Oppression and Emancipation, a Re-Cast of the Exodus Narratives and Its Socio-Political Implication in Africa

By

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Abstract

Globally, international relation or politics covertly or overtly is on vested interest. Thus, it is common to see nations take advantage of others to pursue or perpetuate their target. This paper attempts an analytical discourse of the issue of oppression and emancipation in the Exodus narratives and the roles individuals and groups to favor, disfavor, enslave or free the Israelites from the Egyptian bondage. The study notes that Egypt had remained a feeder nation to Israel. It observes that the presence of Joseph in the corridors of power gave the Israelites the initial favor they enjoyed in Egypt. Unfortunately, when Joseph died as did the pharaoh he served, things turned to the contrary. The paper appreciates the role of the Hyksos in the political history of Egypt in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries BCE. The role of the recalcitrant pharaoh who did not know Joseph and the calamity he brought to his people. The paper notes the feast of Passover, the crossing of the red sea and the Sinaitic covenant as land mark events in the history of Israel. They study recalls that African socio-political atmosphere is characterized by ethnic prejudice, strife, racial discrimination, marginalization and cultural isolation. The paper adopts the harmonistic and comparative approaches in the discussion. The paper notes that oppression and discrimination do not last forever. It concludes that people do not know the value of what they have until they lose it.

Introduction

In modern times, international relation or politics is characterized by different nations trying to lord themselves on others. Similarly, this has also been responsible for most of the conflicts around the world. History of nations has shown the desire of some countries to annex others while others attempted to treat other nations as their subjects.

In all human societies, any relationship characterized by stereotyping and prejudice is bound to crumble. While the oppressor might be basking in the euphoria of his action, the oppressed may be tempted to take his destiny in his hands. In this vein, internal conflict or external aggression account for the greater proportion of human conflicts. In corroboration, Marx and Angel hold "the history of all hitherto existing societies is the history of class struggle".[1]

According to economists, different people have different thing going for them, otherwise known as comparative advantage. This may be the abundance of natural resources, strong administrative or political structure, industry or economic enterprise or a large pool of human capital. For instance, the Igbo according to the Omo n' Oba Erediauwa "the Igbo is remarkable for their economic enterprise and industry"[2]. In support of the above, Achiebe submits that "the rise of the Igbo in Nigerian affairs is due to the self confidence engendered by their open society and their belief that one man is as good as another, that no condition is permanent"[3]

Without doubt, oppression, stereotyping, marginalization and subjugation result in protest. Ekanem, quoting Awolowo, writes that "in a true federation, each ethnic group, no matter how small, is entitled to the same treatment as any other ethnic group, no matter how large"[4] Referring to the case of the Ogonis in Nigeria, Amanyie argues, "the nations which the British left behind was supposed to be bounded by a few agreements and the people were so desperate, so culturally different, so varied in size that force and violence seems to be the only way of maintaining the nations"[5]

Globally, human migration may be forward or backward. In each case, the immigrant may be propelled by many factors-- either that the new place is offering a new and favourable opportunity or that the former is presenting a renewed hope. Where there is a condusive social environment supported by a favorable economic or political atmosphere, migration might be encouraged.

This study re-casts the exodus narratives with a view to examining the effect of racial discrimination and its socio political implication in Africa. The study adopts both the historical and comparative approaches in the discussion.

Theoretical Framework

According to Jones, "humanity could be divided in many ways… by culture, by language and by race or skin pigmentation"[6]. In his view, the issue of race has been used by different

cultures against themselves merely out of prejudice. He observes that thinking about race has gone beyond classifying human groups to judging them.

Racism is a form of extreme prejudice, and a manifestation of how different people see themselves. Racists often based their arguments on biological superiority. In their view, all societies are not equal and ought not to be treated as such. However, social psychologists like Richardson and Lanberts, hold that the biological differences is a negative approach in the argument on racism. To them, the idea of pure race is misleading in the extreme and opined that all human societies have many things in common.

Egypt, a feeder nation: Egypt has been a feeder nation to Israel. Right from the period of their patriarch Abraham, it remained a buffer nation where they seek refuge to ease off hard times. Indeed, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob remain the eponymous ancestors of the Israelites[7]. And the story of the relationship of the Israelites with the Egyptians were woven around them.

Letter in their history, Jacob and his descendants also travelled to Egypt. According to the biblical narratives, Joseph who was already in Egypt invited his father and brothers to escape the famine. While in Egypt, Joseph used his vantage position to settle his people at a choice area in the land and expectedly, they prospered exceedingly.

The Turning Point: The turning point came when Joseph died as well as the Pharaoh he served. According to Exo. 1:8… "there arose a new Pharaoh who did not know Joseph".

The Hyksos Dynasty: At about 1720 B.C.E, the Hyksos, invaded Egypt and toppled their political structure. They imposed themselves on the people having taken over their political administration.

According to Okueze, during the 15th and 16th centuries, the Hyksos took advantage of their military might and dominated the political landscape of the entire region, including Palestine and Syria. Biblical scholars like Okueze argue that the movement of Jacob and his family coincided with unfavorable political atmosphere in Egypt. Others hold that the Israelites gained favour from the foreign rulers of Egypt who probably were of the same Semitic origin with them.

Whether the Israelites were favoured by the Hyksos or not, the fact remains that on their arrival in Egypt, Joseph secured the Eastern Nile Delta (a very fertile part of the land) where they settled. Perhaps, the attraction to Egypt might not be unconnected with the

green pasture which results from the over flow of the entire land round the Nile Valley. Most times, it was noted that Egypt often throw their doors open to inhabitants of the region who migrate into their territory owing to the perennial drought.

According to the New Jerusalem Bible, "the number of the descendants of Jacob who came to Egypt was about seventy as Joseph was already there. … the Israelites were fruitful and prolific, and with time, the whole of Goshen was occupied by them (Ex.1:1 ff).

Indigenous king enthroned: The death of Joseph and Hyksos King he served, brought to an end glorious days of the Israelites in Egypt. As it were, there arose a new Egyptian king in the land who did not know Joseph. And he dealt cruelly with Israelites. (Ex.1). In what might seem a restoration agenda, the new Egyptian leadership set for himself a task of curbing some of the privileges and opportunities hitherto enjoy by the Israelites. Accordingly, several steps were considered in this direction. First, the Israelites were drafted to provide the work force in the building project in the kingdom. Secondly, their population has to be checked. "So the Egyptians installed captains of work force over them to oppress them with hard labour. … they built Pithom and Rameses as store cities".[8] Unfortunately, this did not deter the Israelites. As a result, the Egyptian authorities increased their burden by withdrawing the support services they received. The number of bricks the Israelites are to produce was increased yet, they were also required to source the materials with which to work.

In an effort to check their population, two notable Egyptian midwives Puah and Shifrah were instructed to kill every male child given birth to by the Israelites' women. However, these two women feared God and did not carry out this instruction, (Exod. 2).

According to the book of Exodus chapter 2ff, the reason for this attitude towards the Israelites was to break their collective spirit and faith in God, as well as to exploit their spirit of services and diligence.

The Birth of Moses: At a time when the Israelites were subjected to racial discrimination, economic exploitation, religious oppression, political subjugation and social exclusion, came a glimpse of light, the birth of Moses. His parents were in a dilemma whether to kill him or not. However, since the Egyptian midwives did not, his life was spared. They hid him for three months. As a point when they can no longer do this, his mother placed him in a basket and dropped the basket at the back of the Red Sea while his sister Miriam who had so much love for him, watched by to see what might eventually happen to the poor boy.

As fate may have it, Pharaoh's daughter came to bathe at the river and one of her attendants saw the basket. Her attention was draw to it. She remarked that this baby must belong to one of the Israelites women. She took pity on the boy and brought him out. As she contemplated what to do with this baby, Miriam quickly suggested that she get someone to help nurse the baby for Pharaoh's daughter, an idea she immediately accepted. Moses was handed to his biological mother to nurse for Pharaoh's daughter who took Moses as her adopted son.

In the course of time, Moses was sent to Pharaoh's daughter at the palace. Here, he grew up as an adopted prince. However, he recalls that he is a blooded Israelite.

Occasionally, he visits the Israelites' settlement and the site of their hard labour. In one occasion, he met an Egyptian fighting an Israelite. He assisted the Israelite to kill the Egyptian, there by rescuing the Israelite. Another day, he met two Israelites fighting and cautioned them. Unfortunately, one of the parties was the person he rescued the previous day. This quarrelsome fellow rudely questioned "who made you a prince and a judge over us". Going further, he added; you mean to kill me as you killed the Egyptian yesterday? Now afraid of his life at the palace, Moses escaped to the land of the Midianites where he got married to Ziporrah Jethro's daughter. He took care of his father in-law's flock pasturing them in the wilderness.

Moses Theophany and charge: The incident of the burning bush presented Moses with a new experience. Close to the foot of Mount Horeb, he saw a flame yet, the bush was no burnt. As he balanced properly to have a better look, he had a voice urging him to remove his sandals to mean that the land on which he was standing was holy. As if this was not enough, the voice informed Moses that he is going to be the instrument to lead the Israelites out of Egypt.

To Moses, it was abrupt to recruit him for leadership. However, it seems this is inescapable. "Following this theophany, thoughts half formed in his mind became clarified, resolves half made became clear cut. He became clear out. He became convinced that he was called to the work of delivering his people". On a second thought, Moses doubted if he has any capacity for leadership, if he has the ability to rouse men from their lethargy and can he break the fetters of slave mentality which has accustomed his people. He remembers what source of authority could he lay claims to. He remembers that an Israelite had previously questioned his authority to lead[9]. However, the Almighty God who called him to service assured him of protection. Though, Moses is not eloquent, Aaron his brother will be his mouthpiece and the shepherd staff with him will be the symbol. God instructed Moses to

tell the Israelites that He has remembered His covenant with their forefathers and their cries have come to him. That Moses should go to Pharaoh and ask him to let the Israelites go.

Expectedly, Moses encounter with Pharaoh resulted in more hardship for the Israelites. Moses demand that Pharaoh should let Israelites go was misinterpreted to mean a sign of idleness. Pharaoh remarked that the Israelites were not occupied enough and that is why they had the boldness to request to go and serve their God. He instructed the labour masters to increase their burden as earlier mentioned so that they will have enough punishment for their 'nonsense' demand.

From the first to the ninth plaque, Pharaoh demonstrated his obstinacy. He questioned and contexted the authority of Moses to ask that the Israelites be allowed to go. The tenth plague was not only heart broken to the Israelites but devastating.

The Passover (pischak) heralded a new dawn in the history of the Israelites. The recalcitrant Pharaoh, yielded helplessly to Moses' request to let the Israelites go. The Passover was marked by the slaughtering of a ram and the eating of unleavened bread, with the blood of the animal smeared on the door post of the Israelites, separating them from the Egyptians. As the angel of death came, they Passover the residence of the Israelites and wrecked havoc among the Egyptians. This boosted the faith of the Israelites in Yehwah; it gave them an unpresidented favour from the Egyptians who willingly granted every request made by the latter. (Okueze)[10].

The Exodus of the Israelites out of Egypt was received with mixed feeling. Especially, when the former realized the sudden lose of manpower which they provided. The events of the exodus could be interpreted based on two principal elements. First, is the promises and prophecies of Genesis 12:1-3. Secondly, the oppression and dehumanizing condition to which the Israelites suffered in Egypt after the death of Joseph and the Pharaoh he worked with[11].

Most probably, Egypt seems not to have a systematic pattern of labour supply. They obtained the workforce partly from prisoners or serfs. Therefore, the exit of the Israelites was obviously going to impact negatively on them.[12].

The Match to the Promised Land: From Egypt to the Promised Land, the Israelites were confronted with some daunting challenges. Soon after crossing the Red Sea, their initial

enthusiasm was dampened when they came face to face with the excruciating realities of desert life.

The Red Sea was a huge challenge to the Israelites accessing the Promised Land. On the other hand, it boasted the confidence of the Egyptians that the escapees will be arrested and brought back to Egypt. When Moses appeared roughed, God made a way for them where there was none. The water of the river was parted into two for the people to cross on dry land. Pharaoh and his chariot men oblivious that this was a divine intervention, pursuit them into the river only to be drowned when the waters closed in again[13].

After this final victory, Moses remembered God's instruction to bring the people to the foot of the mountain when they are out of Egypt. Here, God intended to renew the covenant He had with Abraham so as to extend to it to his descendants. Unfortunately, the Israelites exhibited a lack of confidence in Moses as they murmured against Moses and Yehweh.

Here at Mount Sinai, God renewed his covenant with the Abraham to extend to his descendants. As Moses went up the mountain to receive the Decalogue, the Israelites reverted to their act of disobedience and commissioned Aaron to make for them a golden Calf.

This act of mistrust infuriated God who threatened to severe his relationship with this rebellious group. However, Moses intervened, praying God to remember His covenant with Abraham. Despite the fact that the Israelites were fed with manna throughout their Exodus period, they persistently manifested a total lack of confidence on Moses. While it may appear that the Israelites suffered untold hardship in Egypt, "the hardship in the wilderness was considered worse. In the judgment of many, freedom in the desert, was a poor substitute for slavery in Egypt"[14]. They queried Moses if there are no graves in Egypt that he has brought them to the wilderness to die. In the face of all these, Moses continually reminded God to consider his promise to Abraham to give the land of Canaan to his descendants. On this promise, the Israelites strolled gradually despite all odds into the Promised Land.

The African experience: In Africa, cultural prejudice, stereotyping and ethnic rivalry characteristics the life style of the people. The different peoples pitch themselves against one another resulting in both intra and inter-ethnic clashes. Some cultures see themselves as of superior race to others. Even within some others, there is a marked class distinction. Human beings are stratified into classes.[15] (Mbiti).

The Rwandan Genocide of 1994 reveals the degree of tribal hatred among the different peoples of Africa. This is a case of Hutu's majority attempting to exterminate the minority Tutsi.

The war between the Ogba and Abo tribes of the Niger Delta was attributed to the Ogba refusal to hand in a young man for the Ewareji festival by the Obi of Abo. In this area, the Obi operated like a Lord and all the surrounding societies were under their subjugation. The refusal by any, was interpreted as rebelous.[16].

In Central African Republic, it is the context between the Salakaa Muslems and the Christians. While the Salaka resorted to dominant the political affairs of that country, another group under the umbrella of Anti Salaka fought the insurgence.

Despite the fact that Nigeria is a multi-ethnic country, the majority tribes have persistently dominated the political, economic and social life of the entire citizenry. In one way or the other, they resist the opinion of the minority. Commenting about the case of the Ogoni, Ekanem writes "Even so often, the voice of the oppressed minority could be heard far and near among the oppressed majority"[17].

Mental torture lives the effected devastated. The horror of the slave trade still exacts its negative effect on African till the present. Rodney quoting Sekou Toure regrets "The relationship between the degree of destitution of peoples of Africa and the length of the nature of exploitation that they had to endure is evident. Africa remains marked by the crimes of the slave traders. Up to now, her potentialities are restricted by under population"[17]. (Rodney). Indeed, in Europe and America, blacks continue to be discriminated against. They are insulted, assaulted, mamed and killed as sub humans.

The monarchical system of traditional administration in Africa also supports racial discrimination and class differences. In a situation where members of the ruling lineage are seen as rare blood and first class citizens, encourages polarization and discrimination. If one is not from the ruling lineage the individual is considered a second class citizen.

All over Africa, there are traces of civil war or insurgencies everywhere. These are attributed to one culture trying to dominate the other. The civil war in Southern Sudan is polarized along tribal lines. The Nigerian civil war, was also as a result of regional as well as ethnic rivalries. According to Ademoyiga, the different tribes in the country could not agree on certain issues. As a result, the people of the Eastern Region who were more aggrieved, attempted to secede.

Implications: History has shown globally, that oppression does not last forever. On this note therefore, this paper presents the following suggestions.

i) Every individual, society or culture, should endeavour to discover its unique potentials.
ii) Individuals or cultures should understand that different people are endowed in different ways and one's advantage may be the disadvantage of another people.
iii) Since history is not static, we should strive to be on the good side of history.
iv) Global resources whether human or material, should be applied towards the development of humanity.
v) People should be allowed to enjoy the benefit of their God-given endowment.
vi) Any attempt to deny of people of their natural endowments is often visited with supernatural sanction.

Conclusion

On the final note, while some critiques may argue that the oppression which the Israelites suffered in Egypt was predestined, it exposed the callous and inhuman mind set of the Egyptian leadership. The cruel attitude of Pharaoh towards the Israelites stemmed from their wrong perception of the Israelites whom they feared might also become another Hyskos from whom they have just regained their independence. With total disregard to the services they were getting from them, the Egyptians felt they were loosing so much by allowing the Israelites their basic freedom. Unfortunately, they realized the usefulness of the Israelites when they are gone, thus confirming the saying that "people do not know the value of what they have until they loose it". In this wise therefore, I wish to conclude that no one should count himself indispensable or an island.

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