

The Cappadocian fathers on slave management

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Abstract

The aim of this article is to investigate the views of the three Cappadocian fathers, namely Basil of Caesarea, Gregory of Nyssa, and Gregory of Nazianzus, on how to manage slaves. The article approaches slaveholding as a habitus. Firstly, Basil of Caesarea's views are examined. Basil's views on slave management were based on the principle that slaves should still remain obedient and submissive to their masters, but that masters should treat their slaves justly. He especially discusses slave management as the management of wealth and sexuality. Secondly, Gregory of Nazianzus's views, especially from his testament, highlighted the importance of managing slaves after death. It is also a window into the realities of clerics and churches managing slaves. Finally, Gregory of Nyssa's fourth homily on Ecclesiastes can be described as **the** ancient treatise against mastery and the vice of pride, since this is the angle from which he criticises slave management. The homily is indeed proof that ancient authors were able to think outside the habitus of Roman slaveholding.

Introduction

The aim of this article is to investigate the views of the three Cappadocian fathers, namely Basil of Caesarea (330-379 CE), his younger brother Gregory of Nyssa (332-395 CE), and Gregory of Nazianzus (329-389 CE), on how to manage slaves.¹ Slave management was part of the larger discourse of household management. The art of governing one's household, called *oikonomia*, was one of the most important discourses in the late ancient Roman world, since the household was considered both the primary unit of economic production and the space where identities were formed and negotiated. With the rise of the Christian Roman Empire, the bishops became directly involved in the discourse of *oikonomia*. They believed that the management of the church is simply a macrocosm to the management of the household. The bishops therefore acted as domestic advisors and gave input on almost all domestic matters, including the management of slaves in the household. The main documents used in the early church on *oikonomia* are the Deutero-Pauline *Haustafeln* in Ephesians 5:22-6:9 and Colossians 3:18-4:1. There are also similar guidelines throughout the Pastoral Epistles, most notably in 1 Timothy and Titus (the themes permeate the entire text of these epistles), and also in 1 Peter 2:18-3:7. These texts therefore served as an authoritative scriptural apparatus when it came to *oikonomia* and the Cappadocians do not hesitate to utilise them.

The approach to slavery followed in this article mirrors that of Jennifer Glancy, who, in turn, applies the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu's notion of the habitus. It is important to note the following statement made by Jennifer Glancy (2010:73):

... [S]ome Christians used their bodies symbolically to challenge, or at least outrage, the habitus of slavery, thus attempting to disrupt, albeit fleetingly, the practice of Christian slaveholding. In these few exceptional moments, ancient Christians evinced some awareness of moral problems intrinsic to the institution of slavery, moments where they brought to consciousness moral discomfort with the habitus that shaped them. These moments of resistance were, in fact, futile, church hierarchies being receptive neither to the efforts nor to the Christians who made them. Ultimately these examples of embodied and enacted resistance illustrate precisely the conservative social effects of corporal habituation to particular social locations.

Glancy therefore argues that slavery was less a juridical state and more of a habitus. What is a habitus? Pierre Bourdieu developed the concept in his practice-centred social theory. Bourdieu (1990:52) calls the habitus a "system of structured, structuring dispositions ...". He describes it in more detail thus (Bourdieu 1984:167):

As a system of practice-generating schemes which expresses systematically the necessity and freedom inherent in its class condition and the difference constituting that position, the habitus apprehends differences between conditions, which it grasps in the forms of differences between

¹ For general biographical details of each of the Cappadocian fathers, see Drobner (2007:266-290).

classified, classifying practices (products of other habitus), in accordance with principles of differentiation which, being themselves the product of these differences, are objectively attuned to them and therefore tend to perceive them as natural.

The view of slavery as habitus is central to this investigation, since it examines instances of slaves in scenes of domestic life presented by the Cappadocians, scenes that appear very natural and not so much viewed through legalistic as through socio-religious lenses. This article will show how the Cappadocians negotiated and even resisted this habitus.

Basil of Caesarea

Basil's thoughts on slavery are linked with his views on asceticism, and he attributes slavery to the fall and the origin of sin (Kontoulis 1993:132–53,186–91; see De Wet 2010:26-39). Moreover, Basil does not subscribe to natural slavery: "... no one is a slave by nature? Men are brought under the yoke of slavery either because they are captured in battle or else they sell themselves into slavery owing to poverty ..." (*Spir.* 20.51).² While Basil never condemns slavery directly, there is a contained critique of slavery in his thinking and he does provide some information on Christian approaches toward slave management. He was not against slaveholding and like many other Christian authors he often used the guidelines from the *Haustafeln* in his teaching on slave management, most notably stating that slaves had to be submissive and obedient. He also believed that Christian slaves were supposed to be better labourers than their non-Christian counterparts (*Reg. mor.* 75). He does believe that owning some slaves is necessary, especially for basic and menial labours, but rejects having high numbers of slaves. He is very negative about the luxury of having slaves for almost every single duty (see *Hom. div.* 2.2-6; *Attend.* 5) and he is against any cruel punishment of slaves (*Hom. div.* 2.6; see Klein 2000:35-41; Grey 2011:498; Harper 2011:46, 120-21;). Basil is especially critical of the high profits of agricultural holdings by means of slave labour (Harper 2011:176-78). At the other extreme, Basil bewails the poor father who is forced to sell his children as slaves due to poverty (*Dest. horr.* 4). This phenomenon was not all that common in the Roman world, but the mention of it here by Basil does indicate that it could happen. Besides the selling of one's children, slavery was also fuelled by infant exposure. Basil's view on child exposure is quite curious and rather disturbing since while he believes that child exposure is in itself a crime, he adds that one should understand the motive for the deed. It would be acceptable to abandon a child out of poverty, but not due to neglect or promiscuity (*Ep.* 217.52; see Harper 2011:419).

It also becomes evident that Basil's views on slave management or dealing with issues related to slaveholding are directly related to sexual matters, and he saw it fit to give detailed guidelines on managing the sexuality of slaves (Kontoulis 1993:160-91). Basil discusses the problem of a slave being forced to commit a sexual sin: for instance, a female slave who is compelled into prostitution has no guilt (*Psalms.* 32.5). He also forbids slaves to marry in secret, and resorts to the authority of the slaveholder in such instances: "It is a grave fault even on the part of a slave to give herself away in secret wedlock and fill the house with impurity, and, by her wicked life, to wrong her owner ..." (*Ep.* 199.18.21-23).³ If, however, the slaveholder approves of the marriage it is permissible: "The woman who yields to a man against her master's will commits fornication; but if afterwards she accepts free marriage, she marries. The former case is fornication and the latter marriage. The covenants of persons who are not independent have no validity" (*Ep.* 199.40.1-5; see Harper 2011:273). These statements were common to Roman law and practice regarding slave marriages. It is the authority of the slaveholder that deems such a marriage legal or not, and if not, it is fornication (Nathan 2000:173). It was important to control the sexuality of one's slaves, since shameful sexual behaviour of slaves would reflect back onto the Christian slaveholder.

In conclusion, Basil never opposed slaveholding directly, but he did believe that the management of slaves could be quite complex. He agrees with the New Testament *Haustafeln* that slaves should be obedient to their owners, but that owners should not mistreat their slaves. Christian slaves ought to work better than non-Christian slaves, and the cruel punishment of slaves is abhorred. His views on slave management revolve around two issues, namely the use of wealth and the regulation of sexuality. In typical ascetic fashion, Basil rejects owning large numbers of slaves since this is superfluous. He also advises slave owners to carefully regulate the sexuality of their slaves.

Gregory of Nyssa

² Translation: Garnsey (1996:45–47); Greek text: SC 17.253: ... παρά μὲν ἀνθρώποις τῇ φύσει δούλος οὐδεὶς. Ἦ γὰρ καταδυναστευθέντες ὑπὸ ζυγὸν δουλείας ἤχθησαν, ὡς ἐν αἰχμαλωσίαις· ἢ διὰ πενίαν κατεδουλώθησαν ...

³ Translation: *NPNF*; Greek text: Courtonne 162: Μέγα μὲν ἀμάρτημα καὶ δούλην λαθραίοις γάμοις ἑαυτὴν ἐπιδοῦσαν φθορᾶς ἀναπλῆσαι τὸν οἶκον καὶ καθυβρίζειν διὰ τοῦ πονηροῦ βίου τὸν κεκτημένον·

In his biography of Gregory Thaumaturgus, Gregory of Nyssa describes this holy man as a faithful Christian slave of God by referring to the *Haustafeln* in Ephesians (*Vit. Greg. Th.* 27.19). While the metaphor of slavery is very common in the rest of Gregory's writings, he is probably the one Christian author who gives the most scathing criticism of institutional slavery. The *locus classicus* here is Gregory's fourth homily on Ecclesiastes, where Gregory provides comment on Ecclesiastes 2:7: "I bought male and female slaves and had other slaves who were born in my house." This homily is probably one of the most potent late ancient reactions against institutional slavery. The homily is concerned with living a virtuous life and for Gregory the sin of pride is central in the practice of slaveholding and slave management. This is the main premise in the entire homily, namely that slavery is a most sinful display of pride. There are similar statements among some Stoic philosophers, especially Seneca (see *Ep.* 47), but while the Stoic philosophers would display mostly indifference when it comes to institutional slavery, Gregory rejects it outright. There are very few writings from antiquity that are as negative about slavery as this homily. Gregory argues (*Hom. Eccl.* 4.1-2):

So, when someone turns the property of God into his own property and arrogates dominion to his own kind, so as to think himself the owner of men and women, what is he doing but overstepping his own nature through pride, regarding himself as something different from his subordinates? "I got me slaves and slave-girls." What do you mean? You condemn man to slavery, when his nature is free and he possesses free will, and you legislate in competition with God, overturning his law for the human species. The one made on the specific terms that he should be the owner of the earth, and appointed to government of the Creator -- him you bring under the yoke of slavery, as though defying and fighting against the divine decree.⁴

For Gregory it is only God who can possess human beings. This type of metaphorical slavery is common in Gregory's writings. God is seen as the only real slaveholder and human beings are supposed to be his slaves. Gregory accepts this type of slavery. But when human beings possess others it is deplorable. Like Basil, Gregory rejects the concept of natural slavery. The display of pride is seen in the fact that humans have been so consumed by greed that they rob God of his rightful property, namely other humans. According to Gregory there are limits to human dominion. Several Old Testament texts refer to the rule of humans over creation, over plants, animals and the land, but never over other humans (see Gen 1:26; Ps. 8:7-8; 104/103:16 [LXX]; see also Bergadá 1994:185-96; Epstein 2001:140). The irony for Gregory lies in the fact that the rulers now become the slaves. Slavery is therefore a reversal of the roles of dominion, and slave management can be nothing else than vain and sinful. Gregory also has a serious problem with the fact that one can put a price on the life of another human being, since the fact that humans are created in the image of God makes them, in fact, priceless (Dennis 1986:129-45).⁵ Only God can rule over the human body, and when people own slaves they become guilty of the most shocking hubris of all – taking the place of God.

Gregory constantly emphasises the shared humanity between the slaveholder and the slave, and those legal contracts that bind people in a state of slavery mean nothing (Dennis 1982:1065-72; Moriarty 1993:62-69). He continues:

Your origin is from the same ancestors, your life is of the same kind, sufferings of soul and body prevail alike over you who own him and the one who is the subject of your ownership – pains and pleasures, merriment and distress, sorrows and delights, rages and terrors, sickness and death. Is there any difference in these things between the slave and his owner?⁶

The shared experience of being human is what levels the social playing field, especially the fact that both are subject to physical deterioration and death. This type of thinking was also very common among Syriac authors of the same period. Aphrahat, in commenting on the impartiality of death, observes (*Dem.* 22.7): "He [Death] leads away to himself together slaves and their masters; and there the masters are not honoured more than their

⁴ Translation: Wright (2005:210); Greek text: Alexander: 335: ἐξουσίας παρὰ τῆς ὁ οὐν κτῆμα ἑαυτοῦ τὸ τοῦ θεοῦ κτῆμα ποιούμενος ἐπιμερίζων τε τῷ γένει τὴν δυναστείαν, ὡς ἀνδρῶν τε ἅμα καὶ γυναικῶν ἑαυτὸν κύριον οἰεσθαι, τί ἄλλο καὶ οὐχὶ διαβαίνει τῆ ὑπερηφανία τὴν φύσιν, ἄλλο τι ἑαυτὸν παρὰ τοὺς ἀρχομένους βλέπων; Ἐκτησάμην δούλους καὶ παιδίσκας. τί λέγεις; δουλεία καταδικάζεις τὸν ἄνθρωπον, οὐ ἐλευθέρᾳ ἢ φύσιν καὶ αὐτεξούσιος, καὶ ἀντινομοθετεῖς τῷ θεῷ, ἀνατρέπων αὐτοῦ τὸν ἐπὶ τῆ φύσει νόμον. τὸν γὰρ ἐπὶ τούτῳ γενόμενος, ἐφ' ᾧ τε κύριον εἶναι τῆς γῆς καὶ εἰς ἀρχὴν τεταγμένον παρὰ τοῦ πλάσαντος, τούτον ὑπάγεις τῷ τῆς δουλείας ζυγῷ, ὡσπερ ἀντιβαίνων τε καὶ μαχόμενος τῷ θεῷ προστάγματι.

⁵ Hart (2001:51-69) convincingly states that Gregory's criticism of slaveholding is based on his eschatology, especially eternal reward and punishment, wherein all human beings are treated equally.

⁶ Translation: Hall and Moriarty (1994:73); Greek text: Alexander: 338: ἐκ τῶν αὐτῶν σοι ἡ γένεσις, ὁμοίτροπος ἡ ζωὴ, κατὰ τὸ ἴσον ἐπικρατεῖ τὰ τε τῆς ψυχῆς καὶ τὰ τοῦ σώματος πάθη σοῦ τε τοῦ κυριεύοντος κάκεινου τοῦ ὑπεζευγμένου τῆ κυριότητι, οὐδὲνα καὶ εὐθυμία, εὐφροσύνη καὶ ἀδμονία, λύπη καὶ ἡδοναί, θυμὸς καὶ φόβοι, νόσοι καὶ θάνατοι. μὴ τις ἐν τούτοις διαφορὰ πρὸς τὸν δούλον τῷ κυριεύοντι;

servants. Small and great are there, and they hear not the voice of the oppressor. The slave who is freed from his master there pays no regard to him who used to oppress him” (see Job 3:18-19).⁷ Yet another Syriac author, Ephrem the Syrian, provides a similar response to the pride of slaveholding and the inevitability of death (*Carm. nisib.* 36.5).

For Gregory, it is in the practice of mastery that pride becomes visible (Harper 2011:346). There cannot be any virtue resulting from the mastery and domination of other people. This is a very significant statement since mastery was seen as a crucial element in the formation of virtue and masculinity according to traditional Roman values. Mastery was a key feature in Roman formulations of *oikonomia*. These ascetic virtues promoted by Gregory were totally incompatible with conventional Roman practice. All forms of slaveholding were unacceptable to Gregory, whether one owned scores of slaves or simply one or two. No human body can be commodified. Since a human body is priceless, owning only one is an act of extreme greed and luxury. Slaves are still viewed as wealth, but a type of wealth that is priceless and that should never be present in a Christian’s life.

Gregory is therefore against two of the most fundamental principles in the habitus of Roman slaveholding: firstly, he is against the concept of mastery due to its proud nature and, secondly, he is against the notion that human beings are fungible. His views also indicate that it is possible to use the metaphor of slavery (i.e. that God is the slaveholder and human beings are slaves) without showing the typical Stoic indifference to institutional slavery. The homily displays many Stoic viewpoints of slaveholding, most notably the mutual human experience of life and death and shared pre-existential origins – one can very well read the homily along with Seneca’s *Epistula* 47.

The use of the metaphor of slavery may be the only criticism against the homily. Gregory still uses the language of slave management when describing the relationship between God and human beings, a typical Pauline concept.

Gregory of Nazianzus

The last of the Cappadocian fathers, Gregory of Nazianzus,⁸ is surprised by the fact that (Pseudo-) Paul even speaks to slaves in the *Haustafeln* (*Apol.* 2.54). Gregory is also very aware of the problems of owning and managing slaves (*Carm.* 2.1.1):

To be a master over slaves is a fatal net! Harsh masters always become hateful, but slaves will trample a pious master without shame, the bad slaves cannot be made mild, the good ones cannot be made docile. They breathe sharp bile against both types of master beyond all reasoning.⁹

Gregory intimates that any psychological strategy of manipulation is futile in slave management. No matter how one manages slaves, it is always linked in some way with sin and vice (Kontoulis 1993:288-300; Klein 2000:52-55). As with Basil, Gregory is also very critical of the lavish lifestyles led by wealthy landlords of agricultural holdings (*Carm.* 1.2.8).

One of the most important sources for understanding slave management is in fact Gregory’s will, and Harper (2011:482) confirms this:

Gregory’s testament is one of the most complete to survive from antiquity. It offers a still-shot of an ascetic, most of whose property was presumably already given to the church. It illustrates the complicated but precise apportionment of human property and human labour between multiple generations. It exemplifies the perils of manumission and testation.

The document shows that despite having several reservations about slaveholding, Gregory himself owned slaves (this is also true for Basil [*Ep.* 37]). It also highlights a very important dimension of slave management, namely how to manage slaves after one’s death. Gregory had a bad experience with slaves in the administration of his late brother Caesarius’s estate, and he knew that the administration of slave-related matters were one of the most important matters that should be present in one’s testament. Basil tells of the difficulties his brother had to endure after Caesarius’s death. He had to manage slaves whom his brother neglected to manage in his testament (*Ep.* 32.1): “The matter rather is that those who have so freely distributed all the effects of Caesarius that were worth anything, after really getting very little, because his property was in the hands of slaves, and of men of no

⁷ Translation: *NPNF*; Syriac text: Graffin: 1008: .)NdB(\$Md)LQ nY(M\$)Lw !wh nMt)Brw)rw(z .nwhYd*B(nM)Yr*M nMt nYrYQY)Lw !nwhYr*MLw)dB*(L tY)Yw\$ htWl rBd.hL)wh dB(\$Md nML b\$X)L nMt hrM nM rXtMd)dB(

⁸ For an excellent discussion of the life and times of Gregory of Nazianzus, see Elm (2012).

⁹ Translation: Harper (2011:212); Greek text: PG 37:980-81: Πρώτον μὲν δμώεσσι ἀναστέμεν οἶον ὀλέθρου δικτιόν! οἱ πικροὺς μὲν αἰεὶ στυγέουσιν ἀνακτας, τοὺς δὲ ἱερούς πατέουσιν ἀναιδέες, οὔτε κακοῖσιν ἦπιοι, οὔτ’ ἀγαθοῖς εὐπειθέες. ἀμφοτέροις δὲ κέντρα χόλου πνεύοντες ὑπὲρ νόον.

better character than slaves, did not leave much for the executors.”¹⁰ It is then also reasonable to see in Gregory’s will that he appointed slaves who were also monks to administer his estate after his death. These slave monks were also intimate members of Gregory’s household. As was common in ancient Christian practice, upon his death Gregory manumitted the majority of his slaves (showing that he had some wealth), and donated others to the service of the church (*Diath.* 32-35, 52-55; see also Kontoulis 1993:281-282; Harper 2011:481). Gregory’s will therefore exhibits that dimension of clerical slave management often absent in other ancient Christian sources.

Conclusion

The purpose of this article was to examine the views of the Cappadocian fathers on the management of slaves. Both Basil and Gregory of Nazianzus owned slaves, while it is not clear from the works of Gregory of Nyssa whether he did. His negative attitude toward slaveholding may indicate that he did not own slaves, but this remains speculation. It was also pointed out that slaveholding can be considered a type of habitus, a system of beliefs and practices that are considered natural. In the case of Basil and Gregory of Nazianzus slavery is still discussed as an inevitable part of human social existence, and both provide comments, as domestic advisors, on how to manage slaves. Gregory of Nyssa is one of the very few ancient authors who was able to criticise the habitus of Roman slaveholding. All three of the Cappadocian fathers used the New Testament *Haustafeln* in their discussions on slave management (Gregory of Nyssa incorporated it in his elaborations on metaphorical slavery).

Basil’s views on slave management were based on the principle that slaves should still remain obedient and submissive to their masters, but that masters should treat their slaves justly. He also believed that Christian slaves should work better than non-Christian slaves. He especially discusses slave management as the management of wealth and sexuality. He is against owning large numbers of slaves.

While Basil’s views exhibited the complex nature of managing slaves during one’s lifetime, Gregory of Nazianzus’s views especially highlighted the importance of managing slaves after death. Gregory’s will is one of the most important sources for understanding this dimension of slave management. It showed us that much hardship could be avoided if slaves were managed properly in one’s will. It is also a window into the realities of clerics and church management of slaves.

I refer to Gregory of Nyssa’s views last since they are unique, and differ substantially from the views of the other Cappadocians. Gregory’s homily can be described as a treatise against mastery and the vice of pride, since this is the angle from which he criticises slave management. The homily is indeed proof that ancient authors were able to think outside the habitus of Roman slaveholding. Its strength is that it rejects any possibility of owning and dominating another human being. Slave management, *oikonomia* and domination have their limits.¹¹ Its weakness is that the language of metaphorical slavery is still prevalent in the homily. Gregory’s utilisation of the shared humanity between slaves and their owners should be approached with care. While it may seem commendable to seek the humanity of slaves, it is in fact highly problematic. Saidiya Hartman (1997) has looked closely at this phenomenon and has convincingly shown that the concept of the humanity of the slave in antiquity was in itself a tool of oppression and domination. Hartman states (1997:6): “I argue that the barbarism of slavery did not express itself singularly in the constitution of the slave as object but also in the forms of subjectivity and circumscribed humanity imputed to the enslaved.” Thus, by increasing the sphere of the humanity of slaves one also opens up more opportunities for suffering. How does the humanity of slaves function as a tool of oppression? Those characteristics that are typically human, such as having a body prone to pain, the importance of family life, hunger, sleep, and sexuality, now function as methods for controlling and disciplining the slave. By seeking the humanity of the slave, one also intensifies those possibilities for recourse to disciplinary measures that are distinctly human. One should rather follow Johnson’s (2003:113-24) caveat in this instance, namely that rather seeking the humanity of slaves, or proving that slaves are in fact also human beings, one should rather assume the humanity of the slave. It means that the very language of slavery, which dichotomises and pathologises different individuals, should be rejected. Hence the problem in the homily of Gregory, namely that while institutional slavery is still rejected, metaphorical slavery (to God) is still accepted. Nevertheless, Gregory’s homily is at least proof that ancient authors were able to criticise institutional slavery and it stands out as one of the most potent treatises against the horrors of slaveholding.

¹⁰ Translation: *NPNF*; Greek text: Courtonne: 37: ...ἐπιρεάζουσιν αὐτῶ ὡς χρήματα Καισαρίου παρ' αὐτῶν εὐληφότος. Καὶ οὐ τὸ τῆς ζημίας βαρὺ· πάλα γὰρ ἔμαθε χρημάτων ὑπερορᾶν, ἀλλ' ὅτι, μικρὰ παντελῶς δεξάμενοι τῶν ἐκείνου, διὰ τὸ ἐπὶ οἰκέταις αὐτοῦ γενέσθαι τὸν βίον καὶ ἀνθρώποις οὐδὲν οἰκετῶν αἰρετωτέρους τὸν τρόπον, οἱ, κατὰ πολλὴν ἄδειαν τὰ πλείστου ἄξια διανεμάμενοι, ἐλάχιστα παντελῶς ἀπέσωσαν...

¹¹ For a more detailed discussion of *oikonomia* in the writings of Gregory of Nyssa, see Kees (1995:36-37, 110).

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