

BECOMING SLAVES OF GOD. THE PAULINE SLAVERY METAPHOR IN LIGHT OF THE PAPYROLOGICAL EVIDENCE

ROMEO POPA

Abstract. The various terms and representations around slavery and freedom in the letters of Paul are examined in this study against the background of the evidence in the documentary papyri. Thus, the perspective of the primary readers, who were acquainted with such practices from their everyday life, comes strongly to the fore. Especially the very common form of manumission by ransom could have served to some extent as a functional pattern of interpretation for the Pauline redemption theology. Given the important role of Christ's death in the liberation from sin, law and death, the connection between emancipation and the death of the testator in the testamentary manumissions is brought into discussion. In reference to the Pauline phrase Χριστοῦ δοῦλος, the role of the gods in slavery and emancipation is discussed in connection with the issues of the ἱερόδουλοι and the sacral manumission. No exclusive point of reference for the Pauline slavery metaphors can be determined, rather various terms and images from this broad thematic field are taken up to describe a completely new situation in the existence of individuals and of the world as a whole.

Keywords: slavery, documentary papyri, Paul's letters, Χριστοῦ δοῦλος, manumission, testaments.

The topic of slavery in the letters of Paul is a complex and often discussed subject.¹ The social reality of slavery served as a background for the formation of various metaphors and references that the primary readers could decode without any problems. The Pauline language on slavery and freedom has become so familiar to today's readers of the New Testament that it is easy to lose sight of the connection of the various terms to the actual reality of slavery in antiquity.

If we reverse the interpretive perspective and first try to understand the ancient situation from the perspective of everyday documents, we are in a better position to pose new questions to the Pauline texts. In what sense should we

¹ A valuable presentation of the research on the Pauline slavery metaphors can be found in BYRON, *Recent Research*, 67–91; see also GOODRICH, "From Slaves of Sin to Slaves of God", with an extensive discussion on the origins of the slavery metaphor in Paul's letters; for an overview of the slavery topic, cf. also HARRILL, "Paul and Slavery".