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How amazing is 'amazing grace'? A radical re-reading of Philemon from an African perspective

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Many experts have argued in their commentaries on the book of Philemon that Paul courageously used his age and apostolic imprimatur to forge a Christian reconsideration, reconciliation, and restitution of the status and identity of Onesimus with his master, Philemon. Although Paul wanted Onesimus to return to Philemon and be accepted as a brother-in-Christ rather than slave-to-master-in-Christ, it is unclear how Onesimus' and Philemon's new statuses would affect their newly reconciled social, political, and existential relations. If Philemon accepted Onesimus as he would accept Paul, Onesimus would definitely have had a higher status than Philemon, which is logically contradictory to the contract between slaves and their masters at that time and sometimes even in today's Christian world.

Contribution: The article argued that Paul was not radical enough in the appropriation of his apostolic grace that formed the fulcrum of his appeal to Philemon to receive Onesimus back into an enhanced slave status – this time in Christ. Rather, the article suggests that Paul would have used that leverage to untangle the identity, socio-political, and relational fissures embedded in slavery, which have been used as theological excuse to deal with Africans as slaves, by not returning Onesimus to Philemon in accordance with Deuteronomy 23:15–16.

Keywords: Onesimus; slavery; Philemon; grace; Paul; Christian; *ubuntu* freedom.

Introduction

This article is partly motivated by Manus and Nwanguma's (2021) article entitled: 'Onesimus, Philemon's runaway slave boy: A brief liberation-theological exegesis of Philemon vv. 8–18 in the Nigerian context', in this journal. Manus and Nwanguma are concerned about the unequal and lopsided preference Nigerian Muslims enjoy over Christians which, according to them, is entrenched in the structure and socio-ethnic constitution of Nigeria. The height of this structural imbalance is exhibited by the incumbent government, headed by President Muhammadu Buhari, who brazenly disregards the principles of religious and ethnic plurality in Nigeria. The president, through his 'body language' and explicit acts, for example, has disdain for non-Muslims and he appointed and continues to appoint Muslims from northern Nigeria, the region he belongs to, to head critical positions in his government.

Indeed, Nigerian Muslims, particularly in the northern parts of Nigeria, became emboldened to unleash severe inhuman treatment on Christians, both in the north and all over the country. Of particular importance in the throes of these violations of Christian human rights under the Buhari government are his Fulani ethnic group, who apparently enjoy the support of government in their nefarious activities by effectively occupying other people's lands, killing, maiming, kidnapping, raping, and engaging in banditry and so forth without any consequence. Also, in spite of the fact that the Miyetti Allah has been declared the fourth most dangerous terrorist group in the world, Buhari has not declared it a terrorist group in Nigeria. This has resulted in Christians becoming 'second class citizens' in their land, which violates not only their rights but also the controversial secularity of the country. It is this social and political status that Manus and Nwanguma (2021) refer to as enslavement of Christians in Nigeria, which thus demands that they struggle for their liberation.

Manus and Nwanguma (2021) argue that, in order for the Nigerian Christians to liberate themselves from Muslim slavery, there is the need to re-read and apply the principles entrenched in the Epistle to Philemon.

Note: Special Collection: Reception of Biblical Discourse in Africa., sub-edited by Itumeleng Mothoagae (University of South Africa).

According to them:

> [*F*]or the Nigerian Christians, Paul's intervention on behalf of Onesimus behests them to rise up and challenge the Head of State to come to his senses, to embrace wisdom and courage to govern the country as the Father of all and sundry in the nation. (p. 4)

It is not clear who Manus and Nwanguma are recommending this to, given that the president is a Muslim who has not, according to them, hidden his disrespect for Christians. How does Paul's intervention on behalf of Onesimus help Christians in Nigeria when dealing with non-Christians who do not believe in what Christians believe? Paul wrote to Philemon because Philemon himself had converted to Christianity and, therefore, could understand the spirit and letter of Paul's epistle, a situation that is different in Nigeria. In fact, as Manus and Nwanguma themselves acknowledge, there is a growing demographic competition between Christianity and Islam, such that both religions want to hold sway in the country. They also notice that the conflict between Christians and Muslims is existential and none is ready or willing to tone down. Such an existential struggle requires a much more radical strategy than Paul's intervention in the case of Onesimus. In fact, the most potent solution to the socio-political and religious panacea in Nigeria lies in restructuring the country, a position the northern political hegemony has continued to reject because of the apparent economic consequences it will have on it.

This article argues that Manus and Nwanguma's use of Philemon as a liberative mantra against Christian enslavement in Nigeria is politically deficient and too narrow. It further argues that Paul's intervention does not have a radical liberative motif; in other words, Paul was not radical enough to end the slavery of Onesimus. Therefore, reading the text from a postcolonial criticism perspective, which lends itself to interrogating relationships of domination and subordination, imperialism and colonialism – disproportionate power relationships that have been exalted to structural and ideological sanctorum – becomes pertinent. Judged from this methodological standpoint, it is argued that Paul wrote the epistle from the perspective of the slave-owner rather than the slave himself, thereby strengthening the distinction between Philemon as the slave-holder and Onesimus as the slave (Punt 2015:150). From the perspective of a slave, Punt (2015) analyses the account of Olaudah Equiano, a slave from West Africa in England, who bought his freedom in the 19th century with 40 pounds. Equino argued that:

> [*S*]lavery went against the basic understanding of the doctrine of atonement, which claimed that people were brought up with the inestimable blood of Christ, and therefore should not end up 'as slaves and private property of their fellow human beings'. (p. 149)

Even though Equiano's argument is interpreted as being against the grain of the social context of Paul's time, it nevertheless serves as a good example of postcolonial interpretation which, we argue, is in tandem with the expectation of slaves. After all, Equiano was enslaved not by non-Christians, but by Christians who believed that they had been bought by the blood of Christ. Equiano's trajectory followed that of Onesimus, because being converted to Christ did not immediately translate into freedom for him; he had to pay a very large sum of money to buy his freedom. This transactional aspect raises critical questions on the doctrine of redemption by the blood of Christ (Igboin 2011).

In addition, Lim (2016) argues that the epistle has long been read from Paul's and Philemon's hegemonic perspectives, but it now demands a 'reading with' Onesimus approach. Lim argues that a 'reading for' Onesimus approach, which some have employed, robs him of his agency, thus further dehumanising him. Therefore, a 'reading with' approach aligns with a postcolonial deconstruction of the epistle, that enables Onesimus as a subversive person to (re)gain his lost or muted voice, an approach that challenges hierarchy and social structures in human society. This article aligns with the suggested 'reading with' Onesimus approach, because it is through this approach that the African voice can be heard in the epistle.

Paul on slavery

It is pertinent to state that Paul's position on slavery is not only complex but also controversial. It is so because he did not expressly maintain one standpoint from which the issue would be discussed. Although this ambivalence could be traced to the character of the Greco-Roman world and its understanding of slavery, Paul's positions apparently approbate and reprobate on the issue. These complexities and ambiguities in Paul's discourse have been applied to suit certain positions in modern slavery (Barclay 1991). Paul's position oscillates between a declaration of universal egalitarian Christian community and retention of hierarchal, discriminatory, human society. For instance, 'There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus' (Gl 3:27, 28) addresses three aspects of the social location of humanity: 'race, ethnicity, religion; status and economic disparity; and gender' (Killingray 2007:85). Even though Paul's theology of equality before God is profoundly acknowledged as socially and ethically important for the pursuit of human rights for Christians and non-Christians alike, the practices of racism (even religious racism), classism, and gender discrimination have not ceased to exist in either secular or Christian spaces. Paul's thoughts here readily tend towards ultimacy rather than immediacy. However, the fact of life remains that the immediate, existential conditions affect one's relationship with, and attention to, the ultimate goal of life.

Paul wrote:

> Were you a slave when called? Don't let it trouble you. Although if you can gain your freedom, do so. For he who was a slave when he was called by the Lord is the Lord's freedman; similarly, he who was a free man when he was called is Christ's slave. (1 Cor 7:21, 22)

Many have interpreted this to mean that Paul was not ready to legislate on the social location of slaves; the slaves' capacity

to buy their freedom rested entirely on themselves, not on the church. This meant that slavery is a personal status and state in life but, as Paul states, 'if you can gain your freedom, do so'. In any case, the slaves can be Christians in the fellowship centres and return back home as slaves to their masters. In this instance, Christ is the master of the slaves in the fellowship, while the slave-owners are their masters thereafter. This two-master situation of the slaves raises critical social, ethical, and existential questions that impugn on the faith and faithfulness of the slaves to Christ. Killingray (2007) captures this thought in the following way:

> Slaves sometimes may not have been in situations where they were free to 'flee the works of darkness and keep themselves pure', that is to live in ethical obedience to their new Lord … Slaves were, in some households, sexually available to their owners. Their bodies were not their own … What kinds of tensions were there in small churches where owners, their slaves and slaves of other non-Christian owners worshipped together? How were slaves to react to injustice and to the ill-treatment of younger, more vulnerable slaves when new 'neighbour-loving' obligations were placed on them? What if a slave was moved to prophesy, with his owner sitting listening? Could they mutually admonish one another and bear one another's burdens? (pp. 89–90)

These questions are germane because, in reality, the Greco-Roman world formed the context of Paul's writing had harsh legislation for the management of slaves (Baker 2013). Could a Christian slave indeed deny her master her body, her body being the temple of the Lord, without dire consequences? We must not forget that Christian slaves had been admonished to obey their masters, and that they should not be bothered about their social location and relation to their masters. For Mounce (2000:418), 'while he [Paul] instructs slaves to be obedient to their masters, he never teaches that slavery is right'. But the question would then be: if Paul, as an apostle of the Lord to whom the slaves looked up to as a pastor and guide, believed slavery was not right, and yet did not condemn it, was he not encouraging it? Thompson (2005:242) radically responds that 'Paul simply had no real options for effecting social change or overhauling the social structures of his day such as slavery'. This suggests that slavery was compatible with Christianity, and one's faith in Christ could help entrench it in human society.

Some have argued that salvation in Christ was to be focused on more than our social location in human society. If Paul's focus was entirely on preaching the gospel and converting souls to Christ, where was his prophetic and incarnational role in the matter of slaves and slavery? The point that slavery was deeply entrenched in the New Testament world, and that challenging it would have meant challenging the secular authorities and their economic base, in itself challenges the revolutionary teaching of Christ in the same world. If a revolutionary faith like Christianity did not radically challenge such an inhuman, iniquitous, and ethically abhorrent institution that saw humans created in God's image as mere chattels and property, then it also raises further questions as to the redemption of the whole of humanity, including nature. Paul is described as 'not a revolutionary in secular matters' but 'revolutionary in religion' (Lynch 2009:48–49). In other words, Paul's attention was purely on radical, religious conversion of the soul rather than conversion of one's social status. This can be attested to by his reference to his Roman citizenship in Acts 16 (where he invokes his status as Roman citizen). This, some have argued, reflected on his position on slavery. 'When Paul addressed the institution of slavery he was not pressing for change, but instead Paul used the institution of slavery as a tool for Christian devotion' (Baker 2013:18). Paul's position is that slaves should serve Jesus with the same energy they serve their masters. Paul's metaphor of slavery is that of total and unquestionable submission and service to the masters (Col 3:22–25). The slaves must be within the reach of their masters. This might inform why Paul had to send Onesimus back to Philemon.

What is clear from the foregoing is that Paul used his elitist status to mirror slavery, using 'reading for' rather than 'reading with' approach. Paul's 'reading for' approach exalts submission above freedom, service above gratification, social immobility over dynamism. This rigid form of relationship with slaves and their masters, to Paul, is more of moral than spiritual. But it is hardly possible to separate both in developing a whole Christian personality (Baker 2013). Put plainly, a slave is converted to become a Christian slave, while a master is converted to become a Christian master. Nothing changes, at least, in their social status. As Pliny wrote, 'accordingly, I judged it all the more necessary to find out what the truth was by torturing two female slaves who were called deaconesses' (Baker 2013:21). Pliny confessed that, even though slaves could be allowed to hold positions in the Christian community, their social status as slaves remained. Such treatment was to remind them that they could never be emancipated from their position.

Paul, Philemon, and Onesimus

Many commentaries on Philemon have supported the argument that Paul was indeed apostolic, gracious, and diplomatic in handling Onesimus' case, especially when keeping in mind the prevalent situation at that time (Tolmie 2016). Paul resorted to the Roman laws guiding slavery rather than the biblical ones, which expect that runaway slaves should be returned to their masters. However, in the Hebrew Bible, runaway slaves are not to be returned to their masters:

> You shall not hand over to his master a slave who has escaped from his master to you. He shall live with you in your midst, in the place which he shall choose in one of your towns where it pleases him; you shall not mistreat him. (Dt 23:15–16)

Runaway slaves were not infrequent among the Jews, for example, as depicted in Genesis 16:6 and 1 Samuel 25:10. Two of the reasons that slaves would run away were because of mistreatment or unnecessarily hard labour. Even Israelites who sold themselves into slavery in order to offset their debts had to be released on the Sabbath year (Dt 5:14; 15:1). As a

result of the laws guiding slavery and slaves in Israel, many foreign slaves ran away to Israel and lived among them in places of their choice. The grace they enjoyed in Israel was a manifestation of the special position Israel had with God in the midst of its neighbours. The implication of this law is to restore human dignity to the slaves, because they are also created in the image of God. According to a commentary:

> Thus, even a lowly slave was created as the image of God and thus had worth, dignity, meaning, and purpose. Israelites, unlike their neighbors, were to treat a slave's life as valuable. Having such an attitude would set them apart from their neighbors and be a testimony to the grace of the LORD to all, and the great benefit of following His ways. It also spoke to the impartiality of God, whose benevolence extended to all who sought refuge under His wings, regardless of one's station in life. (https://thebiblesays.com/commentary/deut/deut-23/deuteronomy-2315-16/)

In line with the Scriptures, it is expected of Paul to protect Onesimus. It is even a possibility that Onesimus ran to Paul under the cover of the Deuteronomic injunction, especially after having been converted to Christ. This argument is made with the understanding that Paul and Philemon knew each other before Onesimus went to meet Paul (Roth 2014). Onesimus could have enjoyed freedom from the burdens of slavery while with Paul. Reading with Onesimus exposes the possible feeling, assuming that Onesimus was aware of the Deuteronomic injunction, that Onesimus actually expected Paul to invoke it in his situation. How would Onesimus feel towards Paul and Philemon, being sent back into slavery? What would Onesimus find in the house of Philemon: a Christian leader and slave owner? How did he feel about going back to his master's house? These questions are important, given that Paul was never a slave and would never be (physically). We thus opine that Paul's return of Onesimus raises more questions than the good intentions he is said to have had.

The Jewish law mentioned here is one that has largely been ignored by modern scholars while engaging with the epistle and for good reason. Paul's decision to return Onesimus pits him between obeying the Roman law and the Jewish law. This is pertinent, given his constant references to the Hebrew Bible to validate his arguments. According to Baker (2013):

> Philemon is a complicated letter because Paul does not bluntly state what he wants Philemon to do concerning the status of Onesimus, but his message can be understood by placing it in the context of Roman culture and Paul's vision of social interaction within the Christian communities … Instead of siding with the Old Testament, Paul forges a new Christian response which handles questions of slaves solely within the Christian community and trusts in Philemon to follow his direction from the letter. (pp. 31, 35)

But there is a point that Baker misses: Why did Paul choose Roman law rather than Jewish law? Did the new Christian response to slavery indeed end slavery? Or did it just give it another social context within the Christian community? These questions are important to ask, especially for our contemporary societies that often want to interpret scriptures to validate their unethical, and even unconstitutional, positions. The article argues that, if Paul had invoked the Jewish law and explained to Philemon, a fellow Christian, what the Hebrew Bible says, it is possible that his reasoning would have persuaded Philemon. If Paul was diplomatic enough to have carefully chosen his words of appeal to Philemon, would it not have been better to also let Philemon know the state of the Christian law? Should contemporary Christians deal with slaves the same way Paul handled Onesimus' case – by making reference to secular laws, where they exist – rather than the Bible? Can anyone validly blame a person who claims to follow Paul's complicated position of obeying the Roman law to the disregard of God's law? Is Paul's complicated position informed by the discrepancy between civil and biblical law in Roman times whereas the two were the same in the time of Israel? Does obedience to authority plays a role? The argument made here is that Paul was very much aware of the position and authority of the Hebrew Bible, and how obedience to the commandments was an obligation rather than choice. However, Baker (2013) notes that:

> The Letter to Philemon is not full of statements which call for Christians to restructure society or to abolish slavery, and it does not have instructions for Christian communities and their interactions with slavery. What Philemon does have is Paul's views on an enslaved Christian's interactions with his Christian master, and it is consistent with Paul's views on the human aspect of slavery. (p. 13)

Paul's description and construction of Onesimus as both son and brother creates a complex identity, and the instructions contained in the Letter to Philemon ignore Onesimus' agency, but project Paul himself as the 'ultimate slaveholder' (Punt 2015:12). Paul affirms that Onesimus is a brother in Christ, now sent back to be accepted as more than a slave:

> [*N*]o longer as a slave but more than a slave, a beloved brother – especially to me but how much more to you, both in the flesh and in the Lord. (Phlm 16)

This has been interpreted as indicating abolition of slavery (Kreitzer 2008:26; Tiroyabone 2015:69). Tiroyabone (2015) adds that Paul could have meant that Philemon and Onesimus should forge a new relationship on the basis of a patron–client agreement. As we have argued, however, Paul did not give a direct instruction or command; he left the decision to Philemon to make.

The concept of abolition of slavery can thus hardly be substantiated with the Letter to Philemon. This is because Paul did not intend a structural change. De Vos (2001) states that the structure of the Roman social relations at that time did not give the impression that Onesimus would ever be a completely free man, even though a thorough manumission took place. De Vos (2001) argues that freed slaves were still coerced and severely punished by their former masters whenever the former misbehaved. This is not just because of the cultural and legal strictures that existed, but also because slavery had been driven down into the consciousness of the slaves. Thus, even if Onesimus had been manumitted,

it would not have made any significant difference. Although De Vos has a good argument, that manumission would not have changed Onesimus' status, he undermines Onesimus' agency. The point is that Onesimus being both manumitted but also retained in Philemon's care undermines the manumission altogether. Manumission and retention of Onesimus in Philemon's house arguably means that both have now become social equals.

The runaway hypothesis is hegemonic; it is also stereotypical in that it conceives Onesimus as a thief (De Vos 2001). The hypothesis states that Onesimus actually ran away from Philemon after having stolen from him. As a result, Paul had to send Onesimus back to Philemon, having been converted, and also undertake to pay whatever Onesimus must have stolen (Byron 2008; Kreitzer 2008; Tiroyabone 2015). De Vos (2001) argues that, if Philemon was to accept a runaway slave who had stolen from his master and make him equal in social status, it would set a dangerous precedence for the entire society. It would amount to rewarding an unfaithful slave, and an absconded one for that matter, with promotion. Tiroyabone (2015) notes that:

> … [*T*]he majority of scholars who are proponents of the runaway slave hypothesis emphasize the opinion that Onesimus was a slave that made a bad choice of stealing from his master and running away. To put Onesimus in that light is to advance the thinking of former colonizers that slaves had no mentality of their own and had to be thought for. The traditional runaway slave hypothesis already poses Onesimus as a bad person who can only think of stealing from his master who has been good to him. (p. 77)

The question might rather be: If Onesimus was a runaway slave and thief, was Paul restituting him for being a runaway slave? Was Paul also restituting what Onesimus was alleged to have stolen? And would that restitution have resulted in a promotion of Onesimus to an equal in social status to Philemon? The voicelessness of Onesimus is entrenched and his agency lost entirely because of this bad image. However, it has also been suggested that Onesimus must have run away from Philemon because of mistreatment and because the Roman law allowed a slave to seek someone to mediate between him and his master, Onesimus must have approached Paul. This interpretation suggests that Onesimus must have known Paul as a 'partner' to Philemon, his master (Dunn 1996:304). Tiroyabone (2015:77) aligns with this position, arguing that the runaway hypothesis makes sense in that 'it was a system of mediation within the institution of slavery and Onesimus used it to his own advantage to seek liberation for himself'. This agential interpretation means that:

> Onesimus needs to be liberated from the traditional runaway slave hypothesis, he has been misrepresented and needs to be called out into the fore as an intelligent person who was oppressed by a system of slavery and used the very same system to liberate himself from it. (p. 77)

Roth (2014) notes that the partnership deeds between Paul and Philemon need to be unpacked in order to grasp the intent of the letter. Roth (2014) explores the concept of *koinonia* in the letter and argues that it means partnership. She expands upon the idea that slaves, regarded as chattel, are part of the materials partners transact business with. She adds that slaves were employed to render domestic services and that Paul could have done the same thing while in prison. Philemon certainly had other slaves apart from Onesimus and, as such, even as a Christian he was not averse to slavery. Roth (2014) argues that there was a *koinonia* to which Paul and Philemon belonged. This partnership relates to Paul and Philemon; it is in this partnership agreement that Paul writes to Philemon to pay whatever Onesimus owes (or that Onesimus' debt should be credited to his account). What this implies, Roth (2014) argues, is that Paul was 'a slaver owner'. She elaborates on this claim when she writes:

> The provision of Onesimus to render services to Paul should therefore be understood as an indication of the slave's employment by the apostle for tasks of a secular nature – until the slave's conversion to the faith: after Onesimus had become a Christian, Paul is able to recommend the slave for future tasks *within* the Church. It is in fact telling that Paul emphasises the slave's potential for services of a religious nature in his Letter to Philemon – thereby demonstrating that the slave had not previously been employed for tasks associated with the ministry as such. (p. 111)

Paul's employment of slaves is justified on the ground that, while in prison, the spread of the gospel must continue. Onesimus must have served Paul in this regard and, perhaps, in other janitorial duties. Roth (2014) again explains:

> 'Paul's *modus operandi* did not allow him to combine his labour fully with his ministry'. It made therefore good sense for Paul to seek the assistance of others in terms of day-to-day services as often and as regularly as possible: the services of a slave or slaves to assist with everyday errands and communications would have been an ideal form of support and, whilst ultimately benefitting the spread of the gospel, not in itself of a religious nature. Paul's specific request to Philemon – sent from the prison cell – could not be clearer in this context, and demonstrates further the type of role allocated Onesimus in what Meggitt has called Paul's 'survival strategy'. (pp. 113–114)

Roth (2014:128–129) submits that the partnership between Paul and Philemon was not just on Christian relations but also of transactional purpose, which caused Paul to respect the terms of the *koinonia* in returning Onesimus to Philemon, but not freeing Onesimus from slavery completely. She concludes that Paul's act means that 'slavery was not at an end here, either functionally or technically'.

It may be asked if Philemon accepted Paul's 'plea', and how he accepted it? There is obviously no internal evidence to suggest that Philemon accepted Paul's plea, although Paul had included in his letter that Philemon should prepare a room for him for his next visit, after his release from prison. However, it has been conjectured that, because Philemon is included in the New Testament, it is probable that the contents of the letter were implemented. This can hardly be validated, given that Paul's other letters also carried instructions he wanted the churches to carry out. Kolohai

(2009:2) argues for the possibility of Philemon accepting Onesimus back, thus setting in motion 'human systems [that] can make the restoration happen only through a deep relationship in Christ'. Kolohai (2009) analyses Paul's use of the word 'prisoner' to illustrate that Paul was also a kind of slave suffering some form of deprivation, but 'in Christ' he has freedom. This interpretation is contradicted by Paul's desire to be free from prison to meet Philemon in person.

Onesimus on an African experience

Several commentaries on Philemon emphasise that Paul demonstrated an act of grace, restoring Onesimus to a higher status than Philemon. This derives from Paul writing to Philemon to accept Onesimus as he would receive himself, a position that is difficult to accept (see Tolmie 2016). Our argument is that Paul ought to have followed the Deuteronomic law on slavery by not returning Onesimus to Philemon at all; in this instance, grace would have been seen in Paul's letter. This is because, no matter how slavery is embellished, reality shows that it is outright dehumanising. Returning Onesimus to Philemon set a guide for continuous retention of slaves by Christians, and of course, with such neologies as Christian slaves or enslaved Christians, the freedom from sin and eternal death that conversion to Christ gives to the converted seems to not extend to social location, causing grace to be limited. Igboin (2011) argues that this notion of 'grace' was exhibited during the trans-Atlantic slave trade, described as the 'most iniquitous transaction in history' (Oguejiofor 2001:26), 'most ignoble of institutions in the modern civilized world' and 'social death' (Wade & Newman 2002:21). Perhaps, on the basis of the Letter to Philemon, the British government would staunchly support the Church of England to trade in humans: 'the trade in slaves from Africa was not at variance with philosophy, nor with Scripture' (Bediako 2002:47). According to Igboin (2011), John Newton's 'Amazing Grace', the hymn that still inspires Christians today, was composed as a celebration of salvation of Newton. But, in reality, Newton – 'a notorious slave dealer' (Igboin 2011:142) – did not speak against the slave trade for almost 30 years after his conversion, even though he preached thousands of sermons and composed 279 hymns. Salvation to him, as to other slave owners, did not affect human social location and hegemony.

Igboin (2011) further argues that, just as Onesimus' agency was lost under the rubrics of Paul's letter, African slaves were also treated as objects. The roles Christian bodies played in the trans-Atlantic slave trade; the insuperable treatment meted out on them and so forth are reminiscent of the belief that slaves lack the *imago Dei*. Although most commentators are interested in how Philemon would respond to Paul's letter concerning Onesimus, almost no attention is paid to how Onesimus would respond to the same letter, having the belief that he should have been retained by Paul. For Onesimus, the gospel was not applied to his case – he needed total freedom rather than being christened a Christian slave. Carmody and Carmody (1989:170) argue that most African slaves did not positively respond to the gospel message in spite of its 'down-to-earth' mode of delivery by the slave owners and their evangelists. Igboin (2019), examining the 'Slave Bible' exhibited in the British Museum in 2018, makes the case that the African slaves were actually just 'converted' from African slaves to African Christian slaves. In other words, all that changed was the addition of 'Christian'. As Vilanculo (2008:10) notes, 'in short, a slave was always a slave'. This argument is premised on the fact that, in the 'Slave Bible', the Book of Exodus (and other chapters and verses that talk about freedom) was deliberately removed, while those that emphasise submission and slavery as virtues were conspicuously retained. In essence, 'freedom from slavery is incomplete until the spiritual aspect is incorporated' (Ibanga 2020:19). This accounts for the reason the trans-Atlantic slaves had to fight wars of liberation, even though they were defeated. The struggle for the abolition of the slave trade was not solely and completely an act of grace. African slaves' agency was eroded in the struggle, and the fear of a civil war was partly the reason for expediting the enactment of the *Abolition Act* (Igboin 2011).

In its post-colonial reality, Onesimus emerged from colonialism or 'Apartheid' battered and dehumanised. According to Tiroyabone (2015):

> The Onesimus in the postcolony is the people who find themselves at the bottom of the socioeconomic inequality in South Africa. Because they do not have the desired traits for people to identify with them and aspire to be like them, they fall further into the margins and their voice less prioritised … My interpretation of the letter focuses on the inequality between Philemon and Onesimus and I have established Onesimus' presence, yet his very own voice is not heard. How can interpretation bring to the fore the Onesimus and yes, the Philemon, in our contemporary context for a meaningful engagement with each other and thereby formulate a hermeneutic in the postcolony? (p. 103)

This question is germane because of the perennial inequality and oppression in Africa between the colonial authorities and their African colonies in their supposed independence and between African local compradors, who pose as African leaders with colonial authorities' methods, and the African masses. Tiroyabone (2015) asks how the Christian brotherhood intended in Paul's Letter to Philemon can be made real in Africa, when the agency of African Onesimus is violated socially, politically, and economically. How can a dialogue of 'conversion' from colonised Africans to Africans take place when Africans and Africa still lacerate from heinous economic and political exploitation? In plain words, when will focus be shifted from Paul and Philemon to Onesimus?

Vilanculo (2008) observes that the Letter to Philemon expressly conveys the thought of *ubuntu* in Africa because it seeks to build a community that recognises the humanity of its members. Vilanculo (2008) hinges his argument on the values of brotherhood, togetherness, sharing, and so forth. In this kind of community, a symbiotic relationship is entrenched to cater to the humanity of all members. This, he notes, is the goal of Paul, even though he also recognises the agency and

freedom of Philemon to take the final decision on how to receive Onesimus. However, like Tiroyabone (2015), Vilanculo (2008) argues that Apartheid and its consequences eviscerated the principles of *ubuntu*, in that the black South Africans were 'the problem' rather than 'the persons'. He concludes that the walls of partition that dichotomise African humanity should be broken down so that authentic *ubuntu* can take place. Ibanga (2020) helps us to make sense of this kind of *ubuntu* when he avers:

> It is spiritual freedom that makes freedom from cultural and mental slaveries complete. Without it freedom from cultural and mental slavery is a kind of freedom but a hollow, a shadow of freedom. Freedom from slavery is ontological and extends to the being of his being, the self, his personhood, his identity. Freedom for the enslaved and descendant of the enslaved is not an end in itself. The captive must move from slavery to freedom and through freedom to selfhood. The selfhood is defined through others – *I am because others are*. It is by constructing his selfhood in this way that one can attain African identity. (pp. 18–19)

Manus and Nwanguma (2021) observe three kinds of slavery prevalent in Africa today: self-inflicted, intellectual, and executive slavery. Although they blame the self-inflicted slaves for selling themselves into slavery because of socio-economic poverty, they do not consider the structural system that allows pervasive poverty in the midst of abundance (Nyarwath 2019). On intellectual slavery, they argue that African thoughts are usually validated on the basis of western methodologies and theories. In other words, Manus and Nwanguma (2021) have come to terms with the reality of the loss of African scholars' agency in knowledge production. However, they recommend liberation theology as a panacea. Liberation theology, as it is well known, is not returning to slave owners, but radically challenging and confronting slave owners and the system that grows it. Executive slavery refers to the oppression of the masses by the political rulers. Although Manus and Nwanguma (2021) view this as the grounds for all kinds of slavery, they only chronicle the manifestations of executive slavery and support groups that are appealing to international bodies to rescue the continent, thus further eroding African agency. In particular reference to Nigeria, the executive 'oppressors' have weaponised poverty to the extent that with a small amount of money, votes can be easily bought to sustain the oppressors in power. But the so-called oppressed Christians, Manus and Nwanguma (2021) argue for, are avidly supporting Muslim-Muslim presidency in 2023 elections, that is, many Nigerian Christians and groups are supporting and campaigning for a Muslim president and Muslim vice president under the same political party in a country where Christians have been crying out as the marginalised and oppressed (see Igboin 2023). This brings us to Christ's word in John 8:32 – that knowing the truth is the basis for true human freedom; politically, socially, and economically. Manus and Nwanguma's (2021) notion of liberation theology should have encapsulated the rupturing and disrupting of the grounds for slavery, not reconciling with slave owners. Society has to be restructured to countenance the freedom so desired.

The final question is, how does one apply the Letter to Philemon to a slave and master who do not share the same faith? This question is crucial because of our pluralistic world where there are not only competitive religions, values, philosophies, but also race, and abject poverty. Answering this question compels us to honestly accept that even the contemporary Christian community discriminates on the basis of race, wealth, position and so on. According to Shore (2018):

> There was a world whose fundamental structures were certain pairs of opposites: circumcision/uncircumcision Jew/Gentile slave/freeman male/female. Thales, Socrates, and Plato – not to mention the later Rabbi Judah – finding themselves in such a world, may give thanks that they exist on the preferable side of the divide. Those who have been baptized into Christ, however, know that, in Christ, that world does not any longer have real existence. (p. 395)

The world there was, has not significantly changed as Shore (2018) wants us to believe. The Church community still have its Thales, Socrates, Plato and Rabbi Judah. Therefore, it will be difficult to apply Paul's principles in the Letter to Philemon to a non-Christian community if the Christian community it is meant to serve primarily has not been able to fully accept that slavery in all its ramifications violates the *imago Dei* and the dignity of its membership. In plain words, if, as we have argued, Paul did not abolish the slavery of Onesimus, and leave it to the discretion of Philemon, a non-Christian slave owner cannot be persuaded to act differently, nor will a Christian slave under a non-Christian owner struggle to be free. This is the critical challenge the Letter to Philemon poses to us.

Conclusion

In this article, we argued that Onesimus' agency was lost simply because Paul was not radical enough in his approach. Rather than returning Onesimus back to Philemon in accordance with the Greco-Roman laws, which conflicted with the unambiguous Deuteronomic law, Paul should have resorted to the latter, and graciously appealed to Philemon who, being a Christian also, would have realised that every human being is freely created in the image of God. Although it has been argued that the Scriptures aided in the abolition of slaves and the slave trade (Killingray 2007), the Letter to Philemon provides ample ambivalence, giving slave dealers the latitude to decide whether or not to trade in humans. The question indeed should not be whether the Scriptures were used to abolish the slave trade or ground colonialism and Apartheid. The question should have been why enslavement at all, especially in a Christian world by Christians? It is concluded that African freedom should be radical, that is, a rupture in the very foundations of slavery, rather than just a trimming of its branches. After all, as Shutte (2019:181) reminds us, Jesus saves from the slavery of sin and thus, the bonds of Satan. In other words, Jesus does not save from sin and reconcile the saved with Satan. The saved are completely free and grow into the fullness of Christ. This is the radical liberation that Africans and Africa need, which will make the gospel authentic and grounded.

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