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The Most Important Social Problem of New Testament Times — Slavery

A Conference Essay

By E. C. MALTE

The student of the Greek New Testament will readily note the frequent occurrence of the word δούλος, "slave," and ἐλεύθερος, "free man." The second word in Paul's Letter to the Romans is δούλος: "Paul, slave of Jesus Christ." Paul uses the word more than twenty times in his Letters. He says (Phil. 2:7) that Christ took upon Himself the nature of a slave, μορφὴν δούλου. Paul speaks of himself and all fellow Christians as δούλοι Χριστοῦ, "slaves of Christ," and urges us not to become δούλοι ἀνθρώπων, "slaves of men." His letters to the Ephesians and Colossians contain explicit rules for the conduct of slaves and masters. Living in a society in which it is estimated that more than half of the population belonged to the slave class, it is little wonder that Paul often uses this word and its antonym, free man.

It is regrettable that most English translations of the New Testament have weakened the full force of the word δούλος and have rendered it "servant." Goodspeed* calls attention to the difference between "slave" and "servant" when he says: "To reduce such terms to 'servant,' as the King James generally does, is to forget the fact that the New Testament Greek has two or three other words for 'servant,' that is, an employed person, who could be discharged or resign; διάκονος and ὑπηρέτης certainly have that meaning, and παῖς may also be rendered 'servant,' though it, too, may mean 'slave.'"

If we keep the full meaning of this word δούλος, which occurs 121 times in the New Testament, clearly before us, how much more significant the words of our Savior become which He addressed to His disciples in John 15:12-15: "This is My commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends. You are My friends if you do what I com-

* Goodspeed, Edgar H., *Problems of New Testament Translation*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago (1945), p. 139.

mand you. No longer do I call you δούλους [slaves, not merely servants], for the δούλος [slave] does not know what his master is doing; but I have called you friends, for all that I have heard from My Father I have made known to you." To tone down the word δούλος here and translate "servant" weakens the force of the contrast which the Savior evidently intended.

Or again, if we take the words of the elder brother in Luke 15:29 and translate them as Weymouth does in his translation, namely, "all these years I have been *slaving* for you," the real spirit and attitude of the elder brother becomes evident. He looked upon his work these many years as *slavery*. The word "serve" has such high uses in common speech today that it does not accurately convey the relation of this elder brother to the father and to his work. Work for him on his father's estate was regarded as conscript toil. It was a labor without love and without respect and esteem for his father. His harsh and bitter feeling toward the brother who had returned and who was now being welcomed by the father is clear when we permit his word ἰδοὺ τοσαῦτα ἔτη δουλεύω σοι to say in English what they mean.

In the following we propose to ascertain what light, if any, Greek and Latin sources, and especially the papyrus documents unearthed in recent decades, shed on what has been called "the most important social problem of New Testament times." The duties and rights of slaves and free men, the price paid for slaves in the market, the manner in which slaves might be set free, the price paid for their freedom—these and many other questions connected with the slavery problem are understood in the light furnished by many Greek and Latin references and the papyrus documents.

In his *Theologisches Woerterbuch zum Neuen Testament* Kittel† says:

Das Kennzeichen des griechischen Selbstbewusstseins ist der Freiheitsgedanke. Der Grieche findet seine persoenliche Wuerde darin, dass er frei ist. Damit ist die Abgrenzung des griechischen Selbstbewusstseins gegenueber allem vollzogen, was unter den Begriff δουλείειν faellt; denn da, wo es zum δουλείειν kommt, ist ja die menschliche Autonomie beseitigt und ein fremder Wille dem eigenen uebergeordnet. Der δούλος

† Kittel, Gerhard, *Theologisches Woerterbuch zum Neuen Testament*, Stuttgart. Verlag von W. Kohlhammer (1933—1939).

ist einer, der nicht nur keine Moeglichkeit besitzt, sich einer ihm aufgetragenen Arbeit zu entziehen, sondern auch nicht einmal das Recht hat, sich fuer irgend etwas zu entscheiden, der vielmehr nur das zu tun hat, was ein anderer getan haben will, und das zu unterlassen, was ein anderer unterlassen sehen will. Im δούλος hat darum das freie Griechentum von jeher seinen eigenen Antitypus gefunden, und im δουλεύειν hat es das gesehen, was sein Wesen in sein Gegenteil verkehren wuerde. Fuer einen Dienst, der dem Dienst des Sklaven seiner inneren oder seiner aeusseren Struktur nach auch nur von ferne aehnlich ist, hat darum der Grieche nur Ablehnung und Verachtung.

"You know perfectly what it is to be a slave," Herodotus reports some Greeks as saying to a Persian official who was urging them to submit to Xerxes. "Freedom you Persians have never tried, to know how sweet it is. If you had, you would urge us to fight for it not only with our spears, but even with hatchets."

The Athenians with but rare exceptions regarded slavery as natural and justifiable. In his treatment of this subject Aristotle characterizes in heartless and legal fashion the slave as being merely *ἐμπνεύχον ὄργανον*, "a breathing machine, or tool, a piece of animated property." He asserts that some men are so inferior that they may be regarded as slaves by nature. Aristotle defends the enslavement of Orientals and Scythians as natural on the ground that the Orientals had intelligence without courage and the Scythians had courage without intelligence. Aristotle's view was generally accepted by Greek law and public opinion. A slave could be bought and sold at pleasure, could be given in pledge or taken in distraint just like any other commodity or property. A slave's family relationships were not recognized by law; he could not own property, and any money he might earn legally belonged not to him but to his master.

Plato in his *Republic* never spoke against slavery; in his old age he actually advocated it. Still there are signs that he was troubled by it. He says: "A slave is an embarrassing possession" and suggests that slaves should be well treated and not abused or insulted.

Whence came these slaves? A few were born in servitude of slave parents; the majority were captives of war. Slavery arises from two main causes, namely, want and war.

Privation and famine compel a man, a family, or a tribe, to accept terms of service and maintenance from others to which under normal conditions they would never submit. War, a yet more potent cause, brings in its train foreign captives, who are forced to enter a condition of subjection to the will of their conquerors. War also carries in its wake desolation of home and of all means of subsistence. Whole populations are rendered destitute and flee for protection and maintenance to some friendly but alien race, and thus voluntarily enter into the position of slaves as a refuge from famine and death.

Roman history tells us that Domitian built the famous Arch of Titus in A. D. 81 to commemorate his predecessor's sack of Jerusalem and humiliation of the Jews. Many of these arches of triumph were erected in Rome and other parts of the empire. Except for a few that served as city gates, these arches had no utilitarian purpose whatever. One supposition is that these arches of triumph represented the yoke of submission under which captives were forced to march after being defeated.

Among the Romans it was taken for granted that much of the labor of everyday life, including agriculture and the arts and crafts, should be performed by slaves. The Romans used the Greek island of Delos as one convenient center for a slave trade so big that some contemporary accounts put the number of slaves sold under the hammer there in a single day as high as 10,000.

The wars of Rome during her great period of expansion had filled the city and the country districts with slaves, most of them members of races of a high civilization. In a rich family there were men and women skilled in every task from the most menial to the most expert. There was no need for a Roman to go outside his household for any craftsman. Slaves were secretaries, copyists, accountants, carpenters, metalworkers, jewelers, weavers, plumbers, cooks, bakers, managers of country estates as well as rural laborers, painters, artists, surgeons, tutors, physicians, teachers.

According to Roman law a slave could be dealt with as any other piece of property; in theory and according to the custom of the ancients his life had been forfeited by defeat, and his enslavement was a merciful commutation of his death. They could be flogged or branded at their master's will. In

a criminal trial their evidence was given under torture, and strict limits were set to their acquisition of property.

The country slaves had hard and heavy work. The Roman was a hard and stern man; he did not spare himself, so why, he argued, should he spare his slaves? They were to be cared for as long as they were useful to him; but then they were to be thrown aside. Cato believed that "worn-out cattle, sick sheep, broken tools, old and sick slaves, and other useless things should be sold." He also gave instructions as to the food and clothing that should be given to the farm slave. In addition to his regular allowance he might have a few of the olives that drop of themselves and a small quantity of sour wine. "As for clothes, give out a tunic and a cloak once in two years. When you give a tunic or cloak, take back the old ones to make quilts. Once in two years should shoes be given."

The country slave had very little opportunity of gaining his freedom. He could run away, but he was sure to be caught; and when he was returned to his master, he was cruelly flogged and the letter *F* for *fugitivus* was branded on his forehead. The country slave seldom saw his owner; and the rewards of the overseer, or manager, of the farm or estate depended upon squeezing every possible profit from the chattels entrusted to his lash. The wages of the slave on the great estates were as much food and clothing as would enable him to toil from sunrise to sunset every day barring occasional holidays until senility. If he complained or disobeyed, he worked with chains about his ankles and spent the night in an *ergastulum*, a subterranean dungeon.

In the city the lot of the slave was mitigated by humanizing contacts with his master and by the hope of some day gaining his freedom. The town slave had lighter duties and, as a rule, lived under better conditions. Sometimes his master would give one of his city slaves his freedom as a reward for long and faithful service. Or a slave might buy his freedom out of his savings, for it was possible for a town slave to earn and save a little money (*peculium*). He sometimes received gifts from his master or his master's friends, or if he was skilled in any occupation, he could occasionally find opportunities to practice it for his own benefit. In such ways he could slowly and laboriously save enough, but at the best

it was a long process, for the more valuable the slave, the greater was the price he must pay for his freedom.

In the imperial palace and in other great houses a very large number of slaves were employed. Augustus and Livia lived far more simply than any other imperial family, yet Livia had 600 slaves attached to her household. Such large numbers were necessary because the duties were so divided. Among the slaves Livia had a keeper of purple robes, of her morning dresses, of her imperial robes, of her state robes, of her overcoats; she had slaves for folding the clothes and a hairdresser, a keeper of perfumery, eight goldsmiths and many other jewelers, a keeper of her imperial shoes and of her sandals; the regulator for the hot and cold water for her bath and a keeper of her chair. There was also a governess for her favorite pet dog and a keeper of the family portraits.

There was, of course, much cruelty to slaves in many Roman households, and the absolute power of a master, unrestrained by principle of kindly feeling, was an unmitigated curse till it was limited by the humane legislation of the second century. Peter's reference (1 Pet. 2:18-25) to the cruelties and indignities often inflicted by the masters on their slaves would indicate that these were not isolated cases. But there must have been many houses, like that of the younger Pliny, where the slaves were treated, in Seneca's phrase, "as humble friends and real members of the family."

A slave might be bought for less than a hundred dollars in the open market, whereas another of superior quality might be sold for several thousand. High-grade dancing girls and mistresses for the wealthy Roman houses brought excellent prices. At auction men and women alike, stripped and sold naked, were handled and examined like animals. Strict laws protected the purchaser's interests with prescribed penalties for misrepresentation and fraud.

Slaves could be manumitted, that is, set free, and in such an event the slave paid a certain sum to his master as price for his liberty. He could not, however, claim the right to buy his freedom, as the purchase money was in the eye of the law his master's property. Since the slave could not enter into a contract recognized by law, manumission often took the form of a fictitious sale by the owner to some god; reg-

isters of these sales and manumissions to some god were preserved in the temples and many specimens have been found at Delphi and in many of the papyrus documents in Egypt.

The custom of manumission as practiced by the Greeks and Romans throws much light on many passages in Paul's letters. Among the various ways in which the manumission of a slave could take place by ancient law we find the solemn rite of fictitious purchase of the slave by some divinity. The owner comes with the slave to the temple, sells him there to the god, and receives the purchase money from the temple treasury. The slave is now the property of the god; not, however, a slave of the temple, but a protege of the god. Against all the world, especially his former master, he is a completely free man. The god will protect him now as a free man.

As an example of such manumission under the protection of some god, we quote in translation a papyrus document from Oxyrhynchus of the year 86 A. D.

Chaeremon to the agoranomus, greeting. Grant freedom to Euphrosyne, a slave, aged about thirty-five years, born in her owner's house of the slave Demetrous. She is being set at liberty under the sanction of Zeus, Earth and Sun, by ransom of her mistress Aloine, daughter of Common, son of Dionysius, of Oxyrhynchus, under the wardship of Common, the son of Aloine's deceased brother Dioscorus. The price paid is 10 drachmae of coined silver and ten talents, 3,000 drachmae of copper. Farewell. (Signatures.)

The following is one of many nursing contracts found in the papyri. Especially in time of famine, children of the poor, usually girls, were thrown on a village dung heap. Often they were recovered by a person who would have them reared as slaves.

The 12th year of Tiberius Caesar Augustus. Pachon 26th. In the village of Oxyrhynchus of the Thebaid. Taseus, daughter of Peteus, Persian of the Epigone, with her husband Petsiris, son of Horus, Persian of the Epigone, who is also her guardian and surety for the fulfillment of all the terms of this contract, both residents of the village of Tanais in the middle toparchy, enter into an agreement with Paapes, son of Philas, in the street, that they have received from him on the 17th of the present month Pachon, the female child to whom he has given the name Thermoutharion, whom he picked up from a dung heap to rear as a slave. Taseus is to rear and suckle it with her own milk, and is to care for it for

a term of 2 years from the present 17th day of Pachon, in return for the agreement made by Paapes to provide food and clothing and all other expenses incurred for the child, paying therefor 60 drachmae a year. Taseus further acknowledges that she together with her husband Petsiris, who is also her surety, has received 60 dr. in advance for the first year in cash from his house. At the end of this year Paapes will pay at once 60 drachmae in silver for the second year, and further he agrees to provide 2 cotylae of oil per month for the 2 years. Accordingly Taseus will of necessity provide every assistance and care for the child as is incumbent on her. She will not cohabit with her husband so as not to harm the milk, nor will she become pregnant, nor suckle any other child nor . . . And she will hand over the child to Paapes well nourished, as is incumbent upon her. If the child suffers any fatality which is plainly accidental Taseus will be held blameless, and if Paapes picks up another child to put in her care, she shall nurse it for the remaining period on the aforesaid terms; but if she does not wish to do so, she shall repay whatever she appears to owe for the term of nursing which still remains. If she violates the contract made in these terms, she shall repay to Paapes what she has received from him in silver, with an addition of 50% and 200 dr. as compensation for damages and penalty and an equal sum to the fiscus. Paapes shall have the right of exaction from the aforesaid parties and from whichever one he chooses and from all their property. This agreement is valid. I, Taseus, daughter of Peteus, have concluded the agreement. I shall nourish the infant Thermoutharion for 2 years. I have received 60 dr. in silver for its support, and I shall perform all the provisions of the aforesaid contract. I, Petsiris, son of Horus, have subscribed to this document as guardian of my wife, and I am her surety for the fulfillment of the above conditions. Heracledes, son of Theon, wrote on their behalf as they are unlettered. Paapes, son of Philas, consents to the above contract. . . . Honey-colored, round-faced, with a scar on the right knee.

The following papyrus document is typical of the many contracts for the sale of a slave that have been found in Egypt.

To the agoranomi of . . . from Sarapion, adopted son of Zoilus, son of Apion. I swear by the Emperor Caesar Titus Aelius Hadrianus Antonius Augustus Pius that I have sold to Agathodaemon, freedman of Heraclides and Sarapion, also called Dorion, both sons of Sarapion, belonging to the same city, the house-born slave Didymus, belonging to me and who came into my possession by inheritance from my aforesaid father by adoption, who was my paternal uncle and is now deceased. This slave is free of blemish save for epilepsy and leprosy, and I further swear that he is mine and is subject

to no mortgage nor have any other any right of alienation in any way, and I have the price of 1,300 dr. in silver, and guarantee the transaction. May it be well with me if I swear truly and the opposite if falsely. (Signatures.)

Do these recently discovered papyrus documents help us to understand the institution of slavery in the first century of the Christian era? We believe they do. Document upon document, discovered and translated and edited by scholars in Germany, England, and the United States, would seem to prove the correctness of Deissmann's contention, namely: "The stupendous force of dogmatic tradition and the fact that the word 'slave' with its satellites has been translated 'servant,' to the total effacement of its ancient significance in our Bibles, have brought it about that one of the most original and at the same time most popular appraisals of the work of Christ by Paul has been, I think, only vaguely understood among us. I refer to the metaphor of our redemption by Christ from the slavery of sin, the law, idols—a metaphor influenced by the customs and technical formulae of sacred manumissions in antiquity."

St. Paul is alluding to the custom referred to in these papyrus records when he speaks again and again of our being made free by Christ. Before we came to faith in Christ, all of us were δούλοι. This δουλεία in which Paul finds all men by nature is a slavery of ἀμαρτία (Rom. 6:6), a slavery of uncleanness, ἀκαθαρσία (Rom. 6:19), a slavery of diverse lusts, ἐπιθυμίας (Titus 3:3); a slavery unto the elements of the world, στοιχεῖα τοῦ κόσμου (Gal. 4:3, 9). By nature all of us are so completely under the control and complete subjection of these masters, that apart from Christ and without Christ it is impossible for us to serve any other master.

But thanks be to Christ, who by His death has freed us, paid the ransom price for us, and has delivered us from the slavery of sin. Paul describes this manumission, this emancipation, with some of the very terms that were used in Roman and Greek law for the manumission of slaves. Gal. 3:13: Χριστὸς ἡμᾶς ἐξηγόρασεν ἐκ τῆς κατάρας τοῦ νόμου, "Christ has redeemed us from the curse of the Law." Now we are no longer in δουλεία, slavery, but we have received υἱοθεσία, adoption (Gal. 4:5). Paul's admonition in Gal. 5:1 takes on added meaning. Τῇ ἐλευθερίᾳ ἡμᾶς Χριστὸς ἠλευθέρωσεν· στήκετε οὖν καὶ μὴ πάλιν ζυγῷ δουλείας ἐνέχεσθε, "For freedom Christ has

set us free; stand fast therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery." In numerous records of manumission the nature of the newly obtained liberty is illustrated by the enfranchised person's being expressly allowed henceforth to "do the things that he will." So the Christian is indeed a free man in Christ.

Some manumissions, again, expressly forbid, sometimes under heavy penalties, that the person set free should ever be made a slave again. We now see how wicked is the plan of those in Gal. 2:4: οἱτινες παρεισῆλθον κατασκοπεῖσαι τὴν ἐλευθερίαν ἡμῶν ἣν ἔχομεν ἐν Χριστῷ Ἰησοῦ, ἵνα ἡμᾶς καταδουλώσουσιν, "who slipped in to spy out our freedom which we have in Christ Jesus, that they might bring us into bondage." In the light of these papyrus documents we understand Paul's moving exhortation in 1 Cor. 7:23: Τιμῆς ἡγοράσθητε μὴ γίνεσθε δοῦλοι ἀνθρώπων, "You were bought with a price; do not become slaves of men."

For the saints in many of the congregations, such as those in Rome, Ephesus, Corinth, among whom there were certainly many slaves and freemen who had been slaves, Paul could not have found a more popular and vivid illustration of the past and present work of our Lord Jesus Christ. Christ gave them freedom from another slavery, redeeming with a price the slaves of sin and lusts and the Law — and that price no pious fiction, first received by Him out of the hard-earned money of the slave, but paid by Himself with the redemption money of His own blood, rousing up for freedom those who had been languishing in the chains of slavery.

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