The Colour of the Words: The Domestic Slavery in John – From "Social Death" to Freedom, in the Household

Adriana Destro and Mauro Pesce – Bologna

Foreword

Most Egyptian bas-reliefs, encountered in archaeological sites and museums today, do not appear in the form they had when they were first produced. Most of them are colourless or have preserved few traces of their original and intense colours. The variation of the colours' intensity induces us to concentrate on the temporal alterations of cultural forms and appearances and on the consequent instability of cognitive values. This fact allows us to understand that a bas-relief without colour does not convey a correct and complete knowledge of the bright cultural world of its time. It may give us a simplistic or false perception of that world. The words of ancient texts almost always resemble bas-reliefs without colour. They are actually discoloured or faded. They do not fully embody and transmit their original content and don't keep intact their old cognitive meaning.

Of course, language is a medium of communication that uses sounds rather than other symbols or media such as images, smells, or tactile perception. We should note that symbols have negotiated meanings and that their communicating values change according to place and time. They always undergo transformations, alterations or semantic losses. When speaking of "words without colour", or "discoloured words" we, therefore, merely use a metaphor in order to allude to the weakening, or dissolving meanings of ancient verbal symbols. In other words, the disappearing of colour on an ancient image is a process that lets us understand the disappearing of the meaning of the words of an ancient text.

The meaning of the words is given by concrete social situations (a ritual, a court process, a political meeting, etc.). Words are never pronounced outside of their context or within a social *vacuum*. Without the context of the relations in which they were used, words no longer convey their original meanings. In brief, we claim that the original social settings represent for words that, which original colours represent for an Egyptian bas-relief.

The aim of the Papyrological Commentaries on the New Testament (PKNT) is to clarify the meaning of words used in early Christian texts in the light of documentary papyri. In such documents the meaning of words depends on their everyday context, and is connected to specific legal, familial, or economic situations. In this perspective, we imagine that readers in the first or second century might have given words of early Christian texts those meanings, which they had assumed in social representations and ordinary conventions of their times. A word assumes sense only

within the specific relational situation that generated it. Surely, the issue is complex. It is not sufficient to affirm that the meaning of words of an early Christian text had, to the reader of the first two centuries, the same sense we find in the documentary papyri. Some words may have a different sense: it is dependent on how many contexts have been taken into account. This implies that we simply do not have to *directly* compare the words of an early Christian text with the same words found in a documentary papyrus. We need to compare the context in which the same word occurs in both cases. One cannot equate the meaning of a word used in the context of initiation with the same word used in a legal trial, or in a commercial contract. The possibility of a linear and direct comparison or equivalence of meaning is possible only when facing identical (or very similar) relational contexts. Where contexts are different, or very different, the comparison needs a careful process of interpretation and of cultural *mediation*. And at the end of this analytical process, the probability of finding an equivalence may be much smaller than we imagined at the beginning.

As an illustration of these theoretical observations, we chose the theme of slavery as the social setting and relational context, in which the words and the religious patterns of the *Gospel of John* should be reconstructed.

Definitions, Classifications, and Models

1. The sociology of slavery has attempted to formulate definitions, classifications and models of slavery.[1] Two prevailing views have defined slavery as a system of labour exploitation and as a system of human property ownership. R. HELLIE, for example, sees the property relation as a crucial element of slavery, asserting that "slavery is first and foremost a legal institution".[2] J. M. WIENER maintains that

> the problem for Weber […] becomes that of explaining why free labor and capitalism triumphed in modern society, whereas free labor gave way to slavery in ancient Rome.[3]

M. WEBER constructed typologies of slavery starting from the point of view of the different systems of production. He distinguishes Ancient Middle East patriarchal slavery from Roman slavery,[4] and the slavery of great Roman plantations from the lower middle class of urban slave artisans.[5]

The concept of slavery as a system of labour exploitation has been challenged in many ways. O. PATTERSON proposed the concept of "slavery as social death", as a definition applicable to all forms of slavery at all times.[6] P. KOLCHIN affirms that ac-

1 See PATTERSON 1977, 407–449.
2 HELLIE 1976, 29, as cited in KOLCHIN 1986, 771.
3 WIENER 1982, 391.
4 See WEBER 1995, 46–47.
5 See WEBER 1999, 180.
6 See PATTERSON 1977.

cording to O. PATTERSON "slavery was not a system of labour, it was even less one of human property ownership".[7] For O. PATTERSON, the slavery, "originating as an alternative to death, usually in war, […] represented a 'conditional commutation'". The slave was "a socially dead person" without any independent existence, "denied all claims on, and obligations to, his parents and […] blood relations".[8] The slave was the quintessential outsider, without rights or honour. In conclusion, slavery may consist in "the permanent, violent domination of natally alienated and generally dishonoured persons".[9]

P. KOLCHIN has rightly pointed out the limits of this proposal. His critique underlines the fact that O. PATTERSON is correct in affirming that working conditions are not the only relevant characteristic of slavery. However, O. PATTERSON's definition foregrounds a psychological element that does not correspond to a multiplicity of cases, either within the same culture, or on the comparative level. We agree that a definition of slavery embodying universal features is not at hand, or even possible.

2. We have to avoid overgeneralizations. P. KOLCHIN affirms that although O. PATTERSON has effectively shown that slavery did not always constitute a system of labour,

> he has not shown that it never did, and it is by no means clear that the psychological explanation he propounds is more universally valid than the economic explanation he challenges.[10]

At times, however, O. PATTERSON seems to recognize the limits of his definition, when he admits, for example, "that slaves did sometimes have social relationships, and were not in fact always 'socially dead'" (and he insists that "the important point […] is that these relationships were never recognized as legitimate or binding").[11]

> But more often, Patterson ignores striking contradictions between his theory and reality. Thus, he establishes that slaves were by no means always ethnic outsiders – of fifty-seven slave societies, 75.4 percent had masters and slaves of differing ethnic groups […] and distinguishes between "intrusive" slavery in which slaves represented "the permanent enemy on the inside" […] and "ex-trusive" slavery, in which the slave was "an insider who had fallen" […] But, he insists that in both cases slaves were "natally alienated" and "socially dead".[12]

7 KOLCHIN 1986, 770.
8 PATTERSON 1982, 5, as cited in KOLCHIN 1986, 771.
9 PATTERSON 1982, 13, as cited in KOLCHIN 1986, 771.
10 KOLCHIN 1986, 773.
11 KOLCHIN 1986, 773.
12 KOLCHIN 1986, 771.

In front of this variety of interpretation, in our analysis of slavery in the *Gospel of John*, we have to bear in mind different interpretive models: slavery as a labour system, a system of human ownership, a legal institution. But we must also take into consideration slavery as social death. Distinctions must be drawn among rural slavery, urban artisan slavery and domestic slavery, and between foreign slaves and natal slaves as well. Precisely because of this wide array of cases, we believe it is also useful to make use of social configurations and classifications so far provided by studies on ancient social history.

What Does the Gospel of John Actually Bring to Light When Talking of Slaves?

1. From literary, epigraphical ad papyrological evidence we have articulated and important profiles of the slave: a) The slave is the *alter ego* of the owner, he is his deputy. b) His presence is useful or indispensable to the house.[13] c) The slave is integrated into society as teacher, manager, philosopher, scholar. But d) the slave also embodies some critical aspects at personal or social level. The main duty of a slave is faithful obedience. This means strong links and personal weakness at the same time. On one hand, slaves may be subjected to any kind of domination, even "sexual exploitation" and "castration".[14] They may be the victims of slave traders or wicked and evil masters. In the context of social morality, the slaves, however, may be considered a dangerous element in the house, because they may be inclined to steal, to flee, to deceive or even to kill the master.[15] In other words they may become socially unacceptable or dangerous figures.

In conclusion, a "model of slavery" must put together the vision of the slave as a necessary support for the household, as a correct and worthy servant, as an efficient substitute for the master, but also as a victim subject to exploitation, as a domestic enemy, as a morally ambiguous person.

2. It is first of all important to note here that representations of the slave as a morally ambiguous person, or as a person who represents a danger to the master are completely absent in *John*.

John's Gospel contains a) several texts, which explicitly mention slaves, and b) one *episode* where Jesus is shown in a typical *function* of a slave, in the act of washing the feet of his disciples (13:1–17). Actually, among *Gospel of John*'s passages referring to slaves, *three*, for example (4:46–53, 18:10, 18:18), describe their usual menial tasks (slaves warning their master, accompanying him, lighting the fire). *John*, however, reveals other aspects of the slaves' world. In chapter 4:46–51, where the synoptic gospels speak of παῖς, παιδίον and δοῦλος (Mark 7:30; Matt. 8:6.8;

13 On the usefulness of the slaves see the large papyrological documentation assembled by ARZT-GRABNER 2003, 210–215.

14 HARRILL 2006, 129–135; see also HARRILL 2003, 231–254.

15 On the "mastercide", see HARRILL 2003, 234.

Luke 7:2.7), while continuing to use the terms παῖς and παιδίον, he specifies that he is speaking of a son (υἱός) of the king's official (βασιλικός) and not of a slave. Probably the author of the gospel was aware of the fact that, in the given context, *pais* could mean a young slave with sexual functions toward his master. This means he was well acquainted of the actual situation of slaves, and of the linguistic sensibilities of his addressees. This text, therefore, throws some light on the cultural context in which the author was rooted and moved. In the story of the miracle of the loaves (6:26), the *Gospel of John* is the only one to speak of a young boy who brought with him food (the five loaves and two fishes). The term he uses to designate this young boy is παιδάριον, a word that in documentary papyri is used for slaves. With certainty, παιδάρια are slaves in a private letter of 100–120 CE where a master recommends great care for his young slaves (παιδάρια).[16] With certainty, παιδάριον is a slave in an ostracon of the second-third century CE, where mention is made of a slave's duties.[17] Once again, the author's language shows how rooted he was in a cultural situation in which everyday life was permeated by non secondary aspects of slavery.[18]

Also at the wedding banquet of Cana the ἀρχιτρίκλινος is in all likelihood a slave. The term, which appears as synonymous to συμποσίαρχος, defines one of the many tasks accomplished by different types of slaves in the symposial context. Its meaning is *head waiter*, *butler*. Following W. DANKER, ἀρχιτρίκλινος was "the slave who was responsible for managing a banquet: in Lat[in] architriclinus, triclinarcha"[19] and was probably equivalent to the συμποσίαρχος.

To give an idea of the variety of domestic-convivial tasks performed by slaves, C. OSIEK speaks of the

> slave role in various forms of service at the household meal, the *convivium*, usually thought of as a less formal and more intimate dining occasion in a household context […]. Roles of slaves include gatekeeping, guest control, food service, and wine service. The *obsonator* supervises banquets and sees to procuring what is necessary. The *vocator* or *nomenclator* acts as agent of

16 O.Claud. I 151 (ca. 100–120 CE): Sabinos writes to Zosimos because he is worried about his young slaves (παιδάρια): Σαβ[ῖ]νος Ζοσίμῳ τῷφιλτάτῳ πλεῖστα χαίρειν. ἐρωτηθεὶς ἐπίσχες τοῖς παιδαρίοις μου, μή τις αὐτοῖς ὕβρις γένηται.

17 O.Bodl. II 1834 (II–III CE).

18 In the Gospel of John, we also find the words διάκονος and ὑπηρέτης. The word διάκονος designates a function and not a *status*. In papyrological documentation it is attested for slaves, but also for freemen. The word ὑπηρέτης seems to designate a public function (and not the condition of a freeman or a slave).

19 DANKER 2000[3], 139, and further: "Heliod. 7, 27, 7 ἀρχιτρίκλινοι καὶ οἰνοχόοι […]. For the view that the context suggests equivalence of ἀ. with συμποσίαρχος *toastmaster*, *master of the feast* (cp. ἡγούμενος Sir 32:1f)". CALZOLAIO forthcoming defends however a different opinion: since ἀρχιτρίκλινος is only attested in John and Heliodoros, the word could be – in his opinion – a creation of the author of the Gospel of John, but this seems doubtful to us.

> the host or hostess, issuing invitations and assigning places. Other slaves welcome guests, help them to change into dining attire, wash and anoint their feet, etc. Between courses, they wash and anoint the hands of the guests. Those who serve may be called *ministri* or *ministratores*, in Greek, *diakonoi*. In clever presentations, slaves might also sing and dance as they present the food.[20]

In conclusion, the *Gospel of John* presents a realistic vision of the figure of the slave. It recognizes that his condition is one of subordination, and dependence. Representing the tasks of the slaves, the *Gospel* shows that they actually help the master or perform normal menial services or direct house-jobs for him. The slave, which the *Gospel of John* has in mind, is a domestic one. *John* basically considers the household (οἶκος) as an *ensemble* of masters and slaves, who participate in its everyday life and economy. This type of household, in which the slaves share many perspectives and resources related to domestic life and policy, is for him of the utmost importance. It constitutes the reference point of *John*'s "model". Within the household the slave's condition is absolutely central to him, and provides him with a key to understanding the master-disciple relationship, and therefore the nucleus of religious experience.

The Framework of Chapter 13:1–17

1. In chapter 13:1–17, *John* is performing a completely unusual operation. He deliberately creates a scene in which Jesus performs a typical servile task. Here, the slave's service and behaviour are explicitly described, *not simply presupposed*. The *Gospel of John* makes of the servile gesture of the foot washing, normally performed by slaves,[21] one of the fundamental moments of religious initiation undergone by the disciples.

We wish to emphasize in the first place that – in the scene of the footwashing – it is through the clothing as a slave that *John*'s Jesus assumes the symbols of the inferior condition. In the narration, he takes off his mantle (John 13:4)[22] and remains dressed solely in the tunic (χιτών). A comparison with the scene of the crucifixion (John 19:23), tells us that the author of the Gospel thought, that Jesus was wearing a tunic under his mantle[23]. The linen cloth itself (λέντιον), that Jesus ties around his waist, is a typical object used by slaves during the meal to serve and wipe the table

20 OSIEK 2008, 1.

21 The feet-washing at the entrance of the home or of the triclinium was normally performed by slaves (or by women): see Plat. symp. 175a; Petron. 31; Plut. Phocio 18,3 (749f); Plut. mor. 242e–263c (*Mulierum Virtutes*); *Joseph et Aseneth* 7,12; 13,12; 20,2–3.

22 See DESTRO/PESCE 2000, 41–64.

23 Many images from the ancient world illustrate the way the ἱμάτιον was worn over the χιτών. The image 14 in GARDNER/WIEDEMANN 1991 presents on the left, a slave "removing the sandal of a guest who has just arrived", he seems to have a belt around his waist with a *linteum* on it.

guests. The Greek word λέντιον[24] is a term quite widespread in symposial contexts[25]. The corresponding Latin term *linteum* is, for example, found in an inscription on the wall of a Pompei triclinium:

> *abluat unda pedes puer et detergat udos mappa torum velet lintea nostra cave* (CIL IV 7698).[26]

Jesus position as slave deserves attention. That it is legitimate to interpret the act of Jesus through the function of the slave, is confirmed by Peter's reaction: "you shall never wash my feet" (13:8). This reaction presupposes that the performance of the foot washing implies the social subordination of the person, who is washing the feet (the slave) to another person (the served).

An important parallel to the Johannine foot washing (as a gesture typical of the slaves), is the *Life of Aesop*, a text chronologically not far off from *John's Gospel*[27]:

> So Xanthos' wife, out of hatred for Aesop, tied a towel (λέντιον) around her waist (περιζωσαμένη), took another over her arm and brought over the basin to the stranger. The man realized that she was the lady of the house, but said to himself, "Xanthos is a philosopher. If he wanted my feet to be washed by a slave, he would have ordered it. And if he has ordered his wife to wash my feet in order to show me honor, I do not want to bring dishonor on myself, so I won't be a busybody. I'll just hold out my feet and let her wash them" . So as Xanthos' wife washed his feet, the man settled in and relaxed.[28]

This text is important because it confirms unequivocally that the χιτών, the basin, the λέντιον, and the foot washing are normal and necessary elements of the customary welcome ritual performed by the slaves. This is why they are chosen by *John*.[29] We may affirm that the text of John 13:1–7, in detail and as a whole, acquires meaning only within the domestic role of the slaves in the Graeco-Roman culture (of which also Palestinian and first century diaspora Judaism was a part). This throws light on *John*'s cultural awareness and purpose. Making the figure of a servant a protagonist means bringing to the surface a deep cultural level, widely understood in the author's culture. Implicitly, practices and conceptions that are taken for granted are used to convey, with greater naturalness and immediacy, the meanings *John* wishes to channel into the initiation process of the disciples: the figure and the function of the slave.

24 DESTRO/PESCE 2000, 51–52.

25 The word is absent in the Greek Bible and in the New Testament. That means that John derives it from Graeco-Roman symposial context.

26 VÖSSING 2001, 35–40. See also Suet. Cal. 26: *ad pedes stare succinctos linteo*. See also CARCOPINO 1995, 313.

27 See BONELLI/SANDROLINI 1997; JOUANNO 2006.

28 *The Life of Aesop*, 61, translated by WILLS 1997, 198.

29 See PESCE 1999.

2. As we have already underlined, in the Graeco-Roman culture, the implicit meanings in the figure of the slave cannot be restricted to serving in the ordinary life of the household. We will give two examples of different and delicate functions.

a. The slaves can perform roles that are impossible for the master. They can become intermediaries in specific, "difficult" personal affairs or business. A slave can face the adversary of his master in his place. Slaves are more than a pure substitute: they are agents. This is what J. F. GARDNER and Th. WIEDEMANN have argued about a first century document from Pompei (dated July 2, 37 CE):

> slavery enabled a Roman master to perform through the agency of the men he owned *actions he could not carry out directly* […] Slaves could act as agents for their owner in business deals, making valid contracts with a third party on his behalf[30].

The document reads:

> I, Diognetus, the slave of Gaius Novius Cypaerus, have written on the order of my master that in his presence I have rented to Hesicus, the slave of Primianus Evenus, freedman of Tiberius Julius Augustus, warehouse 12, of the central Bassian warehouse, community property of the people of Puteoli, in which is stored wheat imported from Alexandria which he has received as a pledge today from Gaius Novius Eunus; also in the same warehouse, on the bottom floor, is a space between the columns where he has stored 200 sacks of vegetables, which he has received from the same Eunus, as a pledge from the Kalendas of July for one sestertius (nummus sestertius) per month. Done at Puteoli (AE 1973, 143).

The employment of the slave, as an active representative, intermediary, or alternative agent of the master, could concern noble or ignoble purposes, or could derive from the basis of prestige or status. The slave was the instrument, whereby the master could obtain results that he could not achieve on his own. A. M. BEAVIS[31] thinks that Graeco-Roman literature offers parallels to the parable of the unjust steward (Luke 16:1–8). She argues that in the *Life of Aesop* and in Plautus' comedies[32] there are similar figures of slaves, in the sense that through incorrect behaviour, the slave manages to obtain an advantage for his master. This is a basic model in the culture of the author of the Gospel. It is obvious that in Jesus' gesture all reference to the astute and fraudulent slave is absent. Nevertheless, it does seem that underneath this conception, a much more common and relevant idea does remain. It is precisely be-

30 GARDNER/WIEDEMANN 1991, 74–75.

31 BEAVIS 1992, 54.

32 See BEAVIS 1992, 44–49. In Plautus' *Pseudolos*, the slave *Pseudolos* achieves through subterfuges and expedients a result that the owner Calidorus by himself cannot obtain (see especially PARATORE 1992, 341.355.359.365).

cause the slave can play roles that the master cannot play, and is capable of achieving goals that are too dishonourable, or impossible for the master that the slave becomes part of the deep implicit cultural level of the *Gospel of John*[33]. In other words, the author has chosen to make use of the model of the slave, seen not as a blind instrument, but as the *substitute of the master* in special situations or actions. When Jesus appears in the dresses of a slave, he seems to recognize that *only* a slave can obtain the purpose at which he is aiming. It is because it is impossible to achieve the purposes of his mission, by acting as the powerful worker of signs or miracles that Jesus decides to invert his role and adopt the efficient role of the subordinate.

b. As we have argued elsewhere, John 13:1–17 presents a ritual of inversion. The characteristic of this kind of ritual is that the overturning of status is normally limited to the period of time in which the ritual occurs. An inferior may play the role of a superior only within a clearly defined time span. He can do this legitimately because everyone knows the meaning and duration of the ritual. Temporary inversion, therefore, is a ritual technique that does not really change either status or roles, but briefly suspends them[34]. Once the inversion is over, each role is clearer than before. The inferiors remain inferiors with a greater awareness of their obligations.

To describe the initiation, *John* presents Jesus "on the stage", who instructs the disciples through gestures that are centred upon customary situations, but are the instruments of radical new meanings. Normally, indeed, the function of giving orders has to correspond with the status of the owner. In the ritual described by *John*, the function of Jesus, master and lord, is to serve, not being honored and served. The sense of the overturning is clear. If the lord and master serves his disciples, they, insofar as are being served, receive a dignity equal to that of the lord/master.

The basic characteristics or peculiarity in *John*'s foot washing (compared to the models of Roman slavery) lies in the fact that it is Jesus, lord and master, who adopts the attitudes of a slave of his own will (and within precise temporal limits). Furthermore, the lord does not exploit a substitute to obtain a result, but transforms himself into a subordinate. By becoming a slave, Jesus achieves otherwise impossible results. The objective of Jesus can be achieved only *if the master changes* his position towards his disciples, and transforms himself into a slave. The paradigm of slavery, socially very instructive, becomes the point of departure to revolutionize the master-disciple relations. By adopting servile roles, Jesus makes the status of the slave functional to the achievement of the object, which is the aim of the master-disciple relation.

The master-disciple relation takes shape only with the momentary lowering (and drawing closer) of the master to the condition of the disciple. By doing this, Jesus critically abandons or rejects the slave subordination that is normally required to the disciples. It is when the master inverts his relation with his followers, that a change

33 On slaves in the *Gospel of John* see also OSIEK/BALCH 1997, 188–189.
34 See DESTRO/PESCE 2000, 54–57; TURNER 1972, 190.

takes place. A real communion with Jesus (and among the disciples themselves) can be achieved according to a rule of equality: "you also ought to wash one another's feet" (13:14).

c. Second, what made the slave important was also his participation in the construction of a domestic unity. R. SALLER has shown how, between the first and second century CE, the presence of the slaves offered special alternatives in planning their families activities and in the transmission of their property and in the modification of roles within the household. The Romans played on the fundamental ambiguity of slavery – human beings as property they could manoeuvre – to manipulate the size and the composition of the family.[35]

In particular, R. SALLER suggests that the separation of roles within the domestic group was depending on, or affected by, the presence and availability of slaves.[36] If the mistress of the house, for example, has her own slaves (independently from those owned by her husband), the reciprocal roles of husband and wife are more distant. The presence of slaves introduces a greater distance between the members of a household. That is not without consequences for the construction of models in the community life. That means that if the *Gospel of John* has the intention to propose a model of group life characterized by a close link between the subjects, he has to modify the servile function in the domestic group. John 13:12–16 makes explicitly this point:

> After he had washed their feet, had put on his robe, and had reclined, he said to them: Do you know what I have done to you? You call me teacher and lord, and you are right, for that is what I am. So if I, your lord and teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. For I have set you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you. Very truly, I tell you, slaves are not greater than their lord/owner, nor are messengers greater than the one who sent them.

John's Jesus asks the disciples to adopt the reciprocal function of the slave, and to renounce any type of domination of a member of the community over someone else. This means putting forward an ideal community in which the reciprocal roles are similar and of equal value. In the absence of slaves, the members of the household are forced to adopt roles that are not dissociated from each other. The social ideal that Jesus, acting as a slave, expresses is the elimination of the servile function imposed upon some persons (the slaves). His ideal implies that it is necessary to attribute servile position to each member of the group in order to obtain a close participation, a communion where the roles tend to be non-differentiated.[37]

35 See SALLER 1990, 96.

36 See SALLER 1990, 117–122.

37 In *John* there is no elimination of the servile function of the act of feet-washing, but only its attribution to other members of the domestic group. See DESTRO/PESCE 2000, 155.

d. In John 13:16||15:20 a new aspect appears. The Gospel states twice: "the slave is not greater than his lord". Once again the point of view of *John* seems to develop starting from a reflection on the house-slaves. This sentence shows that *John* remains within the social scheme of relations between the householder and his slaves. He does not eliminate from ordinary life, the scheme of subordination that dominates the domestic area. The only way to escape from it, is to assume voluntarily the servile function and act "as a slave towards the others", as ritually represented in John 13:1–17.

We can conclude: all this shows that a transformation of the "same words" occurs when they are shifted from one context to another, from the economic life of a household and from the construction of the domestic institution, to the disciple's initiation.

Slaves, Free Men, Friends

1. In the *Gospel of John*, other passages (8:31–35; 15:12–17; 13:12–16||15:20) show that the master-slave relationship is used as a cultural reference or as an instrument for understanding a central aspect of the religious project of *John*.

Already in chapter 8, before the description of the process of initiation in chapter 13, we find a reflection on the master-slave (κύριος-δοῦλος) relation, essential to the religious discourse of the Gospel. *John*'s *Jesus* says that whoever does not believe in him is like a *slave*, while those who are really his disciples, and remain in his words, will become *free* men:

> Then Jesus said to the Jews who had believed in him, "If you remain in my word, you are truly my disciples; and you will know the truth, and *the truth will make you free*." They answered him, "We are descendants of Abraham and *have never been slaves* to anyone. What do you mean by saying, 'You will be *made free*'?" Jesus answered them, "Very truly, I tell you, everyone who commits sin *is a slave* to sin" (8:31–35).[38]

These sentences suggest that the process by which a person becomes a disciple is a process of transition from subordination to the free condition. The final state attained by the disciple at the end of the initiation, is full liberation. To represent the major aim of the religious life, total freedom, *John* makes openly use of a widely recognised cultural model: the paradigm of slave liberation, not a moral doctrine, not a behavioural code.

Freedom is constantly desired by slaves. The slave's wish to be free is so widely accepted and powerful as to become the main term of comparison in several occasions: it is the way to express the deepest desires of any person; also those of a free

38 Translation of NRSV.

person. In a beautiful private letter of 14–13 BCE, we read: "as a slave strives to please in order to achieve freedom, I am striving for your love […]":

> ὅτι ὡς δοῦλος ἐπ' ἐλευθερίᾳ θέλει ἀρέσαι ο̣ὕ̣τω | κἀγὼ (l. καὶ ἐγὼ) τὴ`ν´⟦ς⟧ φιλίαν σου `θέλων´ ⟦θ̣έ̣λ̣ω̣ι̣⟧ κτλ.[39]

This sentence is used here to show how the slave's desire for freedom had become an established conception for describing the intensity of inner feelings. It is essential to realize that *John* is influenced by this model of representing the innermost wishes of a person. The text of *John* seems deeply immersed in a culture that adopts slavery in a metaphorical powerful way.

2. The text of chapter 8 that we have just quoted affirms:

> Jesus answered them, "Very truly, I tell you, everyone who commits sin is a slave to sin. The slave does not remain for ever in the household; the son remains forever. So if the Son makes you free, you will be free indeed" (8:35–36).[40]

The expression "to remain in the house" reveals that the focal point of *John's Gospel* is on the domestic condition of the slave. When *John* speaks of slaves he seems to think first of all of the conditions of domestic slavery.[41] In documentary papyri the expression μένειν ἐν τῇ οἰκίᾳ is very frequent, and always indicates the people and subjects residing within the house. The house appears as a reserved and private place, in which the master lives with those bound to him: his wife, children, male and female slaves, and all of his possessions. He considers it a place of tranquillity, harmony and full possession, in which no hostile presence will be accepted. This internal and controlled space is, however, threatened by external violence and by thefts. Many texts speak of the arrival of thieves, or describe acts of robbery and intrusion in the house.[42]

Apparently, in *John*, "not always being in the house" (8:35) is a negative or disadvantageous condition. The right to reside *always* in the house is considered the socially optimal and most secure situation. For this reason, the master's son is the one who possesses stability and protection. On the contrary, the slave is a member of the household without security. He is the figure that dramatically embodies permanent discontinuous relations: he stays in the house, but cannot stay there forever.

39 BGU IV 1141,24–25. Translation in OLSSON 1925, 47–48.

40 Translation of NRSV.

41 The expression ἐν τῇ οἰκίᾳ is found in John 8:35; 11:21 (see also 14:2).

42 See for example: P.Yadin I 21 (September 11, 130 CE); P.Yadin I 22 (September 11, 130 CE); P.Mich. V 298 (I CE); P.Mil.Vogl. IV 229 (ca. 140 CE); P.Oxy. I 69 (November 21, 190 CE); P.Oxy. III 489 (August 27, 117 CE); P.Oxy. III 531 (II CE); PSI VIII 913 (I CE); P.Tebt. II 332 (November 18, 176 CE); SB VI 9458 (second half II CE).

Lack of security depends also on the fact that the slave is a person constrained to obedience, but who constantly aspires to freedom, to personal liberation.

C. OSIEK and D. BALCH view as problematic and full of consequences, the fact that the slave cannot remain (μένειν) in the house:

> slavery was never a secure existence and always subordinate, in spite of the possibility of great authority and responsibility over others. The slave had no claim to house and no rights to be respected in it.[43]

For slaves, being part of a household, also according to D. B. MARTIN[44], meant that many

> in spite of being slaves, could "serve" as husbands, wives, children, parents, lovers, siblings, patrons and clients in relations with slaves freed, and free people[45].

If permission to remain (μένειν) in the household is removed, all such relationships are annulled. The slave's condition, outside the household system, becomes precarious and his life is then under threat.

Within this frame, the transformation from slaves into free men becomes a paragon for explaining the optimal conditional, which the disciple will obtain at the end of his discipleship. Like the freed slave, he is no longer threatened by the danger of being cast out of his house. Symbolically, the disciple, once acquired his religious identity, is and will remain "at home".

John's implicit view can be understood in the light of J. A. HARRILL's definition of slavery as an essentially contradictory condition. J. A. HARRILL sought to combine the oxymoric definitions of the slave-as-chattel, of a person non-person, with that of O. PATTERSON (slavery-as-social-death):

> Greco-Roman slaveholding […] constructed "the slave" as an oxymoron, the "insider-outsider" – a person-non-person – of enforced and so dubious loyalty in an unequal power relation of chattel bondage. The oxymoronic construction of "the slave" served classical culture as a rhetorical, historical, and literary *topos* of moral polarity.[46]

Also in *John*, slavery functions as a social model: It becomes a *topos* of crucial relevance, an index of moral polarity. One must not forget, moreover, that in this Gospel the slave is defined, on the one hand, by nostalgia for the house and, on the other, by

43 OSIEK/BALCH 1997, 188–189.
44 MARTIN 2003, 230. MARTIN's analysis is based especially on funerary inscriptions.
45 TAM II 1044: "slaves could be patrons vis-à-vis those people who were their own slaves or freedpersons" (MARTIN 2003, 229).
46 HARRILL 2003, 231–232.

the desire for freedom. This is the background that in *John* is to be considered as pivot of his religious project and of his mechanism of initiation.

3. The master-slave relationship is transformed into a relationship of "friendship". John 15:15 states:

> I do not call you slaves (δοῦλοι) any longer, because the slave (δοῦλος) does not know what the master (κύριος) is doing; but I have called you friends (φίλοι), because I have made known to you everything that I have heard from my Father.

Essential is the opposition between "*the slave does not know* what the master is doing" and "*I have made known everything* what I heard from the Father". Sharing of knowledge transforms the slave into friend and therefore is the basis for his liberation from the slave condition.

The terminology of friendship is rare in the *Gospel of John* but is used to define a central aspect of his religious project. On the other hand, in documentary papyri φίλος and φιλία express a wide range of meanings. We do not deal here with the question of equality in status and reciprocity between friends, because this goes beyond the purposes of our presentation. What we want to underline is that while the friend is granted a full knowledge, the slave is deprived of it.

In order to understand the passage of the disciple from the status of slavery to that of friendship, there are two questions we need to discuss: a) whether evidence exists, outside *John*, about a master-slave relationship, in which disciples are considered as slaves, and b) whether we have evidence about a relation of friendship between the slave and his owner and between the disciple and his master.

a. From rabbinical literature we have evidence of disciples behaving like agricultural slaves of their master, because they work in his olive groves while he is teaching.[47] A relation of subordination μαθητής-διδάσκαλος is attested in documentary papyri, for example in a "contract […], in which […] a boy [… is given] for five years, to be taught the trade of weaving" (P.Oxy. IV 725).[48]

b. The friendship of the master philosopher towards his disciples (and of the disciples for each other) is attested only in literary texts and only as atypical and exceptional. According to Xenophon, Socrates

> for himself, without making any such profession, […] was content to believe that those who accepted his views would play their parts as good and true friends to himself and one another their lives long (Xen. Mem. 1,2).[49]

47 Pe'a 5,2 (18d) .

48 B. P. GRENFELL and A. S. HUNT in P.Oxy. IV p. 206.

49 Σωκράτης δὲ ἐπηγγείλατο μὲν οὐδενὶ πώποτε τοιοῦτον οὐδέν, ἐπίστευε δὲ τῶν συνόντων ἑαυτῷ τοὺς ἀποδεξαμένους ἅπερ αὐτὸς ἐδοκίμαζεν εἰς τὸν πάντα βίον ἑαυτῷ τε καὶ ἀλλήλοις φίλους

c. A search on the documentary papyri shows a lack of evidence of friendship between master and slave. On the contrary, not infrequently, what is found is a relationship of animosity, and the image of the slave, as we have said, may be that of a possible domestic enemy.[50]

However, the terms "friend" or "friendship" must not mislead us, because it turns out that in many cases the relationship between master and slave was positive, and even affectionate, without being classifiable as one of friendship. Sometimes kinship language is employed. In this sense, for example, D. B. MARTIN cites a Latin inscription from a locality near to Philippi (101–300 CE): "A sixteen-year-old keeper of a *taberna* calls himself a homebred slave. He calls his owner his 'father' and also mentions his 'mother'":[51]

> *Vitalis C(ai) Lavi Fausti / ser(vus) idem f(ilius) verna domo / natus hic situs est vixit / annos XVI institor tabernas / Aprianas a populo acceptus / idem ab dibus ereptus rogo / vos viatores si quid minus / dedi me(n)sura ut patri meo adicere / ignoscatis rogo per superos / et inferos ut patrem et matre(m) / commendatos abeatis / et vale.*[52]

Certainly, the word friendship does not appear, but the terms used are implicitly charged with feeling that are as intense as friendship or love. At least, intimacy and trust seem emerge. In many other situations a strong familial and personal bond is widely testified to.[53] Documentary papyri are not lacking in testimonies of affectionate concern of masters towards their slaves. Familial formal language may dominate over other registers. In one case, a mistress treats her slave as a daughter, so that the latter will take good care of her in old age.[54] For example, in papyrological documentation, φιλοστοργία (heartfelt love or strong affection of slaves towards the master) is attested in their favour in testaments as well.[55]

We cannot ignore that human affectivity is a highly ambiguous sphere. In the case of Latin funeral inscriptions, cases are encountered where the words "*delicia* children" are used also in reference to slaves born in the house (house born *vernae*).

ἀγαθοὺς ἔσεσθαι.

50 HARRILL 2003, 231–241; HARRILL 2006, 145–163.

51 MARTIN 2003, 226–227.

52 CIL III 14206, 21. PILHOFER 2000, 409–412, Nr. 416.

53 "A Latin inscription (TAM 4.147) portrays a man supplying an inscription for his *verna*, a man named Vitalis, who lived twenty-two years. The slave is called *amantissimus*, but the term was common enough that we should probably avoid reading erotic meaning into its use here" (MARTIN 2003, 225).

54 P.Oxy. L 3555 (I–II CE).

55 P.Oxy. III 494,5–7 (October 28 – November 26, 165 CE): ("wenn ich aber mit diesem Testament mein Leben beende, lasse ich unter dem Schutze von Zeus, Ge und Helios für ihr Wohlwollen und ihre Liebe meine Sklaven Psenamunis alias Ammonios, Hermas und Apollonus alias Demetria und deren Tochter Diogenis sowie meine andere Sklavin Diogenis frei" as cited from R. E. KRITZER in ARZT-GRABNER/KRITZER/PAPATHOMAS/WINTER 2006, 279.

It is hazardous to judge the sentiments suggested by these epithets, but they certainly reveal interesting and even common feelings and attitudes of masters towards their slaves.[56] Another evidence, hinting at friendly relationships between master and slave, can be found in the so called *manumissio inter amicos* (μεταξὺ φίλων) found in papyri dating after the Antoninian Constitution of 212 CE. It is dubious, however, that it refers to relationships among friends. It may be simply related to usual relationships of trust, which do not require formal written agreements, as shown by R. E. KRITZER.[57]

As P. ARZT-GRABNER and F. WINTER write on P.Petr. III 36 (218 BCE): "ein Herr sorgt normalerweise dafür, dass sein Sklave nicht zugrunde geht, und erst recht richtet er ihn nicht selbst zugrunde".[58] The worry of an owner about the danger that his slave could die of hunger in prison is, however, not a symptom of friendship, but only a worry concerning his property.[59] Also, Seneca's moral reflections, in which he argues a relationship of friendship between masters and slaves, can be seen as a confirmation of the fact that such friendship did not exist.

> *Servi sunt. Immo humiles amici; Non est, mi Lucili, quod amicum tantum in foro et in curia quaeras; si diligenter adtenderis, et domi invenies* (Sen. epist. 47,2.16).

Final Remarks

1. In the text of *John*, the deep social reality of slavery, especially of the domestic one, comes to the surface. It is a widespread and influential reality that the *Gospel of John* seems to know very well. Its terminology demonstrates a knowledge of the actual functions of the slaves and of the forms of relationships that bind them to their masters. The author shows capacity in the symbolic use of the slave terminology and is able to adapt it to his project.

2. Not by chance is the environment of the household, which offers the best situation in which *John* takes over social conditions and relations as serving and being served, the superiority of the master over the slave, the aspiration of the slave to liberation, the relationships of friendship. It is in the household that personal ties are continuously constructed, modified, and destroyed. The relation that occurs in the οἶκος constitutes the intense and inevitable cultural background of his religious imagination.

56 LAES 2003, 313.
57 R. E. KRITZER in ARZT-GRABNER/KRITZER/PAPATHOMAS/WINTER 2006, 278–280.
58 ARZT-GRABNER/KRITZER/PAPATHOMAS/WINTER 2006, 86.
59 See for example P.Brux. I 19 (117–118 CE), where the owner speaks of his slave as his own property – l. 8: ὁ καὶ ἐνθάδε λογιζόμ(ενος) ἴδιό(ς) μο(υ). See also SB XXII 15704,73 (after 138 CE); ARZT-GRABNER/KRITZER/PAPATHOMAS/WINTER 2006, 161.

3. The papyrological documentation relating to domestic slavery shows the variety of roles, positions, and functions of the slave, and thereby the structural importance that slavery had in the Graeco-Roman society. It gives evidence of the complexity of the slave *status* and of its social relevance.

4. *John* does not want to change the social status of slaves and does not give up the slave model. However, he has a transformation in mind. The centre of the *Gospel of John* consists of a process of initiation to which the disciples must be submitted in order to attain a new religious condition.

a. The most important symbolic mechanism explaining this process is the ritual in which Jesus undergoes a temporary and symbolic reversal of status. In the ritual, what matters is the transformation of the master. He, acting as a slave, constitutes the dynamic centre of the process. The *Gospel of John*, in substance, proposes the function master-slave as necessary for religious experience, but this function is altered. Once the master transforms himself, the typical functions of the slaves should be taken by all members of the group in their mutual relations.

b. The theme of friendship enters in the *Gospel of John* as an essential aspect, although it is not frequently discussed. It is the environment of domestic slavery (characterized by the wish to reach a peaceful and affectionate relationship among masters and slaves) that generates the Johannine idea of the friendly *status* of disciples. The friendship toward slaves was a topic present in philosophical literature. In the documentary papyri there are symptomatic signs of friendly bonds and mutual affection between owners and slaves. The papyri do not give only essential details, but also occasionally unexpected backgrounds. *John* has taken into consideration these positive human relations between owner and slaves and has incorporated them in his religious project. Despite the lack of explicit words illustrating friendship ties, *John* let us understand his positive consideration of such relationships.

c. Freedom appears in the *Gospel of John* as the final goal of the process of initiation of the disciple. The process is conceived as a transition from slavery to freedom through "remaining in the words of Jesus". Within this scheme of initiation, slavery defines the condition in which the disciple finds himself at the point of departure. The liberation defines its point of arrival. Implicitly, in *John*, the metaphor of slave's freedom evokes the final and necessary stage in the religious progress of mankind.

d. The liberation of a slave depends essentially on the decision of the owner. For this reason the scheme of slave-liberation is particularly suitable for *John*. It makes clear the essence of the master's role in the initiation: only Jesus can give liberation to the disciple. Disciples cannot reach the liberation by themselves. John 15:5 is absolutely explicit on this point: "apart from me you can do nothing". From this point of view, the Johannine process of initiation is different from the slave-liberation. Papyrological documentation gives evidence about the fact that the slave constructs for himself the conditions for his liberation through a good behaviour towards his owners (and in many cases through his independent economic activity,

that permits him to pay the price of his liberation). The active participation of the slave in his liberation seems to be almost absent in the Johannine model of initiation.

e. O. PATTERSON's concept of slavery as "social death" seems to clarify another aspect of the *Gospel of John*. Its author conceives the slave, and also the disciple, as someone basically passive or socially inert. The fact that *John* necessarily conceives the process of initiation as a transition from the condition of slave to the liberation, means that he considers both the slave and any man not yet freed by Jesus as socially dead persons. In fact, we saw that *John* has a positive vision of the slave as a substitute of the master, as one who can do what for his master is impossible. *John*'s slave is a figure indispensable, as far as servile functions are unavoidable. From one side, the slave is socially active, from another aspect, is religiously passive. "Socially dead" could then signify that the slave and the disciple are unable to obtain by themselves the liberation which is the goal of the religious experience. They are, on the contrary, active in relation to others.

Only further research could clarify if *John* has a passive and authoritarian vision, not only of the process of initiation of the disciples, but also of the house-slaves of his time.

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