Obey Your Masters: The Transformations of Colossians 3:22–4:1 from Pauline Manual on Literal Bondage into an Ethical Blueprint for Corporate and Civic Relationships in Nigeria

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Abstract

This paper examined the interpretive mutability of Colossians 3:22–4:1, focusing on the use of this text as a tool for psychological and economic exploitation on the one hand, and as a principle for holistic social justice on the other hand. This paper traced the trajectory of this text from its first-century Greco-Roman context through the Patristic era, Eurocentric colonial projects, the transatlantic slave trade, and its contemporary appropriation in Nigeria. Using Hans-Robert Jauss's reception theory, this paper analysed how the text's meaning shifts relative to the reader's socio-economic and ideological horizon. The findings reveal that while the original Haustafel (household code) accommodated Greco-Roman imperial structures by reframing slavery Christologically, subsequent eras weaponised its literal commands to justify institutional bondage and colonial hegemony. Conversely, abolitionists used its internal ethical tensions to subvert those same structures. In contemporary Nigeria, the text undergoes a modern transformation: mainline denominations read it as a guide for workplace ethics, while Pentecostal leaders like David Oyedepo, Jerry Eze, W.F. Kumuyi, E.A. Adeboye, Johnson Suleman, and Paul Enenche adapt it to fuel prosperity, holiness, or deliverance agendas, contrasted by Abel Damina's strictly historical-grace approach. This paper demonstrated that biblical texts function as fluid sites of ideological negotiation. This Paper recommended that theological institutions adopt contextual, socio-historical hermeneutics, that faith communities foster critical reception awareness to prevent structural exploitation, and that preachers balance worker submission with the strict systemic accountability demanded of employers and leaders in Colossians 4:1.

Keywords: Colossian household codes, interpretive-fluidity, slavery-reception, Postcolonial hermeneutics, Nigerian-Pentecostalism, Worker-employer-accountability, Socio-historical-context, Human dignity

1. Introduction

The interpretation of biblical texts is not static. Instead, they function as fluid literary and theological sites that highlight different historical, cultural, and ideological landscapes. This fluid nature is highly evident in the reception history of the Pauline and Deutero-Pauline *Haustafeln* (household codes). Colossians 3:22–4:1, which addresses the relationship between enslaved persons and their masters, has served historically both as a weapon of

systemic oppression and as a tool for radical liberation. As biblical scholars have noted, the hermeneutical appropriation of these domestic codes reflects the socio-political anxieties of the reading communities rather than a fixed, objective authorial intent (MacDonald 114; Harrill 43; Igwe *Ethics of the Colossian Code* 46). This paper examined the interpretive mutability of Colossians 3:22–4:1. It traces its trajectory from its first-century Greco-Roman context through the Patristic era, Eurocentric colonial projects, and the transatlantic slave trade. Finally, it analysed its contemporary appropriation by Pentecostal and mainline preachers in Nigeria. By exploring these historic shifts, this paper demonstrated how biblical interpretations can be used to validate existing socio-economic structures or fuel spiritualised, prophetic, and materialist agendas.

2. Theoretical Framework

This paper used Reception Theory as its primary framework, relying on the scholarship of Hans-Robert Jauss and Wolfgang Iser. Reception theory argues that a text's meaning is not fixed within its authorial intent. Instead, it is realised through the historical interaction between the text and its readers. Jauss introduces the concept of the "horizon of expectation" (22). This refers to the cultural, historical, and linguistic criteria readers use to judge, interpret, and make sense of a text in any given era. When a new text or interpretation emerges, it either satisfies, surpasses, or disappoints these societal expectations, thereby exposing the ideological framework of the reading audience (Jauss 24; Holub 56).

When applied to biblical hermeneutics, reception theory shows that interpretations of Scripture can be fluid. David Carr notes that biblical texts underwent continuous revision, contextualisation, and reframing to meet the needs of changing communities during their composition (14). Once a text achieves a canonical form, its fluidity shifts from textual transmission to interpretive application. It becomes a dynamic site where meaning is constantly renegotiated (Boyarin 33; Thiselton 142).

Using the Reception Theory to examine the interpretations and applications of Colossians 3:22-4:1,this paper demonstrated how different interpreters projected their own socio-political, economic, and ecclesiastical realities into this text thereby turning this biblical text into a mirror of the interpreter's own cultural horizon.

3. Historical Context and Background of Colossians 3:22–4:1

To understand how the interpretation of Colossians 3:22-4.1 became fluid, we must first look at its original setting. Colossians 3:22–4:1 is set within a traditional Greco-Roman household framework. Aristotle's *Politics* established that the stability of the state depended on the hierarchical submission of wives to husbands, children to fathers, and slaves to masters (1253b). The domestic sphere was viewed as a micro-political reflection of the macro-imperial state; if the household fractured, the empire collapsed (Balch 31; Fitzgerald 65; Igwe *Ethics of the Colossian Code* 8). The author of Colossians adopts this ubiquitous structure but modifies it with a pervasive Christological focus:

> Slaves, obey your earthly masters in everything, not only while being watched and in order to please them, but with sincerity of heart, fearing the Lord. ... Masters, treat your slaves justly and fairly, for you know that you also have a Master in heaven. (*New Revised Standard Version*, Col. 3:22, 4:1)

Scholars have noted a distinction between slavery in the ancient Jewish and Greco-Roman worlds and the racialised chattel slavery that characterised the British and American Atlantic slave trade of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries as well as the modern-day slavery through various forms of labour exploitation. Although the biblical text addresses the institution of slavery, it does so within a socio-economic framework that differs fundamentally from the race-based, hereditary, and dehumanising system established in the modern Atlantic world. In the Hebrew Bible, slavery among the Israelites functioned primarily as a form of debt servitude or indentured labour, regulated by covenantal laws that protected the dignity of the enslaved and limited the duration of Hebrew servitude (Exod. 21:2–11; Lev. 25:39–43; Deut. 15:12–18). Hebrew slaves were entitled to Sabbath rest, legal protection against abuse, and eventual release, while the kidnapping of persons for enslavement was explicitly condemned as a capital offense (Exod. 21:16). As Christopher J. H. Wright argues, Israel's slavery legislation sought to humanise an existing social institution by grounding it in Israel's own memory of liberation from Egyptian bondage (323–29). Similarly, John Goldingay observes that Old Testament servitude was embedded within covenantal ethics that emphasised kinship, justice, and restoration rather than perpetual ownership (221–25). By contrast, British and American slavery was founded upon racial ideology, perpetual hereditary bondage, legal commodification of human beings, and systematic denial of personhood, family integrity, education, and civil rights (Davis 27–54; Walvin 85–113).

Scholars have equally pointed out that first-century Roman slavery was not based on modern concepts of race.It was a legal and economic status resulting from warfare, piracy, or debt (Glancy 9; Bradley 15; Igwe *Ethics of the Colossian Code*23). Slaves were legally classified as *instrumentum vocale*—speaking tools lacking bodily autonomy or social honour (Varro 1.17.1; Glancy 12). Despite these limitations imposed on slaves, Meeks argues, that slavery in the first-century Mediterranean world cannot be simplistically equated with the racial chattel slavery of the modern Atlantic world. Meeks argues that Slaves occupied diverse roles—as household managers, artisans, teachers, physicians, and administrators—and some possessed considerable education, social mobility, and the possibility of manumission. Although slavery remained an oppressive institution marked by legal inequality, it lacked the rigid racial ideology and hereditary permanence that defined seventeenth- and eighteenth-century British and American slavery.

According to Meeks, Paul's household instructions, including Colossians 3:22–4:1, should therefore be understood as pastoral guidance for Christian conduct within an existing social order rather than theological endorsement of slavery itself. By addressing both slaves and masters under the common lordship of Christ, Paul subtly relativises the social hierarchy and introduces an ethic of mutual accountability that ultimately undermines absolute claims of mastery (Meeks 84–87). Consequently, reading Colossians through the lens of Atlantic slavery risks imposing an anachronistic framework that obscures both the historical realities of the first-century church and the transformative social vision embedded within Paul's ethical teaching.

Furthermore, by addressing enslaved persons directly as moral agents within the church assembly, the author of Colossians grants them a degree of spiritual dignity missing in wider Roman society (Dunn 245; Barth and Blanke 452). However, the text does not challenge the legal institution of slavery. Instead, it reframes earthly labour as service rendered unto Christ (*Kyrios*). This tension creates an interpretive ambiguity. It allows later readers to emphasise either the preservation of social hierarchies or the ultimate spiritual equality of all believers under God (Lohse 156; Schweizer 219; Igwe *Ethics of the Colossian Code*41).In the light of these, N. T. Wright maintains that Paul's instructions in Colossians were directed toward transforming relationships within an existing social order rather than legitimising the racial slavery or labour exploitation that emerged many centuries later (145–49).

4. Patristic Reception: Spiritualisation and Social Order

During the Patristic era (second to fifth centuries CE), early Church Fathers adapted Colossians to navigate their changing status from a persecuted sect to the official religion of

the Roman Empire. The horizon of expectation shifted from expecting an immediate apocalypse to maintaining civic stability and institutionalising ecclesiastical power (Maier 78; Christian 112).

John Chrysostom, writing in his *Homilies on Colossians*, used Colossians 3:22–25 to argue that Christianity did not disrupt the political order. Chrysostom maintained that insubordination by Christian slaves would blaspheme God's name and bring unnecessary persecution upon the Church. He wrote that when a slave submits to a master, "the disrespect is shown to God, if [the slave] does not obey" (231). Chrysostom spiritualised the condition of bondage. He argued that true slavery is bondage to sin, while physical slavery is a temporary, worldly distinction irrelevant to the soul's salvation (234).

Similarly, Augustine of Hippo used the passage in *The City of God* to justify social stratification. For Augustine, slavery was a direct consequence of the Fall (*sin*), yet it was preserved by divine providence to maintain temporal peace and cosmic order (19.15). He argued that an enslaved person could be spiritually freer than an unjust master, as the master was enslaved to his passions (Augustine 19.15). Patristic hermeneutics established a pattern: they retained the hierarchical command of the text to ensure social order, while transferring the rewards of justice and freedom into an abstract, eschatological future (Clark 88; Cannon 104).

5. Eurocentric Interpretations and Colonial Hegemony

With the rise of the Enlightenment and European colonial expansion, Eurocentric biblical interpretation began to treat Western cultural norms and economic models as universal truths (Segovia 34; Sugirtharajah 55). Scholars often read Colossians 3:22–4:1 through an imperialist lens that linked Christian discipleship with European civilisation and the docility of indigenous populations.

As historical-critical methods emerged in Europe, nineteenth-century commentators like Heinrich Meyer viewed the *Haustafeln* as expressions of a natural law that kept society ordered. Eurocentric hermeneutics frequently ignored the harsh realities of historical Roman slavery, choosing instead to romanticise the master-slave dynamic as a benevolent, paternalistic relationship (Meyer 312; Alford 411). This interpretive move directly served colonial interests. It framed colonisation not as violent, extractive exploitation, but as a providential civilising mission where colonised subjects owed obedience to their European "masters" as part of their Christian development (Kwok 72; Dube 89; Igwe *Ethics of the Colossian Code*69).

6. Pro-Slavery vs. Abolitionist Hermeneutics in European and American Slavery

The historical fluidity of Colossians 3:22–4:1 became a central ideological battleground during the era of transatlantic chattel slavery. Both pro-slavery defenders and abolitionists claimed the text supported their cause, displaying how diametrically opposed horizons of expectation produce contradictory exegesis from the same semantic data.

6.1. Pro-Slavery Hermeneutics

In the American South and British slave-holding colonies, pro-slavery theologians developed a highly literal, proof-texting hermeneutic rooted in common-sense realism (Noll 34; Harrill 122; Igwe *Ethics of the Colossian Code*19). Thinkers like James Henley Thornwell and Richard Furman argued that because the New Testament explicitly commanded slaves to obey their masters, the institution of slavery was sanctioned by God for all time. Furman, in his 1823 exposition to the Governor of South Carolina, explicitly cited the Colossians household codes to argue that "the right of holding slaves is clearly established in the Holy Scriptures, both by precept and example" (7). Thornwell expanded this by asserting that the domestic codes were immutable moral mandates, declaring that "to oppose slavery is to oppose the explicit revelation of God" (45).

The pro-slavery horizon of expectation was defined by racial hierarchy and economic dependency on cotton and tobacco (Genovese 23; Daly 67). Consequently, commentators like Thornton Stringfellow argued that the phrase "singleness of heart, fearing God" meant that an enslaved person's devotion to their owner was the highest expression of their religious duty (14). Planters even published the infamous "Slave Bible" (*Select Parts of the Holy Bible for the Use of the Negro Slaves in the British West India Islands*, 1807). This version systematically removed the book of Exodus, the book of Galatians, and other liberationist narratives while retaining Colossians 3:22. This deliberate editorial choice illustrates textual fluidity pushed to an extreme: changing the physical shape of the canon itself to enforce submission and pacify an enslaved workforce (Erasmus 41; Callahan 56; Igwe *Ethics of the Colossian Code* 19)

6.2. Abolitionist Hermeneutic

Conversely, abolitionists like Theodore Dwight Weld, Frederick Douglass, and Albert Barnes argued that transatlantic chattel slavery was fundamentally different from the Greco-Roman institutions addressed by Paul. Abolitionists focused on the ethical weight of Colossians 4:1: "Masters, treat your slaves justly and fairly, for you know that you also have a Master in heaven." They used a synthesis hermeneutic, reading individual verses through the broader biblical trajectory of love, justice, and human dignity (Weld 34; Tise 112; Igwe *Ethics of the Colossian Code* 19).

Weld asserted that the systemic violence, racial prejudice, total denial of human rights, and permanent hereditary nature of American slavery violated the command to act "justly and fairly" (34). He argued that if a master denied an enslaved person wages, education, and legal protection, that master was actively violating Colossians 4:1 and was under divine condemnation (Weld 38). Albert Barnes, in his radical notes on the New Testament, claimed that the principles laid out in Colossians would naturally undermine and eventually liquidate the institution of slavery if applied properly (204).

Douglass famously distinguished between the "Christianity of this land" (which used Colossians to justify chains) and the "Christianity of Christ" (which demanded universal justice) (97). Douglass argued that pro-slavery preachers were performing hermeneutical acrobatics to transform a gospel of liberty into a tool of human trafficking (99). The abolitionist reading shifted the focus away from the slave's duty to obey, placing it instead on the master's accountability to a higher heavenly Master. This reading turned the text into an implicit critique of the entire slave system (McKivigan 44; Emerson 81, Igwe *Ethics of the Colossian Code* 19).

7. Contemporary Nigerian Interpretations: Mainline vs. Pentecostal Hermeneutics

In contemporary Nigeria, Colossians 3:22–4:1 remains highly relevant, but its socio-economic application has shifted completely. It is rarely read today as a defence of literal slavery. Instead, it is applied to labour relations, civic governance, corporate leadership, and spiritual warfare within a neo-liberal capitalist economy (Ukpong 23; Asaju 45; Igwe ‘A Hermeneutical Evaluation of the Use of Household Codes’ 54). Mainline denominations (Anglican, Catholic, Methodist) generally view the passage through an ethical lens, utilising it as a guide for workplace dynamics to urge employers to pay fair wages and employees to work with productivity and integrity (Manus 89; Ndiokwere 112; Igwe, ‘Colossian Code and Nigerian Anti-corruption Crusade’ 168).

7.1. The Roman Catholic Hermeneutic: Social Doctrine and Subsidiarity

The Roman Catholic Church in Nigeria interprets Colossians 3:22–4:1 through the robust framework of Catholic Social Teaching (CST), relying on papal encyclicals like Leo XIII’s Rerum Novarum and John Paul II’s Laborem Exercens. Rather than decoupling the slave's obedience (3:22) from the master's accountability (4:1), Catholic theologians use an integrative hermeneutic that views both verses as a call for human dignity and fair labour practices (Obinomen 74; Ihejirika 112).

Catholic exegesis in Nigeria explicitly reframes the "Master in heaven" from Colossians 4:1 as a warning against the exploitation of workers. The Catholic Bishops' Conference of

Nigeria (CBCN) frequently references the ethical imperative of Colossians 4:1 to condemn structural injustices in the Nigerian state, such as the unpaid salaries of civil servants, the absence of a liveable minimum wage, and the casualisation of corporate labour (CBCN 14).

Furthermore, the Catholic reading applies the principle of subsidiarity and the "preferential option for the poor" to this text. Commentators like Anthony Obinomen argue that while Colossians 3:23 ("whatever you do, do it heartily, as to the Lord") mandates an honest work ethic for employees, it cannot be used by employers to pathologise or silence workers who protest unsafe working conditions or systemic corporate greed (82). The text is thus used as a balancing mechanism: it demands absolute vocational integrity from the citizen or worker, while holding corporate executives and state actors strictly accountable to the divine justice of God.

7.2. The Anglican Hermeneutic: Civic Order, Stewardship, and Ecclesiastical Hierarchy

The Anglican Church of Nigeria, operating within a deeply liturgical and institutional framework, reads Colossians 3:22–4:1 through the traditional three-legged stool of Scripture, Tradition, and Reason. Historically tied to the Church Missionary Society (CMS), the Anglican Church views this passage as a manual for civic order, institutional stewardship, and the preservation of healthy societal structures (Oshitelu 55; Ndegwah 94).

Anglican homiletics focus on the concepts of vocation (calling) and stewardship. Preachers interpret working "not with eye-service, as men-pleasers" as a call for national transformation, targeting the systemic corruption and civil service lethargy (the Nigerian factor) that hinders public infrastructure. In this view, accountability to Christ elevates mundane professional duties into an act of worship (Akaenyi 118).

Simultaneously, the Anglican tradition reads Colossians 4:1 as a mandate for leadership accountability within both the state and the church hierarchy. Because the Church of Nigeria operates with a highly structured episcopacy, bishops and clergy frequently use this passage during synod charges to remind leaders that institutional authority is a trust. According to Chukwuma Akaenyi, the text warns bishops, politicians, and business owners alike that their authority over subordinates is subordinate to the heavenly Kyrios (122). This dual emphasis ensures that the text stabilises institutional life without endorsing the absolute, unchecked exploitation of those on the lower rungs of the socio-economic ladder (Igwe, Igwe, ‘Colossian Code and Nigerian Anti-corruption Crusade’ 169; Igwe, Igwe, ‘Colossian Code and Development in Nigeria’ 168).

7.3. Nigerian Pentecostal Paradigms for Interpreting Colossians 3.22-41

In contrast, Nigerian Pentecostalism—dominated by Prosperity Theology, the Word of Faith movement, and prophetic deliverance ministries—reads this text through a highly transactional and spiritualised lens (Ojo 67; Kalu 104). Below is an analysis of how seven prominent Nigerian pastors interpret and apply the themes of submission, mastery, and labour found in this passage.

7.3A. David Oyedepo (Living Faith Church / Winners Chapel)

David Oyedepo reads Colossians 3:22–25 through the lens of covenant prosperity and divine labour. For Oyedepo, "heart-singleness" and working "as to the Lord" are spiritual keys to escaping poverty. He teaches that grumbling against an employer blocks God's financial blessings. In his book *Understanding Financial Prosperity*, Oyedepo argues that hard work is a spiritual rubric; hence, obedience to supervisors is a form of seed-sowing that guarantees a supernatural harvest (88). The master-slave dynamic is modernised into an employee-employer relationship where absolute productivity leads to divine promotion and financial breakthrough (Oyedepo, 'Pillars of Destiny' 142).

7.3B. Jerry Eze (Streams of Joy International)

Jerry Eze, known for the global digital prayer ministry NSPPD, interprets the text through a prophetic and devotional lens. Eze focuses on the phrases "not with eye-service" and "the reward of the inheritance." On his daily broadcasts, he frequently emphasises that human promotion does not come from trying to please earthly bosses through flattery, but from secret devotion and integrity (Eze, *Supernatural Shift* 34). For Eze, God is the ultimate Judge who bypasses unfair earthly "masters" to reward those who serve with a pure heart, transforming a workplace struggle into a testimonies-generating altar.

7.3C. W.F. Kumuyi (Deeper Christian Life Ministry)

W.F. Kumuyi approaches Colossians 3:22–4:1 from a traditional holiness perspective. Kumuyi emphasises the literal command to obey "in all things" (provided it does not violate God's word). He frames this as an indispensable sign of a sanctified life. In his systemic Bible teachings, Kumuyi asserts that a Christian worker who engages in eye-service, strikes, or workplace protest has compromised their salvation (Kumuyi, *The Christian Worker* 56). He demands absolute submission to authority structures, teaching that suffering injustice under a harsh employer reflects the suffering of Christ and purifies the believer's character (Kumuyi, *Holiness for Every Day* 112).

7.3D. E.A. Adeboye (Redeemed Christian Church of God - RCCG)

E.A. Adeboye frequently uses this passage during his workplace and Holy Ghost Congress teachings to address the theme of divine governance. Adeboye highlights Colossians 4:1, warning political leaders, CEOs, and church leaders that their power is on loan from a "Master in heaven." Adeboye uses his grandfatherly, teaching style to balance submission with responsibility (Adeboye, *Lessons from the School of Prayer* 73). He counsels workers to remain loyal to their organisations while reminding employers that mistreating workers or withholding salaries invites divine judgment on their businesses.

7.3E. Apostle Johnson Suleman (Omega Fire Ministries)

Johnson Suleman interprets this passage through a warfare and prophetic deliverance model. While acknowledging the need for workplace ethics, Suleman often focuses on the spiritual deliverance of the worker from abusive employers. He frames oppressive bosses as spiritual "taskmasters" operating in the spirit of Pharaoh (Suleman, *Defeating the Powers of the Night* 89). For Suleman, Colossians 3:25 ("he that doeth wrong shall receive for the wrong") is a prophetic promise that God will judge malicious employers who exploit their subordinates, release demonic arrows, or manipulate promotions.

7.3F. Paul Enenche (Dunamis International Gospel Centre)

Paul Enenche combines the prosperity approach with an emphasis on character and excellence. Enenche teaches that "eye-service" is a manifestation of a compromised character that limits a believer's potential. He posits that practicing the principles of Colossians 3:23—doing all things excellently as unto God—makes a Christian indispensable in their career (Enenche, *30 Secrets to the Top* 45). In Enenche's view, professional excellence is a form of lifestyle evangelism that forces secular employers to acknowledge the God of the believer.

7.3G. Abel Damina (Power City International)

Abel Damina provides a distinct contrast to the other Pentecostal leaders through his Christocentric, grace-centred hermeneutic. Damina rejects the moralistic and transactional readings of this passage. He argues that the *Haustafeln* must be understood strictly within their historical context as ancient societal codes, rather than as timeless formulas for financial wealth or physical promotion (Damina 44). Damina teaches that the believer's identity is fully secure in Christ's finished work. Therefore, Colossians 3:22–4:1 should not be used by modern preachers to guilt believers into legalistic submission or to promise material riches based on human effort (Damina 78).

8. Findings

The textual and historical analysis reveals three main findings:

1. **Contextual Fluidity:** The meaning of Colossians 3:22–4:1 is directly tied to the reader's "horizon of expectation." The text shifts from an ancient social accommodation to a colonial weapon, an abolitionist tool of resistance, and finally a corporate-spiritual manual.
2. **Selective Hermeneutics:** Dominant power structures historically isolated Colossians 3:22 to enforce compliance, while marginalised or resistance groups leaned heavily on the reciprocal accountability of Colossians 4:1.
3. **The Neo-Liberal Pentecostal Shift:** In contemporary Nigeria, the text has been adapted to mirror economic realities. It is used to pathologise systemic labour exploitation as either a spiritual character test (Kumuyi), a prosperity seed (Oyedepo), or a target for warfare deliverance (Suleman).

9. Implications of the Study

The interpretive history of Colossians 3:22–4:1 offers several key insights for modern biblical scholarship and theology:

1. **The Ideological Danger of Literalism:** When readers ignore a text's historical context and apply its literal commands directly to a new era, the Bible can easily be weaponised to defend oppressive structures like slavery or colonial rule (Gottwald 54; Fiorenza 112).
2. **The Mirror Effect of Socio-Economic Context:** The vast difference between how a Western colonialist, a nineteenth-century enslaved person, and a contemporary Nigerian Pentecostal preacher read the same text shows that the reader's social location deeply shapes how they find meaning in Scripture (Mosala 77; West 93; Igwe, 'Colossian Code and Development in Nigeria' 168).
3. **The Transformation of Economic Systems:** The shift from literal slavery to modern workplace employment shows how biblical language can adapt to new economic realities. However, it also warns against turning ethical instructions into transactional prosperity formulas that obscure structural injustices (Cone 122; Boff 89; Igwe, 'Colossian Code and Development in Nigeria' 168).

10. Recommendations

Based on these insights, this study suggests the following actions for researchers and religious communities:

- **Adopt Socio-Historical Hermeneutics:** Seminaries and theological institutions should move away from isolated proof-texting. Instead, they should teach contextual, socio-historical methods that look at why a text was written before deciding how it applies today.
- **Develop a Liberationist Work Ethic:** Preachers should use Colossians 3:22–4:1 to address modern labour issues in a balanced way. Rather than just demanding that workers submit, they should also emphasise the ethical demands placed on employers and leaders in Colossians 4:1.
- **Encourage Critical Reception Awareness:** Faith communities should teach the history of how the Bible has been interpreted over time. Understanding how Scripture was used both to support and fight slavery can help believers discern when a text is being misused to exploit others today.

11. Conclusion

The reception history of Colossians 3:22–4:1 highlights the fluidity of biblical interpretations, demonstrating that applications of scriptural texts are not fixed in a historical vacuum but is continuously realised at the intersection of text and the reader's "horizon of expectation." From its inception as an ancient household code that structurally accommodated Greco-Roman imperial realities while subtly subverting them Christologically, the text has undergone profound ideological transformations. In the Patristic era, it was spiritualised to preserve civic order in a newly Christianised Roman Empire. During the colonial era and the transatlantic slave trade, its literal commands were isolated and weaponised by pro-slavery ideologues to validate racial capitalism, a process starkly illustrated by the radical redactions of the 1807 Slave Bible. Conversely, abolitionists successfully reclaimed the text by using a trajectory-based synthesis that prioritised the structural accountability of Colossians 4:1 over blind submission.

In contemporary Nigeria, this fluid interpretive dance manifests within a complex neo-liberal economic climate. The text has been effectively modernised from a manual on literal bondage into an ethical blueprint for corporate and civic relationships. Mainline denominations, particularly Roman Catholic and Anglican bodies, read the passage through institutional, liturgical, and social doctrines that balance personal work ethics with a structural critique of leadership and economic exploitation. In stark contrast, the highly individualistic and transactional horizons of Nigerian Pentecostalism split the text into specialised theological avenues. It is used to fuel prosperity doctrines (Oyedepo), spiritualise corporate promotion

(Eze), mandate total submission as a test of holiness (Kumuyi), enforce ethical governance (Adeboye), execute spiritual warfare against oppressive corporate entities (Suleman), demand professional excellence (Enenche), or it is historicised and stripped of legalistic weight through a Christocentric lens of grace (Damina).

This study proves that biblical texts operate as active sites of ideological negotiation. The hermeneutical choices made by reading communities are rarely neutral; they either legitimise existing hierarchies or provide the ethical vocabulary necessary to critique them. Recognising this interpretive fluidity is vital for the modern church, ensuring that ancient scriptures are not misused as tools of psychological or economic subjugation, but are instead applied as principles of holistic justice, human dignity, and mutual accountability under a common heavenly Master.

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