

## Images of Slavery in the Early Church: Hatred Disguised as Love?

Dr. Kimberly Flint-Hamilton  
Stetson University, Dept. of Sociology & Anthropology<sup>1</sup>

Keith Bradley points out that, in many ways, Christianity was a revolutionary religious development. Its members acquired spiritual fulfillment as well as salvation and eternal life. And all were welcomed. Bradley describes in some detail the social reform that the Church prompted. In fact, he states that the Church at Rome supported more than 1500 widows and beggars by the middle of the third century, successfully blending belief and social action. But those in positions of authority never fully accepted that slaves were equals, either socially or religiously, and therefore worthy of love, and for some reason, Christianity brought about little or no change for slaves.<sup>2</sup> And, in place of the love that Christianity advocated, oftentimes the writings of the early fathers of the Church contain words of disdain or even hatred.

According to Bradley, Christianity did not make life better for slaves. Instead, it made life worse. In his words:

To pious slaves the teachings on obedience and submission automatically foreclosed all possibility of agitating for freedom, of seeking material improvements, of resisting servitude. Freedom of spirit and hopes of eternal life, they were repeatedly told, were all that mattered. . . . Christianity brought change, therefore, but from the servile perspective it was change not for the better but for the worse (151).

It is difficult to determine to what extent Christianity actually impacted slavery and the lives of slaves. Since we have so little documentary evidence reflecting the voices and experiences of the slaves themselves, we cannot truly know how the slaves felt about and reacted to this new dimension in their lives. We do, however, have the words of the early fathers of the church. While they rarely commented directly on slaves or the institution of slavery, there are occasional references that help to shed some light on their attitudes regarding the slaves in their congregations and slavery in general. We also have early catechetical documents that instruct the faithful on matters regarding household management, including management and catechesis of slaves. It is in these documents that we find the attitudes of the early authority figures, which often are laced with apparent contempt.

This paper seeks the answers to four basic questions. First, to what extent did the early fathers concern themselves with the slaves in their congregations, and what were the views of the early fathers, particularly Ignatius and Tertullian, regarding slaves' place in the early Church? Second, how were slaves represented in early catechetical documents, particularly *The Didache*, *The*

*Shepherd of Hermas*, and *The Apostolic Constitutions*? Third, what evidence do early church councils provide us regarding slaves and their treatment within their households and their congregations? Finally, at what point did the fathers of the church begin advocating for slaves as equal members of their congregations?

When slavery is mentioned in early church documents, including letters and homilies of the church fathers themselves, early catechetical documents, or the records of councils, it generally is framed as one of the following sentiments:

- 1) An emphasis on the fact that slaves should accept their station in life and fulfill their roles;
- 2) An acceptance of the social stereotype of slaves as deceitful, lustful, and conniving;
- 3) Rarely, an argument made against slavery as an institution.

It is in the context of these three sentiments that the answers to the above questions can be found.

## I. SLAVES SHOULD ACCEPT THEIR STATION

The first sentiment is demonstrated in the Epistles of Paul, early catechetical documents such as *The Didache*, records of local church councils or synods, and the writings of Augustine and Gregory the Great.

### A. *The Epistles of Paul*

In the epistles of Paul, both slaves and free are invoked as members of the Church. In no fewer than four places<sup>3</sup> he calls slaves together in Christ, and exhorts them to be obedient to their masters. He also warns masters not to treat their slaves too harshly. He asks Philemon to take back his runaway slave Onesimus<sup>4</sup> and criticizes the Corinthians for humiliating those poorer members of the congregation who come to worship while hungry.<sup>5</sup>

Although the authorship of the admonitions to slaves and owners in Paul has been called into question, and it has been shown that they are in fact later intrusions and not the real words of Paul, the nature of the rhetoric is still relevant to this discussion. In Paul, slavery is used as a metaphor for our relationship with God; it is better, for example, to be slaves to rightness and goodness than to be slaves to earthly pleasures. This metaphorical image recurs throughout the writings of the early fathers. An important distinction, however, between the references in Paul and those in other early documents is the fact that in Paul's work slaves are addressed directly. In most cases, the early documents contain the metaphorical image alone, without any direct invocation to slaves.

### B. *Early Catechetical Document: The Didache*

Early catechetical documents, particularly *The Didache*, *The Shepherd of Hermas*, and *The Apostolic Constitutions*, can give us many insights on the manner in which early Christians are instructed to manage their households, including household slaves. In *The Didache*, slavery seems to be accepted as an appropriate station in life. *The Shepherd of Hermas* and *The Apostolic Constitutions*, however, challenge this view, as will be shown later.

The wording of *The Didache*, a composite Christian document for catechetical instruction composed sometime in the second century, supports the sentiment that slaves should accept their stations. In section 4, verses 10-11, *The Didache* appears to echo Paul's sentiments on the manner in which slaves and masters should behave.

You shall not give a command in bitterness to your slave or your maid, those who hope in the same God [as you], lest they stop revering the God who is over both [you and them]. For he comes not to call [people] according to their personal status but [he comes] upon those whom the Spirit has prepared. As for you [pl.] who are slaves, with respect and reverence you shall be subject to your masters as replicas of God.<sup>7</sup>

It is the last phrase, verse 11, that is most relevant to this discussion. The Greek of this segment reads: “ὁμεῖς δὲ οἱ δοῦλοι ὑποταγῆσασθε τοῖς Κυρίοις ὑμῶν ὡς τύπῳ θεοῦ ἐν αἰσχύνη καὶ φόβῳ.” This sentiment clearly originates with Paul (Ephesians 6:5-6): οἱ δοῦλοι, ὑποακούετε τοῖς Κατὰ σάρκα Κυρίοις μετὰ φόβου καὶ τρόμου ἐν ἀπλότητι τῆς καρδίας ὑμῶν ὡς τῷ Χριστῷ . . .” (Slaves, be obedient to those who are your masters according to the flesh, with fear and trembling in singleness of your heart, as to Christ.)

The statement in *The Didache*, however, casts Paul's message in a slightly different light. The key distinction rests on the manner in which slaves are instructed to carry out their duties to the master. Paul instructs slaves to be as obedient to their masters as they would be to Christ. *The Didache*, however, instructs slaves to think of their masters as the *typos* of God. Niederwimmer comments that verse 11 of *The Didache* was written in the context of classical household tradition. “[I]n the earthly *kurios* the slave encounters the type of the heavenly *Kurios*, namely, God.”<sup>6</sup>

In early Greek literature, *typos* means a striking or beating, like the beat of a horse's hoof. It may refer as much to the sound of the hoofbeat, however, as to what is left afterward, for example, the hoofprints of the galloping horse.<sup>7</sup> Eventually the word came to mean a stamp or impression. A *typos* is produced when pressing a signet ring into wax or clay.<sup>8</sup> By the second century AD, roughly contemporary with *The Didache*, the word had come to mean statue or replica,<sup>9</sup> something very physical and very tangible. A statue is made in the

physical image, the *tupos*, of the person who commissioned it. Furthermore, a child is referred to as the *tupos* of the parent.<sup>10</sup>

The meaning of *tupos* has important implications for our understanding of *The Didache's* instructions. It seems to mean more than a simple representation. Rather, it conveys the sense of a physical replica, calling to mind a statue of the Roman emperor, or of Zeus. When a Roman citizen gazed upon it, what emotional reaction might have been elicited? Consider, for that matter, the reaction of a modern Christian in the presence of a crucifix. Is the master meant to elicit the same response when in the presence of his slaves? According to *The Didache*, slaves are to consider the master *tupos* of God. When they are in the presence of the master, they are to consider themselves in the physical presence of God. When they look at the master, they are to think of God.

### C. Church Councils

Records of local church councils, or synods, occasionally carry references to slaves. In such cases, we might be able to glean something of the attitudes of the church aristocracy toward slaves. In the early fourth century a synod was convened at Elvira in southeastern Spain. Three canons regarding slaves resulted from this council:

Canon 5: If in anger a woman should strike her slave, so that the latter should die at the end of three days, the guilty woman shall undergo a seven years penance if she struck so violently on purpose, and a five years penance if she did not do so on purpose to kill. She shall not be received into communion until after this delay. If she should fall ill during the time of her penance, she may receive the communion.<sup>11</sup>

Canon 41: It is forbidden for masters to allow their slaves to have idols in the master's house. If however the master truly fears the servants because of their number, he must keep them at a distance and watch against every approach to idolatry (154).

Canon 80: It is forbidden that freedmen whose patrons are heathens to be ordained (171).

These three canons tell us a great deal about the church of Spain. First, it seems that the church aristocracy regarded slaves in much the same way as did their Greek and Roman predecessors. In Greek and Roman law, similar legislation existed regarding the relative value of slaves and free. In the Law Code of Gortyn (early fifth century BC), for example, it is written that, if a woman divorced from her husband is convicted of exposing her child before presenting it as required, she must pay a fine of 50 staters if the child is free, but only 25 staters if the exposed child is a slave.<sup>12</sup> The Twelve Tables, the fifth-century BC Roman law code, calls for a penalty of flogging for a free man caught in the act of stealing, but for a slave, flogging is to be followed by execution. In both

cases, a distinction is drawn between the value of a free person and the value of a slave.<sup>13</sup> This attitude infected the Church and persisted through the centuries. Canon 5 demonstrates this, particularly when juxtaposed with Canon 54, the penalty for adultery. Bloch cites an example from the ninth century, when Regino of Prum asked the bishops to pay attention to the conduct of slave owners. Those who had killed slaves without a trial were to be excommunicated for a period of two years. Mistreatment less severe than death, however, apparently did not occupy the minds of the aristocracy, whether lay or ecclesiastical.<sup>14</sup>

Canon 41 implies that it was not contrary to church law, at least in Spain, for Christians to own non-Christian slaves, as long as idols were not brought into the house. This canon calls to mind verse 10 of *The Didache*: “You shall not give a command in bitterness to your slave or your maid, those who hope in the same God [as you].” In fourth-century Spain, slave owners possessed Christian as well as non-Christian slaves who owned idols. If this was true for the Christian slave owners of the second century, it suggests that the authors of *The Didache* were concerned more with the treatment of Christian slaves than of non-Christians. Perhaps the milder treatment of the Christians was thought to encourage conversion to Christianity of heathen slaves.

Canon 80 makes it clear that even all *former* slaves were not completely free within the church. Freedmen owed special obligations to their former masters who acted as their patrons following manumission. If their patrons were heathens they could not take orders. So even the free members of the Church were not completely equal. The status of first-generation freedmen depended rather heavily on the religious status of their patrons.

According to Bloch, the question of the eligibility of slaves for ordination seemed not to occupy the minds of the fathers before the fourth century. When at last the matter came under discussion, the Church remained singularly opposed to the ordination of slaves, the rationale being that a man who was under the control of another represented a conflict of interest for the Church. Apparently, however, the ordination of slaves continued to take place from time to time. Bloch writes:

Concern for the dignity, if not a horror of some original blemish attached to servitude, was so much the true motivation for the prohibition that we can see it equally applied in the Merovingian kingdom to coloni, who were juridically free men (13).

#### D. *Augustine*

Early in the fifth century, shortly after Chrysostom and Gregory of Nyssa (discussed below), a new voice rose in the Western Church. Written shortly after the sack of Rome by the Visigoths in 410, Augustine’s *City of God* was

circulated. In this book Augustine reasons that slavery is the result of sin, and God's just punishment of humankind.

For justly was the burden of servitude laid upon the back of transgression. And therefore in all scriptures we never read the word servant, until such time as that just man Noah laid it as a curse upon his offending son. So that it was guilt, and not nature, that gave origin unto that name.<sup>15</sup>

Augustine concludes that how one falls into slavery is of no consequence, even if as a result of an unjust war in which the blameless side lost. God must have had good reasons for enslaving the conquered:

For in the most just war, the sin upon one side causes it; and if the victory fall to the wicked (as sometimes it may) it is God's decree to humble the conquered, either reforming their sins herein, or punishing them (xix.iv).

There would be no slavery without sin, so all slaves must be sinners. God is just, and his punishments are just:

Sin therefore is the mother of servitude, and first cause of man's subjection to man; which notwithstanding comes not to pass but by the direction of the Highest, in whom there is no injustice, and who alone knows best how to proportionate His punishment unto Man's offences. He Himself says: "Whosoever committeth sin is the servant of sin" (John 8:34) (xix.iv).

In fact, slavery is a kindness. In his benevolence, God has given slaves the easiest route into the kingdom of heaven.

And it is a happier servitude to serve man than lust, for lust (to omit all other passions) practices extreme tyranny upon the hearts of those that serve it, be it lust after sovereignty or fleshly lust. But in the peaceful order of states, wherein one man is under another, as humility does benefit the servant, so does pride endamage the superior (xix.iv).

The lowly position of the slave does as much good as the proud position of the master does harm: "Until they be installed in (heaven), the masters are to endure more labour in their government than the servants in their service" (xix.iv). Therefore slaves need to accept their position in life, for a number of reasons. First, it is the new order of fallen humanity. The slave also has much to gain in the way of Christian character by his station in life. And, finally, Christian slaves should be content with their slavery and not worry about manumission. By doing so they blaspheme the name of God (xix.iv).

If any be disobedient, and offend this just peace, he is forthwith to be

corrected with strokes or some other convenient punishment, whereby he may be readjusted into the peaceful stock from whence his disobedience has torn him (xix.xvi).

Rupprecht argues that this is probably the most offensive observation Augustine could have made.<sup>16</sup>

Augustine's attitude toward slavery was not entirely consistent. In spite of his rationale that God enslaves only those who deserve it, Augustine spent much of his personal fortune freeing those who had been unjustly enslaved—kidnapped and enslaved by pirates. He spoke against the rampant piracy along the coast of North Africa in *Epistulae 10*, describing the enslavement of whole villages.<sup>17</sup>

Augustine's logic concerning the legitimacy of slavery had a tremendous impact on later church policy. This becomes apparent in the canons laid down at local councils, as well as in the writings of Augustine's successors. At the Council of Jena in Gaul near Lyon (AD 517), for example, it was decreed that slaves who had been bestowed on monks by their abbot were not to be emancipated, on the grounds that it would be sinful and inappropriate for slaves to enjoy the idleness of freedom while the monks were engaged in daily work cultivating the land (canon 8. Mansi 8, 560).<sup>18</sup> Augustine also clearly had an influence on the policies of Pope Gregory the Great.

#### E. *Pope Gregory the Great*

Pope Gregory the Great of the late sixth and early seventh centuries, in his document on pastoral care, lays out the manner in which church leaders should teach and admonish their subjects. Gregory treats his subjects as diametric opposites: rich/poor, wise/dull, joyful/sad, as well as subjects/superiors. Certainly in some cases this treatment makes sense. But in other instances, we can see very clearly the influence of Augustine, especially in the following passage, in which Gregory explains that subjects are not to criticize the ways of their masters, even when the masters are obviously wrong, because God has placed masters above and subjects below:

Indeed, the deeds of superiors are not to be smitten with the sword of the mouth, even when they are rightly thought to be deserving of reproof. And if sometimes the tongue in criticism of them slips in the least degree, the heart must be overwhelmed with penitential grief. It should reflect upon itself, and when it has offended the power set over it, it should dread the judgment passed against it by Him who appointed superiors. For when we offend those set over us, we oppose the ordinance of Him who set them above us.<sup>19</sup>

Like Augustine, Gregory warns that slaves who oppose their position in

life offend God, and masters are to understand that their station in life is a gift from God.

Slaves are to be admonished not to despise their masters, lest they offend God by their proud opposition to His ordinance. Masters are also to be admonished that they offend God by priding themselves on His gift to them (102).

Gregory provides tangible evidence that the early church fathers had the same feelings toward slaves as did the Romans before them. Perhaps they felt their own superiority even more vividly than did the Romans, since their station in life was a gift from God, just as the status of slaves was a punishment from God. Before Gregory made the point clear, we might have assumed that, since slaves were thought to be inferior and worthy of punishment, they must have been treated accordingly. But Gregory was the first who actually spelled this out. Their treatment seems not to have been any better in this period. Pierre Dockes reported that, in a local council of AD 675, it was mandated that clergy stop mutilating their slaves,<sup>20</sup> suggesting, of course, that mutilation of slaves had become problematic enough among the clergy that it had become an agenda item.

The first sentiment, the acceptance of slavery as a proper station in life, appears on the surface to be an innocent and harmless one. In fact it paves the road to the second, more odious sentiment. By accepting that masters are the image of God, by accepting, even encouraging the violent beating of slaves so long as they do not die immediately afterwards, and by acknowledging that slaves must accept their lot because it is a just punishment for sin while being a master is a reward from God, it becomes easy to accept that slaves are less worthy of humane, fraternal treatment than non-slaves. It becomes even easier to embrace the image of slaves as lazy and ignorant, deserving of ill treatment.

## II. SOCIAL STEREOTYPE OF SLAVES AS LAZY AND DECEITFUL

The second sentiment, acceptance of the stereotypical image of the slave as deceitful, lazy, and conniving, while implicit in the work of Augustine and Gregory, is best demonstrated in the writings of Ignatius and Tertullian.

### A. *Ignatius, Bishop of Antioch*

In his letter to Polycarp, Ignatius, third bishop of Antioch, instructs masters in the proper treatment of slaves. There are some clear similarities between Ignatius' instructions and those from Paul. But there are also some notable differences.

*Paragraph 4*

Let widows not be neglected, for after the Lord, you (Polycarp) are their guardian. Let nothing take place without your approval; nor do you do anything without God, which indeed you do not; stand firm. Let meetings be held more often; seek out all individually; do not despise slaves, male or female, but neither let them be puffed up; rather let them serve all the more to the glory of God, that they may attain a greater freedom from God; let them not desire to be set free out of the common fund, that they may not be found slaves of lust (*δοῦλοι ἐπιθυμίας*).

*Paragraph 5*

Avoid evil arts (*κακοτεχνία*); better yet, preach sermons against them.<sup>21</sup>

Like the invocation in Paul, Ignatius advises against ill treatment of slaves. Ignatius, however, cautions masters against allowing their slaves to become “puffed up.” According to Ignatius, widows require the attention of the faithful, and it is the obligation of the church to ensure that they are not neglected. But it is inappropriate to use the common fund for corporate manumission of slaves. Indeed, Harrill suggests that Ignatius is advocating for the support of widows out of the church’s corporate fund, while advocating *against* using the same funds for manumission.<sup>22</sup> To do so is to run the risk of making them slaves of their desire (160).

The phrase *douloi epithumias*, “slaves of desire,” has been variously interpreted. Schoedel translates the phrase as “slaves of lust.” He suggests that this is a reference to sexual license, commenting that freedmen often found themselves in such dire financial difficulties that they frequently resorted to prostitution (271). Glancy supports this view also:

The sexual availability of slaves to their masters (and those to whom their masters chose to provide access) was a peculiar aspect of the lives of enslaved females and young males that may have affected their participation in the Christian body. Even if we assume that Christian masters did not pressure their slaves sexually, pagan masters would not have shared such scruples about bodies they owned.<sup>23</sup>

The fact that slaves were sexual property created a stereotype of slaves and freed-people as sexually loose. As Finley points out: “The ethical position was summed up by the elder Seneca, with reference to the passive partner in buggery: ‘Unchastity (*impudicitia*) is a crime in the freeborn, a necessity for the slave, and a duty (*officium*) for the freedman.’”<sup>24</sup> Schoedel, therefore, suggests that Ignatius here is advocating against manumission of slaves in principle.

Harrill, on the other hand, interprets the meaning of *douloi epithumias* as “an enslaving desire for what they do not have (e.g., access to the church’s

money)"(167). He suggests that Ignatius may be discouraging *corporate* manumission, advocating instead that they continue to serve in the role of slaves so that they might attain a spiritual freedom. In this context, then, the "slaves of desire" refers not to sexual activity of slaves, but instead to those who may be insincere in their new faith, more concerned with freedom than with Christianity.

Others, however, disagree with this interpretation. Manumitted slaves were required to show public displays of respect toward their former masters. Harrill tells us that

for the eastern Mediterranean and other regions influenced by Hellenistic norms, ex-slaves were regularly bound to their former masters by *paramone* contracts. *Paramone* obligated the ex-slave to "hang around" (παράμεινω) the former master for a specified period, frequently "as a slave," before the manumission contract became valid (162).

Indeed, the practice of *salutio*—the lining-up of freedmen/women outside their patron's house at dawn to beg in ceremonial fashion for food and hand-outs—could easily be perceived as creating a line of "slaves of desire," which Ignatius may be trying to discourage (163).

Similarly, the first phrase in paragraph 5 has also been interpreted in various ways. Lake translates the phrase as: "Flee from evil arts, but rather preach against them."<sup>25</sup> His interpretation of the word *kakotechnia* as "evil art" is consistent with its connotation as magic or trick, especially as concerned with the so-called trickery of the heretics. But, while not inconsistent with first-century usage of the word, there are alternative connotations. Strabo, for example, uses *kakotechnia* to describe behaviors, techniques, or tricks used to acquire vices and sensual pleasures.

There may be another explanation as well. During the Classical period, *kakotechnia* was used to refer specifically to falsehood. For example, in the middle of the fourth century BC, Demosthenes used *kakotechnia* to refer to perjury or false testimony.<sup>26</sup> In Plato's *Laws*, *kakotechnia* was used to refer to conspiracy.<sup>27</sup> In his discussion of the phrase "slaves of greed," Harrill proposes that the rhetoric of Ignatius was influenced as much by Greco-Roman culture as by early Christian tradition (166). This may be the case with respect to *kakotechnia*. Ignatius may have been warning Polycarp that slaves would invent lies and falsehoods in order to manipulate the use of the common fund for their manumission. If this is the case, perhaps we should translate the first phrase of paragraph 5 as: "Avoid [their] lies; rather, speak against them." Is Ignatius here demonstrating a greater concern for the slaves who match the Roman stereotype of the scheming and untrustworthy than for those who might genuinely want to be freed from a particularly unpleasant, perhaps severe bondage? While, on the one hand, he advocates for widows, he does not, on the other hand, warn against the scheming of widows who might have other rela-

tives of means, and who might not need to use the common fund. His disdain for and distrust of slaves becomes very clear.

B. *Tertullian (c. 160-c. 240)*

The jurist and ecclesiastical writer Tertullian produced a great many epistles and doctrinal documents that discuss proper Christian behavior. He often uses the imagery of slavery to elucidate a point. In his *Treatise on Penance*, for example, he uses the image of the lazy, thieving slave to make his point about penance and absolution.

[I]t will, I suppose, be clear that we are amended when we are absolved. By no means; (but our amendment should be manifested) while, pardon being in abeyance, there is still a prospect of penalty; while the penitent does not yet merit—so far as merit we can—his liberation; while God is threatening, not while He is forgiving. For what slave, after his position has been changed by reception of freedom, charges himself with his (past) thefts and desertions? What soldier, after his discharge, makes satisfaction for his (former) brands?<sup>28</sup>

In his *Treatise on Marriage and Remarriage*, he reminds his wife of the traditional Roman custom of forbidding one's slaves to marry slaves from other households. Christian women should marry Christian men for reasons similar to those of slave owners who insist that slaves marry within the same household: Slaves slip into debauchery and become neglectful of their duties too easily to allow such latitude.

Is not true that, even among the heathen, masters who are strictest and most careful to preserve right order forbid their slaves to marry into other households? This is because they do not want them to break bounds in their debauchery, to neglect the performance of their duties and give over their master's property to strangers. Is it not also decreed that persons (women) may be claimed as slaves who continue to cohabit with the slaves of another, after he has formally forbidden them to do so? And are we to regard earthly laws as more severe than those of Heaven? Are pagan women who marry strangers to lose their liberty, while Christian women who unite themselves to the slaves of the devil suffer no change in the status they enjoy?<sup>29</sup>

In section 7 of *ad Nationes*, Tertullian writes that domestic slaves, by peeping through cracks and holes in doors and lurking about, spread damaging gossip about their Christian masters to the authorities. Tertullian questions the trustworthiness of the slaves, and the wisdom of the authorities who put faith in such reports.

Well, then, it is more in keeping with the character of strangers both to be ignorant (of the true state of a case) and to invent (a false account). Our domestic servants listened, and peeped through crevices and holes, and stealthily got information of our ways. What, then, shall we say when our servants betray them to you? What is the value of such evidence?<sup>30</sup>

It seems that Tertullian mentions slaves only when he has something bad to say about their character. The images he presents to the readers suggest that, rather than the children of God whose souls are a matter of concern for the community, he considers slaves the kind of people whose behavior set a bad example. His contempt for slaves is very clearly revealed.

Aside from Ignatius and Tertullian, the church fathers seem not to have been occupied with thoughts about slavery and the condition of slaves. Slaves are rarely mentioned in the early documents. While it remained convenient to use slavery as a metaphor, the real-life slaves were virtually ignored.

Those proponents of the second sentiment, then, characterize slaves as burdensome and deserving of their fate and victimization. It excuses, albeit indirectly, any mistreatment of slaves by their masters, for, according to the first sentiment, slavery is a just institution and slaves should accept their station in life.

### III. CHALLENGING THE STATUS QUO AND ADVOCATING FOR FREEING SLAVES

The third sentiment, which challenges the justice of slavery as an institution and encourages Christians to free their slaves, stands in antithesis to the first two and helps pave the road, albeit slowly, for the liberation theology movement. It is clearly demonstrated in two early catechetical documents (*The Shepherd of Hermas* and *The Apostolic Constitutions*), and the writings of Gregory of Nyssa and John Chrysostom.

#### A. *Early Catechetical Documents: The Shepherd of Hermas and The Apostolic Constitutions*

The Shepherd of Hermas, an early Christian document composed in the late first/early second century and known to early Christian writers, including Tertullian, who cites it three times, instructs the faithful to use the common fund for liberating prisoners and freeing slaves.<sup>31</sup> *The Shepherd of Hermas* gives quite a different impression of slaves and the Christian community's responsibility toward them than encountered thus far.

In Parable I, the shepherd enjoins Hermas, "So instead of lands buy suffering souls, as each one can, and take charge of widows and orphans and do not neglect them" (157). In Parable 10, he explains the responsibility the Christian has to those in distress.

But I say that everyone ought to be rescued from adversity. The one who is in need and suffers adversity in daily life is in great torment and deprivation. Whoever rescues such a person from deprivation acquires great joy for oneself. The one who is troubled by this kind of adversity suffers the same torment as one who is tortured in chains. For many bring death on themselves because of these kinds of calamities when they are not able to bear them. So the one who knows the calamity of such a person and does not come to the rescue commits a great sin and incurs blood guilt (259).

*The Shepherd of Hermas* makes it the responsibility of all Christians to care for those in severe distress. According to Osiek, the theme of this parable is stated in verse 9: "That is why the Master has made you wealthy, in order to carry out these ministries for him" (157, 160). Wealth is not to be used selfishly. The afflicted souls of Parable I, and the distressed souls of Parable 10, therefore, are to be bought or ransomed by the good Christian. Failure to do so renders Christians guilty of grave sin.<sup>32</sup>

*The Shepherd's* instructions represent a divergence from those of Ignatius. The Shepherd does not caution the reader regarding slaves of desire. It seems that by the late first/early second century, there were at least two trains of thought on the issue of the downtrodden of society and our responsibilities toward them as Christians. The distrust and perhaps even hatred of slaves does not permeate the writings of *The Shepherd*.

Toward the end of the fourth century, another catechetical document appeared. *The Apostolic Constitutions* is a composite document that, like *The Shepherd of Hermas*, instructs the faithful on Christian behavior. Also like *The Shepherd*, this document encourages Christian congregations to offer communal aid to the needy.

Therefore, maintain and clothe those who are in want from the righteous labor of the faithful. And such sums of money as are collected from (the faithful), appoint to be laid out in the redemption of the saints, the deliverance of slaves, and of captives, and of prisoners and of those that have been condemned by tyrants to single combat and death in the name of Christ. Do not go to any of those public meetings, unless to purchase a slave and save a soul or to buy things as needed.<sup>33</sup>

Christians are being advised to go to the slave markets and purchase slaves with monies, presumably from a common fund. Harrill comments that the souls of the slaves purchased by the Christian would be saved because they would be converted to Christianity (180). Like *The Shepherd of Hermas*, the *Apostolic Constitutions* represents a clear divergence from Ignatius' cautions regarding corporate manumission. Again, here is an example of slaves' being regarded as worthy of the help of the more fortunate, and hatred and disdain are absent from *The Apostolic Constitutions*.

B. *Fourth Century Church Fathers*

It was in the fourth century that slavery finally became fodder for the minds of Christian intellectuals. Three leaders of the early Church, Gregory of Nyssa, John Chrysostom, and Augustine, raised questions regarding slavery as an institution. But all did not reach the same conclusions. While we have already seen how Augustine regarded slaves and the institution of slavery, the views of Gregory of Nyssa and John Chrysostom act as a breath of fresh air in the stagnant atmosphere of disdain for slaves.

The first anti-slavery text of the patristic age was written by Gregory of Nyssa in AD 385. Gregory points out the hypocrisy of owning a fellow human being who has the same body and soul as the slave owner:

“I have owned slaves, both men and women.”

You condemned a person to slavery whose nature is free and independent, and you make laws opposed to God and contrary to His natural law. For you have subjected one who was made precisely to be lord of the earth, and whom the Creator intended to be a ruler, to the yoke of slavery, in resistance to and rejection of His divine precept. Have you forgotten what limits were given to your authority? Your rulership has been limited to the extent, namely, that you may only have ownership over brute animals . . .

How is it that you disregard the animals which have been subjected to you as slaves under your hand, and that you should act against a free nature, bringing down one who is of the same nature as yourself, to the level of four-footed beasts or inferior creatures? For the only proper slaves of mankind are the animals devoid of intelligence. “Grass must grow for cattle; those faithful servants of man must have their fresh feed” (Psalm 103:14). But you have abused the nature of service and ownership, and have made service into slavery and have obtained ownership over the owner.

“I have owned slaves, both men and women.”

Tell me, what price did you pay to acquire them? What is the equivalent in goods for the cost of human nature? How much, in terms of money, is the value of intelligence? What price did you pay, in obols, for the image of God? For how many staters did you buy a human nature made by God? . . . For One who has known human nature said that not even the whole world is a sufficient price for a just payment for the soul of a man. . . .

Is there any difference in any respect between slave and master? . . . Do they not both preserve their nature by eating the same food? Is there not the same structure of internal organs? Do not both become the same dust after death? Do they not have the same judgment? Do they not go to the same heaven or the same hell? You who are equal in all respects, why should you be superior such that while you are only a man you think you can be the owner of a man?<sup>34</sup>

While Gregory very eloquently pointed out the hypocrisy of slavery, his concerns were largely ignored. One wonders to what extent his views were influenced by the work of Greek antecedents of the Classical period. In several of his tragedies, for example, Euripides explores the concept of slavery and freedom. He shows in many instances that slave and free are the same, differing only in social construct but not in virtue. Consider for example *Ion*, in which he puts the following words into the mouth of a loyal slave:

If there is aught that causes slaves to blush,  
It is the name; in all else than the free  
The slave is nothing worse, if he be virtuous.<sup>35</sup>

In this same period as Gregory of Nyssa, John Chrysostom emerged. His homilies are filled with references to slaves. Like Ignatius and Tertullian, many of Chrysostom's comments reflect a negative stereotype. In Homily 16 on I Timothy, for example, he states that masters do more good for slaves than slaves do for masters:

Masters contribute greater benefits to their servants than servants to their masters. For the former furnish the money to purchase for them sufficient food and clothing, and bestow much care upon them in other respects, so that the masters pay them the larger service . . . they suffer much toil and trouble for your repose, ought they not in return to receive much honor from you, their servants?<sup>36</sup>

Like Tertullian, Chrysostom's image of slaves is that of quarrelsome individuals, which he uses to illustrate his point in Homily 51 on John 7:37-44. He comments on the meaning of the phrase "Vengeance is mine: I will repay, says the Lord" (Romans 12:19):

Now, if we have slaves and if, when they quarrel with one another, they do not submit their differences to us for judgment and punishment, but take care of them themselves, even if they submit to us a thousand times over, we are not requited but even are offended. "Runaways and knaves," we say, "you ought to have submitted everything to my judgment. But since you have anticipated and taken revenge, do not bother me in the future."<sup>37</sup>

In his nineteenth homily, he interprets Paul in I Corinthians 7:21-24 to mean that slaves should not try to obtain their freedom. Chrysostom suggests that there are some advantages to remaining in bondage.

Astonishing! Where has he put slavery? As circumcision profits not, and uncircumcision does no harm, so neither doeth slavery, nor yet liberty. And that he might point out this with surpassing clarity, he says "But

even if thou canst become free, use it rather," that is, rather continue as a slave. Now upon what possible ground does he tell the person who might be set free to remain a slave? He means to point out that slavery is no harm but rather an advantage.<sup>38</sup>

But in other homilies, Chrysostom presents an alternate view of slavery. He encourages Christian masters to free their slaves. He makes his point elaborately in Homily 40 on I Corinthians:

For, why hast thou many servants? Since as in our apparel we ought to follow our need only, and in our table, so also in our servants. What need is there then?

None at all. For, in fact, one master need only employ one servant; or rather two or three masters one servant. But if this be grievous, consider them that have none and enjoy more prompt attendance. For God hath made men sufficient to minister unto themselves, or rather unto their neighbor also. And if thou believe it not, hear Paul saying "These hands ministered unto my necessities, and thou them that were with me" (Acts xx.34). . . . For to that end did God grant us both hands and feet, that we might not stand in need of servants. Since not at all for need's sake was the class of slaves introduced, else even along with Adam had a slave been formed; *but it is the penalty of sin and punishment of disobedience*. But when Christ came, He put an end to this. . . . So that it is not necessary to have a slave: or if it be at all necessary, let it be about one only, or at the most two. What mean the swarms of servants? For as the sellers of sheep and the slave-dealers, so do our rich men take their round, in the baths and in the forum. However, I will not be too exact. We will allow you to keep a second servant. But if thou collect many, thou dost it not for humanity's sake, but in self indulgence. Since if it be in care for them, I bid thee occupy none of them in ministering to thyself, but when thou hast purchased them and hast taught them trades whereby to support themselves, let them go free. But when thou scourgest, when thou putteth them in chains, it is no more a work of humanity.

I know that I give disgust to my hearers, but what must I do? For this I am set, and I shall not cease to say these things, whether anything come of them or not (248, emphasis mine).

This is a remarkable document. Chrysostom links slavery to our fall from grace and considers slavery to be the result of sin. But he also sees the coming of Jesus as *absolving* that sin. He exhorts his congregation to avoid having slaves, or at least more than one or two. And the good Christian will teach slaves a trade and then set them free. Most importantly, slaves should not be used for their owners' selfish purposes. The implication here is that slaves are to be bought precisely to teach them a trade and eventually grant their liberty. And John instructs his congregation not to beat their slaves or put them in chains.

John admits that he is probably annoying his congregation, and that nothing might happen. And nothing did, at least not in the big picture, for a long time. But now, in nearly the same generation, we have two documents by church fathers condemning slavery. Both documents come from the Eastern Church. Perhaps, at this point, the Church was moving closer to realization of the oppression that slavery represented.

#### IV. CONCLUSION

It seems that images of slavery and slaves in the early Church were often conflicting and confusing. The images presented to the early Christians through the eyes of Tertullian call to mind negative social stereotypes, while Ignatius warns masters not to allow slaves to become “puffed up” and advises against corporate manumission. Both speak not to slaves but to slaveholders. And the words of both are laced with contempt for slaves. The early canons reinforce this negative image, and support the idea that slaves are subordinate to masters in terms of their value.

Early catechetical documents, however, reflect negative images of slaves as individuals as well as criticism of slavery as an institution and the responsibilities of Christians toward slaves and their liberation. *The Didache* reflects the stereotypical image of Tertullian and reaffirms the master’s role as head of household and  $\tau\upsilon\pi\omicron\varsigma$  of God. But *The Shepherd of Hermas* and *The Apostolic Constitutions*, while still purporting to address the slaveholding population, instruct the masters that it is their duty to free slaves. John Chrysostom and Gregory of Nyssa attack social convention and advocate for manumission of Christian slaves. But Augustine reinforces social convention, teaching that slavery comes from God and is a just punishment for sin. This level of contempt for slaves, as well as for former slaves who had been freed and their descendants, permeated not only the early Church, but extends even to modern society. And it is no small wonder that the clergy and laity of the later Church reflected this confusion and contempt in their attitudes regarding enslavement of Africans.

#### NOTES

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every attempt to ensure accuracy, any errors that might remain are solely my own responsibility and not the fault of the *JHS* editors or the reviewers.

2. Keith Bradley, *Slavery and Society at Rome* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 145-146.

3. I Corinthians 7:21-24; Ephesians 6:5-9; Colossians 3:22-24; I Timothy 6:1-2.

4. Philemon 12-19. James Harrill (*The Manumission of Slaves in Early Christianity* [Tubingen: J.C.B. Mohr, 1995], 3) suggests that Paul may even be calling for the manumission of Onesimus.

5. I Corinthians 12:20-22. In James 2:1-4 we see a similar theme.

6. Kurt Niederwimmer and Harold W. Attridge, *The Didache: A Commentary (Hermeneia—A Critical and Historical Commentary on the Bible)*, trans. Linda M. Maloney (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1998), 111.

7. Xenophon, *de Equitandi ratione* 11.12.

8. Plato, *Republic*, 377b.

9. Pausanias, *Description of Greece* 8.37.2; Artemidorus, *Oneirocriticus* 2.45.

10. For the meaning and usage of τυπος, refer to H.G. Liddell and R. Scott (1996), *Greek-English Lexicon with a Revised Supplement* (Clarendon Press).

11. Carolus Josephus Hefele, *Apostolic Fathers* (Tubingae: Early Christian Collection, 1872), 140. Note that, in this same synod, parents of a betrothed man or woman who fail to keep their promises are excommunicated for three years [canon 54]. First-time adulterers are excommunicated for five years.

12. R.F. Willetts, *The Civilization of Ancient Crete* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1977), 171.

13. Bradley, 17.

14. Marc Léopold Bloch, *Slavery and Serfdom in the Middle Ages*, trans. William R. Beer (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1975), 14.

15. *City of God*, xix.xv.

16. Arthur A. Rupprecht, "Attitudes of Slavery Among the Church Fathers," in *New Dimensions in New Testament Study*, eds. Richard Longenecker and Tenney Merrill (Michigan: Zondervan Publishing House, 1974), 272.

17. Bradley, 37.

18. John Maxwell, *Slavery and the Catholic Church* (Chichester: Rose [for] the Anti-Slavery Society for the Protection of Human Rights, 1975), 41.

19. Pope Gregory I, ca. 540-604, *Pastoral Care; Ancient Christian Writers Series*, no. 11, translated and annotated by Henry Davis (Westminster, Md: Newman Press, 1950), 100.

20. Pierre Dockes, *Medieval Slavery and Liberation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979), 146.

21. William Schoedel, *Ignatius of Antioch: A Commentary on the Letters of Ignatius of Antioch* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1985), 269.

22. Harrill, *Manumission*, 161, 186 (see n. 4).

23. Jennifer Glancy, "Obstacles to Slaves' Participation in the Corinthian Church," *JBL* 117 (1998): 500.

24. Moses Finley, *Ancient Slavery and Modern Ideology* (New York: The Viking Press, 1980), 96; Seneca *Controversies* iv pref. 10.

25. Kirsopp Lake, *The Apostolic Father vol. 1* (Loeb Classical Library, 1912), 273.

26. 47.1; 49.56.

27. *Laws*, 936d.

28. A. Cleveland Coxe, D.D., *Latin Christianity: Its Founder, Tertullian* (Buffalo: The Christian Literature Publishing Company, 1885), 661.

29. A. LeSaint, *Tertullian. Treatise on Marriage and Remarriage: To His Wife. An Exhortation to Chastity, Monogamy. Ancient Christian Writers Series*, no. 13 (Westminster, MD: Newman Press, 1951), 33.

30. Reverend Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson, eds., *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*.

## 2002/03] IMAGES OF SLAVERY IN THE EARLY CHURCH 45

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31. Carolyn Osiek, *The Shepherd of Hermas* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1999), 4.
32. Harrill, 179.
33. Harrill, 179.
34. Maxwell, 33.
35. Euripides, *Ion*, 855-857. <http://classics.mit.edu/Euripides/ion.html>
36. Philip Schaff, *Saint Chrysostom and Saint Augustin* (New York: Whittaker Press, 1889), 465.
37. Roy Joseph Deferrari, *The Fathers of the Church. A New Translation. Saint John Chrysostom: Commentary on Saint John the Apostle and Evangelist. Homilies 1-88*, trans. Sister Thomas Aquinas Goggin, S.C.H. (New York: Fathers of the Church, Inc., 1960), 41.
38. Schaff, 108.

