

**SLAVERY IN THE PAULINE EPISTLE TO PHILEMON:  
THEOLOGICAL, SOCIAL, AND ECONOMIC IMPLICATIONS  
FOR NIGERIAN CONTEXT**

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**Abstract**

The point of departure for this study is the slave identity of Onesimus and the inter-relationship of Paul and Onesimus, Philemon and Onesimus, Paul and Philemon in the Pauline epistle to Philemon with the aim of comparing the resurgence of contemporary slavery in the Nigerian context. The study adopts semiotic analysis intending to proffer a solution to the puzzle of Onesimus' identity. Slavery was an acknowledged part of the world in which the biblical authors lived. It was a dynamic part of the empires in the ancient Near East, the Greco-Roman and the Mediterranean world. The Hebrew Bible contains laws regulating slavery and even uses it as a metaphor to describe God's relationship with Israel. The New Testament, engrained in the Greco-Roman world, accepts the fact of slavery. But as psychology transforms, abolitionism became an inspiring force, Biblicists were challenged to reconsider the Bible in the light of the novel worldview. It is problematic that the Bible was used both to support and condemn slavery. The study reveals that Nigeria has also become a transit corridor through which modern slavery thrives highest in Africa. Modern slavery is occurring through poverty, unemployment, hunger and ignorance. One has to reassess how slavery is studied. The paper in conclusion recommends equality of humanity in God's sight irrespective of skin colour, language, tribe, or religion. In general, slavery is viewed

through negative eyes for the fact that slaves are not treated as human beings, but as animals or inanimate things in the first century C.E.

**Keywords:** Onesimus, slavery, Pauline, Philemon, freedom, and Africa

### **Introduction**

This study aims at reassessing Onesimus' identity prompting his triangular interrelationship with Paul and Philemon through the lens of an innovative psychological rethink in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century as modern slavery seems to have manifested in different forms. It is the prevalent phenomenon that has eaten deep into the fabric of Nigerian society. Slavery was an approved institution in the first century C.E., thus, people became slaves in several ways. There were no frontiers to turning into a slave. This entails that even freepersons could become slaves. Harrill notes that ancient slavery was not founded on race or skin colour.<sup>1</sup> There were various ways to acquire slaves such as unveiling oneself due to poverty, capture in warfare, imports from overseas trade, kidnapping, brigandage, piracy, tribute and tax payment, debt infant exposure or being born as a slave, and as punishment for criminals. The birth was the indispensable technique of conventional enslavement under the Roman Empire.<sup>2</sup> Bartchy moreover stresses that in the first-century slaves were largely deprived of the freedom to neither own property nor marry.<sup>3</sup> They were not allowed to do anything to benefit themselves. In a nutshell, they lost their rights to live as human beings. Patterson is thus apt that slavery can be designated as social death.<sup>4</sup> However; slavery could also be understood in another sense, namely the metaphoric understanding of slaves in Christian communities. Paul in his letter to Philemon advocates an innovative philosophy regarding Christian slaves. Ostensibly, Paul made no effort to annihilate the social rules and the social order of the day. Relatively, he comprehends slavery in terms of his theological thinking.

In the initial Greco-Roman world, slavery was a social institution. Bartchy unveils that the economy of the Greco-Roman society came to depend on slaves.<sup>5</sup> On another note; the acrimonious experience of African slavery is extremely devastating because Europeans and Americans considered Africa as a dark and evil continent that was cursed.

### **The Term Slavery**

Slavery is downplayed in the Epistles to Philemon. The word 'ebed עֶבֶד, slave<sup>6</sup>, nevertheless, denotes not just concrete slaves occupied in production or the household but also persons in lesser positions with

regard to a higher administrator, and so the term *'ebed* is occasionally translated as servant. Also, the term was applied as a sign of servility in relation to oneself when speaking with persons of higher status. The same concept was also used in the allegorical meaning, “the slave or servant of God”. In contemporary translations of the Bible Hebrew *'ebed* דַבְדָב, Greek *doulos*<sup>7</sup> δούλος and several other similar terms are rendered “slave” as well as “servant”, “attendant”, and so on.

### **Slavery in Pauline Epistle to Philemon: Inter-relationship of Paul-Onesimus-Philemon**

In the biblical framework, there is a man who challenges typical thinking about slavery. That man is Onesimus in Paul’s letter to Philemon. He is identified as a slave of Philemon’s household. Diverse circumstances regarding the identity of Onesimus as a slave have been critically projected by some academics, including in recent scholarship. The foremost school of thought is the traditional viewpoint, buttressed by Bartchy that Onesimus was a runaway slave. This position is the commonly held view since the fourth century C.E. According to this perspective, Onesimus was brought back to his Christian slaveholder, Philemon, by Paul, having done some damage, including burglary, and obviously by fleeing.<sup>8</sup> Onesimus met Paul in prison and was baptized by him. Paul’s yearning to reintegrate Onesimus into the community of the Colossian church upholds the values of this awareness. In the past, Onesimus would have evinced once useless (ποτέσοιᾶχρηστον) to Philemon, but now, he would turn out to be, accurate to the connotation of his name, ‘useful’ (δὲσοι καὶ ἐμοιᾶχρηστον), not only to his ex-master but to the entire community. In this very transitory declaration, Paul uses three qualities to suit Onesimus, the slave, on equal footing with every Colossian believer, as well as Philemon. Onesimus is said to be ‘faithful’, ‘beloved’ to me (ἀδελφὸν ἀγαπητόν, μάλιστα ἐμοί) and a ‘brother.’

The following main view concerning the status of Onesimus is the belief that he was a dispatched slave. Consistent with this idea, Onesimus did not escape as believed but was sent on an errand to Paul by Philemon. The submission is that Onesimus served a definite role on behalf of Philemon’s parishioners, comparable to that of Epaphroditus on behalf of the church at Philippi. Symbolically, Winter supports this view. She suggests that the letter on no account indicates that Onesimus was a fugitive and to assume such is to read further than Paul projected.<sup>9</sup> Thus, Onesimus was with Paul in prison because he was sent there by his landlord. Again, Paul wrote the letter so that Onesimus should no longer

be treated as a slave but be considered a brother who supports Paul's work. Lastly, Paul states that Onesimus is not a slave any longer in the Christian setting and meanderingly requests that Onesimus be manumitted. Paul's intrepid approach in appealing to Philemon not only to forgive Onesimus but also to accept him as a brother and a faithful fellow to be reabsorbed into society as a free man is worthy of approval. And, the Pauline position, which in due course gave robust stimulus for the agitation for freedom for slaves in the 18th century.<sup>10</sup>

A different view contends that Onesimus appeals to Paul for mediation with his owner. Consistent with this position, Onesimus was not a fleeing slave making efforts towards obtaining freedom. His escape has some drive correlated to intervention after committing a crime, possibly to Philemon. This view absolutely deduces that Onesimus was not an unlawful runaway slave but a felonious truant as stated by Roman slave law. Lampe designates that Onesimus could be seen as knowingly fleeing to Paul who was a friend of Philemon, instead of seeing Onesimus as a slave absconding from his owner. The aim of this 'fleeing' was not intending to abscond the bonds of enslavement but to acquire the apostle's intervention.<sup>11</sup> A departure from the traditional view, Winter and Lampe as birds of the same feather argue that marketable and legal methodical terms in the letter to Philemon are recycled to back up the impression that Onesimus was not merely an escaped slave.<sup>12</sup> Winter maintains that Onesimus was a soul who laboured for a house church in Colossae, and he was a slave. So he disputed the popular runaway slave view.

Callahan treads on another path. He discards the traditional interpretation that Onesimus was Philemon's slave and advocates that Onesimus was an alienated brother of Philemon.<sup>13</sup> When Paul urged Philemon to boycott from treating Onesimus as a slave, he was imposing on him to discontinue refuting him the mutual merits of brotherhood which were love, integrity and reverence. Above all, the first view that sees Onesimus as a runaway slave is convincingly the right view because Paul would not have been appealing to Philemon to accept Onesimus back and with a commitment that even if he owes him anything, it should be charged to him. Onesimus was not only a slave but also converted to Christianity after meeting Paul. To begin with, Paul presents several descriptions of Onesimus in his letter to Philemon. He designates Onesimus, for instance as "my child" (Phlm 10, RSV), "my very heart" (Phlm 12, RSV), and "a beloved brother" (Phlm 16, RSV). These terms depict a clue at who Onesimus is or may have become in Paul's life.

Through exploring these terms, it is plausible to conclude that Onesimus might not be perceived as a slave any longer in his Christian life.

The slave as a literary metaphor appears clearly in Paul's writings. For example, Paul calls himself a slave of Christ. Martin rightly takes slavery here as a literary metaphor.<sup>14</sup> He suggests some examples of literary expressions concerning the slave. Firstly, slavery is described as unconditional obedience. In some of Paul's letters slavery was used negatively: Rom 8:15, 21; Gal 4:3, 24-25; 5:1. However, Paul in most cases positively uses unconditional obedience. For example, he suggests unconditional obedience to God as an instrument of righteousness in Romans 6:13. Christians are no longer slaves to sin, but slaves of God. Therefore, they have to live for God and for ministry to God from that point on. The study deduces to a logical submission that a believer as a slave of Christ is a representative of Jesus Christ. Even though the normal sense of slavery indicates the notion of labour, toil, or unrestricted obedience to an owner, slavery is a metaphor that can suggest the meaning of the role of an agent as an unquestionable, authoritative representative of an owner. Slavery as a literary metaphor can be used paradoxically to designate a "friend" of Jesus Christ and the "recipients of the prophecy." For example, in John 15:14-15, a slave is labelled as a "friend" of Jesus Christ.

### **The Resurgence of Slavery in the Contemporary Nigerian Society**

A dark era straddling three and a half centuries of upsetting trans-Atlantic slave trade, expansively labelled 'the European crime against humanity.' Slaves were not permitted to wear clothes; they were disgraced with stocks on their necks linked to each other. The ones that were ill had been deposited into the sea and when they arrived at the plantations, they sealed their mouths.<sup>15</sup> This criminal act happened to fellow humans just because someone has traded them in return for a necklace, alcohol or a mirror. The slave trade is one of the cruellest features in the history of mankind. Although it was their fellow Africans that traded them, the devilish buyers motivated it. As these people were being offloaded into the sea, the dying ones would surely utter curses on the sellers and the buyers.

The Trans-Atlantic slave trade began as early as the 15th century. It has been assessed that about 500 million Africans were shipped away as slaves. Ayoola asserts that it is now obvious that the question of the slave trade is revealing its spiritual trajectory in Nigeria<sup>16</sup>Africans were stolen from their homeland, packed like sardines into the bellies of slave ships and after suffering the hell of the so-called 'middle passage', were sold on

auction blocks to the highest bidder<sup>17</sup>”A moral evil could not justify the foregone conclusion of chattel slavery. The end does not justify the means. Even though slavery was obliterated more than two centuries ago, an existing form of slavery metamorphosed globally into contemporary slavery. The current trend varies in its methods of exploitation and inhumanity. As the act assumes different scopes, it includes human trafficking, forced labour, sex trafficking, sex slavery, child sex trafficking, forced child labour, early forced marriage, baby factory, gendered kidnapping, and debt bondage or peonage. Indeed, modern slavery takes place within the context of human trafficking and, occasionally starts with kidnapping.<sup>17</sup> There are other overlapping types of slavery, such as organ harvesting, usage of child soldiers, and human exploitations leading to beggary.

According to the Global Slavery Index (GSI) 2018, the population of people in slavery in Nigeria is 1,384,000, more than the total number of all the other 16 West African countries when added together, which is 1,081,000. The 2018 GSI shows that seven out of 1000 Nigerian citizens live in modern slavery while the vulnerability of Nigerians to modern slavery is 74 out of 100 people.<sup>18</sup> Human trafficking involves the act and attempted act of recruitment and transportation of persons within or across borders.<sup>19</sup> It is the fastest-growing form of slavery. The majority of those forced into it are enforced into the commercial sex trade or forced labour. It poses negative economic and social consequences in Nigeria.<sup>20</sup> The Third World nations in Asia, Africa and Latin America grieve the most from child labour because poverty ravages a great number of its citizens. Across international borders yearly, between 800,000 and 4,000,000 people are trafficked, with women and children being the most common victims.<sup>21</sup> Modern Nigerian slaves are trafficked to Europe and most specifically Italy. The Middle East and North America are also common places for trafficked persons from Nigeria to end up for adoption, domestic and agricultural labour, and for the sale of their human body parts. Edo state is verified to have the maximum percentage of externally trafficked victims in Nigeria. This trafficking crisis in Nigeria is caused by socioeconomic factors.<sup>22</sup>

The interchange between terrorism and modern-day slavery typologies is vibrant and on the rise. Boko Haram plays a large role in the trafficking of women in Nigeria by kidnapping girls and forcing them into slavery. They have kidnapped more than 1000 children in Nigeria since 2013 as stated by UNICEF.<sup>23</sup> There appears to be a high connection between juvenile sexual abuse and child prostitution in Nigeria. This

category of child slavery may consist of prostitution, pornography, sex tourism, sex rings, nude dancing or modelling, and sexual mistreatment of child domestic servants.<sup>24</sup> Many efforts have been made to fight this crime. The National Agency for the Proscription of Traffic in Persons (NAPTIP) was formed to fight human trafficking in 2003<sup>25</sup> In 2018 the Walk Free Foundation valued that there were nearly 1.4 million individuals living in modern slavery in Nigeria.<sup>26</sup> These vulnerable young women or girls easily fall victim to the traffickers as the urge to find gainful employment abroad, earning better incomes following the irresistible nature of the Nigerian naira devaluation and the abject poverty in the land. It is only on arrival at their destination that the women and girls are confronted with the harsh realities that they have been deceived, and are lured or coerced into commercial sex. A lady sleeps with 30 persons a day for years until she would be allowed to be on her own.<sup>27</sup>

Poverty has been devastating in Nigerian society. Poverty and ignorance are the two major reasons that dragged people into contemporary slavery, reluctantly or un-reluctantly. Unemployment and corruption are other causes of modern slavery. Due to the corruption and mismanagement of the government in Nigeria, many people do not succeed to get a decent job which affords their families with necessities. Contemporary slavery may affect the psychology of the Nigerian people, education, health and economy also. The Global Slavery Index (GSI) reported that civil unrest, terror threats, endemic corruption and ongoing abductions of Nigerians, including the well-made known kidnapping of school-girls by the Boko Haram terrorists, underscored ongoing stumbling block of fighting modern slavery in Nigeria.<sup>28</sup>

It is from the spiritual perspective that Ayoola perceives the current ASUU (Academic Staff Union of Universities) strike phenomenon, its roots and its features when likened to the historical slave trade that transpired in Africa and Nigeria especially, and the manifestation of the faces of the slave trade in many sides of national lives. A slave is the asset of its possessor and works without pay or skimpy pay labelled slave wages<sup>29</sup> The products of the academics' toil (the graduates) drive the general economy but they must not be perceived to have meaningful incomes that pledge a decent living in this botch economic environment. Their products may be living well, but not the academics that produced them. This is typical of the evil treatment given to the slaves in comparison to the excellent living conditions accorded to the children of the slave masters. It is like slaves dispatched to work in the sugarcane plantations in America or West Indies Islands with their mouths

sealed. And in the process of their academic union agitating for better welfare, the little slave wages were ordered to be stopped so that they can die of hunger and sicknesses and in so doing be deposited into the grave reminiscent of the slaves of old being dropped into the ocean on their way to slave captivities in America and other places.

### **The Theological Implications of the Onesimus Episode**

Luther asserts that all believers are God's Onesimuses.<sup>30</sup> He explains further how Paul stood in poor Onesimus' shoes to plead his case with his master. He acts precisely as if he were himself Onesimus who had done wrong... Yet he does this without duress, considering his rights; but he lowers himself of his rights in order to oblige Philemon also to renounce his rights. What Christ has done for humanity with God the Father, the same Paul does also for Onesimus with Philemon. For Christ emptied himself of his rights (Phil. 2:7) and overwhelmed the Father with love and humility so that the Father had to clear up his rage and rights and accept humans in kindness for the sake of Christ, who so industriously advocates their cause and so enthusiastically bears their miseries. Calvin saw Onesimus runaway slave for whom Paul demands forgiveness. In this plea, Paul signals such biblical patience that his message turns out to be a testimony to the entire Church.<sup>31</sup> Calvin comprehends Paul to be modifying the flight of Onesimus as a disappearance that was essentially beneficial, for given that Onesimus was a fugitive in the heart (possibly not yet in practice), Philemon was not unloading his value.<sup>32</sup>

Dunn filtered out Paul's expression in verse 9 as depicting passionate compassion for Philemon.<sup>33</sup> Paul appealed to Philemon to temper justice with mercy. Wilmington deduces in stronger terms that Philemon was requested to pardon and reinstate Onesimus by considering the triangular relationship of Onesimus, Philemon, and Paul.<sup>34</sup> As a result, Onesimus, along with Philemon were assimilated into the body of Christ, or so it is believed. Accordingly, both Philemon and Onesimus united in the same Lord, and a fresh rapport between Philemon and Onesimus is moulded between them as brothers, devoid of a possessor and a slave.<sup>35</sup>

In Paul's theological viewpoint, Onesimus was a beloved brother instead of a slave. Fitzmyer on the same page and line of thought with Obrien holds that the slave was measured not only as a man but also as a brother like any fellow Christian in the epistle to Philemon.<sup>36</sup> The theme of slavery can be understood from two standpoints, that is a theological and social perception. These two viewpoints can be pragmatic to the Philemon letter in order to describe the status of Onesimus as a slave. For this cause,



Onesimus is considered a slave of Philemon, but Paul termed Onesimus a son in Philemon 10. Accordingly, both Philemon and Onesimus belonged to the same Lord, and a new relationship between Philemon and Onesimus is moulded between them as brothers, not as an owner and a slave.<sup>37</sup> The new relationship between Philemon and Onesimus is moulded in faith, and the relationship between them in faith surpasses their old relationship as an owner and a slave. Hence, for Paul, the issue of manumission was not vital.

Theologically, verse 16 labels Onesimus' present status obviously by considering the meaning of two Greek phrases, namely, *evnsarki*, and *evnkuri,w* (v. 16). Consistent with Wilson, Onesimus was a beloved brother in the physical sense (*evnsarki*) as well as in the spiritual sense (*evnkuri,w*). Similarly, Onesimus' position was portrayed at the normal human level in *evnsarki*, ("in the flesh"), and also is revealed as a new status with *evnkuri,w* ("in Christ"). Paul's drive in this letter was to aver that a Christian in a helpless condition should be treated as a brother in Christ by a fellow Christian.<sup>38</sup> In this logic, Onesimus as a believer should be measured as a fellow believer as all other believers in the community. Felder as well submits that Paul's core emphasis in this letter is not on the establishment of slavery.<sup>39</sup> He argues that Paul's motivation is somewhat on the power of the gospel which can change and reconcile human relations. Moreover, some terms which were used by Paul for instance 'my child' (v. 10), and 'my very heart' (v. 12) designate that Paul appealed to Philemon in the best interests of Onesimus, but this may not necessarily mean that Paul requested for the manumission of Onesimus. Paul merely stressed the altered status quo in which Onesimus is considered to have moved from a slave to a beloved brother in Christ. Thus, the word 'slave' no longer signifies "degradation," or "abuse".<sup>40</sup>

Migrating from Trans-Atlantic slavery to modern slavery is not less an act of evil against humankind than the latter. Equality of humankind ought to be encouraged, but it seems to be less than expected in Nigeria. Bradshaw avers that humans are the common progeny of one worldwide Parent with whom there is no respect of persons. The Calvinist philosopher and revivalist, Jonathan Edwards, taught that 'benevolence' is a crucial element of 'true virtue', and his followers came to see slave-owning as mismatched with disinterested benevolence.<sup>41</sup> Also, in Paul's theological awareness, he reflects on spiritual freedom primarily more than physical freedom. Paul, in Philemon, started slavery eradication by alluding to a shared societal ethical system generally acknowledged and entrenched in the Golden Rule and Christian morals.<sup>42</sup> Beale and Carson

assert that the epistle is alluded to in the OT and the Jewish ethos. This inference is made from Paul's craving that the slave, Onesimus, should not be stigmatised but be received as a brother (Dt 23:15–16). This view is domiciled in the Rabbinic, Targumic, and Qumranic works.<sup>43</sup>

### **Social Implications of the Onesimus Episode in relation to Nigeria**

By social implication, the triangular relationship of Paul, Philemon and Onesimus signifies communal living to forgive, reconcile, love and tolerate one another in Christ. Onesimus is allowed to return to Philemon in the anticipation that he will be acknowledged as a beloved brother; and he is similarly allowed to return to Paul, accordingly sharing some of the burdens that Paul's incarceration has inflicted on Paul's life and mission work<sup>44</sup> This is purely the demonstration of life in the Christian community: liberty articulating itself in love that accepts one another burdens. Paul teaches that, "Through love, become slaves to one another" (Gal 5:16), and "Owe no one anything, except to love one another" (Rom 13:8). "Bear one another burdens, and so fulfil the law of Christ" (Gal 6:2). While Paul is imprisoned, and even as Philemon and Onesimus are at odds with each other, the Spirit of Christ is opening a future for all three of them to be pulled into a relationship branded by freedom and love.<sup>45</sup> This is virtually unquestionably what Paul is asking of Philemon: "Receive this brother of ours as free, freed and free to return to me to help both with my survival and my proclamation of the gospel." By inference, from Paul's social perspective, Onesimus, as converted to Christ seizes to be a slave.

Paul's letter to Philemon can be summarised by the word community. The way in which Paul crafts his letter and the discourse he employs in developing his argument, masterfully demonstrates the apostle's insightful perspective of what it means to belong, to be connected, and to live in a united community, such as Nigeria is expected to be. The concept of community is a prominent biblical theme, which finds symbolic expression in the people of Israel as a nation, the church as the body of Christ, and now in Onesimus, as an equal member of a community stratified between the rich and poor, slaves and masters, free humans, Jews, and Gentiles. It is thinkable that Philemon lived in Colossae. In the letter to the Christians of that city, Paul the apostle of Jesus Christ speciously observes that Onesimus, a "faithful and beloved brother, who is one of you", is coming in the company of Tychicus, the carrier of the letter (Col 4:9). In the opening verses of the letter (Phlm 1-3), the apostle Paul explores this concept right from the outset of his letter in two ways. First, he expresses his appreciation and love towards Philemon,

whom he addresses as “our beloved collaborator.” One can note Pauline’s emphasis on the term community, highlighted by the pronoun ‘our’ and the adjective ‘collaborator’. Secondly, it is demonstrated in this passage that, Paul places Onesimus in the union of the local community of Christian brothers. To the Colossian congregation, Onesimus is a ... *brother... one of you* (Phlm9). In this very brief statement, Paul places Onesimus, the runaway slave, the social outcast, on equal footing with every Colossian believer, including Philemon.

Nigerians are obliged to be freed from the scourge of modern slavery in the same way as Paul facilitated Onesimus’ freedom. Paul acknowledges that slavery is a loathsome institution and thus disgraceful. Wherever Nigerians are challenged with the menaces and evils of enslavement, it is appropriate for them to hunt for freedom through actions of love and unity.

Socially, the triangular relationship between Paul, Philemon and Onesimus was built on trust, love and reconciliation. It erased the thought of slavery in Onesimus’ life and eroded the stigma of inferiority complex in his life. Paul rehabilitated Onesimus’ life to the present status quo. The religio-political leaders and financially rich people in Nigeria are expected to strategise and intensify efforts aimed at eradicating poverty in Nigeria which is the root cause of modern slavery. Enforced labour is socially unacceptable because people are compelled by their fellow humans to work for free under relentless threats, penalties, or bullying. Other examples of enforced labour are found in brick-making, working in cocoa or sugar cane plantations, cotton or fishing industry. The content of the letter to Philemon is strikingly similar to much of what is seen as authentic African traditional thought, values and anthropological tenets. In other words, it embodies typical African thought about hospitality, love, brotherhood, togetherness, community life, caring and sharing. The vulnerability of Nigerians to modern slavery is a menace to be uprooted in totality.

### **Economic Implications of the Onesimus Episode in Relation to Nigeria**

The construction in Philemon 17-19 is articulated in a meticulous legal-economical lexicon and is a responsibility of payment, ‘I owe you’ that is enforceable before any court.<sup>46</sup> Paul climaxed his entreaty as he took it upon himself to shoulder the financial obligation that Onesimus would have had himself entangled in as he fled from his master. Economically, the earlier relationship between Philemon and Onesimus suffered a serious

setback. As he ran away from his master and the possibility of taking along with him Philemon's anonymous possession coupled with his absence must have resulted in an economic downturn for the master. However, Paul's intervention was timely as he pledged to pay back whatsoever Onesimus must have taken away. Should many Nigerians imbibe such an approach to life, Nigerian society would be a better place to live in. According to Manus, in Nigeria, the modern Pharaohs disguise in the wrap of political parties, some Ministries and some Directorates of Public Utilities, the Houses of Assembly and Oil Marketers, and Police and Customs mete out injustices on the masses through numerous socio-economic matters they have botched to punctually address.<sup>47</sup> Too many Nigerians in one way or another have turned out to be slaves in their own country. The hard-hearted denial of people's freedom, the oppressive and negligent character of the political officeholders have ultimately filtered out to all facets of leadership in Nigeria. The overwhelming enslavement proliferation in Nigeria is already getting out of hand and calls for the instant consideration of all the requisite stakeholders who are concerned to get rid of the inhumanity.

### **Conclusion**

This study has investigated the act of slavery in Pauline epistles to Philemon concerning theological, social, and economic implications for the Nigerian context. The study found out that Paul's epistle to Philemon deals with one of the most disreputable institutions in the Roman Empire of the first century, termed, slavery. Trans- Atlantic Slavery which was abolished centuries past did not finish but relatively metamorphosed into other forms labelled modern slavery. The findings unveil that contemporary slavery comprises human trafficking, forced labour, sex trafficking, sex slavery, child sex trafficking, forced child labour, early and forced marriage, baby factory, gendered kidnapping, and debt bondage or peonage. Modern Slavery is caused by ignorance, poverty, unemployment, corruption and other reasons. Considering the different irritating forms of modern Slavery, Nigeria ranks highest in Africa. Nigerians in one way or another other have turned out to be slaves in their own country. In so doing, the triangular interrelationship of Paul, Onesimus and Philemon, dominated with metaphors of social relationship, culminating in hospitality and community life which encourages a reorientation and rethink to embrace communal life thereby abolishing the menace of modern slavery in totality. The efforts of scholars, policymakers and human rights activists reveal the spacious and

multifaceted problem of modern slavery and how people are dragged into the cons of mistreatment and dehumanisation. The efforts to fix this is a call to the Nigerian government, kings, religious leaders, researchers, politicians and ordinary people who are endowed with the power to fight this social evil. It is optimistic since these atrocities are synthetic, thus, they can be dared and overturned. There is a need for proficiency in advocacy because it is inaudibility and indifference that tolerate the spread and standardization of slavery in its many forms.

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