



*P.G. Kirchsclaeger*

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# SLAVERY AND EARLY CHRISTIANITY – A REFLECTION FROM A HUMAN RIGHTS PERSPECTIVE

## ABSTRACT

Addressing the topic “slavery and Early Christianity” is a difficult task for various reasons. First, it is complex to reach an understanding of slavery of that time. Secondly, there is the hermeneutic challenge of approaching the issue with a current mind-set that includes the notion of the abolition of slavery. Furthermore, from a contemporary perspective, a critical account of slavery and Early Christianity is possible, with the temporal distance protecting one from the consequences linked to a judgement about slavery. Finally, there is the hermeneutic challenge of engaging with texts from Early Christianity from an ethical perspective in order to reach present-day normative propositions, while respecting the original intention of the texts. In light of these challenges, this article will offer a brief overview of opinions on slavery in Hellenistic philosophy and in the Jewish tradition, and then discuss slavery and Early Christianity, followed by a reflection on slavery and Early Christianity from a human rights perspective.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

It is a difficult task to address the topic of “slavery and Early Christianity” for various reasons. First, there is the technical element, as

... there are more than enough difficulties in attempting to grasp the true character and significance of slavery in the Graeco-Roman

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*Dr. Peter G. Kirchsclaeger, Senior Research Fellow at the Faculty of Theology of the University of Lucerne, Visiting Fellow in Ethics at Yale University, and Research Fellow, Department of New Testament, Faculty of Theology, University of the Free State. E-mail: [peter.kirchsclaeger@unilu.ch](mailto:peter.kirchsclaeger@unilu.ch)*

world of the first century, due not merely to the fragmentary and one-sided nature of our evidence but also to the deep-rooted political and philosophical commitments which influence almost every significant treatment of the topic (Barclay 1991:161).<sup>1</sup>

Secondly, there is the hermeneutic challenge of approaching the issue of slavery with a current mind-set that includes notions on human rights, the abolition of slavery, and the recognition of the equality of all human beings.

Bei dem Aktualitätsbezug der Thematik liegt die Gefahr zu dem methodischen Fehler nahe, die antike Sklaverei und entsprechende Äusserungen des Neuen Testaments von vornherein mit den Massstäben modernen Menschenrechtsverständnisses zu messen. Zur Erhebung des historischen Sachverhalts und der von den neutestamentlichen Texten intendierten Aussage ist dieses methodische Vorgehen offensichtlich so ungeeignet, dass auf diesem Weg die widersprüchlichen Positionen sich aufbauen lassen: auf der einen Seite das vernichtende Urteil, das Neue Testament sei in seinen Äusserungen zur Institution der Sklaverei vom Geist der Menschenverachtung durchzogen ..., auf der anderen Seite die weitreichende Feststellung, das Neue Testament – insbesondere Paulus – habe in dieser Frage eine Richtung eingeschlagen, die den Anfang einer Befreiungsbewegung bedeute und die Aufhebung der Sklaverei über kurz oder lang notwendig zur Folge gehabt habe ... Aber beides trifft so nicht zu. Die Dinge liegen differenzierter, als es solche Alternativlösungen mit ihrem Defizit an geschichtlicher Betrachtungsweise zunächst vermuten lassen (Laub 1982:9).

Besides the necessity of a critical account of slavery and Early Christianity from a contemporary perspective (Wolbert 2010:203-224), this analysis is done with the temporal distance protecting one from the political and social consequences and insecurities linked to a judgement about slavery. It is easier to discuss slavery and Early Christianity two thousand years later than at that time. In addition, one should not forget:

Die Sklaverei der Antike endet also nicht am Übergang zum Frühmittelalter und wird erst am Beginn der frühen Neuzeit mit der Entdeckung Amerikas "wiederbelebt", sondern Sklaverei existiert, in vielfältigen Varianten, von der Antike bis in die Gegenwart (Grieser 2012:3).

Finally, there is the fundamental hermeneutic challenge of engaging with mostly Biblical texts from Early Christianity from an ethical perspective to reach contemporary normative propositions (Heimbach-Steins 2012:11-36;

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1 For an overview on this controversy, cf. Finley (1980:11-66).

Kirchschlaeger 2016), while respecting the texts' original intention (Kirchschlaeger 2014:127-133).

In light of these challenges, this article first offers a brief overview of the notions of slavery in Hellenistic philosophy and the Jewish tradition, and then discusses slavery and Early Christianity, followed by a reflection on slavery and Early Christianity from a human rights perspective.

## 2. NOTIONS OF SLAVERY IN HELLENISTIC PHILOSOPHY AND THE JEWISH TRADITION

Slavery was part of the “normal” life in the Graeco-Roman world (Laub 1982:11-18).<sup>2</sup> Slaves were treated like objects; they had no rights; they did not even possess the right to life (Justinian *Digesta* 1,6,1,1). Obviously, they were excluded from any likelihood of seeking redress for injustices. They had to follow their owners' orders, without any exception (Buckland 1908:10-72). Slavery found a “justification” in philosophical treatises of that time that endeavoured to prove the existence of two kinds of human beings. By incorporating ideas from Plato, Aristotle (*Politeia* I, 5, 1254b, 20-25) stated that some human beings were, by their nature, meant for slavery because of the lack of intellectual capacities that are essential for an autonomous life.<sup>3</sup>

On the other hand, the Roman practice of slavery was based on a different kind of understanding of human beings. Roman slavery included the likelihood that slaves could be set free and obtain Roman citizenship. In the Roman context, the differentiation between *ius naturale* and *ius gentium* justified a differentiation within the *ius gentium* between different social classes, among others, slaves.<sup>4</sup> One becomes a slave because of imprisonment in a “just war”; condemnation by a court; birth from a mother who was a slave, or poverty (bonded labour) (Spindelboeck 2014:165).

Certain fundamental principles of slavery applied to all slaves in the ancient world, namely that the *dominus* possessed the slave, including his/her life, workforce, and property. Therefore, slavery meant to be unfree. The Delphic manumission inscriptions define the four characteristics

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2 For legal background of the trade, cf. Plato, *Nomoi* 916a-c; for the trading-process, cf. Seneca, *Epistulae morales* 80,9.

3 For an overview on corresponding texts of Plato and Aristotle, cf. Hermann-Otto (2005:16-22).

4 *Servitus est constitutio iuris gentium, qua quis dominio alieno contra naturam subicitu* (Justinian *Institutiones lib. 1, tit. 3.2*). For other relevant legal texts, cf. Wieling (1999).

of slavery as follows: lack of legal rights, liability to seizure, inability to choose one's activities, and lack of freedom to determine one's residence (Westermann 1960:17-32).

Based on the parables of Jesus of Nazareth, a slave's circumstances at that time could be described as follows:

A slave might handle large sums of money for an owner, yet that owner could, at will, torture the slave. A slave might function as a trusted agent of a slaveholder, but his low status nonetheless left him vulnerable to physical abuse by those he encountered. Some slaves were overseers, exerting physical control over lower-ranking slaves. Lower-ranking slaves endured the violence not only of slaveholders but also of slave overseers. Food for slaves was often doled out as rations, or else slaves waited until slaveholders finished eating before consuming the leftovers. Slaves labored in agriculture. Slaves, male and female, labored in domestic settings. Some slaves enjoyed their owners' trust. Perhaps all slaves lived in fear (Glancy 2011:5).

At the same time, there was the heterogeneous reality of daily life:<sup>5</sup> A highly qualified house-slave in an emperor's home lived a different life from that of a slave working in a mine (Grieser 2012:3).

The content of master-slave relationship may vary greatly. One or the other aspect may be emphasized: economic, domestic, religious, sexual, or whatever. Any attempt to classify systems of servility in terms of economic obligations and positions of the slave is to assume that this one point provides an index for the rest, when in fact such a situation must be shown empirically to exist or not to exist (Bohannon 1963:181).

One can assume that all slaves shared one dream: "It is the slave's prayer that he be set free immediately" (Epictetus *Diss.* 4, 1, 33).<sup>6</sup>

The Stoics never questioned the institution of slavery, although Seneca recommended a friendly treatment of slaves with a noble character (Seneca *Epistle* 47.15-17).

It must be pointed out that the manumission of slaves was mostly not an act of grace.

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5 Cf. Seneca (*De Ira* 3, 40); Seneca (*De Beneficiis* 3, 19); Philo (*Spec Leg* 2, 83, 90-91); Petronius (*Satyricon* 75, 11); Horace (*Satires* 1, 2, 116-119); Dio Chrysostom (*Orationes* 15, 5).

6 Cf. also Dio Chrysostom (*Orationes* 14, 1); Philo (*Spec Leg* 2, 84); Seneca (*De Beneficiis* 3, 19).

For the masters, manumission was economically rational, partly because it tempted slaves to increase their productivity and lowered the cost to the master of supervising his slaves at work, and partly because the slave's purchase of freedom recapitalized his value and enabled the master to replace an older slave with a younger one (Hopkins 1978:131).

Only a small minority of slaves gained their freedom free of charge (Hopkins 1978:167). According to Exodus 21:1-6, the release of a Jewish slave entailed that the master could keep their slaves' children who were born during the period of slavery. In this way, the system of slavery reinforced itself with the practice of manumission. This was even enhanced by the fact that freedmen had to continue to fulfil their obligations (Duff 1928:36-49; Waldstein 1986).

In the Hebrew Bible, the institution of slavery is not fundamentally questioned (cf., for example, Ex. 20:17). The meaning of the term עֶבֶד is fairly broad.

Im sozialen Bereich ist עֶבֶד die im AT geläufige Bezeichnung für den Sklaven. Es ist aber nicht terminus technicus in dem Sinne wie unser "Sklave", das ein unbedingt negatives Vorverständnis mit sich bringt. Man darf nie vergessen, dass das gleiche Wort den Offizier und den Minister des Königs bezeichnen kann, und welchen Klang es in der Selbstbezeichnung "dein Knecht" hat. Die Sklaverei ... ist als Institution von Israel vorgefunden und übernommen worden, als es in Kanaan sesshaft wurde. Das zeigt sich in der Übernahme des Sklavenrechtes aus der Umwelt (Ex 21,2-11.20f.26f.32) (Westermann 1979:185).

At the same time, it must be noted that Job (31:12-15) emphasises the common human characteristic that God created all human beings.

Furthermore, the Jewish tradition has clear rules for slavery:

Moreover, Leviticus (in chapter 25) insists that you must not call your brother a slave and must not be harsh in your treatment of him; his status as a brother, with the inalienable property rights which will be recognized at the next jubilee, makes it impossible to regard him as a slave in the way that members of other nations may be termed and treated as slaves (vv. 44-46) (Barclay 1991:180).

The Jewish Bible uses the imagery of slavery, for example, in order to describe the liberation of Israel from the slavery in Egypt by JHWH (cf. Ex. 3:7-8).

Finally, the Jewish tradition distances itself from slavery of Jewish brothers. This is, at least, not the case with Stoics. "Stoics never questioned

the institution of slavery, though Seneca recommended strikingly friendly treatment of slaves – at least those who had noble characters (*Epistle* 47. 15-17)” (Barclay 1991:181). In the Jewish tradition, the brotherhood is of higher value and dominates the handling of slavery.

The Stoic notion of brotherhood involves no difficulty in having brothers as slaves, while the OT texts do display a sense of anomaly, due to the legal and social rights which belong to a (Hebrew) brother (Barclay 1991:182).

It appears that this lack of reluctance with regard to slavery is incoherent within the Jewish tradition because of the Jewish belief in the *imago Dei* – human beings being created in the image of God – which is formulated in Genesis 1:26-27:

Then God said, “Let us make man in our image, after our likeness. And let them have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over the livestock and over all the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth.” So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them.

The Jewish-Christian teaching of the *imago Dei* is based on two substantives: the Hebrew word מַלְאָכָה, meaning “sculpture”, “image”, and דְמוּת, meaning “appearance”, “resemblance”, “analogy”. It must be emphasised that the main focus of the text does not entail what the *imago Dei* consists of, but why the *imago Dei* is given (Middleton 2005; Schuele 2005:1-20; 2009:591-611; Neumann-Gorsolke 2004; Niskaner 2009:417-436). The Hebrew word מַלְאָכָה, translated as “image”, is also used for statues representing the king in the city centres of that time (Loretz 1969:118; cf. also Duncker 1969:77-87; Schuengel-Straumann 1998:2-11). This means that they ensured the presence of the king during his absence. Similarly, human beings are called upon to be the emblem of God on earth, to conserve and to implement God’s claim of power (Von Rad 1967:46). In this Biblical context, the power of God – bearing in mind that JHWH was honoured as a king – embraces the responsibility of God to take care of those who are entrusted to him. Genesis 1:26-27 thus embraces a rather practical understanding of the *imago Dei* rather than a substantial notion (Barr 1968:11-16).

Human beings perform the duty of taking care of all other human beings, of the entire creation in the name of God (Middleton 2005). Therefore, the *imago Dei* refers mainly to the relations among human beings and those between human beings and the environment. That God entrusts the responsibility to human beings of representing God on earth as God’s image is thus a gift of God to them. Such an understanding of the *imago Dei* accentuates the notion of human dignity, and points to a

precise orientation – God. This orientation towards God also functions as the foundation of the relationship with God. This, in turn, forms the foundation of the relationship with all other human beings and with the entire creation.<sup>7</sup>

Furthermore, Genesis 1:26-27 must also be read in conjunction with Genesis 5:3, where the term *בְּצַד* is used for the resemblance between father and son (Adam and Set). Because of this semantic relationship between Genesis 1:26-27 and Genesis 5:3, the closest possible blood relationship, that of childhood, complements the *imago Dei*. Human beings not only receive the gift of the responsibility for all other human beings and for the entire creation, but they also resemble God, like a child resembles his/her parents.

A Midrash related to Rav Kahanā deliberates on this relation of childhood: “It is like with twins: If one of them suffers headache, the other feels it as well” (PesK 5,6; commentary by Thoma & Lauer 1986:139-140 [translation by PGK]). This sympathy must be understood to be from the father to the child: God feels with human beings as a father feels with his child. Finally, the Jewish-Christian principle of the love for fellow human beings also reinforces the *imago Dei* (Leviticus 19:18).

When examining the notion of slavery in Hellenistic philosophy and in the Jewish tradition – where, for instance, Philo (*De spec. leg.* 2, 69) did not question the institution of slavery either – one has to take into account that Antiphon’s (*Frag.* 44B Diels, Col. 1 [232-66H.]; Col. 2 [266-99 H.]; fifth century B.C.) statement that to infer social difference from “one’s being or not being well-born” shows ignorance (Merlan 1950:164). Antiphon further elaborates on the reasons for his assessment:

For, we all, Greeks and barbarians alike, by nature have the same nature in every respect .... This can be seen from the fact ... that the natural necessities (breathing, eating) are the same for all men and can be provided for by all men in the same way (we all breathe by mouth and nose and eat with our hands) and in none of these respects (i.e., neither as to our needs nor as to our ways of satisfying them) is there a difference between Greek and barbarian (Merlan 1950:164).

One must recognise that Antiphon speaks about “the all-inclusive human equality” (Merlan 1950:164). Rather than revolutionary thinking, Antiphon’s conclusion represents an application of the discourse of the fifth century B.C.

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<sup>7</sup> The significance of relationships and of community may then be seen in the second creation narrative in Genesis 2:4b-24 (Kirchschlaeger 2011:63-82).

about the relation between *physis* and *nomos* in terms of the tension between the two poles, namely free men and slaves.<sup>8</sup> Merlan (1950:164) observes:

[T]he idea of brotherhood of man originated without the idea of the fatherhood of God as its counterpart. It originated as a nonreligious idea, as a protest against prejudice in the name of nature – this nature being conceived, as far as we can see, without any divine quality ... The equality of biological functions is the all-important factor in interhuman relations.

In addition to the Antiphon fragment, one should read the text by Alkidamas (*Or. Att.*, II, 154), outlining that “all were sent into being by God as free men, no one was created by nature as slave” (Merlan 1950:164), as indicative of the fact that Alkidamas referred to all human beings, not merely all Greeks.

### 3. SLAVERY AND EARLY CHRISTIANITY

Early Christianity was connected with slavery in different ways. For example, it is likely that Paul was in contact with slavery on a regular basis:

As Paul traveled from city to city, then, he would have found it impossible to avoid contact with slaves. When he went to the marketplace to find other craftspeople or to purchase food for dinner he would have mingled with both male and female slaves (Glancy 2006:42).

Therefore, it is likely that Paul was also aware of the sexual abuse of slaves (Glancy 2006:58-69).

Early Christianity mostly experienced slavery as part of the *familia*, the *οἶκος* (Barclay 1991:165). Slaveholders as well as slaves were part of Early Christian circles. “There are slaves although we cannot tell how many” (Meeks 2003:73). The same can be said for slaveholders as members of Christian communities (Glancy 2006:131): “In other words, our evidence implies that the ‘typical’ Christian was as likely to be a slaveholder as a slave”. This ubiquitous ancient institution influenced the emergence and early development of Christianity, including that of the Christian texts.

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8 Herodotus also came close to such thoughts:

In the famous story in which Greeks and barbarians dispose of the corpses of their ancestors, Herodotus (iii. 38) obviously implies that the difference of *mores* between Greeks and barbarians is only a matter of convention. How far is it from here to the assertion that *all* differences between them are so? (Merlan 1950:165, author’s emphasis).



It is impossible to imagine someone like Gaius or Philemon offering hospitality to a whole church (Rom 16:23; Phlm 2) without the aid of slaves: one could not maintain a house sufficient to accommodate a significant number of guests on a regular basis without the assistance of slaves, at least door-keeping, cooking and serving at table (Barclay 1991:166).

Furthermore, the number of slaves in a household (Laub 1982:19-47) corresponded to the wealth of the *pater familias*.<sup>9</sup>

Christian texts do not differ from other texts of that time in their perception of the common composition of a household embracing slavery (Grieser 2008:125-143). They describe slavery without any critical remark on this deeply problematic social institution. They seem to accept it as a given social order (Herrmann-Otto 2005:56-81). This lack of hesitancy about slavery in Early Christianity seems incoherent, because of the Jewish-Christian belief in the *imago Dei* and the Jewish-Christian principle of the love for one's fellow human being (Lev. 19:11-18). Every human being must be regarded as one's neighbour – in his/her misery, a human identifies with Jesus Christ (cf. Matt. 25:40-45). In the Gospels, only Luke 22:51 refers to direct contact between Jesus and a slave when Malchus' ear is healed. In addition, the imagery of slavery is part of the parables of Jesus in the Gospels (Glancy 2011:16-23):

Attention to the frequency and consistency of Jesus' references to the battered bodies of slaves should alert us to the persistent and intense violence of ancient slavery. At the same time, awareness of the dishonor associated with slavery should bring us a fresh appreciation of the newness of Jesus' mandate to his followers to embrace the role of "slave of all". Jesus died an excruciating and humiliating death, the death of a slave. This death is a model for the disciples' life. Jesus does not condemn the institution of slavery. What he demands is something unexpected. He stipulates that his followers are to become a community of slaves serving one another. How strange this mandate must have seemed in the first century. How strange it seems today (Glancy 2011:27).

The Acts of the Apostles includes Rhoda, a slave, in the narrative in Acts 12:2-14, without any comment on this problematic social institution, similar to an account of Lucius visiting the house of Milo (Apuleius *Metamorphoses* 1.21-22). Paul addresses slavery directly in Galatians 3:28, 1 Corinthians 7:21-24, 1 Corinthians 12:13, and Philemon. It is difficult to grasp Paul's position on slavery. On the one hand, he aims for equality within Christian communities. The focus is on human beings as creations of

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9 For an example of a household, cf. Tacitus (*Annals* 14, 42-45).

God; everything else is irrelevant, thus emphasising the dignity of all human beings irrespective of citizenship, social position, gender, and so on. These are emphasised for the baptised in Galatians 3:28: “There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.” While acknowledging the unrestricted solidarity, one should not overlook the limitation to the baptised. Yet the unrestricted commandment of love of Jesus Christ points one in a particular direction. In the New Testament, this message was explosive and dangerous. Any differentiation between Christians and all other human beings must be confronted with the universality of human dignity based on the *imago Dei*: All human beings, not only Christians, receive God’s gift of the *imago Dei* (Loretan 2010:59; Gabriel 2009:7; Vatican II *Dignitatis humanae* 1; 9; 11; 12; Vatican II *Gaudium et spes* 26; 29; 78). Ogereau (2012:377) elaborates:

Paul’s rhetorical appeal to *ισότης* and *κοινωνία* ... suggests that he had very concrete objectives in mind. His intentions seem to have extended beyond the mere alleviation of poverty by means of charitable giving. Indeed, he appears to have aimed at reforming the structural inequalities of Graeco-Roman society that were also becoming apparent in the early church (cf. 1 Cor 11:17-22), by fostering socio-economic *ισότης* between Jews and Gentiles and by establishing a global, socially and ethnically inclusive *κοινωνία* among them. ... Needless to say, this deeply challenged ancient socio-political theories and dissolved ancient prejudices based on socio-ethnic distinctions.

On the other hand, one should also point out that Paul is not fundamentally opposed to slavery. For example, in the case of Philemon, Paul does

... a little more than offer a variety of different suggestions, none with certainty of a clear instruction and leaving unresolved the central tension in the present status of Onesimus as both slave and brother to Philemon (Barclay 1991:183).

As far as Galatians 3:28 is concerned, one must differentiate

... between the claim that for those in Christ there are no distinctions between slave and free and the claim that slavery presents no obstacles to those who want to join the Christian body. In fact, Paul never clearly makes the latter claim, which has been repeatedly made for him by modern scholars (Glancy 2006:70).

In general, Christian texts do not only accept slavery as a reality and avoid protesting for a change of this inhuman practice, but also remind all members of the household – including slaves – of their duties for the harmonious existence of the *familia*, the *οἶκος* (Grieser 2012:4). In addition,

these reminders follow theological lines of argumentation – referring, for example, to the will of God (Col. 3:22-24; Eph. 6:5-9; Didache 4:10-11; *Constitutiones Apostolorum* 4:12). Of course, this strengthens the social acceptance of the institution of slavery rather than shaking its basis, thus contributing to the stabilisation of this problematic practice.

In addition, the presence of the notion of slavery in Christian texts forces one to investigate the reciprocal interdependence between the *pater familias* and the slave, thus opening the likelihood of identifying malpractices in this regard as cause for concern for the Christian community and its leaders (Theissen 1969:213-243).

Eine solche mögliche Parteinahme über den innerfamiliären Rahmen und zugleich über die vom Gesetzgeber hinaus geregelte Sanktionierung von Delikten dokumentieren einzelne Synodenbeschlüsse, die entsprechende kirchliche Strafen androhen, aber auch die Einrichtung eines Kirchenasyls u. a. für flüchtige Sklaven (Grieser 2012:4-5).

Reciprocal interdependence meant that both sides were expected to play their role in the household. Therefore, from the perspective of Christian texts, slaves were expected to perform as slaves. There was thus a difference in the morality of slavery and in that of slaveholders (Glancy 2006:139-156).

Early Christian authors used the figure of the slave (for example, in Jesus' sayings; Glancy 2006:102-129), the rhetoric of slavery (Glancy 2006:9-38), or slavery as imagery or a metaphor (for example, Phil. 2:6-11) in order to characterise the relation between God and human beings and between human beings (Combes 1998). For example, Christians understood themselves as *δοῦλοί Χριστοῦ*. This self-understanding includes the masters' care for their slaves, on the one hand, and the notion of dependence, subjection, and surrender of autonomy, on the other. One can assume a constant interaction between this use of the notion of slavery and the institution of slavery. Moreover, the imagery of a present practice in society – such as slavery – would probably not be used without any critical comment by someone who was against this social institution. For example, in the case of the Christ hymn in Philipians,

... one is confronted with the fact that the material reality of that social relationship (slavery) has been transformed into metaphor, that the cultural, including the religious imagination of the Greco-Roman world is bounded by the mentality of a slave society (Briggs 1989:143).

The Christ hymn in Philippians also explains:

In coming to terms with Jesus' teachings on slavery, then, we recall not only his words but also his actions – indeed, according to the Philippians hymn, his very being. A community that conforms itself to him has no place for masters (Glancy 2011:26).

Finally, Glancy (2006:1-38) points out that the reality of slavery impacted on the structures and beliefs of Early Christianity:

Christianity was born and grew up in a world in which slaveholders and slaves were part of the everyday landscape. In a context in which slaveholders treated slaves as bodies – available bodies, vulnerable bodies, compliant bodies, surrogate bodies – ascetic Christians learned to treat their own bodies as slaves (Glancy 2006:156).

The question remains: How can it be explained – not justified – that Christian authors in Antiquity (Laub 1982:63-98) did not criticise, but accept slavery,<sup>10</sup> although they “shared the conviction that there is an original equality of all human beings which is grounded in creation?” (Grieser 2012:20). How could the letters of the Pauline School (Col. 3:22-4:1; Eph. 6:5-9; 1 Tim. 6:1-2; Tit. 2:9-10; 1 Pet. 2:18-20) place “a heavy emphasis on the duties of slaves to be whole-heartedly obedient, to work for their masters with a good will and to count them worthy of the highest respect?” (Barclay 1991:185).

Before attempting to answer this question, it can be stated that Christian authors did not use Plato's and Aristotle's arguments, although it will be obvious from the following that the lines of argumentation are similar (Woehrlé 2005:40). Pragmatic concerns such as, for example, security, financial costs of manumissions, the functioning of the churches, and theological reasons such as, for example, the expectation of the *parousia* and different intentions of the Biblical texts (soteriological) could potentially be answers to this question.

This can be shown in the case of the Letter to Philemon. If Paul were to ask Philemon explicitly to manumit Onesimus, free of charge, and Philemon would follow his request, or if Philemon were to manumit Onesimus of his own will, free of charge, this would have had an impact on his reputation among other slave owners and his other slaves (Barclay 1991:176). Manumission (Glancy 2006:92-96), including the customary payment, would lead to the following problem: Who would be able and willing to pay for the manumission of Onesimus? From Hermas, Mand 8,10; Sim 1,8;

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10 Exceptions that embodied a fundamental criticism are, for example, Clement of Alexandria (*Stromata* 4,8, 58-59); Isidor of Sevilla (*Sententiae* 3,49,3) (all human beings share the same *conditio nascendi moriendique*).

and Ignatius, Polycarp 4,3, it is clear that some churches paid for the manumission of Christian slaves in the second century, but a generalisation of this practice “could easily become an impossible burden on a church’s finances” (Barclay 1991:176). Furthermore, “Paul’s churches depended on patrons wealthy enough to provide homes as meeting-places for Christians – and that meant, in effect, that they depended on Christian slave-owners!” (Barclay 1991:176).

The functioning not only of the churches (Laub 1982:49-62), but also of the entire society was based on slavery (Philo *Spec. Leg.* 2, 69, 84).

Only the Therapeutae and ... the Essenes could put into practice their claim that slavery was contrary to nature since they were able to establish wholly independent and self-contained communities (Barclay 1991:177).

Both examples show that this was indeed possible, and that an authentic theory respecting the equality of all human beings could be put into practice.

Finally, the case of Paul, Philemon, and Onesimus shows the above pragmatic reasons for consolidating the actual institution of slavery, on the one hand, and highlights the impossibility of continuing slavery by a Christian and a Christian community, due to the teaching of brotherhood by Paul – expressed in Philemon 16: “no longer as a slave, but as more than a slave, as a beloved brother”, on the other hand. Besides these pragmatic responses, a possible explanation could also be that

Paul expected the *parousia* before most of his generation died (1 Cor 15:51-52), there was indeed little point in advocating manumission since its main beneficiaries were the future generations descended from freedmen and the whole system of slavery was soon to disappear (Barclay 1991:184).

One possible explanation for Christian authors’ acceptance of slavery could be that they focused on theological, anthropological, soteriological, and eschatological issues rather than on problems of the concrete world around them (Grieser 2012:5). Another explanation derives from the notion of equality and inequality of human beings, even true of the precedent, paradisiac perfection when they were created (for example, the notion of a hierarchy between parents and children as part of the divine order in creation) (John Chrysostom, *Homilia* 4,3 in *Genesis*). Augustine (*Quaestiones in Heptateuchum* 1,153) places this hierarchy in the *ordo naturalis in hominibus*. The consequence of this understanding of the natural equality and inequality of human beings is the attribution of moral neutrality to inequality among human beings. This notion also

finds its way into the discourse on slavery. A further explanation is based on the assumption that slavery is a consequence of the fall-of-humankind narrative in Genesis. This turned all human beings into slaves.<sup>11</sup> This general enslavement was then regarded as the beginning of real slavery (Grieser 2012:8). Furthermore, the narrative of Noah and Ham (Gen. 9:18-29) inspired another line of argumentation. The curse of Ham to be the servant of his brothers was perceived as an enslavement of Ham, as punishment for his wrongdoings, thus giving rise to the notion that slavery should be regarded as punishment for a specific group of human beings.<sup>12</sup> Irrespective of which explanation is used, the following can be stated:

Ob die christlichen Autoren die Entstehung der realen Sklaverei mit dem Fall des ersten Menschenpaares, mit der Verfluchung des Ham oder mit einer menschlicher Einsicht verborgenen göttlichen Einteilung rechtfertigten – mit diesen variantenreichen Erklärungen von Sklaverei gelang es ihnen, die *servitus* mit der Vorstellung einer ursprünglichen, in der Schöpfung begründeten Gleichheit aller Menschen zu vereinbaren und damit die grundsätzliche Widernatürlichkeit der Sklaverei zu behaupten. Zugleich legitimierten sie diese Sklaverei auch, insofern sie sie als fortdauernde Strafe oder als Lösung individueller oder gesellschaftlicher Missstände präsentierten (Grieser 2012:16-17, emphasis in the text).

The Christian authors' use of the concept and imagery of slavery (for example, arguing that true slavery was spiritual in nature) contributed to the continuation of the acceptance of the social institution of slavery.

I shall now examine whether – because of both the normative nature of the texts and the ethical issues arising from our perception of these texts – ethical concerns from our perspective undermine the legitimacy of these likely responses.

## 4. A REFLECTION FROM A HUMAN RIGHTS PERSPECTIVE

### 4.1 Present-day slavery

At present, millions of human beings are still victims of modern forms of slavery. In order to avoid a misunderstanding that “modern slavery” is substantially different from slavery in ancient times – which is definitely

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11 For an overview of such an opinion in ancient texts, cf. De Wet (2010:26-39); Philo (*De opificio mundi* 60).

12 On the controversy regarding this explanation, cf. Goldenberg (2005:157-167).

not the case – it must be clearly stated that “modern slavery” still includes exploitation, coercion, wrongful deprivation of personal freedom, suppression, violence, abuse, and so on. The term “modern slavery” is used to ensure that new forms of slavery are also covered. According to the Slavery Convention of 1936, Article 1/1, “[S]lavery is the status or condition of a person over whom any or all of the powers attaching to the right of ownership are exercised.” The Supplementary Convention on the Abolition of Slavery, the Slave Trade, and Institutions and Practices Similar to Slavery of 1956, Article 1 states:

Each of the States Parties to this Convention shall take all practicable and necessary legislative and other measures to bring about progressively and as soon as possible the complete abolition or abandonment of the following institutions and practices, where they still exist and whether or not they are covered by the definition of slavery contained in article 1 of the Slavery Convention signed at Geneva on 25 September 1926: (a) Debt bondage, that is to say, the status or condition arising from a pledge by a debtor of his personal services or of those of a person under his control as security for a debt, if the value of those services as reasonably assessed is not applied towards the liquidation of the debt or the length and nature of those services are not respectively limited and defined; (b) Serfdom, that is to say, the condition or status of a tenant who is by law, custom or agreement bound to live and labor on land belonging to another person and to render some determinate service to such other person, whether for reward or not, and is not free to change his status; (c) Any institution or practice whereby: (i) A woman, without the right to refuse, is promised or given in marriage on payment of a consideration in money or in kind to her parents, guardian, family or any other person or group; or (ii) The husband of a woman, his family, or his clan, has the right to transfer her to another person for value received or otherwise; or (iii) A woman on the death of her husband is liable to be inherited by another person; (d) Any institution or practice whereby a child or young person under the age of 18 years, is delivered by either or both of his natural parents or by his guardian to another person, whether for reward or not, with a view to the exploitation of the child or young person or of his labor.

Article 4 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights of 1948 states: “No one shall be held in slavery or servitude; slavery and the slave trade shall be prohibited in all their forms.”<sup>13</sup> With this prohibition of slavery,

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13 Based on the Slavery Convention of 1926, the Protocol amending the Slavery Convention of 1926 leading to the above-mentioned Article 4 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights of 1948, several ensuing human rights treaties made the prohibition of slavery legally binding. For example, the

human rights protect essential elements and spheres of human existence, enabling human survival and life as a human being (Kirchsclaeger 2013:194-195). Unfortunately, the implementation of human rights – as well as the specific human rights that protect a human being from slavery – faces difficulties and problems.

In contrast to these positive developments of human rights instruments and mechanisms concerning slavery, the Global Slavery Index (2013) estimates that, globally, 29.8 million human beings are in slavery. According to the International Labor Organization (ILO) (2014), nearly 21 million people are victims of forced labour – 11.4 million women and girls and 9.5 million men and boys. Private individuals or enterprises exploit nearly 19 million victims and state or rebel groups exploit over 2 million victims. Of those exploited by individuals or enterprises, 4.5 million are victims of forced sexual exploitation. Forced labour in the private economy generates US \$150 billion in illegal profits annually. Domestic work, agriculture, construction, manufacturing and entertainment are among the sectors in which slavery mostly occurs. Migrant workers and indigenous people are particularly vulnerable to such forced labour.

Forms of modern slavery continue to exist. There are different forms of forced labour, including debt bondage, trafficking and other forms of modern slavery. The most vulnerable victims include women and girls forced into prostitution, migrants trapped in debt bondage, and sweatshop

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Supplementary Convention on the Abolition of Slavery, the Slave Trade, and Institutions and Practices Similar to Slavery of 1956; the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court; the Barcelona Traction, Light and Power Co, Ltd. (Belgium v. Spain); Judgment of 5<sup>th</sup> February 1971, I.C.J.; the ILO Convention concerning Basic Aims and Standards of Social Policy of 1962 (No. 117); the ILO Protection of Wages Convention of 1949 (No. 95); the ILO Worst Forms of Child Labor Convention of 1999 (No. 182); the ILO Forced Labor Convention of 1930 (No. 29); the ILO Abolition of Forced Labor Convention of 1957 (No. 105); the ILO Domestic Workers Convention of 2011 (No. 189); the Convention for the Suppression of the Traffic in Persons and of the Exploitation of the Prostitution of Others of 1949; the Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons Especially Women and Children, supplementing the United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime of 2000; the Sub-Commission on the Promotion and Protection of Human Rights Resolution 2005/27; the Sub-Commission on the Promotion and Protection of Human Rights Resolution 2003/26; the Sub-Commission on the Promotion and Protection of Human Rights Resolution 1999/16; the Sub-Commission on Prevention of Discrimination and Protection of Minorities Resolution 1998/18, and the Sub-Commission on Prevention of Discrimination and Protection of Minorities Resolution 1996/11.



or farm workers through clearly illegal tactics and with hardly any or no payment, and so on.

## 4.2 Hermeneutic considerations regarding the use of human rights as an ethical point of departure for our perspective on Early Christianity

It is essential to contextualise the texts of Early Christianity and our own perspective (Roediger 2012:63-89). The two poles should be understood as the poles of a communication process and respected in terms of their specificities, the different contexts, and their original intentions. For example, for the interaction with Biblical texts, one should pay attention to

Direktableitungen aus der Schrift [verdecken], dass ethische Argumente immer aus mehreren Elementen zusammengesetzt sind. ... Wissentlich oder nicht sind in jedem ethischen Argument Vorannahmen über die Gestalt des ethischen Urteils, über den Personenkreis, für die die Ethik gilt, über die Wahrnehmung der gegenwärtigen Situation und andere Vorannahmen mehr enthalten. In diesem Sinne gibt es keine Direktableitungen ethischer Sätze aus der Schrift (Hailer 2006:289).

Some texts of Early Christianity such as the texts of the New Testament possess normativity:

... weil in den neutestamentlichen Schriften das geistgeprägte Zeugnis über eine geisterfüllte Zeit überliefert ist, und weil in diesen Schriften das Wort und Handeln Jesu, des Christus Gottes, und das jeweils neu in ihren Kontext hinein reflektierende und aktualisierende Wort und Handeln massgeblicher Personen über das Christusgeschehen seinen Niederschlag gefunden hat – deswegen ist der Blick zurück nicht beiläufig oder als einer unter anderen möglich. Dieser Rückblick nimmt hingegen einen Norm gebenden Platz ein (Kirchschaelger 2009:454).

This normativity of the New Testament texts must be taken into account and one should contextualise these texts as well as the recipients and the ethical elements of these texts.

I have developed the following methodical considerations by relying on the modi of Biblical communication identified by Marianne Heimbach-Steins (2011:254-258). In order to observe the advice provided by the texts of the New Testament on the hermeneutic question as to how such texts may be a source for answers to ethical issues, I start with the pattern of moral discernment which can be distilled from the texts themselves in terms of the following four steps: “Perceiving, discerning, judging, and

giving of account” (Wannenwetsch 2008:177). This pattern builds a “circle of reflective ethos as it is suggested by a conceptually alert reading of the New Testament” (Wannenwetsch 2008:177). It must be emphasised that this has the character of a communication process (“perceiving”, “giving of account”), including the combination of a subjective and an objective dimension (“discerning”, “judging”) and the narrative element (“giving of account”) – taking into account the genre of Biblical texts as accounts of revelation, not as historical reports.

Based on these considerations, the first step in approaching the normativity of the texts of the New Testament from a methodical perspective would be “listening”. The core of “listening” is the attempt to understand the original intention of the text (cf. Bachmann 2003:32-45; Ebner & Heiningner 2005; Schnelle 2013; Schreiber 2006:11-14; Kirchschaeger 2012:8-30). The original intention of the text should be decisive, not the concern that one brings to the texts.

Ich suche nicht zuerst nach bestimmten Antworten auf bestimmte ethische Fragen, nach Begriffen oder nach ethisch bedeutsam klingenden Topoi. Vielmehr gehe ich der erzählerischen Dynamik des Textes nach und lese ihn in seinem ersten literarischen Kontext, dem Kontext der Bibel selbst (Heimbach-Steins 2011:254).

Of course, one listens with one’s ears. This implies that listening happens from one’s own context, one’s own horizon of knowledge and understanding, and one’s own reality. This dialogue strives towards a specific aim, namely the understanding of the original intention of the Biblical text and the search for ethical orientation facing moral contemporary issues, excluding arbitrariness. The latter is reinforced by the fact

... dass ich den Text als Text der Bibel wahrnehme und damit als Teil der Heiligen Schrift der Glaubensgemeinschaft, in die ich als Christin eingebettet bin und der ich als Theologin zugleich mit dem Anspruch einer wissenschaftlich zu verantwortenden Deutung im Rahmen eines Diskurses theologischer Ethik verpflichtet bin (Heimbach-Steins 2011:255).

However, this should not overrule the aim to understand the original intention of the Biblical text, as this would provoke a failure in terms of “listening”.

The second step, “inquiring”, entails the critical examination of the results of the “listening” to the extent that this is really what the Biblical texts want to tell their addressees or that it still embraces what one would like to see in the text from our ethical perspective. The controlling question

is whether the results of the “listening” would also make sense without the ethical perspective being the origin of the “listening”.

During “listening” and “inquiring”, one must also take into account that the process of coming as close as possible to the original intention of the Biblical text entails that one should realise that one’s notion of the original intention of the Biblical text always remains a construction from one’s own perspective on the text.

The third step, “locating”, aims to embed the potential ethical elements in the Biblical texts (which have passed the examination) within the horizon of knowledge and understanding of the authors and the addressees, in the “genuine Gotteserfahrung” (Heimbach-Steins 2011:255) and “im hermeneutischen Zirkel der Selbstausslegung des gläubigen Subjekts (Israel; Gottesvolk; Jesusgemeinschaft; Kirche)” (Heimbach-Steins 2011:255). It must be possible to embed these elements in the general scheme of the Biblical message. Therefore, the canon of the Holy Scriptures provides a hermeneutic framework for the normativity of Biblical texts. Such “locating” is necessary in order to respect the context of the Biblical texts and to consider the differences between the present and the past in the dialogue with the normativity of Biblical texts.

Rezeption von und Auseinandersetzung mit biblischem “Material” für die Ethik [kann] nur dann fruchtbar und weiterführend sein, wenn die Frage metaethisch gewendet wird in dem Sinne: Welches Ziel mag die Formulierung bestimmter Vorschriften angeleitet haben? Warum wurden konkrete Lebensbereiche und Problemkreise so und nicht anders geregelt? Welche Vorstellungen von Gerechtigkeit und gutem Leben lassen sich “hinter” den Normen ausfindig machen? (Heimbach-Steins 2011:257-258).

The fourth step, “bringing to mind”, embraces the transfer of ethical elements of Biblical texts to the present. While considering the ethical elements of Biblical texts, there is a compromise between the ethical questions of the present and the ethical elements of the Biblical texts. This elicits the following challenge:

Sind die entschlüsselten Erfahrungen mit gegenwärtigen ethischen Fragen und Zielen kompatibel, sind sie inspirierend und orientierend, so dass im Gespräch mit dem biblischen Text ethische Analogate entdeckt werden können, auch wenn dessen Norminhalt als solcher überholt erscheint, weil heutigen Rezipientinnen ... ein anderes und reichhaltigeres Wissen ... zu Gebote steht (und deshalb auch in verantwortliche ethische Urteilsbildung Eingang finden muss) als in den antiken Bezugstexten verarbeitet werden konnte (Heimbach-Steins 2011:258).

In this instance, a re-examination similar to what happened during the second step of “inquiring” helps do justice to the Biblical text and avoid reading aspects into the Biblical accounts that are not really part thereof.

A fifth step, “justifying”, entails the necessity of providing an argumentative foundation for these ethical elements of the Biblical accounts for contemporary ethical discourse. One must consider the character of the Biblical texts as texts of revelation.

Die biblische Erzählung redet über ethische Ansprüche bzw. Beanspruchungen (...) im Modus einer ganz bestimmten Selbstausslegung des Menschen in einem komplexen Beziehungsgefüge. Die Zentralperspektive fokussiert die menschliche Selbsterfahrung auf die Gotteserfahrung hin oder eher noch: von dieser her. Indem erzählerisch ein notwendiger Zusammenhang von menschlicher Selbstausslegung und ethischer Beanspruchung sowie von Gottesrede und Reflexion der sittlichen Beanspruchung des Handelnden entfaltet wird, markiert die biblische Erzählung einen weltanschaulich-religiös voraussetzungsreichen Standpunkt. Insoweit wir diesen Zusammenhang adaptieren, begeben wir uns *nota bene* auf die Ebene nicht universalisierbarer Deutungen; denn wir binden uns und unsere ethische Reflexion an eine Interpretationsgemeinschaft, die bestimmte, nicht-triviale Voraussetzungen und Konsenserwartungen geltend macht, wie über den Menschen zu reden sei (Heimbach-Steins 2011:256).

Ethical statements based on ethical elements of Biblical texts do not build upon an argumentative justification based on reason, but on a “theological justification”. “Theological justifications” – by their nature – refer to transcendence and thus provoke the suspicion that they delude further rational inquiry and arguments that would lead to proofs and conclusions. Therefore, the term “justification” does not seem to be accurate for the theological collection of reasons. The term “foundation” appears to be more adequate in order to provide the justifying ethical elements of Biblical texts. “Foundation” develops an argumentation based on beliefs, faith, and with a logical coherence.

One must also take into account that the “foundations” include *universalia* that represent a particularity of Christianity due to the universality of its requirement of faith. Christian core beliefs can be explored in philosophical systems and thus attain their plausibility and rationality. They consist of a rational nucleus that leads to universality.

Auf dem Hintergrund der biblischen Botschaft vermögen die christlichen Theologen der *Patristik* schon früh in den Ansätzen der antiken Philosophie zentrale Inhalte des eigenen Glaubens und des aus ihm folgenden universalen Ethos wiederzuerkennen und

das Eigene in der Sprache der philosophischen Theoriebildung auszulegen und weiterzuentwickeln. Dies gilt nicht nur für die schon von Sokrates artikulierte Sicht des Menschen als eines der eigenen Erkenntnis des Guten verpflichteten, verantwortlichen Subjekts, sondern auch im Blick auf die durch die *Stoa* entwickelte Sicht des Menschen als Bürger einer alles umfassenden Welt, dem als Vernunftwesen ein "natürliches Gesetz" eingeschrieben ist, das seine verpflichtende Kraft im Modus des "Gewissens" (*syneidesis*) zur Entfaltung bringt (Honnefelder 2012:6).

There is thus neither a contradiction nor a contrast, but a connection, because *universalia* are part of philosophical systems and can influence their understanding critically – stimulating (affirming and furthering) or criticising (influencing their respective perception). This results in a difference between natural morality and beliefs – a surplus of meaning – undergirding the function of faith.

Our perspective has human rights as one of its central elements. Human rights can indeed serve as an ethical point of reference (Kirchschlaeger 2013:89-229), attempting among others

... eine institutionelle, auf moralische Kategorien und ein rechtliches Instrumentarium zurückgreifende Lösung für das menscheitsalte Problem zu bieten, wie man die allgegenwärtige Gewalt von Menschen gegen Menschen mindern und vielleicht sogar überwinden kann (Hoppe 1998:28).

### 4.3 Slavery and Early Christianity from a human rights perspective

Nowadays and from a human rights perspective, it can be stated that:

Es ist ja grundsätzlich damit zu rechnen, dass inhaltliche Aussagen in einem veränderten sozialgeschichtlichen Kontext einen anderen Stellenwert bekommen. So hat das Motiv von der Freiheit bzw. vom Sklavesein in Christus (1 Kor 7:21f) oder von dem einen Kyrios, vor dem kein Ansehen der Person gilt (Kol 3:25; 4:1; Eph 6:9) in der Anfangssituation christlicher Gemeinden sicher eine nicht zu unterschätzende Rolle gespielt im Sinn eines im Christusglauben begründeten Ausgleichs zwischen Freien und Sklaven (Laub 1982:99).

Currently and from a human rights perspective, it is difficult to understand why early Christians did not object to the social institution of slavery, because, from our perspective, one would expect them to apply the gospel in order to overcome the social inequalities and injustices of their time. It is uncertain whether one can go so far as to criticise Early Christians,

including Paul and other authors of Biblical texts, for their active or passive acceptance of slavery (Overbeck 1875:158-230; Kehnscherper 1957:79-96; Schulz 1972:167-193).

In addition, a defence of the reticence of Early Christians seems problematic, since it may be understood or misunderstood as the justification of Early Christians' acceptance of slavery at that time. This risk cannot be eliminated or reduced by attempts to point out the political danger linked to a criticism of slavery (Lightfoot 1880:323; Wright 1986:150, 169); by emphasising that Paul's choice of focusing on changing personal relationships rather than social structures is adequate (Preiss 1954:32-42); by combining this view with the teaching of a new existence "in Christ" and the corresponding irrelevance of a particular social order (Conzelmann 1975:126; Lohse 1971:203, 205); by reading a strong subversive power in the Christian redefinition of the relation between master and slave (Moule 1957:11); and so on. The last two points lead to the consequential risk of an oversimplified "solution" that could easily become an excuse for remaining silent in light of oppression and for taking the side of the oppressor rather than the oppressed, as Laub (1982:108) identified in the case of the "alte Kirche":

[A]uf der einen Seite eine innerkirchliche Bewegung, die, durchaus neutestamentlich motiviert, die Institution der Sklaverei ausser Kraft zu setzen geneigt war, auf der anderen Seite eine Kirche, die sich so weit mit dem Staat und seinen gültigen Ordnungen identifizierte, dass sie im Entscheidungsfall schon auf einen entsprechend vorgegebenen Handlungsrahmen festgelegt war.

From our perspective and taking human rights as an ethical point of reference, it can be stated that it does not make sense that Early Christian texts did not fight against the slavery of their times, while simultaneously acknowledging that it is easier to make such a judgement approximately two thousand years later, with the temporal distance protecting one from the political and social consequences and insecurities linked to such a judgement, and while emphasising that the focus of the judgement is not the lack of practice against slavery, but rather the lack of theoretical criticism. In addition, this criticism should lead to a deconstruction of this acceptance of slavery in order to open the horizon of the liberating message of the texts of the New Testament (Schüssler-Fiorenza 1993).

Although neither Jesus nor Paul turned away would-be disciples who were slaveholders, their teaching empties the slaveholding ethos of its power. ... Like so many slaves in the ancient world, Jesus endured brutal beating. Crucifixion was a common means of executing slaves. As a result Jesus was said to "take the form of a slave". Through the ages Christians in hopeless circumstances have been comforted by

this likeness; surely Jesus understands their suffering. *All* Christians are mandated to recognize Christ in the faces of the enslaved and the oppressed – and to work to end oppression (Glancy 2011:102-103).

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