Review of Glancy's *Slavery In Early Christianity* by Colin Green

Jennifer Glancy And Slavery In The Pauline Churches – A Curious Case

The following is a review of Glancy's *Slavery In Early Christianity* and is by Colin Green as per his essay at https://gettingtothetruthofthings.blogspot.com/2020/05/the-strange-case-of-jennifer-glancy-and.html

Scholar Jennifer A. Glancy paints a dark shadow over Paul, or at least the Pauline corpus of letters, in her book *Slavery in Early Christianity*.[i]

Her thesis in this book is, broadly, that in classical antiquity physical abuse and the threat of it was a slave's lot, to be expected by the slave, and duly doled out by slave owners far and wide; and that Christianity took this to the next level by embedding such behaviour in a religious code. But there are problems in her presentation of her research, not least in her treatment of the Pauline epistles. It is on this I will focus here - a review of her book as a whole is beyond the scope of this post.

But we first need to put this in the context of some blind spots in her assessment of slavery within the Roman Empire in the first century - in this book at least. Glancy's book omits to mention that the Therapeutae allowed no slavery in their community, nor that the same was true of the Essenes, nor that Philo highly praised the Essenes for this.[ii] This set of omissions gets her book off on the wrong foot, since she asserts on page 7 that:

"Acquaintance with a wide assortment of ancient writings is necessary for piecing together *a picture of slavery in the Roman Empire.* In every case, however, we must be wary of construing partial, biased sources as though they provide neutral overviews of what it meant to be a slave or to live in *a society in which slavery was unquestioned*. Still, a rich sense of the sources pertaining to slavery will help us to see what is either distinctive or typical about slavery in Christian circles" (emphasis added).

Clearly it was questioned in at least two first century groups with Jewish heritage, testified to by Josephus and Philo, and which was especially praised by Philo. These are invisible in her wide assortment of ancient writings. Her thesis is challenged by evidence she does not consider.

Other omissions affect her portrait of Paul and his churches. If we were to pick out something distinctive in Christian circles, we might start with the injunction in Ephesians to slaveholders: do not threaten slaves. This injunction would probably have stunned many slave-owners, who wouldn't be able to imagine how their slaves would do as asked if they couldn't threaten them. But Glancy does not acknowledge the existence of this injunction in her book, whereas you would think it is precisely the sort of thing she might want in view. So, here are some details about it and some other ways in which Glancy treats the Jewish Christian Paul, and Christian circles, with less objectivity in this book.

"do not threaten them."

- Describing the household code in Ephesians in just a single paragraph (pg 144-45), she cites the instruction to slaves from Eph 6:5-6, but not the instruction to masters in verse 9. She wants to emphasise the servile submission "with fear and trembling" of slaves' "bodies and souls to their masters." But she omits 6:9 which would be inconvenient to her thesis if she acknowledged it here. It's the instruction to slaveholders, "do not threaten them." No threats; therefore entailing no carrying out of any potential threats. This disempowers slaveholders in regard to a fundamental aspect of ancient slavery

– it cancels their right to take out their aggression on slaves' bodies. Slaves should be free from threats from their owners: they obviously felt that this was a message that Christian slave households needed to be told; but it makes unequivocal an early teaching not to threaten and not to do the sorts of things that you might threaten to do. This injunction amounts to nothing less than an outright ban on the physical abuse of slaves. One wonders how she can write an entire book on slavery in early Christianity, quote this very chapter, and miss this distinctive instruction. Glancy, it gradually appears. seems to want us to think of Christian slaveholders as unreasoning brutes who went without any clear guidance from the church to change their minds about threatening and harming slaves, possibly unable to recognise their common humanity, like compassion-less zombies.

- Curiously, Glancy says "the morality of the Christian *haustafeln* [household codes] promotes the interests of slaveholders, not of slaves" (pg 143). This is a false dichotomy. If she acknowledged how Ephesians disempowers slaveholders, by cancelling their right to threaten slaves, she may have noticed some benefit to slaves in it, and that it might to slaveholders appear on first sight to offer themselves no benefit at all.

- By way of digression, it is curious that in Glancy's all too brief coverage of patristics, her survey of the extant literature in this book has a glaring omission of Gregory of Nyssa and his strong anti-slavery views, whereas she cites Gregory's contemporary Augustine. It just so happens that she can use Augustine to support her thesis, whereas Gregory would somewhat challenge it.[iii] See Sharon Weiser for more on this.[iv] The pattern of Glancy's omissions here is troubling.[v]

"brothers in the Lord"

- Back to Paul: just as Glancy omits "do not threaten them" when discussing Ephesians, she omits the important phrase "brothers in the Lord" when discussing Philemon. It starts to look like erasure of evidence. She discusses "no longer a slave" in Philemon 16 but not the said phrase found in the same verse. It seems to be a challenge for Glancy's antagonism towards the Pauline corpus. Paul requests his slave-owning Christian friend Philemon to receive back his Christian slave Onesimus "no longer as a slave, but… as a brother in the Lord" (however we interpret it). Paul writes to Philemon "what you ought to do." Paul clobbers Philemon with the force of a theological basis – do it "as brothers in the Lord" - for an injunction to take Onesimus in some meaningful sense as a slave no longer. Glancy strains hard to dismiss "no longer as a slave" as merely a negotiation of personal relationships between the three men. However, at a minimum, it is difficult to see how at least some hearing the letter originally would not have wondered whether Paul is invoking the available route to this slave's freedom - the Roman practice of manumission of slaves - and taking it to a higher level by giving it religious force. (This risks lending religious legitimacy to the undesirable institution of the slave economy, but strengthens the bridge to a measure of freedom, which would be the wish of most, if not all, slaves.) Consideration that this may include a positive message she asserts to be "a futile exercise." Is this rhetorically to tell people who disagree with her to quieten down? There is good reason to pursue the exercise, especially given the evidence that she does not acknowledge.

- Firstly, as she sometimes does with any evidence that puts these epistles in a positive light, she atomises the evidence: "He was not giving advice… to be followed by other slaveholders with runaway slaves." However, other slaveholders in Pauline churches hearing the letter would surely prick up their ears (as would their slaves), except that Glancy seems to want us to think of Christian slaveholders as unreasoning brutes. Hence, she isolates this epistle and dismisses it as a matter of "personal relations" (pg 140). reflecting a situation "in which he [Paul] was personally embroiled" (pg 92). She puts it all down to "Paul's highly personal relations with the two men" (pg 140). Only on the fifth occasion on which she

visits the text does she finally admit into view that Paul uses the significant word “brother.” But Glancy even there omits key words, leaving out of view that it is a theological injunction to treat Onesimus “as a *brother in the Lord*.” This makes it rather more than “personal relations” – it is a specifically Christian theologically-weighted statement. Without acknowledging the evidence, she dismisses the letter as too “ambiguous.” Yes, the letter has its ambiguities for sure, but not so much as to make futile any argument for a glimmer of good in it.

- In contrast, on 1 Thess 4:4, Glancy makes too much of a phrase that is actually notoriously ambiguous. She claims “Paul advises as an antidote to *porneia the acquisition and control* of a vessel, *skeuos*” (emphasis added). As there is only one verb, to say “acquisition and control” is dubious. Choose one or the other but not both. Scholars tend to interpret it as either “acquire a wife” or ”control one’s body.” Elsewhere, both meanings are reviewed excellently with the conclusion that *skeuos* means keeping one’s “member” (his genitalia) under control as argued by Smith.[vi] Paul could be quite coarse at times. Glancy’s 2002 book doesn’t mention this 2001 article but rather Elgvin’s 1997 summary of previous literature on the question. Glancy suggests a third meaning that fits her thesis: “What Paul actually wrote is that each (male) Thessalonian Christian should know how to “obtain his own vessel” and she asserts from this ambiguous phrase that Paul is saying a man should get a slave girl to penetrate in the absence of a wife (pg 60-62). This is tendentious at best. Honestly, “obtain a vessel” could just as easily mean buy a pot to masturbate into. I’m not pushing that interpretation, but it’s as plausible as her interpolation of slaves into it. Glancy is pushing energetically for us to accept *from a couple of highly ambiguous words* that Paul is advocating the use of slaves for sex as an antidote for sexual immorality (pg 60-63), and also that Paul would not conceive of this being morally questionable. She bases this idea on the fact that sex with one’s own slaves was not thought morally questionable in non-Christian Greco-Roman society, which is a pretty thin basis for her re-imagining of Paul. I’m pretty sure that Paul told his readers not to be conformed to the world, but that’s not the only grounds on which her suggestion is unlikely to gain wide acceptance. It’s curious that she exploits a thoroughly ambiguous phrase with zeal, yet dismisses the clearer language of Philemon as too ambiguous for interpretation. One does not want to accuse a scholar of confirmation bias, but it is difficult to explain the patterns here of selection of evidence, interpretation, and so on.

  - So, back to Philemon: Glancy treats Paul sending the slave back as reaffirming slavery and contrary to Torah asylum laws (although Paul as a prisoner would hardly be in a position to effect asylum!). Her book curiously lacks discussion that the seemingly friendly (to Paul) slave Onesimus might have had any say in this decision, one way or another. Yet Onesimus would surely have known that if he didn’t go back, then he could well be abandoning his friend Paul (already in chains) to the malice of reward-seeking troublemakers and the risk of capital punishment for assisting a runaway slave. Paul had no chance to escape. What kind of friend would Onesimus choose to be, if he had a chance to say anything to Paul? – an avenue for reconstruction of the episode that Glancy doesn’t consider, although that would be true of many, if not most, commentators.[vii]

A few more observations about her problematic treatment of the Pauline epistles.

sexual relations *involving a believer*

- Her key comment on Col 3:5 seems almost contradictory: “slaves might have a difficult choice between the obedience enjoined in the household code and preservation of their sexual purity, upon which the letter also insists (3:5)… nowhere in the New Testament epistles does Paul or any other letter writer state explicitly that the sexual use of slaves constitutes sexual immorality…” (pg 144).

- That is actually contained in a single paragraph in her book, and I guess the operative word is explicitly. But Glancy seems to be saying that a slave hearing the words of Col 3:5 would receive the message that slaveholder-slave sex would constitute sexual immorality risking disfellowship, but her slave-owner hearing 3:5 at the same time as her would not. How are they to know, and not to know, at the same time, that 3:5 disallows him using her for sex? And no doubt, if they were both calling themselves Christians, and his use of her body would disqualify her from church membership (as Glancy claims), such a Christian woman might ask him to consider the words of 3:5 for his own spiritual benefit and hers. But Glancy seemingly wants us to think of Christian slave-owners in Paul's churches as unreasoning brutes, inferior in reasoning to slaves hearing the same words.

- In any case, what she says above (pg 144) seems inconsistent with what she says in discussing Pauline churches on pg 49, which implies that there *was* explicit understanding of boundaries:

  - "because slaves were their masters' sexual property, their obligations to their masters would at times have included actions defined as polluting or aberrant in the Christian body. Slaves *whose owners were not members* of the church would have been especially vulnerable, since their owners *would not have been subject to the community's censure*." (emphasis added) (pg 49)

- On that take then, Christian slaveholders that were members *would* be subject to community censure - yes, expected to know not to use their slaves for sex. I'm really not sure if Glancy changed her mind in the middle of writing the book.

- Again, Glancy seems to imply that a believing slaveholder would have to know that sex with slaves is not morally neutral, on pg 66: "It is hard to see how, on Paul's view, *any* sexual relations *involving a believer* could be morally neutral. All sexual relations would affect the Lord and indeed the entire Christian body (6:19-20)."

- Again, "by limiting the legitimate range of sexual expression to marriage, Paul implicitly suggests that slaves who oblige their masters sexually are engaged in *porneia*" (pg 67). And "he [Paul] encourages the Corinthian Christians to confine their sexual practices to marriage" (pg 70).

- But again confusing, on pg 69 she makes these two statements that are difficult to reconcile: "this reading of 1 Corinthians 7:21 does not include any claim about how Paul would respond to slaves or freedpersons who were still being used sexually by their owners or former owners – whether he would believe that such activity excluded the slave or freedperson from the Christian body or whether he would perceive coerced sexual activity as morally neutral." But then: "Paul rejects the idea that sexual couplings can be a matter of moral indifference." It is difficult to see the direction of argument here.

Exodus

- Exodus in Stephen's speech

- Here we come to one of the most striking problems with this book for me. It's almost as if Glancy doesn't want the Exodus narrative to be there even when it is. When she mentions it (pg 48) it's to disparage the speeches in Acts 7 (Stephen's) and Acts 13 (Paul's). Glancy claims: "these first century synopses of the exodus expunge any memory of the enslavement of the Israelites." Expunge? Glancy is incorrect here. In the speech at Acts 7:6, 34, it actually re-enacts the story of the enslavement in Egypt. It reports God saying this to Abraham: "Your descendants will be strangers in a country not their own, and they will be *enslaved and ill-treated* for four hundred years"; and God saying this to Moses: "I have indeed

seen *the oppression* of my people in Egypt. I have heard their groaning and have come down *to set them free*." I don't understand how this can be claimed to "expunge any memory of the enslavement." When I see Glancy being somewhat careless with texts that I know something about, it prompts my doubts about her treatment of the texts in which I have no expertise. (In fact, scholars look at how the long speech in Acts 7 may be inspired by the long prayer in Nehemiah, both telling the story of Israel; but one of the differences is that, compared to Nehemiah 9, it's Acts 7 that actually *increases* the amount of references to Israel's enslavement and oppression, re-affirming its importance in Israel's story.)

- Awareness (of lack of it) of Paul's meta-narrative matters. She is not very sensitive to the use of the theme of the Israelites' slavery in Egypt in his letters. Not noticing that exodus lies in the background of Paul's thought, she says: "the implications of the slavery metaphor in Romans 6, with its stress on servile submissiveness, are disturbing" (pg 98).

  - She doesn't seem to recognise the implications of the theme of the exodus here.[viii] Thus, she says that Paul is re-inscribing the relations of slavery in his metaphor of changing from being slaves to sin to being slaves of righteousness (pg 98).

    - Re-inscribing, a word borrowed from literary theory, would mean that Paul is re-establishing the norms of the slave system in a new context. What he is actually doing is taking the reader on a journey to a new exalted status.

  - Glancy does not acknowlede how it fits into Paul's larger scheme. The Israelites' journey was from slavery in Egypt, through the Exodus, to freedom, into the promised land, to inheritance with the status of heirs of God. Paul's metaphor in Romans represents part of this journey. He is not re-inscribing nefarious values of the slave system, he is setting out the journey to inheritance. In this, to be slaves of God is a high calling, language used in the Old Testament of kings and prophets. So, Paul's argument proceeds, mapped on Israel's journey to Romans 8: "then we are heirs - heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ, if indeed we share in his sufferings in order that we may also share in his glory" (Rom 8:17). This is where being slaves to righteousness leads. It's not meant to be a dead end.

  - In discussing "no longer a slave… but an heir" in Gal 4:7 – which is surely invoking exodus and promised land themes, Glancy says, "Paul's metaphors make sense only in the context of some peculiar dimensions of first-century slavery." Roman law may be a referent of Paul's metaphor, but so is the exodus. (And something is seriously awry in her follow-up about Paul's contrast of slave and heir, which to her "emphasises… the slave's lack of a phallus." She is determined to read the text this way: "Paul thus subordinates biological to symbolic dimensions of fatherhood, the flesh to the phallus" (pg 35-36).)

Resurrection

If one is to exegete Pauline material sensitively, an awareness of early Christian theology is a must. Glancy however seems unaware of the belief in a general resurrection of the righteous and the unrighteousness to judgment. This may explain her barbed aside in her reading of 1 Cor 6:12-20: "Paul reminds the Corinthians that the body is made for the Lord and will ultimately share in the Lord's resurrection. His lack of interest in the prostitute suggests that unlike the believer, her body "is not destined for resurrection."." I don't know quite whether to put her interpretation down to reading the text through the prism of feminist critical theory, or an unawareness of Christian theology, or both. For the avoidance of doubt, early Christians would have expected everyone, prostitutes included, to be resurrected and face the final judgment.

So although there are many important insights in this book, Glancy's treatment seems to lack sufficient objectivity or attention to New Testament texts. Reading her book, references have to be checked carefully, and the historian's inevitable bias treated with caution. One does not expect complete objectivity of a historian, a virtual impossibility. But Glancy's standpoint in writing to raise the anti-slavery banner seems to get in the way of even-handed presentation of historical data sometimes.

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[i] Jennifer A. Glancy, *Slavery in Early Christianity*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002
[ii] She only briefly acknowledges the ancient reports of the Essenes' rejection of slavery in her book, *Slavery as Moral Problem: In the Early Church and Today*, (Fortress Press, 2001, 9.
[iii] Gregory of Nyssa, Fourth Homily on Ecclesiastes 1.1-106.
[iv] Sharon Weisser, "Philo's Therapeutae and Essenes: a precedent for the Exceptional Condemnation of Slavery in Gregory of Nyssa?" in K. Berthelot and M. Morgenstein (eds.), *The Quest for a Common Humanity: Human Dignity and Otherness in the Religious Traditions of the Mediterranean*. Leiden: Brill, 2011, 289-310.
[v] Glancy does attend to Gregory in a later work: *Slavery as Moral Problem: In the Early Church and Today.* Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2011, 97.
[vi] Jay E. Smith, "1 Thessalonians 4:4: Breaking the Impasse." In *Bulletin for Biblical Research* 11.1 (2001), 65-105. For a rebuttal of Glancy's novel idea here, see Karin B. Neutel, *A Cosmopolitan Ideal: Paul's Declaration 'Neither Jew Nor Greek, Neither Slave Nor Free, Nor Male and Female' in the Context of First-Century Thought*. T&T Clark, 2015, n.7, 147. The pre-publication copy available online covers this more extensively on pages 145-49.
[vii] See Bellen on this in *New Documents Illustrating Early Christianity*, Vol 6., Llewelyn and Kearsley. Ancient History Documentary Research Centre, Macquarie University, 1992, 54.
[viii] See for example N.T. Wright, "The New Inheritance According to Paul" in *Bible Review*, 14.3, June 1998.