

Review of *God, Slavery, and Early Christianity: Divine Possession and Ethics in the Shepherd of Hermas* by Chance E. Bonar (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2025)

Kitap Değerlendirmesi: Chance E. Bonar, *God, Slavery, and Early Christianity: Divine Possession and Ethics in the Shepherd of Hermas* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2025)

Sena Nuhuğlu

Yüksek Lisans Öğrencisi
İbn Haldun Ü.
Türkiye



Kitap Değerlendirmesi
Book Review

Geliş : 30.10.2025

Kabul : 17.12.2025

Yayın : 31.12.2025

Bu makale, iThenticate yazılımı ile taranmış ve intihal tespit edilmemiştir.



Discussions of early Christian thought often revolve around salvation, freedom, and faith. However, what if this moral world was also shaped by the institution of slavery in the ancient world? Chance E. Bonar's *God, Slavery, and Early Christianity: Divine Possession and Ethics in the Shepherd of Hermas* (Cambridge University Press, 2025) takes this question as its starting point. Concentrating on *The Shepherd of Hermas*, an often-overlooked text, Bonar reads "enslavement to God" not as a loose metaphor but as a way of thinking that shaped obedience, discipline, and the believer's understanding of the body. The book builds upon and expands his doctoral dissertation, "Enslaved to God: Slavery and Divine Despotism in the Shepherd of Hermas," completed at Harvard University.

This review discusses the book's main argument, the concepts it relies on, the sources it uses, and the contribution the study makes to current debates on early Christianity, slavery, and ethics, with particular attention to its treatment of moral formation and power relations.

In *The Shepherd of Hermas*, the relationship between God and believers appears through a clear master-slave pattern. This pattern does not function only as a symbolic image. It reflects the social imagination of the Roman world and shapes how moral life is described and practiced.

To clarify this structure, Bonar draws on Chris L. de Wet's concept of *doulology*¹ (the logic of slavery discourse), which focuses on slavery as a language system shaping thought and behavior. By connecting this with the notion of *divine possession*,² enslavement comes to appear not only as a social condition but as something that reaches the believer's body, emotions, and moral self.

Rather than following the common question of whether Christianity opposed slavery, Bonar redirects the debate toward how Christian moral language was shaped by a slaveholding world. By specifically turning to *The Shepherd of Hermas*, a text commonly associated with an enslaved author, he demonstrates how deeply Christian theology was shaped by the structure and logic of the Roman slave system. *The Shepherd of Hermas* is thus presented not only as a text of religious counsel but as a historical document reflecting how ancient slavery culture informed Christian ethics. The study grows out of the author's doctoral dissertation and is based on close textual analysis informed by slavery studies and social theory.

The book is organized into five main chapters. The first chapter focuses on "*Usefulness, Loyalty, and Property*." Adherents are portrayed as belonging to God in a way that closely resembles Roman slave ownership. Loyalty and obedience appear here not as optional virtues but as expected conditions of belonging. The author also draws attention to the "tower" image in *the Shepherd of Hermas*, where the Christian community is described as a structure built up stone by stone. This image not only reflects unity but also order and discipline. Each believer finds a place within the structure through obedience and moral reliability. In this way, the tower metaphor reinforces the loyalty-obedience relationship within a collective and visible framework.

The second chapter, "Give Me the Little Book: Enslaved Literate Labor in the Shepherd," presents Hermas as an "enslaved literary worker," underlining the crucial role of enslaved scribes in writing, copying, and spreading divine messages. Here, Bonar exposes the often "invisible labor" that sustained the transmission of sacred texts.

In the third part of the book, Bonar turns to the link between the Holy Spirit, possession, and enslavement. At this point, slavery is no longer treated only as a figure of speech. Instead, it appears as something that shapes the body as much as the soul. Spiritual submission is tied to discipline, control, and the regulation of everyday life.

The fourth chapter, "Enslaved Surveillance and Spirit-Flesh Symbiosis," turns to surveillance. The Holy Spirit is compared to a *vilicus* (a slave overseer), and divine observation is shown to create Christian behavior. In this context, the relationship between spirit and body takes the form of ongoing supervision, control, and submission.

In the final chapter, "Instrumental Agency and Ecclesiastical Unity," believers are instrumental agents who enact God's will in the world, serving as both subjects of discipline and participants in divine purpose.

Taken together, these chapters show that slavery is not confined to metaphor in this study. It becomes part of how ethical formation itself is described. When slavery language is read together

¹ Bonar, Chance E. *God, Slavery, and Early Christianity: Divine Possession and Ethics in the Shepherd of Hermas*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2025.

² Hermas. *The Shepherd of Hermas*. Translated by J. B. Lightfoot. In *The Apostolic Fathers*, Vol. 2. London: Macmillan, 1891.

with divine possession, early Christian moral thought appears in a different light. Additionally, *the Shepherd of Hermas* is read with close attention and clearly situated within the social world of Roman slavery.

Key concepts such as loyalty-obedience, the tower as a metaphor for the Christian assembly, repentance, and virtue form the conceptual backbone of Bonar's analysis. Loyalty and obedience are presented as obligatory conditions of belonging to God rather than voluntary moral attitudes (pp. 48-75). The tower metaphor, introduced as the central image of the community, visualizes how unity, discipline, and moral reliability determine one's place within the assembly (pp. 48-59). Repentance functions as a structured process of ethical transformation and reintegration (pp. 20-23), while virtue is articulated through the allegorical female figures that signify the qualities required for entry into the tower (pp. 16-18). Bonar also situates the Holy Spirit within this framework as a disciplinary and enslaving force shaping bodily conduct and emotional self-regulation (pp. 135-156). These concepts collectively clarify the moral logic that undergirds Bonar's reading of divine enslavement.

At the same time, the study also has clear limits. Because much of the wider argument depends on a single non-canonical text, it remains difficult to decide how far the conclusions can be extended to early Christianity as a whole. The conceptual framework is strong, yet it occasionally feels too tightly bound to discipline, obedience, and control. For this reason, other parts of early Christian moral life—especially grace, mercy, and inner moral struggle remain less visible. These elements are not absent from early Christianity, yet in Bonar's reading, they stay in the background, while patterns of discipline and supervision remain more prominent in the analysis.

Chance E. Bonar's *God, Slavery, and Early Christianity* offers a careful, thought-challenging contribution to the ethical thought of early Christianity. By showing how deeply the God-human relationship is intertwined with the ancient slave system, the author presents a reconsideration of early Christian moral language. Bonar's study demonstrates that slavery was not merely a historical phenomenon, but a mode of thought internalized in the fundamental structure of belief systems. The book helps clarify the Christian understanding of positioning oneself as "property" belonging to God, and the resulting ethic of active service and internalized surveillance that this acceptance involves.

For this reason, the book is likely to be useful for students and researchers who work on early Christianity, slavery, and ethics. This work is essential reading not only for the fields of theology and history of religion but also for anyone reflecting on the foundations of ethical theory. Bonar's approach offers a new perspective for understanding the relationship between faith, power, and the body, deepening discussions on early Christian ethics.

Bibliography

- Bonar, Chance E. *God, Slavery, and Early Christianity: Divine Possession and Ethics in the Shepherd of Hermas*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2025.
- Hermas. "The Shepherd of Hermas". Trans. J. B. Lightfoot, *The Apostolic Fathers*, ed. J. R. Harmer, London: Macmillan, 1891, 2: 291-483.