

The Plight of East African Children in the Light of 2 Kings 4:1-7

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Having visited Kenya and Uganda for the first time, I must say that the experience was both instructive and stunning. Typically the word “stunning” takes into account the illuminating nature of experience—its wonderment. In this particular case, however, although I did learn and experience many wonderful things my reference to being stunned is intended to convey a slightly different meaning.

Upon arriving home after two weeks in East Africa (one week lecturing to pastors in Kenya and another week lecturing to Bishops in Uganda) I commented to a friend that my time spent there was like being in the twenty-first and the fifteenth centuries *at the same time*. Kampala, Uganda, especially, is the picture of a Bentley driving by a woman who is walking along a street with a large basket of bananas balanced perfectly on her head.

The whole situation is one of extreme polarities. The ultra rich and the ultra poor. Cutting edge technology and ancient tribal rites and traditions. Breath-taking natural beauty and rampant social injustice. East Africa is suffering from cultural schizophrenia.

Perhaps some do not see this as a problem. I do. Parts of East Africa have advanced economically, culturally, and socially (not always for good reasons, some of which I will address shortly) while vast areas of its infrastructure and the daily life of many of its people have not.

To provide a sense of what I am talking about, before I left the Entebbe airport to return home to the States, a friend handed me a copy of a local newspaper which I read from cover to cover on the flight. One article is titled “Moroto girls reject female genital mutilation” (The New Vision, October 23, 2009, Vol., 24, No. 211, 7). That’s right. Female castration. The gruesome

and vile practice is still alive and well in the Looro sub-county and in many other areas. About 600 girls bolted before the contemptible act could be performed on them. A spokesperson for the district, Mary Liiza, could only comment, “The girls had disobeyed their parents and instead went to school.” Unbelievable.

The basis for the rite extends back many years, but in more recent times, witchcraft is the *modus operandi*. Yes, even witchcraft is a hard issue for most Westerners to mentally consolidate. We are used to thinking of witches as a metaphor for evil, or as those poor, misunderstood women of early Salem, Massachusetts, or as a theme in the Wizard of Oz and Harry Potter. Or perhaps we may think of the modern, politically correct form of witchcraft espoused and practiced by Wicca—a group which is really a cultic form of super-feminism.

But In Africa, many witches are for real. They are demonically-possessed, walking examples of the very thing Paul has in mind when he warns us of “spiritual forces of wickedness” (Ephesians 6:12). Such forces are to be distinguished from “flesh and blood” but on the other hand are not to be divorced from flesh and blood as they all too often occupy real people (see Mark 5:4, Acts 16:16). Thus, Peter can warn us of Satan who prowls about as a roaring lion, seeking whom he may devour (1 Peter 5:8). In Africa, the lion comes in many guises, usually as a manipulating witch or soothsayer.

It is sad, but in this region of the world Satan is seeking very young women, teenagers in fact. The ploy goes like this: a witch (usually an elderly woman) convinces an unsuspecting family that it is best for their daughter to be mutilated and then married off quickly so that they can acquire wealth in the form of “bride price.” In the end, everyone makes out well, except the girl. The witch is paid handsomely in the form of three to five cows and the family gets a nice gift often in form of several pigs.

Reading further in the newspaper, one comes across the article “7000 kids rescued from labor” (The New Vision, 9). According to Kampala authorities, 7,538 children in Acholi, Karamoja and Lango sub-regions have been rescued and returned to school. Apparently, a bright politician thought it wise to call on the government and donors to “address the causes of child labor and also poverty, HIV/AIDS, conflict and domestic violence.” You think? One can hear the political pandering in this statement, for the issue was at first child labor, not HIV/AIDS and a host of other issues. One gets the sense that this politician is really not concerned with gross child labor but with using the occasion as a stage to muster emotions on a host of issues and to make it look like he is the one to do something about it. So it goes in East African politics.

And don't let the phrase “and donors” cited above escape your attention. The main way things get done in Kenya and Uganda is when someone greases the palm of a politician. This problem is not uncommon to our American system of politics but at least here it is done behind closed doors. In East Africa, a major Newspaper can speak of the need of “donors” to wake politicians to the abuse of children under severe labor conditions without even questioning the graft-ridden policy.

But the more immediate problem is this. How did over 7000 children manage to escape notice for days and even weeks before someone decided to try to return them to their schools? Who's watching the kids? Excuse me, but while I'm happy that the kids have been returned to school where they belong, my hat is *not* off to the authorities who took longer to rescue them than what is reasonably permissible.

On an individual note, the newspaper tells of this amazing story of child exploitation by Peter Bakka, a Roman Catholic Priest. No it's not what you're thinking. This time a priest made a false claim to a miracle. He claimed that a baby had been born with a Bible, palm leaf, and a stick in

her hands. No one is quite sure what the stick represents. Once exposed which, incidentally took almost as much time as did the rescue of the over 7000 children from brutal labor conditions, the priest issued an apology. "I feel deeply sorry for my involvement in this saga. I was misled" (The New Vision, 5). Misled? I suspect that this is as close as Father Bakka plans to come to real repentance.

The newspaper reports many other issues, some of which lay beyond the borders of East Africa, including reports of millions starving in Ethiopia, Nigerian rebels, and the consequent loss of 1 billion dollars a month in oil revenue owing to the unrest in the Niger Delta.

On the positive side, the paper contains many editorials written by well informed people that offer solutions to the many problems facing the region and its outlying areas.

In addition to the terribly sad stories reported by The New Vision are some equally sad facts about the area. As I have written elsewhere, Uganda is a land of Orphans. These destitute children are the result of two main causes: brutal dictators who killed their parents and the loss of parents from the AIDS epidemic.

Twenty years of rebel activity by the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) has created a humanitarian upheaval in Northern Uganda that has displaced 1.7 million people who don't have access to humanitarian aid. Especially hard hit are the children. It is estimated that 935,000 children have been displaced from their homes (OXFAM, 2006). Many orphans live in one of the estimated 230 displaced persons' camps which offer limited supplies. Many simply wander the streets.

Uganda also has the highest number of AIDS orphans in the world.

- There are 2 million orphans in Uganda (UNICEF, 2003).

- By 2010, it is estimated that the number of children orphaned by AIDS will nearly double as more parents die (UNICEF).
- Around 1 million people live with AIDS in Uganda and over 1 million children have lost one or both parents due to AIDS (Global Health Report 2005).

Now if you take the articles I have referenced from The New Vision together with the Uganda statistics what do you notice? It is that all of it has to do with children.

This is what stood out to me after reading through the newspaper on the plane. Children, children, children. Maltreated, suffering, and neglected children. There is even a short blurb in The New Vision about a father who physically abused; indeed the paper actually uses the word “tortured,” his son for “a long time.” Now if you were to notice a child, who had been “tortured” for a long time, would it not be evident? Where were his neighbors? Teachers? Perhaps he was one of the over 7000 kids sent into forced labor so no one noticed. Even while the police were investigating the incident the paper reports that the father of the child continued to beat him! Has anyone in Kampala heard the phrase “protective custody?”

After I refolded the newspaper and sat it in my lap, I spent some time contemplating what I had read. As I reflected on the preponderance of articles about children, I recalled a story from the Old Testament that may shed some light on the suffering of African children.

The story is about the widow and the miracle of oil. The Bible records,

Now a certain woman of the wives of the sons of the prophets cried out to Elisha, “Your servant my husband is dead, and you know that your servant feared the LORD; and the creditor has come to take my two children to be his slaves.” Elisha said to her, “What shall I do for you? Tell me, what do you have in the house?” And she said, “Your maidservant has nothing in the house except a jar of oil.” Then he said, “Go, borrow

vessels at large for yourself from all your neighbors, even empty vessels; do not get a few.” And you shall go in and shut the door behind you and your sons, and pour out into all these vessels, and you shall set aside what is full.” So she went from him and shut the door behind her and her sons; they were bringing the vessels to her and she poured. When the vessels were full, she said to her son, “Bring me another vessel.” And he said to her, “There is not one vessel more.” And the oil stopped. Then she came and told the man of God. And he said, “Go, sell the oil and pay your debt, and you and your sons can live on the rest” (2 Kings 4:1-7).

The widow had been married to a prophet who was part of a company of prophets led by Elisha. Either he was not a very good financial manager or he simply fell on bad times prior to his death because he left his dear wife with a large debt. In verse one, the woman goes to Elisha to complain about her circumstances. In essence she says to him, “My husband worked for you. What can do about it?” The immediacy of the situation is enhanced by the fact that the creditors have waited long enough for their money and are now coming for her children as payment.

Here is the thought that ran through my mind on the plane home. East Africa, for all of its revival of Christianity, remains a remarkably corrupt and spiritually barren place. The gospel has yet to pierce the overall culture there. Christianity is gaining momentum throughout Africa but it remains “a mile wide and an inch deep.” The Christian message has not impacted East African corporate life; and this is especially the case at the governmental and professional levels. *Could it be that because the spiritual debts of the present East African generation remain open that the creditors have come to collect the children?* (By “creditors” I mean the spiritual effects of living outside of covenant faithfulness to God).

It is all too easy to see people living in terrible living conditions and blame the situation on the people’s sin. Some people are just too easy a target. I do not want to do that. In fact Jesus

rejected such a notion in his response to the Jews regarding the accident that happened at the tower of Siloam (see Luke 13:1-9). But even in this brief but important revelation of our Lord we do not see the whole story of sin and its potential personal and social consequences. In another place, Jesus tells a man whom he had healed to show himself to the priest—the point being that his long illness was in fact related to his sin which was in need of the ongoing ministry of a local man of God (see Luke 5:14). And Isaiah 24 presents an alarming summary of the historical judgments upon the nations described in chapters 13-23 of the same book.

So have the creditors come for the children of East Africa because the spiritual debts of the current generation there remain outstanding? The story of the widow teaches us that Satan will stop at no lengths to collect on our debt to God. But the story also teaches us about the grace of God and the miracle of his provision when we turn to him in faith. Note the extraordinary blessing of God recorded at the end of the text. The woman had asked only for enough money to repay what her husband owed. But the miracle of the oil that continued to pour until there were no more vessels left provided enough oil to pay not only what was owed, but also was sufficient for her and for her children to live on for the rest of their days.

Let us hope and pray that the people of East Africa will experience true revival and the reformation of their culture that is deep and abiding, such that the children there will also know the covenant blessings that come from God's rich storehouse of grace.