

Serving the Right Master:
The Metaphor of Slavery in Paul and Seneca the Younger's *Epistulae Morales*

In this paper, I offer a brief comparative reading between the Apostle Paul's *Epistle to the Romans* and Seneca the Younger's *Epistulae Morales*—in particular, how each author employs the metaphor of slavery. While each appropriates the image for different ends, both authors use servitude as an analogy for the relationship between mortal free will and the compulsion of external forces. Both advise that being enslaved to malevolent forces (sin for Paul and unrestrained desire for Seneca) should be eschewed but that servitude to the good (righteousness and philosophy, respectively) cannot be avoided and should in fact be embraced.

I do not argue for a direct intertextual connection or ideological correspondence between the two contemporary figures (as do some scholars; see Ramelli 2010, 336); rather, the similarity in thought can be satisfactorily explained by the shared intellectual milieu of mid-first century Rome. Both Paul and Seneca have much to say on the topic of slavery—both are critical of some aspects of the institution, agreeing that slaves should be treated humanely while stopping short of advocating an overthrow of the system—but they also find in the practice a useful metaphor for describing the human condition. Base human behavior, the result of either sin (Paul) or a lack of Stoic discipline (Seneca), has the power to hold its captive in bondage. Only a new, benevolent master (obedience/righteousness for Paul and philosophy for Seneca) can provide the appropriate situation within which to exercise moral freedom (Denzey 2010, 180–81).

This study provides a small window, through the lens of the two texts, into the intellectual correspondence between Roman philosophical schools and burgeoning Christian thought. While much has been said and remains to be said about the interrelationship of these modes of thought, this case study may serve as a small piece of the scholarly mosaic.

Bibliography

Denzey, N., 2010. "Facing the Beast: Justin, Christian Martyrdom, and Freedom of the Will."

Pages 176–98 in *Stoicism in Early Christianity*. Edited by Tuomas Rasimus, Troels

Engberg-Pedersen, and Ismo Dunderberg. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic.

Ramelli, Ilaria L. E., 2013. "The Pseudepigraphical Correspondence between Paul and Seneca: A

Reassessment." Pages 319–36 in *Paul and Pseudepigraphy*. Edited by Stanley E. Porter

and Gregory P. Fewster. Leiden: Brill.