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Jesus and Slavery

What was it like to be a slave in Galilee?
A slave might handle large sums of money for an owner, yet that owner could, at will, torture the slave. A slave might function as the trusted agent of a slaveholder, but his low status nonetheless left him vulnerable to physical abuse by those he encountered. Some slaves were overseers, exerting physical control over lower-ranking slaves. Lower-ranking slaves endured the violence not only of slaveholders but also of slave overseers. Food for slaves was often doled out as rations, or else slaves waited until slaveholders finished eating before consuming the leftovers. Slaves labored in agriculture. Slaves, male and female, labored in domestic settings. Some slaves enjoyed their owners' trust. Perhaps all slaves lived in fear.

These glimpses of slave life are taken from the parables attributed to Jesus of Nazareth. The casual frequency of Jesus' reliance on slave imagery is a clue that we should pay careful attention to the slaves and slaveholders who populated Jesus' world.

Can we imagine Jesus in the midst of a slaveholding world? It is important to do so, because we may otherwise overlook or misinterpret the slaves who populate his parables. In his parables, Jesus relied on everyday images. His parables featured fishermen. They featured

women cleaning house. They featured sheep and shepherds, leaven and bread baking. They also featured, prominently and repeatedly, slaves and slaveholders.

Despite the familiarity of the parables, the slaves who populate the parables seem somehow unfamiliar. The King James Bible typically translates the Greek word *doulos* as "servant" rather than "slave." For many Christians the phrase "Well done, good and faithful servant" resonates in a way that the phrase "Well done, good and faithful slave" does not. The Greek is not ambiguous, however. In a wide range of sayings, Jesus refers to *douloi*, slaves.

Christians today struggle to make sense of the ways Jesus spoke about slaves and masters. Where's the good news? In assessing the place of slave imagery in Jesus' sayings, we need to account both for the battered slaves in his parables and for his mandate to his followers to become "slaves of all."

Slavery in Galilee and Judea

Spartacus would not have found in Palestine the concentration of slaves he found in Italy in the first century B.C.E.—a concentration sufficient to muster an army. Nonetheless, slavery existed in Galilee and Judea. Small landholders owned a few slaves. Some householders owned a few slaves for domestic labor, gardening, marketing, and service as financial agents. Slaveholders incurred no penalties for sexual relations with their slaves, nor did slaves enjoy protection from unwanted sexual advances by their owners.

The Herodian household owned a vast number of slaves. Slaves and freedpersons associated with the Herodian household would have mingled with the free peasants of Galilee. Military officials and other

occupying authorities brought slaves with them to Palestine. In Palestine occupying forces continued to buy and sell slaves.

The forms of slavery familiar to Jesus were more widely familiar throughout the eastern reaches of the Roman Empire. This may surprise those familiar with biblical law. The Torah stipulates that Israelites could not own fellow Israelites as chattel slaves. Rather, an Israelite could only hold a fellow Israelite as a bondsman or bondswoman for six years, with an expectation of freedom in the seventh year (cf. Exod. 21:1-11; Deut. 15:12-18; and Lev. 25:35-46). Even in the sixth century B.C.E., however, Jeremiah castigated the people of Jerusalem for ignoring this commandment (Jer. 34:8-16). We have no evidence from the Hellenistic or Roman periods to suggest that biblical slave law governed Palestinian practices.[1] Even if some pious Jews freed Jewish bondsmen and bondswomen in the seventh year of servitude, that practice would not have benefited Gentile slaves owned by Jews, nor would it have benefited Gentile or Jewish slaves owned by Gentiles in Palestine.

To be a slave in the Greco-Roman world was a harsh fate, regardless of whether the slaveholder was Gentile or Jew. Gentile, Jewish, and Christian moralists were critical of cruel slaveholders, but slaveholders suffered no penalties for cruel actions. Furthermore, even moralists approved of regular disciplinary violence against slaves. Sometime in the second century B.C.E., the Jewish sage Ben Sira wrote these words:

> Fodder and a stick and burdens for a donkey; bread and discipline and work for a slave. Set your slave to work, and you will find rest; leave his hands idle, and he will seek liberty. Yoke and thong will bow the neck, and for a wicked slave there are racks and tortures.

> Put him to work, in order that he may not be idle, for idleness teaches much evil. Set him to work, as is fitting for him, and if he does not obey, make his fetters heavy. Do not be overbearing toward anyone, and do nothing unjust. If you have but one slave, treat him like yourself, because you have bought him with blood. If you have but one slave, treat him like a brother, for you will need him as you need your life. If you ill-treat him, and he leaves you and runs away, which way will you go to seek him? (33:25-33)

Ben Sira advises the reader against unjust and overbearing behavior, yet his advice is paired with an injunction to rely on force to control slaves. Apparently, ancient and modern audiences have different understandings of what constitutes "unjust and overbearing behavior."

Ben Sira does advocate leniency for the slaveholder humble enough to own but one slave. Such leniency is justified on the basis of self-interest. The humble slaveholder would be hard up if the lone slave ran away. Similar advice can be found in the words of Gentile moralists of the era. We have no evidence to suggest that the slaves Jesus encountered were treated differently from the slaves in other eastern provinces.

So was there anything distinctive about Jewish slavery? Documents and inscriptions suggest that, outside of Palestine, synagogues sometimes purchased the freedom of Jewish slaves.[2] Perhaps Diaspora communities were especially concerned to strengthen their communities by rescuing fellow Jews.

What about rabbinic law? In many respects, Jewish slave law was similar to Roman slave law. An important exception: rabbinic law was more inclined than Roman law to penalize a slaveholder who caused the

death of his or her slave.[3] However, because rabbinic law was codified centuries after the destruction of the Jerusalem temple, it tells us little about the practices of Jesus' fellow Jews in the early first century.

Intriguingly, several first-century Jewish writers mention a group of Jews who rejected the practice of slaveholding. The Alexandrian philosopher Philo and the historian Josephus both claimed that a Jewish group known as the Essenes refused to be slaveholders. Philo asserted that Essenes repudiated the institution of slavery because they believed it violated the common humanity of those involved.[4]

The reports of Josephus and Philo can help us imagine what Jesus knew about slavery. First, we should note that both Josephus and Philo accepted Jewish slaveholding as the norm. Thus, the principled rejection of slaveholding demanded attention. Second, the reports of Josephus and Philo raise the possibility that Jesus of Nazareth might also have heard rumors about a group of Jews who questioned the morality of slaveholding. How might such rumors have influenced him?

Growing up in Nazareth, Jesus would likely have been familiar with the fate of the nearby Galilean town of Sepphoris. After the death of Herod the Great in 4 B.C.E., a Galilean named Judas led an armed insurrection against royal strongholds around Sepphoris. The campaign was short-lived. Three Roman legions crushed the uprising. In their brutal suppression of the rebels, the Romans crucified two thousand men in the vicinity of Jerusalem. In Galilee, Josephus tells us, the Romans sold the entire population of Sepphoris into slavery.[5]

In Galilee as in other parts of the Roman Empire, slavery was both a mundane and an ominous reality. While Jesus might have heard tales of a group of Jews called Essenes who repudiated slaveholding, it is

still more likely that he heard tales of Galilean Jews dragged into the Diaspora to be sold as slaves.

Jesus in a Slaveholding World

We do not know the name of the slaveholder quartered in Capernaum who reportedly sought Jesus' help in healing a household member, an incident variously reported in Matthew, Luke, and in what I take to be a variation, in John (Matt. 8:5-13; Luke 7:1-10; John 4:46-54). In all three Gospels, the healing is presented as a benefit to the slaveholder. The tradition records no words of admonition to the slaveholder, nor is there an injunction to the slaveholder to free a slave or slaves in return for the healing.

The accounts differ but each identifies the slaveholder as a military or royal official, a telling detail. In Galilee, Jesus would have encountered slaves associated with the Herodian household and security forces. In Judea, Jesus would have encountered slaves belonging to the members of the Roman military, slaves who might have been purchased anywhere in the empire.

In John, Jesus is reported to be in Cana when a royal official from Capernaum begs Jesus to go to Capernaum to heal the official's son. Promising that the son will live, Jesus tells the official to go on his way. On his way back to Capernaum, the official encounters his slaves coming to meet him with word of the boy's recovery (John 4:46-54).

In the Gospel of Matthew, the incident takes place in Capernaum. A centurion approaches Jesus to ask him to heal the centurion's *pais*, a word that may refer to a child, a slave, or even to a young male lover.[6] The centurion claims that he is unworthy to have Jesus in his house but expresses a belief that Jesus could heal the

pais by speaking a healing word. The centurion identifies himself as a slaveholder: "For I also am a man under authority, with soldiers under me; and I say to one, 'Go,' and he goes, and to another, 'Come,' and he comes, and to my slave, 'Do this,' and the slave does it" (Matt. 8:9).

The Gospel of Luke narrates a more detailed version of the incident (Luke 7:1-10). Luke reports that a centurion in Capernaum has a valued or honored slave who is ill. The centurion sends a delegation of Jewish elders to Jesus to beseech his assistance. The elders beg Jesus on behalf of the Jewish community. The centurion, they say, built the synagogue, presumably the synagogue where Jesus taught and healed (Luke 4:31-37). Jesus accompanies the elders to the centurion's house, but on the way they encounter a second delegation, this time a delegation of the centurion's friends. The friends deliver the message that in Matthew the centurion delivers himself. The centurion considers himself unworthy to have Jesus in his home but entreats Jesus to speak a healing word. The friends report the words spoken by the centurion himself in Matthew: "For I also am a man set under authority, with soldiers under me; and I say . . . to my slave, 'Do this,' and the slave does it" (Luke 7:8).

The centurion is strikingly concerned for the well-being of his slave. Such paternalism is consistent with imperial slaveholding ideology. The centurion's message suggests not so much humility as the deference of an authoritarian man to the greater authority of Jesus. Both in Matthew and in Luke, the centurion is said to call Jesus *Kyrie*. *Kyrie* is often translated *Lord*, but in this context, it is more appropriately translated *Master*. The centurion, a military man, acknowledges the authority of those hierarchically above him and the obedience of those hierarchically beneath him. Jesus

ranks among those above him in power. Jesus responds positively to the centurion's declaration of trust in the chain of command: "Not even in Israel have I found such faith" (Luke 7:9). The slave is healed.

Did Jesus in fact reach out in compassion to a slaveholding official of Capernaum, or did later tradition invent the episode in all its variants? Jesus enjoyed a reputation as a healer, and I expect there were historical incidents that engendered that reputation. What seems important is that three Evangelists have no qualms about reporting Jesus' approving interaction with a slaveholder. To an extent that is difficult for us to appreciate, slaves and slaveholders were an unquestioned part of the landscape of the Roman Empire, even in its remoter provinces.

The presence of slaves in their masters' retinues was so commonplace as to escape comment. Consider an incident reported toward the end of each canonical Gospel. Each Gospel reports that during Jesus' arrest, the ear of the high priest's slave is severed. However, in describing the arresting party, none of the Gospels bothers to mention that slaves are present. Consistent with patterns of narration we find from other sources in the Greco-Roman world, the inclusion of slaves in such cohorts is so ordinary as to escape notice. Had the slave's ear not been severed, no Gospel would note his presence.

The Gospels are peppered with reports of Jesus in conversation, often tense, with those threatened by him. His interlocutors are variously identified as scribes, Pharisees, and teachers of the Law. Are these men slaveholders? They are not identified as such, and we should not assume they are. But they might be.

The implicit assumption that they are *not* slaveholders is problematic. Jesus moved in a world of

slaveholders and slaves, a world where slavery was an everyday reality. The Evangelists mention the presence of a slave in the cohort that arrests Jesus only because of a violent incident involving the slave. Why bother to mention slaves who might accompany Pharisees or scribes? Why bother to mention that some of these individuals owned slaves?

The situation is no different with those drawn to Jesus for wisdom or healing. I have already commented on Jesus' readiness to respond to the plea of a royal official or centurion who was a slaveholder. Here is a brief list of some other figures in the Gospels who, if they were historical figures, could plausibly have been slaveholders: the leader of a synagogue, identified in Mark and Luke as Jairus, who requests healing for his daughter (Matt. 9:18-25; Mark 5:21-34; Luke 8:40-55); the rich young man who approaches Jesus to ask about eternal life (Matt. 19:16-22; Mark 10:17-22; in Luke 18:18-25, a rich ruler); Zacchaeus (Luke 19:1-10); the Syrophoenician woman (Mark 7:24-30; cf. Matt. 15:21-28); and Nicodemus (who first appears in John 3:1-10).

This list is not exhaustive. Could a Pharisee who invited Jesus to dine at his home be a slaveholder? How would it affect our reconstructions of the circles around Jesus to take into account the slaveholding population of first-century Palestine?

Although Jesus is reported to instruct Zacchaeus and the rich young man to divest themselves of their wealth in part or whole, he gives no special instructions to free whatever slaves they own. Was there a "historical Jairus"? A "historical Zacchaeus"? If not, I find it perfectly plausible that Jesus interacted with slaveholding peers of Jairus and Zacchaeus. The Gospels do not describe Jairus and Zacchaeus as slaveholders, but then we would not expect them to do so.

Perhaps most problematically, Luke implies that some of the apostles were slaveholders. In Luke 17, Jesus speaks to his disciples. The apostles petition Jesus to enhance their faith. Jesus replies that if the apostles had the faith of a mustard seed, they could move mountains. Still speaking to the apostles, he continues:

> Which one of you who has a slave that plows or tends sheep, when he returns home from the field, would say to him, "Come here at once and take your place at the table?" Would you not rather say to him, "Prepare supper for me, put on your apron and serve me while I eat and drink; later, you may eat and drink?" Do you thank the slave for doing what was commanded? So you also, when you have done all that you were ordered to do, say, "We are worthless slaves; we have done only what we ought to have done." (Luke 17:7-10)

Luke's suggestion that the apostles include slaveholders is incidental and casual.

A trend in commentaries is to analyze this parable without recognition of its second-person address, an address that, in context, is directed to the disciples and more immediately to the apostles. Joseph Fitzmyer at least acknowledges the difficulty: "Details in the parable proper (having a servant, a farm with fields to be plowed and sheep to be tended) seem out of place if the parable were originally addressed either to 'disciples' or 'apostles'."[7]

Such details seem out of place to us but not to Luke. In 18:28, Peter reminds Jesus that he and his companions left their households to follow Jesus. Did some of those households include slaves? The two volumes of Luke-Acts are colored by Luke's cosmopolitan

knowledge of the wider empire. Still, though I find it difficult to imagine the apostles as (former) slaveholders, it gives me pause to consider that Luke, so much closer than I am to the everyday realities of Jesus' world, sees nothing amiss in an off-the-cuff suggestion that some of Jesus' close followers might have had experience giving orders to slaves.

If Jesus interacted with slaveholders, he surely interacted with slaves as well. Again, one can imagine that some of the slaves and former slaves with whom Jesus interacted would not be identified as such. Luke claims that Jesus was supported by, among others, Joanna, who was the wife of Herod's steward Chuza (Luke 8:1-3). Stewards were often freedmen or slaves, and a steward's wife was likely to share his social status.

Joanna does not seem to be impoverished, but one would expect the wife of Herod's steward to have some resources at her disposal. Without concluding that Joanna was in fact of servile status—more likely a freedwoman than a slave, given her liberty to accompany Jesus—Luke's report that she traveled in Jesus' company opens the possibility that Jesus was in regular conversation with slaves and freedpersons associated with the Herodian household.

Much of this is, admittedly, speculative. However, we should keep in mind that ancient sources did not mention that an individual was a slaveholder unless that fact was immediately relevant. As a result, there was no reason for the Evangelists to name figures such as Nicodemus or Zacchaeus as slaveholders. I do not think we should assume they were—but it's at least as problematic to assume they were not. Likewise, we have little way of knowing whether other named or unnamed figures in the Gospels should be understood as slaves.

Slavery in the Parables of Jesus

Jesus' reliance on the imagery of slavery is perhaps the most important reason to situate him in a slaveholding landscape. Slaves appear in every branch of the Jesus-sayings tradition. The Gospels of Mark and John preserve sayings attributed to Jesus that feature slaves. So does the extracanonical *Gospel of Thomas*. Slaves are prominent in the parables of Q, the hypothetical early Christian document that can be defined as material common to Matthew and Luke but absent from Mark. Slaves are featured in parables found uniquely in Matthew or Luke.

Some parables attributed to Jesus turn on interactions between masters and slaves. In many of those parables, at least in the versions transmitted by the Evangelists, the master or slaveholder figuratively represents God. In other parables—for example, the parable of the prodigal son—slaves appear as incidental actors. The details about slave life that we glean from the parables are consistent with other kinds of evidence regarding slavery throughout the Empire.

Jesus' parables do not represent the full spectrum of slave life in the Roman Empire. For example, the parables do not depict slaves consigned to the harshest labors, such as laboring in mines. Nor do Jesus' parables feature prostitutes, who were frequently slaves. Keeping in mind these restrictions, we may infer from the parables that a slave's lot was not the most miserable fate in the Roman Empire.

Based on Jesus' parables, for example, we may infer that slaves did not eat as well as their owners. In one Lukan parable, Jesus refers to a slave who is tasked with giving out rations to fellow slaves (12:42). In another Lukan parable, to which I have already referred, Jesus

suggests that a slaveholder would routinely expect a slave who had been working outdoors all day to delay his own dinner until he had served his master (17:7-9). Nevertheless, as we may infer from the parable of the rich man and Lazarus, many slaves enjoyed higher caloric intakes than beggars, who would hunger even for scraps (Luke 16:19-21).

The relationship of "slaves" to "the poor" requires investigation. The lot of a free poor person was often miserable. Likewise, the lot of a slave was often miserable. Still, it is revealing that throughout the empire, poor persons who were legally free lived in horror at the prospect of enslavement. Material conditions were desperate for many in first-century Palestine before the Jewish War, yet the population was terrorized and debilitated by the large-scale enslavement that resulted from that war. We have no evidence that any man who saw his wife dragged off to be sold as a slave said, "I'm glad she'll have a good meal." Men chained on the auction block did not measure up prospective buyers as patrons.

In writing of the rebel leader Eleazar speaking to the defenders of Masada, Josephus famously attributed to Eleazar words that proclaim, in effect, death before slavery: "Is a man to see his wife led off to violation, to hear the voice of his child crying 'Father!' when his own hands are bound?"[8] One reason a husband would dread seeing his wife taken in slavery was that a female slave was considered the sexual property of her owner. According to Josephus, because the men at Masada feared slavery more than death, they killed their wives and children and then themselves. Eleazar's speech is invented. The sentiment, however, is not. Slaves were considered without honor; to be a slave was shameful. This was a powerful concept in a society predicated

on the dynamics of honor and shame. Throughout the empire, many preferred an empty belly to a ration of grain doled out by an overseer.

Luke

To give a better sense of the variety of ways in which slaves figure in the sayings tradition, let us consider a handful of parables from Luke. How do the Lukan parables help us think about the relationship between the categories of "the poor" and "slaves"? In the parable of the dinner party, the master orders his slaves to invite guests to a dinner (Luke 14:16-24; cf. Matt. 22:1-10). When the first guests decline, the master tells his slaves to deliver invitations to the poor, the disabled, and the shabby folk in roads and lanes. Still, the master does not ask the slaves themselves to join the party, reinforcing status distinctions between slaves and destitute free persons. Some slaves were not as materially deprived as the poorest free persons, yet the system of slavery nonetheless accorded slaves a lower status.

A similar dynamic colors the parable commonly known as the Prodigal Son (Luke 15:11-24). The son grew up on an estate that includes both hired hands and slaves. Hungry in a foreign land, the son nostalgically recalls his father's well-fed hired hands. When he returns to his father's estate, the father calls his slaves and says, "'Quickly, bring out a robe—the best one—and put it on him; put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet.'" The parable ultimately returns the son to a position of respect within the family. He is honorably garbed and honorably shod. The dignity and uniqueness of a son's position is reinforced by the presence of family slaves, stooping to fasten sandals on the son's hard-traveled feet.

Slaveholders relied on slaves to manage funds and even to manage other slaves. The prerogatives of those enslaved agents or managers could be considerable. In Luke's parable of the slave overseer (12:42-48; cf. Matt. 24:45-51), the overseer, who distributes food rations to other household slaves in the slaveholder's absence, has access to the storerooms. In his owner's absence, he eats and drinks to excess, and he abuses his power over the other slaves.

This is the only canonical parable to feature female slaves. The overseer beats both male and female slaves. The parable illustrates the access some slaves enjoyed both to power and to material resources. We should note that most slaves in the parable do not enjoy such access. Although the parable centers on the slave manager, the parable presents him as an atypical slave.

We should not leave Luke's version of the parable of the slave overseer without commenting on its final vision of punishment—not its gruesome allusion to dismemberment (the angry slaveholder cuts the overseer in pieces) but its disturbing summary of the routine discipline of slaves: "That slave who knew what his master wanted, but did not . . . do what was wanted will receive a severe beating. But the one who did not know and did what deserved a beating will receive a light beating" (Luke 12:47-48). These words that Luke attributes to Jesus crystallize ancient expectations regarding the vulnerability of slaves to disciplinary violence.

Matthew

Two facets of slavery evident in the parables of Luke are still more evident in the parables of Matthew. The first is that many slaves in the Roman Empire acted as agents or managers for their owners, as illustrated by Luke's parable of the slave overseer. When we turn

to Matthew, we find that almost all parables in which slaves figure feature slaves who act as agents or play managerial roles. Second, in Luke's parable of the slave overseer, Jesus gives a pithy summary of slaves' routine expectations of violence: those who knowingly defy the slaveholder are beaten severely, but even those who unwittingly fail to please the slaveholder should expect to be bruised. The parables of Matthew emphasize this liability of the slave to abuse and punishment. Although the agricultural slaves of the parable of the weeds and wheat escape this cycle of violence (13:24-30), every other Matthean parable that features slaves in either central or supporting roles describes the physical violation of at least some of those slaves (Matt. 18:23-35; 21:33-41; 22:1-10; 24:45-51; 25:14-30). Slaves are seized, imprisoned, treated with dishonor, beaten, cut in pieces, handed over to torturers, consigned to a place of "weeping and gnashing of teeth," killed, and stoned. This list of injuries to slaves' bodies is evidence of first-century familiarity with the travails of enslaved life.

Slaves in several of Matthew's parables command considerable wealth. Because of their access to wealth, many readers of Matthew have found it difficult to fit them into the category of slave. However, the more we know about slavery in the Roman Empire, the more credible this identification becomes. Some slaves in the Roman Empire rose to positions of considerable authority, influence, and even wealth. The best known of these powerful slaves were members of the family of Caesar. As personal attendants and financial agents, these slaves had unique access to the most powerful individuals in the empire. Free persons who sought access to those powerful individuals might strategically curry favor with well-placed slaves.

Because free persons relied on slaves to handle finances, many slaves enjoyed access to wealth. A few slaves accumulated personal funds that amounted to small fortunes. However, such slaves were still liable to whatever punishment an owner might choose to mete out. So, for example, Matthew recounts the parable of the unmerciful slave (18:23-35). A slave who belongs to a king owes the king ten thousand talents, a staggering sum. The magnitude of the debt suggests a slave who enjoys seemingly unlimited access to the king's coffers. The king is at first inclined to sell the slave and his family in order to recoup the debt but responds to the slave's plea for mercy and agrees to wait for payment. The slave turns around and imprisons a fellow slave who owes him a much smaller debt. When the king discovers the unmerciful slave's cruelty, he responds by handing him over to torturers.

Again, contemporary readers may take that as an exaggeration, but many of the punishments employed by ancient slaveholders qualified as torture under any definition. In some parts of the ancient Mediterranean world, slave owners hired public officials to discipline their slaves. An inscription from the Italian city of Puteoli detailed the job description of a *manceps*, which included the task of torturing and executing slaves on demand. The *manceps* supplied the equipment.[9] In this context the king's directive that his slave should be handed over to torturers hardly seems fanciful.

In the parable of the talents, the slaves are financial agents. The master entrusts them with his wealth—and keeps them in check with force (25:14-30; cf. Luke 19:11-27). The "wicked" third slave explains to his owner that he has buried his single talent because his master is a harsh man, whom he fears. The "good and faithful" slaves do not identify fear as a motivation.

Surely, however, they are aware that vulnerability to physical abuse is inherent in the situation of the slave. Classicist Richard Saller writes of Roman slavery, "The lot of bad slaves was to be beaten and that of good slaves was to internalize the constant threat of a beating."[10] Parables that conclude with wicked slaves enduring corporal punishment allude to the strongest incentive slaves had for loyalty to their owners: fear of disciplinary retribution.

In Roman law and practice, slaves lacked the ability to protect their own bodies. Although in many parables the abuse occurs as disciplinary action, slaves in several parables act violently toward fellow slaves. In the two Matthean parables where slaves are killed, the violent encounters take place outside the master's household, as slaves perform duties required of them. For example, in the parable of the vineyard, wicked tenants beat and then kill the slaves sent to collect rent (21:33-41; cf. Mark 12:1-12; Luke 20:9-19). The vineyard owner anticipates that the tenants will treat his son with greater respect. He understands that a son merits respect that is denied to slaves. His logic makes sense in a society structured by slaveholding.

In the opening of this chapter, I noted that, despite the familiarity of the parables, the slaves who populate the parables are somehow unfamiliar to readers today. One likely reason is that the King James Bible and other influential English-language translations render *doulos* as "servant" rather than "slave." My analysis of the parables suggests an additional reason for this lack of familiarity: for those unacquainted with some of the distinctive elements of Roman slavery, including the substantial wealth accumulated by a few slaves and the violence to which all slaves were vulnerable, the slave parables may seem fantastic. In addition, there may be

a third reason why the slaves of the parables remain unfamiliar: quite simply, today's Christian readers of the Gospels are uncomfortable to confront the degree to which the parables rely on troubling assumptions about the relationships between slaves and slaveholders. To say that Jesus relies on the patterns of slaveholding in his parables does not mean Jesus therefore approves of those patterns of behavior. Nevertheless, he does not explicitly repudiate those behaviors.

As I argue in the next section, the gospel Jesus proclaims is incompatible with slaveholding values. To live out the gospel, then, we need to be honest about the ways in which our patterns of thinking are unwittingly complicit with a system in tension with the gospel. Readers of the Gospels come to recognize the disciplined flesh of parabolic slaves as an antitype, a model to avoid. Curiously, however, the Gospels feature another tortured body as a model to emulate: the battered and crucified body of Jesus. In a peculiar way the corporal punishment of disobedient slaves in the parables foreshadows the broken body of Jesus, ridiculed, beaten, and executed. The good news about Jesus and the good news he proclaims can strengthen us as we work to rectify the bad news in the world around us.

The Death of a Slave

One saying attributed to Jesus stands out for its implicit challenge to the ethos of slaveholding. According to the Gospel of Mark, Jesus instructs his close followers, "Whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all" (Mark 10:43-44; compare Matt. 20:26-27 and Luke 22:26).[11]

The Gospel of John does not include this saying, but an incident in John reflects a variant of the teaching. According to John, in the hours before Jesus' betrayal, he washed his disciples' feet and instructed them that they must likewise serve one another: "So if I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. For I have set you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you" (John 13:14-15). Foot washing was a chore assigned to one of the least regarded slaves in a household, a role often played by women. The Fourth Gospel thus depicts a Jesus who defied the hierarchical and gender norms of his day. In this Johannine scene, Jesus embodies the part of the slave of all, a slave who desires "not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many" (Mark 10:45). John's inclusion of the scene testifies that early Christians associated Jesus with a challenge to the slaveholding ethos.

Jews and pagans in the ancient world sometimes styled themselves as "slaves of God" or "slaves of [some god]." A slave might boast that he or she was "slave of Caesar." Such appellations advanced the status of the person so-named. Not so with the designation "slave of all." The slaveholding ethos was predicated on control and honor. By calling on his followers, whether they were slaves, freedpersons, impoverished freeborn persons, or even members of slaveholding families, to become slaves to all, Jesus emptied that ethos of its power.

Early Christians struggled to live out the implications of this saying. So Paul wrote to the Galatians, "Become slaves to one another" (Gal. 5:13). But because the early Christian community did not forbid or place conditions on the baptism of slaveholders, the power of this mandate was, at best, limited. It is an interesting

thought experiment to ponder how differently Christianity might have developed if early Christian communities had made freeing one's slaves a precondition of baptism.

From the first century to the twenty-first, the church has failed to live up to the radical demands of the gospel. The demands of the gospel are still radical. Directed toward slaveholders in the first century, directed toward CEOs in the twenty-first century, Jesus' words dare listeners: Be slaves to one another. Become the slave of all.

We should not approach this saying without awareness of its resonance over two thousand years of Christian history. Too often, these words have been beaten—metaphorically and often literally—into slaves, women, and other subordinates. As a result, many Christians today recoil from such imagery. For those who have fought to free themselves from internalized oppression, an insistence that slavery is a paradigm for discipleship is cringe-worthy. We must therefore recall that Jesus emptied of its force the mentality of slaveholding and thus the ethos of slavery.

In calling his followers to serve as slaves, as I have noted, Jesus refers to his own example: "For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many" (Mark 10:45). The image of the slave-Jesus whose self-giving death set an example for his followers was picked up in an early Christian hymn quoted by Paul in his letter to the Philippians (2:5-8):

> Let the same mind be in you that you have in Christ Jesus,
> who, though he was in the form of God,
> did not regard equality with God
> as something to be exploited,

but emptied himself,
taking the form of a slave,
being born in human likeness.
And being found in human form,
he humbled himself
and became obedient to the point of death—
even death on a cross.

In coming to terms with Jesus' teachings on slavery, then, we recall not only his words but also his actions—indeed, according to the Philippians hymn, his very being. A community that conforms itself to him has no place for masters.

The Death of Slavery

So what, exactly, are we to make of widespread references to slaves in the sayings tradition?

Did Jesus endorse or enforce the norms of slavery? No. Unlike the early Christians who composed the letters of the deuteropauline tradition, Jesus did not teach, "Tell slaves to be submissive to their masters and to give satisfaction in every respect; they are not to talk back, not to pilfer, but to show complete and perfect fidelity" (Titus 2:9-10; compare Col. 3:22—4:1; Eph. 6:5-9; 1 Tim. 6:1-2). Although Jesus peppered his stories with images of battered slaves, he never taught, "Slaves, accept the authority of your masters with all deference, not only those who are kind and gentle but also those who are harsh. . . . If you endure pain when you are beaten for doing wrong, what credit is that? But if you endure when you do right and suffer for it, you have God's approval" (1 Peter 2:18-20).

Did Jesus urge an end to the system of slavery? No, but it's hard to see how he could effectively do so.

Perhaps more to the point, Jesus did not urge his followers who were slaves to resist or run away. Furthermore, we encounter no suggestion that he urged would-be followers who were slaveholders to free their slaves.

Rather, the sayings tradition suggests that slavery was prominent among the realities of everyday life that entered into Jesus' stories. This is not surprising, of course. Slavery was a significant factor in the world in which Jesus lived and in the communities that preserved and transformed the memory of Jesus and his words. Attention to the frequency and consistency of Jesus' references to the battered bodies of slaves should alert us to the persistent and intense violence of ancient slavery.

At the same time, awareness of the dishonor associated with slavery should bring us a fresh appreciation of the newness of Jesus' mandate to his followers to embrace the role of "slave of all." Jesus died an excruciating and humiliating death, the death of a slave. This death is a model for the disciple's life. Jesus does not condemn the institution of slavery. What he demands is something unexpected. He stipulates that his followers are to become a community of slaves serving one another.

How strange this mandate must have seemed in the first century. How strange it seems today.