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EXCURSUS: SLAVERY AND INTERPRETATION OF THE HOUSEHOLD CODES TODAY

Ephesians 6:5–9 of the household codes is difficult to interpret today, particularly because we are dismayed that Paul does not critique the institution of slavery directly.⁶⁴⁴ Yet to conclude that Paul ignores or tacitly accepts slavery fails to judge his words within their historical and theological context. As we look closely at context in 6:5–9, the astute reader will discern my assessment of the biblical text as more than a set of propositional truths understood merely by common sense. Such a flat reading often leads to proof-texting rather than to grasping the full account of God’s redemptive work in Christ.⁶⁴⁵ Moreover, it can hide preconceived notions about reality, as in the case of the racism that infected the American discussion of slavery. In assuming the Bible has no context but rather floats above all cultures, the reader might ignore or discount their own historical situation.

p 386 WHAT PAUL SAYS

Paul’s language of salvation—redemption, justification, and reconciliation—draws on terms also used to describe a slave’s freedom.

Redemption in its most straightforward sense meant being redeemed from slavery.⁶⁴⁶ The term connects with the concept of ransom and the idea of giving money to ensure release. We observed that Paul sees believers’ redemption through Christ’s blood, which provides forgiveness of sins (Eph 1:7; see also Acts 20:28). Justification for Paul entails a “not guilty” verdict for the believer “in much the same manner as the slave who has received the most perfect of manumissions, the restoration of his natality with the legal fiction that he had been wrongfully enslaved.”⁶⁴⁷ The third term, reconciliation, includes for Paul adoption into God’s family.⁶⁴⁸ Paul stresses this in his declaration that Christ is our peace (Eph 2:14) who made one new humanity from Jew and gentile. The scope of Christ’s work on the cross extends from personal forgiveness to remaking the people of God, done in a single, redemptive motion of death-resurrection-ascension. The insistence on this new humanity jars modern Western sensibilities, so comfortable with individualism.

Reconciliation between brothers and sisters in the faith, regardless of social status or ethnic background, presents a powerful image of a new reality in Christ. This new status comes not because the slave died and so is released from his plight (e.g., through the noble suicide promoted by Seneca).⁶⁴⁹ Instead, all believers are now “slaves” to

⁶⁴⁴ MacDonald, 341, rightly notes that “it is important to acknowledge that the text presents a vision of household relationships, rooted in an ancient setting, that is considered unjust today (and, in the case of slavery, completely immoral).” See also Jennifer A. Glancy, *Slavery in Early Christianity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002).

⁶⁴⁵ For an excellent discussion of hermeneutics and interpretations of key biblical passages that shaped the slavery debate in the United States, see Mark A. Noll, *The Civil War as a Theological Crisis* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006). Noll cites Philip Schaff, a German theologian who perceptively pointed to the underlying issue with American slavery: “*The negro question lies far deeper than the slavery question*” (51, emphasis original).

⁶⁴⁶ On ἀπολύτρωσις see BDAG 117.

⁶⁴⁷ On δικαιώ see BDAG 249 and Orlando Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death: A Comparative Study* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1982), 70.

⁶⁴⁸ On καταλλάσσω see BDAG 521. Paul uses this verb in Rom 5:10 (twice); 1 Cor 7:11; 2 Cor 5:18–20. The cognate noun occurs in Rom 5:11; 11:15; 2 Cor 5:18, 19.

⁶⁴⁹ Seneca, *Epistles* 70.20–23, recalls the bravery exhibited by a German gladiator. This clever man asked that he might use the bathroom before going into the arena. It was the only room men were allowed to go without a guard. Once there the man grabbed a dirty sponge on a stick and shoved it down his throat, choking himself. Another man pretended to be falling asleep while riding in the cart heading to the arena. He let his head slowly sink down to his chest, then further through the bars of the cart, and at last between the spokes of the revolving wagon wheel, thus

God and to righteousness, because Christ Jesus died on their behalf (cf. Rom 6:17–18). As Orlando Patterson explains, Christ “annulled the condition of slavery in which man existed by returning to the original point of enslavement and ... gave his own life so that the sinner might live and be free.”⁶⁵⁰ The church abandons this truth to p 387 its peril. An overemphasis on the justified sinner and the hope of eternal life in the hereafter relegates the present moment to secondary importance. The stress on spiritual change and the disinterest in social realities allows social injustices to be ignored as not relevant to the eternal destiny of the soul. But reconciliation in Christ between all believers reminds us that not only is the individual redeemed by the cross, but the cross creates a new humanity.

In Paul’s time, Christians numbered as a fraction of society and often lived at the margins; therefore, social change would seem beyond reach. Yet the broad testimony of the New Testament indicates that the wider society noticed a difference in the Christian community. When the Thessalonian townspeople cry out against Paul as a dangerous man, the charge is that he envisions a different empire, with a different emperor (Acts 17:5–9). The gospel proclaims that God’s kingdom admits no social hierarchy and that its king is a crucified and risen lord. The early Christians did not tackle the Roman legal system, but they acted counterculturally by treating slaves as full members of their communities.⁶⁵¹ In the letter to the Ephesians, Paul addresses slaves directly as full members of Christ’s body, God’s children who await an inheritance. With this public recognition in front of slave owners, Paul honored slaves as worthy children of God.

Theologically speaking, Paul uses slavery as a metaphor for understanding his own calling and for

explaining the importance of the bodily resurrection. First, Paul insists on describing himself as a slave of Christ.⁶⁵² This continues the biblical tradition of faithful Israelites declaring themselves servants of the one God.

Second, Paul understands humans to be trapped or enslaved by sin, which preys on the weakness of their mind and body (cf. Rom 6:17–20). Stoics taught that the body was to be discarded at the end of life, and thus saw little need to challenge slavery other than to argue for the master’s moderation in controlling slaves. Unlike Stoics, Paul does not wish his mind to be freed from the body, but rather he desires Christ to free him, body and soul, from the clutches of this present evil age. The resurrection of the body cuts to the heart of slavery’s power, for in Christ, the slave’s body is not a commodity but a redeemed treasure of God. Slave masters do not “own” the slave, for his or p 388 her body is eternal, sealed by the Holy Spirit, and beyond the master’s reach. The doctrine of the resurrection impacts the view of the body now, bestowing dignity on it as God’s possession.

Third, Paul speaks not only of himself as Christ’s slave, but he remarks that the body of Christ, the church, is composed of slave and free members, even as they are also made up of Jew and gentile believers. He recounts to the Galatians the tense Jerusalem conference held early in the church’s life (Gal 2:1–10; see also Acts 15). Paul fought against the proposal that gentile men needed to be circumcised to be full members of Christ’s body. He spoke against the movement that encouraged Jewish believers to distance themselves from their fellow gentile believers vis-à-vis kosher laws.⁶⁵³ Paul insists that the “separate but equal” approach inappropriately elevates the

snapping his neck. But what a man should not choose is endurance without honor. Thus Seneca scoffs at Maecenas who desires above all to live through illness or torture, though it incapacitates him. He labels such extreme love of life “effeminate” (*effeminatus*) (*Epistles* 101.13).

⁶⁵⁰ Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death*, 71. Patterson fails to fully appreciate the eschatological aspect of Paul’s theology that focused on the continuing struggle with the flesh during this age, but Patterson rightly laments that the symbolism of the believer as a slave of God supported the institution of slavery (72).

⁶⁵¹ Ulrike Roth, “Paul and Slavery: Economic Perspectives,” in *Paul and Economics*, ed. Raymond Pickett and Thomas R. Blanton IV (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2017), 160, argues that Paul was a co-owner with Philemon of the slave, Onesimus. Her questions are useful, but her conclusions rest on several weak assumptions and are unpersuasive.

⁶⁵² See Rom 1:1; 2 Cor 4:5; Phil 1:1; Titus 1:1. See also the disciples James, Peter, and Jude; Jas 1:1; 2 Pet 1:1; Jude 1.

⁶⁵³ Brad Ronnell Braxton, *No Longer Slaves: Galatians and African American Experience* (Collegeville,

clean/unclean distinction that food laws perpetuate, thereby making gentiles second-class citizens in the kingdom of God. It is against this separateness that Paul reacts, and he concludes that “there is neither Jew nor Greek, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female” (Gal 3:28).⁶⁵⁴ Paul insists that all believers are in Christ, having been baptized and clothed with Christ (3:26–27).

Paul declared that gentiles remained gentiles, but left paganism. Jews remained Jews, but now followed the promised Messiah, Jesus of Nazareth. The unity came, not at the social, cultural, ethnic, or linguistic level, but at the foot of the cross. The unity experienced by the church is not an “either/or” but a “both/and.”⁶⁵⁵ But this does not mean that difference has been eliminated.⁶⁵⁶ Brad Braxton comments that Paul “is not asserting the obliteration of difference, but rather the obliteration of *dominance*.”⁶⁵⁷ Paul spends most of his energy in Galatians on the first pair, Jew and gentile, but his interpretive principle holds for the second and third pairs. Those groupings are key in the Ephesians household codes. Paul eliminates the power of the superordinate—husband and (male or female) slave master—and elevates the importance and worth of the subordinate. By so doing, he effectively cuts the bottom out of the institutions of patriarchy and slavery.

p 389 WHAT PAUL DOES NOT SAY

Some interpreters state that Paul never addresses the problem of evil social structures, for it is the transformation of individuals that will make a new society.⁶⁵⁸ But Paul knew Israel’s history and the call of God toward social action and responsibility.

MN: Liturgical Press, 2002), 75, observes: “The food laws gave tangible, ritual, and regular expression to the principle that Jews were to maintain their separateness from Gentiles.”

⁶⁵⁴ In the third pair “male and female,” the language echoes Gen 1:27 LXX.

⁶⁵⁵ Braxton, *No Longer Slaves*, 69, writes: “Many African Americans would share Paul’s understanding of unity, namely that unity is not an antithesis (either/or) but rather a dialectic (both/and).”

⁶⁵⁶ Bock, *Ephesians*, 80–81, explains, “There is no segregation in Christ, even in the midst of recognizing a distinction in where each group came from before being united, for reconciliation

Even as God rescued the Israelites from slavery in Egypt, so too they were to show justice to strangers and aliens in their midst (Deut 15:15; 24:17–22). To argue that Christianity is about individuals is to ignore the social capital that so many Christians have today. Micah’s words about justice should ring loudly in wealthy churches in the West (Mic 6:6–8).

In analyzing this section of the household codes, it might be tempting to talk about the *roles* that slaves played in society and to conclude that Paul affirms the duties performed by both slaves and owners. Some suggest that Paul spoke of slaves and masters as equal before Christ, but as having different roles and responsibilities and specific lines of authority.⁶⁵⁹ Speaking of slaves as performing certain roles, however, masks the social reality that slaves were the property of another human.⁶⁶⁰ The distinction was not at the level of roles—most jobs that slaves did were also done by free men and women. And it was not at the level of responsibilities, as though owners earned their place by greater intellect or other merit. The owner *dominated* the slave. The distinction was about social worth, even ontological worth. Slaves were human tools, Aristotle declared. The Roman legal system gave them almost no rights; generally speaking, the owner could kill his or her slave with impunity, and slaves were routinely beaten. This treatment was consistent with the belief that slaves were of lesser value. The institution of slavery included at its core the humiliation of the slave, denying the dignity of any past, present, or future.

Some argue that because he never asks the owner to submit to her slave, or the slave to command his master, that Paul is addressing lines

is only clear when the former estrangement is appreciated.”

⁶⁵⁷ Braxton, *No Longer Slaves*, 94 (emphasis original).

⁶⁵⁸ Hoehner, 804: “Christianity’s emphasis has always been on the transformation of individuals who will in turn influence society, not the transformation of society which will then transform individuals (1 Cor 1:18–2:16).”

⁶⁵⁹ Hoehner, 804.

⁶⁶⁰ Bock, *Ephesians*, 192, rightly cautions that the analogy between a slave and today’s employee is limited to the attitude with which believers should work. “The employee chooses by contract to give his or her labour and has options to continue that service or not under that contract. That difference is significant.”

of authority.⁶⁶¹ By zeroing in on the issue of authority, commentators implicitly connect the ancient system of slavery, including the slaves' roles and the owners' responsibilities, with a hierarchical position about the social structure of marriage today and its discussion about the roles of husbands and wives. This hermeneutical p 390 move conceals the foundational beliefs that supported slavery and patriarchy, namely, the convictions that slaves were ontologically less human and women were less rational (human) than men. Without these fundamental beliefs, the systems of patriarchy and slavery would not have survived.⁶⁶²

Paul uses the social reality of slavery to make a theological point about believers being God's sons (children) who inherit. He states what was common knowledge, specifically, that a slave does not inherit, and contrasts this with sons and daughters who receive an inheritance at the proper time (Gal 4:1–7). As Sarah Ruden explains: "One of the greatest cruelties of slavery was that, having no legal family, a slave was boxed off in time, without a real tomb or recognized descendants or anything else to ensure he was remembered."⁶⁶³ The social construct favored those in power and allowed those with money and influence to solidify their power.

The biblical case against slavery is strong, even in Ephesians. Paul undermined the basis of slavery, as well as sought immediate protection for slaves within the church.⁶⁶⁴ He did so primarily by giving

the slave their personhood and a family and an inheritance, as due them through the gospel of Jesus Christ. The reader requires an agile interpretative method that does not simply rely on common sense, but allows the exposure of the reader's blind spots, such as ethnic superiority and racism. It is true that the New Testament world did not know the white/black racism of the United States' experience. However, they share a deeper commonality with many cultures today, namely, the belief that one sort of person is superior to another. The ancient slave was inferior to the free person; in the United States, the black slave was inferior to the white owner.⁶⁶⁵ The damage done to the slaves by this way p 391 of thinking is obvious; what is less apparent is the damage such superiority-minded ideology inflicts on the owners.⁶⁶⁶ If pride is the greatest sin, then racist or ethnic prejudice could be the most dangerous human invention.

EXCURSUS: SLAVERY IN THE ANCIENT WORLD

The institution of slavery was widespread in the ancient world, with slaves making up about 10 percent of the population of the first-century Roman Empire. The number rises to about 30 percent, one in three persons, in the city of Rome.⁶⁶⁷ The institution of slavery was woven into the fabric of ancient society, crucial for the political, economic, familial, and social hierarchy that framed the cultural landscape. Slavery was a legal category supported by codes and courts. It was a key

⁶⁶¹ Hoehner, 804.

⁶⁶² Schüssler Fiorenza, 106, rightly argues that simply observing the admonition to slave masters does not fully address the exegetical concerns. However, she goes further than I am willing to go in her call to reject the passage altogether: "Caution! Dangerous to your health and survival!"

⁶⁶³ Ruden, *Paul among the People*, 161.

⁶⁶⁴ John M. G. Barclay, "Paul, Philemon, and the Dilemma of Christian Slave-Ownership," *NTS* 37 (1991): 161–86, highlights the tension present in Paul, with an insistence on kinship language that promoted brotherhood and the reality of the institution of slavery. Barclay argues that a wealthy church member such as Philemon or Gaius (Rom 16:23) could not have hosted the church or maintained their social status without slave labor.

⁶⁶⁵ In 1854, the slave owner George Fitzhugh remarked: "Some men are born with saddles on their backs, and others booted and spurred to ride them, and the riding does them good"; cited in Braxton, *No Longer Slaves*, 16, from G. E. M. De Ste. Croix, *The Class Struggle in the Ancient Greek World: From the Archaic Age to the Arab Conquest* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1981), 417.

⁶⁶⁶ Braxton, *No Longer Slaves*, 16, writes: "The slaves' humanity was real. Yet a ruling class discourse had prevented many white Americans from seeing this reality. The inability to perceive reality accurately ... is a form of oppression."

⁶⁶⁷ Sandra R. Joshel, *Slavery in the Roman World*, Cambridge Introduction to Roman Civilization (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 8.

component of the economic system as free men and women, freed persons, and slaves worked alongside each other in most jobs. Yet Paul includes slavery within the context of the household, because the basis of economic life was the home, not the factory or office. Much of the production of goods used by humans prior to the industrial revolution were made at home, thus slave labor was integral to household management. Perhaps most importantly, slaves formed the foundation, the basement, of the social hierarchy on which was built the imperial skyscraper. The Greco-Roman world esteemed honor above all else, and the slave was without social capital, even if he or she had material wealth. Orlando Patterson coined the apt phrase “social death” to describe the slave’s life.⁶⁶⁸ The graphic event of the slave on the block, stripped and examined as one would a horse for defects, bought and sold, threatened and mistreated, was as common as air.⁶⁶⁹

p 392 ARISTOTLE’S VIEW OF SLAVERY

Aristotle lived in a slave-based economy in fifth-century BCE Athens. Out of the total population of 250,000 in the city and the surrounding lands (Attica), approximately 80,000–100,000 were slaves, many who were non-Greeks.⁶⁷⁰ This high percentage of slaves makes the ancient Greek

society one of the few societies based economically on slavery; others include Rome and central Italy in antiquity, and Brazil, the Caribbean, and the American South in modern times.

Aristotle develops his theory about the political nature of the city-state in part by drawing parallels with the household. Three subordinate/superordinate pairs formed the household unit, including wife/husband, child/parent (father), and slave/owner. Aristotle advocates the despotic rule by the master over the slave; this is in contrast to the royal rule of the father over the son as noted above in the discussion of parents and children (Eph 6:1–4). The despot advanced his own interests, while the king or father ruled benevolently, caring for the subject or son.⁶⁷¹ One can say that the master ruled by means of the whip, while a father controlled without resorting to the whip.⁶⁷² The slave bore scars, the child received instruction, a dichotomy noted above. In discussing his view of male and female, Aristotle posited an inferiority of the female body, which prevented the full realization of her rational capacity.⁶⁷³ Aristotle holds that the free male has the capacity to appreciate supreme good, while the female and the slave enjoy lesser goods, based on their lesser physical capacities.⁶⁷⁴ Therefore, as the mind/soul

⁶⁶⁸ Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death*, 38. Patterson explains that laws governing Roman slavery addressed the critical issue, namely, “that all human beings can be the object of property and that, strictly speaking, property refers to a set of relationships between persons” (31). Sandra R. Joshel, “Slavery and Roman Literary Culture,” in *The Cambridge World History of Slavery*, vol. 1: *The Ancient Mediterranean World*, ed. Keith Bradley and Paul Cartledge (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 234, adds that slaves experienced “the loss of ethnicity, family, membership in the community, honour and integrity.”

⁶⁶⁹ Seneca, *Epistles* 80.9.

⁶⁷⁰ The approximations are from Paul Anthony Cartledge, “Slavery,” *The Oxford Classical Dictionary*, 3rd ed., ed. Simon Hornblower and Antony Spawforth (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 1415.

⁶⁷¹ Aristotle, *Politics* 1278b32–37; *Nicomachean Ethics* 8.10.1160b29–31.

⁶⁷² Henrik Mouritsen, *The Freedman in the Roman World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 26–28.

⁶⁷³ Aristotle declared that women have fewer teeth than men (*History of Animals* 2.3.501b19–21) and smaller brains (*Parts of Animals* 2.7.653a28–29); however, he saw the brain as regulating body temperature and the heart as the seat of the intellect. And women generally ate diets deficient in vitamins C and D, which we know today often lead to dental hygiene problems, especially in pregnant and lactating women. He might have innocently concluded female bodily inferiority based on neutral observation, yet its use in concluding overall female inferiority remains.

⁶⁷⁴ Aristotle talks of female as the deformation or deviation of the perfect, that is, male. Sarah Borden Sharkey, *An Aristotelian Feminism* (Switzerland: Springer, 2016), 13n42, reminds us that Aristotle “does not argue ... that women and ‘natural slaves’ are equally able as free males to flourish as human beings, but nonetheless, still ought to be subordinated.”

rules the body, so too the master rightly rules the slave.

p 393 Aristotle presents a moral foundation for the institution of slavery as he sees it in his Athenian context.⁶⁷⁵ Aristotle argues against claims that slavery was unjust and created by humankind. Instead, he theorizes that nature created some peoples to be slaves and others to be masters.⁶⁷⁶ Because nature is just and beneficent, both the slave and the owner benefit from the institution of slavery. The theory of the “natural slave” grew from his thoughts on the contrast between soul and body, and so between reason and emotion.⁶⁷⁷

Aristotle’s theory also grew from his observations that barbarians (non-Greek speakers) had no natural rulers and thus were all slaves in that sense.⁶⁷⁸ Aristotle begins with the idea that the free male in his natural state is good, with the elite free male as the highest good. The elite free male depends on ample leisure time to pursue the good and thus on slave labor so that the city runs well. Aristotle views the non-Greek, with their perceived lack of reason and hierarchical social structure, as the “natural” slave.⁶⁷⁹ Said another way, Aristotle believes the ethnic Greek was a natural master, and it seems painfully obvious today that his conclusions were built on some measure of cultural bias. Aristotle defends his position through describing the Greek language as providing the

vehicle for exploring reason and other languages as mere babble.⁶⁸⁰ Nicholas Smith writes: “Hence, when the barbarian/natural slave is captured and enslaved, he finally has the opportunity to come into contact with the proper use of *logos*—reasoned arguments designed to identify right from wrong.”⁶⁸¹

p 394 PHILO OF ALEXANDRIA’S VIEW OF SLAVERY

The first-century Jewish philosopher and exegete Philo of Alexandria focuses on slavery and the Torah.⁶⁸² Philo lived at the turn of the ages, when the Roman Republic became imperial Rome and when Stoicism held pride of place in the Roman worldview. While these political and philosophical sea changes certainly affected him, Philo’s approach to slavery was rooted in his reading of the Decalogue. Philo maintains that slaves and owners were of the same nature, even as they have different social status, thus no person is by nature a slave.⁶⁸³ Philo picks up the idea of freedom in his discussion of freeing Israelite slaves in the seventh year (Deut 15:12–18). As we saw with Aristotle, so too Philo is against enslaving a fellow countryman or countrywoman. Philo declares the slave is also a human; the master has the opportunity to do a great deed by freeing the slave in the seventh year, as freedom is a great blessing. Philo asks the owner to

⁶⁷⁵ In his day, the Greek city-states were being brought under the single rule of Philip of Macedon, whose son, Alexander the Great, would go on to conquer much of the East. Aristotle was Alexander’s teacher.

⁶⁷⁶ Aristotle, *Politics* 1252a30–34.

⁶⁷⁷ Peter Garnsey, *Ideas of Slavery from Aristotle to Augustine* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 108–27, discusses the complexity of Aristotle’s thought on “natural slave” in his *Ethics* and *Politics*. Nicholas D. Smith, “Aristotle’s Theory of Natural Slavery,” in *Phoenix* 37 (1983): 109–13, recounts the numerous contradictions and discrepancies within Aristotle’s thought on the natural slave who lacks reason. This theory of the natural slave shaped discussion through the ages, including debates in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries regarding American slavery.

⁶⁷⁸ Aristotle, *Politics* 1252b5–9.

⁶⁷⁹ Aristotle, *Politics* 1255a28. Garnsey, *Ideas of Slavery from Aristotle to Augustine*, 126, observes that “this was a crucial decision, for otherwise

the category of natural slaves might be thought of as entirely academic.” See also Benjamin Isaac, *The Invention of Racism in Classical Antiquity* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004), 178, who observes: “For Aristotle, however, it is clear that slaves by nature are non-Greeks and the masters by nature Greeks, which means that the division between superior and inferior men is essentially one based on ethnic identity.”

⁶⁸⁰ Herodotus, *Histories* 2.158.2 explains that *barbaros* likely reflects etymologically the ba-ba-ba sound of a foreign tongue.

⁶⁸¹ Smith, “Aristotle’s Theory of Natural Slavery,” 119–20. Cohick, *Women in the World of the Earliest Christians*, 229–30, adds that wet nurses are chosen based in part on whether they speak Greek well (Soranus, *Gynecology* 2.19).

⁶⁸² For a general discussion of Jews and slavery, see Catherine Hezser, *Jewish Slavery in Antiquity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005).

⁶⁸³ Philo, *On the Special Laws* 2.69; 3.137.

go further by giving gifts to freed slaves, so that they do not fall back into slavery based on poverty.⁶⁸⁴ Therefore, slaves must be treated justly based on divine law.⁶⁸⁵ The master who violently oppresses his slaves will not stop at this foul deed, but pursue even greater tyrannical exploits as he attacks other cities and nations to satisfy his insatiable lust for power. Moreover, the owner who beats his slave to death will not escape justice, for the judge will not accept the rationale that the master only sought to correct, not kill, with his physical blows. Philo concludes that a slave accused of wrongdoing that warrants death should be judged by a court, not the master. Philo's conclusion greatly mitigates the owner's authority.

Philo draws on the teachings about the Sabbath for his understanding of slaves and slavery. This holy day of rest is for contemplation of God's law, and both masters and slaves abstain from work. For slaves, it is a day of freedom, and for the masters, a day to reacquaint themselves cheerfully with doing some things themselves.⁶⁸⁶ Philo speaks of the master "submitting" on Sabbath to doing the tasks typically done by his household slaves. It is not that the master submits to the slave, but rather to the tasks; nevertheless, the theme of reciprocity that we see in Ephesians is represented here. Philo locates such principle in the law, whereas Paul locates it in Christ and his body, the church.

p 395 SENECA'S VIEW OF SLAVERY

Seneca, the Stoic philosopher and teacher of Emperor Nero, discusses slavery on several occasions. He follows the Stoic concern for the slave owner's morality, endangered through the misuse of the master's absolute power over his or her slave. Seneca cares most about the owner's self-

control or self-mastery. Slavery served as a metaphor for the human mind or rational self that was trapped by the body and its fleshly passions. He declares that "it is a mistake to think that slavery penetrates the entire man," since "the better part of him is exempt ... bodies can be assigned to masters ... but the mind ... is its own master [*sui iuris*] ... that inner part can never come into anyone's possession."⁶⁸⁷

Yet slavery was not merely a metaphor for Seneca, as he owned many slaves. He rejects the idea of "natural slave" and argues that all humans come from the same stock. But he never sought to reform the system, only to encourage owners to act mercifully toward slaves.⁶⁸⁸ In a personal example, he recalls that a failure of his household slaves to prepare for his visit provided him the opportunity to practice patience and temper his hunger. He writes to his friend, Lucilius, that slaves are our humble friends, who could have a free soul.⁶⁸⁹ He rejects the maxim "you have as many enemies as you have slaves," stating: "We do not acquire them as enemies; we make them so."⁶⁹⁰ Instead, he asks that owners treat their inferiors as they would wish their superiors to treat them.⁶⁹¹ He also suggests that his friend train his slaves, for "good material [a slave] often remains unused without a craftsman [the owner]; try and you will learn from your experience."⁶⁹² Seneca's letter exposes the reality of slavery, which, coupled with the metaphor of the enslaved mind, created a vortex of anxiety within Seneca. He recognizes that the very domination required for maintaining slaves' obedience could at any moment be used against a freeborn man.⁶⁹³ In an ironic twist of fate, p 396 his own slaves likely helped him commit suicide to prevent Nero from imposing a humiliating death.

⁶⁸⁴ Philo, *On the Special Laws* 2.85.

⁶⁸⁵ Philo, *On the Special Laws* 3.137–43.

⁶⁸⁶ Philo, *On the Special Laws* 2.66–67.

⁶⁸⁷ Seneca, *On Benefits* 3.20.1–2. See Peter Stacey, "Senecan Political Thought from the Middle Ages to Early Modernity," in *The Cambridge Companion to Seneca*, ed. Shadi Bartsch and Alessandro Schiesaro (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 291.

⁶⁸⁸ Seneca, *Epistles* 123.1–4. Mouritsen, *Freedman in the Roman World*, 13, summarizes: "The slave enjoyed no legal protection of his or her person, no right to own property, no formal marriage, and no authority over his own children."

⁶⁸⁹ Seneca, *Epistles* 47.17.

⁶⁹⁰ Seneca, *Epistles* 47.5.

⁶⁹¹ Seneca, *Epistles* 47.11.

⁶⁹² Seneca, *Epistles* 47.16.

⁶⁹³ Thomas Habinek, "Imago suae vitae: Seneca's Life and Career," in *Brill's Companion to Seneca: Philosopher and Dramatist*, ed. Andreas Heil and Gregor Damschen with Mario Waida (Leiden: Brill, 2014), 22, perceptively notes that "for Seneca, as for many Roman writers, the experience of dominating intensifies the fear of being dominated."

ROMAN IMPERIAL VIEWS ON SLAVERY

As in Greek thought, so too Romans did not question the existence and utility of slavery. Romans tended not to enslave another Roman, even as Greeks tried not to enslave a fellow Greek. Owning slaves was a status symbol; thus we see freedmen and freedwomen owning slaves. Similar to Aristotle's contention that conquered slaves might benefit from their Greek master, the Roman orator Cicero suggests that Rome's conquest of the provinces is beneficial because Rome protects them even as it also subjugates them.⁶⁹⁴

Romans rejected the idea that some groups were by nature slaves. They admitted that it was Fortune or plain bad luck that caused most to be enslaved.⁶⁹⁵ Nevertheless, Cicero smeared the Jews and Syrians as "peoples born to be slaves."⁶⁹⁶ Typically, slaves were captives in war, or taken by pirates or brigands, and not a few were homeborn (Latin *vernae*). Yet slaves were seen as inferior, made so by the very institution to which Fate consigned them. The slave was characterized as cowardly, weak, lazy, conniving, cruel, and lacking in judgment and wisdom. Therefore, the slave must be beaten in order to work hard and speak truthfully. Such circular logic reached a hideous pinnacle in the courts as slaves were uniformly tortured before they gave testimony.⁶⁹⁷

A further word about the reality of slavery must not be swept under the rug. An ancient saying proclaimed the social reality: "Losing one's virtue is a crime in the freeborn, a necessity in a slave, and duty for the freedman."⁶⁹⁸ The male and female slave's body was owned, including the sexual use of that body by the male family members and by anyone to whom the owner made the slave available. It is likely that female owners also used

p 397 their slaves for sex, but social conventions would frown on a free woman's having sexual relations with anyone but her husband. Christian slaves, including boys and girls from the age of seven, would be sexually used by their nonbelieving owners (and by their Christian owners, against church teaching). These same Christian slaves attended church gatherings. Paul says nothing here in Ephesians about this treatment,⁶⁹⁹ which likely means that he does not hold the slave guilty of sexual misconduct. The slave is in the same position as the rape victim, noted in Deuteronomy, who cries out in the field for help, but no one is there to aid her (Deut 22:25–29).⁷⁰⁰ Earlier in Ephesians, he speaks against sexual immorality and stresses in the strongest possible terms that such a person will not inherit the kingdom of Christ and of God (Eph 5:5).

MANUMISSION

To better understand the complicated, seemingly contradictory view that slaves were both tools of the owner and also human beings, we turn to the practice of manumission. Romans took the process seriously, for it was both practically necessary and theoretically paradoxical. On the practical side, the promise of freedom motivated slaves to work all the harder. Yet theoretically, the slave was inferior to the free person, and this hierarchical relationship was staunchly maintained. How then could a slave become free? The answer is twofold. First, the legal process was well defined and involved three possible options. Second, the social reality was that slaves were never "free" but rather joined the ranks of the "freed." We will examine both more closely.

Underpinning the legal process of manumission was the legal fiction that the slave had been wrongfully enslaved and that the legal change

natural stranger to the truth—which therefore had to be extracted through the application of physical force."

⁶⁹⁸ Mouritsen, *Freedman in the Roman World*, 27, citing Seneca the Elder's quotation by Haterius.

⁶⁹⁹ Glancy, *Slavery in Early Christianity*, 60, draws the opposite conclusion in her analysis of 1 Thessalonians, suggesting that Paul allows sexual access to slaves.

⁷⁰⁰ Ruden, *Paul among the People*, 41, notes that Jewish families would not accept sexual relations with slaves, seeing such actions as abuse.

⁶⁹⁴ Isaac, *Invention of Racism*, 184. See Cicero, *On Duty* 2.26.

⁶⁹⁵ Cicero, *Stoic Paradoxes* 5.33–34. See also Seneca, *On Benefits* 3.28.1, which concludes that all humans come from the same source. See also *Epistles* 31.11.

⁶⁹⁶ Cicero, *On the Consular Provinces* 5.10; see Hezser, *Jewish Slavery in Antiquity*, 61; Mouritsen, *Freedman in the Roman World*, 24–25.

⁶⁹⁷ Mouritsen, *Freedman in the Roman World*, 28, explains: "The use of torture was therefore rooted in the social construction of the slave as a

was merely doing justice. One process involved a mock trial wherein an owner and their slave stood before a Roman magistrate and a Roman citizen. The citizen touched the slave with a rod, spoke words of emancipation, and the magistrate validated the legal change.⁷⁰¹ A second possible process of manumission was less involved, as the owner merely included the slave's name on p 398 the census record. A third option had the owner testify that their slave shall be free. After any of these processes, the slave was one no longer in the eyes of the law.

The reality is, however, that the slave was not entirely free, if by "free" we refer to a person with self-determination. Instead, the slave joined the ranks of the "freed." This category likened the former slave to a client of the former owner, now viewed as a patron. The former slave became a part of the owner's family circle, but still an outsider. This new social configuration gave the former slave a home, relations of a sort, protection, and community. Freedmen or freedwomen served their patron and were legally obligated to share income from a business. Furthermore, the previous owner would not be charged with committing adultery with his former slave, now a freedwoman.

Moreover, the stain of slavery remained, and the former slave was forever deemed inferior. Why did the stain of slavery remain? It was not because the slave's skin color marked him or her as inferior. Rather the Romans believed that the bodily humiliation, endemic to a slave's existence, forever rendered them servile in mind and character. The scars from whippings, beatings, and shackles marked the body and the mind as subservient. Free people were at risk of being contaminated by a freed person's low morality and lack of virtue. For example, Emperor Augustus formed a military unit of freedmen to increase the size of his army without infecting the regular army.⁷⁰² Again, a senator

divorced his wife upon discovering that she spoke to a freedwoman in public.⁷⁰³

Interestingly, Paul refers to this group only once, in 1 Cor 7:22.⁷⁰⁴ The context has been interpreted to refer to slave's using their own money to buy their freedom. This "savings" was known as *peculium*, which was technically under the control of the owner. The same term described a son's money controlled by his paterfamilias. A few remarks from ancient authors lead many to believe that slaves regularly earned their freedom, but recently that assessment has been challenged. Mouritsen suggests that the slave's savings were a symbol of status, which the slave carried as they became freedmen and freedwomen. This explanation fits well with Paul's charge to the Corinthian believers not to change their social status as pertains to marriage, or Jew/gentile, or slavery. For in all cases, it is not society that pronounces a person's worth, but God in Christ, and God has declared each believer a member of Christ's body and a coheir with Christ. Yet Paul is mindful of the slave's lot and p 399 so encourages them to embrace manumission if given. These words were read in the church that included owners; it is entirely possible that Paul implicitly and rhetorically throws down the gauntlet to owners that they manumit their believing slaves.⁷⁰⁵

SLAVERY IN ANCIENT AND MODERN TIMES

The paradox of slavery is that it flourishes where one might least expect it. In classical Greece, the cradle of democracy, we find Aristotle defending the institution as natural and therefore just (in certain circumstances). In the United States, we find a rapid growth of capitalism and modern democratic institutions and proclamation of individual rights alongside the enslavement of

⁷⁰¹ Mouritsen, *Freedman in the Roman World*, 11, describes this process known in Latin as *manumissio vendicta*. The citizen would pronounce the free status of the slave and touch them with a rod and state: "Hunc ego hominem liberum esse aio ex iure Quiritium." This phrase can be translated: "I declare this man to be free by right of the Quirites," with "Quirite" indicating "Roman citizen."

⁷⁰² Suetonius, *Augustus* 74. Also noted is Augustus's decision not to meet with freedmen.

⁷⁰³ Valerius Maximus, *Memorable Deeds and Sayings* 6.3.11; see Mouritsen, *Freedman in the Roman World*, 21.

⁷⁰⁴ Paul uses the term ἀπελεύθερος.

⁷⁰⁵ Scot McKnight, *Philemon*, NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2017), 11, concludes differently, namely, that "Paul did not so much turn a blind eye to the morality of slavery as he did not realize slavery was an issue of morality. He was blind to the immorality of slavery as an institution."

Africans as means of production and as the political and social identification of white and black races. In both imperial Rome and colonial America, the owner's rights to the slave's labor and obedience was of primary importance. As noted above, Seneca worried that the owner's pursuit of virtue might be derailed by giving into passionate rage and violence against his or her slave, because the owner had absolute power. Yet such qualms did not induce Seneca to suggest eliminating slavery, for ultimately the elite life he and other philosophers desired could be achieved only (so it seemed to him) by slave labor. So too in the American South, the slave obeyed based on the owner's absolute authority.

Those who compare the slavery of the American South with that of ancient Rome are quick to point out that slaves in the ancient world could gain their freedom, while the American slave had no such opportunity. This observation, while true in some sense, is misleading in several ways. First, few agricultural or mining slaves in the ancient world were released; most died on the job, a job similar to the hard labor of American slaves. Second, few female slaves received freedom, unless it was to marry their owner or their owner's son. Third, manumitted slaves joined the ranks of freedmen and freedwomen, not of "free" persons. This middle category included obligations toward the owner's family, including a percentage of any wages or income, as noted above. Most importantly, the stain and shame of slavery remained. In sum, slavery in the ancient world was not a more civilized, beneficent, or necessary societal institution than that which existed in the American South.

p 400 Perhaps the most salient difference between the two slavery institutions is the lack of racism in the ancient system.⁷⁰⁶ In the ancient world, the dark-skinned person, identified as an Ethiopian, was not considered inferior based on physical appearance. Instead, the Greco-Roman slave was constructed socially as an inferior based on ethnic background (barbarian) or on the social degradation done by the enslavement itself. So too within early European history, the person's skin color was immaterial to their place as servant, and white and black alike held this position. Yet as

"Christianity" came to mean "civilized" in some circles, the "heathen savage" in Africa seemed barbarous, and so racism developed within the church supported by "natural" reasoning.⁷⁰⁷

⁷⁰⁶ Frank M. Snowden Jr., *Blacks in Antiquity: Ethiopians in the Greco-Roman Experience* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1970), 176.

⁷⁰⁷ Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death*, 7.