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# God as Father and Master

*Sons and Slaves in Sifre Numbers 115 and in the New Testament*

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## Summary

Every year during Passover Jews commemorate the liberation of their ancestors from Egypt. It was God who 'broke the bars of their yoke' and who 'made them walk erect' (Lev 26:13). Elsewhere, however, the Torah seems to suggest that the redemption from Egypt's service was not so much a release from slavery, as it was a change of master (cf. Ex 4:23 and Lev 25:42). This paradoxical way of thinking about slavery is perpetuated by the early rabbis in the *midrashic* and *halakhic* literature of the first centuries C.E. By means of a close reading of a parable from Sifre Numbers (chapter 115) I will clarify the early rabbinic perspective on slavery: becoming a slave of God was the ultimate purpose of the people of Israel, while being a slave of Egypt's ruler formed its ultimate degradation. We will also see that in Sifre Numbers, as in other early rabbinic and early Christian writings, the metaphor of slavery competes with the metaphor of sonship. In Sifre Numbers the metaphor of slavery is preferred over that of sonship, due to the absolute obedience that God expects from his people, an aspect that cannot be sufficiently expressed by the relation between a father and his son. Finally, this paper will also contribute to the way we understand slavery metaphors in the New Testament, especially in Romans 6.

## Introduction<sup>1</sup>

During the Passover Seder it is customary that one of the children asks the question: 'Why is this night different from all other nights?'<sup>2</sup> In the Passover Haggadah this question is answered by the following words:

We were slaves to Pharaoh in Egypt, and God brought us out with a strong hand and an outstretched arm. And if God had not brought our ancestors out of Egypt, we and our children and our children's children would still be subjugated to Pharaoh in Egypt. (...)<sup>3</sup>

These words highlight God as redeemer and liberator of the people of Israel – an idea that finds support in many Bible verses, e.g. Leviticus 26:13: 'I am the Lord your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt, to be their slaves no more; I have broken the bars of your yoke and made you walk erect.'<sup>4</sup> While God might be the liberator of the people of Israel from Egypt, the post-Exodus status of Israel *vis-à-vis* God (is Israel like a son or a slave?) is not always clear – not in biblical traditions, nor in postbiblical theology.<sup>5</sup>

In this paper I discuss Israel's post-Exodus status in early rabbinic literature, by close-reading a parable from the *midrash* Sifre Numbers. By using

1 The research presented in this paper is part of my PhD project on slavery in Jewish and Christian parables, which is financed by NWO (project 'Parables and the Partings of the Ways', nr. 360-25-140). Previous versions of this paper have been presented at the 17<sup>th</sup> World Congress of Jewish Studies (August 6-10, 2017), at the PThU Summer Conference (see the introduction of this special issue), at a meeting of the Biblical Studies Seminar of NOSTER, and at a meeting of the research group Mystagogy and Initiation of the Tilburg School of Catholic Theology. I owe gratitude to the participants of all these meetings for their valuable suggestions and comments. I also would like to express my gratitude to the editors (especially Peter Tomson) and the anonymous reviewer of *NTT Journal for Theology and the Study of Religion*, whose comments have been of great help to me.

2 b Pesah 116a.

3 Jewish Federations of North America, *The Passover Haggadah: A Guide to the Seder*, 6 (accessible online: [http://jewishfederation.org/images/uploads/holiday\\_images/39497.pdf](http://jewishfederation.org/images/uploads/holiday_images/39497.pdf), latest visit 10-11-2017).

4 Unless otherwise indicated all biblical quotations are from the NRSV. Other examples of bible verses that emphasize God's role in bringing Israel out of Egypt are, e.g. Ex 6:7, 20:2, 29:46, 32:11, Lev 11:45, 19:36, 22:33, 25:38, 25:55, 26:45; Num 15:41; Deut 5:6, 8:14, 13:5, 13:10, 10:1; Josh 24:17; Judg 2:12, 6:8; 1 Kings 9:9; 2 Kgs 17:7; 2 Chr 7:22; Ps 81:10; Dan 9:15.

5 J.D. Levenson calls this 'the temptation of selective attention' (in 'Exodus and Liberation', in idem, *The Hebrew Bible, the Old Testament, and Historical Criticism: Jews and Christians in Biblical Studies*, Louisville 1993, 127-159, 146).

data from ancient social-historical reality I explore the metaphorical language of master and slave on the one hand, and father and son on the other. However, due to the limited space of this paper, my discussion of the metaphorical and theological implications of the parable cannot be exhaustive. For the purpose of the paper I treat parables as extended metaphors, playing with and making use of the 'cultural reservoir' or the *Kulturkreis* of the ancient world.<sup>6</sup> On the basis of my analysis of the rabbinic parable, I argue that when the language of slavery is employed to describe the relation between God and his people, it is often not so much freedom from slavery that is intended, but serving a better master – or one could say: the best master – God. That the metaphor of slavery is preferred over that of sonship is due to the absolute obedience God expects of his people, an aspect that cannot be sufficiently expressed by the relation between a father and his son. These insights from rabbinic literature will also turn out to be helpful in understanding the Christian use of the slavery metaphor. At the end of the paper I show how my findings support the reading of the slavery metaphor in Romans 6 by Gerd Theissen and Petra von Gemünden, which suggests that the early rabbinic and the early Christian traditions made use of the same field of metaphors, and that those metaphors expressed the same view: that being enslaved to a good and mighty ruler like God was not a bad condition to be in.

## Sifre Numbers 115

In the Christian world, telling parables is mainly associated with the figure of Jesus, to whom the New Testament attributes approximately 40 parables.<sup>7</sup> However, in writings of the earliest rabbinic period, the Tannaitic period, parables also are a very popular mode of expression; scholars have counted more than a thousand examples.<sup>8</sup> Most of those parables (Hebr. *meshalim*, sg. *mashal*) can be found in *midrash* (rabbinic exegesis of the Hebrew Bible) and serve to clarify problems, 'gaps' in the text.<sup>9</sup> Rabbinic

6 Cf. H. Weinrich, *Sprache in Texten*, Stuttgart 1976, 284.

7 Old Testament parables are rare, cf. 2 Sam 12:1-4; Is 5:1-7; or (more fable-like) Judg 9:8-15.

8 Thoma counts 1300 parables, with the Amoraic period included. See C. Thoma, 'Literary and Theological Aspects of the Rabbinic Parables', in C. Thoma, M. Wyschogrod (eds.), *Parable and Story in Judaism and Christianity*, New York 1989, 27.

9 D. Stern, *Parables in Midrash: Narrative and Exegesis in Rabbinic Literature*, Cambridge 1991; cf. D. Boyarin, *Intertextuality and the Reading of Midrash*, Bloomington 1990. For a good

parables are more uniform in their use of formulas and characters than their counterparts in the New Testament. What is particularly striking is the recurrent role of the king, or a 'king of flesh and blood' in the rabbinic parables. In most cases the king personifies God.<sup>10</sup>

The parable that is the focus of attention in this paper is situated in Sifre Numbers, chapter 115. Sifre Numbers is a *halakhic midrash* that is ascribed to the school of Rabbi Ishmael.<sup>11</sup> Our parable is part of a unit called Parasha Shelach (chapters 107-115) which discusses chapter 15 of the biblical book of Numbers. Sifre Numbers 115 deals with Numbers 15:37-41:

The Lord said to Moses: Speak to the Israelites, and tell them to make fringes on the corners of their garments throughout their generations and to put a blue cord on the fringe at each corner. You have the fringe so that, when you see it, you will remember all the commandments of the Lord and do them, and not follow the lust of your own heart and your own eyes. So you shall remember and do all my commandments, and you shall be holy to your God. I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, to be your God: I am the Lord your God.

In Sifre Numbers 115 this biblical passage is completely dissected.<sup>12</sup> The length of the fringes is discussed, as is the question which color exactly is meant by 'blue'. In section five of the chapter, the biblical passage is quoted again. Immediately after the biblical quote, the *midrash* asks the following question: 'Another matter. Why remember the Exodus from Egypt at each and every commandment?'<sup>13</sup> The rabbis answer this question by telling a parable. Since the parable immediately follows after the question, and a new issue is raised immediately afterwards, the parable with its application is the only answer the *midrash* gives to its question.

overview of publications on the *maschal* in rabbinic literature see L.M. Teugels, *The Parables in Mekhilta de Rabbi Ishmael and Mekhilta de Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai: A Critical Edition with Translation and Commentary*, Tübingen 2018 (forthcoming), chapter 2.

10 For more explanation and examples I would like to refer to our project's Dutch website: [www.parabelproject.nl](http://www.parabelproject.nl) and to the special issue on parables of *NTT Journal of Theology and the Study of Religion* (71/2, 2017).

11 See G. Stemberger, *Einleitung in Talmud und Midrasch*, Munich 2011<sup>9</sup>, 295-296 and M. Kahana, 'The Halakhic Midrashim', in Sh. Safrai e.a., *The Literature of the Sages. Second Part* (Compendia Rerum Iudaicarum ad Novum Testamentum 3b), Assen 2006, 3-105.

12 Jacob Neusner is right in calling this chapter a 'systematic exposition' (J. Neusner, *Sifre to Numbers. An American Translation and Explanation*, Volume 2, Atlanta 1986, 177).

13 ד"א למה מזכירים יציאת מצרים על כל מצוה ומצוה

<p>A parable. To what can it be compared? To a king whose friend's son was taken captive.<sup>14</sup>  When he (the king) redeemed him, he did not redeem him as a free man, but as a slave, so that if he decreed something and he did not listen, he could say to him: 'you are my slave'  When he entered a city, he said to him: 'Put me my sandals on and carry [my] garments in front of me and bring [them] to the bathhouse.'  When the son began to protest, he presented him with a document<sup>16</sup> and he said to him: 'You are my slave.'  So, when the Holy One Blessed be He redeemed the offspring of his friend Abraham, he did not redeem them as sons, but as slaves, so that if he issues decrees and they do not accept them, he can say to them: 'you are my slaves.'  When they entered the wilderness, he started to decree some light commandments and some heavier commandments, for example the Sabbath and forbidden sexual relations, fringes and phylacteries.  When Israel began to protest, He said to them: 'You are my slaves.'  On this condition I redeemed you, on the condition that I would decree and you would carry out.'</p>	<p>משל למה הדבר דומה למלך שנשבה בן אוהבו<sup>14</sup>  וכשפדאו לא פדאו לשום בן חורין אלא לשום עבד  שאם יגזור ולא יהיה מקבל עליו יאמר לו עבדי אתה  כיון שנכנס למדינה אמר לו נעול לי סנדליי וטול לפני כלים להוליך לבית המרחץ  התחיל הבן ההוא מנתק הוציא עליו שטר ואמר לו עבדי אתה  כך כשפדה הקב"ה את זרע אברהם אוהבו לא פדאם לשום בנים אלא לשום עבדים  כשיגזור ולא יהיו מקבלים עליהם יאמר להם עבדיי אתם  כיון שיצאו למדבר התחיל לגזור עליהם מקצת מצוות קלות ומקצת מצוות חמורות כגון שבת ועריות ציצית ותפילין  התחילו ישראל להיות מנתקים אמר להם עבדיי אתם  על מנת כן פדיתי אתכם על מנת שאהיה גזור ואתם מקיימים</p>
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As I will explain below, the theme of this parable is the reluctance of the friend's son to accept his role as a slave, and the master's insistence on his new slave's obedience. This becomes clear in obvious elements, such as the king saying to the son that he is his slave, but also in more subtle points. I want to focus first on one of those subtle elements. That is the formulation of the king's command: 'Put me my sandals on and carry [my] garments in front of me and bring [them] to the bathhouse.' We find the same wording of a slave's duties in a Talmudic discussion on the rabbinic institution of *chazakah* (חזקה). Within the framework of *chazakah* the possibility was

14 Translation by the author.

15 Text: *Sifre 'al sefer Ba-midbar ve-sifre zuṭa*, edited by S. Horovitz, Jerusalem 1966<sup>2</sup>, 127-128.

16 See for this translation M.A. Friedman, 'Contracts: Rabbinic Literature and Ancient Jewish Documents', in Sh. Safrai e.a., *The Literature of the Sages. Second Part* (Compendia Rerum Judaicarum ad Novum Testamentum 3b), Assen 2006, 423-460, 425, 428.

acknowledged to acquire a slave by usucaption (in Roman law: *usucapio*), i.e. to gain ownership by making use of something or someone (often for a prescribed period of time; compare the Dutch ‘Recht van overpad’ [‘right of way’] and the phenomenon of ‘adverse possession’).<sup>17</sup> In the Palestinian Talmud, tractate Qiddushin, we read how *chazakah* is performed:

What is possession [*chazakah*] of a slave? He tied his shoe for him, or untied his shoe, carried his things to the bath (בעל לו מנעלו, והתיר לו מנעלו, ונטל לפניו למרחוק). Rabbi Simeon says, if he lifted him, that is possession. If he lifted his master, there is no stronger possession than this. (y Qidd 1:3, 59d)<sup>18</sup>

Without claiming that the parable is an example of *chazakah*, I do like to notice the similarities on a lexical level between the words of the king in Sifre and the first half of the Talmudic saying.<sup>19</sup> Apparently, the authors/editors of Sifre Numbers made use here of a well-known, formulaic enumeration of slave duties. Elsewhere in the Talmud it becomes clear that the care for shoes and feet is the pivotal task of a slave.<sup>20</sup> Traces of the importance of the care for shoes and feet can be found in the New Testament too. We may recall how John the Baptist says about Jesus in Mark 1:7 that ‘I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the thong of his sandals.’<sup>21</sup> Moreover,

17 See e.g. P. du Plessis, *Borkowski's Textbook on Roman Law*, Oxford 2015<sup>5</sup>, 192 (with reference to *Dig* 41.10.3); cf. C. Hezser, ‘Slavery and the Jews’, in K. Bradley, P. Cartledge (eds.), *The Cambridge World History of Slavery*, vol. 1, *The Ancient Mediterranean World*, Cambridge 2011, 438-455, 443. See for modern laws on usucaption for example the 2006 *Report by the British Institute of International and Comparative Law for Her Majesty's Court Service on Adverse Possession*, online accessible via [https://www.biicl.org/files/2350\\_advposs\\_sep\\_ftnsv3.pdf](https://www.biicl.org/files/2350_advposs_sep_ftnsv3.pdf) (latest visit 2-1-2018).

18 Text and translation: H.W. Guggenheimer, *The Jerusalem Talmud. Third Order: Našim Tractates Qiddušin* (Studia Judaica 43), Berlin 2008, 94.

19 The similarities are even clearer in the text of the Babylonian Talmud (b Qidd 22b).

20 See for example C. Hezser, ‘The Social Status of Slaves in the Talmud Yerushalmi and in Graeco-Roman Society’, in P. Schäfer (ed.), *The Talmud Yerushalmi and Graeco Roman Culture III* (Texts and Studies in Ancient Judaism 93), Tübingen 2002, 91-137, 134 (esp. note 213). Hezser quotes from y Yebam 13:2, 13c: ‘R. Abbahu said: A story concerning the mother of R. Eleazar who was nagging him to marry the daughter of his sister. And he would say to her [the girl]: “My daughter, go get married, my daughter, go get married,” until she said to him: “Behold I am your maidservant to wash the feet of the slaves of my master” [cf. 1 Sam. 25:41] (...).’ Cf. b Ketub 96a; b Qidd 22b; Mek Nez 1:56-63 (with a difference between Hebrew and non-Hebrew slaves).

21 Cf. Luke 15:22 (the Parable of the Lost Son): ‘But the father said to his slaves, “Quickly, bring out a robe – the best one – and put it on him; put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet.”’

both in the New Testament and in other ancient sources, the ultimate slave duty was the washing of feet. The resistance of Peter against Jesus' washing his feet in John 13 should be explained by the overtly servile character of the deed.<sup>22</sup> Jesus was aware of this, when he says after the feet-washing: 'Very truly, I tell you, slaves are not greater than their master' (13:16). That taking care of the feet belonged to the traditional tasks of slaves in the ancient Mediterranean world is also shown by Greek and Roman texts,<sup>23</sup> and when the washing of the feet was not performed by slaves, that was worthwhile mentioning for the Romans.<sup>24</sup>

What might be puzzling, however, is why the king from the parable in Sifre orders his slave to do so. Is he trying to convince the son of his new status as a slave? Why is that necessary? Apparently, the status of the son of the king's friend was open for debate. That is why it is worthwhile to discuss his status somewhat more elaborately here.

The son of the king's friend probably did not originate from a family of slaves, for a king would normally not have friends amongst slaves. Moreover, the son was not enslaved (העביד), but captured (נשבה). What kind of situation did the parable teller envision here? The *crux interpretum* is formed by the remark that the king did not redeem him (פדאו) *as a free man*, but *as a slave* (אלא לשום עבד). To understand the parable we should consult the Mishnah, tractate Gittin 4:4:

If a slave was taken captive and others ransomed him, if he was ransomed as a slave he must remain a slave, but if he was ransomed as a free man he may not remain a slave. Rabban Simeon b. Gamaliel says: In either case he must remain a slave.<sup>25</sup>

עבד שנשבה ופדאוהו אם לשום עבד ישתעבד אם לשום בן חורין לא ישתעבד רשב"ג אומר  
בין כך ובין כך ישתעבד

22 Compare the washing of the feet of Jesus in Luke 7:36-38 and John 12:3. Cf. *Joseph and Aseneth* 20.

23 In the Roman world this is, for example, attested in writings on the walls of Pompeii (CIL IV 7698a-c: 'Let water wash your feet clean and a slave wipe them dry'; transl. A.E. Cooley and M.G.L. Cooley, *Pompeii: A Sourcebook*, London 2004, D80), cf. Martial, *Epigrams* 14.65. See for some Greek examples Herodotus, *The Histories* 6.19, *Odyssey* 19.386 and *Life of Aesop* 61. As Thomas puts it 'Footwashing could be used as a synonym for slavery' (J.C. Thomas, *Footwashing in John 13 and the Johannine Community*, Sheffield 1991, 46).

24 Plutarch, *Parallel Lives, The Life of Pompey* 73.7.

25 Translation: H. Danby, *The Mishnah. Translated from the Hebrew with Introduction and Brief Explanatory Notes*, Oxford 1933, 311 (with adjustments by MS).



The situation described here is that of the kidnapping of a slave by bandits. The slave is redeemed by someone who is not his owner. The Mishnah lays down as a rule that when that third party redeems him as a slave, he should go back to slavery, and when he is redeemed as a freeman, he should go free (לשום עבד, ישתעבד; לשם בן חורין, לא ישתעבד). Rabban Simeon ben Gamliel disagrees with the majority opinion presented in the Mishnah; he states that in both cases the captured person should go back to slavery. In the Babylonian Talmud the following rationale for this opinion is ascribed to him: 'So that slaves should not go and throw themselves into the hands of robber bands and so liberate themselves from their masters' (b Git 37b). If we follow this explanation, Rabban Simeon ben Gamliel apparently anticipated the possibility that slaves would speculate on a redemption as freeman, and therefore would want to be kidnapped. However, in our parable the situation is the opposite of the one described in the Mishnah – that of an original freeman who is redeemed as a slave. Was that even possible?

To answer that question we turn to other ancient sources, since the rabbinic discussion ties in to a broader discussion in the Mediterranean world about the status of liberated captives. According to Roman law, the liberated captive regained the status he had before his imprisonment – whether he was a slave or a freeman.<sup>26</sup> However, when he is freed by a third party, problems arise.<sup>27</sup> According to Catherine Hezser, the Roman and Byzantine legal systems were complex and uncertain on this point.<sup>28</sup> Some Roman laws indicate that redemption of a captivated freeman by a third party led to a continuation of the captivated freeman's state of slavery, but now because the ransomer had a lien on him. In that case he became (at least *de facto*) the slave of the one who had ransomed him.<sup>29</sup> It is exactly this situation that we find in Sifre Numbers 115: a person – the son – who was free before his kidnapping, but was ransomed as a slave by the king.

26 W.W. Buckland, *The Roman Law of Slavery. The Condition of the Slave in Private Law From Augustus to Justinian*, Cambridge 1908, 292 (with reference to the, admittedly late, Codex Theodosianus 5.7.1)

27 'It remains to consider how far these rights [of a formerly free man] are suspended in the case of redemption for a price, by a third party' (Buckland, *The Roman Law of Slavery*, 311). Cf. C. Hezser, 'Der Loskauf von Sklaven und Kriegsgefangenen im antiken Judentum', H. Grieser, N. Priesching (eds.), *Gefangenenloskauf im Mittelmeerraum: Ein interreligiöser Vergleich* (Sklaverei – Knechtschaft – Zwangsarbeit vol. 13), Hildesheim 2015, 3-23, 13; Y. Rotman, *Byzantine Slavery and the Mediterranean World*, transl. by Jane Marie Todd, Cambridge 2009, 29ff.

28 Hezser, 'Der Loskauf von Sklaven und Kriegsgefangenen im antiken Judentum', 13.

29 Buckland, *The Roman Law of Slavery*, 311-317.

If this is the situation imagined here, it is not surprising that the friend's son has to get used to his new status and even dares to protest explicitly against the king. Also, this might have had its impact on the way his (justified?) protest would have been perceived in antiquity. The worst thing a free Roman would dread was getting enslaved. In Roman literature this anxiety was, as Fitzgerald states, 'among the most maligned of literary plot devices'.<sup>30</sup> From the perspective of the 'fear of enslavement'<sup>31</sup> the response of the son in our parable might have been benignly received by an ancient audience, while it normally would have been inclined to oppress such behavior with brutal force.<sup>32</sup> Notice how the king responds to the impertinence of his new slave. Not by threats, but by showing him a document that probably served as proof of the sale.<sup>33</sup> The king goes all the way to convince the slave of his status.

This brings us logically to the application of the parable: 'So, when the Holy One Blessed be He redeemed the offspring of his friend Abraham, he did not redeem them as sons, but as slaves.' What is interesting here is the way sonship and slavery are connected.<sup>34</sup> Slaves and sons are often mentioned together in parables,<sup>35</sup> and there are parables that have two variants, one with sons and one with slaves.<sup>36</sup> As Catherine Hezser has put it: 'These parables show that the father-son and master-slave relationships provided forceful images which could be used to illustrate the various facets of God's relationship with Israel.'<sup>37</sup>

30 W. Fitzgerald, *Slavery and the Roman Literary Imagination*, Cambridge 2000, 93; see also J.A. Harrill, 'The Vice of Slave Dealers in Greco-Roman Society: The Use of a Topos in 1 Timothy 1:10', *Journal of Biblical Literature* 118:1 (1999), 97-122. That this 'plot device' has not lost its power in modern times is shown by the 2013 movie *12 Years a Slave*, which tells the true story of the free African-American man Solomon Northup who was kidnapped and sold as a slave in 1841.

31 Cf. A. Serghidou (ed.), *Fear of Slaves: Fear of Enslavement in the Ancient Mediterranean*, Besançon 2007.

32 In Plautus' comedies we find many examples of slaves who are (threatened to be) beaten, because they talk back to their master. Cf. *Rudens* 1401-1402, *Amphitryo* 1030.

33 See for another parable in which the receipt of the sale of slaves plays a role Gen Rab 2:1.

34 Also take notice of the fact that both parable and application use the same words: the offspring of Abraham are not *like* slaves of God, they *are* slaves of God, just like the friend's son *is* a slave of the king.

35 A few examples of slaves and sons mentioned together: Sifre Num 94, Sifre Deut 38 and 40 (//Midr Tan 11:12). An example of a New Testament parable in which the difference between sons and slaves is thematized: Mark 12:1-12//Matt 21:33-44//Luke 20:9-18//Thomas 65.

36 E.g. Sifre Zuta 10:35 (slave) and Sifre Num 84 (friend).

37 C. Hezser, *Jewish Slavery in Antiquity*, Oxford 2005, 351. Elsewhere Hezser writes that 'in both rabbinic Judaism and early Christianity both images, that of the merciful father and that of the authoritative master were two sides of the same coin' (ibidem, 352).

The positions of slave and son share a number of features, since they are both under the *potestas* of the head of the household in Roman law (*patria potestas* in case of children, *dominica potestas* in case of slaves).<sup>38</sup> They are dependent on the leader of the household and cannot manage their own finances, nor decide for their own future. However, sons probably had more room to disobey or disagree with their fathers than slaves would have had.<sup>39</sup> Moreover, things will change over time for the sons: the son will build his own family, will inherit his father's belongings and will, eventually, succeed his father as the master of the family.<sup>40</sup> The only way for the slave to escape his owner's power, is to buy himself free – which was in many cases not possible, or not allowed.

Expositions playing on the difference between sons and slaves can be found in rabbinic literature as well as in the New Testament.<sup>41</sup> A very relevant passage in this regard is the way Paul discusses the change over time in the status of slave and son in Galatians 4:1-7.<sup>42</sup> Paul states that we are originally not different from slaves (4:1), because we were enslaved to the elemental spirits of the world (4:3: τα στοιχειά του κόσμου). But the arrival of God's Son redeemed (ἐξαγοράσθη) us from our slavery of the law and turned us – by means of adoption – into sons (4:5), and as sons we are heirs of God's kingdom (4:7).<sup>43</sup>

38 E.g. *Dig* 50.16.215.

39 Compare Matt 21:28-32 (Parable of the Two Sons) to Luke 17:7-10, esp. 9 (Parable of the Master and the Slave).

40 P. Garnsey, 'Sons, Slaves – and Christians', in B. Rawson, P. Weaver (eds.), *The Roman Family in Italy. Status, Sentiment, Space*, Oxford 1999, 101-122.

41 Cf. Hezser, *Jewish Slavery in Antiquity*, 350-356; S. Tsang, *From Slaves to Sons: A New Rhetoric Analysis on Paul's Slave Metaphors in His Letter to the Galatians* (Studies in Biblical Literature 81), New York 2005; Garnsey, 'Sons, Slaves – and Christians'. Also notice that that the Greek *παις* (and its Roman counterpart *puer*) could be used both for sons and slaves (compare the use of the word 'boy' for slaves in the American context). Cf. J. Edmonson, 'Slavery and the Roman Family', in K. Bradley, P. Cartledge (eds.), *The Cambridge World History of Slavery. Volume 1: The Ancient Mediterranean World*, Cambridge 2011, 337-361, 357.

42 'My point is this: heirs, as long as they are minors, are no better than slaves, though they are the owners of all the property; but they remain under guardians and trustees until the date set by the father. So with us; while we were minors, we were enslaved (δεδουλωμένοι) to the elemental spirits of the world. But when the fullness of time had come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the law, in order to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as children. And because you are children, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, "Abba! Father!" So you are no longer a slave but a son, and if a son then also an heir, through God (ὥστε οὐκέτι εἰδούλος ἀλλ' υἱός· εἰ δὲ υἱός, καὶ κληρονόμος διὰ θεοῦ.).' (NRSV with adaptations; italics MS)

43 Garnsey correctly notices that Paul elsewhere does imply that slaves and sons are comparable (Garnsey, 'Sons, Slaves – and Christians', 106-107).

It is very clear that our parable from Sifre Numbers does not take the route of Galatians.<sup>44</sup> Precisely because a son has, in the end, more autonomy than a slave, did God not liberate the Israelites as sons, but as slaves; as Hezser puts it: ‘The assumption [of the parable] is that the master has more power over the slave than the father over the son.’<sup>45</sup> God wants the Israelites to listen and to obey his commands. The application of the parable even states that the obedience of Israel was the ‘only condition’ on which God redeemed them from Egypt. The motivation for this condition is that when Israel starts to protest, God can say: ‘You are my slaves.’

The idea that Israel is liberated from Egypt as slaves is firmly rooted in the Torah. The best scriptural proof for this might be Exodus 4:23, in which God says: ‘Let my son [i.e. Israel] go so he may serve (וַיְעַבְדֵנִי) me.’<sup>46</sup> The redemption from Egypt’s service also serves as a legitimation for God’s disapproval of ‘worldly’ slavery: ‘For they are *my* slaves, whom I brought out of the land of Egypt; they shall not be sold as slaves are sold’ (Lev 25:42, italics MS). John Byron speaks in this context of the ‘paradox of the Exodus imagery’ – that the Israelites were freed to serve God.<sup>47</sup> As he analyzes in his book *Slavery Metaphors in Early Judaism and Pauline Christianity*: ‘The image of enslavement in Egypt is sometimes contrived of as a cruel domestic slavery that ends with manumission at the hand of Israel’s victorious God. This is not the case, however. Rather it is the image of a people oppressed by a king who refuses to release those he has enslaved to the state so that they might serve another king. The episode in Egypt is not about the manumission of Israel *but a change of master*.’<sup>48</sup> This also forms the answer to the question that evoked the parable: ‘Why remembering the Exodus from

44 This exact same tension – between the designation of the people of Israel as slaves and as sons – is addressed in the Babylonian Talmud too, by the use of two parables. The conclusion of both parables is ‘When you carry out the desires of the Omnipresent you are called “sons”, and when you do not carry out the desires of the Omnipresent, you are called “slaves”’ (b B Bat 10a; translation from *The Babylonian Talmud. Translated into English with notes, glossary and indices under the editorship of I. Epstein*, 35 vols., London 1935-1952, with adjustments by MS). See also Pes R 27 (28):3.

45 Cf. Hezser, *Jewish Slavery in Antiquity*, 352.

46 Translation MS. Cf. Lev 25:55.

47 J. Byron, *Slavery Metaphors in Early Judaism and Pauline Christianity. A Traditio-Historical and Exegetical Examination* (Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen Zum Neuen Testament 2. Reihe, 162), Tübingen 2003, 197. Compare 1 Corinthians 6:20: ‘For you were bought with a price [ἡγοράσθητε γὰρ τιμῆς]; therefore glorify God in your body’ and 7:23 ‘You were bought with a price; do not become slaves of human masters’. See also J.D. Levenson, ‘Exodus and Liberation’, 158, who speaks about ‘a movement from one form of slavery to another’.

48 J. Byron, *Slavery Metaphors in Early Judaism and Pauline Christianity*, 48.

Egypt at each and every commandment?' The answer to that question is: 'Because obedience to the commandments is a direct consequence of the Exodus'.

## New Testament

As I have indicated earlier I think that the parable from Sifre can be very helpful in understanding slavery metaphors and language in the New Testament writings.<sup>49</sup> In the previous section we have briefly discussed a passage from Galatians 4 in which Paul explained that because of the redemption by Christ we are no longer slaves, but sons and heirs. Paul's creative use of the slavery metaphor becomes visible in a passage from the Letter to the Romans that has a rather different message. In Romans 6:20-22 we read:

When you were slaves of sin, you were free in regard to righteousness.  
(ὅτε γὰρ δούλοι ἦτε τῆς ἁμαρτίας, ἐλεύθεροι ἦτε τῇ δικαιοσύνῃ) So what advantage did you then get from the things of which you now are ashamed? The end of those things is death. But now that you have been freed from sin and enslaved to God (νυνὶ δὲ ἐλευθερωθέντες ἀπὸ τῆς ἁμαρτίας δουλωθέντες δὲ τῷ θεῷ), the advantage you get is sanctification.

I would like to argue that this passage from Romans 6 closely resembles the situation we have found in the parable from Sifre Numbers 115. At first the Roman Christians were already slaves (v. 20), namely slaves of sin. They were captured, so to say, by evil forces. This we may compare to the friend's son in Sifre Numbers 115 who was enslaved by his kidnappers. Now, however – after the ransoming by Jesus – 'they' (the Romans) have been freed from sins *and enslaved again* (v. 22), but now by God, just like the son in

49 As Francis Lyall already noticed in 1984 many commentators do not see the difference between metaphors of purchasing a slave and redeeming a slave: 'Of course, most of the references in the Epistles to purchase definitely include the concept of redemption, but this is quite a different legal notion from the idea of the purchase of a slave. Unfortunately, many modern commentators fail to distinguish between the two metaphors. The redemption of an individual who was up for sale in a slave market was quite possible, but that does not mean that the person involved was a slave. [...] we ought to keep redemption and the transfer of a slave following a sale quite separate.' (F. Lyall, *Slaves, Citizens, Sons: Legal Metaphors in the Epistles*, Grand Rapids 1984, 39).

Sifre was freed from his kidnappers, but enslaved by his 'liberator'. So, the Roman Christians are not really free, since they still have a master.<sup>50</sup>

One could wonder whether this transfer from one master to another (from sins to God, or from Egypt to God) is an improvement. To answer this question I would like to circle back to the rabbinic discussion about the liberation of slaves from robbers. From the Talmud we also learn that Rabban Gamliel was of the opinion that it is a religious duty to ransom both free men and to ransom slaves.<sup>51</sup> The primary rationale for that was that it is only possible to be a devout Jew as freeman in Israel or – for a slave – under a Jewish master, also preferably in Israel.<sup>52</sup> So in this line of thinking a Jewish master is always better than another master, since only in a Jewish context the keeping of commandments can be safeguarded. Similarly, being enslaved to God is not a bad condition according to Paul, since it comes with great advantages, like sanctification, while being enslaved to sin only brings you death.

Finally, it is worthwhile to take a look at social reality again. In a recent book on Romans, Petra von Gemünden and Gerd Theissen observe that manumitted slaves in antiquity were not really free. As former slaves, *liberti*, they still had obligations towards their former masters. Only when slaves were bought by another master, they were completely free from obligations towards their former masters.<sup>53</sup> Paradoxically, for slaves in the ancient world, true freedom from the power of one's master lays only in the power of a new master. Therefore, Theissen and Von Gemünden argue that underlying the concept of slavery we find the ancient view that human

50 J. Byron, *Slavery Metaphors in Early Judaism and Pauline Christianity*, 197. Cf. J.K. Goodrich, 'From Slaves of Sin to Slaves of God: Reconsidering the Origin of Paul's Slavery Metaphor in Romans 6', *Bulletin for Biblical Research* 23:4 (2013), 509-530.

51 y Git 4:4, 45d: "Rabban Simeon ben Gamliel says, in any case he shall serve; just as Israel are obligated to ransom free persons so they are obligated to ransom slaves." [...] Practice follows Rabban Simeon ben Gamliel.' (Translation: H.W. Guggenheimer, *The Jerusalem Talmud. Third Order: Našim Tractates Gittin And Nazir* (Studia Judaica 39), Berlin 2007, 149). Cf. b Git 37b.

52 Compare the opinion of R. Joshua b. Levi in b Bek 3a: 'If one sells a slave to a heathen, we punish him by forcing him [to redeem the slave] even up to a hundred times his value [...] for every day he [his gentile master] prevents him from carrying out religious duties.'

53 'Denn nur wenn ein neuer Herr den Sklaven gekauft hat, ist der Sklave ganz und gar von seinem vormaligen Herrn frei und von da ab ganz und gar seinem neuen Herrn verpflichtet: Als Sklaven der Sünde waren die AdressatInnen frei gegenüber der Gerechtigkeit (6,20), jetzt – befreit von der Sünde – sind sie Sklaven Gottes und nur diesem verpflichtet.' In G. Theissen, P. von Gemünden, *Der Römerbrief. Rechenschaft eines Reformators*, Göttingen 2016, 175.

existence always is determined by all kinds of forces.<sup>54</sup> It is this way of thinking that governs the metaphorical language of both early rabbinic and early Christian thought. Freedom is not so much to be found in autonomy as it is in the protection of a good ruler. Likewise, Dale B. Martin writes with respect to the Letter to the Romans: ‘In Rom. 6:20-23, Paul can speak of slavery to God as the positive counterpart to slavery to sin by contrasting the returns or benefits of slavery to one master, sin, with those of slavery to a better master, God.’<sup>55</sup>

## Conclusion

To sum up, in this paper we have studied the competing metaphors ‘father-son’ and ‘master-slave’ in a parable from Sifre Numbers 115. We have established that the metaphor of slavery is preferred over that of sonship, since the parable underscores the unconditional obedience of the people of Israel towards its God. We also have seen how the parable of Sifre Numbers opens up surprising perspectives on the Exodus from Egypt, in which the interpretation of the Exodus as an a transition from a bad master to a good master trumps the well-known interpretation of the Exodus as liberation. These insights have proven to be useful for the study of New Testament slavery metaphors too, since both the parable in Sifre Numbers and Romans 6:20-22 express the same, ancient view that freedom can only be found in the protection of a good ruler. Such a protection one should not try to escape, or – as Josephus puts it: ‘shall we fly from the best of masters (κάλλιστον δεσπότην), from God Himself, and not be deemed impious?’<sup>56</sup>

54 Theißen, Von Gemünden, *Der Römerbrief*, 164.

55 D.B. Martin, *Slavery as Salvation. The Metaphor of Slavery in Pauline Christianity*, New Haven/London 1990, 62.

56 Josephus, *Bellum Judaicum* 3:373 (text and translation: *Josephus. The Jewish War, Books 304* [Loeb Classical Library 487], translated by H.St.J. Thackeray, Cambridge 1927, 109). I would like to thank Peter Tomson for this reference.

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