

Reading into the gaps

“Because certain scribal puns appear only in Galatians,” says Candida Moss, “we have to consider that they come from the secretary rather than Paul.”

Interview by [Amy Frykholm](#) in the [January 2025](#) issue

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You say in *God’s Ghostwriters* that your process as a historian involves reading into the gaps. You call it a form of history telling that is imaginative and not untrue. Why do you approach your subjects this way?

When I first became aware of enslaved literate workers, I wanted to try and figure out what they did, who they were, and what their lives were like. But our historical archive hasn’t preserved that information in detail.

Then I ran across the work of Saidiya Hartman, who talks about a responsible imaginative method of recounting history. For me, that meant protecting my subjects from the accusation that I’m just making everything up. So I read widely about the history of slavery, the history of people writing books, histories of labor, and the history of psychology. I looked at inscriptions and at manuscripts in libraries.

At the same time, I realized that what we consider ordinary history is really imaginative too. If you look at any picture of Paul writing his letters, he’s always at a desk—even though Paul didn’t have any desks and he dictated to other people. That’s a projection of our modern practices into the past. It’s not even remotely good history.

When people want to talk about women or enslaved people who were erased from the record, they’re doing something else. In a way, being aware that you’re trying to tell a story that’s incomplete makes you do history better.

I’ve always thought of reading and writing as an elite skill that leads to upward mobility. What was it to be a literate, enslaved writer in the ancient world?

Education was seen as the domain of the elite man. But when an elite child went to school, he was accompanied by an enslaved person who often took notes for him. He was educated by an enslaved teacher who taught him how to read and write. There would've been enslaved children there, too, who were being trained to be copyists. There are stories of famous educators in Rome who became grammarians by way of accompanying someone who was richer than them to school.

What was Paul's relationship to enslaved writers?

We know that Paul used secretaries to read and write. One of them was Tertius, which just means third. That's almost certainly the name of an enslaved person or a formerly enslaved person who had been emancipated. Often people have said, *Well, he's using secretaries, but they don't do anything. It's all Paul.* I think we have to acknowledge that this reflects the Roman elite enslaving view.

We can see subtle differences between Paul's letters. In Galatians, he has all of these scribal puns that don't come up in any of the other letters. For instance, he talks about being enslaved to *stoicheia*, which is usually translated as "elementary principles of the world" (4:3). It's a vague term, but it can also refer to the alphabet, which would make it a joke: the enslaved secretary is enslaved to the alphabet. They're utilizing the double entendre for themselves, for their own amusement.

In another place (Gal. 2:9), he refers to Peter and James and John as the pillars of the church. But the word there, *styloi*, can also refer to a pen. It's as if Peter were just a pen, an instrument of God. But this was also the way people would refer to enslaved scribes. So we have a little scribal pun here, and it happens only in Galatians. Because it appears nowhere else, we have to consider that it comes from the secretary rather than Paul.

We suddenly see the production of these texts as a relationship, a conversation, a collaboration.

Yeah, that's right, and it's not about taking anything away from Paul. It's not that we don't have Paul anymore; it's that we also have other people. That enables us to have richer, more diverse interpretations of what's happening in the text.

But you're not saying that Paul owned slaves.

Some scholars think that he may have owned slaves who were “gifted” to him by wealthier members of the Jesus community. I think it’s more likely that some of the wealthy converts to the Jesus movement were loaning—it’s a very horrible phrase to use of a human being—enslaved people to Paul and to other apostles.

None of this means that they weren’t followers of Jesus. It just means that we have to think very carefully about how we talk about that work and how we think about them. It doesn’t necessarily mean that Paul’s an enslaver, but he’s certainly benefiting from that process.

Could you walk us through what it was like to begin to imagine the author of the Gospel of Mark as enslaved?

Our earliest traditions about Mark tie him to Peter, with some calling him Peter’s interpreter. The Greek word for interpreter can also mean translator, which you can imagine Peter might have needed as he strayed further afield from his hometown. When you look at the use of that term in written records, it’s almost always in reference to enslaved people, often because they were bilingual since they had been moved from home.

Considering Mark as an enslaved translator changes how I think about the story as a whole. The main point of the story is crucifixion. We always describe crucifixion as a punishment for rebels and enslaved people, but that makes it sound like it was 50/50 and it wasn’t. It’s predominantly enslaved people who were crucified. The way Jesus dies in Mark is horrendous. Mark will not let you look away from the pain. It was probably profoundly moving to Mark and to his audience to have someone see the injustice. This is a violence to which even God responds.

Another story that really changed for me is the healing of the paralytic (2:1-12). Four people bring a paralyzed man to the house, pull apart the roof, and lower him down. Jesus looks at them and recognizes their faith, and then he says to the man: *Your sins are forgiven. Take up your bed and walk.* Who are the four people? We always assume they’re friends. But if we look at the practice of carrying people in ancient society, they’re probably enslaved people. And that makes sense of the story in a whole new way, because Jesus sees them where the story doesn’t want us to. When Jesus says, “Take up your bed and walk,” he’s saying: “Carry your own bed, do your own work.” That’s a whole different story with a very different message.

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