REDEMPTION, RESISTANCE AND LIBERATION:
CHRISTIAN RESPONSES TO MODERN SLAVERY

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ABSTRACT

The European slave trade is both a social and a theological challenge to the churches in Europe. As a social problem, slavery calls for the churches to be involved along with other faith groups and secular NGOs in exposing and publicising the continued existence of slavery, and working to bring slavery to an end. The first part of the paper examines and critiques faith-based Christian responses to modern slavery that ‘redeem’ slaves on an individual or group basis. It argues that a better response is to pressure European governments and statutory agencies to make tackling slavery a high priority. This will mean targeting the perpetrators of the trade, whilst protecting the human rights of those who are trapped in the trade, and addressing the root causes of trafficking and slavery. As a theological challenge, the adequacy of Christian language and imagery of ‘redemption’—which is rooted in the slavery of the ancient world—needs to be critiqued as well. If a Christian social response to slavery needs to go beyond redemption, a similar argument can be made against the over-emphasis on the language of redemption as opposed to other language and images in Christian theology. It concludes that the language of resistance and liberation provides a more helpful theological framework to address the slave trade than the language of redemption.

Introduction

This is a joint paper, from myself and Jayme, and we are basically going to present it in two parts. To begin with, Jayme is going to address some of the current debate and controversy around the redemption of slaves by western agencies operating in Sudan, and will suggest why Christians in the West need to understand the complexity of the issues involved in the contemporary practice.

Then I will pick up on some of the theological issues that I think are raised in Jayme’s discussion, to assess some of the strengths and weaknesses of the slavery – redemption language of Christian faith, by examining ‘redemption’ as a theological construct as well as a social practice.

I should add, that for both of us this is something of a work in progress, and it is still in its early days, but the holding of this conference was too good a chance to miss, and it is very good to be here and we have both learnt at lot this week.

Jayme

*Contemporary Slavery and Contemporary Redemptions*

I first became aware of the issue of ‘redemption’ – the practice of buying slaves from slave traders and setting them free – when I read the novel *Acts of Faith* by Philip Caputo. Set in southern Sudan, the novel, among other plots, detailed the work of a fictitious organization based in Europe who actively redeemed slaves from the Dinka tribe who were captured by Arab raiders supported by the Khartoum government in the north.

What I found interesting was my reaction. My reaction wasn’t based on the fact that slavery existed in the world today; I am not as naïve as to think that it had gone the way of the dinosaur. My reaction was related to this practice of redemption. I was shocked! That such an approach would seriously be used to address the issue of slavery was unthinkable to me. The issues surrounding it seemed obvious – sustaining (if not growing) the slave trade, the fraud and trickery used to buy and sell more slaves, the dichotomy it perpetuates between the Arab and Black participants and their white redeemers, and so on. Furthermore, the fact that it was called ‘redemption’ was offensive to me. What purpose is served by using such a religiously and theologically loaded word? Was it intentional or unintentional? It was with this book that I became aware of this practice of redemption and, therefore, I sought to find out more about it.

*The Particular Problem with Redemption*

Prior to the issue of Darfur, there was a firestorm of press related to the issue of slave redemption in Sudan, focused particularly on the work of Christian Solidarity International (CSI) based in Switzerland and Christian Solidarity Worldwide (CSW) based in the United Kingdom. It was during this time - 1999 to 2001 - that several journalists investigated allegations of fraud and corruption in these transactions between redeemers and slave traders.¹ Stories began to abound of people being borrowed to act as slaves and given a cut of their ‘purchase price.’ Other allegations were that the redemption schemes were being used to fund, arm and support the SPLA (Sudanese People’s Liberation Army). A seminal article published by *Atlantic Monthly* about these stories and first-hand accounts was written by Richard Miniter, who also took with him on the trip Sudan a man named John Jacobson, the president of Christian Freedom
International (CFI) which was, at the time, a U.S. branch of CSI. The allegations became stronger when, after that trip, John Jacobson withdrew CFI from CSI’s framework in 1999 and publicly stated that his organization would cease participating in redemption schemes because ‘they were only causing more raids and enriching unscrupulous individuals.’ Amazingly, CFI went so far as to offer to ‘refund all donations given for redemptions, relinquishing a first-rate fund-raising tool.’

Slave redemptions began for CSI and its partners in 1995 and by 1999 it was reported that they had freed 7,725 slaves in the state of Bahr el Ghazal in southern Sudan. However, numbers for 1999 alone were 2,833, equaling 36% of the total redemptions it reported over the course of 4 years, showing a significant increase. Since 1999, the annual numbers have remained high and in 2006, CSI reported it had ‘contributed to the liberation of 2,942 slaves.’ Numbers for 2007 reported on their website were at 198 slaves by March with future redemption efforts being planned. Most sources quote CSI’s redemption rate at between $35 and $50 per person, with several mentioning that since they buy in such large quantities, the slave traders give them a 50% discount (rather than the $100 per person charged to others interested in redeeming individuals).

Redemptions in Sudan are not new, however. Before CSI and its partners arrived on the scene, the process of buying back those who have been captured by enemy tribes during raids was based in families or in local authorities. They searched for particular individuals; the practice of buying back hundreds of people at one time was unheard of. Yet, now that CSI has become involved with a very effective fund-raising machine in Europe and the U.S., the ability to go in and redeem hundreds at one time has become common practice. Believing that since they (meaning CSI and it’s contributors) have the means to free slaves, it is their duty to do something about it. Furthermore, because CSI identifies many in need of redemption as Christians who have been enslaved by Muslim captors, there is an added dimension that seems to be at work here. One journalist noted that ‘[m]uch of the money for the ‘Redemption’ program comes from gullible

3 Rone, 27-28.
7 Gardner, 29.
Christians believing in the ‘Redeemer’ emissaries…[because] saving slaves from Islamic bondage is a very powerful message indeed.⁸

Kevin Bales notes that while the compassion and motivation from Western Christians on behalf of the slaves being redeemed are justified, there is a threefold return on their investment when they contribute to the redemption schemes:

...the good-feeling generated by having freed slaves; the public relations and motivational power gained by reporting these redemptions; and, for some groups, reclamation of a set of pawns in a global chess game being played out between Christian and Muslim fundamentalists.⁹

The issue here is not compassion. Western Christians, while sometimes alleged to be self-absorbed and ill-equipped to deal with tragedy, are not short on compassion. We care. We want to see people living well. We want the problem to be fixed. However, we are conditioned through our own global economic status as well as our stewardship lessons and missions offerings in our local churches to believe that money and our ability to give it will fix the problem. For some it is laziness, this propensity to throw money at the issue and hope that it goes away, or it is an inability to understand that there are very few quick solutions to very complex problems. Nevertheless, for the majority of Christians from the West where one’s life is permeated with buying and selling, paying traders to buy back the freedom of someone seems to be the easiest, most logical and most immediate response. It is compassion which drove primary school students in Colorado to raise $50,000 to send to organizations such as Christian Solidarity International to redeem 1,000 slaves in Sudan. It is compassion which enabled the National Association of Basketball Coaches in the U.S. to raise $100,000 for this purpose.¹⁰ Yet, this compassion is misguided and can be manipulated in order to address other sentiments such as guilt (rising from our own economic standing or national history) or fear of the spread of Islam.

Furthermore, it should be stated that the Sudanese Christians whose various denominations are organized within the framework of the New Sudan

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⁹ Kevin Bales, ‘Expendable People: Slavery in the Age of Globalization,’ Journal of International Affairs 53/2 (Spring 2000), 461-484. (but I’m using a printout from OCLC and it’s page 10)
Council of Churches (NSCC) has ‘no position’ on the issue of slavery.\textsuperscript{11} The general secretary of the NSCC, Haruun Ruun, has stated that ‘one cannot look at slavery in isolation from the other issues of racism and economics – these issues cannot be viewed piecemeal.’\textsuperscript{12} Those who are supportive or active in redemptions are surprised at this response, but as is common in the African context, issues that seem immediate for Western Christians are not always the same for the people who live and die there. In most, if not all, parts of Africa, the main issue is survival: food, potable water, healthcare and other life and death issues. While ‘slavery is a trendy issue for Americans,’ it is more an issue of pragmatism for the Sudanese and other Africans who are the recipients of Western well-meaning aid.\textsuperscript{13}

Clive Calver, the president of World Relief who has partnered with the NSCC on reconciliation efforts between southern tribes, stated that while he believed there are ‘fewer than 50,000...under the threat of slavery,’ there are ‘2.4 million who are in danger of dying of starvation.’\textsuperscript{14} He went on to say, ‘We jump up and down about the forcible Islamicization of a child who has been kidnapped and taken into slavery, while we sit by and watch as half a dozen children starve to death,’\textsuperscript{15} primarily due to the long-running war in Sudan. It seems clear that a healthy and truly helpful missiology for Western Christians would include consulting local church bodies on the most pressing needs of the community and addressing the issues of poverty, starvation, peace and justice which indirectly contribute to the slavery issue.

Again, it is not an issue of who is more compassionate. Compassion abounds among those who are concerned for the slave as well as the malnourished free. The issue here is considering the importance of addressing systemic injustice and seeking ways to empower those who are experiencing this problem first-hand, the Sudanese. It takes patience, creativity, ingenuity, holistic thinking, and a willingness to cede power to those you have come to help. And this, of course, is something at which Western Christians have never been particularly good.
David

**Exploring the Theological Issues**

Jayme has drawn attention to some of the obvious drawbacks with redemption as a European or American response to slavery in Africa. Like her, I was very struck by the apparent link that is drawn by Christian organisations between the contemporary social practice of buying slaves back (from the Latin *redimere*, ‘to buy back’) and the theological language of the Christian tradition, in which God is understood to redeem (or buy-back from the Latin *redimere*) sinful creation.

What I would like to suggest, first, is that the problems associated with the contemporary practice of buying back slaves, are useful prompts for a critical interrogation of the Christian understanding of the redemption of sinners that is based on a model of buying back individual slaves. Then I will suggest that a better understanding of the economic issues around redemption can bring out new aspects of what the Christian doctrine of redemption was originally trying to express, pointing to a restructuring of the earthly order, which included a far-reaching economic transformation.

a. **The Christian Doctrine of Redemption and the Realities of Slavery**

Although some might question the logic of moving from the realities of slavery to the theology of redemption, as a strange jump from the ‘earthly’ to the ‘heavenly’, it should be remembered that the language of redemption was not invented by Christians out of nothing. Rather Christianity drew on existing language dealing with slavery and slave redemption in the ancient world, to speak about a new relationship with God. And in the process they drew on Jewish traditions, which had gone before Christianity in thinking of God’s saving of Israel as ‘redemption’, with the story of slavery in Egypt and the Exodus very much in mind. However, because the slavery of the first century world is unfamiliar to Christians today, it is easy to forget that slavery forms the essential context for understanding Christian theological language of redemption. It is as if, with the passage of time, the language of redemption has been allowed to drift off from its earthly roots, and float ever higher into a theological abstraction. For many people now it is assumed to simply belong to

another realm. The contributions on contemporary slavery presented at this conference are a chance to re-anchor the Christian doctrine of redemption in earthly realities, the harsh realities of both ancient slavery in the first century, and contemporary slavery in the twenty first century.

A popular Christian understanding of redemption understands God’s action achieved by a payment—Christ’s blood—to the devil as slave holder. This payment buys back sinful creation from the devil’s control. Jayme’s contribution on why redemptions might be limited, unhelpful and ultimately self-defeating as responses to slavery in Sudan, suggest similar questions that might be put to the Christian doctrine of redemption in the light of slavery practices in either the first or twenty-first century.  

First, at a pragmatic level, if God responds to slavery in this way, the redemption does not break or even challenge the mechanics of slavery, rather it is likely to sustain them. The underlying problem is not really addressed. What is to stop creation from falling into slavery to sin again and again? Indeed, if freedom is achieved through a redemptive payment, it can easily encourage the slave system. If slave holders believe they can receive redemptive payments for slaves, they have more reason to take slaves, as hostages to be ransomed for future payment.  

Second, at an ethical level, if God is understood as using redemption as a response to slavery, it seems to leave unchallenged the moral assumptions and values of the slave system. To speak primarily in terms of redemption, rather than resistance, abolition or liberation, leaves God’s attitude to slavery as morally ambivalent, and at least seeming to tacitly accept that they cannot be changed.  

Many of the key assumptions in conventional Christian understandings of redemption need to be challenged, and a greater knowledge of ancient and contemporary slavery should help us to do this. However, raising these questions about the Christian understanding of redemption is not intended to be simply negative. It is not suggesting that a doctrine of redemption is inevitably flawed and

16 The focus here is on the contemporary slavery context, but it would seem that very similar questions could be raised from the experiences of slavery in the first century.

17 A useful distinction might be drawn between hostages which are taken with the intention of being ransomed, and slaves who are taken with the intention of being used for work or other service. Unlike hostages, slaves might be ‘redeemed’ but it is not the primary intention.
that there can be no role for redemption language in Christian doctrine. I would suggest that the greater understanding of contemporary slavery and the problems with individual redemptions, can be a creative theological opportunity. It should prompt Christians to think more carefully and more adequately about their understanding of God as a redeemer.

b. Redeeming the language of Redemption

In his recent book, Understanding Global Slavery, Kevin Bales begins with the story of Meera in Uttar Pradesh. With the help of a credit union, Meera was able to redeem herself from bond-slavery, and her contributions to the union then allowed other women in the village to do the same. Meera’s story is followed in the book by the story of Baldev, a debt-bonded ploughman, who was redeemed when his wife received money from a relative, but subsequently choose to re-enter the bondage because he found surviving on his own too difficult.18

Taken together, the stories illustrate that if redemption is limited to nothing more than the purchase of individual freedom, it makes very little difference to the bigger economic structures on which contemporary slavery rests. It is not an adequate response to the 27 million people who by Bales’ estimate are currently enslaved, and even those individuals who are freed may find themselves re-enslaved relatively quickly. As Bales points out, a much wider economic programme is required to address the economic conditions that support slavery. In Meera’s case it was important that the women who were freed first might not have survived if they had not joined together in solidarity, and got help from an outside agency so that they could help others as well. They were able to create new economic relationships direct with the wholesalers which provided the economic foundation to sustain their new freedom.

The importance of these wider economic changes are brought out a little later in the same chapter, when Bales tells the story of children sold to be slaves in the fishing villages of Lake Volta in Ghana. The children were freed by the International Organization for Migration (IOM), with a grant of money from the US government.

To prevent the same problems from recurring, the IOM also helped the families of the children to raise their incomes to escape the pressures which had led to the children being sold originally. In addition, in exchange for promises not to use child slaves, the fishermen were helped to find new types of work.

The lesson from all three case-studies is that the economic relationships around slavery are complex, and redemptions can only help to address slavery if they are linked to other economic programmes and structural reforms.

In theological terms, this bigger economic picture is a useful reminder that it is the whole of sinful creation that needs to be redeemed not just individual sinners. For Christian theologians to develop their understanding of redemption along these more holistic and structural lines would not be a modern distortion of Christian teaching. Rather it would recapture something that has been lost within the tradition. It is the limitation of redemption to just an individual transaction that is the distortion. Redeeming the language of redemption in this way would give Christian believers both a better sense of the complexity of contemporary slavery and also a deeper sense of the responsibility that Christian concern for redemption puts upon us to act in the world.

There are, of course, other types of Christian language that have a vital part to play in this, including the terminology of ‘resistance’ and ‘liberation’ but seen in this more inclusive economic context redemption is likely to remain a key term, precisely because it should point directly to the economic issues that have to be part of this.
Bibliography


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