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's vision of asceticism as social outreach. John's views on divine slavery are less conventional. In *Lives*, the ideal slave of God ('*abdā 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

asceticism – *Liber graduum* – Byzantine slavery – hagiography – John of Ephesus – late antiquity – *Lives of the Eastern Saints* – monasticism – slave of God – slavery – Syriac

1 Introduction

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 Burd'aya. 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

- 1 Biographical studies on John of Ephesus include: A.P. D'yakov, *Ioann Efesskiy i ego cerkovno-istori-českie trudi*, St. Petersburg, 1908; S. Ashbrook Harvey, *Asceticism and Society in Crisis: John of Ephesus and The Lives of the Eastern Saints* (TCH, 18), Berkeley, 1990; and J.J. van Ginkel, "John of Ephesus: A Monophysite Historian in Sixth-Century Byzantium," Ph.D. diss., Groningen, 1995.
- 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?," *J ECS*, 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.⁴ 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.”⁵ 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.⁶ 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, *taš’ūtē*. With reference to *Lives*, I shall use the term *Taš’ūtā* 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 (Godsdienswetenskappe)*, 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 Wickham⁸ 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

7 Harvey, *Asceticism and Society*, pp. 132-133.

8 C. Wickham, "The Other Transition: From the Ancient World to Feudalism," *Past and Present*, 103 (1984), pp. 3-36.

9 K. Harper, *Slavery in the Late Roman World, AD 275-425*, Cambridge, 2011.

10 John of Ephesus features only minimally in Rotman's extensive study. See Y. Rotman, *Byzantine Slavery and the Mediterranean World*, trans. J.M. Todd, Cambridge, Mass., 2009, pp. 115, 148-149.

11 For instance M. Gordon, *L'Esclavage dans le monde arabe: VII^e-XX^e siècle*, Paris, 1987; P. Crone, *Slaves on Horses: The Evolution of the Islamic Polity*, Cambridge, 1980; and N. Lenski, "Captivity and Slavery among the Saracens in Late Antiquity," *AntTard*, 19 (2011), pp. 237-266.

12 I. Ramelli, *Social Justice and the Legitimacy of Slavery: The Role of Philosophical Asceticism from Ancient Judaism to Late Antiquity* (OECTS), 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*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 (عبدية; *abdūtā*) 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

overview of attitudes to slavery among some Syriac authors, including Bardaisan, Aphrahat, and Jacob of Sarug. In *Preaching Bondage: John Chrysostom and the Discourse of Slavery in Early Christianity*, Oakland, Calif., 2015, I have explored already slavery in the thought of John Chrysostom, one of the most prolific Greek authors to hail from Syria. I have also covered some basic groundwork on slavery in the Syriac Christian sources in my monograph, *The Unbound God: Slavery and the Formation of Early Christian Thought*, Routledge Studies in the Early Christian World, London, 2017, pp. 22–29.

13 De Wet, *Preaching Bondage*, pp. 1–44.

region.¹⁴ 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 *ḥqbā* ('*abdē*') in Syriac sources, which is a basic term designating slaves.¹⁵ 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.¹⁶ The use of the term *ḥqbā* 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.¹⁷ 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.¹⁸

14 J.K. Choksy, "Sassanians," in: *Late Antiquity: A Guide to the Postclassical World*, ed. by G.W. Bowersock, P.R.L. Brown, and O. Grabar, Cambridge, Mass., 1999, pp. 682-685.

15 I. Colditz, *Zur Sozialterminologie der iranischen Manichäer: Eine semantische analyse im Vergleich zu den nichtmanichäischen iranischen Quellen*, Wiesbaden, 2000, pp. 123-134; and R. Payne, *A State of Mixture: Christians, Zoroastrians, and Iranian Political Culture in Late Antiquity* (TCH, 56), Oakland, Calif., 2015, pp. 73 and 138.

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 I^{er} au VII^e 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.

17 Payne, *State of Mixture*, p. 138.

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 through 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."¹⁹ The male slaves are referred to as ܡܬܥܒܐ (ܡܬܥܒܐ), while the female slaves are ܡܬܥܒܐ (ܡܬܥܒܐ) (*ʿamhātā*). The hired servants attached to Harfat's household are called ܡܬܥܒܐ (*ʿagīrē*), which probably denotes agricultural labourers. These ܡܬܥܒܐ 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" (ܡܬܥܒܐ ܡܬܥܒܐ) practising asceticism.²⁰ This triad of servile terms is most common in *Lives*.

But along with ܡܬܥܒܐ, John also sometimes uses the term ܡܬܥܒܐ (*mšamšānē*) in conjunction with ܡܬܥܒܐ to distinguish between slaves and servants.²¹ However, in John's *Lives* ܡܬܥܒܐ differ from ܡܬܥܒܐ 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" (ܡܬܥܒܐ) of Theodore, the *castrensis*. The word ܡܬܥܒܐ (*mhaymnā*), albeit somewhat ambiguous in that it could simply refer to a "trustworthy servant", often means "eunuch"²² – 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.²³ These servants, at least, are

19 John of Ephesus, *Tašūtā* 11; PO, 17.159; ܡܬܥܒܐ ܡܬܥܒܐ.

20 John of Ephesus, *Tašūtā* 31; PO, 18.583; see also PO, 18.581.

21 John of Ephesus, *Tašūtā* 34; PO, 18.603.

22 John of Ephesus, *Tašūtā* 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.

23 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*,

also discerned from Theodore's regular حَقِيقَةً. 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 لَحْيَا (*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" (لَحْيَا) 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 مَحَلَّة (*nakpā'īt*) 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 (مَحَلَّة; *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 لَحْيَا or, in Greek sources, as παῖδες), were often victims of sexual abuse.²⁶

London, 2009, pp. 41-42. More generally, see E.A. Costa, "The Castrensis Sacri Palatii," *Byz*, 42 (1972), pp. 358-387; and K. Hopkins, *Conquerors and Slaves* (Sociological Studies in Roman History, 1), Cambridge, 1981, pp. 175-176. But there is a chance that Theodore himself was a eunuch. On Theodore see T.E. French, "Many Truths, One Story: John of Ephesus's *Lives of the Eastern Saints*," in: *Hagiography and Religious Truth: Case Studies in the Abrahamic and Dharmic Traditions*, ed. by R.G. Monge, K. P.C. San Chirico, and R.J. Smith, London, 2016, pp. 151-167, at pp. 162-164.

24 John of Ephesus, *Taš'itā* 44; PO, 18.665: لَحْيَا مَحَلَّةً مَحَلَّةً. See also *Taš'itā* 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," *JJP*, 32 (2002), pp. 83-105; and M.C. Giorda, "De la direction spirituelle aux règles monastiques: Péchés, pénitence et punitions dans le monachisme pachômien (iv^e-v^e siècles)," *CollChrOr*, 6 (2009), pp. 95-113, both focusing on an Egyptian monastic context.

26 On the sexual abuse of children in Byzantine monasteries see R. Greenfield, "Children in Byzantine Monasteries: Innocent Hearts or Vessels in the Harbor of the Devil," in: *Becoming Byzantine: Children and Childhood in Byzantium*, ed. by A. Papaconstantinou and A.-M. Talbot (Dumbarton Oaks Byzantine Symposia and Colloquia), Cambridge, Mass., 2009, pp. 253-282.

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 [تجمل وأمهة]”.³³

[illegible]

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,³⁴ 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.³⁵

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.³⁶

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.³⁷ Slavery, however, is afforded a far more am-

34 John of Ephesus, *Tašūtā* 13; PO, 17.212.

35 John of Ephesus, *Tašūtā* 55; PO, 19.192-193.

36 John of Ephesus, *Tašūtā* 4; PO, 17.74-76.

37 On the main characteristics of Syrian asceticism see A. Vööbus, *History of Asceticism in the Syrian Orient*, vol. 1 (CSCO, 184), Louvain, 1958; and S.P. Brock, "Early Syrian Asceticism," *Numen*, 20 (1973), pp. 1-19, with some important correctives on Vööbus' work.

biguous 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.³⁸ Encratism is a heresiological construct, and what is more, even when examining earlier expressions of rigorous asceticism, we find no explicit renunciation of slaveholding.³⁹

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*⁴⁰). 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.⁴¹

Some ascetics would have indeed given up all their slaves, along with most of their possessions and wealth.⁴² 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,⁴³ while Theodore the *castrensis* manumitted his slaves and gave them, as was the convention, gifts.⁴⁴ 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.⁴⁵ The slaves were obviously

38 E.J. Hunt, *Christianity in the Second Century: The Case of Tatian*, London, 2003; and T.S. Berzon, *Classifying Christians: Ethnography, Heresiology, and the Limits of Knowledge in Late Antiquity*, Oakland, Calif., 2016, p. 228.

39 See my forthcoming monograph, *The Captive Monk: Slavery and Asceticism in Early Syrian Christianity* (Routledge Studies in the Early Christian World), London, 2018.

40 J.A. Glancy, "Slavery in *Acts of Thomas*," *JECH*, 2 (2012), pp. 3–21.

41 See especially H. Rhee, "Wealth and Poverty in *Acts of Thomas*," in: *Prayer and Spirituality in the Early Church*, vol. 5: *Poverty and Riches* ed. by G.D. Dunn, D. Luckensmeyer, and L. Cross, Strathfield, NSW, 2009, pp. 111–118.

42 Ramelli, *Social Justice*, pp. 212–231.

43 John of Ephesus, *Taš'itā* 11; PO, 17.159.

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

45 John of Ephesus, *Taš'itā* 57; PO, 19.202–204.

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 – ربات بايتايتا (rabat baytāyūtā) 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” (رستگاهي براي غريبان).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* [= *EOMIA*], 2.2 (1913), pp. 147–149 (canons) and 170–183 (synodical letter).

48 John of Ephesus, *Taʿrīḫ* 13; PO, 17.212.

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

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.

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

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.⁵⁹ 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*.⁶⁰ In *Liber graduum*, asceticism is characterized doulologically in no uncertain terms. In *Mēmra* 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 [ܥܠܡܐ] 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

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. On the influence of *Acts of Thomas* on the Syrian tradition more generally see J.-N. Mellon Saint-Laurent, *Missionary Stories and the Formation of the Syriac Churches* (TCH, 55), Oakland, Calif., 2015, pp. 17–35.

60 On the relationship and influence between *Acts of Thomas* and *Liber graduum* see A.F.J. Klijn, *The Acts of Thomas: Introduction, Text, and Commentary* (NovTSup, 108), Leiden, 2003, pp. 66, 89, 114, 157, 162, 165, 207, and 215; and S. Minov, “Marriage and Sexuality in the *Book of Steps*: From Encratism to Orthodoxy,” in: *Breaking the Mind: New Studies in the Syriac “Book of Steps”*, ed. by K.S. Heal and R.A. Kitchen (CUA Studies in Early Christianity), Washington, D.C., 2014, pp. 221–261.

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.⁶³ 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 *msarrqūtā* (مسارقات). Sebastian Brock has shown how radical renunciation, or *ḥṣṣā* (حصص), was characteristic of the ascetical theology of *Liber gradu-*

63 De Wet, *Preaching Bondage*, pp. 170-219.

3:17 states: "[C]ursed is the ground because of you; in toil you shall eat of it all the days of your life."⁶⁸

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.⁶⁹

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

68 Translation: NRSV. See also WTT: "אֲרוּרָה הָאֲדָמָה בְּעִבְדוֹךָ כֹּל יְמֵי חַיֶּיךָ." And LXX: ἐπικατάρατος ἡ γῆ ἐν τοῖς ἔργοις σου ἐν λύπαις φάγη αὐτὴν πάσας τὰς ἡμέρας τῆς ζωῆς σου.

69 Theodoret of Cyrrhus, *Phil.* 4.6; *Théodore de Cyr: Histoire des moines de Syrie*, ed. by P. Canivet and A. Leroy-Molinghen, vol. 1 (SC, 234), Paris, 1977, pp. 302-305: νομοθετεῖ τοῖς ὀφθαλμοῖς μήτε τὸ πεδίον ἐκεῖνο θεωρῆσαί ποτε μήτε τῷ οὐρανῷ κάλλει καὶ τῷ τῶν ἀστέρων ἐστιαθῆναι χορῶ ... [καὶ] ... "Ἰνα δὲ μετὰ τῆς γνώμης καὶ ἀνάγκῃ τις αὐτὸν ἐπὶ ταῦτα καθέλκῃ, ζώνῃ σιδηρᾷ τὴν ὀσφὺν καταδῆσας καὶ βαρύτατον κλοιὸν περιθεὶς τῷ τραχήλῳ, ἄλλῳ τινὶ σιδηρῷ τὴν ζώνην συνήρμοσε τῷ τοῦ τραχήλου κλοιῷ ἵνα τοῦτῳ τῷ τρόπῳ κατακαμπτόμενος εἰς γῆν κατακύπτειν διηγεκῶς ἀναγκάζεται. Τοιαύτας αὐτὸς τῆς τῶν γηπόνων ἐκείνων θεωρίας εἰσεπράξατο δίκας. English translation in *A History of the Monks of Syria by Theodoret*, trans. by R.M. Price (Cistercian Studies, 88), Trappist, Ky, 1985.

were symbolic of the captivity and carcerality of the flesh under the dominion of the soul.⁷⁰

By the time that John writes his *Lives*, the expression ܐܒܕܐ ܕܡܫܝܗܐ (*ʿabdā daMšihā*), that is, “slave of Christ,” and ܐܒܕܐ ܕܐܠܠܗܐ (*ʿabdā dʾAllāhā*), that is, “slave of God,” had practically become technical terms denoting a respected and devoted ascetic. John also speaks of ܐܡܬܐ ܕܡܫܝܗܐ (*amtāh daMšihā*), the “bondmaid of Christ.”⁷¹ John is also fond of referring to the ascetic vocation as a ܢܝܪܐ (*nīrā*), a ‘yoke’ or, as we will shortly see, a ܝܘܩܪܐ (*yūqrā*), meaning, ‘burden’.⁷² Coming from the words of Jesus in Matthew 11:30, “For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light,”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.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.⁷⁵ By the sixth century, and in John’s *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

70 Matthias Henze, *The Madness of King Nebuchadnezzar: The Ancient Near Eastern Origins and Early History of Interpretation of Daniel 4* (JSJSupp, 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.

71 John of Ephesus, *Tašʿitā* 12; PO, 19.171.

72 The concept of the ‘yoke’ occurs quite frequently in John, especially with relation to the “yoke of monasticism” (ܢܝܪܐ ܕܡܫܝܗܐ; *nīrā dʾdayrāyutā*) in John of Ephesus, *Tašʿitā* 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 *Tašʿitā* 44; PO, 18.661.

73 Translation: NRSV. NA²⁸: ὁ γὰρ ζυγός μου χρηστός καὶ τὸ φορτίον μου ἐλαφρόν ἐστιν. See especially John of Ephesus, *Tašʿitā* 36; PO, 18.626.

74 De Wet, *Preaching Bondage*, pp. 74-75.

75 R.W. Connell, *Gender and Power: Society, the Person, and Sexual Politics*, Stanford, Calif., 1987, pp. 167-190.

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.

⁷⁶ John of Ephesus, *Tas'itā* 27; PO, 18.556: "لا يهوه انما ومعلمي حقا، ولا حكمي حقا لا وحذا، ومعسلا." See also PO, 18.552.

78 De Wet, *Preaching Bondage*, pp. 214-215.

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 irons 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

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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” (فتلا وحصص), John simply admires the man and leaves him.⁸⁴ 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.

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5 Conclusion

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- 96 See, for instance, John Chrysostom, *Inan. glor. et ed. lib.* 70.855-856; *Jean Chrysostome: Sur la vaine gloire et l'éducation des enfants*, ed. by A.-M. Malingrey (SC, 188), Paris, 1972, p. 170; and De Wet, *Preaching Bondage*, pp. 159-160.
- 97 T.M. Shaw, *The Burden of the Flesh: Fasting and Sexuality in Early Christianity*, Minneapolis, Minn., 1998, pp. 13-14.
- 98 John of Ephesus, *Ta^ςŭtā* 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 حاجب الله.