

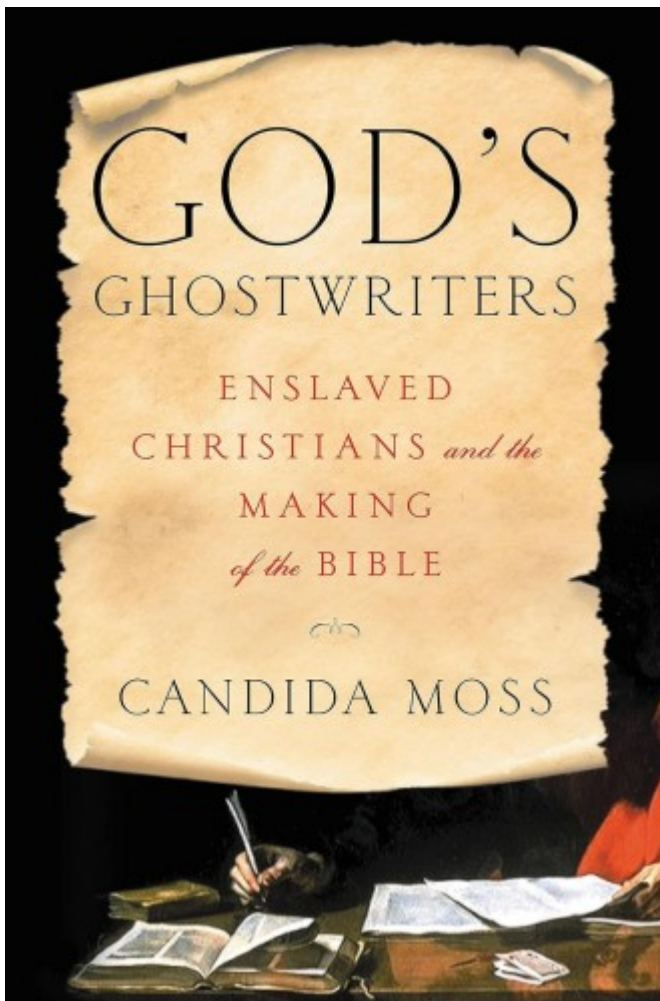
Did enslaved people write the New Testament?

Candida Moss argues that when early Christian texts were written, unpaid laborers were in the room where it happened.

by [Nijay K. Gupta](#) in the [January 2025](#) issue

Published on December 19, 2024

## In Review



### God's Ghostwriters

Enslaved Christians and the Making of the Bible

By Candida Moss

Little, Brown

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RW-REPLACE-TOKEN

We refer routinely to “Paul’s Letter to the Philippians” or “the Gospel of Luke,” and most Christians today assume that Paul and Luke were the authors of these works. Countless paintings throughout history portray Paul in a small prison cell, quill in hand, carefully inking his thoughts by dim candlelight; or Luke posing with a large book while resting his arm on an ox, the ancient animal symbol of the Third Gospel. These are evocative and inspiring images, but they are often full of anachronisms. A more realistic picture of writing, document delivery, and reading from the ancient Roman world was far more mundane and excruciatingly laborious—and writing was almost never done alone. That’s where Candida Moss’s latest work comes in. *God’s Ghostwriters* sheds light on the contributions of the often uncredited and “invisible” workers who were everywhere in the Roman world: slaves.

Of the approximately 60 million inhabitants of the Roman Empire in the first century, scholars estimate that about a quarter of them were slaves, and they performed many of the tedious tasks in society. Moss’s meticulously researched and exquisitely written work makes the undeniable (but often unstated) case that there would be no New Testament without slave labor and slave expertise. There is a subtext running throughout *God’s Ghostwriters* that the early Christians were not unlike the rest of Roman society when it came to ownership and use of slaves.

Moss repeatedly notes that a slave need not be mentioned in the New Testament for slave contributions to be implied or assumed—from dictation to skill in copying to delivery and public reading. Even tasks that required education and professional skill were often performed by slaves, either because these “unfree” workers (as Moss often calls them) were highly educated before taken captive in war by Rome, or because they were bred and trained from a young age to develop skill (or face the consequences of incompetence).

Moss’s overall point is well made: however we imagine early Christian texts being written and disseminated, we should envision unpaid laborers in the room where it happened. First-century Christians did not immediately free all of their slaves when they were filled with the Holy Spirit or when they joined a Christian assembly. Moss acknowledges that Christianity developed a reputation for attracting the lowest in

society, including slaves—but not because they were crusaders for abolition. While Christians promoted benevolent treatment toward all, with a special interest in the “least of these,” that did not stop them from urging slaves to obey their masters and to work diligently. This messy, awkward, but realistic portrayal of the early church should replace idealized versions that make the first generation of Christians into modern civil rights advocates and utopian egalitarians.

While Moss’s account is responsible and accurate overall, a few concerning things caught my attention. Moss is at her best when telling documented stories from the ancient world, giving voice to real-life slaves and masters amid their day-to-day lives. Sometimes she ventures into the murky territory of “probably” and “perhaps,” as when she entertains the possibilities that Mark (the gospel writer) could have been a slave as a translator and assistant for Simon Peter and that Paul’s companion Timothy could have been a slave in the apostle’s service. In these cases, she connects dots that I’m not sure need to be (or can profitably be) connected. Slaves were everywhere, but they were not the only kinds of people doing these kinds of tasks.

That leads me to a second concern. Moss is absolutely correct that most labor-intensive jobs were carried out by slaves, but overall she has very little to say about freedmen and freedwomen (manumitted slaves who often continued to do the same kinds of work with a new legal status and the prospect of meager earnings). Moss lumps freed slaves in together with the legally enslaved because the former did not enjoy autonomy, were often still dependent on their former masters for work, and maintained certain obligations to those masters. Still, Moss could have—and I believe should have—said much more about freedmen and freedwomen. They were not enslaved, though they struggled to survive at the near bottom of Roman society. (I was surprised that “freedmen/freedwomen” was not even listed in the book’s index as a key topic.)

I was also disappointed that Moss did little more than mention Onesimus in the book. I would have hoped for a whole chapter, or at least a major section, on Onesimus, given that he is the only named Christian slave (*doulos*) in the New Testament and was almost certainly the carrier of Paul’s letter to the Christian slave master Philemon. This would have provided a fascinating case study in the complexity of advocacy for an unfree laborer as well as the dangers of sending an estranged slave back home.

*God's Ghostwriters* is a sobering book. It is uncomfortable to think about the forced labor of so many people, especially those involved in the creation and dissemination of religious texts that are revered and considered inspired by Christians today. Moss clearly has no intention to smear Christianity; she is a thoughtful historian wanting to tell the whole truth. Christians are responsible for knowing this truth.

Moss's epilogue makes explicit a broader point, namely, that the temptation is always there to take all the credit for oneself and to keep important contributors invisible because that's just how things work. One of my favorite parts of the book is found in the back, where she includes a "Credits List" of all the people involved in her book, from marketers to proofreaders to editorial assistants. A good book by a good historian is a good read. But when a historian models what she has learned with integrity and conviction, it is a treasure.

[Read Amy Fryholm's interview with Candida Moss.](#)