

“If I Perish, I Perish” (Esther 4:16): A Re-reading of Bishop Crowther’s Christianizing Mission To Bonny, 1865-1891.

By

Richard Ibituru Hart

**Department of Religious and Cultural Studies,
University of Port Harcourt,
Choba, Port Harcourt, Rivers State, Nigeria**

Caroline U. Mbonu

**Department of Religious and Cultural Studies,
University of Port Harcourt,
Choba, Port Harcourt, Rivers State, Nigeria**

&

Okey Ogba, PhD

**Department of Religious and Cultural Studies,
University of Port Harcourt,
Choba, Port Harcourt, Rivers State, Nigeria**

Abstract

This article explores the hazardous mission of Bishop Samuel Ajayi Crowther to establish the first Christian outpost in Bonny Island of the Eastern Niger Delta from the periscope of Queen Esther and her kith and kin who faced persecution in exile (Esther 4:16). A re-reading of the text highlights the commonality of events surrounding the two narratives. This article argues that Bishop Crowther faced similar precarious conditions as Queen Esther in order to bring the gospel message and its emancipatory mission to the Bonny people, thus making St Stephen’s Church Bonny the *mater ecclesia* of Christianity in the Niger Delta. The study adopts polymethodic approach, such as descriptive and historical research complemented with intertextuality in biblical hermeneutics in order to contextualize the work to the Niger Delta region. The theory used is also polycentric; a combination of African Church historiography and African biblical cultural hermeneutics to draw insight into how the Bonny people with their own traditional particularities negotiated Christianity to suit them without pretense. Data were mainly drawn from oral and secondary sources, especially the Bible and extant literature on African Christianity. Findings show that Bishop Samuel Ajayi and Queen Esther cultivated similar passion for human liberation from oppression, slavery and dehumanization. It is recommended that faith communities should condemn every oppressive measures which may lead to

“man’s inhumanity to man” by encouraging human liberation, human dignity, empowerment and betterment of life.

Keywords: Bishop Samuel Ajayi Crowther, Bonny Mission, Queen of Israel, Christianity, Niger Delta.

Conceptual Analysis

The text of study surrounds the great deliverance of the Jewish people during the reign of *Xerxes*’ Barker et al (1995). The theme explores the threat faced by the Jews in exile and triumph from imminent annihilation by their enemies. The city of event was Susa, the land of king *Ahasuerus*’ palace. The chronology of the event leading to the threat and triumph of the people is captured in the following:

- i. King *Ahasuerus* organized a royal banquet to display his glory to the people of Susa
- ii. He proudly asked for the display of Queen *Vashti*’s beauty as part of the programme.
- iii. The conservative Queen would not accept to make herself a public spectacle.
- iv. The advisers of the King counseled the him to immediately drop the Queen and replace her with another
- v. By choice through God’s will, Esther found favour in the eyes of the king and won the royal “beauty pageant”
- vi. Haman became the king-post (or Captain) of the Prince of Persia. This Character wanted everyone especially the Jews to bow before him, but Mordecai would not. Haman plotted to annihilate the Jewish the Jewish race in Susa. Through falsehood, he convinced King *Ahasuerus* “to issue an edict that all Jews in the empire will be slain eleven months hence in a single day.”
- vii. Following this threat of mass annihilation, Mordecai asked Esther to quickly use her position as a Queen to appeal to the king to save the people.
- viii. Queen Esther accepted and decided to place her life on the line for the salvation of the Jews.

Drawing insight from the story of Queen Esther above, Samuel Ajayi was sold into slavery at 12 (Page 1892; Adoga, 2020; Akwum, 2018; Obuoforibo, 1990). Born round about 1810 to an *Egba* Community in Yoruba land, little Ajayi was a precocious child. His father was said to be a farmer and weaver, a trade which enabled him to grow up with the spirit of patience and courage. However, the boy Ajayi was taken captive by the *Foulah*’s, the “Yoruba Mohammedans” alongside his mother and two Sisters to *Iseyin* where *Ajayi* was exchanged for a horse. Separated from his Mother and Sisters, he was taken to *Ijaye* where he “unsuccessfully attempted to commit suicide by strangling himself when he became fed

up with perpetual misery of slavery.” His life’s journey to the external world landed him in Lagos for Portugal. By striking co-incidence, the British anti-slavery naval ship, the ‘Myrmidon’ intercepted the slave ship carrying *Ajayi* and others. He was one of the 87 survivors out of the 189 slaves on board “Myrmidon”. That was how *Ajayi* found his way to Sierra Leone where he studied in a C.M.S School, apparently as a convert to the Christian faith. *Ajayi* named himself “Samuel Crowther”, a name of the Vicar of Christ’s Church, Newgate, London. This was at his baptism on 11th December, 1825. He got married to a former slave girl named *Asano* who later took the name “Susan Thompson” at baptism. Their marriage lasted for about fifty years. Samuel *Ajayi* Crowther was ordained into the Holy Orders in 1843 (Trinity Sunday) and Priested the following October.

After about 21 years in the Missionary work, precisely on the 29th June 1864 (St. Peter’s Day), he was consecrated at the Canterbury Cathedral as the Bishop of the Niger Territories when he was about the age of 57. He was the first black African Bishop consecrated to preside over African clergy in some parts of Western Africa . Henry Venn, the Secretary of the CMS enthused that it was the full development of native episcopate: self- government, self-financing and self-propagating.

Pre-colonial Bonny Religion and Worldviews

There is no original uniform belief system of the people ab initio. However, belief in local deities and ancestral spirits evolved with the migration of the *Ibani* people from place to place. Nathaniel (2007) posits that between 1350 – 1864, “in Bonny land when 17 Monarchs ruled Bonny, the idol tradition gained ground”. He added that there were pockets of traditional priests who served the community as intermediaries between the people and the deities. In other words, these personalities were in charge of the spiritual needs of the people while the kings/chiefs took charge of provisions and security of lives and property. Some of the early deities of the people were, *Ikuba*, *Ibarunyana-Simingi*, *Ekpe-owu*, *Adum*, *Tolofari*, *Ogbolo-duain*, *Otuburu*, *Epelema-akanja-owu*. Jesse Page’s work on Samuel Crowther in 1888 corroborates the fact that the people of Bonny were traditionally religious with some of dangers therefrom. He wrote inter alia:

Bonny had an evil reputation. Whilst its position gave it natural advantages for trade in palm oil, its people were most repulsive and degraded. Within a few years of this visit of the Bishop cannibalism was a common practice, human sacrifices were freely offered on the death of a chief, the juju temples were the scene of the most revolting customs, and were paved and decorated with the skulls and bones of their victims. Everywhere devilry and cruelty still abounded, and the town was

infested with huge crawling hazards, which had been created into deities, and must not therefore be destroyed.

Killing of twins/multiple born babies was a celebrated practice as these children were considered cursed spirits come in human form. Execution centers or 'bad juju bush' were designated at various satellite communities. One of these places is the present St Stephen's Cathedral (*Iwoama Sipiri*). Writing about this dreaded center, Jessy Page (1889) narrated that the forest was " *a bad juju bush,*" *being a place which had been used for the bodies of victims killed for sacrifice, also the rubbish heap where twins were, according to their custom, flung away to die.*

The people lived mainly in thick forested settlements and along the river banks. These locations were due to their farming and fishing occupation. Movements to close and distant places were by wooden canoes and propelled by human beings using paddles. The world view of the people was microcosmic. To say the least, life and activities were at the lowest ebb. The environment was stricken with wide spread malaria and un-imaginable illiteracy. People lived in mud and thatched houses. Human sacrifices were the order of the day especially during the sacred seasons and events. Clothing were made of botanic materials and animal skins while a few aristocratic groups or the intelligentsia with members of their household who enjoyed the miniature luxury of the Whiteman's fabrics. The school system were traditional canoe-paddling, fishing skills, farming, crude hunting by means of locally devised traps, beads making and drumming.

From its very beginning, Bonny has been a traditional trading centre for fishes, slaves, salt, palm oil, and palm kernels. Much of these merchandises came from the hinterlands. The Pepple dynasty has governed the kingdom from the fifteenth century to date. The kingdom's wealth was originally based on the sale of [slaves](#) to European traders. Bonny was one of the largest slave-exporting depots of West Africa, that in 1790 more than twenty thousand people were shipped to the Americas.

Bonny, a city state in the Niger Delta before the arrival of the Europeans was a very difficult place to navigate. The land was a notorious arena for malaria which made it to be called the "Whiteman grave". Prof G. O. M. Tasié in his **Christian Missionary Enterprise in the Niger Delta 1864 – 1918** wrote concerning the area as "... notorious, especially among nineteenth century travelers, for unhealthiness and savagery". In his writing, Bindloss (1898) described the region as "the ghastliest place in Africa...standing ...near the mount of one of the foulest of foul rivers with maze of quagmires about it, Bonny town is a singularly uninviting spot."

Bishop Ajayi Crowther and Christianization of Bonny

Bishop Crowther arrived in Bonny at the invitation of the King, Chiefs and people of Bonny. The Bonny people were traditional religionists who revered the giant Lizard as their totem. While in Bonny, Bishop Crowther sustained a sudden attack of paralysis and lost his right hand and leg. His doctor in Lagos requested him to come over for medical attention which he (Crowther) obliged. He left Bonny on 25th September 1891 hoping to return 1st week in January 1892 to continue the Lord's work but that was never to be. He communicated this thought in a letter he addressed to Major Macdonald, the consul from the oil Rivers. At 12:45am the great sage passed on and was buried the next day being 1st January 1892 at *Ajele* cemetery in Lagos after a funeral service in Christ Church led by the Rev. James Johnson.

Eugene Stock, the late editorial secretary of the Church Missionary Society England did what others see as an appropriate microcosm of the life, times and events of the sage – Crowther. He wrote inter alia:

Bishop *Ajayi* Crowther's career was unique. Kidnapped a slave in 1821, rescued a slave in 1822, a mission school boy in 1823, a baptized Christian in 1825, ordained in 1843, a first negro bishop in 1864...

The Bonny Mission, Native Agents and Martyrdom

In an interview with the Reverend Hope Masterton Waddell in 1846 when the King had his first contact with a missionary, a mission station was offered him, and in a hurry, the King put off the offer saying "Oh yes, very good, next year". In another interview with same Reverend in December 1849, during his second visit to Bonny, after the King had signed undertaking on the 2nd of December, 1849, for Commander Arthur Cumming to abolish human sacrifice and to receive missionaries and teachers with kindness. The Reverend requested for a site from the King, for a mission station in Bonny for the second time: and in reply to the Reverend, the King was abrupt and hurried,... he said, "the mission house must be put up in my country within a twelve months. King would not hear of our extending our mission to the Ibo country". Apparently, the King wanted a mission at this time in his country, believing that it was a means of gaining the friendship of the British government and it will encourage trade on the Bonny River. The King obviously, at this time had no intention of becoming a Christian. When queried on his above behavior by Waddell, the King answered: "... the children which go to your school may do as you say; but we men must keep on same fashion as old time; for we grow for that already". From 23rd January, 1854 when King *Dappa* Pepple was deposed and deported by the British, *Dapu-ye-Fubara* the son of *Dapu*, the first son of King *Adum-Opubu* took over the

Bonny throne. *Dapu-ye-Fubara* was crowned king and reigned from August, 1854 to August, 1855 when he died mysteriously. At the death of *Dapu-ye-Fubara* in 1855, a regency council of four Chiefs was put in place. The Chiefs were *Ioli Opubu Annie Pepple*, *Adda Allison*, *Oju Captain Hart*, and *Jack Ncheke Gboitemegha Fubara Manilla Pepple*. They took charge of the affairs of Bonny Country from August, 1855 to August, 1861. The Chiefs tried all they could, but Bonny knew no peace till the return of King *Dappa Pepple* in 1861. While in England the King had interviews with Queen Victoria, and visited many areas of importance and one of such areas, was Saint Paul's Cathedral London. The king regularly worshiped at the Cathedral with his family for a period of about five years. The King, his wife, and Children all became baptized. The King was called William, his wife *Alaputariabo-oforiagha, Eleona*, and his Children; *Oruigbi, Onu, Owunegima, and Adum-taa* were called George, Henry, Charles, and Florence.

In one of his interviews with the Queen in England, the King sought to know where lies the power and greatness of Britain; and the Queen in reply said "the Holy Bible based on the Christian faith" (Crowther, 1907). The King then resolved based on that interview he had with the Queen, the impression made on him by Reverend Hope Masterton Waddell of the Presbyterian mission in 1846 and 1849 respectively, and the undertaking he had signed for Commander Arthur Cumming to abolish human sacrifice and to receive missionaries and teachers with kindness on the 2nd of December, 1849, that on his return to his Country Bonny, he will introduce the Christian faith. With over UK£7,523 seven thousand pounds (Epelle, 1955), UK£4,520 being for compensation and £3,003 for legal expenses at his disposal, the king put his words to action in August, 1861 when he hired seven Europeans among whom were a chaplain, schoolmaster, Doctor, Nurse, Gardener, Schoolmistress, and a Carpenter at a very high salaries (Crowther, 1907). He bought books and implements for the introduction of the Christian religion, Civil service and Western Education. He also chartered a schooner (flat bottomed ship) in which they all sailed to Bonny in August 1861.

Second attempt to Introduce the Church Mission in Bonny

In 1864, precisely in the month of June, few weeks before the first black Bishop, Samuel Ajayi Crowther was consecrated (on Saint Peter's Day, 29th June) at Saint Paul's Cathedral London, the king asked his son Prince George Oruigbi Pepple to write a letter to the then Bishop, Dr Tait of the Cathedral Church of London, requesting for a missionary to help him consolidate on the Church mission in Bonny. On receipt of the letter, after the consecration of the first black Bishop, Dr Tait redirected the letter to the then Secretary of the Church Missionary Society (CMS) the Rev. Henry Venn. The Rev. Henry Venn in turn invited His Lordship, Bishop Samuel Ajayi Crowther and asked him to proceed to Bonny

Kingdom. On the 6th of November, 1864 the Bishop Samuel Ajayi Crowther arrived Bonny with other missionaries and proceeded to make himself available to the King who at this time, was residing in Fini-ama. A reception was given the Bishop and his entourage by the King after the meeting was held between the King and his Chiefs on one part and the Bishop and his entourage on the other part. The result of the meeting was an agreement between the Bishop on the one part, and King and Chiefs on the other part, to share between both parties fifty per centum, the initial cost of establishing the Mission. Prince George who later became King George signed the agreement as a witness.

In an interview with King Pepple, on the subject of his application to the Bishop of London for introduction of Christianity into his country, it is estimated that the sum of UK£300 will be required for the first year to erect necessary buildings for a beginning and to pay salaries to native ministers and School master, half of which sum UK£150, is to be paid by the king and inhabitants of Bonny in coin or palm oil to a supercargo who may be appointed treasurer to their fund. The subject of this interview is laid before the Chiefs of Bonny, for their information and signatures to be obtained as a proof of their concurrence with the same. The agreement was dated November 6th, 1864. This agreement was signed by Bishop S.A. Crowther on one side and King William Dappa Pepple and his Chiefs on the other side. The Chiefs were: William Banigo, Waribo Manilla Pepple, Oko Jumbo, Adda Allison, Jack Brown, Admiral Sunju Allison, Captain Hart and Prince George witnessed the agreement. The above agreement was dispatched to the Bishop. Gabriel (2014) in a lecture titled "The Delta Church – Our Heritage To Celebrate presented during the 150th anniversary of Christianity in Bonny" stated that the ratification of the aspect was delayed for two reasons; first, the factional disagreement between the Manilla Pepple House and the Annie Pepple House. The second reason was the fine of one hundred and twenty puncheons of palm oil imposed on Bonny for contravention of an agreement by the HMS Pandora. The king was therefore faced with burden of settling the fine. In the circumstance, honouring the agreement between the king and the Bishop on the establishment of the mission in Bonny was no longer a priority

Missionary work started actively in Bonny on the 29th of April, 1865 after the Bishop selected a site on Chief Osai Bereibibo Bristol's ground with the permission of the King, which the Bishop considered suitable for a temporary school erected of native materials. J.K. Webber, W.E.L. Carew, and Thomas Samuel were appointed lay Agents to Shepherd the work in the new Bonny station. The present site (Perekule Iwo-ama or Opu-sipiri) of Saint Stephen's Cathedral Bonny, was located after a ten (10) minutes walk south of old Bonny town from the King's Palace by the Bishop. The clearing of the site started on the 19th December, 1865. The king sent his son, Prince George and ten laborers from Chief

William Banigo's nearby rice farm now called "Orosikiri" to clear the bush as no one would touch a single leaf of this grove.

At this time, the Bishop was coming from a hulk (trading Ship) on the Bonny River to preach to the Bonny people. The Bishop who was lodging on the hulk called *Bahamian*, requested for accommodation to stay on-shore from the King. Chief Adda Allison and his elder brother, known as Admiral Sunju gave the first accommodation of two buildings to Bishop Crowther and his entourage and in one of these houses, the Bishop started the first permanent school hall and in front of the Allison family house (Opu-wari) the first Divine service was held by J. K. Webber. He was the first School master and Catechist employed at forty pounds (UK£40) annually. W. E.L. Carew also became the first Assistant School Master and first Assistant Catechist employed at thirty-six pounds (UK£36) annually. W.E.L. Carew was the first to translate some English words to Ibani language.

From 1864 to 1870, Bonny had 204 indigenous Christian converts; with the members of the Allison House accounting for 62 or 30.39% of the converts (Obuoforibo,2001). The foundation of a school chapel capable of accommodating 200 persons erected of native materials, was laid on the 19th of February, 1866 by King William Dappa Pepple and Mrs. Babington, the wife of an English trader on the Bonny River, possibly making it the last public function of His Majesty, William Dappa Pepple after he returned from exile. This School Chapel stood on the spot where the Magistrate Court was subsequently built in Bonny Town today. The Holy Bible, with which the King came back to Bonny from England in August, 1861 is still in the Perekule Palace.

Bishop Samuel Ajayi Crowther in Dialogue with Esther 4:1-6

"If I perish, I perish", these were the enduring words of Queen Esther, the Israelite. Esther and Crowther had slave origin and both came to the knowledge of their God through the events of history and instrumentality of human beings. As missionaries to their people, both wanted to redeem their kith and kin from slavery to freedom, from ignorance to enlightenment, and from exile to liberation and independence. In fact both were inspirational figures who at a certain history redeemed their people for serfdom.

If I perish, I perish- Journey to Bonny.

If I perish, I perish, though not with these exert words, such, were certainly the breath of Ajayi when he was asked to proceed to Bonny as a Christian missionary. Like Esther, Samuel would have prayed out his heart when the charge to proceed to the kingdom of Bonny was given to him shortly after his consecration. Turning to Asano his wife and four

children, Crowther may have asked the family to fast and pray for him who was about to embark on the journey to an unknown land.

- The land of darkness
- The land of the death of earlier explorers
- The land of the devastating gods and goddesses
- The land of the blood of innocent slaves and multiple born babies

Like Esther, Samuel Crowther did not settle for a 'no' as an answer to the Mordecai(s) of his day who asked him to proceed. His near "If I Perish, I Perish" words as recorded by Jessy Page read thus:

To-day about eleven o'clock the Soudan got under way for the Niger, the highway into the heart of Africa. She was soon followed by the Wilberforce, which took her in tow in order to save fuel. When I looked back on the colony in which I had spent nineteen years—the happiest part of my life, because there I was brought acquainted with the saving knowledge of Jesus Christ, leaving my wife, who was near her confinement, and four children behind—I could not but feel pain and some anxiety for a time at the separation. May the Lord, who has been my guide from my youth up till now, keep them and me, and make me neither barren nor unfruitful in His service.

The hazardous mission to emancipate the people of Bonny from their multi socio-religious and economic threats to life was indeed a baneful one. The courageous Bishop while in Bonny dared the gods and ancient beliefs of the people when he delivered a sermon on 21st April 1867. It was before the all-powerful king George Pepple of Bonny and his chiefs. He openly condemned the worship of one of the national gods of the land – the Iguana, a reptile deemed sacred and venerated by the people. Obuoforibo (2001) states that "Sir H. H. Johnston, in his lecture before the Royal Geographical Society, gave his invaluable testimony to this, when he pointed out that the animal worship was so real at this time that the British authorities on the Oil Rivers were compelled to afford it a certain recognition". Furthermore, Sir Johnston adds that

At Bonny the monitor lizards became a sickening nuisance. They devoured the European's fowls, turkeys, ducks, and geese with impunity ; they might lie across the road or the doorways of houses with their six feet of length and savagely lash the shins of people who attempted to pass them with their whip-like serrated tails, and if you wounded or killed one of them there was no end of a to-do. You were assaulted or robbed by the

natives, harangued by the consul on board of a man-of-war, and possibly fined into the bargain.

The Bishop himself wrote on April 22, 1867 concerning this risk he took for the extirpation of these reptiles viz:

You will be glad to hear that yesterday, at the mutual consent of myself and chiefs, the *geedee* or guana. Bonny juju, was declared to be no longer Bonny juju, and many of the townsmen are killing them. No sooner was this renunciation made and orders given to clear the town of them than many persons turned out in pursuit of these poor reptiles, which had been so long idolized, and now killed them as if it were in revenge, and strewed their carcasses all about in open places and in the markets by dozens and scores ; fifty-seven were counted at one market-place, where they were exposed to public view as a proof of the people's conviction and former error, and that they were determined to reform in good earnest in this respect. Everywhere one went the carcasses of the guana met the sight.

The brazen and combatant spirit of the Bishop took him yet to another level. This time, it was the attempt to destroy an evil forest in '*Iwoama Sipiri*'. This place was the traditional site where the vegetated persons suspected to have offended the gods sorely were flung to die. Others who met their waterloo were twins or multiple born babies and those found guilty of death by the royal court were executed in this forest reserve.

Undeterred, Bishop Crowther requested for this evil forest/grove for the setting up of his mission state. The king and his chiefs in trepidation advised that the spirits in the forest would harm the Bishop and his works. The Bishop in reply said to the king and chiefs: "give us the land and leave us to do the palava with the juju".

The audacity of Bishop Crowther who on 1st May 1868 delivered a powerful and heart moving sermon against the killings of twins or multiple born babies, especially with their mothers. He took his text from Gen 25:23 "And the Lord said unto her, two nations are in thy womb". This sermon led to a meeting by the Church father and the traditional leaders of Bonny where they resolved to end such practices. A home for such children was set up in the mission premises and run by Mrs. S. Crowther and assisted by Mrs. J. Boyle. Two of the many rescued babies were baptized and given new Christian names. Two of these were Theodorah Kezia Powel and Fred. He (Fred) was assisted to travel to London and never returned.

Concluding Remarks

This study has shown the intertextuality between the Inspiring and courageous Queen Esther and Samuel Ajayi Crowther. Both epitomize the redemption of their people from slavery to freedom from darkness to light. No other fitting word could capture their life and time than what the Niger Delta cleric and academic Obuoforibo (2001) wrote concerning Bishop Crowther, notably, "Bishop Crowther always prepared to do battle-biblically against all evils and at all angles – from the pulpit, in class meetings, in house-to-house visits, in social talks and in prayers – private and public the evil was attacked". His mission to the kingdom of Bonny was not without the placing of his life on the line like Esther did when it became necessary. He dared the call, despised the shame and endured the cross. Today, Bonny stands as the apex of Crowther's Missionary enterprises in Nigeria. In Bonny, once a jungle stands the Cathedral, the Episcopal throne of Samuel, first in Nigeria and second in West Africa. Yes, a great and edifying lesson to contemporary times. "When duty calls or danger, never be found wanting (George Duffield 1818-88). This resonates with the sapiential statement that Christians are called to deny themselves, take up the cross and follow Jesus (Matt 16:24).

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