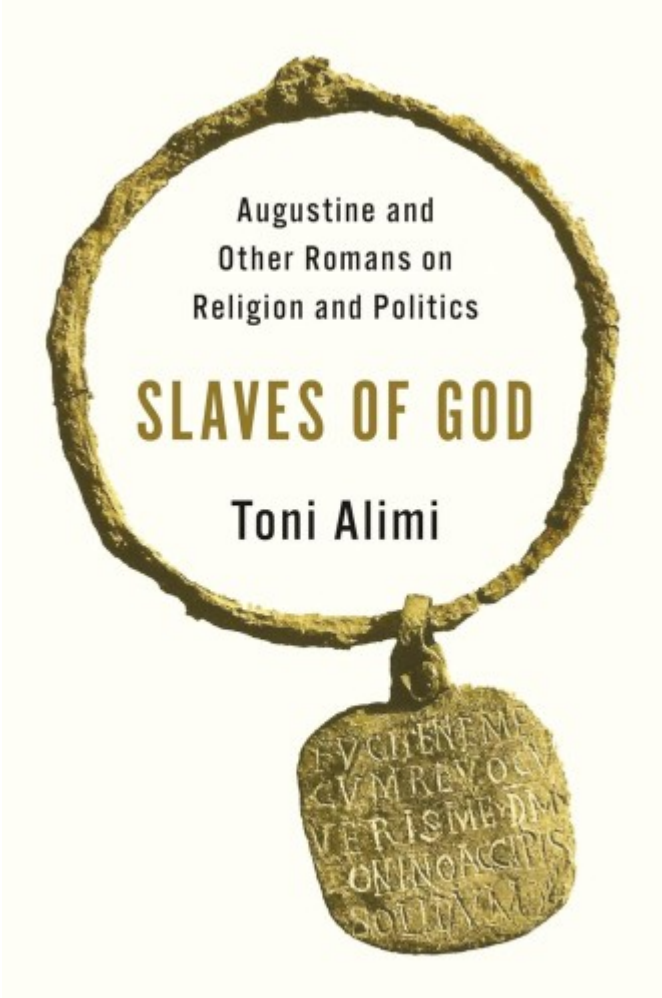
Is slavery integral to Augustine’s theology?

Toni Alimi and Matthew Elia each make the case that it is. Their books demand a reckoning.

by James K. A. Smith in the June 2025 issue
Published on May 14, 2025

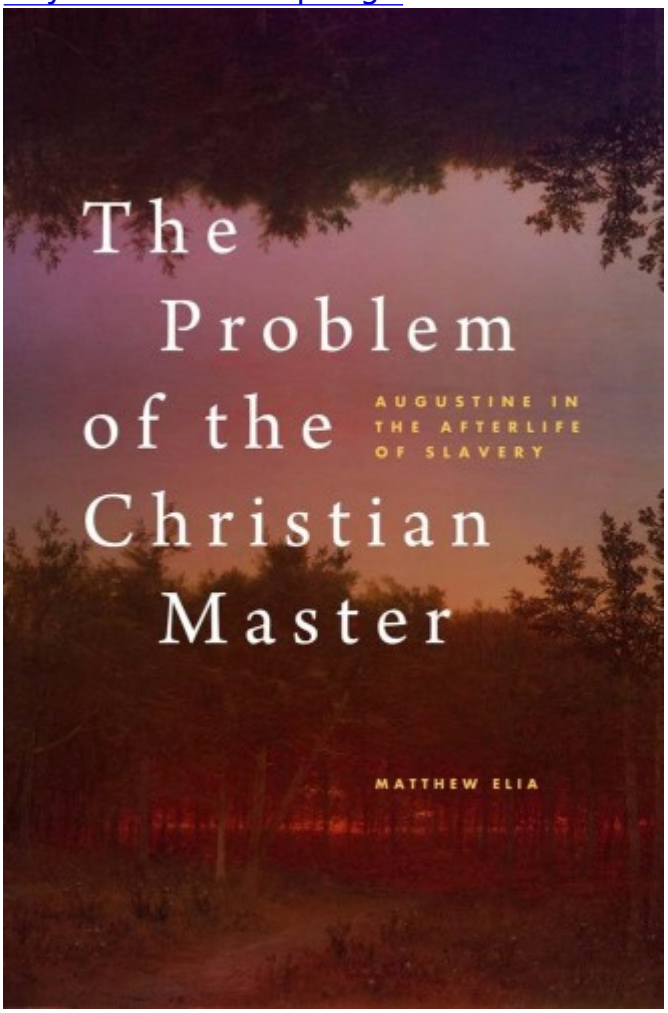
In Review



Slaves of God

Augustine and Other Romans on Religion and Politics

By Toni Alimi
Princeton University Press
Buy from Bookshop.org ›



The Problem of the Christian Master

Augustine in the Afterlife of Slavery

By Matthew Elia
Yale University Press
Buy from Bookshop.org ›
RW-REPLACE-TOKENRW-REPLACE-TOKEN

Imagine growing up with a remarkable painting as the centerpiece of your home. The artwork seeps into your imagination. You see yourself in it, somehow. Its power and beauty are amplified by a whiff of enchantment since the painting has been handed down for generations. You are now its caretaker. Like grandparents and

great-grandparents before you, your family has decorated your living room in relation to its palette. In a way, you've built your home around this cherished painting. Then one day you learn the buried tale of its provenance. The only reason your family owns the painting is because it was looted from a Jewish family deported to the camps. You've built a home around an artifact of monstrous inhumanity and profound injustice. What do you do with it now?

That was my experience reading two game-changing books on Augustine and slavery. Published within months of each other, Toni Alimi's *Slaves of God* and Matthew Elia's *The Problem of the Christian Master* are scholarly works that have landed like bombshells in the field of Augustinian studies. But the blast zone should be wider. Given the extent to which Western Christian traditions, both Roman Catholic and Protestant, have built their theological houses around Augustine's legacy, these books should occasion a reckoning.

Both Alimi and Elia caution that this isn't just a question of whether Augustine owned slaves (he did not) or endorsed slavery (he did). The issue is the ways and extent to which slavery functions conceptually in Augustine's theology, ethics, and metaphysics. Alimi adopts philosopher W. V. O. Quine's notion of a "web of beliefs" to get at this. All of us have an array of commitments and beliefs, and many of them are peripheral and relatively inconsequential. If it turned out we were wrong about David Lynch's birthday or the merits of Cardi B's last album, our lives wouldn't change. But some beliefs are central; we organize our lives around them like a hub. Alimi's argument is clear: "Augustine's beliefs about slavery were much closer to the center of his web than has previously been thought." His book is a careful, patient demonstration of this claim.

What Augustine says (and doesn't say) about the institution of slavery is only part of the story here. Drawing on sermons and letters, Alimi shows that Augustine did not challenge the institution of slavery. He saw it as a penal, postlapsarian reality that was not inherently morally wrong. We can't write this off as merely contextual, since other ancient Christian writers like Lactantius, whom Augustine read, denounced the institution of chattel slavery.

But Alimi's more unsettling argument is about the way that slavery is at the conceptual center of Augustine's theology—as a metaphor that governs the way Augustine pictures humanity's relation to God as both Creator and Redeemer. "All are slaves of God" because all are creatures made and owned by God. In other

words, for Augustine, the Creator/creature relationship is pictured, again and again, as the relation of a benevolent *dominus* (master) to a dependent, obedient *servus* (slave). While he rejected something like Aristotle's notion of "natural slaves" (particular peoples born for enslavement), Augustine ends up reproducing a different sort of "natural slavery" in his doctrine of creation: "God made humans as slaves," Alimi summarizes, and God is the only non-cruel master. But God also remains unaccountable. Thus Alimi describes this as "benevolent domination."

This is replayed in the way Augustine construes worship, which is central to his theology. *Cultus* meets *servitus*: true worship is just better slavery. (I can't stop hearing this as a mash-up of David Foster Wallace's famous commencement address, emphasizing that everybody worships, and Bob Dylan's "Gotta Serve Somebody.") To worship is to devote oneself to the better *dominus*, the Master above all other masters. Hence the metaphor of slavery also shapes Augustine's picture of redemption, which is construed not as emancipation but rather as being purchased by a better *dominus*. Salvation makes us "faithful slaves."

In a disturbing homily on Psalm 123:2, Augustine says we look to God as a slave looks to the master wielding his whip. "The slave is whipped and feels the pain of the welts, so he fixes his gaze on the master's hands, longing for the master to signal, 'That's enough.'" Our whipping, he says, began with Adam. "All your life on earth is your beating." So look to the Master's hand and beg for mercy. Even when he is grappling with biblical texts that proclaim an overcoming of enslavement, Augustine's expositions preserve the central picture of humans as "slaves of God." For example, in his *Tractates on the Gospel of John*, commenting on 15:15 ("I do not call you slaves any longer . . . I have called you friends"), Augustine undoes what Jesus seems to suggest: "For the good slave, it is possible, therefore, to be slave and friend." Augustine's theology of the Creator as benevolent *dominus* means humanity's enslavement to God is eternal. So, at best, grace offers the opportunity for the slave to *also* be a friend with the *dominus*.

As Alimi notes, for Augustine, "everyone is either a faithful slave of God or a fugitive." The figure of the fugitive animates Matthew Elia's *The Problem of the Christian Master*, which comes at these themes from a different angle. Alimi's book is a work of classical scholarship, focused on philosophical questions, grappling with our understanding of an influential figure from late antiquity. Elia's book is more focused on modernity and the present, critically considering the reception history of Augustine's thought. If Alimi is focused on Augustine and speaking to scholars of

Augustine and late antiquity, Elia is focused on contemporary Augustinians (including Augustinian liberals) who have adopted Augustine's thinking as their framework for addressing contemporary social and political questions. Reading Augustine from modernity, Elia more explicitly considers the intersection of slavery and race. This would be anachronistic if he were writing a book for patristics scholars, but Elia is interested in what people have done with Augustine in modernity—and what contemporary Augustinians have ignored.

Elia's book is also quite different in style, even genre. Staging what he calls "unlikely humanities encounters" between theology, ethics, and Black studies, Elia's book is more literary and allusive—a kind of intellectual jazz that is powerful and poetic, even if it is also less disciplined and careful. We could hope for more theology books like this.

Elia contrasts two figures and places: the pilgrim versus the fugitive and the road versus the woods. In both *Confessions* and *City of God*, the concept of pilgrimage is central to Augustine's picture of the Christian life. Elia's contrasts arise from what he calls an "iconic" passage in the *Confessions* in which the pilgrim on the road is threatened by fugitives in the woods. Those fugitives include runaway slaves. Siding with the pilgrim's vulnerability, Augustine never seems to consider whether the fugitive slaves are running away from injustice. They are construed only as threats, violators of law. But what if fugitivity is a faithful response to a broken, unjust world? Does God ever identify with the fugitives?

Not in Augustine, Elia argues. Instead, the default sympathy of Augustine's thinking and preaching is on the side of the master, concerned to maintain political order under the guise of "peace." This is what Elia means by "the problem of the Christian master": the ways in which our theologies, often enough inherited from Augustine, adopt a standpoint that both accepts and sympathizes with the master's position. Elia describes this in a couple of different ways. The problem of the master is "the specific position of moral reasoning from which one is compelled to accept, that is, to recognize the legitimacy of, the central premise of the 'law' of earthly peace." More acutely this manifests as "the deep structural issue of reasoning while accepting the central legal fiction of slavery."

A significant part of his brief against contemporary Augustinians is the unwitting ways we looked to Augustine precisely because his theology presumes such power and privilege. It's a matter both of what we have done and of what we have left

undone. We've constructed political theology for citizens privileged with agency, and we've been blind to the fugitives in the woods, running from the very "order" we've shored up with appeals to Augustine. The "problem of the Christian master," Elia summarizes, "consists in Christian theological discourse invisibly reproducing the vantage of the masters."

Like Alimi, Elia sees this not as a peripheral, occasional theme in Augustine but as something central. If all are slaves of God, then all of creation is "the master's house" (echoing Willie James Jennings's account, in *The Christian Imagination*, of how the slave owner's home became a template for a wider social architecture). Augustine pictures sanctification and obedience in terms of what Chris de Wet calls a "doulological" cosmology in which the virtue of humility is a matter of a slave learning their place. This culminates in "slave Christologies," rooted in Philippians 2: "Christ appears here both in the form of the slave modeling obedience and in the form of the master to whom all obedience is owed." When the master's house is enshrined as a cosmology, "Christians are not imaged as freed slaves." Rather, "Christians take on the status of the *vilicus*, the elite slave in the *domus* of God." Thus Augustine could preach that Christ "is the true and eternal *dominus*" (slave master). In Christ "he has not made slaves free, but turned bad slaves into good slaves."

Both of these books amass textual evidence and make persuasive arguments. I have hardly done them justice. But the question is: What do we do with all of this? Like a painting centered in a home, Augustine's theological influence is enshrined in most Western Christian traditions.

Let's not rush to defense. We might heed Elia: "I propose we let ourselves be troubled and stay troubled." Our first impulse shouldn't be to "save" Augustine. That will almost always be some form of self-defense. Our reckoning should begin by asking what the fugitive knows that we have not heeded. The fugitive knows something about the world, and perhaps about hope, that the pilgrim has not yet discovered. There is a moment in *No Name in the Street* when James Baldwin reaches into his preacher-kid memory and cites Jesus: *Ye shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free*. He then remarks: "The truth which frees black people will also free white people, but this is a truth which white people find very difficult to swallow."

Alimi and Elia raise searing questions not just about Augustine but about the metaphors that organize and govern our theologies—the word pictures we adopt for understanding, approaching, and receiving God. How much does our working picture of sovereignty imagine God as *dominus*? How often does the New Testament portray our relationship to God as a better enslavement? What pictures of God have we absorbed every time we've heard Jesus say in Luke 17:9–10, "Do you thank the slave for doing what was commanded? So you also, when you have done all that you were ordered to do, say, 'We are worthless slaves; we have done only what we ought to have done!'"

In the adventure of God's Spirit in history, can we outgrow metaphors? Can God's unfolding revelation and our collective discernment give rise to the courage to refuse pictures handed down to us? Are we willing to risk being conceptual fugitives for the sake of the love that never ends?