

## **FREEDOM FOR THE BENT OVER WOMAN: LESSONS FOR OUR MISSION ENDEAVORS**

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### **Introduction**

Africa among other marginalized societies has been plagued by various injustices over the years. Economic and mental slavery have been prevalent among others. These injustices have had a profound impact on the lives of many Africans. Economic slavery refers to the systemic exploitation of labor and resources by more powerful nations or groups, which results in economic dependence and subjugation of the affected country or region. This phenomenon has been a significant challenge in Africa, where many countries have been unable to benefit from their vast natural resources due to exploitation and marginalization by external forces.

One of the key factors contributing to economic slavery in Africa is the legacy of white supremacy. For centuries, European powers colonized Africa, plundering its resources and exploiting its people for their own economic gain. This legacy of exploitation has continued long after the formal end of colonialism, with multinational corporations and wealthy nations continuing to exploit African resources and labor for their own benefit. The current situation in Africa is also as a result of mental colonialization. Mental colonialization is the process by which the minds of people in colonized or formerly colonized societies are influenced by the cultural values, beliefs, and practices of the colonizer. This process can result in a lack of self-esteem, self-doubt, and a perception of inferiority. In the context of African history, mental colonialization has been a significant challenge. The legacy of colonialism has left many Africans with a sense of inferiority and a belief that Western culture and values are superior to their own. This perception has been perpetuated by the media, education system, and other cultural institutions that often prioritize Western knowledge and values over local knowledge and values. However, it is possible for Africans to change their mentality about themselves, and Westerners to change their mentality about Africans. This change is only achievable through a commitment to freedom and unity. Freedom in Christ refers to the spiritual liberation that comes from recognizing one's worth and dignity as a child of God. Therefore, this paper seeks to expound various ways through which freedom and unity can be achieved and make the world a habitable place for all humankind. It will draw lessons from the story of the bent over for 18 years.

### **A Re-telling of Luke 13:10-17 in the Words of 'The Bent Over Woman'**

My story is narrated in Luke 13:10-17. Even though I have a name, the writer does not mention it. He only introduces me in view of my condition by describing me as 'a woman who had been bent over for eighteen years. I come from a small village near Jerusalem. My life was normal until one day, when I woke up and felt an excruciating pain in my back. I became completely crippled and couldn't stand up straight. My family and friends were devastated and didn't know what to do. They tried to find a solution, but nothing worked. My sickness was not just physical, it was also emotional. I was in constant pain and struggled to do even the simplest tasks. This made me ashamed and felt like a burden to my family and community. People would stare at me and whisper behind my back, and some would even avoid me altogether. This period of sickness was not only traumatic and depressive but also humiliating and isolating. But one day, everything changed.

On this Sabbath day, I woke up early and made my way to the Synagogue. I always had to leave home exceptionally early to arrive on time since my bent over condition did not permit me to walk in a fast pace like other people. When I arrived, I sat behind with my fellow women and children as tradition demanded. As the service progressed, a man who was teaching that day called me forward. I panicked! I wondered why this man was calling me to the front, yet tradition forbade women like me from accessing such a space. I was scared and nervous because I had not experienced such attention before due to my condition. I was used to my lonely life because no one wanted to associate with me. Nonetheless, I decided to walk forward; I slowly limped and made my way to the front. I had a better view of the man and realized it was Jesus. He then told me; 'You are free from your infirmity!' While still wondering what all this was about, Jesus put his hands on me and immediately I was healed. I was no longer crippled! No longer bent over! I now could straighten up!

Then another man who I knew very well, the synagogue ruler, rose to speak. He expressed anger and disappointment that Jesus had the audacity to heal me on a Sabbath day. He was so furious and insisted that the law did not permit such an act on the Sabbath day. But Jesus appropriately reminded him of their constant double standards in applying the law. Jesus made it clear to him that since they tied and untied their oxen and donkeys on the Sabbath; it was of much more importance that the wellness, dignity, and value of humanity be prioritized on the Sabbath.

I walked home free! Jesus had moved me from the pain and humiliation of being described in view of my condition and led me to the freedom of being identified by my name. My 'bent over' condition, as well as being a woman in a patriarchal society, had compounded my vulnerability and exposed me to verbal, religious and even physical violence. But Jesus led the way in showing that a new reality is possible; a new reality where the dignity of all humanity is upheld and violence in all its forms is shunned. He did this by challenging the political, cultural, and religious system of the day which had relegated me and my fellow women to a subservient position. Jesus led in eliminating the gender disparities of the time which denied women the privilege of being 'at the front' in the Synagogue. He called me and allowed me into this 'protected space,' touched me, and healed me as everyone who was in the Synagogue on that Sabbath day watched. He further defended his action of healing me on the Sabbath and made it clear to everyone that because I am a valuable daughter of God, I deserved that healing and freedom, more so on a Sabbath day! From that day on, my life was transformed. I felt like a new person, and I was filled with hope and joy.

### **Free in Christ and United Together**

The story that we have read of a woman who was bent over for 18 years provides a fundamental metaphor for this struggle. It sheds light on the issue of economic and mental slavery in Africa and its connection to the legacy of colonialism. Economic slavery refers to the systemic exploitation of labor and resources by more powerful nations or groups, which results in economic dependence and subjugation of the affected country or region or people group. This phenomenon has been a significant challenge in Africa, where many countries have been unable to benefit from their vast natural resources due to exploitation and marginalization by external forces. The issue of economic slavery in Africa is deeply interconnected with the story of the woman bent over. The woman in the

story represents those who are oppressed and marginalized by unjust systems of power. Similarly, the people often marginalized and exploited by those who hold economic and political power. One of the most troubling aspects of economic (slavery in Africa) is the fact that the continent is rich in natural resources, yet many of its people live in abject poverty. This phenomenon is known as the resource curse, where countries with abundant natural resources often suffer from economic and political instability, corruption, and underdevelopment.

The current situation in Africa is also a result of mental colonialization. Mental colonialization is the process by which the minds of people in colonized or formerly colonized societies are influenced by the cultural values, beliefs, and practices of the colonizer. This process can result in a lack of self-esteem, self-doubt, and a perception of inferiority. In the context of African history, mental colonialization has been a significant challenge. The legacy of colonialism has left many Africans with a sense of inferiority and a belief that Western culture and values are superior to their own. This perception has been perpetuated by the media, education system, and other cultural institutions that often prioritize Western knowledge and values over local knowledge and values. Therefore, the questions are, what is freedom in Christ? To what purpose are we free? What is the relationship between freedom and being united? "For though I am free with respect to all, I have made myself a slave to all, so that I might win more of them." 1 Cor. 9:19 in regard to freedom and unity in Christ we have added the text from Micah that reads "Do justice, love mercy and walk humbly with your God." (Micah 6:8)

The story of the bent over woman in the context of freedom and unity offers a solicitous theological rationale that can help Christians understand the importance of working towards a more just and equitable society. One of the key theological themes in the story is the concept of liberation. The theme of liberation in this story can be seen in several ways. First, the woman is liberated from her physical ailment. Being bent for 18 years had caused her pain and limited her mobility. By healing her, Jesus liberates her from this physical oppression. Secondly, the story shows that the woman was a victim of various systemic injustice. She was unable to stand up straight because of her condition and as a result, she was marginalized and excluded from many aspects of society. By healing her, Jesus liberates her from this social oppression and restores her dignity. Our freedom and unity in Christ we submit should be rooted in Humility, justice and mercy.

### *Humility*

The definition of "humility" as we know it comes from the Latin, "humilis," meaning "low. Employing "humility" provides an impetus to social equity which counters the natural tendency to look after one's own self-interest to the detriment of our neighbors. Additionally, humility requires that we actively advocate for the value of those who are on the margins. The notion of social humility requires us to put people ahead of profits and ensure that before we seek a profit for ourselves and of our nations that we think of those who do not have." A Washington Post article explores humility regarding the way it is espoused in leadership.<sup>1</sup> Participants were divided into two groups – the intellectually

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<sup>1</sup> Ashley Merryman, "Leaders are More Powerful When They're Humble," in *The Washington Post*, Dec 8, 2016. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/inspired-life/wp/2016/12/08/leaders-are-more-powerful-when-theyre-humble-new-research-shows/>

arrogant and the intellectually humble. The intellectually arrogant skimmed material, quickly came to conclusions, and were slow to accept more information. The intellectually humble took more time to take in new information, and they were more able to embrace ambiguity. Humble leaders regularly “prioritize the organization’s success ahead of their own.” The Church and her mission should demonstrate intellectual humility while pushing civic leaders toward intellectual humility as a form of acceptable leadership.

This humility, for the oppressed, is to exhibit the strength to exert the authority God has given to seek recompense on their own behalf and on behalf of their communities. And, for those who operate from a position of obvious power and strength (such as financial power or State sanctioned power) the challenge is to actively participate in and advocate for those changes and behaviors which will benefit those who are vulnerable. If we “walk humbly with our God,” we honor the full dignity of those around us. As a prophet, Micah says to walk “humbly with your God.” By prioritizing humility in our solutions, we will prioritize the good of our communities over our individuals, while also prioritizing the country over individual companies. We cannot “do justice” without humility.

### *Mercy*

In the Micah text, “love mercy” grabs the attention as it is the only part of this sentence which talks about emotion. Much of the current rhetoric about the poor works against an attitude toward mercy. Today, meritocracy has been used as a counter argument to dignity. It advocates that, those who have achieved any measure of success do so through hard work. It blatantly ignores those who work hard but are unable to get ahead due to systems and structures which provide obstacles felt by specified groups. Meritocracy further implies that those who do not have wealth must be somehow deficient or lazy.

Meritocracy counters the mercy we should extend to others. Such mercy should be extended both to those who are within the borders of affluent countries and those who are not. Mercy requires us to find ways to create connection between communities and even countries so that the gaps in different sectors are not further exacerbated along racial, class or ethnic, gender lines. Lack of mercy has impacted our inability to protect those who migrate to look for better places.

### *Justice*

Biblically, we cannot flourish with the fullness God desires for us, until we address the suffering of the most vulnerable. The term for this is tzedakah, a relational term of righteousness which implies “doing right” by others. We accomplish righteousness through mishpat (or “justice”), as an ethical standard of equitable relationships. In Ps. 112:9, the Hebrew word translated “righteousness” and throughout the Old Testament is “tzedakah”. The New Testament usage of righteousness is about alms, charitable giving, and more generally rescuing, redeeming, blessing, and saving. Modern slavery affects those that in the margins in myriad ways Whether through immigration, or through current trade efforts, the hubris to treat other human beings without any regard for genuine mercy precludes the capacity to “do justice.” Mishpat is a mandate which, when employed, provides better economic, quality outcomes for the poor among us. Mishpat is more than charity. It’s to take an active role of advocating for the vulnerable among us

and changing social structures to prevent the continuance of injustice. The action point for the humility, mercy and justice will require repentance/ recognition, redress and redemption.

I. Recognition /repentance

As an act of repentance, we should recognize our complicity in perpetuating the spreading powerful hegemonies in all its manifestations including religious hierarchies that support racial injustice, capitalism, and economic inequalities.

II. Redress

Justice must not only be realized through the Mission of God, but it must also be seen and felt, just as the injustices are felt and seen by those who have been asphyxiated under the heels of religious hegemonies. Redressing is important and good for the Church as a way of interrogating the colonial heritage, patriarchy and sexism in the Church and culture. We need to interrogate further our religious and secular hegemonies that embody whiteness as normative. We must therefore interrogate what justice looks like for women, girls and children everywhere. This may include affirming and utilizing the leadership skills that they bring to the table.

III. Redemption

Inasmuch as the Bible, liturgy and tradition have been used as point of contact for inhalation of religious hegemony, we must also explore how we read texts with a hermeneutic of suspicion, especially those that have been read and used ideologically to further enslave those on the margins. It is time for redress; but it is also time to liberate people from under the yoke of hegemony by offering a balanced exegetical framework in the recognition and affirmation of non-traditional forms of biblical criticism. Exhume the texts and to ask "Why" questions. Be willing to acknowledge conviction from the post-colonial rereading of the biblical texts, as in reading the story of the bent over woman.

## **Conclusion**

This story in the context of freedom and unity offers a solicitous theological rationale that can help Christians understand the importance of working towards a more just and equitable society. Salvation is taking into account politico-economic ideologies which are also religious-spiritual-ethic issues, about the imago Dei in all of God's creation, not to mention kingdom values like truth, love, and justice, peace and reconciliation. Christians are called to stand in solidarity with those who are suffering and work towards a more just society. This means working across racial, ethnic, and political divides to build relationships and create a more inclusive community.