Slavery and Asceticism in John of Ephesus’ *Lives of the Eastern Saints*

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**Summary**
This article examines the phenomenon of slavery – both institutional (being enslaved to other human beings) and divine (being enslaved to God) – and its relationship to asceticism in John of Ephesus’ (507-589 CE) *Lives of the Eastern Saints*. The study first examines the nature of institutional slavery in *Lives*. It is shown that John is somewhat indifferent with regards to institutional slaves – they are either depicted as symbols of the wealth and decadence of the elite, or part of the ascetic households of the virtuous. In both cases, though, the slaves serve to illuminate the vice or virtue of the masters (wicked masters have scores of slaves serving them, while virtuous masters are so exceptional that even their slaves follow the ascetic lifestyle). Slavery is no impediment to the ascetic vocation – slaves have a part to play in John vision of asceticism as social outreach. John’s views on divine slavery are less conventional. In *Lives*, the ideal slave of God (*ʿabdā d’Allāhā*) is not one who busies him- or herself with self-centered acts of self-mortification, but rather one who supports and cares for those who suffer, the poor, and the marginalized. In this regard, labor and service to society become the prime virtues of John’s slave of God. By promoting this quasi-utilitarian stance on divine slavery, John also positions himself against earlier traditions such as those in *Liber graduum* that view worldly labor and service as unfitting to the life of Perfection.

**Keywords**
John of Ephesus (a.k.a. John of Asia, c. 507-589 CE) was a Syrian Christian monk and missionary from the region of Amida in northern Mesopotamia. According to his own account, he entered the monastic life as a child, perhaps as young as four. Because of some congenital disease, John's parents had lost all their sons before they reached two years of age. When it seemed as if John would suffer a similar fate, his parents approached a local stylite named Maro, who told the parents to feed the child lentils if they wanted the boy to be healed. Indeed, the monk Maro’s prescription of lentils proved successful, and after two years his parents committed John to the monk, who would raise him in the monastic life. Some years later, in the 520s, John joined the monastery of Mar John Urtaya in Amida.¹

John was part of an eastern Christian community who disagreed with the “two-nature” christological formulations of the Council of Chalcedon (451 CE). These anti-Chalcedonians (or Monophysites/Miaphysites – that is, those who adhered more to a ‘one-nature’ christology)² suffered uneven bouts of persecution, with many anti-Chalcedonians settling in Egypt and others in Constantinople. John is especially known for his travels in the eastern Roman provinces and Egypt; he settled in Constantinople c. 540 in support of the anti-Chalcedonian refugee community in the city. Two years later, Emperor Justinian chose John to embark on a missionary campaign in Asia Minor, and also to establish churches and monasteries. Around 558 John was consecrated titular bishop of Ephesus by Jacob Burdʿaya. When persecutions against anti-Chalcedonians intensified, especially under the reign of Justin II in the 570s, John was imprisoned and died some years later (c. 589).

_Historia ecclesiastica_ and _Lives of the Eastern Saints_³ are John’s major extant works. I have selected _Lives of the Eastern Saints_ – a compendium of hagiographical narratives depicting the lives of different anti-Chalcedonian monks

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² For the purposes of this study, I shall use the term anti-Chalcedonian where appropriate. For a useful discussion on the problems of terminology related to Monophysitism/Miaphysitism see F. Millar, “The Evolution of the Syrian Orthodox Church in the Pre-Islamic Period: From Greek to Syriac?,” _JECS_, 21 (2013), pp. 51-58.

³ The Latin title for _Lives_ is _Commentarii de beatis orientalibus_, although in this article I shall use the more common English title.
and ascetics – as the focus of this study exactly because of its unique hagiographical style and, as I will show, alternative views on the ascetic vocation. As Susan Ashbrook Harvey has noted with reference to Lives: “The holy is not restricted to certain persons (nobles, leaders) nor to certain places (cities). It is found in the people and places of daily lives; it is found in the midst of the same events that would seem to deny God’s presence.” John’s Lives therefore presents us with a rare window into the everyday life of the inhabitants, both ascetics and regular villagers, of the sixth-century Syrian Orient. While heeding the regular cautions of working with hagiographical writings, Lives is nonetheless a useful albeit neglected source for the study of late antique social history. Harvey has demonstrated this utility in her monograph, aptly titled Asceticism and Society in Crisis (1990), which looks at how the social crises and pressures of sixth-century Amida, its surroundings, and the anti-Chalcedonian controversy more generally, shaped John’s ascetic vision. She argues convincingly that these social crises, brought about not only by imperial persecution but also by various natural disasters, compelled John to reimagine ascetic practice as one in service of society. This important finding will be discussed further in this study. Harvey’s work touches upon various social-historical aspects, including the tension between desert and urban asceticism (which become intermeshed in John’s vision), the purpose and effects of the ordination of anti-Chalcedonian leaders, and the transformation of the role of women in the ascetic context. On the latter point of women in John’s Lives, Harvey writes:

4 The Syriac text with an English translation of Lives can be found in John of Ephesus, Lives of the Eastern Saints, ed. and trans. by E.W. Brooks (PO, 17, 18, and 19), Paris, 1923-1925. The direct translation of the title from the Syriac is “A Book of the Histories concerning the Ways of Life of the Blessed Easterners”. It is therefore seen as a collection of histories/vitae, or in Syriac, tašʿītē. With reference to Lives, I shall use the term Tašʿītā followed by the number of the history, along with its location in PO. The introductory material in Brooks’ volumes also provides important biographical information of John of Ephesus.

5 Harvey, Asceticism and Society, p. 37.

6 Asceticism often had to respond to the needs of society in crisis. For instance, Basil of Caesarea had to redefine the nature and value of fasting in the context of famine. As both Susan Holman and Artemisa Rodrigues have shown, fasting becomes a response to social need—fasting is no longer simply abstaining from food, but also sharing one’s food with those who are starving. See S.R. Holman, The Hungry Are Dying: Beggars and Bishops in Roman Cappadocia (OSHT), Oxford, 2001; and A.C. Rodrigues, “The Role of Food and Eating Habits in the Ascetical Spirituality of Basil of Caesarea, Evagrius of Pontus and John Chrysostom,” LitNet Akademies (Godsdienstwetenskappe), 14.1 (2017) <http://www.litnet.co.za/role-food-eating-habits-ascetical-spirituality-basil-caesarea-evagrius-pontus-john-chrysostom>. 
The institutional partnership of asceticism and ecclesiastical organization was strong enough and stable enough to absorb even such threatening flexibility as the sanctioning of authoritative leadership for women. The sanctioning was itself a response to crisis. But the situation allowing women certain roles of impact was possible only in a period of grave unrest. It was not to become a permanent pattern. Even during the period of crisis, women's roles, although expanded, were still at the periphery of church activities.\(^7\)

If Harvey's findings are correct for the women in *Lives of the Eastern Saints*, to what extent do these observations apply to slaves? What are the roles of slaves in *Lives*, and how is the figure of the slave appropriated in John's broader ascetic discourse? The link between women and slaves is a useful one, since both women and slaves often found themselves at the edge of the periphery, socially and ascetically speaking. Now we find numerous references to slaves and slavery in *Lives*, and not surprisingly, considering that slavery was still part and parcel of daily life in the sixth-century East. The persistence of slavery in late antiquity has been affirmed, and it is now accepted that late ancient slavery did not slowly morph into medieval serfdom. The studies of Chris Wickham\(^8\) and Kyle Harper,\(^9\) in particular, have demonstrated this persistence of slavery in the later Roman empire. Youval Rotman's classic study on slavery in the Byzantine world further supports the case for the persistence of slavery in the period before the Middle Ages.\(^10\) Unfortunately, few have analyzed the occurrence of slavery in the Syrian Orient, although there are well-established analyses of slavery in the context of early Islam and the Arab conquests.\(^11\) This article forms part of a concerted effort to provide a social history of slavery in the Syrian Orient, with an emphasis on slaveholding in Syriac Christianity.\(^12\) This

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7 Harvey, *Asceticism and Society*, pp. 132-133.
12 I. Ramelli, *Social Justice and the Legitimacy of Slavery: The Role of Philosophical Asceticism from Ancient Judaism to Late Antiquity* (O ECS), Oxford, 2016, pp. 131-147, provides a basic
study will approach slavery in *Lives* from two angles: first, instances of slavery as (secular) institution will be analyzed with specific attention to the role of slaves in the daily life of the characters in the text, and as characters in themselves. Second, I shall also examine slavery as an ascetical discourse in John's thought. The discourse of slavery – which I have termed *doulology* \(^\text{13}\) – is quite common in *Lives*. Thus, this latter examination implies investigating some doulologically discursive ascetic themes in the text, including the concept of the ‘slave of God’, the enslavement of the body and its passions, and notions of ascetic service. I shall argue in this paper that slavery remains a fundamental concept in understanding Syrian Christian asceticism, and that in John's *Lives* we actually find the negotiation and reconstruction of various manifestations asceticism as ‘slavery to God’. John may be responding to established and enduring Syrian ascetic traditions, such as that characterized in *Liber graduum* (*Book of Steps*), as will be specifically shown. The study will therefore not only contribute to a better grasp of the lives of institutional slaves in the Syrian Orient, but also highlight how slavery was discursively appropriated in various ways to make sense of the ascetic vocation.

### 2 Institutional Slaves in *Lives of the Eastern Saints*

Upon reading John's *Lives*, one could easily overlook the slaves in the various narratives – their presence seems so natural that they barely merit any detailed comments. Slavery (*ܥܒ݂ܕܘܬܐ*; *ʿabdūtā*) was part of everyday life in sixth-century Syria and Mesopotamia, and John's work actually represents an important witness to the nature of slavery in this region and period. From the Sassanian side, due to various administrative refinements (especially with regards to tax collecting and record-keeping) and infrastructure repairs (notably dams and irrigation channels), agrarian productivity was high in sixth-century Mesopotamia, which meant that there was an increase in demand for cheap labour in the
region. What is more interesting is that the dependent laborers in the outlying villages of Mesopotamia, who were often exploited for their labor by aristocratic landholders, were often referred to as دَاڪَّه (‘abdē) in Syriac sources, which is a basic term designating slaves. The villagers were probably not slaves in the technical sense (that is, fungible human property). However, they might have been somewhat similar to Roman coloni, although with perhaps more mobility than actual coloni. The coloni were also land-bound peasants who could be commanded like ‘slaves’ (serui) by landowners. The use of the term دَاڪَّه may be more descriptive of the type of labour (agrarian), or vulnerability to labour exploitation by the elite, which characterized such villagers. And as Richard Payne has shown, owning land or not was probably far more decisive in determining one’s status. However, what is important to note in this regard is that in the rural areas of late antique Mesopotamia, the status distinctions between slaves and ‘freeborn’ villagers were probably less pronounced than in urban areas. As with fugitive slaves, we also hear of coloni fleeing and seeking asylum in monasteries.

16 For a full discussion of the status of Roman coloni see J. Banaji, Agrarian Change in Late Antiquity: Gold, Labour, and Aristocratic Dominance (ocm), Oxford, 2001, pp. 209-210. The question of the presence and status of land-bound coloni in Syria and Mesopotamia remains difficult to determine. In an email correspondence, David Pitz and Florian Battistella (Eberhard Karls University Tübingen, whom I thank for their advice) made me aware that there are no laws which address cases of ‘tied’ coloni for Syria specifically (although some general laws related to coloni were likely applied in Syria). See also C. Gray, Jerome: Vita Malchi. Introduction, Text, Translation, and Commentary (ocm), Oxford, 2015, p. 135. For a detailed discussion of the nature of the villages from which many of these labourers came, see still the foundational work of G. Tchalenko, Villages antiques de la Syrie du nord, 3 vols. (bah, 50), Paris, 1953; G. Tate, Les campagnes de la Syrie du Nord du 1er au vii® siècle: un exemple d’expansion démographique et économique dans les campagnes à la fin de l’antiquité (bah, 133), Paris, 1992; and see also C. Strube, Die "Toten Städte": Stadt und Land in Nordsyrien während der Spätantike, Mainz, 1996; P. Sarris, “Rehabilitating the Great Estate: Aristocratic Property and Economic Growth in the Late Antique East,” in: Recent Research on the Late Antique Countryside, ed. by W. Bowden, L. Lavan, and C. Machado (Late Antique Archaeology, 2), Leiden, 2004, pp. 55-71; and P. Sarris, Economy and Society in the Age of Justinian, Cambridge, 2006, pp. 121-126.
18 Rotman, Byzantine Slavery, pp. 148-150.
It must be remembered that even though John travelled extensively and wrote about slaves in different contexts (urban and rural) and various areas (from Syria and Cappadocia to Constantinople), his view of slaveholding was most likely shaped by his formative years in Amida. From John we benefit by attaining a glimpse of Byzantine slavery though a Syriac lens. This continuity is confirmed by the consistency of linguistic expressions related to slavery in Lives. If we turn to John’s accounts, it is interesting to see that he utilizes a broad semantic scope to denote slavery and servitude. Most importantly, John discerns between persons who are enslaved and hired servants. When he describes the former life of the Anzetene chorepiscopus Harfat, he states that his household had a “multitude of male and female slaves, and hired servants.”\footnote{John of Ephesus, Taṣʿītā 11; PO, 17.159: ܗܬܐܘܕܐܓܝܪ̈ܐܕܐܘܬܐܣܘܓܐܐܕܥܒ.} The male slaves are referred to as ܕܐ ܚܒ, while the female slaves are ܐܓܡ (ʾamhātā). The hired servants attached to Harfat’s household are called ܐܓܪ̈ܐ (ʾagīrē), which probably denotes agricultural labourers. These ܐܓܪ̈ܐ are discerned from the slaves linguistically, but mentioned alongside them, once again showing the close associations between these roles. We have a similar array of servile terms in the account of the trader-ascetic brothers, Elijah and Theodore, who later settled in Cappadocia, who have in their house “hired servants and male and female slaves” (ܗܬܐܘܐܓܝܪ̈ܐܘܥ) practising asceticism.\footnote{John of Ephesus, Taṣʿītā 31; PO, 18.583; see also PO, 18.581.} This triad of servile terms is most common in Lives.

But along with ܐܓܪ̈ܐ, John also sometimes uses the term ܫܢܐܡܫܡ (mšamšānē) in conjunction with ܕܐ ܚܒ to distinguish between slaves and servants.\footnote{John of Ephesus, Taṣʿītā 34; PO, 18.603.} However, in John’s Lives ܐܢܫܐ differ from ܐܓܪ̈ܐ in that the former seem specifically to denote clerical servants or deacons, while the latter appear to denote hired agricultural labourers, or perhaps servants more generally. There is also one instance, where John refers to the “confidential (or faithful) servants” (ܡܢܘܗܝܡܗܝ) of Theodore, the castrensis. The word ܡܗܝܡܢܐ (mhaymnā), albeit somewhat ambiguous in that it could simply refer to a “trustworthy servant”, often means “eunuch”\footnote{John of Ephesus, Taṣʿītā 57; PO, 19.202. See also E. Grypeou and H. Spurling, The Book of Genesis in Late Antiquity: Encounters between Jewish and Christian Exegesis (Jewish and Christian Perspectives Series, 24), Leiden, 2013, pp. 348-349.} – eunuchs commonly served as administrative slaves in the Byzantine courts, and if Theodore was indeed castrensis, it would not be surprising if he had eunuchs under his command.\footnote{Interestingly enough, the office of castrensis sacri palatii itself was, at times, occupied by a eunuch, although John does not give us enough information to make such a deduction about Theodore. See especially S. Tougher, The Eunuch in Byzantine History and Society,} These servants, at least, are
also discerned from Theodore's regular ܐܦ ܗܿܢܘܢ ܢܟܦܐܝܬ ܡܫܡܿܫܝܢ ܗܘܘ ܠܗ. John's almost conscientious differentiation between slaves and servants may further support the fact that on a grassroot's level, and especially in rural Syria and Mesopotamia, such distinctions were not always obvious.

John also uses derivatives of ܛܠܝܐ (ṭalyā) in some instances to refer to a young slave. The Greek and Latin equivalents are παῖς and puer respectively. These terms are often used to refer to young slaves or slaves doing menial work. The lay monk Tribunus has two "slave boys" (ܓܟܠܐ) assisting him in the monastery, "who also served him devoutly."24 In this specific instance we are not sure whether these are personal slaves whom Tribunus brought into the monastery, or whether they are children who were already living in the monastery.25 Interestingly enough, John uses the word ܢܟܦܐ (nakpāʾit) to describe how the slave boys serve Tribunus. Brooks has translated the term as 'devoutly', but it could also be translated as 'chastely' or 'prudently'. The term, on the one hand, may highlight the discipline and modesty (ܢܟܦܘܬܐ; nakpūtā) slaves and children had to exhibit in a monastery. On the other hand, John may be hinting at the nature of the relationship between Tribunus and the young boys, inferring that the relationship between the master and the young slaves was chaste; that is, there was no trace of sexual misconduct. Slaves, particularly young slaves (classified as ܐܛܠܠܝ or, in Greek sources, as παἰδες), were often victims of sexual abuse.26

24 John of Ephesus, Tašʿītā 44; PO, 18.665: ܕܐܦ ܗܿܢܘܢ ܢܟܦܐܝܬ ܡܫܡܿܫܝܢ ܗܘܘ ܠܗ. See also  Tašʿītā 56; PO, 19.198.

25 In this case it should be remembered that the differences between a being a child and being a slave, in a monastery, were often faint. See especially the work of A. Papaconstantinou, "Notes sur les actes de donation d'enfant au monastère thébain de Saint-Phoibamon," JFP, 32 (2002), pp. 83-105; and M.C. Giorda, "De la direction spirituelle aux règles monastiques: Pêchés, penitence et punitions dans le monachisme pachomien (IVe– Ve siècles)," CollChrOr, 6 (2009), pp. 95-113, both focusing on an Egyptian monastic context.


We can therefore deduce with some certainty that the combination of دܐ andipingụ exclusively refers to male and female slaves respectively (with referring to young or menial slaves), who are then also discerned from different classes of hired labourers or appointed stewards and deacons. Moreover, this expansive range of servile terms in John also serves to either indicate the excessive luxury of some of the characters or the complete ascetic devotion of others. As was common in early Christian moral discourse, John is fond of highlighting excessive slaveholding as a prime characteristic of the decadent lives of the elite. The riches of Harfat’s household, which vex his soul, include a multitude of male and female slaves and, as if they were not enough, numerous hired servants. In the life of Thomas and Stephen, Thomas is described as possessing a considerable demesne (νουσία) “and male and female slaves and, and great riches; and he was so luxurious and dainty that he used to clean his face and his hands with water more than ten times a day.” In this description of Thomas, the fact that he possesses many slaves is synonymous with his luxurious and decadent, and seemingly effeminate, former lifestyle. In late ancient thought, being too dependent on slaves was often a symbol of effeminacy. In an earlier Syrian context, John Chrysostom, for instance, believed that men could go without slaves, but women, due to their “delicate” (ἁπαλή) and soft nature, were allowed to have some slaves. In John’s Lives, Thomas is also described as being “luxurious and dainty” (μνήμη ὀμοίωσις), terms denoting weakness and inability that call his masculinity into question. The opposite is seen in the case of Simeon the Scribe (and his patriarch, whom Simeon imitates). In John’s account, Simeon is eager to perform service (even highly servile tasks like cooking and taking care of guests). John’s description does not imply that Simeon and the patriarch are servile, but that they are self-sufficient and masculine. Simeon has many slaves and deacons but, despite his old age, he does not actually need them:

27 Harper, Slavery, pp. 51-53. Unfortunately, determining what number of slaves actually represented a ‘multitude’ is difficult to ascertain.

28 The same is true of Thomas the Armenian’s father. See John of Ephesus, Tašṭā 21; PO, 17.284.

29 John of Ephesus, Tašṭā 13; PO, 17.191-192: “_traitsaܐ ܗܫܬܐ ܘܥܘܬܪܐ ܣܓܝܐܐ ܗܼܘ ܛܘܒܢܐ ܬܐܘܡܐ ܩ݀ܢܐ ܗܘܐ ܘܗܟܢܐ ܕܐ ܘܐܡ ܐܡ ܘܥܒ ܝܐ ܕܘܗܝ ܡܿܪܩ ܗܘܐ ܒܡ ܗܝ ܐܝ ܬܐ ܒܝܘܡܐ ܒܠܚܘܕ ܠܐܦܘ ܓܐܐܼ ܗܘܐ ܘܡܿܚܬܪ. ܐܝܟܢܐ ܕܠܘ ܥܣܪ̈ ܙܒܢ.” See also the discussion in Rotman, Byzantine Slavery, p. 115.

He personally and with his own hands performed all the service; and, as the patriarch, when he possessed all that host of slaves and servants, when he saw the men who were received by him as guests, did not order someone else to run to the herd to fetch the calf, but ran himself in his old age that he might be the receiver of the blessing and not another, so this man with all that advanced old age used himself to perform all the service of the whole day.\footnote{31}

The multitude or ‘host’ of slaves and servants at the disposal of Simeon (and the patriarch before him) is emphasized to further valorize his commitment to service. Self-sufficiency and service now become masculine traits; we will return to the self-sufficient and servile Simeon shortly.

There is then also a sense of irony in the tale where the saints Mary and Euphemia, who are women, rebuke the wealthy on the basis of their decadence and excessive slaveholding: “Is it well that you thus sit yourself while slaves stand and wait upon you, and enjoy a variety of tastes in dainty foods and in wines, and of pure bread and splendid rugs, while God is knocked down in the street and swarms with lice and faints from his hunger, and you do not fear him?”\footnote{32} Once again, the over-reliance on slaves is associated with weakness, effeminacy, and excess. The rich are contrasted with the classic image of the ascetic. The rich, here, recline, while the ascetic had an aversion to lying down; they are served by slaves, while the ascetic is self-sufficient and has no need; they eat delicacies and drink wine, while the ascetic fasts; they ignore the plights of God in the poor, while the ascetic – in John’s new vision of asceticism – responds to the poor and society in crisis.

Excessive slaveholding is therefore associated with the social injustice of the rich and powerful. The wicked magistrate in the lives of Abraham and Maro is also characterized as “an abominable and impious man, an oppressor of the poor, and one who caused orphans and widows to groan, and a perpetrator of all wicked deeds of covetousness and of injustice and of rapine; and he had much property and a great house, and male and female slaves.”\footnote{33}

\footnote{31} John of Ephesus, \textit{Tašʿītā} 34; PO, 18.603-604 (my italics): “

\footnote{32} John of Ephesus, \textit{Tašʿītā} 12; PO, 17.179: “

\footnote{33} John of Ephesus, \textit{Tašʿītā} 4; PO, 17.72: “
But it is not slaveholding per se that is the reason for the social injustice of the rich – we shall see shortly that slavery in itself is not unjust in Lives – but the fact that one does not use one's slaves, as with all other property, to the benefit of the needy and the church. If we return to the lives of Thomas and Stephen, we see that the slaves in Stephen's household are utilized to help the needy, while Sosiana sends her slaves with the costly clothing of her husband, who passed away, to the church in order that cloths and veils be made from it.

In John's Lives, slaves are socially and literarily positioned somewhere between personhood and property. No names of slaves are given, and they are mostly listed with the property of the wealthy elite. This point is evident in the account of the wicked magistrate in the lives of Abraham and Maro. When the magistrate insults Maro, we read that fire came down from heaven and engulfed the man's house and all his possessions. The magistrate escaped naked, along with his domestic slaves. So the slaves escape, and do not immediately suffer because of their master's iniquity. However, later in the narrative, we read that some of the slaves died, and others ran away, showing that the loss of the magistrate's life and possessions was complete.

In Lives institutional slaves mostly function in a referential manner – they are often narrative foils that point to something else. Unlike the women in John's accounts, slaves are not afforded a notable place in the various narratives. Located somewhere between personhood and property, institutional slaves are nameless and mostly remain in the background of John's Lives. However, slaves are afforded some value and meaning when they become part of the ascetic project, to which we now turn.

3 Slaves and/as Ascetics

In the development of Syrian ascetical theology and practice, we find that various social institutions must be renounced in order to attain perfection. In some of the earliest traditions, marriage (and sexual intercourse) was one such institution that was considered by some as totally incompatible with the ascetic vocation and monastic life. Slavery, however, is afforded a far more am-

34 John of Ephesus, Tašītā 13; PO, 17.212.
36 John of Ephesus, Tašītā 4; PO, 17.74-76.
ambiguous position than marriage in early Syrian ascetic thought. While in the past some have viewed so-called ‘encratism’ as an extremely rigorous expression of the ascetic vocation, apparently characteristic in early Christian Syria, more recent deconstructions of ‘encratism’ show that the classification is perhaps less grounded in reality and more in the flagrant and often unrestricted invective of early Christian heresiologists. Encratism is a heresiological construct, and what is more, even when examining earlier expressions of rigorous asceticism, we find no explicit renunciation of slaveholding.

One of the most influential works that shaped early Syrian-Christian ascetic thought is the apocryphal *Acts of Thomas*. In it, the protagonist Judas Thomas is sold as a slave by his master, Christ, to an Indian merchant called Abban of King Gundaphorus. First a slave of Christ, Thomas, at the outset of *Acts*, becomes an institutional slave (while actually remaining a slave of Christ – the borders between secular, spiritual, and metaphorical slavery are impossible to discern in *Acts*). His status of institutional enslavement is not once noted as an impediment to his ascetic status – in fact, by becoming enslaved Thomas ascends back to a position of favor in Christ’s eyes. But while *Acts* explicitly renounces sexual intercourse, for instance, it does not expect the faithful to give up all their possessions, or to free their slaves.

Some ascetics would have indeed given up all their slaves, along with most of their possessions and wealth. And in John’s *Lives* we find ascetics who probably did see slaveholding as an impediment to the ascetic life. Harfat is bothered by the great number of slaves in the household, while Theodore the *castrensis* manumitted his slaves and gave them, as was the convention, gifts. In the case of Theodore we are not sure whether he manumits his slaves out of principle, or simply out of irritation, since his slaves were murmuring and finding fault with him due of his excessive almsgiving. The slaves were obviously

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43 John of Ephesus, *Taššṭā 11; PO*, 17.159.

44 Rotman, *Byzantine Slavery*, pp. 120-130.

concerned for their own wellbeing when witnessing Theodore’s extensive almsgiving. In John’s account of the lives of two Antiochenes, Procopius is told to also free all of his slaves and to give them gifts – however, he does this along with the renunciation of all of his wealth and his bride-to-be. The renunciation of slavery in this tale is encompassed by the more universal renunciation of wealth, inheritance, and marriage. As I have shown previously, for many people the ascetic lifestyle probably entailed getting rid of the majority of one’s slaves, while keeping a handful to assist with the most menial of tasks.46 Forcing people to free all their slaves would be considered an extreme and rigorous measure of asceticism, akin to heresy (like forcing persons not to marry – the renunciation of both marriage and slaveholding was what characterized the heretical group known as the Eustathians47).

John does admire ascetics who give away all their possessions and free their slaves with gifts, but they are not the ideal. Slavery was usually part of the secular distraction that was household management – (rabat baytayūtā) or οἰκονομία (oikonomia) – which was best left behind when entering the monastic life. But in John’s Lives, the monastic households become the point where charity meets society in crisis. Thus, it is better to use one’s slaves (and wealth) in service to society – asceticism becomes very pragmatic (and domestic) to John. As part of the ascetic cause, slavery should be used in service to society. As Harvey has shown, John’s ideal ascetic is one who remains in the city and comes to the aid of those who suffer. We have already seen the slaves of Stephen (from the lives of Thomas and Stephen) assisting in the ascetic cause. While he was practicing asceticism, John tells us that Stephen’s cell became “a house of rest for strangers” (حصّ صامدا).48 The life of Tribunus, an ascetic layman from the region of Sophanene, is also illustrative in this regard. He too comes from a family with a great demesne and many male and female slaves. He renounced marriage and his wealth, and in his old age, John tells us:

And so he was constant in maintaining a life of retirement and the performance of righteous acts, though he had reached old age, still hoping to attain the habit, passing most of his days in this our convent and that of

46 In De Wet, Preaching Bondage, pp. 105-113, I have referred to this as a shift from strategic slaveholding (that is, owning large numbers of slaves) to tactical slaveholding (owning only a few slaves to perform certain key tasks).

47 See “Synodical Letter of the Synod of Gangra,” in: The Seven Ecumenical Councils, ed. by H. Percival (NPNF2, 14), Buffalo, NY, 1900, pp. 253-287; and C.H. Turner, Ecclesiae occidentalis monumenta iuris antiquissima (= KOMIA), 2.2 (1913), pp. 147-149 (canons) and 170-183 (synodical letter).

48 John of Ephesus, Tašʿītā 13; PO, 17,212.
the blessed Z’ura, while he also practised handiwork for his needs, some carpentering; and moreover he made partridge-cages and sold them, and gained his living, with his two slave boys [ܡܢܟܐܐ], who also served him devoutly.49

Here we have Tribunus, a lay yet experienced and respected ascetic who renounced marriage and inheritance, living in a monastery but still employing two young slave boys in order to make a living – there was no contradiction in being a monk and a slaveholder.50 Tribunus is a good example of a person who moved from a strategic to a tactical mode of slaveholding. We also hear that Theodora assigned to John of Hephaestopolis a (his?) slave when he was living at the mansion of Anthemiu.51

Thus, one could be an ascetic and, at the same time, a slaveholder. But in John’s Lives we also find many instances of slaves themselves becoming ascetics, without any effect on their social status. Ascetic households had slaves who were equally adept in ascetic practice, a phenomenon that John admires. Thomas the Armenian built a monastery for use by his wife and his children, and his “slaves also and many free men” [ܡܢܟܐܐ] ܕܘܗܝ ܘܣܘܓܐܐ ܕܚܐܪ̈ܐ, who also served him devoutly.52 Thomas the Armenian’s monastery was open to slaves and free, but monastic participation did not seem to negate these social distinctions. The case of Thomas, here, is illustrative and significant in that it demonstrates a type of mutuality between domestic slavery and monasticism. In the lives of Elijah and Theodore and their two sisters, in Cappadocia, we see a similar arrangement. These brothers were successful traders, and from their success they turned their house into a hospice for strangers, “[a]nd accordingly there were a multitude of many persons in that house, of slaves and hired men and bondmaids [ܡܢܟܐܐ] ܕܐ ܘܐܓܝܪ̈ܐ ܘܐܡ ܥܒ݂̈,” 53 Thomas the Armenian’s monastery was open to slaves and free, but monastic participation did not seem to negate these social distinctions. The case of Thomas, here, is illustrative and significant in that it demonstrates a type of mutuality between domestic slavery and monasticism. In the lives of Elijah and Theodore and their two sisters, in Cappadocia, we see a similar arrangement. 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51 John of Ephesus, Tašūtā 44; PO, 18.665: “ܐܦܐ ܠܡܚܡܠܐ. ܠܡܡܥܡܐ ܠܡܡܥܡܐ ܒܡܫܡܐ ܠܒܝܢ ܗܝܐ:”.
52 See also Rotman, Byzantine Slavery, p. 148.
53 John of Ephesus, Tašūtā 21; PO, 17.290.
Peter and Photius we read: “[T]he blessed Peter had a brother and a sister wearing the lay garb, as they too were living a great life in practices of excellence, so that they and their slaves [تادئشح] used to learn the psalms, and kept hours of prayers and service as in a monastery of recluses.”

Let us return, for a moment, to the issue of terminology. The fact that John often takes the trouble to mention both male and female slaves (ܟܬܐ ܒܬܐ) is significant, as many would simply group all slaves under the collective ܕܐܥܒ. The mention of male and female slaves explicitly probably functions as an emphasis to show the variety of slaves (in the houses of the rich), but the distinction also seems to show that the gender of the slave does not matter in the ascetic vocation. Female slaves are just as capable as males to follow the ascetic life – such reasoning is also consistent with John’s thought about women in general.

Male and female slaves partook in all practices of asceticism, including vigils, fasting, service to the poor and the needy, prayer, hymn singing, and so on. Asceticism is not separated from the world, and because of the social and domestic nature of the brand of asceticism that John pursues, slavery fits in most naturally in these monastic communities. John and his subjects in Lives are at best indifferent to a person’s social status – they are more concerned with their spiritual state, and the poor and oppressed gain far more sympathy than the slaves. For John, slavery is not part of the social crisis his subjects face. In fact, some Christian authors saw enslavement as a benefaction, since one had to provide the most basic material needs for one’s slaves. We can speculate that in John’s view, keeping one’s slaves aided in alleviating the social crisis of his time. This is supported by the fact that whenever John does mention the manumission of slaves, he explicitly mentions that gifts are given to the slaves in order to support them after manumission. Rather, one’s slaves and hired laborers, like one’s wife and children, should become immersed in socially relevant

servants and slaves male and female passed their time in devout practices and rendering of praise and thanks to God, and in fasting and prayers at all times”;

John of Ephesus, Tašʿītā 56; Po 19.198 (my italics): ܐܝܟܢܐ ܕܗܼܢܼܘܢ ܘܝܫܼܐ ܡܿܫܡܠܼܝܢ ܗܘܘ ܘܬܼܼܐ ܘܕܬܫܼܡܫܬܼܐ ܐܝܟ ܕܒܕܼܝܪܼܼܐ ܕܚܒ ܕܨܠ

54 John of Ephesus, Tašʿītā 56; Po 19.198 (my italics); ܐܝܟܼܢܼܐ ܕܐܦ ܗܼܢܼܘܢ ܒܕܘܒܪܼܼܐ ܕܡܝܬܼܪܼܘܬܼܼܐ ܚܼܼܝܼܢ ܗܼܘܘ ܕܘܕܒܼܝܼܬܼܼ. ܐܼܝܟܼܼܢܼܼܐ ܕܗܼܼܢܼܼܘܢ ܘܝܫܼܼܐ ܡܿܫܡܠܼܼܝܼܢ ܗܼܘܼܘ ܘܬܼܼܼܐ ܘܕܬܫܼܼܡܫܼܼܬܼܼܼܼܐ ܐܝܟ ܕܒܕܼܼܝܪܼܼܐ ܕܚܒ ܕܨܠ

55 Harvey, Asceticism and Society in Crisis, pp. 103-133.

56 John Chrysostom, In 1 Cor. hom. 40; Sancti patris nostril Ioannis Chrysostomi archeepiscopi Constantinopolitani interpretatio omnium epistularum Paulinarum per homilies facta, vol. 2: Continens homilies in Epistolam ad Corinthios priorem ed. by F. Field, Oxford, 1847, p. 515, for instance, refers to slavery as a φιλανθρωπία (philanthrōpia), a kindness, and also recommends that slaves be taught a trade whereby to support themselves after manumission. See also De Wet, Preaching Bondage, pp. 111-112.
ascetic practices. Just as monasticism did not call for the abolition of slavery, being enslaved was no impediment to participating in monasticism. Of course, masters were expected to treat slaves justly and not sin against them (by sexually abusing them, for instance), but John says practically nothing about how Christian masters should treat their slaves.

In John’s well-known description of the strict entry requirements of some Amidan monasteries, he states:

For these [monasteries] are not like all the others who, if a man runs away by reason of an offence committed, or from slavery [(room)] or from a quarrel with his wife, or by reason of thefts and the menace of the law, then he goes to a monastery, and at once has his hair shaven from his head, and has passed in and been admitted, while the sensual methods and acts of the worldliness of this world are thronging within his mind.57

Monasteries did provide asylum to fugitive slaves and coloni, but such persons were then bound to that establishment. What is interesting in John’s description above is that he lists fugitive slaves along with those who enter the monastery because they committed crimes, such as theft, or from quarrelling with a spouse (although, strictly speaking, spousal permission was required to enter the monastery).58 John seems to imply that such motives for entering the monastic life, although they may eventually bear fruit, are disingenuous. But we can also deduce from this section that John considered slave flight a crime, and like many free Christian authors of his time, probably felt that slaves should be obedient to their masters and not run away.

4 Asceticism as Slavery: Making Service a Virtue

John’s level of indifference to institutional slaves is only matched by his commitment to depict the ascetics in his Lives as honourable slaves of God. By the time John composed Lives, the discourse of slavery (doulology) had already had a major impact on early Syrian-Christian ascetical theology. In this final section of the article, I shall investigate how doulology functions in John’s understanding and transformation of the ascetic vocation. In many ways, John departs from more traditional ascetic principles in Lives, and gives a new

57 John of Ephesus, Tašʿītā 20; PO, 17.278: “ܐܠܝܢ ܓܝܪ ܠܘ ܐܝܟ ܫܪܟܐ ܕܐܗܪ̈ܢܐ: ܕܢ ܥܪܩ ܐܢܫ ܡܢ ܥܠܬ ܣܘܪܚܢܐ܇ ܘܬܐ ܘܠܘܚܿܡܿܐ ܕܬܘܢܼܐ ܘܐܙܿܠ ܠܕܝܪܐ ܘܡܚܕܐ ܡܬܓܪܥ ܣܥܪܐ ܠܘ ܒܥܪܝܪ̈ܝܐ ܕܥܠܡܝܘܬܗ ܕܥܠܡܐ ܗܢܐ ܒܓܘ ܬܪܥܝܬܗ܇ ܡܢ ܪܝܫܗ ܘܥܒܼܪ ܩܭ ܇ ܟܕ ܣܒܝܣܝܢ ܢܝ.”

58 Ramelli, Social Justice, pp. 228-29; and Rotman, Byzantine Slavery, pp. 145-152.
vision of asceticism for his community. I shall contrast some of the principles and propositions we have in Lives with the ascetic principles laid down in Acts of Thomas and, more explicitly and significantly, in Liber graduum.

As already noted, Acts of Thomas was fundamental in shaping Syrian asceticism, and in Acts we have Judas Thomas representing the proto-monk. His main characteristic is that, although he is institutionally enslaved to Abban, Thomas remains free and, paradoxically, enslaved to Christ. In the wake of Acts, we find further developments of asceticism as the enslavement of the body and its passions by the soul – I term this phenomenon doulological asceticism. The most explicit attestation of this development is seen in the Syriac Liber graduum, a work that shows much continuity with and direct influence by Acts. In Liber graduum, asceticism is characterized doulologically in no uncertain terms. In Mēmrā 29, on the discipline of the body, we read:

“I will subdue my body and subordinate [it],” says Paul, “lest while I preach to others, I myself will be rejected” [1 Cor 9:27]. I will make my body a slave and discipline it and I will not allow it to clothe, put on shoes, feed, and refresh itself according to its own will. And I will not allow it to be honored whenever it wishes, not even to sleep with honor, but I will subdue it with hunger, thirst, and nakedness, vigil, weariness, asceticism, and emaciation, and with much fasting and prayer, with supplication and loud crying, with many bitter tears, and with lowliness, endurance, and patience. I will subdue myself in order to honor everyone as a slave and in order to stand before and greet everyone before me, bowing [my] head before everyone. I will make my body run on foot like a slave in order to reconcile with its enemies ... I will make my body wash the feet of its enemies and greet its murderers ... I will lead [my body] wherever it does not wish: to its despisers and those who are angry against it. Just as our Lord went to teach his crucifiers and despisers, I will make

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59 On Thomas as a proto-monk see D.F. Caner, Wandering, Begging Monks: Spiritual Authority and the Promotion of Monasticism in Late Antiquity (TCH, 33), Berkeley, 2002, pp. 57-59.


it visit as the slave of everyone, the slave of slaves, just as our Lord visited the evil and insolent ones who held him in contempt.  

In this section we have the notion of asceticism as the enslavement of the body and its passions. Liber graduum follows Paul’s words in 1 Corinthians 9:27. In this text, Paul uses the Greek word δουλαγωγέω (doulagōgeō), which could be translated as 'I subdue' or, in the more literal sense, 'I treat (my body) as a slave'. The Syriac for this term is ܡܫܰܥܒܶܕ (mšaʿbed), which carries the same meaning as the Greek. The slavery to God stands in contrast to the slavery of sin. In the early Christian tradition, sin was often conceived as a form of slavery (although slavery was rarely considered a sin), so when the monk performs practices of corporeal enslavement, such as chaining and wearing heavy irons, he or she shows that sin is no longer his or her master, but the soul and, ultimately, God holds mastery.

We have, therefore, in Liber graduum a doulological asceticism in which ascetic disciplines like fasting and vigils become correlates of real disciplinary practices in institutional slaveholding, like food and sleep deprivation. The body of the ascetic mimics that of the slave in the actions performed by the body, such as greeting, foot-washing, and bowing the head – these are all measures of humiliation and the renunciation of all bodily pleasures (or 'emptying' oneself, in imitation of Christ in Philippians 2:7, who also took on the form of a slave), or ܡܣܪܩܘܬܐ (msarrqūtā). Sebastian Brock has shown how radical renunciation, or ܡܣܪܩܘܬ, was characteristic of the ascetical theology of Liber gradu-

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61 Lib. grad. 29.1; ܩܳܬܳܐ̈ ܟܬܳܒܳܐ ܕܡܰܣ


63 De Wet, Preaching Bondage, pp. 170-219.
Humiliation was central in one’s ascetic practice, and enslavement was the pinnacle of humiliation and corporeal renunciation. Now although slavery played an important role in the making of the ascetic subject in Liber graduum, it is very important to note, especially in the light of the current study on Lives, that Liber graduum has a very particular opinion on physical labour. Liber graduum distinguishes between two ascetic ‘classes’, namely the Upright or the Just (ܢܐ̈ܟܐ; kiʿnē) and the Perfect or the Mature (ܓܡܝܪ̈ܐ; gmīrē). As Aryeh Kofsky and Serge Ruzer note in their analysis of mēmrā 21 of Liber graduum:

The contemporary notion of ascetics as a spiritual elite is molded into the author’s paradigm of the dual division of Christian society between the Perfect and the Upright – compatible with his idea of a dual paradise. The Upright represent the situation of Adam after the fall and in the physical paradise, whereas the Perfect achieve in their lives Adam’s original state of existing in the earthly paradise while dwelling spiritually in the heavenly one.

In Liber graduum, Uprightness is characterized by an incomplete renunciation. These ascetics are still involved with the matters of the world – among other actions, the Upright may still perform various ‘worldly’ labours. However, Perfect renunciation is characterized by a strict anti-labor ethic: “However, Adam, in his freedom, chose labor, which is the opposite of Perfection, and through his own choice he bore anxiety – something that stifles those who seek to ascend to the higher realm.” Thus, in Liber graduum we already encounter a type of tension between labour-driven and anti-labour asceticism. The point is made that labor is a consequence of sin, as the curse in Genesis

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3:17 states: “[C]ursed is the ground because of you; in toil you shall eat of it all the days of your life.”

Labour was therefore considered by some as unfitting for the serious monk. In his Philotheus (Religious History or History of the Monks of Syria), Theodoret tells us that Eusebius of Teleda, after staring pleasingly at some ploughmen working on a farm, and finding delight in the sight of the labour of the land:

made a rule that his eyes were never to look at that plain nor feast upon the beauty of the heavens or the choir of the stars ... [and] ... [I]n addition to this resolve, [that] some duress should compel him to this, he bound his waist with an iron belt and attached a very heavy collar to his neck and then used a further chain to connect the belt to the collar, so that bent down in this way he would be forced uninterruptedly to stoop to the ground. Such was the penalty he imposed on himself for looking at those farm-workers.

Because of his desire for earthly labour, Eusebius resorts to punishing his body like a disobedient slave. He fashions chains and a collar that will compel him to serve out this self-inflicted punishment. The doulological asceticism we see in Liber graduum and in the above account of Theodoret promotes the notion of the enslavement of the body by the soul, but it does not want the body to do the ‘earthly’ work that slaves normally do (especially agrarian labour and secular business dealings), which is perhaps reserved for a lower level of ascetic discipline (Uprightness). I have argued that the fashioning and wearing of heavy collars, chains, and irons are direct correlates of the slavery to God – God’s slaves wear such irons just as institutional slaves wore them. The chains

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68 Translation: NRSV. See also WTT: “ךָחַיֶּֽי יְמֵ֥י אֲרוּרָ֤ה הָֽאֲדָמָה֙ בַּֽעֲבוֹן תֹּֽאכֲלֶ֔נָּה כֹּ֖ל הַיּוֹם תִּשְׁתְּוָאָתָֽהּ אֵֽלָּכְּלַנָֽהּ.” And LXX: ἐπικατάρατος ἡ γῆ ἐν τοῖς ἔργοις σου ἐν λύπαις φάγῃ αὐτήν πάσας τὰς ἡμέρας τῆς ζωῆς σου.

were symbolic of the captivity and carcerality of the flesh under the dominion of the soul.\textsuperscript{70}

By the time that John writes his \textit{Lives}, the expression \textit{חָדַד הַמְשִיחָא} (\textit{ʿabdā \textit{daMšīhā}), that is, “slave of Christ,” and \textit{חָדַד הַאֱלֹהָא} (\textit{ʿabdā \textit{dʿAllāhā}), that is, “slave of God,” had practically become technical terms denoting a respected and devoted ascetic. John also speaks of \textit{חָדַד הַמְשִיחָא} (\textit{amtāh \textit{daMšīhā}), the “bondmaid of Christ.”\textsuperscript{71} John is also fond of referring to the ascetic vocation as a \textit{נִיָרָא} (\textit{nīrā}), a ‘yoke’ or, as we will shortly see, a \textit{יָוְקָרָא} (\textit{yūqrā}), meaning, ‘burden.’\textsuperscript{72} Coming from the words of Jesus in Matthew 11:30, “For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light,”\textsuperscript{73} this phraseology is ripe with doulological overtones. Therefore some monks took the advice quite literally by fashioning for themselves collars, chains, and irons as ascetic apparatuses. We shall discuss these apparatuses in more detail shortly.

The slave of God is a highly masculine figure in early Christian thought.\textsuperscript{74} Although the position of the slave was shameful and even effeminate (or passive) in ancient (particularly Roman) thought, the figure of the slave of God became an exemplar of masculinity in early Christian thought. Raewyn Connell refers to such a shift as the replacement of a hegemonic masculinity with a subordinated masculinity – essentially and over time, the formerly subordinated masculinity (e.g. the slavery to God) becomes hegemonic.\textsuperscript{75} By the sixth century, and in John’s \textit{Lives}, the hegemony of the slavery to God is well established. The most interesting example of the hegemony and masculinity of the image of the slave of God is seen in John’s account of Susan, where she

\textsuperscript{70} Matthias Henze, \textit{The Madness of King Nebuchadnezzar: The Ancient Near Eastern Origins and Early History of Interpretation of Daniel 4} (JS\textit{Supp}, 61), Leiden, 1999, pp. 208-209, has also linked the wearing of chains and irons in the Syriac monastic tradition to the madness and penitential behaviour of King Nebuchadnezzar. The various interpretations of the chains and irons, such as my interpretation related to slavery and Henze’s regarding madness, need not be read as mutually exclusive. As material symbols, the chains and irons allow for a variety of interpretations in ancient texts. For instance, the monastic irons and chains could also reflect on the chains of the apostle Paul.

\textsuperscript{71} John of Ephesus, \textit{-Tašʿītā} 12; PO, 19.171.

\textsuperscript{72} The concept of the ‘yoke’ occurs quite frequently in John, especially with relation to the “yoke of monasticism” (\textit{נִיָרָא \textit{dʿdayrāyutā}) in John of Ephesus, \textit{Tašʿītā} 9; PO, 17.135. See also similar instances in PO, 17.198, 290, 297; PO, 18.558, 609, 626, and 661. John also refers to marriage and worldly business as a yoke in \textit{Tašʿītā} 44; PO, 18.661.

\textsuperscript{73} Translation: NRSV. \textit{NA}\textsuperscript{28}; ό γάρ ζηγός μου χρηστός καὶ τὸ φορτίον μου ἐλαφρόν ἐστίν. See especially John of Ephesus, \textit{Tašʿītā} 36; PO, 18.626.

\textsuperscript{74} De Wet, \textit{Preaching Bondage}, pp. 74-75.

castigates a monk who fled his cell after experiencing demonic attacks. “Come see persons that are called men [ܡܓܒܪܐ], and not only men but also Christ's slaves [ܡܕܐ ܕܡܫܝܚܐ],” mocks Susan after the monk tells her of his cowardly flight, “Is it right that you should be called Christ's slaves? You have in this way reckoned Christ your Lord to be feeble.”76 The levels of irony in this narrative are unmatched. Susan is a woman, who is schooling a monk, who is supposed to be a slave of Christ, in the ways of masculinity. The language of strength, power, and authority, and even military rhetoric, abounds in her reprimand. We see here that Susan herself confesses that the slavery to Christ represents the pinnacle of manhood, authority, and courage.

Just as institutional slaves represented their masters, so too do the slaves of God represent their heavenly Master – Christ is present in his slaves. In John's account of the lives of Simeon and Sergius, we read that Simeon was the personification of monastic hospitality and that he built huts for visitors and strangers wearing the monastic habit. When such persons visited him, Simeon prostrated himself before the visitors, kissing their hands and showing them great reverence, because: “I thank my Lord Jesus that he has come today and visited the sinner, and has thought me worthy to see him in his holy slaves.”77 The foundation of monastic hospitality lies in the fact that when one receives strangers, one also receives Christ. Similarly, in late antiquity, when one showed respect to someone's slaves, it was an act of respect toward the master – insulting the slave, on the other hand, was an insult against the master.78 The slave of God was a figure that embodied the virtue, authority, and masculinity of Christ himself.

But there is one important difference between the doulological asceticism envisioned in Liber graduum and in John's Lives. When John writes his Lives in the midst of the social crisis Harvey has pointed out, he is faced with the challenge of changing his subjects' minds to be more positive of socially-oriented labor (and less positive about extreme manifestations of corporeal enslavement, such as collaring themselves or wearing heavy irons). John must transform labour (ܠܐ ܥܡ; ʿamlā) and service (ܬܫܡܫܬܐ; tešmeštā; ܦܘܠܚܢܐ; pūlḥānā) into ascetic virtues. The slave of God is now not only one who labours against the flesh, but also one who labours for the sake of society.

76 John of Ephesus, Tašʿītā 27; PO, 18.556: “ܕܡܘܕܐ ܐܢܐ ܠܡܪܝ ܝܫܘܥ ܕܐܬܐ ܝܘܡܢܐ ܣܥܪܗ ܠܚܛܝܐ ܝܫܐ.” See also PO, 18.552.
77 John of Ephesus, Tašʿītā 5; PO, 17.86 (my italics): “ܠܚܛܝܐ ܝܫܐ ܕܘܗܝ ܩܕ ܐܫܘܝܗ ܕܢܚܙܝܘܗܝ ܒܥܒ.” For similar instances in which Christ is represented in his slaves see PO, 17.72, 88, 133, and 301-302.
Some of the monks in *Lives* have trouble accepting earthly labour for the sake of society as a prime virtue. The best example of this is Harfat. We have already become acquainted with Harfat as someone who came from a wealthy family, and one who grew up in a house with a multitude of slaves. Harfat entrusted the management of the household to a family member. Later in Harfat’s life, John tells us:

Then the blessed man left the house and the office of the chorepiscopate which he had held for some years, and withdrew to a convent of the solitary life. And, because he was very simple, and thought that this was the consummation of perfection, he went and made great heavy irons and put them upon himself, that is on his neck and on his hands and on his feet, two on each. And he went and settled on a certain mountain about three miles from the cultivated land, and he did not take or receive any part whatever of his property, but he would sit thus on that mountain, mourning and weeping and groaning for the rest of life which had been spent and had passed from him in vain.

At this point in Harfat’s life, he starts to follow the way of the ḫudāya (īḥīdāyā), the solitary. He fashions heavy irons (parzlē) for himself, and obviously followed a rigorous ascetic regime. What is most important here is that John tells us that Harfat believed the life of solitude, and specifically the making and wearing of heavy irons and collars, was the way of gmīrūtā, perfection. We find the same language here as in *Liber graduum*. Harfat’s actions are penitential, and represent acts of self-mortification and corporeal enslavement. Like the community of *Liber graduum*, Harfat believes that only this form of asceticism is the way to a higher level of spiritual intimacy with God. On the one hand, John admires Harfat’s acts of self-mortification; but his main purpose in visiting Harfat is not to witness the spectacle of his asceticism, but to convince Harfat of a better way. When John merits the confidence to reason with Harfat, he proceeds thus:

“Wherefore, o our father, have you burdened your body with the weight of all this iron?”, he said to us, “On account of my sins.” And, when we...
were on another occasion conversing with him, we again said to him: “What regulation commands this matter of the irons to be carried out?”, and, “If we seek to humble our body to the earth by labours of asceticism, cannot we humble it without irons?” After we had addressed many words to the blessed man, he continued to weep and sigh; and at last he said to us: “And now, sir, what do you wish done?” And I, joking a little with him, said to him: “We wish you to throw off these irons which are a useless burden [ܝܘܩܪܐ ܣܦܝܩܐ], and lade yourself instead of them with the burden of labours [ܠܐ ̈ ܂ܝܘܩܪܐ ܕܥܡ] performed with knowledge; and thus you will please God.” But the blessed man was much annoyed at these words, saying, “It were better for me that my head were removed and not these irons.” And I turned upon him with the words: “For what reason?” But he in his simplicity said, “On account of my sins, and on account of the stumbling-block put in men’s way.” But we, since we pitied the infirmity of his body, and wished to remove these irons from him, said to him: “Lo! therefore see, our father, that the matter of the irons is addressed only to men, but there is nothing in them that brings near to God; but I even fear lest they lead away from life; since God gave no commandment about irons.80

John needs to convince Harfat that the irons are not needed to please God. Harfat’s persistence in keeping the irons reflects how embedded the notions of self-mortification and corporeal enslavement were in the tradition of Syrian asceticism. The doulological asceticism of early Syrian Christianity was highly particularistic for some – it implied the enslavement of the flesh and the passions by means of ascetic discipline and apparatuses, like the iron and chains. The enslavement of the flesh, on the one hand, represents the slavery of sin, hence the penitential aspect of the irons. But, more importantly, it shows that the soul has gained mastery over the flesh, and the soul is no longer a slave of sin but a slave of Christ. John must convince Harfat (and his readership) that such extreme feats of asceticism, feats that drew much criticism from earlier

80 John of Ephesus, Tašʿītā 11; po, 17.163-165 (my italics): “ܠܐ ܘܐܡܪܝܢ ܗܘܝܢ ܠܗ ܕܡܛܠ ܡܢܐ ܝܘܩܪܐ ܕܗܢܐ ܦܪ̈ژ ܗܝ. ܘܟܕ ܬܘܒ ܐܡܪܝܢ ܗܘܝܢ ܘܫܡܿܥܝܢ ܥܡܗ-overlay image
authors like Epiphanius of Salamis, are not commanded by God. The focus on God’s commandments is important – God does not command his slaves to perform these feats; irons are a useless or an ‘empty’ burden. John reaches back to the language of Jesus in Matthew 11:30. But God does command his slaves, according to John, to assume the “burden of labours” (yūqrā da’mē’).

John concludes his tale of Harfat:

And so he committed himself to our Lord, and to us; and by the aid of many strong men we took these irons off him; and thenceforth he subjugated himself by double labours in their place, insomuch that after seven years we returned to him, and we found him thus living a hard life, and thus he ended his days with great glory.

John constructs Harfat as a (gmīrā), one of the Perfect. But he constructs Harfat the Perfect in order to refute the notion that perfection is attained by the corporeal enslavement of the body with irons. John wants to convince his readers that the true slave of God is not a chained slave, but a slave who labors for the sake of society. Harfat’s zeal for self-mortification is now redirected towards cultivating the virtue of labour, ‘double labours’, in fact. The heavy irons are replaced by heavy service (the weight of the irons is emphasized by the fact that several men were required to remove them from Harfat – the chains nearly cost him his life). A useless burden is replaced with a useful burden. We should not neglect the fact that the rhetoric of usefulness, or utility, was very common in ancient discourses of slavery. In this regard, it is actually the

81 Epiphanius of Salamis, De fide 13.9 and 23.6; The Panarion of Epiphanius of Salamis vol. 2: Books 11 and 111, De Fide, trans. by F. Williams (NHMS, 79), Leiden, 2013, pp. 671 and 680-681, specifically forbade the wearing of slave collars and chains in public – a practice which, he says, was against the regulations of the church, and more characteristic of heretics (it is possible that Epiphanius had in mind communities such as those characterized by Liber graduum in his invective here, since he does speak of collaring among other extreme ascetic practices). Epiphanius, Pan. 48.13.4; ed. by Williams, 2.19, is worried that the irons and the collars may imply that God forcefully compels the monk to worship him, which would be an act against human free will. Moreover, Epiphanius also refers to the initiates of the cult of Cronos who also wore heavy collars around their necks, another possible reason why the practice of ascetic chaining and collaring was scorned in Egypt. See Epiphanius, De fide 11.2; ed. by Williams, 2.669.

82 John of Ephesus, Tašʿītā 11; PO, 17.166 (my italics): “ܘܗܟܢܐ ܐܫܠܡ ܢܦܫܗ ܠܡܪܢܼ ܘܠܢ. ܘܡܪ̈ܙܠܐ ܗܠܝܢܼ ܒܝܕ ܢܝܐ ܫܒܥܝܢ ܡܟܝܠ ܚܠܦܝܗܘܢܼ ܢܦܫܗ ܟܕܢ. ܐܝܟܢܐ ܕܐܦ ܡܢ ܒܬܪ ܙܒܢܐ ܕܫ ܠܐ ܥ ܝܐܐ ܡܢܗ ܐܦܼܩܢܢ. ܘܒܥܡ ܠܬܢܐ ܣܓ ܓܒܪ̈ܐ ܚܝ ܝܢܐ ܐܫܟܚܼܢܝܗܝ. ܘܗܟܢܐ ܫܠܡܼ ܒܢܨܚܢܐ ܪܒܐ܀”.

Upright who are the Perfect, because they are socially useful. Harfat goes from being a useless slave of God to a useful one, which also brings him great glory. In the tale of Harfat, John inverts the logic of the *Liber graduum*.

However, John does not attempt to convince all his subjects to forsake their bonds and restraints. When John meets the monk Zacharias, who keeps a pebble in his mouth and thick rope-like knotted bonds around his hand, which Zacharias calls the “irons of my service” (*ܦܪ̈ܙܠܐ ܕܦܘܠܚܢܝ*), John simply admires the man and leaves him. The possible reason why John’s response differs in this regard from that towards Harfat is that the bonds of Zacharias are not life threatening. The case of Zacharias also tells us that the restraints fashioned by many of these monks were highly personalized, and may have conveyed a number of meanings simultaneously; although most of the time the message of the restraints is related to penitence, self-mortification, and corporeal enslavement. When John opposes the wearing of the irons, he does not only go against established ascetic traditions, but also needs to renegotiate the unique identity that the monk has fashioned for himself.

Practices of corporeal enslavement, such as chaining and collaring, were not the only concepts John had to address. We see a similar attitude towards the illnesses and physical ailments of the some of the monks. John is concerned about Harfat’s infirmity, just as he worries about the black ulcers on Thomas the Armenian’s legs, Euphemia’s withered feet, and Aaron’s gangrenous sores. As John ‘joked’ with Harfat regarding his heavy irons, so too does he jest with Euphemia: “[W]e ourselves too would often jest with her and say to her, ‘Do not kill yourself in so cruel a way, Tabitha’; but she would say: ‘When the end of a thing is corruption and the worm, wherefore do we preserve it?’” Harvey rightly notes that John is far more positive about the medical profession than others, and that he was concerned that physical “negligence would result in the wearing out of the ascetic’s ability to serve.”

*Liber graduum*, for instance, warns monks against physicians, particularly be-

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84 John of Ephesus, *Tašʿītā* 19; *PO*, 17.272.
85 John of Ephesus, *Tašʿītā* 21; *PO*, 17.291.
87 John of Ephesus, *Tašʿītā* 38; *PO*, 18.643-645.
88 John of Ephesus, *Tašʿītā* 12; *PO*, 17.181.
90 Harvey, *Asceticism and Society*, p. 143.
cause they were often associated with the magical arts. But just as some monks considered the irons as an ascetic apparatus, so too did some consider sickness as a form of asceticism. Andrew Crislip has shown that illness itself was considered an ascetic practice, and “to persevere illness with thanksgiving is a great form of asceticism.” Illness was often seen as chastisement, as in the case with the irons, and showing concern for one’s body (and bodily health) rather than one’s soul was disgraceful. In this regard, too, John turns the focus to the usefulness of the subject for society.

If we return to John’s account of Simeon the Scribe, we see very clearly how John valorizes the virtues of labour and service. We have already seen that despite having numerous slaves and servants, Simeon (like the patriarch before him), hastens to perform all labours himself. Simeon is eager to do service so that “he might be the receiver of the blessing and not another.” God rewards service. John further says:

[H]e himself would wait upon them [his guests], and often, whenever any necessary service was required, he would himself rise from table, and fulfil it; and (a great thing which astonishes many) that he would actually himself stand before the cooking-stand every day and cook without tiring, having laid down the following law for himself, that, as soon as they had finished nocturns, he would dismiss his companions to their bodily rest, and would himself direct his steps to the kitchen, and himself begin and cook until morning on account of the poor people who were in the habit of coming early, and would put the food together, and make it ready and so he would go out and wake them, and they would rise to matins; and as soon as the service was finished they would place tables both within and without. Moreover, as if greedy for his great spiritual trade, he did not stop at waiting on those who came and went, but he brought four blind men, and placed them in his cell at his table; and thenceforth he was not to be seen except distributing the food and placing it in the mouth of each one of them by his name.

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92 A. Crislip, Thorns in the Flesh: Illness and Sanctity in Late Ancient Christianity (Divinations), Philadelphia, 2012, p. 106 and see also pp. 81-108.
93 See, for instance, John of Ephesus, Tašūtā 13; PO, 17.211.
94 John of Ephesus, Tašūtā 34; PO, 18.603.
95 John of Ephesus, Tašūtā 34; PO, 18.604-605.
Simeon functions as an exemplar and personification of the virtue of service. John’s rhetoric here would appear most shocking (as he himself admits) and even repulsive to the hardcore īḥīdāyā. John’s use of cooking as an example of Simeon’s devotion is quite strategic. Cooking was seen as a highly servile and shameful task, reserved almost exclusively for slaves. John Chrysostom, for example, felt that it was not fitting for a man to do cooking, and advised his audience that if they choose to keep some slaves, the slaves should do the cooking.96 From an ascetic viewpoint cooking was an equally shameful task – the devoted ascetic was not supposed to eat cooked food (except, in some cases, bread), but followed a dry and raw dietary regimen. Teresa Shaw notes that dry bread actually falls into the category of uncooked foods because it does not have to be prepared on a daily basis.97 When John emphasizes the culinary devotion of Simeon, despite having many slaves who could do such a shameful job, he depicts Simeon in no uncertain terms as a real slave (of God) who performs the base tasks of slaves for the sake of the poor and socially marginalized. This figure representing the slave of God is not a burden on society (by being forced to beg for food, for instance), but one who is in service of society. Shortly before this narration about Simeon’s cooking, he describes him as a ʿabdā šarīrā d’Allāhā (‘abdā šarīrā d’Allāhā), “a true slave of God.”98

5 Conclusion

In John’s Lives, social utility becomes the point where institutional slavery intersects with the slavery to God. John shows a great deal of indifference towards institutional slaves; slaves are either part of the excessive wealth and decadent lifestyle of the wicked elite, or they are part of an ascetic household. In both cases, though, the slaves serve to illuminate the vice or virtue of the masters (wicked masters have scores of slaves serving them, while virtuous

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98 John of Ephesus, Tašʿītā 34; PO, 18.603.
masters are so exceptional that even their slaves follow the ascetic lifestyle). Slaves are located somewhere between property and personhood, but their status in John’s thought remains somewhat elusive. But like the monks – the slaves of God – institutional slaves receive a measure of worth and meaning when they partake in John’s ascetic vision of social outreach. In this regard, John’s comments on institutional slaves and God’s slaves are consistent. However, slavery is not part of the social crisis that John and his monastic subjects face. Yet, if a prospective monk or nun renounces all his or her property, John expects this person to free his or her slaves on the condition that the slaves be given gifts so as not to eventually become part of the social crisis. Because of the domestic nature of the asceticism John promotes, slavery is rather seen as an institution that may be in service of society. Being enslaved, in John’s view, is no impediment to the ascetic life, and we find many slaves in Lives of the Eastern Saints who are practising ascetic disciplines.

Compared with his views on women, as delineated by Harvey, we have some similarities. Slaves, like women, were incorporated into the ascetic response to society in crisis, and the impact of slaves in this response was by no means negligible. However, the “threatening flexibility [such] as the sanctioning of authoritative leadership for women” that Harvey identified was not the case with slaves.99 Whereas many women in Lives rose above the social constraints placed on them, taking up ascetic leadership roles, we find no such instances with slaves in Lives. Slaves remain in their subordinated roles, faithful to their masters, as docile subjects. Both slaves and women embrace the ascetic lifestyle in Lives, but while this move enable women to transcend some of their traditional social roles (even if only marginally and temporarily), slaves do not rise above the domination imposed on them.

Furthermore, John says nothing about how masters ought to treat slaves, or about the problems enslaved ascetics may face if their masters are not Christian. We know that during the Byzantine period slaveholding became quite polarized in terms of religion. There were laws forbidding non-Christians to own Christian slaves (just as non-Muslims were later forbidden to have Muslim slaves), but as Rotman warns: “The ownership of Christians by non-Christians continued to concern lawmakers, indicating that the situation was not rare.”100 This problem of ownership does not present itself in John’s Lives, mainly because John is not primarily concerned about slaves unless they function in ascetic households. With regards to institutional slavery, then, there are no surprises in John’s Lives for the reader. Like most Christian authors before

99 Harvey, Asceticism and Society, p. 132.
100 Rotman, Byzantine Slavery, p. 43.
him, he neither abolishes slavery nor does he explicitly promote the institution. He is, however, somewhat exceptional in that he consistently highlights the difference between slaves and hired servants, most likely because in rural and agrarian contexts such status differences were not always apparent.

John forfeits his conventionality in the way he transforms the figure of the slave of God. In John's thought, the monastic lifestyle is the epitome of the slavery to God, and the most important virtue in this lifestyle is labour and service for the benefit of those who are suffering in society. This finding is in line with Harvey's analysis of John's ascetic vision. However, John seems to go against some longstanding Syrian monastic traditions when he affords the virtue of service preference over disciplines of self-mortification and corporeal enslavement (which entailed doulological practices like collaring, chaining, wearing heavy irons, not tending to one's health, fasting to the point of starvation, and so on). An example of such a tradition is found in Liber graduum. While Liber graduum does not denounce social service and labor in toto, it does relegate it to the realm of a lesser form of asceticism, namely Uprightness. The ascetic master, the one who is Perfect, must avoid manual labour and social service. John seems to invert the ascetic logic of Liber graduum. While he admires acts of self-mortification and corporeal enslavement, the most excellent way for John is more exemplified in the acts of the Upright, namely social outreach and service. John does not negate the image of the slave of God. Both Liber graduum and John's Lives envision the ascetic vocation as being enslaved to God, but John rather reconstructs and restructures divine slavery in a quasi-utilitarian manner, so as to make labour in service of society – which includes equally servile tasks like caring for the poor and the sick, tilling the fields, and even cooking (the same tasks the institutional slaves are expected to perform) – part of the main mandate of the ܥܒܕܐ ܕܐܠܗ.