Book Reviews

Chris L. De Wet


Chris L. de Wet’s *Preaching Bondage: John Chrysostom and the Discourse of Slavery in Early Christianity* is a study in what he aptly terms doulology, the discourse of slavery, in the homilies of the John Chrysostom (347–407 C.E.). Informed theoretically by Michel Foucault, de Wet argues that Chrysostom’s prescriptive discourses on slavery had a corporeal impact, shaping both enslaved and despotic bodies in a carceral regime conditioning bodies to exemplify a Christianized masculinity in ways proper to status as slave or free. Many studies of slavery in antiquity paint with a broad brush, generalizing across centuries, homogenizing evidence from North Africa and Asia Minor. It is thus welcome to have a monograph dedicated to the thought world of a single ancient author, a project enabled not only by Chrysostom’s prodigious output but also, crucially, by de Wet’s strengths as a historian and theoretician.

Although the volume will be most easily digested by those who have some prior knowledge of ancient Mediterranean slavery, in chapter one (“Introducing Doulology”) de Wet locates his discussion of Chrysostom in the context of wider discussions of slavery in antiquity, arguing persuasively that in the study of slavery in the Roman world Xenophon’s view of slaves as aliens, as outsiders, is more relevant than Aristotle’s construction of natural slavery, the theory more frequently cited by modern scholars.

De Wet supports the prevailing scholarly view that the Christianization of the Roman Empire neither diminished support for slaveholding nor ameliorated slavery’s effects. Although Chrysostom preached primarily to slaveholders, he urged enslaved members of his congregations not to be concerned about enslavement to human masters. Instead, he warned against enslavement to the passions or, even more to be feared, enslavement to sin, a line of reasoning
de Wet analyzes in chapter two, “Divine Bondage: Slavery Between Metaphor and Theology.” Because Chrysostom understood the body as heteronomous, he held that liberation from enslavement to the passions and to sin would only be achieved, paradoxically, through enslavement to God.

In chapter three, “Little Churches: The Pastoralization of the Household and Its Slaves,” de Wet situates Chrysostom’s oft-cited dictum that slaveholders should own no more than one or two slaves in the context of what he characterizes as tactical slaveholding, part of a larger program of wealth renunciation primarily concerned with the impact of the character of slaveholders. Operating a household with fewer slaves might well require more arduous labor from the remaining slaves. Chrysostom expected the male head of household to be a pastoral leader, responsible for shepherding his wife, his children, and his household slaves, but also responsible for maintaining status differentials among household members. “Turn your house into a church,” Chrysostom urges, “you are, in fact, even responsible for the salvation both of the children and of the slaves” (p. 94).

Good masters are made, not born, according to Chrysostom. De Wet terms the pedagogical process of forming future slaveholders kyriarchization. In chapter four, “The Didactics of Kyriarchy: Slavery, Education, and the Formation of Masculinity” de Wet analyzes the roles played by nurses, pedagogues, and other household slaves in fostering the elite masculine qualities Chrysostom considered essential for Christian slaveholders. “Slaves were central in the reproduction of mastery,” de Wet concludes (p. 168).

In chapter five, “Whips and Scriptures: On the Discipline and Punishment of Slaves,” de Wet turns to Chrysostom’s views on the moral formation of slaves. Chrysostom considered slaves capable of virtue, a virtue, that is, appropriate to their station. The Christian master intent on instilling obedience in household slaves could rely on the Christic panopticon, the slave’s internalized expectation that his or her every action was known to the Lord. In large measure because excessively violent punishment suggested that a slaveholder had lost control, diminishing his masculinity, Chrysostom urged reliance on moral exhortations and spiritual discipline when possible. Such exercises were inevitably backed by the implicit threat of bodily harm: “Scourging one slave,” Chrysostom explains, “often makes the rest more disciplined out of fear” (p. 214).

A number of recent studies have highlighted the sexual exploitation of slaves in ancient slavery. In chapter six, “Exploitation, Regulation, and Restructuring: Managing Slave Sexuality,” de Wet approaches the question of slaves and sexuality from a distinctive angle. Chrysostom insisted that sexual relationships between married slaveholders and their slaves must be acknowledged as adul-