin”.⁴

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Neither the Gospels nor subsequent Christian literature give any impression that slaves were particularly attracted by Jesus’ message. Since Jesus himself and his first disciples were constantly on the move, only runaway slaves could have joined him. Such behaviour, however, would have required special encouragement, which was not forthcoming. The early Christian communities were not and did not wish to become gangs of outlaws.

After the transformation of the Jesus movement into an urban religion, some slaves gradually began to join Christian communities. Very little can be said about their numbers, but it is more or less clear that almost all of them belonged to two special and somewhat privileged groups.

In the Roman world, great importance was attributed to households as social and productive units. When the head of a household, whether male or female, expressed interest in new religious ideas or rights, the whole *familia* was expected to follow. The early Christian missionaries often addressed themselves to such

leaders, in the reasonable expectation that through their conversion the whole household would be baptised, including women, children and slaves (Acts 11:14; 16:31). It is almost certain that most of the slaves who make their appearance in the sources as converts belonged to Christian masters. Indeed, they often appear to be the favourite servants of their masters, sharing their interests and sentiments, both secular and religious.

Indeed, it is the slaves who served as domestics and as personal or family servants that the early Christians had in mind in the few cases that they turned their attention to bondage and servitude. Thus, an early Christian guide advised Christians not to command their slaves or handmaids who shared the same hope in God as they in bitterness, lest they cease fearing the God who is over them both (*Didache* 4; *Barnabas* 19).

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Domestics of Christian masters apart, there is one further category of slaves that makes a clear appearance in the relevant literature: Those who belonged to the imperial household, the so-called *familia Caesaris*.

All emperors employed some of their slaves and freedmen in the administration and management of both their private and imperial affairs. Such slaves and freedmen occasionally exercised great power and could move frequently and freely around the empire. They were appointed to various tasks and were regularly promoted according to their merits, as well as according to the principle of seniority. Some imperial freedmen eventually became notorious for their extreme wealth and power.

When Paul wrote his letter to the Christians of Rome in the mid-50s, their community already included imperial servants (cf. Phil 4:22). Conspicuous among them were some of the servants of the illustrious imperial freedman Narcissus (Rom. 16:11). Such Christians continued to play a prominent role in the church

⁴ Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History* 5.21.1 (translated by Kirshopp Lake). A well-documented case is Phileas, bishop of Thmuis, who had served as a magistrate in Alexandria and died as a martyr very early in the fourth century.

of Rome throughout the next centuries, until the time of Constantine.

The story of one such imperial servant who lived in the early third century is particularly informative. Callistus was a slave of a Christian master, who was himself a freedman of Commodus; hence Callistus also belonged to the imperial *familia*. At some point he was condemned to the mines of Sardinia – not because of his religious beliefs, since Commodus was rather friendly to the Christians. Through the auspices of Marcia, Commodus' concubine, Callistus and his fellow Christians in the mines were set free. The letter of liberation was taken to the governor of Sardinia by an imperial eunuch called Hyacinthus, who was a Christian presbyter. In due course, Callistus, by then a freedman, became bishop of Rome (AD 217-221) and exercised great influence in important Christian issues of practical as well as dogmatic nature throughout the empire. Nevertheless, on the issue of slavery he had nothing to say.⁵

Several other imperial servants who became Christians, some of them of high rank, also make their appearance in Christian documents. It is very difficult to say whether these people were actually slaves or freedmen, but the difference was not great. They were all together a privileged group, and several among them had to a greater or lesser extent access to important positions. The authority exercised by the church of Rome over much of the Christian movement empire-wide may, to a certain degree, have depended upon the influence of the Christian members of the *familia Caesaris*. During the persecutions, imperial slaves and freedmen who happened to be Christians were occasionally among the first to suffer.

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⁵ See Kyrntatas, *The Social Structure*, p. 81.

The early Christians felt that the idea of slavery was meaningful in a different sense as well and that it could be used as a powerful metaphor. While most people had been enslaved to their passions or to sin, the righteous, it was argued, should consider themselves as slaves of Jesus Christ, whom they called their Lord, i.e. their master (Rom. 6:16). This way of thinking could actually go much further.

The fate of slaves depended, to a large extent, upon the wealth and power of their masters. Living in luxurious households could often be advantageous. While the single slave of a very poor person would have to perform all tasks by himself, receiving the very minimum of provisions, the slaves of prosperous owners normally expected good clothing, sufficient nutrition and tolerable dormitory conditions. They were often gradually promoted, reasonably anticipating their full emancipation. Furthermore, by representing a powerful master in his enterprises, his slaves exercised power themselves. Acting as an emperor's envoy, a slave would be respected by most free men, even those in high positions. Accordingly, regarding themselves as the Lord's slaves, Christians felt that they were members of a very privileged group. "Anyone who was called in the Lord while a slave", Paul argued, "is a freedman of the Lord; and in the same way, anyone who was free when called, is a slave of Christ" (1 Cor. 7:22).⁶

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Our story regarding the position of slaves in the early Christian communities, however, does not end here. Although Christian missionaries and church leaders did not address themselves to the vast servile population of the Roman Empire, there is evidence that some slaves understood the Christian message in their own way, disregarding

⁶ My New Testament quotations are from the New Jerusalem Bible.

the more official and conservative admonitions. In fact, such admonitions, repetitively requesting the submission of slaves to their masters, appear to have been prompted by the behaviour of some slaves or perhaps by the ideas and arguments advanced by them.

Problems occasionally arose as soon as some slaves expressed the desire to become Christians. According to Church rules, if their master was a believer, his permission was required before they were admitted; if he was a pagan, they were taught “to please him, so that there would be no scandal”.⁷ Thus, although in effect slaves of pagan masters requesting to be admitted to the Church were rejected, there must have been at least some who did not think that their conversion was impossible. Such ideas could have only occurred to slaves of pagan masters who had at least some limited freedom of movement – as was quite common among some slave tradesmen, artisans or bankers living on their own. Church rulers knew in advance that sooner or later there would be tension among the Christian slaves and their pagan masters, but some such slaves simply did not give up.

Actually, there was frequent tension within Christian households. Some of those slaves who had been allowed by their Christian masters to join the new faith appear to have thought that this would lead to a relaxation of their earthly duties – probably in order to concentrate themselves more seriously upon their religious obligations. They, therefore, exhibited less rather than more respect towards their earthly masters. In the early second century, for example, some female slaves offered their services to the Christian communities of Pontus as deaconesses.⁸ In such cases, they would reasonably expect that less work would be expected from them within the households they served.

A very influential Christian document included in the New Testament advises slaves in the following manner:

All those under the yoke of slavery must have unqualified respect for their masters, so that the name of God and our teaching are not brought into disrepute. Those whose masters are believers are not to respect them less because they are brothers; on the contrary, they should serve them all the better, since those who have the benefit of their services are believers and dear to God... Anyone who teaches anything different and does not keep to the sound teaching which is that of our Lord Jesus Christ, the doctrine which is in accordance with true religion, is proud and has no understanding, but rather a weakness for questioning everything and arguing about words (1 Tim. 6:1-4).

This command appears as an explicit reply to arguments that gave priority to the religious duties of slaves.

Some Christian slaves seem to have gone further and to have conceived even more radical ideas. They were expecting their manumission precisely because they had become Christians. Indeed, slaves in the Roman world were occasionally given the opportunity to buy their freedom by saving throughout their lives the earnings they were allowed to keep for themselves. In some cases, they were also assisted by benevolent friends or through loans and collections from friends. Some clearly felt that they should be granted the money required from the funds of their Christian communities.

Ignatius, the early second-century bishop of Antioch, addressed the issue directly:

You must not be overbearing in your manner to slaves (he advised his

⁷ Hippolytus, *Apostolic Tradition* 16.5.

⁸ Pliny the Younger, *Letters* 10.96

colleague of Smyrna) whether man or woman; but on the other hand, never let them get above themselves. It should be their aim to be better slaves for the glory of God; so that they may earn a richer freedom at [the Lord's] hands. And they are not to set their hearts on gaining their liberty at the church's expense, for then they only become slaves to their own longings.⁹

Further tension was caused by the desire of some slaves to join the clergy. And since a slave-priest was obviously unthinkable, they regarded their prospective ordination as a *de facto* emancipation. But church rules were quite explicit on the matter. A slave was admitted to the priesthood only with his master's consent and only if he was formally manumitted in advance.¹⁰ Slaves who desired to become monks were treated in a similar manner.

Even more noteworthy is the case of some few Christian slaves who chose to become martyrs. From the mid-second-century *Martyrdom of Justin* we learn that a Christian slave of the emperor (i.e. a member of the imperial *familia*) called Evelpistos was eventually "scourged and beheaded". At his interrogation he replied to the prefect who was acting as a judge: "Once Caesar's slave, I am now a slave of Christ, winning freedom by his favour." This reply clearly demonstrates that, by becoming a Christian, the slave felt that he had no further obligations to his human master when it came to choosing between his earthly and his religious duties. He was actually envisaging freedom through an honourable death.¹¹

From the late-second-century *Martyrdom of Perpetua* we learn that a group of Christians and catechumens, ultimately executed, also comprised two slaves: Revocatus and Felicitas. Revocatus and two other prisoners were scourged before they were thrown to the beasts. The *Martyrdom* comments that they all "rejoiced at this, that they had obtained a share in the Lord's sufferings". Being pregnant in her eighth month, Felicitas was very distressed that her martyrdom would be postponed because of her pregnancy – since, according to Roman law, pregnant convicts were executed only after delivery. Eventually, the birth pains came upon her and she started suffering a good deal in her labour. "What I am suffering now", she told her jailer, "I suffer by myself. But (at the time of my encounter with the beasts) another will be inside me who will suffer for me, just as I shall be suffering for him."¹²

From the mid-third-century *Martyrdom of Pionius* we learn of a certain Christian slave called Sabina. She had been "bound and cast out on the mountains" by her pagan mistress who was attempting in this way to "change the girl's faith". Sabina was not a typical runaway slave, but, having been cast out, kept avoiding her mistress in order to safeguard her religious convictions. She was fortunate to receive sustenance secretly from the brethren, who made efforts to free her from her bonds and her mistress. But she fell into the hands of persecutors and chose death as an even better alternative.¹³

From the *Martyrs of Palestine*, written by the Church historian Eusebius, we learn that the famous Christian teacher Pamphilus was accompanied in his martyrdom in A.D. 309 by his slave Porphyry. Just 18 years old, Porphyry died after long anguish, having been given, like all the other martyrs, the opportunity to save himself.¹⁴

⁹ Ignatius, *To Polycarp* 4 (translated by Maxwell Staniforth).

¹⁰ *Apostolic Canons* 82 (81).

¹¹ See Herbert Musurillo, *The Acts of the Christian Martyrs*, Oxford, 1972, p. 57.

¹² Musurillo, *The Acts of the Christian Martyrs*, p. 123.

¹³ Musurillo, *The Acts of the Christian Martyrs*, p. 147.

¹⁴ Eusebius, *Martyrs of Palestine* 11.

Another well-known Christian slave was Blandina, whose sufferings are described in the late-second-century martyr-acts of Vienne and Lyons. Her earthly mistress, herself among the martyrs, was in agony “lest, because of (the slave’s) bodily weakness, she would not be able to make a bold confession of faith”. The other members of the group were also afraid that she would succumb. “Yet Blandina was filled with such power that even those who were taking turns to torture her in every way from dawn to dusk were weary and exhausted.” “Blandina was hung on a post and exposed as bait for the wild animals that were let loose on her. She seemed to hang there in the form of a cross, and by her fervent prayer she aroused intense enthusiasm in those who were undergoing their ordeal, for in their torment with their physical eyes they saw in the person of their sister him who was crucified for them, that he might convince all who believed in him that all who suffer for Christ’s glory will have eternal fellowship in the living God.” At long last, “like a noble mother encouraging her children, she sent them before her in triumph to the King; after duplicating in her own body all her children’s sufferings, she hastened to re-join them, rejoicing and glorying in her death as though she had been invited to a bridal banquet instead of being a victim of the beast.”¹⁵

Slaves who chose to suffer, not at the hands of their masters, but at the hands of persecutors, and who sought to serve God directly through their death were treated with respect by the Church Fathers. “Both maidens and women, and men, both young and old, and slaves, and freemen, and every rank, and every age, and each sex”, John Chrysostom argued in one breath, “disrobe for those contests, and in no respect suffer harm, since they have brought a noble purpose to such wrestling”.¹⁶

¹⁵ Musurillo, *The Acts of the Christian Martyrs*, p. 67, 75, 79, 81.

¹⁶ John Chrysostom, *Hom. on S. Ignatius* 1.

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My conclusion is that although most mainstream Christian leaders did not address the issue of slavery and did not make any systematic attempts to convert slaves, some few slaves found their own way to understand the Christian message and indeed the message of Jesus. Slaves in all ages and in all societies have often felt the need of a personal religion that could assist them in their sufferings. The leaders of the great slave rebellions such as Spartacus were actually seen by their fellow rebels as religious leaders as well. But Christian slaves seem to have gone even further. They had found a way of dying that gave better meaning to their servile mode of living. They aspired to liberation through what they understood as salvation.

After Constantine, the Roman world started converting to Christianity at a much greater speed. Many slaves were thus becoming members of the Church as a matter of course. A general emancipation of slaves, let alone the abolition of slavery, was not part of the Christian agenda. And yet, slavery was an issue that could not be totally avoided. At least one influential Christian leader of the fourth century is known to have advanced views regarding slavery that were not at all in line with mainstream Christian thinking.

Eustathius, bishop of Sebaste in Roman Armenia, was said to have encouraged slaves to despise their masters and to run away from their service, and not to serve their own masters with good will and honour. The slaves who were under his influence were also known for wearing their own “strange apparel”. It therefore seems that, while remaining within their communities, they dressed in garments appropriate for an ascetic life and gave priority to what they considered as their religious duties.

Eustathius’ partisans were generally renowned for their austere practices and doctrines.

They made distributions among themselves and regarded the rich “who do not alienate all their wealth as having nothing to hope for from God”. The slaves among them had an additional reason to reject property, as they themselves were among their masters’ possessions.

But such ideas could not be tolerated, especially by a religion that was becoming official and dominant. A Synod assembled at Gangra in Paphlagonia around 355 condemned all such practices and doctrines, giving Christianity its official character.¹⁷ And yet, throughout the Middle Ages, many ideas similar to those condemned were to disturb the world until they eventually led to a general appeal for the abolition of slavery in modern times.

¹⁷ Synod of Gangra, “Synodical Letter” and Canon 3.