

Paul and the Python Girl

(Acts 16:16-19)

By John Byron*

The theme of the current series is “The tears of the Oppressed” with a specific focus on human trafficking. This is a topic that we rarely are asked to consider. The practice of kidnapping, selling and exploiting human beings reminds us of slavery which we often equate with a bygone era in our nation’s history. Legalized slavery in the USA was dissolved well over one-hundred years ago and we have a new president to demonstrate just how far we have come from those dark days in our nation’s history. But the fact is slavery has always existed in human history and while it may no longer have the approval of the government the chains of slavery, literally and metaphorically, are just as secure on the lives of human being as they were at any other time in history. Today slaves cannot be identified simply by their skin color, ethnic origin or the places we find them working. In this new era of slavery, the oppressed and exploited are all around us but more hidden. We may pass them on the street and not even know who they are much less that they are a victim of the modern crime of human trafficking.

When I was asked to speak on this topic from a New Testament perspective I admit that I was struck by what I felt was the impossibility of the task. As one who has written two books and a number of essays and articles on the topic of slavery in the New Testament, I have found it more and more difficult to demonstrate how the Bible undermines the claims of the slaveholders. Apart from a passing criticism of slave-traders in 1 Timothy 1:10 it is difficult to identify any criticism of slavery in the New Testament.¹ In many cases the Bible has done more to perpetuate slavery than to eradicate it. This became even clearer to me last year as I worked on a chapter examining African-American responses to Paul and slavery. The Bible was one of many tools that white masters used to keep the enslaved in their oppressed state.

On the other hand, I began to wonder if there is a way that the Bible, although bound by time and culture, can speak to us on this subject. As I prepared for today I read the recent issue of the seminary’s publication “The Table” and was introduced to a world that I was not conscious of. As I watched the video from the ministry Love 146 in chapel I was confronted with the human face of the crime. As I continued to think about modern day slavery and the fact that it disproportionately affects young women, many of those children, I began

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to think about stories of slave girls in the Bible.² In particular I was drawn to the story of the slave girl in Philippi that is related to us in Acts 16:16-24. As I read the story with a new set of eyes I began to ask questions of the story to see what, if anything, I could learn that would be relevant to the topic of human trafficking. The results of this reading are somewhat disturbing. The questions I asked only raised more questions. But it is perhaps the pondering of questions rather than the search for answers that will coax us to action.

The first thing that attracts my attention is the terminology used to describe this woman. In Acts the author introduces us to her simply as παιδίσκη. The term is evocative of many things. First it is a term that is properly translated here as “slave girl”.³ But it is not the more common Greek term of δούλη which clearly designates the status of slavery (Acts 2:18).⁴ The term used to describe this woman can be somewhat ambiguous since it can also mean “young woman” or “maiden” without any hint of slavery.⁵ But this is one of the more sinister aspects of slavery language in the Bible. At times it can hide the cruelty and inhumanity of slavery. The same term was even used at times to refer to prostitutes.⁶ It was not uncommon in antiquity for a master to force a slave, male or female, to sell their bodies so that the master could profit. Young children were often used as a part of this practice. The appearance of the term here in Acts is probably suggestive that this was a young woman, perhaps a child or teenager. There is no suggestion here that she was being forced to work in the sex trade, but it does provide the context in which this was always an option should her owners so decide.

The second thing I notice is that she said to have made much profit for her masters. Again the terminology is curious. In verses 16 and 19 the people who are benefitting from her are described as κυριοι (“masters”). Notice that this is in the plural rather than singular. Often when we think of slavery we think of one or more slaves owned by an individual or a family. But the presentation of the noun in the plural here suggests at least two masters and does not limit our imagination to suggest that she could have had as many as ten (or more). This young girl is not only a slave but she is a slave owned by multiple people. In the context of slavery the story presents her as nothing more than an investment, a business opportunity from which her owners can profit. This would, no doubt, complicate her relationship with her owners since the more people who have a financial stake in her the more people who are making demands on her. Added to this is the fact that as a piece of property, an investment, anyone of her owners would have been at liberty to use her sexually or otherwise.

The description of her abilities to tell fortunes is unusual. The NRSV simply says that she had a “spirit of divination”. But in the Greek she is actually said to have a spirit of python (πνεῦμα πύθωνα). The python was originally the name of snake that inhabited the Greek city of Delphi. Legend related that the snake was killed by Apollo. At Delphi the priestess of Apollo would deliver

oracles, and she was called πυθία (Pthyia). The woman would fall into an intoxicated trance and speak for Apollo.⁷ There seems to have been some sort of connection to the Delphi oracle and the fortune telling that the young woman was performing for her owners. Whatever the source of her unusual gift, whether spiritual or psychological, it is clear that her owners were exploiting her abilities for their own gain. This is the basis of all slavery; one person or group of persons exploiting the bodies of others for personal gain without any concern or thought for the victim.

The last thing that I observe is that this young girl has no name. We are never told who she is only that she was a slave-girl with an unusual gift for fortune telling. This in itself is not all that unusual. In slavery human beings lose the dignity of their name. An important characteristic in all forms of slavery is disconnection. Slavery as an institution has the ability to disconnect completely (an) individual(s) from family, ethnic and cultural ties. M.I. Finley identifies three components of slavery that provide advantages for the owner over the slave: the slave's property status, the totality of power over him/her, and his/her kinlessness.⁸ Slavery eradicated family and national ties and replaced them with new relationships created artificially by the individual's position in the institution. It is this aspect of slavery that Orlando Patterson identifies as natal alienation. "Slaves differed from other human beings in that they were not allowed freely to integrate the experience of their ancestors into their lives, to inform their understanding of social reality with the inherited meanings of their natural forbears, or to anchor the living present in any conscious community of memory."⁹ Natal alienation isolated the slave making compliance with an owner's demands to be effected out of a desire by the slave to have some type of personal connection. The effect of natal alienation in the Greco-Roman period is most evident in the way slaves were identified. Both slaves and former slaves were easily identified by their servile name, and their inability to record the identity of their father or tribe. The only identification slaves and freed persons could legally use was that of their owner/patron's name which immediately revealed their status as a former slave. Even after death the effects of this stigma continued as demonstrated by numerous epitaphs describing the deceased as the former slave of "so and so".¹⁰

Without a name to identify this girl it is not impossible to suggest that she was known not by her family but her unusual gift. I suppose some may have certainly referred to her as the "python girl". Why not? What was important about her to her clients was not her name but what it was they could get from her. She had an unusual gift attributed to a "spirit of python", why not refer to her in that way. It seems clear that the situation of this young-girl in Philippi is not all that different from many that are trapped in the modern slave trade. Human trafficking disproportionately affects young women, many of those

children. They are exploited by what it is they have to offer, quite often their bodies. They have no names. The video from Love 146 demonstrates this phenomenon even in the modern era. The ministry takes its name from the number given to an 8 year old girl waiting to be purchased in a brothel. ¹¹ No name, no personal identity, no dignity. Like the python girl in Philippi, they are not even people. They are commodities to be bought, sold and traded.

As I continued to read the story in Acts 16 I noticed that there is more we can learn here. Not about the slave girl but about us. We can see how we perceive slaves, how we might react to them and how we may or may not be of assistance.

The first thing I notice is that there is a significant contrast here between some of the characters. While slavery affects women and children disproportionately, it does not do so to all women and children. Prior to the story of the python girl we have the story of Lydia. She is a woman who seems to have been somewhat successful by first-century standards. She is a business woman who sells purple cloth which suggests that she has a degree of personal freedom. This is emphasized by the fact that we are not told that she has a husband. In normal circumstance in antiquity, women were the property of their husbands or some other male figure and were not free to travel about or run their own business. Moreover, she must have been a wealthy and fairly powerful woman since we are told that her and her "household" were converted and baptized. This means that she has perhaps a family (if she was widowed), but that she more than likely has slaves. Apparently the house was big enough that she could invite Paul, Silas, Timothy and other unnamed individuals to stay with her. This means not only room for sleeping but food and other comforts of life.

Notice the contrast then to the python girl. Lydia is named, is successful and thus in a class all together different than the Python girl. Slavery has the ability to create social walls between us those who are enslaved to the point that they seem less important, less noticeable and less in need of attention whether from the author of Acts or from ourselves. They cause us to lower our eyes to the street when we walk by and pretend not that we don't see them but that they do not exist.

That leads to still more observations. Notice how we meet this young girl. Acts 16:16 notes that it was while Paul and the others were on their way to the place of prayer that they first encountered the python girl. It was in the course of going to church, that she began to bother them. But notice this is not a onetime event. She follows them declaring to others who they are, an event that takes place repeatedly over the course of "many days" (16:18). This means that people, including the Apostle Paul, continued to ignore the python girl even though she made it difficult for them to ignore her. Somehow, this is not the picture we normally associate with the heroes of the faith.

But it is when Paul does respond and why he responds that is even more troubling. The young woman walks behind them declaring that “These men are slave of the Most High God who proclaim to you the way of salvation”. There is no suggestion that what she was saying was incorrect and that Paul needed to silence her because she was saying something that may have misled potential converts to Christianity. No, the problem, we are told in 16:18, is that Paul got annoyed with her persistent following of them and cast the spirit out of her. Not as a part of a process of leading her to salvation or rescuing her from her plight in slavery, but because he had had enough of having to deal with her.

I wonder how many of us are like Paul in this story. We are able to see those like Lydia who represent one aspect of society, but we are blind when it comes to seeing the less fortunate among us. How many do we overlook everyday on our way to work, the grocery store, or, as with Paul, on the way to church? Is the only reason we notice them is because they annoy us or get in our way on the sidewalk? Would we rather complain to the city that these people be forced to move on so that we do not have to look at them. Do fail to see or perhaps question what might have brought them to this place in their life? When we see prostitutes on the street do we assume that they have chosen that lifestyle and therefore get what they deserve? Do we ever think that they may be forced to do this?

This leads to a final thought. As I read over the story I was struck by the fact that the python girl disappears after Paul rebukes the spirit. What happened to her? Was she converted? Did she join the church? Did her owners, realizing that they could no longer make money one way, exploited her in another way, perhaps sexually? I looked over a number of commentaries and it is amazing how many of them said that the girl was saved. They see the stories of Lydia, the python girl and the Philippian jailer as a three part salvation story. But while the text is clear about Lydia and the jailer, we are told nothing about the python girl. What happened to her? The answer is a mystery. But perhaps we can allow this gap in the story to invite us in and ask ourselves what will we do? What can we do? Will we be part of the solution or will we go on ignoring the problem and only respond when it annoys us and gets in the way of what we want to accomplish? What kind of after care will provide those who have been enslaved? What can we do to help? As I stated in the beginning, this reading of the passage raises more questions that it does answers. Questions about how we perceive others and the prejudices that lurk within us. But it is perhaps the pondering of questions rather than the search for answers that will coax us to action.

ENDNOTES

¹ Paul's letter to Philemon is often referenced as a critique of slavery, but Paul's statements about Onesimus's status as a slave are so ambiguous it is impossible to determine exactly what Paul thinks about slavery. For further discussion see: Barclay, J.M.G., 'Paul, Philemon and the Dilemma of Christian Slave-Ownership', *NTS* 37 (1991), pp. 161-86; and John Byron, *Recent Research on Paul and Slavery* (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2008), 116-137.

² Of the 600,000-800,000 people trafficked across international borders each year, 70 percent are female and 50 percent are children. The majority of these victims are forced into the commercial sex trade. (Figures are taken from the United State Department of Justice – <http://www.ojp.usdoj.gov/ovc/ncvrvw/2005/pg51.html>).

³ BAGD, 729-750.

⁴ BAGD, 259.

⁵ The same term is used to describe Rhoda in Acts 12:13.

⁶ C.K. Barrett, *Acts* (ICC; Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1994), 784.

⁷ For further information see: Everett Ferguson, *Backgrounds of Early Christianity* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), 200-205.

⁸ Moses I. Finley, *Ancient Slavery and Modern Ideology* (New York: Viking Press, 1980). 75, 77.

⁹ Patterson, Orlando, *Slavery and Social Death: A Comparative Study* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1982), 5.

¹⁰ John Byron, "Slaves and Freed Persons: Self-Made Success and Social Climbing in the Corinthian Congregation," *Jian Dao* 29 (2008), 100-101.

¹¹ http://www.love146.org/pages/page.asp?page_id=21460