

THE OTHER SIDE OF SLAVE HISTORY: UNTOLD STORIES AND HIDDEN TRUTHS

INTRODUCTION

In August 2022 I was greatly honoured to be invited by CWM to attend the launch of The Onesimus Project in Bethelsdorp, South Africa. As an African, and as leading the All Africa Conference of Churches, I was greatly moved by the event. I appreciated the way CWM decided to continue its transformation process from the London Missionary Society into CWM, by also addressing its legacies of mission complicity with colonialism, slavery and racism. I thought it is a very bold decision to look oneself in the mirror, be honest about oneself and one's history, and make a bold commitment to address legacies of these evils. I committed to bring this matter strongly into the All Africa Conference of Churches as we move together towards life, justice, peace and dignity.

On that occasion, in my short comment, I raised the issue of the forgotten side of slave trade and history, by focusing on only some parts of the world, and being ready to point fingers on only a few continents. There are other sides of the history which have not been properly addressed and have been blacked out of the history of the evil of slavery, particularly African slave trade.

Today, I want to focus on this side of slave history, and call for more self-reflection of us as Africans, as we move forward to seek justice, restoration and reconciliation. In the first part of my intervention today, I will touch briefly on what we know about slavery in general, and the work we are trying to do to address the issues. Secondly, I will raise the issues of the forgotten truths and other sides of the history of slavery. Third and last, I will summarize the

issues and relate them to the current fight against modern day slavery as well as reparations for the past evils.

SLAVERY: AN EVIL OF HUMANITY OVER CENTURIES

While slavery is totally against God's will to humanity, created in God's image, it is sad that since the fall of humankind, the evil of slavery has been part of the history of humanity.

Looking at the Bible itself, one wonders how in the world was slavery for so many centuries almost seen and experienced as part of life. Why is there in the Bible not so clear condemnation of slavery outright? Why was it like normal that the people of Israel were also enslaved in Egypt? Why do we have so many Bible references and stories of slavery being as part of life, even with admonition to slaves not to revolt against their slaveowners (masters and mistresses?) Even the way Paul treats Onesimus, is transformative but not combative, not condemning slavery as such but putting a Christian faith on it—with redemption and equality under the cross.

Nevertheless, just as there have been many other evils which humanity has **committed** against its some members of society, injustice is an outright NO in the spirit and letter of Scriptures. It negates the purpose of creation. It is contrary to the image of God we know, in which every human being was created. One of the intriguing characteristics of God is that he decides not to punish evil doers on the spot, and let's them continue in their evil acts. I think this is one of those, like many other injustices. God decides not to intervene directly to

stop evils, but continues to demand justice from his creatures. He demands repentance and reconciliation. And promises justice, finally.

Indeed, if one wants to justify slavery, one has plenty in the Bible to do so. I am sure that the slave owners and traders could very easily use the Bible to justify enslavement. One needs to look only at the heroes in the Bible, who were slave owners. Abraham, the famous kings, Job, and others were actually slave owners. God did not punish them for their enslaving others. In fact there are Bible verses which show that among God's blessings, which God gave people, were, e.g.: the servant of Abraham presented the CV of Abraham during courtship for his son by saying: "***I am Abraham's servant. The Lord has greatly blessed my master, and he has become wealthy; he has given him flocks and herds, silver and gold, male and female slaves, camels and donkeys. (Gen 24:34-35.)*** Clearly, far from condemnation, slaves, both male and female were presented in the same category as silver and gold, camels and donkeys, as a sign of affluence. And this continued during the slavery in the last centuries. No wonder the great leaders of the church and society in the so-called "Christian world" saw no conflict between slave ownership and their faith. They could find biblical justification of it. That is why at the infamous Elmina Slave Castle in Ghana, the chapel was right above the male slave dungeons where African people were crammed into the hold, under chains, waiting to be shipped and sold. And in the movie "Roots", one clip shows the owner up the chapel praying and thanking God for the "cargo", with screams and groans of the African people rising from the dungeon below the chapel.

THE EARLY AFRICAN SLAVERY

African societies practiced slavery over centuries. But the slavery in African communities were just as the other continents. Localized incidents of enslaving those people who were either regarded as inferior in society, or those who fell into debt, or prisoners of war. There were legal provisions of how one acquires a slave, and how to deal with the slaves. Indeed, there were some who were sold, or submitted themselves into slavery, as a way of settling some liability issues. It also happened in Africa like we hear the story of Joseph in the Bible being sold by his brothers in order to get rid of him because of envy.

In my survey on literature on this phenomenon, reveals that African slavery had certain characteristics which are seen also in the Old Testament. For example, slavery, while not consensual for the slave, did treat slaves with dignity. They were a special, low-class people who definitely suffered from their freedom being taken away. They worked more, and suffered the plight of not owning anything. They were indeed “owned” by other people. But, as we see in the Bible, they became an essential part of the family, though nevertheless segregated. That is why it is said, female slaves were more expensive than male, because they were needed as wives. They were not subjected to inhumane treatment and their lives mattered. They were normally not resold and resold as commodities. They were not treated as currency. Most important, there were channels of liberation, redemption which someone, even the slaves themselves, were able to go through and regain their freedom. And many did.

But the European enslavement of Africans took a different character and form, which makes it unique.

EUROPEAN AND ARAB ENSLAVEMENT OF AFRICANS—A NEW LEVEL OF INJUSTICE

While it is true that slavery has been part of the historical evils of all humanity, and no country or culture where it has never been practiced, the plight of African slavery has no equals. No other people in the world, or continent, has suffered so much and for so long.

When the Europeans found out about Africa, starting with the Portuguese, the story of slavery changed. Landing first in Cape Verde in the 15th century, continuing in all of West Africa, they soon discovered that there were very able, strong, people in Africa who they needed for work. Very soon, as the political power shifted from country to country in Europe, the interest in African enslavement advanced and took new characteristics.

The Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade is arguably the longest, the most brutal, the most savage we currently know. It involved so many countries, all falling into temptation of enslavement because it was seen as normal and good business. The following characteristics are unique for this form.

One, it was commercial. It is for the first time that regardless of why the slaves were caught in the first place, now they were being sold and bought as commodities. European countries needed labour. So just as people bought farm implements, human beings were part of the equation. Europeans did buy people in order to send them to farms far away, where they were sold to farm owners, and farm owners exchanged them for finished goods in the Americas or the Caribbean (sugar being the most lucrative, and later cotton). The ships

which brought slaves, were packed with these goods and sent to Europe. And from Europe, the ships brought finished goods like guns and textiles to exchange for slaves.

Second it was large scale. No other place in history has seen so many of its people enslaved like the Africans. While it is difficult to state for sure the numbers, slave trade became so large that we are talking about millions. I know no other place in the world where we have legacies of so many “slave markets”, “slave castles”, dungeons to house so many of them, etc.

Third, it was inter-continental. People were moved away from their lands, making sure any relationship or memory or identity of the homeland was severed permanently.

Fourth, it was racist. This is the most enduring characteristic. While in the past and in other continents slavery was among the people, for social-economic and legal basis, they were the same people or neighbours of the enslavers. Because of the culture which was regarded as “uncivilized”, and because of the dark pigmentation of the skin of the Africans, they were not regarded as equal human beings, even after they were free. They were treated with no dignity. They were simply goods, commodities. Some theologies were developed which were basically racist in nature. It is for this reason that the African slaves, and by extension all Africans, have been subjected to injustice which we do not hear anywhere else in the history of humankind. They were called names, not by their category as slaves, but by their race. Slavery became synonymous with “black”, using derogatory names. Even after one was liberated or liberated themselves, their social and legal status as slaves ending, they retained the derogatory social classification which was based on race. They were never

integrated in society, based not on their economic, educational, or social standing, but based on race.

Fifth, it was brutal. So many died on the way (I have read so many different statistics and estimations). So many were killed just by being unable to proceed on the caravan, or became ill, or were too weak. The torture, with every slave city having a special place for public torture and humiliation of disobedient or resisting slaves is one sign of this. Even more disturbing are images of shackles, large pieces of wood on the necks, chains in legs and arms, even “branding by fire”; they are just disgusting. We know how the black people were treated in the plantations they were sold into, including severing of their body parts, etc.

Sixth, it was the longest. I do not know any other people who have suffered such systemic enslavement as long as Africans. It took centuries and a lot of struggle to reach the legal abolition of slavery. Even after abolition, we see how much even abolition was seen by many as illegal and unjust.

Seventh, it coincided with colonization. Colonization of Africa formed a great catalyst for enhancement of slave trade, with colonizing powers (Britain, France, Holland, Belgium, Denmark) using their colonies to source for slaves as the other commodities. They shipped slaves to their other colonies in South Africa, West Indies and even the Indian ocean for the same economic reasons.

Lastly, it has the most permanent remnants in the world. Particularly in Americas, the Caribbean and parts of Europe, the remnants of slavery are everywhere. It is in terms of nations and cultures which through struggle and resistance we have whole countries like Haiti and Belize, as well as large sections of population in the Caribbean full of “People of African Descent.” But they continue to suffer under structural, racist segregation even after the legal ending of slavery and after the ships stopped bringing in chained slaves.

The most indelible remnant of slavery which is utmost disgusting is the racism, which was cemented by slavery. When we see the struggles and systemic injustice against people of African descent, even in countries like USA we are appalled. Visiting the places in Europe where “liberated slaves” were settled, and the racist attitude against them in countries like France, Belgium, and UK, racism is disgusting. And most troubling are rising tendencies of racist treatment of Africans, even those who have no slavery background. We see the appalling, racist mistreatment of African migrants and sportspeople in Europe, which is rising today when we thought that was the past. It is only African footballers who get “monkey sounds” and on whom bananas are thrown, when they miss a penalty in a European league! Their value, in the minds of racists, is their labour. Not as human beings. When they are no longer able to perform to the expectation of the “master” they become simply animals, disposable “equipment”.

THE OTHER SIDE OF SLAVERY TRAGEDY FOR AFRICA

In many studies, the focus on African slavery is on the Trans-Atlantic slave trade, with its triangular structure. However, that was not the only slavery Africans suffered. That very

well researched and known slavery was based primarily in West Africa, and somewhat Southern and Central Africa. But slavery and slave trade also took place in huge numbers in Eastern Africa. This one is not as well known and researched as the others.

I myself come from East Africa. I know and was taught about slave trade which was not through the Atlantic, but the Indian Ocean. Its epicentre was Zanzibar, now part of my country Tanzania. In 2018 I visited for the first time the Zanzibar slave trade museum. I was totally shocked. I would like to highlight a few things concerning this side of the slave trade.

First, it was developed and expanded as part of the same infrastructure of colonization.

Slaves were sourced and sold to colonial powers to work in their colonial plantations. Slaves were used as porters for goods from the hinterland to the coast—ivory, minerals, etc.

Those who survived the journey, after they delivered the goods, they were also for sale.

And Zanzibar became the central market place for slaves.

Second, slave traders there were not mainly European, but Arabs who had already settled as traders at the East African coast. Slaves became a new product line with growing demand in the inter-continental trade.

Third, it was as brutal as all others, probably even more. Beating, killing, raping, and torture were part of the whole way of treating people. We saw a lot of drawings which expressed the precarious and brutal treatment of slaves. There was no difference there.

Fourth, most of them were not shipped to the Atlantic. They were shipped through the Indian ocean to Arabic countries (Oman, Saud Arabia, middle East), and to the plantations in

the colonies in the islands of the Indian Ocean (Madagascar, Comoros, etc.) And many remained in these islands, including Zanzibar and Pemba and settled.

INTRIGUING DIFFERENCES WHICH NEED ATTENTION

The first question which came to my mind during the visit in the museum was, where are the remnants of these people. Inasmuch as disgusting the plight of the remnants of slavery, the people of African descent, is clear, I immediately became aware that at least, they are there and traceable. But the question is raised, and I think it needs further research, what happened to those who went to the East?

True, some were liberated and remained in the islands of their abode, and have become integrated in those societies. Zanzibar itself is one example. The population of Zanzibar is of people of mixed African ethnic groups who were brought to Zanzibar as porters, slaves and many were later liberated or redeemed themselves. They continued integrating with the others and now people cannot distinguish between those who were natives and those who came.

However, those are few. The intriguing question is what happened to those who went to the Middle East and other Arabic countries? If we go to Oman, which was also an epicentre of the Zanzibar based slave trade, what do we find there? If we go to Saud Arabia, Kuwait, Bahrain, Emirates, etc, what remnants of slaves do we see? Do we find people of mixed race who were results of intermarriages? Do we find “colonies” or settlements of people of

African Descent there? What happened to them? Did they all die on the way? Were they simply exterminated because they were not wanted?

Currently this question has started to be raised. And a big question is that why has scientific study not focused on this matter? Why do we have no trajectory of following up their routes apart from a few islands where we see some remnants?

I saw a documentary of Deutsch Welle, under the title: “East Africa's forgotten slave trade”, by Silja Fröhlich, from 08/22/2019 (<https://www.dw.com/en/east-africas-forgotten-slave-trade/a-50126759>). It raises the same question. The article says slave trade was there in Africa before a European set foot on the continent. Apart from the intra-African slavery which was part of the acceptable patterns of punishment and settlement of inter-ethnic wars, the commercialization was started by Arabs. In North Africa, they even enslaved non-Muslim white people in countries of North Africa as Islam expanded, selling them to Arabic countries. Later they started selling black Africans to Muslim countries of North Africa and Egypt. This stopped as Europe concurred North Africa. Then slaves were sold from Africa to Arabic countries.

The question is asked why we do not have African authors and historians focusing on this part of the trade? There could be different theories. But there is no justification why this side of slave trade remains hidden and not discussed. We should expect that scholars will also focus on this side, to see what actually happened and where the people ended up and why we do not have remnants there. What were the ways of extermination, or actually genocide, of the people who were forcibly sent into slavery there.

HARD TRUTHS

In our discussion on the evil of slavery, and in retrospection, there are some truths we need to highlight, even though some of them may be uncomfortable.

First: the evil of African Slave trade has resulted in widespread agony, stigmatization and injustice committed to people of African descent, because of racism which exacerbated the hatred against Africans. We see racism growing all over the world. While not specifically against Africans, but definitely Africans are the most affected.

Second, Africans themselves were protagonists of this trade. Sometimes you wonder who is more to blame, who actually enabled slavery? White people never had expeditions to African hinterland to catch slaves. They could not. And in some places where chiefs refused, there were not slaves sold. But sadly, in reality, Africans sold their fellow Africans to both Arabs and Europeans. It would be unfair and not correct, as it is often done, to depict Europeans and Arabs, as nations and races as the only protagonists of slavery. There is absolutely no justification to see Africans only as victims. Slavery was there before, but when it turned into commercial enterprise, African coastal kings and traders were as protagonists as Europeans and Arabs. Africans need to acknowledge this fact, particularly now when we are committing the same mistakes, of exporting our own people into slavery again.

Third, abolition of slave trade was fought for and achieved mainly by Europeans. It is therefore not correct to view Europe as enslavers only. Whether in Europe (especially UK

which was the most active) or in America, it was mainly people of European descent who started and campaigned against slavery. We know people like John Livingstone in Zambia and Tanzania, Alexander Falconbridge (died 1792) and his friend John Newton who later composed the hymn “Amazing Grace”, Thomas Clarkson (1760 - 1846); Elizabeth Heyrick (1769 - 1831) a female Quaker, legislator William Wilberforce (1759 - 1833), chair of the committee to abolish slavery Granville Sharp (1735 - 1813) were all “white”. Of course, former slaves were also very active, notably Haitian Toussaint Louverture (c.1743 - 1803) and Olaudah Equiano (1745 - 1797). In America, we should acknowledge that the civil war was mainly among white people, and the main contention was about slavery. There are many white people who gave their lives in battle to end slavery. Therefore, in our current fight against slavery, and for reconciliation and restoration or reparation, let us not fall into temptation of depicting this as “we against them” in racial terms. In all societies, there are people who are called by God to fight for justice. We need to build synergies, and networks of justice. People of God everywhere saw the injustice and called out distorted theology. It is a fight against systemic, racist injustice wherever and by whoever is doing it.

Third, the sad truth is that the whole systemic slavery has not ended. Abolition of slavery was a legal battle which took years. But even with it, injustices continued and slavery continues until today. Leaving alone racism and concomitant evils, the sad truth is that the same tragedy happens today to Africans. Unjust economic systems are causing systemic slavery. While people are no longer forcefully arrested and chained and put “slave castles”, people are treacherously lied to by their fellow people, in their own countries and villages, to be sold into slavery. These days they are promised jobs, good life, safe travel to go

somewhere else, because of the crumbling economies at home. But the end effect is the same: their dignity is violated, many die on the way to the “promised land”, and those who get there are simply in slavery. We hear stories of people dying in the Sahara, and those who get to Libya and Morocco find themselves in similar conditions like their forebearers: waiting for ships to cross the ocean. That today modern slaves do so by ignoring all warnings against the journey, even paying money to go there, defies logic. Instead of shipping companies, we have “recruitment companies”, fully supported by the governments in Africa, promoting modern-day slavery as “employment opportunity.” And people pay huge amounts to go into slavery, many of them dying on the way and violated in unimaginable ways and many returning in coffins.

Just as slavery then was seen as acceptable, legally protected trade, it is the same today. With modern slaves traveling on expensively acquired passports, or on faulty boats which are abandoned in the middle of the sea by the modern slave traffickers.

It is a time to respond to the call to do three things: One, to focus and discuss the other side of slavery which is pushed aside or ignored—where did the slaves into the Middle East and other Arabian countries end up? What happened to them? Two, let us acknowledge that slavery is evil, and Africa needs to acknowledge its complicity, just like CWM is doing, in order to lead to genuine repentance and liberation. Three, team with so many people around the world who are disgusted by systemic injustice and modern-day slavery, as we are fighting the same fight. Four, speak as loud as we can, to warn Africa that modern-day slavery is following the same trajectory as the past one, and we cannot play blind.