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NATHAN LEIDHOLM, Slavery and Unfreedom in Byzantine Thought on the Household. Leeds: Arc Humanities Press 2025. 280 pp. – ISBN 978-1-802-70120-3

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NATHAN LEIDHOLM explores in this book specific aspects inherent in the Byzantine concepts of family and household. Rather than providing a history of the family or the household in the Byzantine era, he offers an intellectual examination of the relationships of dependence, obedience, and submission that develop within these two institutions, between the master, head (*despotes* or *kyrios*) of the household and its other members, including wives, concubines, children, and slaves. The central point is that the Byzantines used vocabulary primarily pertaining to slavery in the language describing family relationships, while conversely, they used the language of kinship in the language describing relationships with slaves. This approach owes much to ORLANDO PATTERSON and CHRISTIAAN DE WET. In this context, LEIDHOLM argues that the concept of 'slavery' was firmly established and constituted a fundamental element in Byzantine thought regarding the household, its members, and their roles (p. 21). At the same time, he uses the concept of *unfreedom* 'to designate social realities as opposed to civil or legal status designating enslavement' (p. 6). In other words, *unfreedom* is the intermediate state that imposes obedience and submission within a state of civil freedom, effectively restricting that freedom.

LEIDHOLM's timeframe spans the eighth to fourteenth centuries, though it draws heavily on and includes earlier material and sources, particularly legislation from the sixth century onward. The book is organized into five thematic chapters. The author frequently shifts from the early period to the late Byzantine era and vice versa, to clarify the phenomena and concepts he addresses. His primary sources include the *Life of St. Basil the Younger*, the writings of Theophylact of Ohrid, the *Strategikon* of Kekaumenos, legal sources – which form the core of his research – and texts by the Church Fathers.

The first chapter, '(Un)Natural Partners: Marriage and Slavery', examines the institutions of marriage and slavery, as well as their intersection. Much of the chapter draws on existing scholarship and legal sources regarding both institutions. While marriage was considered a natural phenomenon

under Roman law, the Church deemed that it cured enslavement to sexual desire, and therefore it lay 'outside nature'. LEIDHOLM draws on DE WET's work when claiming (p. 33) that slavery enters into the Church Fathers' discussion of marriage because of original sin. He examines this peculiar intertwining of concepts, including a brief examination of virginity and the consequent exaltation of the Virgin Mary. This section moves from John Chrysostom (late 4th century) to Michael Glykas (12th century) and Gregory Palamas (14th century). A significant portion is devoted to the marriage of slaves and the legal reversals, ambiguities, and inconsistencies in the legislation. Particular focus is given to the relevant Novel of Alexios I Komnenos, its significance, and its consequences up to the 14th century. The final section examines the well-known 'subjugation' of women to their husbands, particularly through vocabulary that applies to both women and slaves. However, it acknowledges without clarifying or analyzing the issue that there is a difference in how female submission and female slavery are presented. Paradoxically, LEIDHOLM argues that 'women, like all slaves, were generally barred from providing official statements in court or acting as witnesses' (p. 76). To my knowledge, this is not true: women could actually file lawsuits and defend themselves and their property in court. The only provision prohibiting women from testifying in court is found in Photios' *Eisagoge*, 12.18 (9th century). In fact, Patriarch Photios is well-known for his conservatism; the obvious contradiction of this stipulation with the rest of the legislation is the reason why it was not enforced. The first chapter of the book concludes with a brief mention of the accommodation of violence in the perception of marriage.

The second chapter, 'Proper Authority: Parents and Masters', examines the relationships between parents and children and between masters and slaves. The chapter aims to demonstrate that the language and terminology used to describe these relationships are similar. The introduction defines the roles of *authentes*, *(oiko)despotes*, and *kyrios* in relation to other household members. The chapter is divided into sections that examine prototypes governing the reflection of these relationships in sources, including parental and slave-master patterns. These patterns are seen in baptism (especially of slaves), education and upbringing, marriage, inheritance, and the use of force. The chapter concludes that the relationships between family members and between masters and slaves are reproduced in the sources using the same vocabulary, which is the vocabulary of kinship.

But it is the start of the chapter that merits further discussion: it begins with an interpretation of the provision in *Hexabiblos*, 17.1 by Harmenopoulos

(14th century), which the author links to the provision in *Prochiron Legum* 22.1, from Calabria (12th century). In the latter, the author provides an explanation of slaves' status under the authority of their 'masters' (the term for the 'master' is not included in any provision). Based on this connection, LEIDHOLM proposes a translation of *Hexabiblos* 17.1, which implies that Byzantine law considered children and slaves to be treated the same by the legislation. Many a reader will find the translation and the connection arbitrary. However, LEIDHOLM knows that this provision by Harmenopoulos copies the *Procheiros Nomos*, 26.1 (early tenth century) and not the Law of Calabria, which adapted the Byzantine model. The correct translation of the phrase in question (from the *Procheiros Nomos* and Harmenopoulos) would be 'We know that we have authority over both our slaves and our children; on the one hand, those [children] who are natural, and on the other, those who are adopted' (Ἴσμεν ὅτι τὴν ἐξουσίαν ἔχομεν κατὰ τῶν ἡμετέρων οἰκετῶν καὶ κατὰ τῶν ἡμετέρων παίδων, τοῦτο μὲν φυσικῶν, τοῦτο δὲ καὶ θετῶν). Τοῦτο μὲν – τοῦτο δὲ in the original text cannot refer to different nouns (τῶν οἰκετῶν / τῶν παίδων); a different expression would be used i.e. τῶν μὲν – τῶν δὲ, for clarifying that children were 'natural' and slaves were 'adopted'. In any case, the translation proposed by LEIDHOLM ('the latter being natural, the former legal') is to be rejected because it reverses the explanation (such a reversion, creating a cross-referential literary device in the text, is extremely rare, even in Byzantine literature). Next, the argument that, since the word παῖς often referred to a slave, then the chapter 'On the termination of hypexousiotes' of the the Law of Calabria 'is suggestive of the master – slave relationship' (p. 84), cannot stand. The author himself acknowledges the fact that the chapter refers primarily to children. Indeed, in this same stipulation of these three collections (17.1, 22.1, 26.1 respectively) it is specifically stated that the chapter on emancipation does not concern slaves (ἀλλὰ περὶ μὲν τῶν δούλων μαθησόμεθα ἐν τῷ τίτλῳ τῷ λέγοντι περὶ ἐλευθερίας). This section, therefore, gives the impression that the author engages in precarious arguments and interpretations.

Chapter three, '(In)gratitude: Children, Slaves, and Freed People', continues the same theme, shifting the perspective to examine issues of dependence and aspects of subordination. It also examines the norms governing the portrayal of children and slaves in the sources, particularly regarding obedience, as well as the attached stereotypes. According to the author, these stereotypes are largely based on the New Testament. LEIDHOLM draws on a rich body of modern literature here, and analyzes the status of children and slaves particularly through the Byzantine legislation,

but also with the aid of other sources. The chapter also examines the position of children of slaves. Notably, marriage to a free individual led to the 'nobility' (εὐγένεια) of the slave. This fact has been highlighted in modern literature, and LEIDHOLM emphasizes it anew, since it determined the status of the children. In the part titled 'Being *Hypexousios*: Shared Experiences Between Slaves and Children', the author begins with the theory that the word παῖς is primarily equivalent to 'slave' (p. 139), a point also made in the previous chapter. A more detailed presentation here would be useful to better support this position, given that it pertains to this chapter specifically. The following section on freedmen is particularly interesting because it examines their dependence on their former masters. This section is followed by others on the beliefs and practices in cases of manumission within and outside the household, given this dependence. The documentation is satisfactory, drawing on well-known testaments (those of Boilas and the Pakourianos family), the *Diataxis* of Attaleiates, the *Strategikon* of Kekaumenos, and other sources including legislation.

The fourth chapter, 'Sexual Availability and the Other: Concubinage (*Pallakeia*)', discusses sexual freedom and access to women under slavery or concubinage regimes, although LEIDHOLM acknowledges that a concubine was not necessarily a slave. The author examines 'the many forms of concubinage' and devotes a separate section to canon law, drawing a brief comparison with Islamic practices. Then, he analyzes stereotypes about the sexual freedom of slaves, related prejudices, and associated practices (e.g., the connection to sorcery) in a series of subsections, followed by a related section based on the decisions of Demetrios Chomatenos. Overall, these sections examine references not necessarily related to slaves or concubines. References to unfree concubines are very rare, raising the question of how beliefs and stereotypes typically attributed to unfree persons can be attributed to third parties (non-slaves and non-concubines).

The final chapter ('Useful Fear: Slavery's Impact on Household Management') summarizes the views on the household with particular reference to the impact of slavery on it. Drawing particularly on the views of Theophylact of Ohrid and Kekaumenos regarding household management, LEIDHOLM highlights the 'centrality of fear' (p. 204) in the way it was perceived. The author identifies in the sources the language that creates 'otherness' and contains the stereotypes regarding slaves, and examines the principles that, in theory, govern the functioning of the household and enforce compliance with the rules: honor, shame, reputation. Two separate sections deal with the families of slaves and 'natal alienation', a topic of great interest,

as there is substantial evidence from Byzantium. Both sections attempt to examine these issues 'from the inside' or from the perspective of the slaves. Another section of the chapter examines, as a parallel to 'natal alienation', the alienation from one's family when one chose the monastic life.

The book is thought-provoking. Its subject is certainly very interesting. The analysis of the data is limited to the intersection of perceptions of slavery and slaves with perceptions of the household and family. This premise serves as a disclaimer. Methodologically, it prevents the research and the author from further analyzing important aspects of Byzantine thought on slaves and the family. It also prevents further criticism by the readers, but simultaneously highlights the work as a circular inquiry where the ultimate goal of proof is the premise posited at the beginning.

The author's research would have benefited from some specialized Greek bibliography that is missing, e.g., from the works of Tonia Kiousopoulou,[1] as well as from the numerous studies by Spyros Troianos on divorce in Roman and Byzantine law.

There are also some editorial issues and oversights. For instance, it is 'Puntoni,' not 'Putoni' (p. 83 nn. 2–3). The repetition of text on p. 115 is clearly an unfortunate cut-and-paste error, just as the placement of the *Procheiros Nomos* before 886 (p. 218) is certainly an oversight, as it is actually dated to 907. Additionally, some contemporary works cited in the text are not included in the bibliography.

This work is not just another study of slavery or family relationships, women, children, and concubines. Rather, it is a book about how certain basic principles that govern the functioning of the household restrict the freedom of individuals both within and outside the family. However, the reader is invited to consider whether the Greek legal term *douleia* translates into English as 'slavery' only. The term encompasses legal and socio-political concepts, denoting relationships of social and political hierarchy and dependence. The author is well aware of this fact, but is only interested in the narrower sense of 'slavery'. This may be a problem for readers. The author's disclaimer may limit the research and analysis to the narrow sense of *douleia*/slavery, but readers may wonder if the broader theme of social hierarchy and dependence, which applies to the household and the family as well, can be causally, implicitly, or inclusively attributed to the concept of slavery only. Sources on the intersection of slavery and the household

1. Χρόνος και ηλικίες. Athens 1997, and especially Ο θεσμός της οικογένειας στην Ήπειρο κατά τον 13ο αι. Athens 1990.

are indeed scarce and originate from politically and ideologically conservative spheres, particularly the church. For this reason, the author included material that does not contain the relevant terminology (meaning that the terms *doulos* or *douleia* are absent), or contains it in a different context (i.e. in cases of political submission to a monarch or an *archon*). This forces him to make inferences, connections, and extrapolations that seem strained. Conversely, he disregards other aspects contained in his sources. For example, he brushes aside the fact that the wife is recognized as an equal to her husband and is clearly distinguished from the slaves, or overlooks that references to sorcery and other aspects that the author categorizes as 'prejudices' against slaves are specifically used to facilitate divorce. In effect, readers are called to ponder on the question whether the concept of slavery was more important in Byzantine thought on the household than patriarchy, which is indeed equally ancient and places adult men – the sole beneficiaries of political, social and other privileges – at the top of the social hierarchy and at the head of the household as 'masters' (*kyrioi*, *despotai*, *authentai*). Was the concept of 'slavery' the reason why 'freedom' was defined in Roman legislation (p. 245), or was the need to restrict access to the ancient polities' privileges (Greek and Roman alike) the reason for the 'construction' of this social hierarchy that included slavery?

The answer to this question may depend on each reader's individual intellectual background. It does not change the fact that the book is an interesting read, especially for its transfer to Byzantine Studies of a methodology derived from contemporary research on slavery and human dependence, which comes from sociological and patristic studies. However, in this reviewer's opinion, the research would be improved by a broader and more inclusive analysis of Byzantine thought on the household and its intersection with slavery. A more complete picture could emerge to clarify the role of perceptions of slavery within the broader framework of perceptions of the household.

Keywords

Byzantine social thought; slavery and freedom in Byzantium; *oikos*; family in Byzantium