

*Preaching Bondage: John Chrysostom and the Discourse of Slavery in Early Christianity*, by Chris L. De Wet

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Doulology, the author's name for the dynamics of the discourse on slavery, is the primary concern of this outstanding study by Chris De Wet, Associate Professor of New Testament and Early Christian Studies at the University of South Africa. De Wet focuses his book on the doulology of John Chrysostom (*ca.* 349–407), the early Church father best known for his discourses against Judaism (or against Judaizers).

De Wet phrases the main objectives of his enterprise as follows:

(1) to account for how ancient slavery is “put into discourse” in the context of everyday life and is spoken about, how it is enunciated and what it says (or is made to say), (2) to determine who does the speaking (and who compels the slave body to speak), (3) to discover which institutions prompted individuals like Chrysostom to speak about slavery, who stores, distributes, and utilizes the things that were said, and most importantly, how the pervasive technologies of power, the discursive “power tools” behind various statements in this discourse led to the formation of various Christian identities. (4)

De Wet emphasizes throughout the embodied experience of the slave. He acknowledges his indebtedness to the work of Michel Foucault and Jennifer Glancy, among others.

The first of seven chapters introduces the concept of doulology, which the author affirms to be a term he coined. He tells readers that “the discourse of slavery should be understood as a system of statements, signs, ideas, and practices discursively associated not only with a framework of labour regulation and the possession of human bodies as fungible property, but perhaps more importantly, one that shaped the very essence of late ancient subjectivity and relationships” (4).

“Divine Bondage: Slavery Between Metaphor and Theology” is the title of chapter 2, which focuses on how Chrysostom followed Stoic philosophy and Pauline theology in interiorizing and metaphorizing slavery. Slavery of the flesh was not as important as slavery to sin. Slavery of the flesh was temporary and the result of sin, but what really counted is the spiritual freedom that Christ brought. For De Wet, “the metaphorization and interiorization of slavery suffocated any possible seeds of abolitionist thought in antiquity” (81).

Chapter 3, titled “Little Churches: The Pastoralization of the Household and its Slaves,” explores the ideology of slavery at the household level. De Wet finds that slavery rhetoric and practices permeated the households of late antiquity. Women were viewed as a sort of slave to the *pater familias*, even if one crucial distinction is her ability to join bodily with him. At the same time, wives were given authority to surveil slaves and some even conducted their own scriptural study groups. Chrysostom’s advocacy of minimizing the number of slaves should not be viewed as part of any conscious trajectory toward abolitionism, but rather “a form of wealth renunciation” (111).

In chapter 4, which centers on “The Didactics of Kyriarchy: Slavery, Education, and the Formation of Masculinity,” the author tackles the issues of how the system of slavery was reproduced through pedagogy, which was itself often considered to be menial work. De Wet discusses the paradoxes and other tensions that arose from the attempt to develop a strong masculine master, and the use of slaves (e.g., as wet nurses) to raise and educate the children destined to be masters.

“Whips and Scriptures: On the Discipline and Punishment of Slaves,” is the title of chapter 5. According to De Wet “Chrysostom had a very explicit and Christianized program of reform for slaves centering on the teaching of virtue—a process I will call aretagogy” (171). Teaching virtue is actually a means of regulating slaves. Obedience is a virtue that should be based on both love and fear of the master. Punishment, even if it had some boundaries, could be harsh, especially because it intended to correct many of a slave’s expected moral flaws (e.g., stubbornness, resistance, tendency to flee). Minimizing horrific punishment became a trend in Christianity. But such minimization could lead to justifying the maintenance of slavery by claiming that slavery was not as violent as it could be under non-Christian slave masters.

Sexuality is the theme of chapter 6 (“Exploitation, Regulation, and Restructuring: Managing Slave Sexuality”). For Chrysostom, the seat of lust

was not in the genitalia but in the seat of reason or in free will (*proairesis*). Such degeneralization of lust had implications for the violent acts that Chrysostom seems to tolerate against slave bodies. Insofar as eunuchism and eunuchs were concerned, De Wet argues that “Chrysostom was less concerned about the forced castration of slaves than he was about the eunuch as a sign of decadence” (270). By emphasizing the importance of spiritual castration, Chrysostom showed “a disturbing indifference to perhaps the most extreme and inhumane violence perpetrated against human bodies” (270).

In his concluding chapter, De Wet remarks that “the problem of slavery never became one of the great theological controversies of late antiquity, nor did it receive the attention that many other theological topics did” (271). Chrysostom’s “homilies exhibit very little empathy toward slaves” (272).

De Wet’s book is highly refreshing and a great contribution to the study of Chrysostom. It is refreshing because De Wet studiously avoids following the apologetic tendencies that one encounters in many works about Chrysostom. Some of these apologetic approaches may portray Chrysostom as signaling an advance toward abolitionism, while others attempt to mitigate some of the more disturbing aspects of his writings and ideas on slavery (and Judaism).

Instead, De Wet shows how some of the seeming mitigation of slavery by Chrysostom actually can work to maintain it. For example, the minimization of violent punishment of slaves can function as a justification to retaining slavery under the pretext that it is not so brutal as it could be. The idea that Christian owners should minimize the number of slaves arises from Chrysostom’s renunciation of wealth and not because of some abolitionist trajectory or empathy for slaves. The whole idea that Christian slaves were considered “spiritual equals” with their master “probably carried very little weight” in ameliorating their situation (278).

I don’t have any significant criticism of De Wet’s work, but it may have been useful to have had a more extensive discussion of how slavery rhetoric permeates Chrysostom’s view of the Jews. For example, in his *Adversus Iudaeos* (5.9.1), Chrysostom states that his investigation focuses on “the Jews’ present slavery and their bondage today” (following the translation of Paul W. Harkins, *Discourses against Judaizing Christians* [The Fathers of the Church 68; Washington DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 1979]).

A similar case can be made for more attention to Chrysostom’s demonological rhetoric, which is ubiquitous in *Adversus Iudaeos*, especially as Chrysostom claims that “the Jews themselves are demons” (*ibid.*, 1.6.2)

In addition, De Wet's focus on the rhetoric of slavery may be complemented by an exploration of Chrysostom's use of therapeutic rhetoric, which is now the subject of a dissertation ("Paul's Therapy of the Soul: A New Approach to John Chrysostom and Anti-Judaism" [Boston University, 2015]) by Courtney Wilson VanVeller.

De Wet offers an important contribution because he shows how the implicit and explicit rhetoric of slavery in Chrysostom's writings reflected and maintained the practice of slavery in early Christianity.

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