

THE CONCEPT OF SLAVERY IN PAUL'S LETTER TO PHILEMON AND THE IMPLICATIONS TO HUMAN TRAFFICKING IN NIGERIA

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Abstract

Human trafficking is the trade in humans for the purpose of commercial sex work, forced labour, organ harvesting and extraction of tissues. It is a form of modern day slavery. It was allowed in Paul's time in the case of Onesimus and Philemon (Philemon 1). Human trafficking which is modern slavery has become a very lucrative business in Nigeria. Cases of abduction, kidnapping and trafficking in persons make headlines in newspapers on weekly basis. It has been difficult to bring this menace to a halt because of the national and international connections between the human traffickers. Degenerating economic situation in the country have worsened the living conditions of people and thereby leading youths into this inhuman and satanic business. Victims are exploited and many lives have been lost while perpetrators make massive gains. This paper discovered that unlike in biblical times when slavery was allowed, slave trading has been abolished in Nigeria and human trafficking is a crime. Therefore anyone caught in the act of slave trade or human trafficking is committing a grievous offense liable to capital punishment. Human trafficking is violation of a person's right. Paul in his letter to Philemon pleaded with Philemon to accept his runaway servant (Onesimus) not as a slave anymore but as a brother who is profitable to him. No good person will treat his brother wickedly. This paper therefore recommends that human traffickers should desist from this crime against humanity. Severe punishments should be meted on anyone caught in the act of human trafficking.

Keywords: Human trafficking, slavery, Onesimus, Philemon, kidnapping

Introduction

In Nigeria, thousands of people have lost their lives through different forms of human trafficking. Some have been kidnapped and had their organs harvested, some killed for ritual purposes, others have lost their lives through forced labour, prostitution and severe torture. Youths nowadays want to make quick money without labour. News of ritual killings makes headlines on weekly basis in Newspapers and social media in Nigeria.

The Bible frowns at desecration of lives. However, the punishment for murder is death. In Paul's letter to Philemon, he advised Philemon to welcome Onesimus, his runaway slave as a brother. No sane person will treat his brother wickedly. This is an important food for thought and lesson every human should learn. Females are mostly victims of human trafficking. They are forced into prostitution while the men are forced to work under outrageous conditions. Human trafficking in the contemporary society can be likened to slavery in Paul's time. It is slavery in disguise. There is no social stratification in terms of human trafficking. Anyone can fall a victim, whether poor or rich.

This paper studies the concept of slavery in Paul's letter to Philemon and the implications to human trafficking in Nigeria. A descriptive approach is employed because of the nature of the topic to examine and accurately describe the menace and its implications socially and economically.

The Concept of Human Trafficking

Human trafficking is the trade in humans, most commonly for the purpose of sexual slavery, forced labour or for extraction of organs or tissue including surrogacy and ova removal.⁴⁰ Human trafficking is regarded as the modern slavery by some scholars. Human trafficking just like in time past (transatlantic slave trade) is still prevalent in our society. The major market of human trafficking is Africa,. People kidnap, harvest organs and export to Europe, America and other parts of the world. Onyezuigbo⁴¹ posits that human trafficking is the possession or trading of humans for the purpose of prostitution through force or threat. It is however a successful and 54money-making venture. Like slave trade, child trafficking is business that has internal and external dimensions. In internal form of child trafficking, children are procured to work as domestic servants. These domestic servants are commonly called house helps in Nigeria, mostly children from poor families and uneducated parents. These parents give them up for servitude with the hope of making extra money which is not

⁴⁰Haken Jeremy, "Transnational Crime in the Developing World" Global Financial Integrity.Retrieved, January 2018.

⁴¹ Euckay Onyeizugbo, "Child's Trafficking" *Afro Asian Journal of Social Sciences*, Vol. 2, No 23, (Quarter 111, 2011).

generally commensurate to the job done by the children. Their masters set the terms and conditions of their work as it suits them or according to their level of generosity as slavers. Some parents give children up for domestic servitude on condition that they will be well fed, clothed and trained in school. Although their master or mistress being 54

desperate to get a domestic servant agree to take care of them, feed them well, clothe and train them, yet rarely abide by agreement. Trafficking in persons has been existing for generations. It affects almost the entire world as one keeps seeing cases emerging on a regular basis. Mondira Dutta⁴² says that “whenever there is chaos in the society arising as a result of natural disaster, ethnic cleansing, political instability or any such abnormal situation, people in most vulnerable situation are the worst sufferers.” Natural disasters, in particular, do not restrict itself to administrative boundaries or to a particular race or community. The impact is felt by everyone.

The Concept of Slavery

Slavery has taken different forms and practiced from the earliest times. It was not uncommon in Biblical times. Paul and the apostles condoned it in their time. A slave is a human being bought and owned as a property by another and is even under the absolute control of the owner. Slavery is defined as an institution whereby human beings are deprived of their freedom and personal rights. In Nigeria, slavery was mostly practiced among the Igbo tribe. It is called “ohu” or “osu”.

The distinctive aim of slavery is forced labour. A master has the right to subject his slave to any form of slavery. Wayne Jackson opines that;

Slavery is an institution whereby human beings are divested of their freedom and personal rights; that is wholly subject to the will of another. Slavery has been practiced in varying degrees since the earliest of all ages. In Genesis 10:8ff, there is the record of Nimrod who was ‘a mighty hunter.’ The context suggests that he was a hunter of man; an ancient tyrant who enslaved others.⁴³

Slavery was not condemned in Paul’s time because they were not really maltreated as chattels like the case of the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade. The concept of slavery in the Ancient Near East is quite different from the form of slavery in existence today. The term was broader then since a slave could redeem himself out of slavery and even gain status as

⁴² Mondiraa Dutta, *Disaster and Human Trafficking*, (Springer, 2021), ix

⁴³ Wayne Jackson, What About the Bible and Slavery? Retrieved from; <https://www.christiancourier.com/articles/800-what-about-the-Bible-and-slavery>, 2009.

a Roman citizen. A king's servant could also be referred to as a slave. Abraham, the father of faith in the Old Testament owned slaves.

Slavery in the Old Testament

According to W.S. Bruce⁴⁴, a slave could be named a heir which as a rule occurred via adoption (Gen. 15:2-3) and indeed not only in the case of childlessness, but rather also in the place of the biological heir (Prov. 17:2). Abraham had a servant named Elieza (Gen. 15:2) who was the chief servant in his household and was in charge of all he possessed (Gen. 24:2).

To show that slavery was a common part of the Jewish social structure, M.J. Raphael a rabbi reveals:

Even on that most solemn and most holy occasion, slave holding is not only recognized and sanctioned as an integral part of the social structure, where it is commanded that the Sabbath of the Lord is to bring rest to the master, "thy male slave and thy female slave (Exodus 20:10; Deut. 5:14). But the property in slaves is placed under the name, protection as any other species of lawful property, when it is said, "thou shall not covet thy neighbor's house, or his field, or his male slave or his female slave or his ox or his ass, or anything that belonged to thy neighbor (Exod 20:17).⁴⁵

There exists a distinction between Jewish slaves and Gentile slaves based on Lev. 25:39-55. A Jewish slave was to be treated by his Jewish master as "a hired worker or a temporary resident." A Jew might become a slave in restitution for stealing (Exodus 22:3). As Jewish slave is not to be maltreated but treated with respect as a fellow Israelite, one who was delivered from the Egyptian slavery.

In Exodus 21:2, a slave can gain freedom in the seventh year and given the resources to begin a new life (Deut. 15:1-18). He could remain a slave if he so desires. There is a death penalty on anyone who kidnapped a person and force him into slavery (Exodus 21:16). Slaves who ran away from their masters were to be welcomed and not returned (Deut 23:15). Wealthy people in the Old Testament acquired slaves. Abraham acquired slaves in Gen. 12:16. Some of the slaves were born in his house (Gen. 14:14). God instructs the children of Israel not to engage in any form of work on the Sabbath day including their maids and men-servant. In Exodus 20:17, God warns "Do not lust after your neighbour's

⁴⁴ W.S. Bruce, *The Ethics of the Old Testament*, (Edinburgh: T and T Clark, 1895), 187-188.

⁴⁵ M. J. Raphael, *The Bible's View of Slavery*, (Lathrup: Jewish-American History Documentation Foundation, 2009), 5.

wife, his man-servant, his maid-servant, nor his oxen, his ass, or anything which is your neighbour.”

Slavery in the New Testament

The New Testament did not condemn slavery; rather slaves were advised to be obedient to their masters (Eph. 6). Jesus did not speak against slavery. Morton Smith states:

There is no single condemnation of slavery by Jesus in the entire gospels. Yet it is inconceivable that Jesus was unaware of slavery and the moral issue since Jesus lived in a world where slavery was common. There seem to have been revolts in Palestine and Jordan in Jesus' youth. There were immeasurable slaves of the Emperor and the Roman state; the Jerusalem temple owned slaves (one of them lost an ear in Jesus' arrest); all of the rich and many of the middle classes owned slaves. Yet Jesus never attacked the practice. He took the state of affairs for granted.⁴⁶

It is crystal clear that both Jesus and Paul did not condemn slavery. There ought to be cordial respect and mutual understanding between slaves and slave masters. According to the New Bible Dictionary⁴⁷ the main source of slavery were; birth, unwanted children who were available for anyone who wants to rear them, the sale of one's own children into slavery, voluntary slavery as a solution to problems such as debt, penal slavery, kidnapping and piracy, the traffic across the Roman frontiers. Jesus used the term slavery in his parables (Matt. 21:34, 22:3). Jesus repeatedly spoke of the relationship of the disciples to himself as that of servants to their Lord (Matt. 10:24; John 13:16). Jesus himself took up the role of a servant in John 13:4-17 by washing the feet of his servants, commending them to wash one another's feet.

In the household Churches, the membership included both masters and servants. In the new community of faith, human divisions and stratifications became useless (1Cor. 7:22, Gal. 3:28). Slaves are enjoined to please God by their service (Eph. 6:5-8). Masters on the other hand are to treat their slaves with restraint and equity because they also have a master in heaven they are accountable to.

In the ancient world, N.T. Wright and Michael F. Bird⁴⁸ are of the opinion that anyone could become a slave; all you had to do was to lose in a battle, or suffer a major business failure. They opine that slavery had nothing to do with ethnic background or skin colour. People could move up and down the social scale, depending on political stability, famine, disease,

⁴⁶ Morton Smith, *What the Bible Says*, (Columbia University, 1989), 143.

⁴⁷ New Bible Dictionary, (Downers Grove, Illinois: Inter-Varsity Press, 1996), 113.

⁴⁸ N.T. Wright and Michael F. Bird, *The New Testament in its World*, (North America: Zondervan Academic, 2019), 111

population, size and taxation. Wright and Bird⁴⁹ reveal that in Jesus' world, there were constant downward pressures, forcing people towards debt and destitution and in some cases even towards banditry or slavery as desperate strategies for survival.

Slavery in Philemon

Philemon was a wealthy Greek Christian whose house was used as a worship centre. He was married to Apphia and both gave birth to Archippus. This wealthy family possessed a slave named Onesimus. Onesimus had run away from his master to Rome where he met Paul. He got converted and became resourceful to the Apostle Paul. He might have told Paul his story. Paul resolved not to keep him to himself but to send him back to his master to ensure he was received in love and goodwill. This informed the writing of Paul's letter to Philemon.

Philemon reveals Paul's attitude to the institution of slavery. Onesimus, a runaway slave who came in contact with Paul while he was in prison was not encouraged to abscond from his master nor be rebellious but was encouraged by Paul to go back to his master. 'Paul's appeal echoes the gospel in urging Philemon to welcome his slave and give him a new status (verses 16-17) and in offering to pay his debt in his stead.'⁵⁰

Paul claims that Onesimus who used to be unprofitable to his master has now become useful through his conversion. Not only useful to his master but even to himself, Paul. What calls for an answer is the purpose of sending Onesimus back to Philemon. Paul also promised to pay back if peradventure he owed Onesimus. Philemon was referred to as a brother in the Lord and a co-labourer in the Lord's vineyard. Paul wanted Philemon to also accept Onesimus as a Christian brother the same way in which he would have welcomed Paul.

Paul's intention of sending Onesimus back was for reconciliation. In this view, Paul describes Onesimus' usefulness to Philemon in two folds. In serving Paul and meeting his needs in the prison in place of Philemon (Philemon 12-13) and secondly to stimulate his spiritual growth as iron sharpens iron. Paul did not want Philemon to see Onesimus as just a slave but as a spiritual brother and partner in God's work.

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⁴⁹ N.T. Wright and Michael F. Bird, 112

⁵⁰ Philip Johnston, *IVP Introduction to the Bible*, (Nottingham, England: Intervarsity Press 2006), 18

resolved not to keep him to himself but to send him back to his master and ensure he was received in love and goodwill. This informed the writing of Paul's letter to Philemon.

Onesimus returned with the letter addressed to his master. At his return, Paul did not want Philemon to take drastic measures, but instead treat Onesimus as a person. Because the Roman law allowed the owner of a runaway slave to go as far as executing them. Most slaves were employed as domestic servants in homes and had easier lives than slaves working in the farms, or mines or on ships. Slavery could be very cruel in the Roman Empire, and revolt severely punished. Professional slave catchers were hired to hunt down runaways, with advertisements containing praise descriptions of fugitives being publicly posted and offering rewards⁵¹.

Human Trafficking in Nigeria

Hardship and economic instability in Nigeria paved way for human trafficking. In a bid to struggle for survival, some women embarked on trafficking for sex. Nigerian girls were exported to Italy and other African and European counties in the 1980s in a bid for survival. Children who are mostly disabled and or from very poor homes are trafficked into organized begging. The only reward for these children are daily meals while their masters make money from them. They are called "almajiris" in the Northern part of Nigeria. These children are denied access to education.

Women and youths including children are most vulnerable to human trafficking. Human trafficking is done locally and internationally. The victims can be moved from one location to another. Shashi Punam⁵² cites Article 3, paragraph (a) of the Protocol to prevent, suppress and punish trafficking in persons as he defines trafficking in persons as the recruitment, transportation, transfer, harbouring or receipt of persons by means of the threat or use force or coercion, of abduction, of fraud, of deception, of the abuse of power, or of position or of vulnerability, or of receiving of payments or of benefits to achieve the consent of a person having control over another person for the purpose of exploitation. Punam⁵³ says that in 2015, 5544 cases of human trafficking were reported as stated in a study by the National Human Trafficking Resource Centre.

⁵¹ Andrea Lawrence, What is Slavery and How do We Stop It? Understanding the Book of Philemon, <https://discover.hubpages.com/religion-philosophy/Understanding-the-Book-of-Philemon> on 25/09/22 (2017).

⁵² Shashi Punam, *Human Trafficking: Causes and Implications*, Retrieved from: (<https://www.researchgate.net/publication/338457522>, January 2018), 11.

⁵³ Shashi Punam, *Human Trafficking: Causes and Implications*, Retrieved from: (<https://www.researchgate.net/publication/338457522>, January 2018), 7.

In states such as Anambra, Enugu, Imo, Abia, Ondo, and Lagos, there are hideouts in the form of hospitals and orphanages where pregnant girls are kept pending delivery. Upon delivery, the babies are sold. This is called "baby factory". The police and army have been able to arrest some miscreants running this illicit business in Nigeria in time past. The Federal Government of Nigeria has not relented in its efforts to nab and prosecute human traffickers.

Dutta posits that human trafficking is a harsh crime against humanity. This is because victims are lured or abducted from their comfort zones. Human trafficking is a humanitarian concern for governance, international institutional collaboration and law. Trafficking in persons affects almost the entire races.⁵⁴ The Bible disapproves of the abuse of human sexuality by stating in Lev. 19:29 that we should not disgrace our daughters by making them prostitutes.

Effects of Human Trafficking

1. It leads to illicit adoption.
2. It engenders forced marriages.
3. It leads to sex trafficking and prostitution.
4. It leads to diseases and untimely death.
5. It leads to forced labour.
6. It leads to violence.
7. It leads to sex slavery of minors.
8. It leads to child soldiers.

Significance of Paul's Letter to the Contemporary Society

This letter penned to Philemon is of great importance to the present Christians. Paul served as an ambassador of peace who forestalled the cordial relationship between Philemon and his run away servant. Christians should serve as agents of peace and reconciliation and not to fuel crisis. Sin pushes people away from the Lord but like Paul found Onesimus, Jesus finds the sinners and works in them to make them conform to his likeness. Christ makes intercession for sinners. Paul mediated between Philemon and Onesimus to bring forgiveness. He maintained the prevailing system of the Graeco-Roman world which does not mean abolition of slavery but encouraging brotherly love and forgiveness. Some scholars posit that Paul's primary aim of writing to Philemon is to have him release Onesimus to him who was useful to him for the purpose of the gospel. In Paul's letter to Philemon, he did not outrightly condemn slavery but fostered a peaceful co-existence.

⁵⁴ Mondira Dutta, *Disaster and Human Trafficking*, (Springer, 2020), 26.

Though in Col. 4:1, he warned slave masters that they too have a master in heaven who would judge them.

Throughout history, slavery has been practiced and accepted by many cultures and religions in different countries. In the Igbo culture, some people are still regarded as “osu” or “ohu”, that is, slaves. In time past, some communities have tried to abolish the practice but have not succeeded. The modernized slavery in our society is known as human trafficking. The government has been making efforts to rescue people from human traffickers. The form of slavery in the biblical time is not exactly the same with the practice of human trafficking. In our society, the word, servant is lighter than slavery. A servant has some rights than a slave and can decide to leave at anytime when he or she is fed up serving. Paul puts it to masters that they have a responsibility towards their servants. Servants are also responsible moral beings who are to fear God. This letter reminds Christians that God’s revelation to humanity is personal.

Conclusion

Pauline thought on slavery as depicted in his letter to Philemon is such a remarkable one theologically. It shows the values of Christian and godly relationship that is expected to exist between a master and a slave, an employer and employee. In this letter of Paul, one can see that slavery is like servanthood. A servant is to respect and obey his master. On the other hand, the master is to treat his slave with love and compassion. The slave in Philemon was asked to go back to his master and the master was to receive him back as a brother. This shows that we all stand equal before God for God is God who created us, we are brothers and sisters. This epistle also teaches forgiveness.

Paul did not criticize slavery explicitly because it was allowed in his days but he warns slave masters to take care of them in Col. 4:1 because they have a master in heaven who will judge them. Onah⁵⁵ posits that “the Bible condemns slavery in the form of marginalization and exploitation of the poor”. In the Old Testament, Amos was emphatic in his condemnation of exploitation of the poor and needy in his days. He prophesied doom for those involved in this wicked act (Amos 8:48).

Slavery was part of the culture of the Jews. The Bible does not contain any direct call to abolish slavery. Both slave and free are called upon to receive the gospel of Jesus Christ. Paul gives a soothing injunction in Gal. 4:7 “Therefore, you are no longer a slave but a son,

⁵⁵ N. G. Onah, “Human Trafficking in Nigeria: A Christian Response” *Nsukka Journal of Religions and Cultural Studies*, Vol. 3. No1, 2010:152.

and if a son, then an heir of God through Christ.” Those living in sin are regarded as slaves to sin. This means that sin has control over such life.

Slave trading has been abolished in our time. Therefore, anyone who is indulging in the act of slavery is committing grievous offense against the law. Christians are not to treat people unjustly no matter the position one occupies. The Bible did not condemn slavery but condemns the abuse of slaves. Christianity is the way of peace and love. We are to love one another and treat others the way we will want them to treat us. Human trafficking is dehumanizing. The Church, government, Non Governmental Organizations (NGOS) should all make efforts to see that it is brought to an end.

The Church today in Nigeria has the responsibility to stand against slavery and human trafficking. She should fight against institutionalized injustice like George Whitefield, John Wesley, John Newton, and William Wilberforce among others who fought for the abolition of slave trade during the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade.

This research discovered that economic and social difficulties are the root causes of human trafficking and slavery. Paul's approach in the case of Onesimus and Philemon encourages reintegration and rehabilitation. This paper however recommends that it is only through the collaborative efforts of religious organizations, Humanitarian Organizations and Law Enforcement Agencies that human trafficking and slavery in all its forms can be eradicated. The factors that encourage slavery and human trafficking having been identified should be seriously checked and dealt with.

Recommendations

1. The agencies that promote human trafficking should be kicked out. Traffickers when caught should be severely punished.
2. Law makers should enact laws that will put a check on the incessant migration of people for greener pastures which is the major route to human trafficking.
3. The Church and government should take sensitization on dangers of human trafficking to the grassroots seriously (schools, churches, markets, remote areas and homes) and to educate youths on the importance of hard work and not relying on empty promises. Creating awareness is a preventive measure.
4. Proper and effective security checks should be mounted at the borders of Nigeria.
5. The government should work with psychologists, psychiatrists, guardian counselors and rehabilitation agencies to work on the victims of human trafficking in order to restore their mental and emotional well being.

6. There should be poverty alleviation programs for females and youths who are mainly the targets of human traffickers. Reducing the vulnerability of potential victims through social and economic development is paramount. Shashi Punam⁵⁶ suggests enhancing job opportunities for women by facilitating business opportunities for small and medium sized enterprises (SMEs). Organizing SME training courses and targeting them in particular high risk groups.

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⁵⁶ Shashi Punam, *Human Trafficking: Causes and Implications*, Retrieved from: (<http://www.researchgate.net/publication/338457522>).,11.