

Not only God, Matthew, Mark, Luke, John and Paul but Guess Who Else:
A Review of *God's Ghostwriters: Enslaved Christians and the Making of the Bible*.
by Candida Moss

In an interview with the Rev. Dr. Shively Smith, author Candida Moss gave a charming example of the why she wrote this book.

“Well, I had gotten to the age where I needed glasses, and as a writer that is difficult...and I wondered how people managed during antiquity without glasses. And I discovered they had to use other people! Then the pandemic came, and I stayed home with my family and realized the only reason I could do that was because of other people! When I got things from Amazon that I needed, I acted as if Jeff Bezos had delivered it to my door! Then when I told people I was renovating my kitchen, I thought I am not a construction worker and you do not want me to come do your plumbing!”

This extraordinary book is about the importance of giving credit where credit is due. “Giving credit is a subversive act,” Moss says. The apostles were not the only ones responsible for the expansion of Christianity; enslaved literary labor helped bring the Bible to life and spread Christianity. This is a book in which every other page you catch yourself saying *really?* And the author saying *Did you know?* Who were these invisible laborers of whom we have never heard?

The message of Jesus and his apostles reached a wider audience than it could have found without these invisible helpers. Hidden behind the named and sainted individuals, all men, who have been credited with the authorship of the New Testament, is a cohort of enslaved coauthors and collaborators. They produced the earliest manuscripts by making the parchment, taking dictation, improving grammar and polishing and refining final texts. When it was time to move the Christian message out, it was enslaved couriers, anonymous bystanders and former patients of Jesus who were the first Christian missionaries undertaking dangerous journeys across the Mediterranean and along Roman roads. And when the texts were read aloud to new audiences of potential converts, it was educated and trained enslaved literate laborers who performed them, frequently changing whatever needed to be clarified or emphasized.

Moss is quick to say, lest you think Roman slavery must have been very different from Atlantic slavery, it was still slavery. She tells many stories from antiquity, some folklore and some documented of the atrocious punishment of this enslaved class if they did not fulfill their duties. Unlike enslaved people in the Atlantic system, Roman slaves were taught to read and write so they could perform this literary labor. In antiquity, those with vision problems would have no glasses, there were no printing presses, no paper, and of course no electricity.

Just to whet your appetite for this extraordinary book, think about who the four “friends” really were who lowered the paralytic through the hole to be healed? They weren’t even identified as people. And when Jesus said to the paralytic your sins are forgiven, take up your bed and walk...maybe he meant do your own work!

Or have you ever wondered about Thomas???. According to a second-century narrative known as the *Acts of Thomas*, Thomas has a scriptural afterlife in which he travels to India as a result of drawing lots with the disciples to decide who would go. India was considered the farthest limit of the world and how could a Hebrew preach among the people of India? The story even suggests that Thomas was sold by Jesus to an Indian merchant. Here the word “enslaver” is “kurios” which was used as a title for Jesus and a name for God. And so the story of Thomas makes enslaved messengers visible to Christian readers. Moss says, “Though the survival of this story is predicated

on his status as an apostle, it reveals an often ignored truth about ancient communication and the spread of Christianity.”

Then there is the story about the writing of the gospel of John as told by an unnamed 1941 German scholar “John sat at a desk with pieces of paper writing along looking heavenward. A gust of wind blew through the window and messed up the papers and that’s why the gospel of John is in the form it is.” Laughing in the interview, Moss said, “but he was in his 90’s! There were no desks and no loose-leaf pieces of paper.” He most definitely had scribes and caregivers – enslaved workers making it possible for him to write. Such a great example of speculation that has gone on uninterrogated.

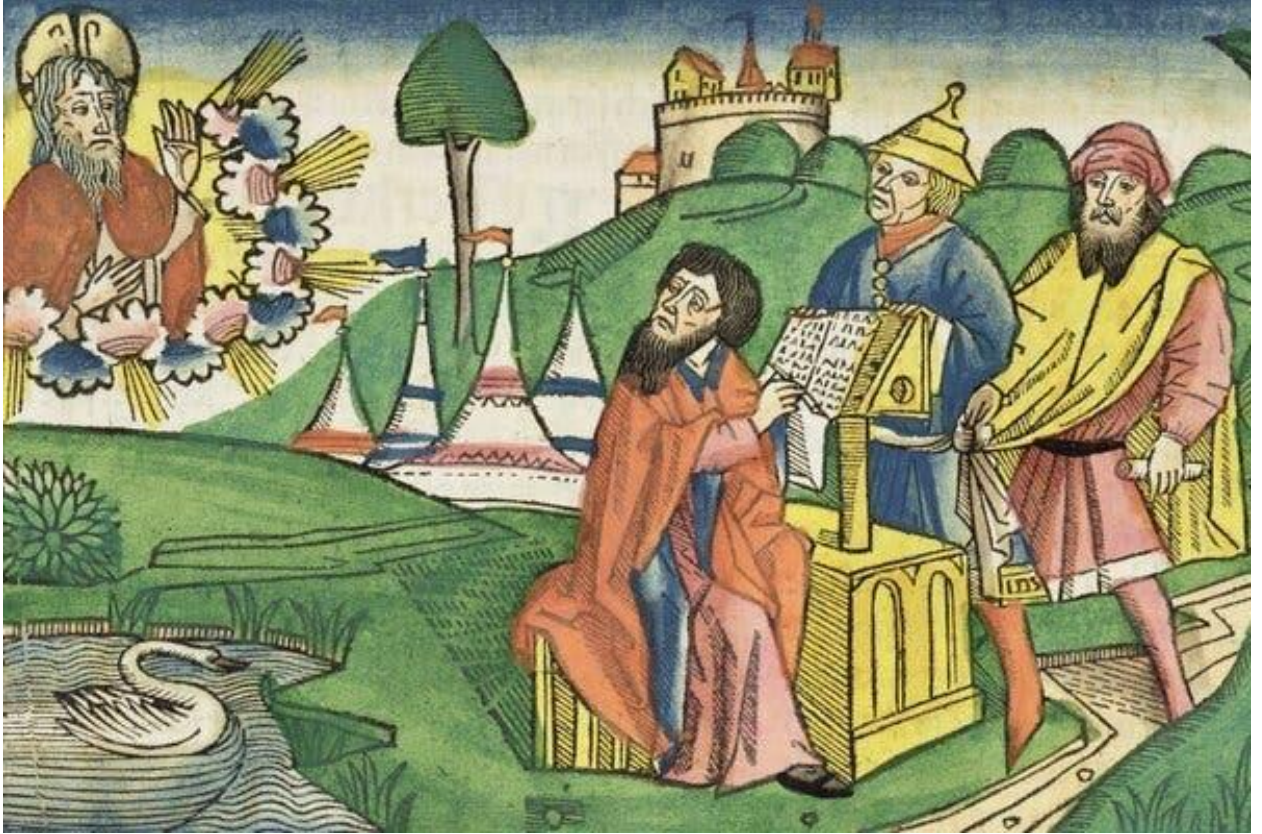
The reading of this book offers great opportunity for us to analyze what we assume about scripture. We have imagination deficit. The enslavement system in the Roman empire was ubiquitous, and this book calls us to see how pervasive slavery is in these gospel accounts. How do we imagine responsibly in a way that can be called history? What assumptions do you bring to your reading? How do you excavate a history that is not only hidden, but also even erased?

Moss has done her homework well. Her research about antiquity goes far beyond just God’s ghostwriters! She references early Christian texts like the *Didache*, second century narratives such as the *Acts of Thomas* and tales told by Ovid and Alexander the Great. She researched histories of book labor and clerical labor so that her answer to “can you prove it” would be yes.

Perhaps the real lesson from her research here is that we need to investigate the assumptions and the values informing our imagination. We know that Paul acknowledged his enslaved workers, but we are the ones who don’t. We should ask ourselves what stories we need to go back and review and revisit, recognizing these matters of enslavement and seeing what we notice. How do some of the stories of essential worker status now appear in ways we have not known before? Where should we be looking as we revisit some of our favorite stories and saying I bet you there is an enslaved person that is here? Where are we missing those footprints? Whenever you see an apostle finding shelter and support in the household of a centurion, there are going to be enslaved workers there,” Moss says, “Christianity benefits from enslaved labor!”

In the ***Acknowledgements***, Moss does exactly what she advocates in the book itself...gives credit where credit is due. “This book,” she says, “like all books, is not mine alone. Though my name is on the cover, it is a group project, and I cannot fully represent the debt that I owe to others.” Though she does not give credit to enslaved workers or scribes, she does what I believe the book encourages us all to do: listen to the voices past and present that offer alternate pathways and opportunities to broaden our horizons. Read ethically and reparatively listening to invisible actors – in the past, and just as importantly, in the present.

Read this book if you want to broaden your horizons to read the Bible with a full appreciation of all the voices of the visible and invisible people who wrote it.



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