

God, Slavery, and Early Christianity

Ancient Christians understood themselves to be enslaved to God, an attitude that affected their ethics, theology, and self-understanding. This widespread belief is made especially clear in the *Shepherd of Hermas*, an overlooked early Christian text written by an enslaved person, which was nearly included in the New Testament. In this book, Chance Bonar provides a robust analysis of the ancient discourses and practices of slavery found in the *Shepherd of Hermas*. He shows how the text characterizes God's enslaved persons as useful, loyal property who could be put to work, surveilled, and disciplined throughout their lives – and the afterlife. Bonar also investigates the notion that God enslaved believers, which allowed the *Shepherd* to theorize key early Christian concepts more deeply and in light of ancient Mediterranean slavery. Bonar's study clarifies the depth to which early Christians were entrenched – intellectually, practically, and theologically – in Roman slave society. It also demonstrates how the *Shepherd* offers new approaches to early Christian literary and historical interpretation.

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*Divine Possession and Ethics in the Shepherd
of Hermas*

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¹ Frederick Douglass, "(1857) If There Is No Struggle, There Is No Progress," *BlackPast*, January 25, 2007, bit.ly/4itsSws; Jasper G. Goodman and Kelsey J. Griffin, "Harvard Will Move to Divest Its Endowment from Fossil Fuels," *The Harvard Crimson*, September 10, 2021, www.thecrimson.com/article/2021/9/10/divest-declares-victory/.

² Craig Steven Wilder, *Ebony and Ivy: Race, Slavery, and the Troubled History of America's Universities* (New York: Bloomsbury Press, 2013), esp. 16–17, 25–27 (on enslaved laborers at Harvard and recruitment of British students from West Indian plantation families), 190–98 (on the DeWolfe family's multiple Cuban plantations purchased to avoid the US 1808 prohibition on the slave trade, funding from the Lowell and

more just world through reparations and repatriation, I hope that this book is a small step toward achieving that goal.

Everett families with ties to Southern cotton and sugar plantations, and Israel Thorndike's funding of Harvard's incipient Divinity School). For a detailed analysis, see the 2022 Harvard & the Legacy of Slavery Report (<https://legacyofslavery.harvard.edu/report>), as well as the Slavery, Colonialism, and their Legacies project at Tufts University, of which I was a peripheral affiliate (<https://slaveryandcolonialism.tufts.edu/>). Despite Harvard's claim to be seeking actionable change in good faith, the University administration has consistently failed to do the bare minimum of, for example, offering to Tamara Lanier the nineteenth-century daguerreotypes of two of her enslaved ancestors, Renty and Delia, that were produced and used by Louis Agassiz to promote his polygenist scientific racism. See Tamara Lanier, *From These Roots: My Fight with Harvard to Reclaim My Legacy* (New York: Penguin Random House, 2025).

Glossary of Terms and Journals

If not present in *The SBL Handbook of Style*, second ed. (Atlanta, GA: SBL Press, 2014), 171–260, all other abbreviations used here can be found in the list below.

- AJA** *American Journal of Archaeology*
ALH *American Literary History*
Arch. Philos. *Archive de Philosophie*
ARG *Archiv für Religionsgeschichte*
ASP American Society of Papyrologists
BICS *Bulletin of the Institute of Classical Studies*
Cult. Rel. Culture and Religion
COMSt Bulletin *Comparative Oriental Manuscript Studies Bulletin*
ICLQ *International & Comparative Law Quarterly*
JEH *Journal of Economic History*
JGS *Journal of Global Slavery*
JIH *Journal of Interdisciplinary History*
JSCE *Journal of the Society of Christian Ethics*
J. Soc. Hist. *Journal of Social History*
LPP *La Parola del Passato*
MTSR *Method & Theory in the Study of Religion*
NHMS Nag Hammadi and Manichaean Studies
NECJ *New England Classical Journal*
OS *Organization Studies*
PAPS *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society*
PSI 4 *Papiri greci e latini*, Vol. 4: no. 280–445. Florence: Tipografia Enrico Arian, 1917.

RAG *Religion and Gender*

RÉGC *Revue des études géorgienne et caucasiennes*

RHT *Revue d'histoire des textes*

RPL *Res Publica Litterarum*

RRE *Religion in the Roman Empire*

SGDI II Baunack, Johannes et al., Hermann Collitz, ed. *Sammlung der griechischen Dialekt-Inschriften, II. Epirus, Akarnanien, Aetolien, ...* Göttingen, 1885–1899.

SLA *Studies in Late Antiquity*

VCSup Supplements to *Vigiliae Christianae*

VetC *Vetera Christianorum*

ŽA *Žiža Antika*