Candida Moss: God's Ghostwriters. Enslaved Christians and the Making of the Bible. New York: Little, Brown and Company 2024. XI, 317 p., 1 map. $ 30.00. ISBN: 978-0-316-56467-0.

In this book, Candida Moss shoulders a difficult set of questions about the authorship of New Testament texts by arguing that enslaved people played a much greater role in their production and dissemination than historians have previously recognized. The paucity of sources related to the role of unfree secretaries and scribes in the creation of early Christian writings makes this an especially challenging task. As a methodological approach to this problem, Moss adopts Saidiya Hartman's notion of "critical fabulation," which she defines as "a form of history-telling that is imaginative, and not untrue" (p. 3).[1] This primarily entails reconstructing the role of enslaved peoples in the making of written culture in the ancient world more broadly and applying those insights to the Christian contexts in which the texts of the New Testament were made and distributed. As presented in the short introduction (pp. 9–16), Moss envisions this as a work of recovery inflected with a moral imperative. By recognizing the enslaved workers who helped to transcribe and transmit the earliest Christian texts, she hopes to elevate them out of obscurity and restore their agency as "coauthors, meaning-makers, missionaries, and apostles in their own right" (p. 13) alongside the dozen free men typically associated with accounts of Christ's earthly ministry. Moreover, in addition to recognizing the role of unfree workers as text-creators, she also wants her readers to confront "the horrors that shaped the lives of enslaved people [...] [and] the violence, pain and oppression they experienced" (p. 16). Without recognition of their role, Moss argues, "the New Testament is unreadable, unknowable, unwritten, and unshared" (p. 16).[2]

"God's Ghostwriters" comprises eight chapters divided into three sections. Part 1 ("Invisible Hands", pp. 17–112) introduces readers to ancient slave culture and argues that unfree people played an important part in the creation of New Testament texts. Chapter 1 ("Essential Workers", pp. 19–49) discusses the origins, experiences, and roles of enslaved peoples in the an-

1 S. Hartman: Venus in Two Acts. In: Small Axe 26, 2008, pp. 1–14.

2 Readers can judge for themselves the value and contribution of "God's Ghostwriters" as a work of reparation. This review will focus on the book's historical arguments, in particular, their plausibility about the role of enslaved peoples in the creation and dissemination of early Christian writings.

cient world. Slaves were a commonplace of Roman society. The merchants who sold them were not discriminating about the source of their merchandise. War captives flowed into the city following successful conflicts, from the Celtic tribes conquered by Julius Caesar to the rebel Judeans defeated by Titus and Hadrian. Home-born slaves (the children of enslaved parents) augmented these numbers as did the steady supply of infants abandoned on the streets of Rome. Children were especially prized as slaves because they could be trained to read, write, and count. Some were sent to apprentice under masters to learn specialized skills, like the complex system of shorthand notation that allowed them to record oral recitations at the speed of spoken words. In addition to notetakers (*notarii*), skilled slaves included readers well versed in the content of ancient literature (*librarii*) and speakers with proficiency in reading aloud from scrolls (*lectores*). These skills did little, however, to protect slaves from the wrath or sexual depredations of their enslavers or the physical wear and tear of their services. Writing was hard work that strained the hand and the eye. Some slaves obtained manumission – Cicero's right-hand man Tiro is the most famous example – but their lives often remained entangled with those of their former enslavers.

Chapter 2 ("Paul and His Secretaries", pp. 50–87) argues that the apostle Paul relied on the work of servile actors in his roles as an itinerant missionary and as an author of letters to the earliest Christian communities. At every stage of his travels, Moss reminds the reader, Paul would have been assisted by enslaved people who specialized in "navigation, bartering, translation, and travel" (p. 55). Moreover, the hospitality of his wealthy patrons would have granted the apostle access not only to food and shelter but also to the expertise and time of their slaves, some of whom may have transcribed, copied, and delivered the apostle's writings. We know several of them by name, including Tertius (the scribe named in Romans 16:22) and Epaphroditus (the courier mentioned several times in Philippians). There follows a long digression on the Gospel of Mark. According to an early tradition, the author of the earliest Gospel was the interpreter and scribe of the apostle Peter, who rendered his preaching in Aramaic into Greek, though it is unclear whether he was in fact enslaved or why the gospel bears his name and not Peter's. Still, this does not prevent Moss from inferring that Mark's role and linguistic skillset "hint that he was the kind of Judean who had been enslaved and trafficked [...] a servile literate worker" (pp. 68–69). Relatedly, she argues based on inference that the forced migration of conquered Judeans circu-

lated the gospel message across the Mediterranean Sea to Rome. As a result, "the spread of Christianity was assisted by Roman roads and Roman human trafficking" (p. 62). The chapter returns to Paul, whose ability to write letters when imprisoned suggests that he had the aid of servile secretaries who took dictation and, according to Moss, may have played some role in shaping the style or even the content of his letters, which resulted in "collaborative authorship" (p. 75). This is difficult to prove in the absence of evidence, as she acknowledges (p. 77), but opportunities for 'enslaved agency' almost certainly existed in the process of ancient literary production. To take one example, the expansion of shorthand notation into Greek or Latin prose hypothetically provided the occasion for unfree scribes to make changes or add nuances to the speeches and letters only they had the proficiency to read in notation form, as it was largely unintelligible to elites, but these acts of resistance are vanishingly rare and almost impossible to verify.

Chapter 3 ("Rereading the Story of Jesus", pp. 88–112) seeks to redress the fact that scholars "have translated and interpreted the New Testament without enslavement in mind" (p. 92), especially the gospel narratives. This chapter offers a highly speculative case study of the Gospel of Mark. As noted above, tradition held that the author of this gospel was a follower of Peter who may have been unfree. Moss interprets the absence of references to the human father of Jesus in this gospel as a detail that an enslaved secretary may have introduced to the text to provide space for "the possibility that Jesus was enslaved or illegitimate" (p. 98). She also argues that the tendency of Jesus to speak in parables signaled a kind of servile status to his readers since this was the preferred mode of teaching for enslaved teachers. The fabulist Aesop, whom tradition likewise considered to be a slave, also spoke in this way. Lastly, Moss discerns that the author of the Gospel of Mark "used structures of enslavement to talk about who Jesus was" (p. 111) in ways that suggest the participation of a servile collaborator in the composition of the earliest life of Christ. These include Jesus's use of parables about enslaved overseers and their charges, his tarrying around the Galilee en route to Jerusalem as a form of passive resistance to his inevitable death, and the vivid details of his crucifixion, a form of punishment reserved for unfree people among others.

Part 2 ("Messengers and Craftsmen", pp. 115–197) comprises three chapters on the role of "enslaved, formerly enslaved, or socially disenfranchised" (p. 119) actors in facilitating the spread of the Christian faith as active medi-

ators of early Christian texts. Chapter 4 ("Messengers of God", pp. 115–139) draws attention to the activities of the couriers and attendants who were known to have accompanied Ignatius of Antioch in the summer of 116 on his journey to Rome. These letter carriers were more than just beasts of burden. Moss draws insight from a statement by Cicero that Roman messengers acted out the text of the letters that they carried to evoke the presence of the sender, thereby playing a vital role in the delivery of their messages. This kind of association between Christian missives and servile couriers may account for the criticism of pagan intellectuals like Celsus, who dismissed Christianity as a superstition of women and slaves. As Chapter 5 ("Curators of the Word", pp. 140–175) explains, copyists played as much of a role in the formation and dissemination of the Christian message as couriers did. Servile workers not only performed the tedious and difficult work of copying out manuscripts, including the earliest Christian texts, but they also looked after the repair of scrolls and books threatened by vermin and worn from frequent use. In Chapter 6 ("The Faces of the Gospel", pp. 176–197), Moss underscores the role of the enslaved reader (*lector*) in the rise of Christianity. In the ancient world, reading was a performative activity that "was accompanied by a carefully choreographed vocabulary of bodily gestures and facial expressions that conveyed the emotion and tone of narrative moments" (p. 182). According to Moss, this performance gave servile readers the agency to shape the reception of the work that they were reading, thereby elevating them to the status of authors. Although she admits that "most people would not characterize a letter carrier, copyist, or reader as an author" (p. 196), she stands by the claim that these unfree actors played some formative role in the spread of the Christian faith.

The final section of the book ("Legacies", pp. 201–253) departs from the examination of the role of enslaved workers in the creation of texts to consider how Roman ideas about good and bad slaves shaped Christian identity in Late Antiquity and beyond. Chapter 7 ("The Faithful Christian", pp. 201–235) finds that the language of enslavement permeated early Christian writings, which consistently presented followers of Christ as slaves of God. Just as slaves became the appendages of their masters, so too did believers become the tools through which God expressed divine will. Like the good slave who anticipated manumission in return for steadfast service, the letters of Paul raised the hope that loyal believers would likewise be rewarded for their

unwavering commitment to Christ at the Last Judgement. Over time, however, the tendency of early Christian authors to use the terminology of enslavement to characterize the relationship between human beings and God provided opportunities for Christian slave-owners in later periods to use this language selectively to their own advantage. In short, because there is no explicit condemnation of slavery in the New Testament, "[i]n the long history of interpretation, it has seemed to many readers that Paul stood with the enslavers" (p. 232). Moss also finds that the consequences of disobedience to God were likewise couched in words and images drawn from the experience of slavery. As Chapter 8 ("Punishing the Disobedient", pp. 236–253) argues, when early Christian authors imagined the horrors awaiting those condemned to eternal punishment in Hell, they borrowed imagery from the torture inflicted on the bodies of disobedient slaves. In the punitive afterlife, however, no one was safeguarded from physical torment by their station in society. Hell was an "egalitarian dystopia" where "punishments that under Roman law were only applied to the bodies of the disenfranchised, enslaved, and impoverished were now visited upon everyone, regardless of status" (p. 243).

"God's Ghostwriters" makes an important contribution to the study of early Christian writings by drawing attention to the roles that enslaved workers may have played in the production of New Testament texts. The evidence for the extent of their involvement remains elusive. The degree to which readers will agree with Moss's contention that unfree workers acted as the coauthors of Christian scriptures will depend very much on their willingness to lend authority to her reconstruction of scenarios in which servile helpers may have participated as independent actors in text creation. Many of these scenarios are plausible, but they are all imputed. The book does not present new evidence, but it does offer a new perspective by imagining the agency of unfree people in a textual tradition long presumed to be the work of a handful of free men. Whether they agree with the book's arguments or not, readers will come away from "God's Ghostwriters" with an increased awareness of the many kinds of servile actors whose participation in ancient literary culture has been overlooked because of their near invisibility in the textual record they helped to create.

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