

Monday, 08.11.2021, 16:00 - 18:00 CET

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Slavery as Path to God in Ancient Christianity

Abstract:

In theological and historical research, Christian talk of the "slave of God" has so far been understood as a metaphor. Although it was oriented towards the Greco-Roman environment of early Christianity, it seemed to have no further significance for real slavery. Starting from the asymmetrical relationship between God and man in monotheistic religions, I would like to use the supposed interdependence between discourse and reality for my historical research. I wish to pursue the problem of how far dependency relationships like slavery were further entrenched in ancient Christianity, especially in the Christian family. How does the metaphor of the "slave of God" affect the structure of the Roman household and perhaps that of early Christian communities? Are their members all "slaves of God"? Or do asymmetrical relationships already exist within and between these groups, between lords and slaves, fathers and children, men and women, clergy and laymen? In this context I will ask whether there were also strategies for establishing symmetrical relationships within the early Christian society and cult communities, so that God's slaves could become brothers and sisters, i.e. children of God.

Bio:

Elisabeth Herrmann-Otto was Professor of Ancient History at the University of Trier. There she led the DFG-funded research training group on "Sklaverei – Frondienst, Knechtschaft – Zwangsarbeit" for seven years. Before her appointment to Trier, she established and managed the research centre on "Forschungen zur Antiken Sklaverei" at the Academy of Sciences and Literature in Mainz. She is the author of several books on ancient slavery (such as *Sklaverei und Freilassung in der griechisch-römischen Welt* [Slavery and manumission in the Greco-Roman world] 3rd edition 2019), co-editor of the *Handwörterbuch zur Antiken Sklaverei* (HAS) and editor of the series *Sklaverei, Knechtschaft, Zwangsarbeit* (SKZ).