

To Save Many Lives: Exploring Reconciliation between Africans and African Americans through the Selling of Joseph

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A long time ago in the land of warm waters, there lived two brothers born of the same mother. . . they grew up inseparable, until one day one of the brothers disappeared. And no matter how hard the villagers searched, he could not be found. And then one day, in a distant land of cold winters, the daughter of one brother walked towards the daughter of the other. With every step, they grew closer until finally they walked past each other like masked strangers, one never noticing the other.¹

Conversations toward racial reconciliation tend to focus on a black/white binary—or perhaps white and another ethnic group of color. Such conversations assume people of color *want* to engage in this dialogue and that they are adequately *equipped* to do so. If we dig a little deeper, we may find that many do not engage in these discussions because they are ill-equipped. In the case of the African American community, I believe the general disengagement with this topic is rooted in our corporate struggle to live out Jesus’s command to “love your neighbor as yourself” (Mark 12:31). In my view, we cannot effectively love our neighbor because we are in the midst of an identity crisis that inhibits our ability to love ourselves. We will not be able to fully love ourselves until we resolve this identity crisis, and this resolution cannot happen

1. Peres Owino, *Bound: Africans versus African Americans*, Nyar Nam Productions (2014).

until we make peace with our history by reconciling with our African brothers and sisters.

The story of Joseph offers resources for African and African American reconciliation. Joseph's being sold into slavery by his brothers finds a parallel in the history of African Americans. Despite the years of pain, shame, and marginalization his brothers caused, Joseph was able to forgive them and be reconciled to them. Is a similar reconciliation possible between African Americans and Africans today? My paper pursues this question, drawing from the Joseph narrative, arguing finally that reconciliation is needed between these two communities. I explore how it can be done, so that, as with Joseph, God may continue to take what was meant for evil and turn it into something good.

A Family Experiences Pain, Shame, and Loss: The Transatlantic Slave Trade

The opening quote offers a poetic depiction of the relationship between Africans and African Americans and its root. The brother who disappeared became a victim of the transatlantic slave trade, and the rift began. The result, even today, is conflict between two ethnically connected groups and distinct pains for each. As New Testament scholar Allen Dwight Callahan states, "The mass deportation of people from Africa to the Americas was nothing short of catastrophic for Africans on both sides of the Atlantic."² Many Africans still experience a sense of loss and guilt, while African Americans experience a sense of dislocation and loss of identity that can result in anger toward Africans.

The transatlantic slave trade drained Africa's human resources. It was the bleeding of Africans to the "New World" that took the largest toll on Africa, with ongoing ramifications for contemporary African nations.³ Many Africans who remain on the continent still suffer the trauma and grief of losing a loved one. In her [autobiography](#),⁴ [Zambian AIDS activist Princess Kasune Zulu](#) recounts her own family's history with the slave trade, imparted to her by her grandfather. He shared stories of slave

2. Allen Dwight Callahan, *The Talking Book: African Americans and the Bible* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2008), 51.

3. Elikia M'bokolo, "A Hundred and Fifty Years after France Abolished Slavery: The Impact of the Slave Trade on Africa," *Le Monde Diplomatique English Edition*, April 2, 1998, accessed July 30, 2015, <http://mondediplo.com/1998/04/02africa>.

4. Princess Kasune Zulu with Belinda A. Collins, *Warrior Princess: Fighting for Life with Courage and Hope* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2009).

traders who disguised themselves as missionaries and traders to earn the trust of local villagers, of women going to fetch water, never to return. He recounted the disappearance of his own ancestor, alerting Zulu to her personal, biological bond with African Americans. With sorrow and shame, her grandfather acknowledged their complicity in the trade, accepting that the African people stood guilty alongside the foreigners. The knowledge that his own people could commit such a traitorous act caused him visible pain, and he admitted, “The scars have never healed.”⁵

Ongoing perseverance in the face of waves of dehumanization brought about by slavery, Black Codes, Jim Crow laws, lynchings, and other atrocities testifies to the resilience of African Americans. Yet resilience does not erase the substantial losses suffered through this serial oppression. For example, African Americans still bear the consequences of intentional attempts to sever slaves from their African culture in order to discourage escape. One concrete means of severing cultural roots was the slave owner’s giving his slave a “Christian” name—as illustrated famously in Alex Haley’s *Roots*, as Kunta Kinte wrestles with the entwined realities of “surrender[ing] his name [and] his heritage.”⁶ When he first realizes his master has renamed him, he is filled with rage and wishes to shout, “I am Kunta Kinte, first son of Omoro, who is the son of the holy man Kairaba Kunta Kinte.”⁷ A slave master often referenced and documented slaves by “their” first name only. It is painful for me to know that my last name is nothing more than the surname of the man who owned my ancestors and that it impedes my efforts to fully trace my lineage. This is but one of the many ways the pain, shame, and loss caused by the slave trade live on for African Americans. This swelling of emotion culminates in anger, rooted in the knowledge that our brothers sold us.

Despite the primary agency of European slave traders and the demand generated by their counterparts in the Americas, many African Americans harbor resentment toward Africans because of their complicity in the trade. I have heard firsthand accounts of how this resentment, along with the desire to distance ourselves from anything African, has led African Americans to lash out at Africans here in the United States, perhaps in an unconscious effort to transfer the feelings of pain, shame, and loss. The village mindset of the African American community owes much

5. *Ibid.*, 183–85.

6. Alex Haley, *Roots: The Saga of an American Family*, 30th anniversary ed. (New York: Vanguard Books, 2007), 328.

7. *Ibid.*, 275–76.

to its African ancestors. In African culture, family extends beyond one's biological family, and even the act of "giving away" a daughter in marriage requires the support and involvement of the bride and groom's entire families. Given the high value placed on community, the selling of community members is a significant violation of tradition—a significant betrayal and not a common practice. This corporate sense of betrayal still plagues many African Americans, as amply illustrated in the recently released documentary, [*Bound: Africans versus African Americans*](#).

Over the course of three years, Kenyan-born writer and producer Peres Owino brought together fourteen Africans and African Americans. In interviews and group conversations this group discussed the tension that exists between their respective communities, exposing the individual and communal pain, shame, and loss. The film also includes contributions from community leaders and scholars, including [Joy DeGruy](#), author of [*Post Traumatic Slave Syndrome: America's Legacy of Enduring Injury and Healing*](#).⁸ This important work reveals how the effects of generations of slavery continue to negatively impact African Americans in ways that many have come to accept as cultural tradition. Is there hope for reconciliation between Africans and African Americans? I suggest that we may find a resource in another story of family betrayal—the selling of Joseph.

A Family Experiences Pain, Shame, and Loss: The Selling of Joseph

The location of the Joseph story (Genesis 37–50) within the Pentateuch reflects its function within the larger story of Abraham. It explains how the Israelites came to live in Egypt and demonstrates the fulfillment of God's promise to Abraham that all nations would be blessed through him and his family (12:2–3).⁹ The selling of Joseph occurs in the very first chapter of the cycle (Genesis 37). The text narrates the favor Jacob bestows upon Joseph (v. 3), leading to sibling rivalry (v. 4) that is worsened by Joseph's "tattling" (v. 2) and boasting about his dreams of his family bowing to him (vv. 6–11). This creates a bitter pill for his jealous brothers to swallow. Miguel De La Torre notes the brothers' inability to greet Joseph peacefully (v. 4) as further evidence of the deterioration of

8. Joy DeGruy, *Post Traumatic Slave Syndrome: America's Legacy of Enduring Injury and Healing* (Milwaukie, OR: Uptone Press, 2005). A DVD version and study guide are also available.

9. Gordon J. Wenham, *Genesis 16-50*, Word Biblical Commentary 2 (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1994), 357–58.

the fraternal relationship.¹⁰

This is the climate into which Jacob obviously sends Joseph when he tasks him with checking on his brothers in the fields and returning with a report of their well-being (v. 14, in the Hebrew *shalom*, contrasting with v. 4). As Joseph approaches his brothers, they recognize him from a distance, perhaps because of the multicolored tunic he wore—a tangible reminder that he was the apple of their father’s eye. This stirred up their hatred even more, and they “plotted” against him (v. 18). They quickly come to a decision to kill him and his dreams along with him, using a statement Gordon Wenham translates, “let’s murder him.” The Hebrew verb used here, *harag*, usually refers to the illicit taking of a human life (cf. Genesis 4:8, 14; 12:12). It also describes the fate Jacob narrowly escaped when Esau plotted to murder him in Genesis 27:41–42.¹¹ Convinced by Reuben to throw Joseph in a pit instead, the brothers callously ignore Joseph’s pleas from the pit, which they will later regret (Genesis 42:21). Joseph references the evil intent of his brothers’ actions in Genesis 50:20, long after their reunion. Their pitiless aggression extends even to their father, as they deceptively present Jacob the multicolored tunic, shredded and bloody.¹²

When Reuben discovers his brothers have sold Joseph, he tears his garment in mourning, foreshadowing Jacob’s reaction to the news. Reuben grieves not only for himself in the loss of Joseph, but perhaps also because he knows how it will affect their father. And Jacob does mourn greatly. He refuses to be comforted and vows to mourn Joseph publicly until the day he dies (Genesis 37:35). The sons know they were not as beloved in Jacob’s eyes, yet his pain still impacts them. Although Reuben wanted to save Joseph, after the sale he joins in his brothers’ deception of Jacob (37:31) and suffers the emotional consequences of his sin.

As the narrative shifts to Joseph, now a slave in a faraway land because of his brothers’ betrayal, Genesis 39–41 recounts Joseph’s process of being elevated from the pit to the palace. These chapters reveal little about the emotional impact of these events on Joseph. When we come to chapter 43, however, we see a glimpse of Joseph’s inner life when his brothers bring Benjamin to him on their second journey to Egypt. The moment is so emotionally overwhelming that Joseph rushes out to cry and compose himself (vv. 30–31). Chapter 45 opens with Joseph’s being

10. Miguel A. De La Torre, *Genesis* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2011), 301.

11. Wenham, *Genesis 16–50*, 353.

12. *Ibid.*, 356.

overtaken by years of emotion, weeping loudly as he finally reveals his true identity to his brothers (vv. 1–3).

Yet the Joseph narrative is not only a story of betrayal. It is ultimately a story of reconciliation and redemptive good. Joseph speaks peace to the brothers who could not speak peaceably to him (cf. Genesis 37:4). With tears and kisses (45:15) he seeks to assuage their fear and guilt. They seek no forgiveness, however, until their guilt turns to fear after Jacob's burial (Genesis 50:15). Afraid that Joseph's kindness was motivated by his love for Jacob and not for them, they plead for Joseph's forgiveness, describing their actions as crime (*pe·ša'*), sin (*wə·ḥaṭ·tā·tām*), and evil (*rā·'āh*), offering themselves as slaves to Joseph (Genesis 50:16–18). Despite the pain, shame, and loss Joseph endured as a slave and prisoner in a strange land, he expresses his desire for reconciliation at his first revelation and reaffirms it in light of his brothers' plea for forgiveness. In both texts Joseph assures his brothers that, though their actions were indeed evil, God brought good from these ill intentions—the saving of many lives (45:5, 7; 50:20): “Even though you intended to do harm to me, God intended it for good, in order to preserve a numerous people, as he is doing today.” This moment of reconciliation is what causes many Christian scholars to consider Joseph a type of Christ, an innocent man whose suffering brings reconciliation to his brothers and life to the world.¹³

The Joseph story presents a strong example of how God's plan for human life can overcome any obstacle and that “delayed is not denied.” However, in the midst of celebrating Joseph's faithfulness and the faithfulness of God, it becomes easy—surprisingly easy—to overlook the underlying themes of loss and pain, reconciliation and redemption. It is these themes that offer a source of hope for those who seek reconciliation between Africans and African Americans.

Bringing It Together: An Intercultural Reading of the Joseph Story

How then might the Joseph narrative empower the same reconciliation between Africans and African Americans—even redemption of the tragic history of the transatlantic slave trade? While there are details of the Joseph story in its historical and cultural context that cannot ever be reshaped to speak to the situation between Africans and African Americans, there is one specific detail I wish to highlight as a parallel. Joseph

13. Ibid., 356.

was sold into slavery by his brothers and all parties experienced some level of pain, shame, and loss as a result. It is my hope that this story can be used as a way to encourage Africans and African Americans to move toward reconciliation and redemptive good, just as Joseph chose reconciliation with his brothers in spite of the trauma he had endured because of their actions.

Reconciliation. The strained relationship between Africans and African Americans mirrors the conflict between Sarah and Hagar in Genesis 21. Two women were being oppressed by a patriarchal system, but rather than together facing their common oppressor, they were at odds with one another. Relationships between Africans and African Americans are complicated by beliefs that Africans “look down on” African Americans because we are no longer “full blooded” Africans and have become “westernized.” The phrase “hurt people hurt people” is apt. However, at the root of it all is an underlying system of white supremacy that fuels the fire of the tension between these two groups. My hope is that those who are not members of these two groups do not use the conflict to justify racist behavior but would instead acknowledge that the conflict is the symptom of a larger problem.

Even so, this does not mean that antagonistic behavior between African Americans and Africans should continue. I wholeheartedly support efforts to bring about racial reconciliation between blacks and whites in the United States (as well as other racial/ethnic groups), but I believe this cannot be fully realized until the African American community is reconciled to itself. People of color cannot effectively engage in reconciliation efforts with whites until they are secure in their own cultural and racial identity.¹⁴ We in the African American community cannot love our non-black neighbors until we address our internalized oppression and learn to love ourselves. However, we cannot effectively reconcile with one another until we address our “identity crisis,” which requires reconciliation with our African brothers and sisters. Therefore, I believe a “family reunion” with Africans is one way to move further in this process. Such a reconciliation requires confession, repentance, lament, and forgiveness.

Confession demands truth-telling. Just as Joseph’s brothers name their sin for what it is (Genesis 50:17), confession and repentance require an accurate identification and naming of the wrong(s) inflicted. The

14. Allan Boesak and Curtiss Paul DeYoung, *Radical Reconciliation: Beyond Political Pietism and Christian Quietism* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2012), 87.

third chapter of the recently published book, *Forgive Us: Confessions of a Compromised Faith* offers a starting point for such confession.¹⁵ The process of reconciliation is aided when we allow space for lament. It is striking how prominently weeping features in Joseph's process of reunion and reconciliation (Genesis 42:24; 43:30; 45:2, 14–15; 46:29; 50:17). Finally, while forgiveness can happen apart from reconciliation—and sometimes circumstances require that it does—in this case, I want to propose that forgiveness and reconciliation go hand in hand. Johann Christoph Arnold says that hating never helps, so forgiveness must involve a conscious decision to stop hating.¹⁶

These themes are helpfully explored in *Reconciling All Things: A Christian Vision for Justice, Peace and Healing*, the inaugural publication of the Resources for Reconciliation series, written by Emmanuel Katongole and Chris Rice, co-directors of the Duke Divinity's [Center for Reconciliation](#).¹⁷ Katongole and Rice argue that lament requires the *unlearning* of the obstacles of speed, distance, and innocence.¹⁸ To counter these, they suggest practices of pilgrimage, relocation, and public confession. That is, the discipline of lament can be developed when we slow down, close the distance between ourselves and the other party, and are courageous enough to name the truth—to be disturbed and remember the “awful depth of brokenness.”¹⁹

It seems difficult to navigate this when we are generations removed from the “original sin” of selling fellow Africans into slavery. Máire Dugan's Nested Theory of Conflict holds that the longer a society or group has been plagued by violence, trauma, or conflict, the longer it will take to resolve the issues.²⁰ The issues that have created conflict between Africans and African Americans as well as African Americans and the dominant white culture in the United States have existed for

15. Mae Elise Cannon, Lisa Sharon Harper, Troy Jackson, and Soong-Chan Rah, *Forgive Us: Confessions of a Compromised Faith* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2014). Cf. Soong-Chan Rah, *Prophetic Lament: A Call for Justice in Troubled Times* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2015).

16. Johann Christoph Arnold, *Why Forgive?*, rev. ed. (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2009), 5.

17. Emmanuel Katongole and Chris Rice, *Reconciling All Things: A Christian Vision for Justice, Peace and Healing* Resources for Reconciliation (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2008).

18. *Ibid.*, 90–92.

19. *Ibid.*

20. Máire A. Dugan, “A Nested Theory of Conflict,” *A Leadership Journal: Women in Leadership—Sharing the Vision*, 1 (July 1996): 9–20.

hundreds of years. For this reason, such a reunion must be a sustained effort and not a one-time event. Being told to “get over” a centuries-old wound when African Americans lament this history is not realistic or appropriate. The church especially should make space for corporate truth-telling, confession, lament, and forgiveness over the repressed history and ongoing effects of slavery.

I strongly recommend that Covenant churches with significant populations of Africans and African Americans consider partnering with each other and use Peres Owino’s film *Bound* as a point of departure for a journey toward healing and reconciliation. Because genuine relationship is a key component of any kind of reconciliatory effort, churches embarking on this journey should ensure adequate time is spent on building authentic relationships. For example, a potluck gathering could offer a visual representation of the historical connection between these groups. In addition, the similar textures, smells, and flavors of the foods would engage the senses, creating a deeper connection similar to what one would experience at a family reunion.

Redemption. Upon the death of Jacob, Joseph’s brothers fear that without their father’s protection Joseph may return their evil for evil. Joseph seeks to allay these fears, saying, “Even though you intended to do harm to me, God intended it for good, in order to preserve a numerous people, as he is doing today” (Genesis 50:20). Paul echoes this logic in Romans 8:28: “We know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose.” Neither text suggests that God causes tragic situations or that the ends justify the means when the means are evil. Rather this story demonstrates God’s ability to create something good from the bad so that God may be glorified. God can and does bring good out of the most hopeless situations. In Joseph’s situation, being sold into slavery by his brothers was indeed an evil act. However, this evil act ultimately resulted in Joseph’s being in a position to keep his family—and all of Egypt—alive during famine.

As Africans and African Americans pursue reconciliation, how might the evil of slavery and the tragedy of inter-familial conflict be redeemed? How might Africans and African Americans participate in God’s redeeming work to bring good from evil? I offer just one possibility, suggested by the Joseph narrative. Like Joseph, African Americans have landed in a prosperous nation. We have access to resources that may be less accessible or inaccessible to our brothers and sisters in Africa. We can use these resources to support ongoing efforts of Africans to address life-threatening

epidemics impacting their communities such as hunger, violence, and lack of access to medical treatment. We, like Joseph, have an opportunity to use our circumstances to save many lives.

Concluding Reflections: Homecoming

As I prepared for my first trip to Africa, I was somewhat anxious because I did not know how I, as one of three African Americans in a group of seventeen, would be received by the Zambians. When our hosts greeted me, they did so by saying, “Welcome home.” Zambians in stores or on the street assumed I was African and were often surprised to discover that I was from the United States. However, no one ever treated me poorly after discovering my nationality. In fact, they affirmed me by telling me that I had roots in Africa, even if I could not identify them. This trip was a homecoming, and coming home was healing. This experience is captured in the following journal excerpts:

Thursday, May 14, 2009, 11:36 p.m.

I feel like somehow...when my feet touched African soil, my ancestors gave a sigh of relief...because they'd believed for generations that God would one day bring them home—whether in person or through their descendants.

So my soul rejoices because my ancestors rejoiced...and we rejoice together, celebrating God's goodness and faithfulness.

Sunday, May 17, 2009; 5:20 p.m.

...I am here because a kidnapped African survived the Middle Passage...and their descendants survived slavery, Jim Crow, etc. And when I come home to Africa...somewhere, the family of that kidnapped African will know that God kept them—because I stand here today.

While my time in Zambia amplified my feelings of loss, it simultaneously brought a sense of peace and belonging as I looked into the faces of Zambians and saw the faces of my friends and family members from home. The welcome I received in Africa heightened my awareness of the broken relationship between Africans and African Americans in the United States. My relationships with the Zambians helped me realize the need for a more communal reconciliation.

As African Americans are reconciled with our African brothers and sisters, we will experience healing in our communities, enabling us to more fully live out Jesus's command to love our neighbors as ourselves.

This process will also provide needed healing to Africans, just as Joseph's family needed and received healing. As both groups move toward the hard and healing work of reconciliation, as the two brothers are reunited, we will be strengthened for the redemptive work of "saving many lives," impacting generations to come.