It is especially fitting, in comparing Paul and Seneca, for us to include a chapter assessing their views on slavery. One of them a representative of early Christianity, the other of Roman Stoicism, Paul and Seneca represent ways of thinking that Enlightenment humanist scholarship long considered responsible for the erosion of slavery as an institution.

The comparison between Paul and Seneca on slavery is equally fitting, however, in that both of them have been charged, since ancient times, with personal inconsistency, whether within their own patterns of thought, or else between their personal ideals on the one hand and their personal practices on the other.1

More recent assessments of ancient slavery have helped accentuate the portrait of these two men as inconsistent. Since the 1980’s, a growing stream of scholarship has maintained that ancient Christianity and Stoicism, far from undermining slavery, actually represented the same acquiescence toward if not outright support for its continuance that was found exhibited in the broader culture.2 In modern times, interpreters have pointed to inconsistenc-
cies between the allegedly egalitarian ideals of Paul and Seneca, and their failure to call for an end to slavery.³

I hope to put the problem in fresh perspective here by exploring their views from a sociological angle. The essay will unfold in three parts. To begin, I provide a brief sketch of slavery under the Roman Empire; second, I undertake a survey of relevant texts from Paul’s and Seneca’s writings;⁴ finally, I examine their views through the sociological theories of Peter Berger and Thomas Luckman.⁵

Slavery in the Roman Empire

Slavery in the Roman Empire, like slavery in the New World between the sixteenth and nineteenth centuries, was chattel slavery: slaves constituted personal property, over whom owners exercised complete legal and physical mastery (*dominium*), including even the power of life and death. But unlike slavery in the New World, slavery under the Roman Empire was never grounded in racial identity. Many slaves were captives of war. Others entered slavery through piracy, trade, or self-sale. Ultimately, the bulk of the slave population was supplied through natural reproduction (the child of a slave, as traced through the mother, inherited the legal status of a slave).⁶

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³ Keith Bradley remarks that Seneca’s philosophical views “did not lead to what now seems the ultimately logical conclusion: a call for an end to slavery” (“Seneca and Slavery,” 339; my italics). Incidentally, Dale Martin draws precisely the same conclusion on Paul: “though Paul attempts a theological undermining of the difference between master and slave, he never pursues the logical end of rejecting the actual social structure of slavery” (*Slavery as Salvation* [New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993], 142; my italics; cf. P. Veyne, *The Life of a Stoic* [trans. D. Sullivan; New York/London, 2003], 138).

⁴ For my comments on Paul, I limit myself to the nine letters to churches traditionally attributed to him, plus his letter to Philemon. For Seneca, I focus on the Moral Essays, a collection of dialogues written over a period of more than twenty years, and the Moral Epistles, written almost undoubtedly within the last two or three years of his life. For Seneca, just as for Paul, dating is notoriously difficult, and it is not always possible to distinguish between development in thought over time and personal inconsistency. For a recent attempt at dating Seneca’s writings, integrating the insights of earlier studies, see C.W. Marshall, “The Works of Seneca the Younger and Their Dates,” in *Brill’s Companion to Seneca: Philosopher and Dramatist* (Leiden/Boston: Brill, 2014), 33-44.


⁶ According to Walter Scheidel, “[N]atural reproduction made a greater contribution to the Roman slave supply than child exposure, warfare, and the slave trade taken together and was