Engaging with Slavery

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To be approvingly addressed, as I have been addressed in the preceding pages, by a group of eminent colleagues in a field of study related to but distinct from my own is at once gratifying yet sobering. Gratifying because of the underlying premise that the contributions I have offered to the history of slavery in classical antiquity have been of some relevance to my colleagues’ contributions to New Testament and early Christian studies; sobering because I am very much aware of the enormity of the subject with which we are concerned and of the impossibility of ever fully understanding it. The evidence is formidable in scope and character; no one can hope to master it all; and there are always new questions to ask of it and new ways in which to understand it. I am deeply grateful nonetheless for the kindnesses and courtesies that the contributors have shown to me in their papers; and in this brief response to some of the issues they raise I proceed from our common, and I think incontestable, understanding that slavery was of elemental importance in the ancient Mediterranean world.¹

¹) I must record my warm thanks to Bernadette Brooten for organizing the original panel at which the papers published here were delivered, and to Jennifer Glancy, Bert Harrill, Sheila Briggs, and Scott Bartchy for agreeing so readily and cordially to participate. The occasion was for me memorable. I have commented elsewhere on the genesis and nature of my interests in the history of slavery (Keith Bradley, “Roman Slavery: Retrospect and Prospect,” Canadian Journal of History/Annales canadiennes d’histoire 43 [2008], pp. 477-500) and will not repeat details here. Readers should be aware, however, that the suggestions I have made have sometimes been contested (see notably Niall McKeown, The Invention of Ancient Slavery? [London: Duckworth, 2007], pp. 77-96, though I am sceptical of his scepticism). The enormity of the subject
First, the question of whether slaves in antiquity might be assumed to have made conscious choices in their response, or responses, to slavery, is a challenging matter raised directly by Jennifer Glancy in her remarks on “humanity” and implicitly by S. Scott Bartchy in his comments on “agency.” The question has special application to the subject of slave resistance in antiquity, which, it is suggested, may as I have explored it rely too heavily on modernizing concepts.

Events involving slaves in classical antiquity are usually recorded in sources unsympathetic to the slaves concerned. This hardly needs to be said. The capacity of slaves to make decisions, however, and to take action against their owners is often apparent in them, as for instance in Tacitus’ account (Ann. 14.42) of an assault on the Roman senator Pedanius Secundus by one of his slaves where the reasons that may have motivated the slave are clearly itemized. Indeed, to judge from a multiplicity of prescriptions on how to regulate slaves’ lives that appear in a sequence of works across a vast expanse of time, from Aristotle to (at least) Athenaeus, slave-owners in antiquity were regularly concerned to nullify the potential they saw in their slaves to act independently, and at times it appears, contrary to their interests.\(^2\) The prescriptions are predicated on the assumption that the human dimension of slave property can never be disregarded, and that efficient management is necessary both to procure services and to eliminate the possibility, if not likelihood, of slaves’ disinclination to accede to authority. (The prescriptions presumably stretched back to the beginnings of Greco-Roman history, given Eumaeus’ awareness that when “the day of slavery” came no man was disposed to work willingly [Hom. Od. 17.320-323]). The slave, it was widely understood, was not an automaton but a human agent who might, as P.A. Brunt straightforwardly stated, “revolt or run away.”\(^3\)
