

CONCEPT OF SLAVERY IN PAUL'S LETTER TO PHILEMON: IMPLICATIONS FOR HUMAN TRAFFICKING IN NIGERIA

Abalogu, Divine Maduka, PhD

Department of Religion and Human Relations

Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka

dm.abalogu@unizik.edu.ng

+2348066672095

&

Okechukwu Orah, MDiv.

Department of Religion and Human Relations

Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka

orahokechukwu@gmail.com

+2348132519540

Abstract

Human trafficking is the trade in humans for commercial gain, which is modern-day slavery. Human trafficking has become a lucrative but illegal business in Nigeria. It is difficult to mitigate human trafficking due to its diaspora connections. Youths are being led into it due to economic frustration. Victims are exploited and killed while human traffickers make quantum gains. This paper examines the concept of slavery in Paul's Epistle to Philemon and explores its implications for addressing contemporary human trafficking in Nigeria. The paper investigates how Paul's appeal challenges the hierarchical norms of Greco-Roman slavery by emphasising Christian brotherhood, dignity, and reconciliation. This paper further connects the biblical principles to the modern crisis of human trafficking in Nigeria, where exploitation, forced labour, and modern slavery persist. This paper adopted a historical method with a descriptive approach. It included a review of the literature, as well as data from primary and secondary sources such as Journals and Textbooks. This paper discovered that Paul's ethical framework promotes human dignity and equality, offering a moral and theological foundation for Christian communities, Churches, and policymakers in combating human trafficking and advocating justice, freedom, and restoration for

victims in contemporary society. It also discovered that, unlike in biblical times when slavery was allowed, slave trading has been abolished in Nigeria, and human trafficking is a crime. This paper recommends that lawmakers should enact laws that will check the migration of people for greener pastures, which is the major route to human trafficking.

Keywords: Human Trafficking, Nigeria, Paul, Philemon, Slavery

Introduction

Thousands of people have lost their lives in Nigeria through human trafficking. Some have been kidnapped and their organs harvested for gain, some killed for ritual purposes, others have lost their lives through forced labour, prostitution and severe torture. Youths these days want to make fast money without labour and integrity. News of ritual killings makes headlines in Nigerian Newspapers and social media.

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 piece of food for thought and a 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 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 victim, whether poor or rich.

This paper examines the concept of slavery in Paul's Epistle to Philemon and explores its implications for addressing contemporary human trafficking in Nigeria. This paper adopted a historical method with a descriptive approach. It included a review of the literature, as well as data from primary and secondary sources such as Journals and Textbooks.

Human Trafficking: Concept

Human trafficking is the trade in humans, most commonly for sexual slavery, forced labour or the extraction of organs or tissue, including surrogacy and ova removal (Jeremy, 2018). Human trafficking is regarded as modern slavery by some scholars. Human trafficking, just like in the past (transatlantic slave trade), is still prevalent in our society. The major market for human trafficking is Africa. People kidnap, harvest organs, and export them to Europe, America, and other parts of the world (The Declaration of Istanbul on Organ Trafficking and Transplant Tourism (2008). Onyezuigbo (Onyeizugbo, 2011, p.111) posits that human trafficking is the possession or trading of humans for prostitution through force or threat. It is, however, a successful and 54money-making venture. Like the slave trade, child trafficking is a business that has internal and external dimensions. In the internal form of child trafficking, children are procured to work as domestic servants. These domestic servants, commonly called house helps in Nigeria, are mostly children from low-income families with uneducated parents. These parents give them up for servitude with the hope of making extra money, which is not generally commensurate with the job done by the children. Their masters set the terms and conditions of their work as they see fit, 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 desperate to get a domestic

servant, agrees to take care of them, feed them well, clothe and train them, they rarely abide by the agreement. Trafficking in persons has existed for generations. It affects almost the entire world, with cases emerging regularly. Mondira Dutta (Dutta, 2021) 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 the most vulnerable situation are the worst sufferers.” Natural disasters, in particular, do not restrict themselves to administrative boundaries or to a particular race or community. Everyone feels the impact.

Concept of Slavery

Slavery was not uncommon in biblical times, and it has taken different forms and been practised from the earliest times. Paul and the apostles condoned it in their time. A slave is a human being bought and owned as 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, the Igbo were disproportionately victims of the Atlantic slave trade, and slavery was mostly practised among the Igbo tribe (Falola & Heaton, 2008). 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 practised 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 (Jackson, 2009).

Slavery was not condemned in Paul’s time because they were not really maltreated as chattels, as in 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.

Slavery in the Old Testament

According to W.S. Bruce (Bruce, 1894, pp. 187-188), 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). (Raphael, 2009, p.5).

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 a Jewish slave is not to be maltreated but treated with respect as a fellow Israelite, one who was delivered from Egyptian slavery.

In Exodus 21:2, a slave can gain freedom in the seventh year and receive the means to begin a new life (Deut. 15:1-18). He could remain a slave if he so desires. There is a death penalty for anyone who kidnaps a person and forces 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-servants. In Exodus 20:17, God warns, “Do not lust after your neighbour’s 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. However, 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 during Jesus' youth. There were innumerable 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. However, Jesus never attacked the practice. He took the state of affairs for granted. (Smith, 1989, p.143).

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 Dictionary (New Bible Dictionary, 1996, p.113), the main sources of slavery were: birth, unwanted children who were available for anyone who wanted 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, and 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 (1 Cor. 7:22; Gal. 3:28). Slaves are enjoined to please God through 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 to whom they are accountable.

Wright and Michael (2019, p.111) believe that, in the ancient world, anyone could become a slave; all you had to do was 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, population size, and taxation. Wright and Bird (Wright & Michael, 2019, p.112) 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 Paul's Letter to 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 was converted and became a resource 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 would be 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.' (Johnston, 2006, p.18).

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 also to accept Onesimus as a Christian brother, just as he would have welcomed Paul.

Paul's intention in sending Onesimus back was for reconciliation. In this view, Paul describes Onesimus' usefulness to Philemon in two ways. 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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Onesimus returned with the letter addressed to his master. Upon his return, Paul did not want Philemon to take drastic measures but rather to treat Onesimus as a person. 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 on farms, in mines, or on ships. Slavery could be very cruel in the Roman Empire, and revolts were severely punished.

Professional slave catchers were hired to hunt down runaways, with advertisements containing praiseful descriptions of fugitives being publicly posted and offering rewards (Lawrence, 2017).

Human Trafficking in Nigeria

Hardship and economic instability in Nigeria paved the 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 countries in the 1980s in a bid for survival. In Nigeria today, children who are mostly disabled and/or from very poor homes are trafficked into organised begging. The only reward for these children was daily meals, while their masters profited from them. They are called “almajiris” in northern 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. Punam (cited in Lawrence, 2017) relies on Article 3(a) of the UN Palermo Protocol to define human trafficking. Under this definition, trafficking occurs when a person is recruited, transported, harboured, or received through coercive or deceptive means—such as force, fraud, abduction, or abuse of power—for the purpose of exploitation. Punam (Punam, 2018, p.7) says that in 2015, 5544 cases of human trafficking were reported, as stated in a study by the National Human Trafficking Resource Centre.

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 a “baby factory”. The police and army have been able to arrest some miscreants running this illicit business in Nigeria in the past. The Federal Government of Nigeria has not relented in its efforts to nab and prosecute human traffickers (Ezea, 2013; Adesina, 2014; UNODC, 2006; NAPTIP, 2013).

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 all races (Dutta, 2020, p.26). 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.

Problems with 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.

Paul's Letter: Significance to Contemporary Society

This letter, penned to Philemon, is of great importance to present-day Christians. Paul served as an ambassador of peace, fostering a cordial relationship between Philemon and his runaway servant. Christians should serve as agents of peace and reconciliation. 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 the abolition of slavery but rather the encouragement of brotherly love and forgiveness. Some scholars posit that Paul's primary aim in writing to Philemon is to have him release Onesimus to him, who was useful to him for the gospel. In Paul's letter to Philemon, he did not outright condemn slavery but fostered a peaceful coexistence. 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 practised 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 the past, some communities have tried to abolish the practice but have not succeeded. The modernised 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 biblical times is not the same as the practice of human trafficking. In our society, the word “servant” is lighter than “slave”. A servant has more rights than a slave and can decide to leave at any time when he or she is fed up with 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 so remarkable theologically. It shows the values of a Christian and godly relationship expected to exist between a master and a slave, or between an employer and an 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 return to his master, and the master was to receive him as a brother. This shows that we all stand equal before God, for God is the God who created us; we are brothers and sisters. This epistle also teaches forgiveness.

Paul did not criticise slavery explicitly because it was allowed in his days, but he warned slave masters to take care of them in Col. 4:1 because they have a master in heaven who will judge them. Onah (2010, p.152) posits that “the Bible condemns slavery in the form of marginalisation and exploitation of the poor”. In the Old Testament, Amos was emphatic in his condemnation of the 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 slaves and the 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, 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 a life.

The slave trade has been abolished in our time. Therefore, anyone who is indulging in the act of slavery is committing a grievous offence against the law. Christians are not to treat people unjustly, no matter the position they occupy. The Bible did not condemn slavery, but it condemns the abuse of slaves. Christianity is the way of peace and love. We are to love one another and treat others as we want to be treated. Human trafficking is dehumanizing. The Church, government, and Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) should all work to bring it to an end.

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

This paper 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 organisations, 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. Law enforcement agencies should enforce laws to put a check on the incessant migration of people for greener pastures, which is the major route to human trafficking.
2. The Church and government should take sensitisation of the dangers of human trafficking to the grassroots seriously (schools, Churches, markets, remote areas and homes) and educate youths on the importance of hard work and not relying on empty promises. Creating awareness is a preventive measure.
3. Proper and effective security checks should be mounted at the borders of Nigeria.
4. The government should work with psychologists, psychiatrists, guardian counsellors, and rehabilitation agencies to work on the victims of human trafficking in order to restore their mental and emotional well-being.
5. 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. Punam (Punam, 2018) suggests enhancing job opportunities for women by facilitating business opportunities for small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs). Organising SME training courses and targeting them in particular high-risk groups.

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