

Book Review
David P. Stevens

First Century Slavery & I Corinthians 7:21, S. Scott Bartchy, Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock Pub. c. 2003, 199 pp., ISBN: 1-59244-195-5. \$24.00.

S. Scott Bartchy earned his Ph. D in New Testament & Christian Origins from Harvard University in 1971. *First Century Slavery & I Corinthians 7:21* is his Ph. D. thesis and was first published in 1973.

The book is divided into five chapters which are preceded by acknowledgements and abbreviations. A Bibliography is included in the back of the book.

Bartchy follows the hermeneutical approach of ascertaining the historical background to I Corinthians 7:21 and then giving the exegetical aspects of the passage with regard to its word meanings and grammatical forms.

In chapter one, the author gives an introduction to the text and its interpretation. He reviews six authors' treatments of I Corinthians 7:21 at length. The authors are: Lappas, Bellen, Daughy, Jang, Russell and Gulzow. To these men, he adds four brief comments on: Neuhausler, Barrett, Conzelman, and Bornkam. He reviews the strengths and weaknesses of each. He rejects their conclusions. Bartchy then proceeds to set forth his procedure for interpreting I Corinthians 7:21. First, he examines the institution of slavery in the first century A.D. This involves a historical approach investigating the laws governing slavery in the Greco-Roman world and Jewish laws as well. Paul would have been acquainted with these laws. Second, he considers the context of I Corinthians 7:21 including word meanings and grammatical forms. This also involves the context of the whole of chapter seven. Third, he explores Paul's preference for celibacy, theology of calling, ethics, and the claim that love is the most important spiritual gift.

Chapter One is followed by an excursus on *Biblical Scholarship and Slavery in the Ancient World* (29). Bartchy gives a survey of the historical research on slavery in the ancient world. He goes back to the work of J. F. Reitmeier, 1789, and Henri Wallon, 1847, whose work he considers to be the real beginning of historical research on the question of slavery. He gives a brief sketch of the historical works on slavery with a brief explanation of the thrust of each work (29). Bartchy indicates that there were social and psychological tensions regarding slavery in the ancient world, but that "*in Western culture slavery was associated with certain religious and philosophical doctrines that gave it the highest sanction*" (quoting David B. Davis, 31). Bartchy notes that neither the Lutheran Bible nor the Authorized Version used the word "sklave or slave." He also remarks that there are 190 instances of Greek words referring to slavery or slaves that can be found in the New Testament alone (31). He shows that slave laws applied to the Jews as well as non-Jews. This excursus is included to provide more details into the nuances of slavery in the ancient world and in the first century A.D. providing important background information on the interpretation of I Corinthians 7:21.

Chapter Two focuses on the institution of slavery in first-century Greece. The chapter attempts to define what it meant to be a slave in Corinth in the middle of the first-century A.D. Bartchy examines what the phrase, “were you a slave when you were called....” means. Areas that he explores are: definitions of “slave” and “slavery”, sources of slaves, Paul’s knowledge of slavery and slaves in the Corinthian congregation. When defining a “slave” Roman, Grecian, and Jewish laws must be considered. Through thoroughly documented materials, Bartchy shows the difference between each of these entities, government and religious, and reveals the intricacies of slavery in the first-century A.D. In another section of this chapter, Bartchy explores the phrase, “don’t worry about it.” In this part, Bartchy examines first-century views of slavery, the treatment of slaves, the positions of slaves and freemen in society and the slave’s view of his situation. In the final part of the chapter, Bartchy considers the phrase, “but, even if you are indeed able to become free.” In this section, the author focuses on manumission. He looks at the owner’s reasons for manumission, the owner’s methods of manumission and the options open to slaves (37-38). Bartchy states, “It is safe to conclude that at least one-third of the urban Corinthian population in the first-century A.D. were slaves” (58). An additional large percentage of the people were freedmen, i. e. they had been in slavery at some point in their lives. Life as a slave was or had been the experience of as many as two-thirds of the Corinthian population in the first-century A.D. (58). This information translates into the fact that many of the first converts and subsequent converts at Corinth were or had been at some time in their lives—slaves. In the section where Bartchy examines Paul’s seeming indifference to slavery (“don’t worry about it”), he states, “No ancient government ever sought to abolish slavery” (63). Slavery was interwoven into the social and economic fabric of the current society in Paul’s day. Paul understood that it was possible to be a slave and be a Christian at the same time. Bartchy affirms, “none of the slave-rebellions in the Greco-Roman world were caused by an intention to abolish the institution of slavery” (63). “None of the authors who had been in slavery, whose works are known to us, attacked the institution of slavery in which they had once lived” (64). For those who did write about slavery the question was not whether slavery was essential to society but whether it was “natural” for those who were enslaved (64). Paul’s lack of concern for slavery was by no means unique in the Greco-Roman world of the first century A.D. (67).

Bartchy indicates that slave-owners viewed their slaves as investments to be protected and developed (72). Slaves were treated in a variety of ways, and sometimes they were treated with cruelty. However, for the most part, slaves were treated well. “In light of this conclusion, it seems unlikely that Paul’s advice in I Cor. 7:21 (Don’t worry about it) was meant to encourage indifference to bad treatment” (72). The author concludes this section by examining the positions of slaves and freedmen in society and the slaves’ view of his own enslavement. The author indicates that the opportunity for manumission was high and that this was sufficient to preclude slave rebellion. “...it must be stressed that the last serious slave-revolt in the Greco-Roman world occurred at least 120 years before Paul wrote to the Corinthian Christians. By the first century A. D., “the days of serious slave or gladiator insurrections were over” (85-86).

The final section of chapter two addresses the understanding of the phrase written by Paul, “but, even if you are indeed able to become free.” Bartchy answers the question, “to what possibilities might Paul have been referring when he wrote 0721c”(I Cor. 7:21c-DS)? (88). A variety of reasons are given for the owner’s desire to free his slaves. In many cases, manumission brought greater benefits to the owner than to the slave. Some slaves were freed because of their good work. Some owners found that it was more economical to use his slave’s services as a freedman than to support him as a slave. An owner might determine that keeping an older slave would cost more than freeing that slave. The slaves upkeep could exceed his value. An owner might benefit from freeing a slave in order to allow the slave to function more effectively as a source of income. The terms of manumission could permit the owner to benefit financially from his freed slave. The owner could profit by seizing part of the slave’s property in exchange for the slave’s freedom. Sometimes an owner freed a slave in order to marry her. Some owner’s arranged for their slaves to be freed upon the owner’s death after a period of public mourning had occurred. The majority of slaves were freed because of the financial advantage that it afforded the owner. Bartchy explores the variety of ways that an owner could manumit a slave. All of this historical background serves an interpreting function regarding the meaning of I Corinthians 7:21.

Next, the author examines the options that were open to slaves regarding their freedom. “The entire history of the interpretation of I Cor. 0721 has been dominated by the fundamental assumption that a person in slavery in the first-century Corinth enjoyed the possibility of deciding for himself whether or not he would accept manumission when that possibility was presented to him” (96). Exegetes of this text have argued that Paul is urging Christians in slavery to “take freedom” when the possibility of manumission comes to them or Paul is urging them to “use slavery” (i. e. remain in slavery) by refusing manumission. Bartchy shows that there was a number of ways that a slave could influence the decision to manumit him, but that there was no way that a slave could refuse freedman-status (98). Bartchy indicates that there were differences under Roman and Greek law on how the relationship between the owner of a slave and his slave could be legally established through the process of manumission. Under Greek law, there was no way that a slave could demand his freedom (99). Under Roman law, an owner could not be forced to accept a slave’s peculiam (wealth and property accumulated while a slave) in exchange for manumission (98). Some Christians or congregations functioned as third-parties and purchased the freedom of slaves who were brothers and sisters “in Christ”. (100). Bartchy believes that this gift of money from the congregation in Corinth might have been one way in which Christian slaves in Corinth secured their freedom from their masters (101). Another way that a slave might obtain his freedom is by challenging his slavery in court asserting that he was unlawfully enslaved. Under Greek law, a slave could flee to an altar or temple and seek asylum. The slave was at least temporarily protected from his owner until the priests decided if he should be reconciled to his owner or be sold to a new one (105). It was not possible to become free by flight to asylum. Still, there were other slaves who fled and hoped not to get caught. If caught, the slave could be imprisoned. However, the fugitive slave was the exception (106). Bartchy concludes that slaves could not force or demand their own manumission. Neither could a slave resist manumission if

his owner decided to free him (106). Both of these facts must be taken into consideration when interpreting I Cor. 7:21. Bartchy suggests that the phrase, “if you are able to become free” means, “if you are able to be manumitted” (110). Keep in mind neither Greek, Roman nor Jewish law made it possible for a person in slavery to refuse or forego manumission (110). Since a slave could not choose not to be manumitted, it is pointless for anyone to have advised him to choose to be manumitted (i.e. “take freedom”). Also, since a slave could not refuse manumission, it would be pointless for anyone to advise him to “use slavery.” Bartchy gives a very good summary of chapter two beginning on p. 114 and continuing until p. 120. This summary along with others, are aids to the reader. Beginning with a good outline of the chapter and ending with a good summary, Bartchy helps the reader assess and retain the information related in the chapter.

Following chapter two, the author records another excursus on the topic, “Sacral Manumission.” Bartchy concludes this excursus by saying, “In short, against Deismann’s conclusions it must be said that Paul in no way relied on Delphic manumission customs in giving expression to his doctrine of redemption or in I Cor. 0722-23” (125).

Chapter three focuses on I Corinthians 7 and the *Pneumatikoi* at Corinth. Bartchy affirms that many persons in the legal status of slavery were members of the Christian congregation in Corinth (127). He refers to the texts which mention the baptizing of the households of Stephanas, Crispus and Gaius make it clear that slaves were among the first converts at Corinth. Bartchy contends that these household conversions would have included slaves. Bartchy sets out to answer two questions. First, What can be discerned about the new self-understanding which slaves who became Christians received when they became Christians, especially with regards to their social status? Second, Is there any evidence that the Corinthian Christians who were in slavery needed any special admonition from Paul for the purpose of correcting their attitudes toward their owners or their status as slaves? (127). Bartchy affirms a three-pronged approach to answer these questions. He examines the theological-ethical situation in the Corinthian congregation which Paul was trying to correct by writing I Corinthians. Then, he seeks to clarify the background of those social problems which did arise in the congregation. Lastly, he sketches Paul’s response in I Cor. 7 to this pneumatic view of Christian faith and life, giving special attention to his “theology of calling” in 0717-24 and the decisive interrelationship of 0720 to 0721 (127). In this section, Bartchy mentions some of the aspects of the charismata. He writes of an ecstatic speaking and prophesying (150). The tongues Paul spoke of were languages not ecstatic utterances (DS). However, the Corinthians did boast of these tongues as Bartchy affirms. Bartchy gives a good definition of the phrase, “continue in the calling by which they were called (0720), i.e. “they should keep “the commandments of God” (0724); “they should continue in the calling in the sight of God” (0724) (150). The Corinthians were called by the gospel to the obtaining of the salvation which is in Christ Jesus. They were encouraged by Paul to remain in this spiritual calling by living lives that corresponded to this call. In God’s sight, the person responding to this call was no longer defined as Jew or Greek, as a male or female, as a slave or freeman, but as a saint (0102) (151). Paul did not want any Christian who was in slavery to think that his manumission could bring him any closer to God or that

his slave-status was a disadvantage before God. Paul makes this clear in 0721ab: “Were you a slave when you were called? Don’t worry about it.” (154). Bartchy completes the translation with these words, “But if, indeed, your owner should manumit you, by all means (now as a freedman) live according to God’s call” (159). Bartchy gives exegetical reasons for this translation in chapter three and in chapter five.

Bartchy examines the structure of I Corinthians 7 in chapter four. He establishes three goals: to demonstrate the appropriateness of 0717-24 in I Cor. 7 on the basis of the form of the entire passage, the connection between male/female, Jew/Greek, and slave/free in Paul’s thinking and the consistency in Paul’s style of argumentation throughout chapter 7 (161). Bartchy gives a thorough explanation of the structure of I Corinthians 7 beginning on page 166 and continuing through page 171. This section serves as an outline of chapter 7. Bartchy notes that Paul is answering questions received from the Corinthians. He divides chapter seven into eleven different sections and breaks down each section into the general principles, exceptions, and explications and reasons. This type of analysis is a beneficial aid to understanding the chapter.

The final chapter of the book, chapter 5, addresses the exegesis of 0721-24 in light of the social-legal system of slaves in Corinth and the theological-ethical situation in the Christian congregation there (172). Bartchy proceeds systematically in his interpretation of I Cor. 7:21. First, he gives the historical background of slavery in Greece in the first century. Then, he investigates Paul’s use of *klēsis* and *kaleō* in I Cor. 7:17-24. Paul stresses that God’s call had made irrelevant every particular social and religious status. He exhorted the Corinthians to live their lives in accord with God’s law in whatever status they found themselves, to keep the commands of God in the midst of whatever relationships they found themselves (173). Bartchy uses this chapter to give a summary statement of all that has preceded it. Then, at the conclusion of the chapter he gives his own translation of I Cor. 7:17-24.

At the end of the book, Bartchy gives a lengthy Bibliography.

Bartchy gives us one of the most comprehensive works on slavery in the first century A. D. He also provides a comprehensive analysis of I Corinthians 7. Finally, he provides his own translation of I Cor. 7:17-24 which clarifies the meaning of this difficult passage. While the reader will need to draw his/her own conclusions from an independent study of I Cor. 7, Bartchy’s work will be helpful as a guide and correct some faulty areas of thinking regarding this passage and Paul’s intended meaning. By avoiding some of the pitfalls, the biblical interpreter can gain greater accuracy and better knowledge of God’s Word.