SAMUEL AJAYI CROWTHER



5

Samuel Ajayi Crowther

A Yoruba Captive Set Free, a Bishop on the Niger, and the Gospel in His Mother Tongue

Ochorus

Portraits of Courage – Samuel Ajayi Crowther

A Yoruba Captive Set Free, a Bishop on the Niger, and the Gospel in His Mother Tongue

Ochorus Originals

First published 2026.

OCHORUS

About Ochorus

"To make the epic classics of the Christian faith free to the Church around the world — in their own language, to the glory of God."

Ochorus is a Christian ministry based in Victoria, Canada, and Kampala, Uganda. Since 2021 we have been finding the great Christian books of the past, editing them carefully for today's readers, and giving them away — free to read and free to keep.

We are not only a website. Books printed in Uganda are placed directly into people's hands across East Africa — at pastors' conferences, and in the churches, schools and prisons we are invited to serve.

Keep reading at ochorus.com

- Hundreds of classics, sermons and biographies — free, with no ads and no account needed.
- Books in many languages, from English and Swahili to Arabic and Hindi.
- Reading plans, highlights and notes that follow you from device to device.
- Listen aloud, or save a book to read offline.
- Free downloads like this one. Share them freely.

"Freely ye have received, freely give."

Matthew 10:8

Table of Contents

Preface 6

Introduction: The Bishop and His Biographers 10

Ajayi of Osogun 15

The Unhappy, Blessed Day 20

Myrmidon 26

Samuel Crowther 32

The Niger, 1841 39

"Who Maketh Thee to Differ?" 45

The Helper of the Fatherless 51

In Our Own Language 57

The Pleiad 62

Wrecked at Jebba 67

Africa's Own Children 74

"I Am Not Worthy" 79

A Bishop in a Canoe 85

Sympathy with All Classes 91

Cotton Gins and Gin 98

The Delta Churches 103

Asano 108

The Gathering Storm 115

Onitsha, 1890 122

The Delta Pastorate 128

"Good Night" 133

A Weaned Child 139

Essentially African, Essentially Missionary 145

Appendix A: Lessons from the Life of Samuel Ajayi Crowther 151

Appendix B: Chapter-by-Chapter Study and Reflection Guide 156

Appendix C: Chronology of the Life and Times of Samuel Ajayi Crowther 170

Appendix D: Notes on Sources and Method 179

Preface

"Princes shall come out of Egypt; Ethiopia shall haste to stretch out her hands unto God."
— Psalm 68:31, ASV

The first four volumes of this series told the stories of Watchman Nee in China, John Hyde in the Punjab, Corrie ten Boom in Haarlem, and Mary Slessor in the forests of south-eastern Nigeria. Mary Slessor's story ended on the Cross River in 1915. This fifth volume goes back a generation and a little to the west, to a boy who was born in the Yoruba country of what is now south-western Nigeria some time around 1807, and who died in Lagos as a bishop of the Church of England on the last night of 1891.

His name at birth was Ajayi. When he was about thirteen, raiders burned his town, tied a rope around his neck, and led him away with his mother and sisters. He was sold six times. He tried, more than once, to kill himself. He was put in chains on a Portuguese slave ship bound for the Americas, and that same evening two British warships stopped it. He was landed in Sierra Leone, a colony for people rescued from the slave trade. There he learned to read, came to faith in Christ, and was baptised with the name of an English clergyman he never met: Samuel Crowther. Forty-two years later, in Canterbury Cathedral, he was consecrated the first African bishop of the Anglican Church. In the congregation that day sat the woman who had taught him the alphabet, and, according to his biographer, the naval captain who had freed him.

Why Courage?

It would be easy to tell his life as a story of rising, from the slave pen to the bishop's chair. It was that. But it was not a story of arriving. Crowther spent almost his whole life on the move, by canoe and steamer and on foot, up the Niger River and its tributaries, in country where he was often a stranger and sometimes a prisoner. He was shipwrecked and lived for a year beside the wreck. He was kidnapped and held for ransom, and the man who rescued him was killed. He preached to kings and to slaves, to Muslim scholars and to worshippers of the old gods, and he did it with a patience that his European colleagues sometimes mistook for weakness.

His hardest courage was needed at the end. In his last years, a new generation of young European missionaries decided that African clergy could not be trusted with the church he had built. They dismissed and suspended his African clergy over his head, including his own son. He did not fight back with the weapons they used. He protested, withdrew from their committee, and went on being their bishop. He died some sixteen months later. The man chosen to succeed him was a European, and for decades afterwards the African bishops on the Niger served only as assistants. It took the Church of England until 2014 to say publicly, in Canterbury Cathedral, that he had been "betrayed and let down and undermined," and that "it was wrong."

How This Book Is Written

Unlike Mary Slessor, Samuel Crowther left a great deal of writing in his own words, and almost all of it is in the public domain. There is the letter he wrote in 1837, describing his capture and rescue, one of the most vivid accounts of the slave trade by anyone who survived it. There are his journals

of three expeditions up the Niger, published in 1842, 1855, and 1859. There are his sermons and his charges to his clergy. This book quotes him freely, and wherever possible it lets him tell his own story.

There are also two biographies by an English writer, Jesse Page, published in 1888 and 1908, and the official history of the Church Missionary Society by Eugene Stock, published in 1899. These are valuable, and they are also partial. Page was an admirer who wrote in the racial language of his day, and both he and Stock took the side of the missionary society in the crisis that clouded Crowther's last years. Modern historians, many of them Nigerian, have told that story very differently. This book draws on all of them, and it will tell the reader which is which.

Scripture in This Book

As in the earlier volumes, all Scripture quotations are from the American Standard Version of 1901, which is in the public domain. Each chapter opens with a passage that carries its theme, and further passages are woven through the narrative.

The verse at the head of this preface was one Crowther loved. In a letter he wrote in 1829, while he was still a young schoolmaster in Sierra Leone, he said he had hope "that Africa will soon stretch forth her hands unto God." The psalm speaks of Ethiopia, which in the Bible stands for the peoples of Africa beyond Egypt. For nineteenth-century Christians it became a prophecy of Africa's turning to Christ. Crowther lived to see the first small churches of the Niger, and to see them humbled. He did not live to see what came after: the growth of Christianity in Nigeria into one of the largest churches in the world, most of it led, as he always believed it should be, by Africans. Paul told the Athenians that God "made of one every nation of men to dwell on all the face of the earth ... that they should seek

God, if haply they might feel after him and find him" (Acts 17:26-27, ASV). This is the story of a man whom God found in a slave pen, and who spent his life helping his own people to find him too.

Introduction: The Bishop and His Biographers

"And Jehovah answered me, and said, Write the vision, and make it plain upon tablets, that he may run that readeth it."
— Habakkuk 2:2, ASV

A Man Who Wrote It Down

Most of the people in this series left little writing behind them. Samuel Crowther was different. He was a careful, methodical man who kept journals on every voyage, wrote long letters to the Church Missionary Society in London, compiled grammars and vocabularies, translated large parts of the Bible, and published his charges to his clergy. He was also, from his teens, a teacher, and he knew the value of writing things down so that others could read and act on them. The verse at the head of this chapter is God's command to the prophet Habakkuk to write his vision plainly, so that anyone who read it could run with it. Crowther wrote plainly, and he meant to be read.

The most important document for his early life is a letter he wrote on 22 February 1837, from Fourah Bay in Sierra Leone, to the Rev. William Jowett, secretary of the Church Missionary Society. It tells the story of his capture, his sale, his rescue, and his conversion. It was printed in 1842 as an appendix to the journals of the Niger Expedition of 1841, and it has been reprinted many times since. This book quotes it from that 1842 printing.

Later copies, including the one in Jesse Page's 1908 biography, contain small errors, some of which change the meaning. In one place Page's version says the rescued captives began to have a "poor opinion" of the British sailors who had freed them; what Crowther wrote was a "good opinion."

Page and Stock

Jesse Page, an English writer of Christian biographies, published two lives of Crowther. The first, in 1888, was written while Crowther was still alive, and Page says that he read the proofs aloud to the bishop, who corrected some of the dates. The second, *The Black Bishop*, published in 1908, is much longer and was written with the help of Crowther's son Dandeson and with access to the missionary society's archives. Both books are full of Crowther's letters and journals, and both are indispensable.

But Page wrote as an admirer and as a friend of the missionary society, and in the racial language of his age. He calls Crowther "a little black boy," speaks of "the peculiar temperament of the negro race," and in one passage makes a remark about Jews and Africans that would be unprintable today. This book does not repeat that language except where it is needed to show how Crowther's contemporaries thought. Page also records, from family tradition, stories about Crowther's childhood that have no other support: that his mother was descended from a king of Oyo, that a diviner foretold he would serve the high God, that he saved the household gods from a fire. Page himself warns that the family's genealogy should not be taken "too seriously"; the other stories he tells without any caution at all. This book tells them as family memory, not as fact.

Eugene Stock's *History of the Church Missionary Society*, published in 1899, is the society's own history, written from its archives. It is reliable on dates and names. On the crisis that darkened Crowther's last years, it is the

society's side of the story, and it too uses racial language that would not be used now. Yet Stock, writing only eight years after Crowther's death, admits that the young missionaries who purged the Niger Mission were "too severe," and he says of Crowther that no tongue, "however malicious," ever ventured to whisper a word against his personal character.

The Historians

Since the 1960s, historians have told Crowther's story afresh. The great Nigerian historian J. F. Ade Ajayi studied the Christian missions of Nigeria from 1841 to 1891 and edited Crowther's 1837 letter. E. A. Ayandele, another Nigerian historian, wrote about the missionary impact on Nigeria and was frank about Crowther's weaknesses as an administrator. Andrew Walls, a Scottish historian who spent much of his life studying Christianity in Africa, called him "probably the most widely known African Christian of the nineteenth century," and described his legacy as a faith that was "essentially African and essentially missionary." Lamin Sanneh, from the Gambia, saw in Crowther's translation work a turning point in the history of Christianity, because it put the Bible into African languages and so gave those languages new dignity. Jehu Hanciles, from Sierra Leone, has written about the church that Crowther's son led after his death.

This book has learned from all of them, and it will say where they disagree. It does not reproduce their books, which are in copyright.

What Is Uncertain

Some things about Crowther's life cannot now be known. The most basic is the year he was born. He never gave it. His first biographer's dates imply about 1808 or 1809; the missionary society in 1842 said he was about

eleven when he was captured in 1821, which would make it about 1810; his gravestone says he died "aged about 89," which would make it about 1802. Andrew Walls's estimate of about 1807 is followed in this book, always with the word "about."

It is uncertain, too, whether his people should be called Egba or Oyo, two branches of the Yoruba. The name of the slave ship on which he was captured, usually given as the *Esperança Feliz*, rests on mission tradition, not on any record of the ship itself. Page's two books give different versions of what Crowther said when he met his mother again after twenty-five years. And his daughter's account of his death, read carefully, places it at about a quarter to one in the morning of the first day of 1892, although every record gives the last day of 1891. This book notes such things as they arise, without making too much of them.

The Harder Story

The most important question on which the sources disagree is the story of Crowther's last years. The older books, Page's especially, tell of a saintly old man, a mission troubled by some unworthy African agents, and a painful but necessary discipline carried out by the society. Modern historians tell of a bishop whose clergy were dismissed and suspended over his head by young Europeans who had lost faith in African leadership, in a decade when the racial attitudes of the British Empire were hardening. The truth is not simple. Some of the charges against some of Crowther's agents were true; one of them concerned a real and terrible crime. Crowther was, by common consent, too lenient a disciplinarian. But the way in which his work was taken from him was unjust, and it was shaped by a belief that Africans could not lead their own church. This book will tell that story as carefully as it can.

The psalmist promised that the people of God would not hide the works of God from their children, but would be "telling to the generation to come the praises of Jehovah, And his strength, and his wondrous works that he hath done" (Psalm 78:4, ASV). Crowther's life is one of those wondrous works. It deserves to be told truthfully, with its sorrows as well as its triumphs.

Ajayi of Osogun

"Thine eyes did see mine unformed substance; And in thy book they were all written, Even the days that were ordained for me, When as yet there was none of them."
— Psalm 139:16, ASV

Osogun

The boy who became Samuel Crowther was born in the town of Osogun, in the Yoruba country of what is now south-western Nigeria, about the year 1807. No one wrote down the date. His own account, written thirty years later, does not give his age, and the guesses of his biographers range over eight years. It is fitting, in a way. He was born into a world that kept its history in memory and song rather than in registers, and the first written record of his life would be made by the people who bought and sold him.

Osogun lies today in Oyo State, near the town of Iseyin. In Crowther's childhood it was a substantial place. He remembered it as a town of about twelve thousand people, able to put three thousand men into the field, surrounded by a wooden fence some four miles round, with six gates. The houses were built of mud, some of them twelve feet high to the eaves, with tall roofs, arranged in square compounds around open courtyards, several of them joined together and belonging to one family, with passages running from one to another. It was, in his words, "the place of my birth, the play-

ground of my childhood, and the place which I thought would be the repository of my mortal body in its old age."

He grew up, as he later wrote, "enjoying the comforts of father and mother, and the affectionate love of brothers and sisters." We know a little about his family, and much of what we know comes from family memory recorded long afterwards by his biographer Jesse Page, with help from Crowther's children. According to that tradition, his father carried on the family trade of weaving, farmed, and was a man of some standing in the town; his grandfather had come from Ketu, to the west. His mother, Page says, bore the title Afala, which marked her as a priestess of Obatala, the Yoruba deity of creation and purity, charged with keeping the god's white cloths clean. Her own name was Ibisomi. Family tradition also held that she was descended from Abiodun, one of the great kings of Oyo. Page admits that these are traditions, and that he could not test them. This book follows his caution.

His name, Ajayi, was one of the names the Yoruba gave according to the circumstances of a child's birth. Page says it was given to a child born face downward. A story in the family said that a diviner, consulted at his birth, declared that the boy must not be given to the service of any of the old gods, because he was destined to serve Olorun, the high God, alone, and that his parents were troubled by this. It is the kind of story that families tell about a child who has become famous, and it may or may not be true. What is certain is that the God who made him saw him before anyone else did. The prophet says, "Jehovah hath called me from the womb; from the bowels of my mother hath he made mention of my name" (Isaiah 49:1, ASV). "Thine eyes did see mine unformed substance," the psalmist writes; "in thy book they were all written, Even the days that were ordained for me, When as yet there was none of them."

The World of Oyo

Osogun belonged to the Oyo empire, which for two centuries had been the greatest power in the Yoruba country. Its king, the Alaafin, ruled from the capital at Old Oyo, far to the north, over a network of towns that paid tribute and sent soldiers. Oyo's strength lay in its cavalry and in its trade. Some of that trade was in human beings. Oyo had sold captives southward to the coast for generations, to the European ships that carried them to the Americas.

By the time Ajayi was born, Oyo was coming apart. Its rulers quarrelled among themselves. Around 1817 a general named Afonja, who governed the northern town of Ilorin, rebelled against the Alaafin and called on Muslim allies for help. Some of those allies were Fulani, part of the great Islamic movement that had swept across what is now northern Nigeria since 1804. Ilorin passed into Muslim hands and became a base for raiding. At about the same time the southern Yoruba towns fell to fighting among themselves in what became known as the Owu war. The result, over the next twenty years, was the ruin of much of the old Yoruba world. Towns were destroyed, their people scattered, killed, or enslaved. The refugees founded new towns, among them Abeokuta and Ibadan, which would become the centres of Yoruba life in the century to come.

Crowther himself described the wars that reached his town. "For some years," he wrote in 1837, "wars had been carried on in my Eyo country, which was always attended with much devastation and bloodshed: the women, such men as had surrendered or were caught, with the children, were taken captives." The raiders, he said, were Oyo Muslims, joined by Fulani and by escaped slaves, "making a formidable force of about 20,000, who annoyed the whole country. They had no other employment but selling slaves to the Spaniards and Portuguese on the coast."

The Trade

It is important to understand what those last words meant. By 1821, when the raiders reached Osogun, Britain had outlawed its own slave trade for fourteen years, and was trying to stop other nations' ships from carrying slaves. But the trade went on. Portuguese and Spanish ships, and ships sailing under other flags, still came to the coast of the Bight of Benin to buy captives for the plantations of Brazil and Cuba. Lagos, on its lagoon, was one of the busiest slave ports in West Africa. The wars in the Yoruba interior fed the trade, and the trade fed the wars. Every town that fell produced captives who could be sold for guns, cloth, tobacco, and rum.

Nobody in this story was innocent. African rulers and raiders captured and sold people. African traders marched them to the coast. European and Brazilian merchants bought them and shipped them across the Atlantic, where the plantations of the Americas worked them to death. Crowther, when he came to write about it, did not spare anyone: he described the cruelty of the raiders, the traders, and the Portuguese buyers with the same plain honesty. What he was chiefly concerned to describe, though, was not the system. It was what happened to one boy and his family on one morning in 1821.

A Childhood

Before that morning, he had been a child like others in a prosperous Yoruba town. Page records, again from family memory, that he was the leader of a club of about forty boys who worked the farms together, and that once, when fire broke out in the family compound, he carried the household gods out of the flames. If true, it is a telling detail. The boy who would one day

preach against the worship of images was, as a child, devoted to them, as any Yoruba boy of his time would have been.

His family was a large one. He had an elder brother, whom Page calls Bola, and several sisters. His father's house, his grandfather's house, and the homes of his aunts and cousins stood near one another in the town. He knew the paths to the farms, the markets, the shrines, and the stream where the women drew water. He knew his own dialect of Yoruba, the one he would later call "my own," and he knew no other. He had never seen the sea, a great river, or a white man.

He could not have imagined that he would one day stand in the presence of the Queen of England, preach in English cathedrals, and be consecrated a bishop. Nor could he have imagined the road by which he would get there. The psalm at the head of this chapter says that all his days were written in God's book before one of them came to be. That is a comforting thought, and also a solemn one. The days written for Ajayi of Osogun included the one that was about to come.

The Unhappy, Blessed Day

"And as for you, ye meant evil against me; but God meant it for good, to bring to pass, as it is this day, to save much people alive."
— Genesis 50:20, ASV

"Which I Shall Never Forget"

When Samuel Crowther sat down at Fourah Bay in February 1837 to tell the missionary society how he had come to Sierra Leone, he began with a day. "I suppose, some time about the commencement of the year 1821," he wrote, "I was in my native country, enjoying the comforts of father and mother, and the affectionate love of brothers and sisters. From this period I must date the unhappy, but which I am now taught, in other respects, to call blessed day, which I shall never forget in my life."

He explained the double name at once. It was an unhappy day "because it was the day in which I was violently turned out of my father's house, and separated from my relations; and in which I was made to experience what is called to be in slavery." It was a blessed day because it was "the day which Providence had marked out for me to set out on my journey" towards the place where the gospel was preached. He wrote those words sixteen years after the event, as a Christian, and the whole letter is shaped by that double vision. But he did not let the blessing cancel the grief. He told the story of the unhappy day in full.

The Morning of the Raid

"The morning in which my town, Ocho-gu, shared the same fate which many others had experienced, was fair and delightful; and most of the inhabitants were engaged in their respective occupations. We were preparing breakfast without any apprehension; when, about 9 o'clock a.m., a rumour was spread in the town, that the enemies had approached with intentions of hostility."

The raiders surrounded the town before anyone could escape. The men of Osogun, many of them away and the rest surprised, had six gates and many weak places in the fence to defend. After three or four hours the enemy broke in. Crowther's description of what followed is one of the most vivid eyewitness accounts of a slave raid ever written:

> *Here a most sorrowful scene imaginable was to be witnessed! — women, some with three, four, or six children clinging to their arms, with the infants on their backs, and such baggage as they could carry on their heads, running as fast as they could, through prickly shrubs, which, hooking their blies and other loads, drew them down from the heads of the bearers.*

Mothers who could not carry both their children and their goods dropped the goods, and then found they could not save all the children either. The raiders caught them "with a noose of rope thrown over the neck of every individual, to be led in the manner of goats tied together, under the drove of one man." Families were divided among different captors on the spot, "to see one another no more."

Ajayi was caught with his mother, his two sisters, one of them a baby about ten months old, and a cousin. He had been carrying a bow and five arrows. He had lost the bow in the thorn bushes while trying to free

himself, "before I could think of making any use of it against my enemies." The last time he saw his father was when his father came from the fighting to tell them to run. Much later he learned that his father had been killed in another battle. "Here I must take thy leave, unhappy, comfortless father!" he wrote.

As they were led out through the burning town, some of the Fulani among the raiders took his cousin away from the group. They passed his grandfather's house, already empty. They saw his grandmother at a distance in the crowd of captives for a few minutes, and then lost sight of her for ever. Old women who could not keep up were threatened with death on the spot. "O pitiful sight! whose heart would not bleed to have seen this?" That night, after a march of twenty miles past towns and villages already burned, they reached the raiders' camp. "It was almost midnight before we reached the town, where we passed our doleful first night in bondage."

Sold

The next morning the ropes were taken off their necks and the captives were brought to the chief of the raiders "as trophies at his feet." The chief took Ajayi and one of his sisters. His mother and the baby went to others. "We dared not vent our grief by loud cries, but by very heavy sobs." Within a few hours it was agreed that Ajayi should be traded for a horse. "Thus, in the space of twenty-four hours, being deprived of liberty and all other comforts, I was made the property of three different persons."

The horse was taken on trial and turned out to be unsatisfactory, and after about two months Ajayi was returned to the chief, who took him to his own town. There, to his joy, he found his mother and the baby again. For three months he cut grass for the chief's horses and visited his mother in her captor's house, "without any fears or thoughts of being separated any

more." His mother told him that she had heard news of his other sister. He never saw her again.

Then, one evening, he was sent with a man to fetch some money from a neighbouring house, and found himself chained with other captives to be taken to market in the morning. His mother was in the same town, and he had not seen her for a day or two. He lay awake all night. At first cock-crow the traders set out with the captives, "with one hand chained to the neck." Another boy in the chain, whose mother was also in the town, cried and begged to be allowed to see her, and was beaten into silence. "Seeing this, I dared not speak, although I thought we passed by the very house my mother was in. Thus was I separated from my mother and sister, my then only comforts, to meet no more in this world of misery." He was wrong about that, as we shall see. But it would be twenty-five years.

The Dark Months

At the market town he was sold to a Muslim woman, who took him with her son southward through many towns towards the coast. He found himself among people who spoke another dialect, "a perfect stranger, having left the Eyo country far behind." He lived about three months in a town called Toko, where he saw the heads of executed people nailed to the trees in the market-place, and heard of a woman shot for bewitching her husband.

His mistress spoke cheerfully of going on to the Popo country on the coast to buy tobacco and other fine things. Ajayi understood what that meant. It was where the Portuguese bought slaves. He lost his appetite and fell ill with dysentery. And then he did something that he confessed, sixteen years later, with a candour that is still startling:

> *I determined with myself that I would not go to the Popo country; but would make an end of myself, one way or another. In several nights I attempted strangling myself with my band; but had not courage enough to close the noose tight, so as to effect my purpose. May the Lord forgive me this sin! I determined, next, that I would leap out of the canoe into the river, when we should cross it in our way to that country.*

Before he could try, his owner, seeing how he had changed, sold him on. Crowther's comment on this is one of the most remarkable sentences in the letter: "Thus the Lord, while I knew Him not, led me not into temptation, and delivered me from evil." He was quoting the Lord's Prayer, which he would not have known until years later: "And bring us not into temptation, but deliver us from the evil one" (Matthew 6:13, ASV). Looking back, he saw that the petition had been answered for him before he had ever prayed it.

At the next town he tried again to strangle himself, several times, and failed. "It was very singular," he wrote, "that no thought of making use of a knife ever entered my mind." He was traded again for tobacco, rum, and other goods, and kept in chains alone for some time until his new owner had collected enough slaves. He was taken to another town, and after two months more, to a slave market on the shore of a great lagoon. He had never seen so much water. "The sight of the river terrified me exceedingly, for I had never seen any thing like it in my life." There he was sold again, for tobacco, and taken across the water by canoe at night to Lagos. "Nothing now terrified me more than the river, and the thought of going into another world."

Ye Meant Evil

It is worth pausing at this point in the story, as Crowther himself did in writing it. A boy of about thirteen had in little more than a year lost his father, his home, his town, his grandmother, his sisters, and twice his mother. He had been sold or bartered at least six times. He had tried to kill himself, and failed. And he was now on the edge of the sea, among people whose language he did not speak, waiting to be sold to white men he had never seen.

Christians have often compared Crowther to Joseph, the son of Jacob, whose brothers sold him to traders for twenty pieces of silver, and who was carried into Egypt as a slave (Genesis 37:28). His first biographer made the comparison, and so do many sermons. It is a true comparison, and Crowther himself would not have objected to it. Years later, when Joseph had become the second man in Egypt and his brothers were afraid of his revenge, he told them: "ye meant evil against me; but God meant it for good, to bring to pass, as it is this day, to save much people alive."

But the comparison can be made too quickly. Joseph did not say that what his brothers did was good. He said they meant it for evil, and it was evil. What he said was that God had been at work in it, for purposes they could not see. Crowther said the same. He called the day of his capture blessed, but he never called slavery good, and he never pretended that his losses were not losses. At the end of his letter he wrote: "Thus the day of my captivity was to me a blessed day, when considered in this respect; though certainly it must be unhappy also, in my being deprived on it of my father, mother, sisters, and all other relations."

That double sentence is the key to his whole life. He held on to both halves of it, the grief and the gratitude, to the end.

Myrmidon

"The Spirit of the Lord Jehovah is upon me; because Jehovah hath anointed me to preach good tidings unto the meek; he hath sent me to bind up the broken-hearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and the opening of the prison to them that are bound"
— Isaiah 61:1, ASV

Lagos

Lagos in 1822 was an island town on a lagoon, ruled by its own king and full of slave-traders. The Portuguese and Spanish buyers lived in one part of it. Ajayi was there more than three months before he saw one of them. Then one evening a group of about six white men walked down the street where he was living. He did not dare to look at them properly, "being always suspicious that they had come for me: and my suspicion was not a fanciful one; for, in a few days after, I was made the eighth in number of the slaves of the Portuguese."

By now he had stopped resisting. "Being a veteran in slavery, if I may be allowed the expression, and having no more hope of ever going to my country again, I patiently took whatever came; although it was not without a great fear and trembling that I received, for the first time, the touch of a White Man, who examined me whether I was sound or not."

The Portuguese kept their captives in a room with one door and no windows. The men and boys were chained together by the neck, on a chain about six fathoms long, padlocked at both ends. The boys suffered most. When the men grew angry, or wanted to ease the weight of the chain to lie down at night, they pulled it tight, and the boys' necks were bruised. "We were almost suffocated, or bruised to death." When one or two fought in the night, all of them were punished. Eventually, when more men arrived and there was no chain to spare, the boys were separated and tied together with cord instead. "The female sex fared not much better." They were kept like this for nearly four months.

Among the captives brought in at this time was another Yoruba boy named Joseph Bartholomew. The two would sail together, be freed together, and years later serve together as agents of the Church Missionary Society.

War on the Sea

Then a rumour went round that the English were cruising the coast. To the captives this was one more cause of dread. They had never heard of war at sea, or imagined it possible. It delayed their embarkation for some weeks. At last they were taken by canoe at night from Lagos to the beach, and in the morning put on board the ship, which sailed at once. There were 187 of them. The crew, busy with loading, gave them nothing to eat that day, and most of them were seasick.

"On the very same evening," Crowther wrote, "we were surprised by two English men-of-war; and on the next morning found ourselves in the hands of new conquerors, whom we at first very much dreaded, they being armed with long swords." When they were brought up from the hold, they found themselves surrounded by two large warships and several smaller

vessels. The warships were His Majesty's ships *Myrmidon*, under Captain H. J. Leeke, and *Iphigenia*, under Captain Sir Robert Mends, "who captured us on the 7th of April 1822, on the river Lagos."

Mission tradition gives the name of the Portuguese ship as the *Esperança Feliz*, which means "Happy Hope." Crowther's letter does not name it, and no independent record of the ship has been found. The name may be right. It would be a fitting one.

The Royal Navy's West Africa Squadron had been patrolling the coast since 1808, trying to enforce the laws against the slave trade. It was a small force for a long coast, and most slave ships got through. The sailors were driven partly by conviction and partly by prize money, which was paid for every captive freed. Many of them died of fever. It was, whatever its motives, one of the few things the British Empire did in West Africa in those years that was simply good, and for the 187 people in the hold of that ship it was the difference between the plantations of Brazil or Cuba and a chance of life.

Hogs and Cannon-Shot

The Portuguese owner and his sailors were tied up. The cook was left free to make breakfast. The captives, hungry and not threatened, began to help themselves to fruit from the stern, and then to wander over the ship looking for anything they could take. "Now we began to entertain a good opinion of our conquerors."

After breakfast they were divided among the ships. Ajayi and five friends, among them Joseph Bartholomew, kept close together so as to be taken to the same vessel, and were rowed across to the *Myrmidon*. They could find no trace there of the captives who had been taken over before them. Then they saw parts of a pig hanging up, with white skin, which they

had never seen, since in their country a pig was always roasted in the fire to remove the hair. And along the deck they saw rows of cannon-balls. They drew the obvious conclusion. The white men had killed and eaten the others, and the round shot were their heads. "But we were soon undeceived, by a close examination of the flesh with cloven foot, which resembled that of a hog; and, by a cautious approach to the shot, that they were iron."

It is a story that Crowther clearly enjoyed telling against himself, and it says a great deal about what the captives believed. Many Africans in the era of the slave trade believed that Europeans bought people to eat them. The fear was not foolish. People taken to the coast by the white men never came back.

Within a few days the six boys were "quite at home in the man-of-war." The sailors took them as their own boys and gave them clothes. The Portuguese owner and his son were brought on board in fetters. Ajayi, sure now that he would never again be in the man's power, walked up to him while he was being shaved by his son and struck him on the head. He recorded it honestly, and judged it honestly: "an act, however, very wicked and unkind in its nature."

Freetown

The slave ship was towed along for a time and then, being a slow sailer and not worth the trouble, stripped and abandoned at sea. Not all the captives who had been freed with Ajayi survived. One of the vessels carrying them was wrecked on a sandbank, though everyone aboard was saved. Another sank in a storm with all the captives and all but five of the sailors, who were found days later in a boat, reduced to skeletons. A hundred and two of the people from the slave ship were lost.

After about two and a half months cruising, the *Myrmidon* landed its rescued captives at Sierra Leone on 17 June 1822. Sierra Leone had been founded on the peninsula around Freetown in 1787 as a settlement for freed Black people from Britain and later from Nova Scotia and Jamaica, and since 1808 it had been a British colony and the place where the Navy landed the people it took from slave ships. They were known as "recaptives" or "liberated Africans," and by 1822 there were thousands of them, from dozens of peoples and languages, settled in villages in the hills around the town.

That same day Ajayi and his companions were sent to one of those villages, Bathurst, and put in the care of the missionary there, Mr. Davey. They found many of their own countrymen, though none they had known before. The people assured them that they were free, "and we very soon believed them."

But a few days later they were sent for to go to Freetown, to give evidence against their Portuguese owner in the court that dealt with captured slave ships. Someone hinted to them that they would be handed back to him. They refused to go unless they were carried, and in the end they were whipped into going. It was, Crowther wrote, "not a small joy to us to return to Bathurst again, in the evening, to our friends." He admitted that he had been afraid, partly because of the blow he had given the man on the ship.

Liberty to the Captives

The verse at the head of this chapter was read by Jesus in the synagogue at Nazareth, at the beginning of his ministry. He unrolled the scroll of Isaiah and read that the Spirit of the Lord had anointed him "to proclaim release to the captives ... to set at liberty them that are bruised" (Luke 4:18, ASV).

Then he rolled up the scroll and said that the scripture had been fulfilled that day.

The captain of the *Myrmidon* did not know that he was setting free a future bishop. He was doing his duty. But the boy with the bruised neck whom his sailors fed and clothed would spend the rest of his life proclaiming a greater release, from a deeper bondage, to the people of his own land. Forty-two years later, according to Page, Leeke, by then an admiral, was in Canterbury Cathedral to see the boy he had freed consecrated a bishop. For Crowther, the day of his rescue was the day the psalmist describes: "Our soul is escaped as a bird out of the snare of the fowlers: The snare is broken, and we are escaped" (Psalm 124:7, ASV).

Samuel Crowther

"Wherefore if any man is in Christ, he is a new creature: the old things are passed away; behold, they are become new."
— 2 Corinthians 5:17, ASV

Bathurst

Bathurst was one of the villages in the hills above Freetown where the colony settled the people the Navy rescued. It had been called Leopold; the government renamed it after a British minister. Its people came from dozens of African nations and spoke dozens of languages. They had been torn from their homes, marched to the coast, chained in holds, and set down in a strange land by strangers. Many of them were children. The Church Missionary Society, which had worked in Sierra Leone since 1804, ran the schools and churches in several of the villages, and at Bathurst the missionary was a man named Davey.

Ajayi was put into the school. He learned fast. "In about six months after my arrival at Sierra Leone," he wrote, "I was able to read the New Testament with some degree of freedom; and was made a Monitor, for which I was rewarded with sevenpence-halfpenny per month." A monitor was an older pupil who taught younger ones; the system allowed a single master to teach a large school. It is the first sign of the gift that would mark his whole life. As soon as he had learned something, he began to teach it.

At Bathurst he lived in the house of the missionary, Mr. Davey, and his wife. According to Page, he served as their pantry-boy, and in return his mistress taught him for half an hour every evening. Years later, widowed twice, she married another Bathurst missionary, John Weeks, a Cornish mechanic who had reached the colony in 1824 and who taught Crowther carpentry. It is as Mrs. Weeks that she appears later in this story, and she would remember those evening lessons forty years afterwards.

Samuel Crowther

The next part of his story he told in two sentences. "The Lord was pleased to open my heart to hearken to those things which were spoken by His servants; and being convinced that I was a sinner, and desired to obtain pardon through Jesus Christ, I was baptized on the 11th of December 1825, by the Rev. J. Raban."

It is a very plain account. There is no vision, no crisis, no dramatic moment. He heard the gospel preached, he came to see that he was a sinner, and he wanted the forgiveness that Christ offered. The words "the Lord was pleased to open my heart" echo the story of Lydia in the Acts of the Apostles, "whose heart the Lord opened to give heed unto the things which were spoken by Paul." That was how he understood it: not as something he had achieved, but as something God had done for him.

At his baptism he took a new name. He was named after Samuel Crowther, the vicar of Christ Church, Newgate Street, in the City of London, who had been one of the founding members of the Church Missionary Society. Henry Venn, the society's great secretary, later said that it was Mrs. Davey, the later Mrs. Weeks, who chose the name. Before she came to Africa she had taught in Mr. Crowther's Sunday school in London, and she gave the boy the name of her own pastor. The English

clergyman died in 1829. He never met the African boy who carried his name, and could not have known what that boy would do with it.

The name was common among recaptives. Rescued Africans in Sierra Leone were often given the names of missionaries, benefactors, or English clergymen, and many of them, like Crowther, kept their African names alongside. For the rest of his life he signed himself Samuel Crowther, and later Samuel Adjai Crowther, using the old spelling of his Yoruba name. The African name was never lost.

Paul says that if anyone is in Christ, "he is a new creature: the old things are passed away; behold, they are become new." For Ajayi of Osogun that was true in a literal way. He had a new name, a new language, a new faith, and a new country. But it would be a mistake to think that the old things were simply thrown away. The boy who had been a Yoruba did not stop being one. As we shall see, he would spend much of his life studying the language, the proverbs, and the customs of his own people, and insisting that the gospel should come to them in their own tongue. What passed away was the old slavery. What remained, and was made new, was Ajayi.

A Visit to England

In 1826 Mr. Davey returned to England on leave, and took Crowther with him. They landed at Portsmouth in August. For a few months Crowther attended the parish school in Liverpool Road, Islington, in north London. "It was my desire," he wrote later, "to remain for a good while, to be qualified as a Teacher to my fellow-creatures; but Providence ordered it so, that, at my return, I had the wished-for instruction." In another letter he admitted that he had "begged very hard" to stay, and that when he found it was not God's will, "I cast myself upon Him, because He knows best."

He came back to Sierra Leone in 1827 with some English clothes, including a blue suit and a beaver hat, and a mattress that someone in England had given him. Mr. Davey, recommending him as the one lad fit to be sent back to England for training, described him as a boy of "abilities far surpassing any I have met with before," who "appears to be truly pious." His only fear was that Crowther "should be lifted up too much" by his visit to England.

Fourah Bay

That same year the society opened a training institution at Fourah Bay, on the edge of Freetown, to prepare African teachers and ministers. It would become Fourah Bay College, for many years the only institution of higher education in West Africa. The first name on its roll of students was Samuel Crowther.

The principal was a German missionary, the Rev. C. L. F. Haensel, a strict and devout man who made his students clean their own rooms, wash their own clothes, and carry loads of rice on their heads, "just to remind them that they are not above" it. When Crowther arrived with his English mattress, Haensel forbade it. "This was too great a luxury," he reported, "I at once forbade its entrance, to which he readily consented. I wish for the good of his own soul to see him in that state of lowliness of mind which Africans so easily lose by visits to England." Haensel's remark about Africans says more about Haensel than about Crowther. But Crowther took the mattress away without complaint, and years later he spoke of Haensel with admiration as "a peculiar person altogether; we could never find one to match him."

Haensel, for his part, soon recognised what he had. "He is a very clever lad," he wrote, "and it is a real pleasure to instruct him." Later: "He is a lad

of uncommon ability, steady conduct, a thirst for knowledge, and indefatigable industry."

There was one complication. Haensel reported to his committee in March 1827 that Crowther was being admitted only on probation, "owing to the information which is received of an attachment entertained by him towards a girl who is schoolmistress at Bathurst." Crowther said it would not interfere with his studies. Haensel was ready to trust him, but doubted "whether he knows himself sufficiently."

Asano

The girl was named Asano. She was a Yoruba like him, and had also been rescued from a slave ship, captured by HMS *Bann* on 31 October 1822 and landed at Freetown the same year as Crowther. Page says that she had learned her letters at his side at Bathurst. At her baptism she took the name Susan Thompson. By the time Crowther went to Fourah Bay she was herself teaching in the school at Bathurst.

Crowther did not let her go. Two years later, when he was schoolmaster at the village of Regent, earning twenty-four pounds a year, he applied to the missionaries in council for permission to marry her. The council recorded that it had received "a satisfactory account ... of the girl's suitableness for a fellow-worker with him," and gave its consent. They were married on 21 September 1829. The marriage lasted fifty-one years, until her death in 1880. By 1837 they had a son and two daughters; in the end there were six children.

Some popular accounts say that Crowther and Asano met on the slave ship. They did not. They were freed from different ships, six months apart. They met as two recaptive children in a mission school, two survivors of the

same catastrophe, who had lost their homes and families and found each other.

"Pray for Africa"

In January 1829, while he was an assistant to Haensel at Fourah Bay, Crowther wrote a letter to the society in London. It is the earliest of his letters to survive in any length, and it shows a young man already thinking about his calling. He was not satisfied, he wrote, to be an assistant: "I am desiring to be instructed by God's Holy Spirit that I may soon rise up and become a teacher to the others. I have hope that Africa will soon stretch forth her hands unto God." He asked for prayer for a few African teachers who felt very few against so great a task. He reminded his readers that Elijah had stood alone against four hundred and fifty prophets of Baal, and that God had answered him (1 Kings 18:22). And he ended: "Pray for Africa is the prayer of your most humble, thankful, and obliged servant, Samuel Crowther."

Over the next twelve years he taught at Regent and then at Wellington, and from 1834 he was a tutor at Fourah Bay. He studied Greek and theology. He began to collect words and phrases in Yoruba, the language of his childhood, which many of the recaptives in the colony spoke, and which had hardly yet been written down. He preached and taught in the villages. He was a respected member of the small African Christian community of Sierra Leone, a schoolmaster and a family man. It might have been his whole life.

He ended his 1837 letter to Mr. Jowett with a sentence from the Book of Common Prayer, where the service of God is called "perfect freedom." "May I ever have a fresh desire to be engaged in the service of Christ," he wrote, "for it is perfect freedom!" For a man who had been chained by the

neck in a Lagos slave pen fifteen years earlier, the phrase was not a cliché. He had known the other kind of service. He knew what freedom was. And he had found, as Jesus promised, that "If therefore the Son shall make you free, ye shall be free indeed" (John 8:36, ASV).

The Niger, 1841

"But ye shall receive power, when the Holy Spirit is come upon you: and ye shall be my witnesses both in Jerusalem, and in all Judæa and Samaria, and unto the uttermost part of the earth."
— Acts 1:8, ASV

A Great Expedition

In 1841 the British government sent an expedition up the Niger River. It was the idea of Sir Thomas Fowell Buxton, who had led the campaign to abolish slavery in the British colonies. Buxton believed that the slave trade could not be ended by the Navy alone. It had to be undermined at its source, by making treaties with the rulers of the interior, by introducing honest trade to replace the trade in people, and by bringing the gospel. Three iron steamers were built for the purpose, the *Albert*, the *Wilberforce*, and the *Soudan*, under the command of Captain H. D. Trotter of the Royal Navy. They carried treaty commissioners, scientists, a company of settlers to start a model farm, and, at the request of the Church Missionary Society, two missionaries.

One was a German clergyman, the Rev. J. F. Schön, who had worked in Sierra Leone for ten years and was a gifted linguist. The other was "Mr. Samuel Crowther," a catechist and schoolmaster of Fourah Bay. Afterwards the society would invite him to England with a view to his ordination "for

Missionary labours in his own country, should the Bishop of London deem him qualified." He was in his early thirties. He had a wife who was expecting another child, and four children. He had lived in Sierra Leone for nineteen years, which he called "the happiest part of my life, because there I was brought acquainted with the saving knowledge of Jesus Christ."

He went aboard the *Soudan* on 1 July 1841, after taking "affectionate leave of my wife, children, and friends." His prayer as he went was characteristic: "May the Lord, who has been my guide from my youth up until now, keep them and me, and make me neither barren nor unfruitful in His service!"

On Board

His journal of the voyage, published the next year with Schön's, is the first long piece of writing we have from him, and it shows a man at ease in any company. The captain of the *Soudan*, Bird Allen, was a devout man who held services and an officers' Bible class, and invited Crowther to join it. He lent Crowther his cabin to write in. Crowther made a first attempt to teach the Kru sailors their alphabet, led evening prayers when asked, "I hope with all lowliness and self-abasement before God," and worked with the Yoruba interpreter on a vocabulary of his mother tongue.

At Cape Coast, on the Gold Coast, he spent a day at the house of the Wesleyan missionary Thomas Birch Freeman, himself the son of an African father, and visited a government school of 170 boys taught by an African master. He also copied, for a Dr. Marshall, the memorial of the Rev. Philip Quaque, a native of Cape Coast who had been ordained in the Church of England in 1765 and had served his people for fifty years. Crowther copied it without comment, but it was proof that an African could be a clergyman of the Church of England. Crowther would follow him.

He listened to a sermon preached through an interpreter, and came away convinced of something he would say for the rest of his life: "The plan of studying the language of the people, and translating the Scriptures into it, ought to be immediately adopted by every Missionary sent into the heathen world."

Up the River

They crossed the bar at the mouth of the Niger on 13 August. "Hitherto hath the Lord helped us!" Crowther wrote, using Samuel's words when he set up a stone of remembrance after a victory: "Hitherto hath Jehovah helped us" (1 Samuel 7:12, ASV). He would use the phrase again and again.

The steamers pushed slowly up through the mangrove swamps of the Delta and into the broad river beyond. At Aboh, the king, Obi Ossai, signed a treaty against the slave trade and asked for teachers. At Idda, the capital of the Igala people, there were long negotiations with the Attah, the king, who thought it beneath his dignity to step into a canoe. The day before they reached Idda, at the village of Doko Abbokkoh, Crowther had acted as interpreter in Hausa for the first time. At the confluence of the Niger and the Benue, the expedition bought land for its model farm at the foot of a hill, and left a company of settlers there under a superintendent, Mr. Carr, with the schoolmaster Thomas King to teach them.

At Gori, Crowther watched three slaves, two women and a man, freed after a trial before the Attah's son. They were given new clothes, and their old clothes were thrown into the river. At Egga, further up, he went ashore and found himself among Yoruba people for the first time since he had been taken from his home twenty years before. They gave him news of the wars: Old Oyo deserted, the new capital moved south, the new towns of Ibadan and Abeokuta rising. He argued with Yoruba Muslims who said

that God had sanctioned the slave trade, and then let the argument drop; "I waived all disputes whether God sanctioned the slave-trade or not," he wrote, and simply told them that the God who had brought him so far could do greater things. He asked Yoruba traders whether it was better to trade in goods, "or to trade in slaves, when the buyer and seller rejoice, and the purchased, our fellow-creatures, enshackled, sit mournfully."

When he told the people of Egga how the liberated Africans lived in Sierra Leone, many of them said, he wrote, "that they could judge of their happy state merely by my appearance." He was, without meaning to be, the expedition's best argument.

The Fever

Then the fever came. It had already begun at the Confluence. Within weeks almost every European on the expedition was ill. The *Soudan* was sent back down the river as a hospital ship, and Crowther moved to the *Albert*, which pushed on a little further under Trotter before he too fell ill and the ship turned back. The officers were all sick. The mate worked the ship, and Dr. Stanger took a turn in the engine room. Two men, delirious, jumped overboard; one was saved by a Black sailor, and the other drowned. At the Confluence the three Europeans in charge of the model farm were all ill. Crowther sat up with Captain Bird Allen until midnight.

They reached the island of Fernando Po in the Gulf of Guinea on 17 October. On 25 October Bird Allen died. "Captain Trotter, with tears, closed the eyes of his departed friend." Others followed. Of about 150 Europeans on the expedition, Macgregor Laird later wrote, 42 died within about two months. The model farm was abandoned the next year. By any measure, the expedition was a disaster, and the society itself called it an "admitted failure."

But the Africans on the expedition had mostly stayed well. Crowther's biographer says that he escaped the fever altogether, though his own journal records a bout of ague on the way out. Whatever the reason, and no one at the time really understood malaria, the lesson seemed obvious. At Fernando Po, while the survivors recovered, Crowther gathered a class of people who wanted to be baptised. By mid-November it had grown from seven to thirty-six. And he wrote a letter to the society in London.

Her Own Children

The letter, written on 2 November 1841, is the first statement of the idea that would govern his life. "I do not limit the power of the Lord of the Vineyard," he wrote, and he did not want to seem to say that European missionaries were not needed. "Still, I am reluctantly led to adopt the opinion, that Africa can chiefly be benefitted by her own Children."

He did not write it proudly. In the same letter he said: "I always feel that myself and my Brethren of the Natives are not sufficiently qualified for so great a work." He added that "human learning will be of very little avail, if the heart is not inspired by the Holy Spirit from above." He was not claiming that Africans were better missionaries than Europeans. He was saying that Africans could live where Europeans died, could speak the languages that Europeans had to learn, and could go where Europeans could not. The question was whether they would be trained, trusted, and sent.

Schön, writing his own report, drew the same conclusion and put a name to it. Might not Samuel Crowther, he asked, "a Native of the same country, and held in high estimation by his brethren, be sent thither, after he shall have received Ordination?" By "thither" Schön meant the Yoruba country, by way of Badagry.

The verse at the head of this chapter records the last words of Jesus before his ascension. The apostles were to be his witnesses in Jerusalem, and Judea, and Samaria, and to the uttermost part of the earth. The order is worth noticing. The witness was to begin at home and spread outward, carried by people in their own land before it was carried to others. The disaster of 1841 persuaded the Church Missionary Society, in a way that no argument had, that the uttermost parts of Africa would be reached chiefly by Africans. Samuel Crowther would be the first of them.

"Who Maketh Thee to Differ?"

"For who maketh thee to differ? and what hast thou that thou didst not receive? but if thou didst receive it, why dost thou glory as if thou hadst not received it?"
— 1 Corinthians 4:7, ASV

Islington

Crowther arrived in England in September 1842, bringing with him a manuscript grammar and vocabulary of the Yoruba language. The society sent him to its training college at Islington, in north London, to prepare for ordination. He was there for about nine months. James Scholefield, a Cambridge professor who examined him on Paley's *Evidences*, praised his work. When his Yoruba vocabulary was published in 1843, it was, as Andrew Walls says, the first such work by a native speaker of the language.

On Trinity Sunday, 11 June 1843, Charles Blomfield, Bishop of London, ordained him deacon. As Page tells it, Henry Venn, the society's secretary, had taken him to the bishop to be examined, and how the bishop had questioned him "pretty smartly." When he had left the room, Blomfield said to Venn: "He'll do, he'll do, only polish him up a bit." At breakfast after the ordination, the bishop told another of the new deacons that Crowther was "no mean scholar; his examination papers were capital,

and his Latin remarkably good." In October the same bishop ordained him priest.

Eugene Stock, the society's historian, records a story that on the day of the ordination the English candidates "waited for the Negro to go first." Stock tells it as a mark of respect. Stock called him "the first African clergyman of our day," adding in a footnote that he had not forgotten Philip Quaque. He was not, as popular accounts sometimes claim, the first African Anglican priest. That honour belongs to Philip Quaque, whose memorial he had copied at Cape Coast.

Home Again

He sailed back to Sierra Leone and landed at Freetown on Saturday, 2 December 1843. The next morning he preached his first sermon in Africa as a clergyman, in English, to a crowded church. His text was from the parable of the great supper, where the servant reports to his master: "Lord, what thou didst command is done, and yet there is room" (Luke 14:22, ASV).

He wrote afterwards:

> *The novelty of seeing a native clergyman performing Divine Service excited a very great interest among all who were present. But the question, "Who maketh thee to differ?" filled me with shame and confusion of face.*

The question is Paul's, from the verse at the head of this chapter. Paul was writing to Christians in Corinth who had begun to boast about their teachers and their gifts. "Who maketh thee to differ? and what hast thou that thou didst not receive? but if thou didst receive it, why dost thou glory as if thou hadst not received it?" Crowther, standing in the pulpit as the

first African clergyman many of his hearers had ever seen, felt the force of it. He had been a slave boy in a Lagos pen twenty-one years before. Everything that now set him apart, his education, his ordination, his place in the pulpit, he had received. There was nothing to boast of.

That sense of having received everything never left him. It was the root of his humility, and it made him patient with others. A man who knows that his own gifts were given is less likely to despise people who have not been given the same.

In His Own Tongue

A few weeks later he did something that had probably never been done before. Many of the people of Freetown were Yoruba recaptives like himself, and he announced that he would hold a service in the Yoruba language. He visited homes to invite people, especially those who never came to church. He called on the headman of the Yoruba Muslims who lived near Fourah Bay, and told him about it. He described the conversation: "I did not raise any objections to their faith nor attack it, but endeavoured to show them the great blessings Christianity bestowed on mankind wherever it was embraced." To his surprise, the Muslims were proud that one of their own countrymen had become a clergyman of the Church of England.

On 9 January 1844, at half past four in the afternoon, he opened the first Yoruba service in the mission church in Freetown. A large crowd came, Yoruba, Igbo, and people from Calabar and elsewhere, drawn by the novelty of hearing the gospel preached in an African language in an English church. He wrote:

> *Although the language is my native tongue, with which I am well acquainted, yet on this occasion it appeared as if I were a babe just*

learning to utter my mother tongue. The work in which I was engaged, the place where I stood, and the congregation before me were altogether so new and strange that the whole proceeding seemed to myself like a dream. But the Lord supported me.

He read the prayers that had not yet been translated in English, and a portion of Luke's Gospel in Yoruba, which he had translated himself on the voyage home. Three young Muslims, sent by their headman, were in the congregation. He preached on the angel's words to Mary: "The Holy Spirit shall come upon thee, and the power of the Most High shall overshadow thee: wherefore also the holy thing which is begotten shall be called the Son of God" (Luke 1:35, ASV). It was the lesson he had just read, and with Muslims present it was a pointed one, since it concerns the very point on which Christians and Muslims most disagree. Afterwards the young Muslims followed him home, said they were glad of what they had heard, and wished God would help him in his work.

The Shango Drummer

Not every encounter went so well. In February 1844 he visited a house in Freetown where worshippers of Shango, the Yoruba god of thunder, were holding a ceremony. The head drummer said something obscene in his hearing, and when Crowther rebuked him he rose in anger and turned on him. The Christians of the colony, he said, were the worst adulterers in the place. He himself had once gone to church and found no good in it.

Crowther recorded what happened next with an honesty that few missionaries of his time would have allowed themselves:

To my great mortification, shame, and regret I was silenced — the charge was too true.

The Christians of Freetown were not all saints, and the drummer knew it. Crowther did not pretend otherwise. When he tried to speak to the owner of the house, the worshippers pulled the man away, and drummed and chanted to drown his voice. They asked him whether his own forefathers had not worshipped the orisha for thirty generations, whether he had not been born and kept alive by their gods, and told him that if his forefathers had gone to hell, he must go too.

"The only weapons I used on this occasion," he wrote, "were patience and an even temper, which the Lord has pleased to grant me." When he left, two of the worshippers ran after him into the street to say how surprised they were that he had kept his temper while he was insulted. "I told them it was the religion of Christ only which could make the temper of man sweet and amiable."

Three things in this story would mark his whole ministry. The first is that he spoke to people in their own language and about their own religion, from inside their world. The second is that he did not answer anger with anger. And the third is that he admitted the truth of a charge against Christians when it was true. The drummer's rebuke stayed with him. A church whose members did not live as Christians would not persuade anyone, however well it was preached.

"Pray Upon Her Lap"

He loved the Church of England, and he loved its Book of Common Prayer. Later he wrote: "I have considered the Church as my mother, which has taught me to pray, as it were, upon her lap by the Prayer Book." It was the Prayer Book that had given him the phrase "perfect freedom." It was the Prayer Book he would translate into Yoruba, and whose services he would carry up the Niger.

It may seem strange that a man with such a deep sense of his own African identity should love so English a book. But Crowther did not see a contradiction. The Prayer Book, for him, was not English. It was the prayer of the Church, drawn from Scripture and from centuries of Christian worship, and it could be prayed in any language. His life's work would be to make it pray in his own.

The Helper of the Fatherless

"Thou hast seen it; for thou beholdest mischief and spite, to requite it with thy hand: The helpless committeth himself unto thee; Thou hast been the helper of the fatherless."
— Psalm 10:14, ASV

Going Home

In the late 1830s something unexpected began to happen in Sierra Leone. Some of the recaptives, having saved a little money by trade, bought ships and sailed back down the coast to the places from which they had been taken. Many of them were Egba Yoruba, and they found that their scattered people had built a new city, Abeokuta, among great granite rocks in the forest north of Lagos. Some of the returnees were Christians. They sent word back to Sierra Leone asking for missionaries to come and teach their people.

The Wesleyan missionary T. B. Freeman reached Abeokuta in 1842, and Henry Townsend of the Church Missionary Society visited soon afterwards. The society decided to open a mission to the Yoruba. It was the obvious work for its new African clergyman. On 18 December 1844 Crowther sailed from Freetown with Townsend and his wife, a German clergyman named C. A. Gollmer and his wife, and several African

assistants, among them Mark Willoughby, who had been freed from the same slave ship on the same day as Crowther twenty-two years before.

They landed at Badagry, on the coast west of Lagos, on 17 January 1845. There they were held up for eighteen months. The chief of Abeokuta who had invited them, Shodeke, died just before they landed, and his successors hesitated. Mrs. Gollmer died. A Brazilian slave-trader named Domingo, who had no wish to see missionaries in the interior, did his best to block the road. The missionaries used the time to build, to preach, and to study. Crowther translated parts of the Prayer Book into Yoruba. At last the chiefs of Abeokuta sent word that they would receive them, and in the last days of July 1846 Crowther and Townsend set out along the forest road. They entered Abeokuta on 3 August 1846.

Twenty-Five Years

Crowther had been in the city less than three weeks when he received news he could hardly believe. His mother was alive. She was living with his sisters in a nearby town. He sent for them. His sisters, Page says, would not believe the message, but his mother came, with one of his half-brothers.

On 21 August 1846 he wrote in his journal:

> *The text for to-day in the Christian Almanac is "Thou art the Helper of the fatherless." I have never felt the force of this text more than I did this day, as I have to relate that my mother, from whom I was torn away about five-and-twenty years ago, came with my brother in quest of me. When she saw me she trembled. She could not believe her own eyes. We grasped one another, looking at one another in silence and great astonishment, while the big tears rolled down her emaciated cheeks.*

She held his hand and called him by the pet names his grandmother had used for him as a child. "We could not say much," he wrote, "but sat still, casting many an affectionate look towards each other, a look which violence and oppression had long checked." The two sisters who had been captured with him were living with her, with their children. "I cannot describe my feelings. I had given up all hope, and now, after a separation of twenty-five years, without any plan or device of mine, we were brought together again."

There is a small puzzle in the sources. Jesse Page printed this journal entry twice, in 1888 and in 1908, and in one version Crowther speaks of "an affection which twenty-five years had not extinguished," while in the other it had "nearly been extinguished." We cannot now tell which is right. Both are true enough. Twenty-five years of separation, in which each believed the other lost for ever, would test any love. It had not died.

Her Story

His mother had her own story to tell, and it was a hard one. The two main sources tell it slightly differently. According to Eugene Stock, she had never been sold to the coast, but had remained a slave in the interior until her daughters were able to redeem her. According to Page's 1908 account, she and her daughters had first regained their freedom through a half-brother. Years later, going to market, she and her eldest daughter had been kidnapped again. The daughter was ransomed by her husband, but the old woman was dragged from market to market, and sold as a domestic slave. She was sent by her mistress towards Abeokuta, captured again on the road, and sold again into hard bondage, until her daughter managed to scrape together enough cowrie shells to buy her back for four pounds ten shillings.

Whichever version is right in its details, the outline is the same. The woman who had been led away with a rope round her neck from the

burning town of Osogun had spent a large part of the next twenty-five years as a slave. She was now old and thin. Her husband was dead, and so was the grandmother whose pet names for the boy she still remembered. And she had found her son again, not as the boy who had been taken, but as a clergyman in the dress of a white man, who had come back to her people with a message about a God she did not know.

The verse at the head of this chapter comes from a psalm that cries out against the violent and the oppressor, the men who lie in wait to catch the poor and drag them off in their net. "Thou hast seen it," the psalmist says to God; "for thou beholdest mischief and spite, to requite it with thy hand: The helpless committeth himself unto thee; Thou hast been the helper of the fatherless." Crowther read it on the morning of the day his mother came back to him, and it described his life exactly. He had been fatherless and helpless, and God had helped him. God had seen the raiders, the traders, and the slave-dealers, and had not forgotten.

Hannah

His mother came to live with him. At first she still worshipped the old gods. She believed that the spirit of her dead husband had brought her son back to her. Crowther was grieved to see her, as Page puts it, still without knowledge of the true God. She attended the services at the mission. Then she fell ill, and afterwards she told her son: "Had I been left alone I should have attributed my sickness to this or that deity, and should have made sacrifices accordingly; but now I have seen the folly of so doing, all my hopes are in the Lord Jesus Christ, whom now I serve."

In February 1848 she was baptised, among the first converts of the Abeokuta mission. Page says it was on the 5th, and that her son baptised her himself; Stock says the 6th, and names only Henry Townsend as her

teacher. What is agreed is the name she took. She was baptised Hannah, the name of the mother of the prophet Samuel.

The choice was deliberate. In the Bible, Hannah was a woman who had prayed for a son, and when her prayer was answered she gave him to the service of God. "For this child I prayed; and Jehovah hath given me my petition which I asked of him: therefore also I have granted him to Jehovah; as long as he liveth he is granted to Jehovah" (1 Samuel 1:27-28, ASV). Hannah Crowther had not given her son to God. He had been taken from her by force. But now she was given back to him, and she gave him, as it were, a second time. When he warned her that his work would keep him travelling, and that he could not stay at home with her as other members of the family might, she told him: "You are no longer my son, but the servant of God, whose work you must attend unto without any anxiety for me." He recalled the words after her death, nearly forty years later.

She lived for another thirty-seven years, her last ones in Lagos, where she kept her Yoruba dress and sat in the market "like a true Yoruba woman," as Page puts it. She died in October 1883, aged about ninety-seven, "as was supposed." No one knew her real age either.

Abeokuta

The mission at Abeokuta grew. By August 1849 Crowther could report five hundred regular worshippers, eighty communicants, and two hundred people preparing for baptism. Other missionaries joined them, among them a German, David Hinderer, who came in 1849 and was later joined by his English wife Anna; they would work in Ibadan. In May 1849 a letter from Queen Victoria to the chief of Abeokuta was read in the town, sent with two Bibles and, from Prince Albert, a corn mill. Crowther's daughter Julianna, then a girl, dictated a letter from Abeokuta, written out in her

father's hand, that survives. The family was together, in the Yoruba country, among his own people.

It was not a peaceful place. The Egba of Abeokuta had powerful enemies, among them the kingdom of Dahomey to the west, whose army raided for slaves to sell at the coast. In March 1851 the Dahomean army attacked Abeokuta. The Egba drove them off. Crowther knew as well as anyone what would have happened to the city's people if they had not.

He had read the psalmist's words on the morning his mother came back, and they had proved true. God had been the helper of the fatherless. He had seen the mischief and spite. He had given a Yoruba slave boy back to his mother, and a Yoruba mother back to her son, and both of them to himself.

In Our Own Language

"And how hear we, every man in our own language wherein we were born?"
— Acts 2:8, ASV

Writing Down a Language

When Samuel Crowther was born, Yoruba had hardly ever been written, except here and there by Muslim scholars in Arabic script. It was a rich language, full of proverbs, poetry, praise-songs, and the verses of the Ifa diviners, but all of it lived in memory and speech. By the time he died, there was a Yoruba Bible, a Yoruba Prayer Book, grammars, dictionaries, schoolbooks, and newspapers, and the language had a standard written form that is still, with changes, the basis of the one used today. Crowther was not the only person responsible for that change, but he was, as Andrew Walls puts it, the principal influence in it.

He had begun collecting Yoruba words in Sierra Leone in the 1830s. On the 1841 voyage he filled in the Yoruba column of the government's vocabulary. In 1843, while he was studying for ordination, the society published his *Vocabulary of the Yoruba Language*, with a short grammar. It was the first such work by a native speaker. An enlarged grammar and vocabulary followed in 1852. He translated parts of the Bible and the Prayer

Book, beginning with Luke's Gospel and the Acts of the Apostles on his voyage home in 1843, and he never stopped.

Writing down a language is harder than it sounds. Yoruba is a tonal language, in which the same syllable spoken on a high, middle, or low pitch may have entirely different meanings. It has sounds that the English alphabet has no letters for. Missionaries in different places had been spelling it in different ways. In the 1850s the society brought together Crowther, Henry Townsend, and several European scholars to settle a common system, with marks under certain letters and tone marks over vowels. The system owed much to Henry Venn and to the German scholar Richard Lepsius, and to careful proof-reading by others. The resulting orthography was not perfect, and it has been revised since, but it made possible a Yoruba literature.

The translation of the whole Bible was a team effort, over forty years. Townsend, Hinderer, Gollmer, the Yoruba clergyman Thomas King, and others all took part. Crowther's part was the largest, and his instinct for the living language shaped the whole. The complete Yoruba Bible was published in 1884, a few years before his death. Popular accounts sometimes say that he translated it alone. He would have been the first to correct them.

Listening to the Elders

He was a native speaker, working in his mother tongue, and that was his great advantage over every European translator. He noticed that some Yoruba customs resembled those of the Old Testament, and wondered at it. And he insisted, all his life, that missionaries must do the same. "The plan of studying the language of the people, and translating the Scriptures into

it," he had written in 1841, "ought to be immediately adopted by every Missionary."

The historian Lamin Sanneh, from the Gambia, argued that this commitment to translation was one of the most important things that ever happened to African Christianity. When the Bible is translated into a people's language, he pointed out, that language is declared worthy to carry the word of God. The people who speak it are no longer required to become someone else in order to become Christians. Crowther did not use those words, but he acted on the idea. For him the gospel was not an English possession that Africans had to learn English to receive. It could speak Yoruba.

The verse at the head of this chapter describes the day of Pentecost. The disciples, filled with the Spirit, began to speak, and a crowd of Jews from all over the world, from Parthia and Mesopotamia, from Egypt and Libya and Rome, heard them in their own languages. "And how hear we," they asked in amazement, "every man in our own language wherein we were born?" The first sign of the Spirit's coming was that the gospel was heard in many languages at once. From that day, Christianity has been a translated faith, never bound to the language of its founders. Crowther's work stood in that tradition.

England, 1851

In 1851 Crowther returned to England. Henry Venn, the society's secretary, wanted him to help persuade the British government to act against the slave trade at Lagos, where a ruler named Kosoko was protecting the slave-dealers. Crowther met the Foreign Secretary, Lord Palmerston, at his house in August. The society remembered, and Stock repeated, that Palmerston asked him in astonishment whether he meant to say that he had

himself been a slave. Palmerston afterwards wrote him a letter promising the government's concern for Abeokuta.

In November he went to Windsor Castle. He had an appointment to see Prince Albert, who was interested in Africa and in the campaign against slavery, and he went with Lord Wriothesley Russell, a clergyman and friend of the society. He left an account of the day, and it is one of the pleasantest things he ever wrote.

He talked with Prince Albert about Abeokuta and Lagos, and showed him a small map that his eldest son, Samuel, had drawn. While they were talking, a lady came quietly into the room and joined them. She was dressed simply, and Crowther did not at first realise who she was. It was Queen Victoria. "She did not come in state," he wrote, "but simply like any other lady." When the lamp by which they were looking at the maps went out, the Queen herself lit candles. Lord Wriothesley Russell asked Crowther to say something in Yoruba. He repeated a Yoruba proverb, and then, so that the Queen could hear the language better, the Lord's Prayer. The Queen said it was "soft and melodious." She stayed nearly half an hour. Crowther was with the Prince for an hour and a quarter.

This story has often been embellished, with the Queen summoning the former slave to her throne and demanding to hear the prayer. The truth, as he told it, is gentler and more human: a lady "simply dressed," a lamp that went out, and a Yoruba clergyman saying "Our Father" in his own language to the Queen of England by candlelight.

Lagos

There is another side to the story. Prince Albert, looking at the map, remarked that Lagos "ought to be knocked down." A month later, in December 1851, the Royal Navy attacked Lagos, drove out Kosoko, and

put his rival Akitoye on the throne, on condition that he end the slave trade. Crowther's visit was one of many voices urging action, and it would be wrong to say that it caused the attack. But he was part of the campaign that brought it about, and he welcomed the result. Ten years later, in 1861, Britain annexed Lagos as a colony. It was the beginning of British rule in what would become Nigeria.

Crowther, like most African Christians of his generation, saw British power as a protection against the slave trade that had destroyed his childhood. He was not wrong about the slave trade. He could not foresee what British rule would become. This book will return to that tension more than once.

"A Real Man of Africa"

Before he left England, Crowther spoke to students at Cambridge. He reminded them of Paul's vision of a man of Macedonia standing and begging him, "Come over into Macedonia, and help us" (Acts 16:9, ASV). Then he said: "It is no vision that you see now; it is a real man of Africa that stands before you." He met again the naval captain who had freed him, Henry Leeke, now Sir Henry, and embraced him, and preached in his parish church in Kent. At a farewell meeting in Islington in December, the society sent him back to Africa with its blessing.

He had been a slave boy who could not speak English. He had now spoken, in his own language, before the Queen. But what mattered to him was not that he had been heard at Windsor. It was that the people of the Yoruba country, and of the Niger beyond it, should hear the gospel in the language wherein they were born.

The Pleiad

"Jehovah will keep thee from all evil; He will keep thy soul. Jehovah will keep thy going out and thy coming in From this time forth and for evermore."
— Psalm 121:7-8, ASV

The Pleiad

For thirteen years after the disaster of 1841, no great expedition went up the Niger. Then, in 1853, a Liverpool shipbuilder and merchant named Macgregor Laird, who had himself been up the river in the 1830s and believed passionately in its future, made a contract with the government. He would build a small steamer, the *Pleiad*, to explore the great eastern branch of the Niger, the Benue, which the explorers called the Tshadda, and to look for news of the German explorer Heinrich Barth, who was somewhere in the interior. Laird offered Crowther a free passage.

Crowther joined the expedition at Fernando Po in June 1854. Before he joined it, at Lagos, he learned that the British consul, John Beecroft, who was to have led it, had died. He wrote simply that he "resigned everything to God's good and unerring providence." He visited Beecroft's grave and preached in his house on Paul's words about the earthly tent that is dissolved and the building from God that is eternal. Command of the

expedition passed to the ship's doctor, a young Scot named William Balfour Baikie.

They crossed the bar into the Niger on 12 July. From the beginning, Crowther noticed signs of change since 1841. There were English shirts on the riverbanks, bought with palm oil, not with people. He suggested to Baikie and the ship's officers that the green firewood they were burning, stacked in the bunkers, might be breeding the "miasma" that caused fever, and they agreed to tow it in canoes instead. It was the wrong theory; malaria is carried by mosquitoes, which no one then knew. Historians have usually credited the expedition's health instead to Baikie's regular doses of quinine. Crowther's journal does not mention quinine. But whatever the reason, something was different this time.

Aboh and Idda

At Aboh, the old king Obi Ossai, who had signed the treaty in 1841 and asked for teachers, was dead, and his sons were quarrelling over the succession. Crowther talked with the eldest, Tshukuma, about the gospel. It was the middle of the day, and the sun was blazing. Would anyone, he asked, light lamps in broad daylight like this to help the sun to shine? The sacrifices the people offered to their gods were like lamps lit at noon. The sacrifice of Jesus Christ, once offered, alone could take away the sin of the world. Before he left, he arranged for Simon Jonas, an Igbo interpreter from Sierra Leone who had been on the 1841 expedition, to stay at Aboh and teach.

At Idda he had to go through a long and tedious ordeal before he was allowed to see the Attah, the same king Captain Trotter had treated with in 1841, who agreed again that his people might "learn the white man's book." Crowther used homely stories in his talks with rulers, about a boil

that needs a salve, or a friend carrying a heavy load. He learned to wait. "The native chiefs always take more time to think and arrange their plans and settle their affairs than we are aware of," he wrote on one occasion; and on another, "A prudent man will not consider an hour or two wasted, ... rather than risk the painful result of misunderstandings which may never be remedied."

At the Confluence, where the model farm had been, the site was overgrown. Old people on the hill asked him whether they had come back to rebuild it. He preached on board that Sunday on Paul's words to Timothy, "God gave us not a spirit of fearfulness," and admitted in his journal that he preached "in much weakness."

Up the Benue

Then the *Pleiad* turned east, up the Benue, far beyond the point where the one earlier expedition had turned back. Crowther found towns destroyed by Fulani raiders and heard stories of treachery and slaughter. He saw Tiv people at their markets, armed and suspicious, and went ashore among them. "What is generally related of the natives of Africa as to their hostility to Europeans is not strictly correct," he wrote. "If feelings of confidence and friendship are left to arise gradually ... we shall soon come to a mutual understanding." At one town a chief offered to sell a boy to the interpreter. At another, a Muslim scholar named Imoru asked him to pray for his wives, who had no children. Crowther read him the psalm that says children are a heritage from the Lord, and showed him his bare arms and neck to prove that Christians wore no charms: "we resign all our affairs to the hand of God."

On 22 September he walked twelve miles through mud to Hamaruwa, the town of a Fulani ruler named Mohamma. It was a long way from the

Yoruba country, among a Muslim people who had been raiding their neighbours for slaves. Crowther asked the ruler's permission to teach the non-Muslim people of his territory, and Mohamma smiled and gave it. Crowther took out a pencil and wrote in front of him, and the king was astonished. Four days later, out of fuel, the *Pleiad* turned back.

Brethren

On the way down, at Agberi below Aboh, he sat with a headman named Agbekun and pointed to himself, to Simon Jonas, and to Dr. Baikie. "Look at me, a Yoruba by birth; Simon Jonas, an Ibo; and Dr. Baikie, an Englishman; though of different nations, we live together as brethren." It was a picture of what he believed the gospel could do among the nations of the Niger, who had been at war with one another for generations.

At Aboh, one of the quarrelling princes, Aje, freed two prisoners at his request. Agbekun, just back from consulting the famous oracle at Aro, had asked how to pray to the Great God, and Crowther told him "to do so, just as a little child would ask his father." Earlier, on the way up the Benue, when the Krumen were set to cut wood on a Sunday, he had written in his journal: "It is a reproach to us, who profess to observe the Lord's-day, and teach others to sanctify it, thus to violate it ourselves."

On the 101st day in the river, he wrote: "It is a hundred and one days to-day since we entered the river, and no death has taken place." He did not take the credit. "Not unto us, but unto God, we give praise." He was echoing the psalm: "Not unto us, O Jehovah, not unto us, But unto thy name give glory, For thy lovingkindness, and for thy truth's sake" (Psalm 115:1, ASV). That Sunday he preached on the stone that Samuel set up, called Ebenezer, "Hitherto hath Jehovah helped us."

They reached the sea on 4 November 1854, "just sixteen weeks, this very day," Crowther noted, after they had entered the river. Crowther wrote to Henry Venn that they had returned "without any death, either among the Europeans, twelve in number, or among the fifty-four Africans." In 1841, forty-two Europeans had died. In 1854, none.

The Lesson

Baikie wrote to Crowther afterwards: "It is nothing more than a simple fact, that no slight portion of the success we met with in our intercourse with the tribes is due to you." Crowther wrote to Venn with his own conclusions. He had marked Onitsha and Asaba as the two most promising places for a mission to the Igbo. Aboh, he wrote, "can only be occupied by native teachers. I cannot recommend it for the residence of European Missionaries." And he wrote: "I believe the time is fully come when Christianity must be introduced on the banks of the Niger." He knew the men he would have to send were not perfect. "As pioneers," he told Venn, "we must not look for instruments of the keenest edge."

The psalm at the head of this chapter is one of the Songs of Ascents, sung by pilgrims going up to Jerusalem. "Jehovah will keep thy going out and thy coming in." It is a traveller's psalm, a prayer for the road. Crowther spent most of his life on the road, and on the river, and he trusted that promise. It did not mean that he would never suffer; he would be wrecked, kidnapped, and bereaved. It meant that his going out and his coming in were in God's hands. In 1854, on the *Pleiad*, he had seen it proved in the plainest way. Every man who went up the river came back.

Wrecked at Jebba

"we are pressed on every side, yet not straitened; perplexed, yet not unto despair; pursued, yet not forsaken; smitten down, yet not destroyed"
— 2 Corinthians 4:8-9, ASV

The Dayspring

In 1857 Macgregor Laird signed a new contract with the government, for five years of regular voyages up the Niger. The first ship sent out under it was the *Dayspring*, commanded by Dr. Baikie, with a naval officer, Lieutenant John Glover, to survey the river. The Church Missionary Society decided that the time had come to plant a permanent mission on the Niger, and that it would be staffed entirely by Africans. Crowther was to lead it.

With him went the Rev. John Christopher Taylor, a young clergyman born in Sierra Leone to Igbo parents who had been sold as slaves, and Simon Jonas, the Igbo interpreter who had stayed at Aboh in 1854. And Crowther did something unusual. He hired, on purpose, a Yoruba Muslim named Kasumo as his teacher of Arabic, so that he could read and discuss the Qur'an with the Muslim rulers of the upper river. It was a mark of the way he meant to work.

They sailed from Fernando Po on 29 June 1857. At Fernando Po the first Igbo primer had just arrived from England, and Crowther started a class to teach it. At Umuoru, on 19 July, he gave the Lord's Supper on board to twelve Africans and three Europeans. Everywhere in the Delta he noted the villages where African teachers might be placed.

Onitsha

On 26 July they reached Onitsha, the town on the east bank of the Niger that Crowther had marked in 1854 as the best place for an Igbo mission. At first the people armed themselves in fear. Then the king, Obi Akazua, received them, and agreed that a teacher should live among his people.

While they were there, the family of a local notable was preparing a funeral, and a slave woman was to be killed to accompany the dead. Crowther and Simon Jonas protested. The family agreed to sacrifice a bullock instead. The people then offered to sell the woman to the missionaries. "We refused to do," Crowther wrote, "as we were not slave-traders." She was sold to someone else, but she was "loosed from her bonds" and lived. The king promised to abolish human sacrifices. It would take much longer than that.

On 31 July Crowther left Taylor and Jonas at Onitsha with a letter of instructions. "Cultivate friendship with all the people as much as possible, so as to gain their goodwill and confidence. ... You will have to teach more by conversation when you visit the people ... than by direct service." He told Taylor to learn the language and translate as much as he could. And he added a sentence that shows his realism: "Be not disappointed if you find the people do not act up to their engagement: it is rather a matter of surprise that they do so much. They must be taught the lesson of justice and truth, and that by our own example." He called the founding of

Onitsha "the first important move of the Church Missionary Society in planting a Mission from a native ministry, and an entire native offshoot from the colony of Sierra Leone."

Gbebe and Bida

Further up, at Gbebe near the Confluence, he chose a site for a second station. He was clear about where it should be: "the Mission station must be in the midst of the people, because we can never expect them to go the distance of a mile to receive religious instruction before they know its real benefits." When he tried to buy land, a local leader told him it could not be sold, "because the land is God's," and the matter dragged on. On 16 August, in the ante-room of a local chief, he gave what he called the first public Christian instruction at Gbebe, reading the third chapter of John in Hausa and giving the chief an Arabic Bible. Three days later a school opened with five boys.

In September he rode with Baikie and Glover to the war camp of the Nupe kingdom, whose rulers, a Fulani dynasty, controlled much of the middle Niger. The king, Sumo Zaki, received them, and so did his half-brother Dasaba, who, Crowther wrote, "rolled on his mat for joy." In the camp market Crowther counted forty slaves for sale. He passed the body of a slave who had died in the night, neglected, by the road.

The Wreck

On 7 October 1857, near the town of Jebba, far up the Niger, the *Dayspring* struck rocks in a narrow channel and heeled over. Local canoes came out to help, and everyone was brought ashore. "We were thankful that, in the midst of the hurry and bustle ... no life was lost." But the ship

could not be saved. Word was sent overland to the coast asking for another steamer. It would be a year before one came.

Fifty people camped on the riverbank at Jebba: twelve Europeans and thirty-eight Africans. Crowther held morning and evening prayers in his tent of mats, and opened it to the sick. He kept night watches with the others, and when a leopard raided the camp in January he admitted cheerfully, "I am no gunner." On 25 October, soon after the wreck, he had preached on Paul's words, "For to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain" (Philippians 1:21, ASV). Before the wreck, on board off the ruins of Rabba, he had preached on another verse from Paul: "ye received not the spirit of bondage again unto fear; but ye received the spirit of adoption, whereby we cry, Abba, Father" (Romans 8:15, ASV). A former slave was telling his hearers that they were not slaves to fear.

The people of Jebba believed that the god of the great rock by the river hated red cloth and had wrecked the ship. Crowther answered that the god's law bound its own worshippers, not strangers. He told them about the great God "who made of one blood all nations," and took the hands of Lieutenant Glover and his Nupe interpreter, "three different nations," to show what he meant.

A Year by the River

He did not waste the year. He began to reduce the Nupe language to writing, working with a Muslim teacher from Jebba named Ibrahima and a young man named Henry George, who had once been a Sunday-school pupil at Abeokuta and had become a soldier in the Nupe army. "They felt very much interested," Crowther wrote, "in seeing their language being reduced to writing." He studied the religion of the Nupe, their farming,

their trade, their ferries, and the work of their women in the markets, and wrote it all down.

When a Fulani chief let one of his followers rob a Nupe woman in front of him, Crowther "seriously told him that God would plead the cause of the oppressed," and took the woman to safety in the mission's boat. When the Nupe official in charge of the district asked him for charms, he "showed him my hands and neck, that I had never used charms, and told him I never should, because there is no help to be had from them." In the spring of 1858 the official gave him land on the cliff above the ruins of Rabba, and Crowther built five round huts there for six pounds. "Though I was the only Christian in the village, with my servant, yet I was greatly respected." In July a hostile letter came from the king, ordering him to leave because he was not of the same faith; it turned out to be the work of a mischief-making interpreter, and the king later cleared him. "Thus the Lord has silenced the mouths of my enemies for a time."

One night in January, sitting up with Kasumo and another Muslim companion, he talked until late about whether Christ had really died on the cross, as Christians believe and the Qur'an denies. "If Christ himself had not died," he told them, "then we are found false witnesses, because then he had never shed His blood, which is the price of our redemption."

How to Deal With Muslims

At the end of his journal of these years he wrote a short essay, "How to deal with Mohammedans," which sums up his method. He had spent some months as the only Christian, apart from his servant, in his village at Rabba, and he had no illusions about how quickly Muslims would change. Already at the Bida camp in 1857 he had written: "A Mohammedan can never be brought round by his religion being quarrelled with, and abusively charged

with falsehood and imposition; but by kind treatment he may be led to read and study the Christian's Bible." He warned against "undue rashness in quarrelling with, and our untimely exposure of, Mohammedanism," which could do no good. And he ended with a sentence of great patience: "God, who has permitted the religion of Mohammed to remain so long ... can easily remove it when He pleases, without violence or rash proceedings on our part."

He believed that Islam was wrong about Christ, and he said so, gently and clearly, when he was asked. But he believed that the way to reach Muslims was friendship, the Arabic Bible, and time. It was a view that many missionaries of his age did not share.

Onitsha Without Him

Meanwhile, at Onitsha, Taylor and Jonas were at work. Taylor held his first service "in my fatherland" to hundreds of people in the king's yard. After hearing a sermon on the third chapter of John, the king said that Jesus, the Son of God, "surpasses him in speaking." Taylor persuaded one man to free a girl held as a debt-slave. He reconciled four chiefs who had not spoken to each other for seven years. He built the first mission house in the town. In February 1858 he watched helplessly as the annual human sacrifice was carried out, two sick people drowned "one for the land, and one for the river," and the king fined the mission for interfering. The first man to ask for baptism was admitted as a candidate on condition that he keep to one wife.

In October 1858 a relief steamer at last reached the camp at Jebba and took the party down the river. Crowther found Taylor at Onitsha and was welcomed as "my friend Mr. Crowther." The people who had first called Taylor "a spirit without toes" wept when he left. A month later Simon

Jonas died at Fernando Po. His last words were: "this is the third time I have gone up the Niger ... and the last was the best I have spent in my fatherland."

Crowther went back up the river by canoe, and then overland through the Yoruba country, past Ilorin, where he argued with the Muslim scholars from the Qur'an as well as the Bible, and they wondered at his learning. On the way he fell ill with dysentery and was nursed back to health at Ijaye, and he reached Abeokuta in March 1859. He had been away nearly two years.

Paul, describing his own missionary life, wrote: "we are pressed on every side, yet not straitened; perplexed, yet not unto despair; pursued, yet not forsaken; smitten down, yet not destroyed." It is as good a summary of the years 1857 to 1859 as any. The ship was lost. The plans were ruined. And by the end of it, there was a mission at Onitsha, another at Gbebe, the beginnings of a Nupe grammar, and a small company of African Christians who had shown that they could plant the church on the Niger without anyone else's help.

Africa's Own Children

"The little one shall become a thousand, and the small one a strong nation; I, Jehovah, will hasten it in its time."
— Isaiah 60:22, ASV

Henry Venn

Behind almost every step of Crowther's career stood one man. Henry Venn was the honorary secretary of the Church Missionary Society from 1841 until shortly before his death in 1873. He was a clergyman from a famous evangelical family, a tireless organiser, and a thinker about missions whose ideas were far ahead of his time.

Venn believed that the goal of a mission was to make itself unnecessary. Missionaries from abroad should plant churches, train local leaders, and then step aside. The new churches should become, in the phrase later associated with his name, self-supporting, self-governing, and self-extending. They should pay their own clergy, run their own affairs, and send out their own missionaries. When that had happened, the foreign mission could be withdrawn, like scaffolding from a finished building. Venn called this, with a phrase that has become famous, the "euthanasia" of a mission: its good and peaceful death, because its work was done.

In the middle of the nineteenth century, when most Europeans assumed that Africans and Asians would need European guidance for

generations, this was a radical idea. Venn meant it seriously. And Samuel Crowther was, for him, its living proof. Here was an African who had been a slave, who had become a scholar, a translator, a clergyman, and a leader. If the Niger Mission could be run by Africans under an African, then the principle was established.

The Native Agents

Crowther had been saying the same thing since 1841, and he said it again, more sharply, in 1857. The Church had been slow to trust its African members. "Had not our candles been long kept under a bushel," he wrote, "and the smoking flax long suppressed, surely the number of faithful native preachers would have been twice as many." The images are from the Gospels. Jesus said that no one lights a lamp to put it under a bushel (Matthew 5:15), and Isaiah's servant of the Lord would not quench "a dimly burning wick" (Isaiah 42:3, ASV). Crowther was saying, as politely as he could, that the Church had hidden its African lamps and quenched its African wicks.

The men he sent up the Niger were almost all, like himself, recaptives or the children of recaptives from Sierra Leone. They were Africans, but they were not natives of the Niger. Most of them had to learn the languages of the peoples they served, and some were as foreign in Onitsha as an Englishman would have been. The historian Andrew Walls points out that the Niger Mission was therefore "a compromise, rather than the full expression" of Venn's principles. It was African, but it was not yet a church of the people of the soil. Crowther knew this. His aim was to train men from the Niger peoples themselves, and in time he would.

Nor were the agents perfect. Crowther had told Venn in 1854 that pioneers could not expect "instruments of the keenest edge." Some of the

men he sent were poorly educated. Some were more interested in trade than in teaching. A few would prove unworthy. But many were faithful, and they went, with their families, to places where no European could live, and stayed.

A Closed River

After the wreck at Jebba, the river was hard to reach. In 1859 a trading steamer, the *Rainbow*, was fired on from the banks in the Delta, and two men were killed. The trading houses of the coast, the African middlemen who had controlled the trade of the lower river for generations, did not want Laird's steamers cutting them out, and they were willing to fight. Laird himself died in January 1861. In retaliation for the attack, a British warship shelled and burned the villages that had fired on the steamer. It was an early example of a pattern that would become familiar: trade followed by gunboats.

In the same year Britain annexed Lagos as a colony. The mission, like everything else on the coast, was becoming entangled with British power, whether it wished to be or not.

In 1862 a naval vessel, HMS *Investigator*, took Crowther up the river again, with a party of about thirty African teachers, wives, and children. They reached Onitsha on 5 September. The mission there had held on through the years when no ship could come. They reached Onitsha on 5 September, but the ship steamed on within hours and Crowther was not allowed to land. The mission there had held on alone.

The First Fruits

Nine days later, on 14 September 1862, at Gbebe near the Confluence, he baptised eight adults and one infant. They were the first people baptised anywhere on the Niger. Crowther called them "the first-fruits of the Niger Mission."

It is hard now to feel how much that meant. The first European expedition up the Niger with missionaries had been in 1841. For twenty-one years men had died, ships had been wrecked and fired on, stations had been opened and left, and at the end of it nine people of the Niger had been baptised. By the standards of the societies in London it was a small result for a great cost. By the standards of the kingdom of God it was a beginning. The verse at the head of this chapter is God's promise to Israel in exile: "The little one shall become a thousand, and the small one a strong nation; I, Jehovah, will hasten it in its time." Crowther believed it. It would take longer than he lived to see it fulfilled, but it would be fulfilled beyond anything he imagined.

The Gbebe station did not last. When its protector, the local king Ama Abokko, died, the town was attacked and the station destroyed, and the Christians moved across the river to Lokoja, where the British had a small post. It was to become one of the centres of the mission.

"By Her Own Sons and Daughters"

J. C. Taylor, the young clergyman at Onitsha, had put the principle in a single sentence. After preaching at Nsube in 1857, Taylor wrote in his journal of Africa's need to hear the gospel. And how was it to hear? "It cannot be otherwise but by her own sons and daughters." Before he sailed, an old communicant in Sierra Leone had asked him in wonder, "our

children too can go out like white men and preach the gospel?" The answer was yes.

In the Yoruba country, the king of Ketu, whom Crowther visited in 1853, had put it another way. "Hitherto I have had no helper," he said; "now I have found one, I will hold it fast." He meant the mission. But the helper he had found was an African, speaking his own language, who had once been carried through that country in chains.

By 1864 the Niger Mission had stations at Onitsha, Lokoja, and Akassa at the mouth of the river, with more planned. It was run, entirely, by Africans. Its leader was a priest who had been in orders for twenty-one years and was now in his late fifties. Henry Venn had a plan for him, and Crowther did not like it at all.

"I Am Not Worthy"

"He raiseth up the poor out of the dust, He lifteth up the needy from the dunghill, To make them sit with princes, And inherit the throne of glory: For the pillars of the earth are Jehovah's, And he hath set the world upon them."
— 1 Samuel 2:8, ASV

Venn's Plan

By 1864 the Niger Mission had African clergy and catechists at several stations, and more were needed. But the only bishop who could ordain them, confirm converts, and consecrate churches was the Bishop of Sierra Leone, far away on the coast, who could rarely come. The Niger lay outside any British territory, so no colonial bishop had authority there. And it was plain after 1841 that a European bishop would be unlikely to survive the climate for long.

Henry Venn saw the answer. The mission should have a bishop of its own, and he should be an African. The society's magazine set out the case in May 1864. The African church in Sierra Leone was already largely self-supporting. The Niger converts needed a chief pastor who could live among them. And "to delay any longer the native episcopate would be unduly to retard the development of the native Church." The obvious man was Samuel Crowther.

Not everyone agreed. Some of the European missionaries in West Africa had grave doubts about an African bishop, and said so. Whether their objections were practical or something more, they would echo later. Venn pressed on. The government, through the Foreign Secretary, and the Archbishop of Canterbury were consulted, and a royal licence was prepared.

"I Am Not Worthy"

The one person who most strongly opposed the plan was Crowther himself. Many years later his son Dandeson told Jesse Page the story, which Crowther could never tell without emotion. He came to the society's committee in London in a heavy old pilot's coat with brass buttons, and some of the members laughed at his appearance. When Venn told him what they proposed, he refused. "I am not worthy," he said. "No, sir, I am their servant in the field; I cannot accept it."

Venn prayed with him and sent him away for two days to stay with his old friend J. F. Schön, to think it over. When he came back, he refused again. Then, the family remembered, Venn made one last appeal. "Samuel Adjai, my son, will you deny me my last wish asked of you before I die?" Crowther answered in the words of old Eli when Samuel brought him hard news: "It is the Lord; let Him do what seemeth Him good." The two men knelt together, Venn weeping.

We should hold this story a little lightly. It comes from the family, decades later, and it has the shape of a story that has been told many times. But it fits everything else we know of Crowther. He had a genuine horror of self-importance. Afterwards he asked, through his son, to be addressed as "Right Reverend Bishop, and never as My Lord." And before he left England he told the committee that he knew his new position made him "a

kind of landmark," and that "any false step taken by me will be injurious to all the Native Churches."

Oxford

Before the consecration Venn wanted him to have a doctorate, as English bishops usually did. The Archbishop wrote to the Vice-Chancellor of Oxford. Crowther's Yoruba grammar, his dictionary, and his translations of the Scriptures were submitted as evidence of his learning. One leading member of the university opposed the degree. The rest voted for it almost unanimously, and the Regius Professor of Divinity composed the Latin speech presenting him. Samuel Crowther, who, the family remembered, had been taught his letters by a missionary's wife in exchange for keeping her pantry clean, became a Doctor of Divinity of the University of Oxford.

Canterbury, 1864

He was consecrated in Canterbury Cathedral on St. Peter's Day, 29 June 1864, by Archbishop Charles Longley. Two English clergymen were consecrated with him, as Bishops of Peterborough and Tasmania. Special trains ran from London. The sermon was preached by H. L. Mansel of Oxford, on the words of Peter to the elders of the church: "Tend the flock of God which is among you, exercising the oversight, not of constraint, but willingly ... neither as lording it over the charge allotted to you, but making yourselves ensamples to the flock" (1 Peter 5:2-3, ASV). Two colonial bishops were meant to present Crowther to the Archbishop, but the Bishop of Winchester, it was said, stepped in to take the place of one of them, so that the African should receive, as Page put it, "a double honour."

Two people had a special claim to be there. According to Page, one was Admiral Sir Henry Leeke, who forty-two years earlier, as captain of HMS *Myrmidon*, had taken the boy Ajayi from the slave ship off Lagos. The other, whose presence Henry Venn himself recorded, was an elderly lady. Page tells a story that she arrived to find her seat reserved for someone else, and refused to move. "I think I have a right equally to this seat," she said, "because that black minister to be consecrated Bishop this morning was taught the alphabet by me." She was Mrs. Weeks, widow of the Bishop of Sierra Leone, who, as Mrs. Davey, had taught him in her house at Bathurst. The Dean, Page says, let her stay. When Crowther returned to London afterwards, his first two calls were on Mrs. Weeks and on Admiral Leeke.

The Book of Samuel preserves the song of Hannah, the mother of the prophet Samuel, after she had given her son to God. It is the verse at the head of this chapter. "He raiseth up the poor out of the dust, He lifteth up the needy from the dunghill, To make them sit with princes." Hannah Crowther was still alive. Her son, the slave she had lost in 1821, now sat among the bishops of the Church of England.

What the Newspapers Said

The event was widely reported. The evangelical newspaper *The Record* called the consecration a "practical refutation ... to the taunts of certain professors who maintain that the cerebral development of the negro shows that he is disqualified for intellectual pursuits." It is a revealing sentence. In 1864 there were respected scientists in Britain who argued that Africans were a lesser branch of humanity, incapable of higher learning. The consecration of an African bishop was, for some, a public rebuttal of that belief. But the sentence also shows how deeply the idea had taken hold.

Even Crowther's supporters felt it necessary to argue that an African could think.

There were limits, too, to what the Church was prepared to do. The royal licence made Crowther bishop "in the said countries of Western Africa beyond the limits of our dominions." His diocese lay entirely outside British territory. He was not given authority over the European missionaries in the British colonies of Sierra Leone or Lagos. Andrew Walls notes that this limit was deliberate. An African bishop over African clergy in an African land was acceptable. An African bishop over Englishmen in a British colony was not yet contemplated. The question would return.

"Can This Be Real?"

He sailed from England on 24 July and reached Freetown on 10 August 1864, where crowds turned out to welcome him. In his reply to the addresses of welcome, he used his favourite phrase: "Here we pause and raise our Ebenezer to God's praise. Hitherto the Lord has helped us." He told them that the weapon which prevailed most in the ministry was "the habit of prayer for help from above," and that "we are better fitted when we feel our incompetency to change a sinner's heart." He reminded the students of Fourah Bay that in 1841 his friends had called him "a fool for joining the expedition without any guarantee of good pay like the Europeans." And when a friend asked whether he meant to rest, he said: "I shall only rest when I have no more work to do."

At Lagos on 22 August he held his first ordination. Then he went up the Niger. At Onitsha he held another ordination. That an African bishop should be ordaining African clergy on the banks of the Niger seemed to him almost beyond belief. "Can this be real?" he wrote.

At the same time, in the same town, a prince had died, and there were human sacrifices at his funeral, among them a girl of eight who was buried alive. The bishop's consecration had changed his title. It had not changed the Niger.

A Bishop in a Canoe

"But I hold not my life of any account as dear unto myself, so that I may accomplish my course, and the ministry which I received from the Lord Jesus, to testify the gospel of the grace of God."
— Acts 20:24, ASV

A Diocese Without Roads

The new bishop's diocese had no boundaries anyone could draw and no roads to travel. It stretched along more than three hundred miles of the Niger and into the Delta, among a dozen peoples speaking a dozen languages, and the only way to reach most of it was by water. For many years Crowther had no boat of his own able to make the journey. He went up the river once a year, when a trading steamer or a naval gunboat happened to be going, and came down when it did.

He knew the danger in this. To the people of the Niger, a man who arrived every year on a trading ship or a warship must be connected with the traders or the government. In February 1868 he wrote to Henry Venn about it. As long as he had to travel in such ships, "it will take a very long time to dissuade the natives from the old belief that I am interested in those ships." He had tried travelling independently in his own small boat, and had been attacked for his pains. "Of two evils I must choose the least for safety's sake, and must either move in a trading steamer or in a gunboat

whenever an opportunity presents itself, whether I be called the proprietor, though I do not own a pennyworth of her, or be called a warrior from being associated with the ship, although I may not fire a blank shot."

It is a frank letter. Crowther saw clearly that the gospel he preached was being associated with trade and with British power, and he did not like it. He also saw no alternative. It was a dilemma that the missions in Africa never fully escaped.

Bonny

His first new work as bishop was in the Niger Delta, at Bonny, one of the great trading towns of the coast, where European ships loaded palm oil brought down from the interior by African middlemen. In the days of the slave trade Bonny had been one of the busiest slave ports in Africa. Its king, William Pepple, had lived in England for five years in exile, and on his return had written to the Bishop of London asking for a mission. Crowther arrived in 1864 and made an agreement with the king and chiefs.

The land they offered for the mission was a patch of "bad bush" where the bodies of sacrificed people and abandoned twins had been thrown, and where no one would live. Crowther accepted it with a joke that became famous: "Give us the ground, and leave us and juju to settle the remaining palaver." The king's son asked for Scripture and prayer before they began to clear it. They found an old copper bell in the town, cast in England in 1824, and one of the chiefs paid to hang it on the mission's chapel.

The people of Bonny held the monitor lizard, the iguana, sacred. It was the town's great juju. The lizards wandered the streets and houses, and no one could harm them. On Easter Day 1867 the king and chiefs publicly renounced its worship. Crowther reported that fifty-seven carcasses of the lizards were counted in one market afterwards, and compared the event to

Moses grinding the golden calf to powder and making the Israelites drink it (Exodus 32:20). It was a dramatic public change. It did not mean that the people of Bonny had become Christians.

Some did, and in the persecution that came to Bonny in the 1870s they paid for it. Page calls a young man named Joshua Hart, martyred in November 1875, "the protomartyr of Bonny." His master, a chief, tried to make him eat food offered to the idols. Hart replied: "If he even requires me to carry the world itself on my head, I will try. ... But if he requires me to partake of things sacrificed to the gods, I will never do it." He was thrown into the river, beaten with a paddle, and run through with a pointed pole. Other converts were persecuted, and one was starved to death over six days. At a prayer meeting in 1878 the Bonny Christians prayed for their persecutors: "We beseech Thee not to rain down fire and brimstone ... but we pray Thee to rain down Thy love on them, as in the case of Saul."

Seized

In September 1867, going up the Niger in his own boat with his son Dandeson and an English bricklayer named Moore, Crowther stopped at a village near Idda to visit a chief named Abokko, whom he had known for years. Abokko had quarrelled with his own king, and he believed, like many on the river, that Crowther owned the trading ships and the trading posts. He seized the bishop's boat, plundered his luggage, and held him and his party prisoner. He demanded three boatloads of goods as ransom. (Ten years later, in a lecture, Crowther himself dated these events to 1868, but his diary and the letters written at the time place them in 1867.)

Crowther kept a diary of his captivity, and it is one of the most revealing documents of his life. He could not make Abokko understand the difference between a mission and a trading company. "A pure missionary

object," he wrote, "unconnected with any selfish object, is beyond the comprehension of such avaricious men as Abokko." The first night they slept on a mat on the damp ground with nothing to eat. One of Abokko's slaves, pitying them, offered Crowther his own cloth as a blanket. A boatman gave him his robe as a pillow, and Crowther gave it to Dandeson, and slept himself on a small ridge of earth with his cap under his head. "I need not say sleeplessly," he wrote, "for my thoughts were full of these unexpected trials. ... But the God of mercies will interpose."

For days the chief gave them almost nothing. The slaves of the household fed them secretly from their own scanty food. "I often told Dandeson," Crowther wrote, "that these slave boys and tender-feeling females were our ravens which brought us daily food as it was needed." He was thinking of Elijah in the wilderness, when "the ravens brought him bread and flesh in the morning, and bread and flesh in the evening" (1 Kings 17:6, ASV). He added that if God gave him the chance, "these small acts of kindness of these poor oppressed slaves shall not pass unrewarded." The man who had once been a slave was being kept alive by slaves.

On the Sunday he had no Bible. "No Bible, no scraps of any book whatever in hand to read, I felt what it was to be deprived of the means of grace." He and his son repeated from memory passages of Scripture that fitted their situation. At noon he went to Abokko and told him that it was the day when the people of God throughout the world met to read and pray, and he had no book. The chief, startled, said he never hindered the worship of God, and had his box brought out. Crowther took out his Bible and Prayer Book. A Muslim visitor begged him for some paper, and Crowther, "stripped of everything as I was," tore a leaf from his notebook and gave it to him. Two days later Abokko sent him some fish that had been offered to his idol. Crowther sent it back, saying that he never ate anything offered to an idol. That day was Dandeson's birthday.

The ransom demanded rose to a thousand bags of cowries, worth a thousand pounds, and Abokko talked of another thousand for Dandeson. It was proposed that Dandeson should be allowed to leave with a messenger. He refused to leave his father.

Fell

On 28 September a steamer arrived unexpectedly, carrying W. Fell, the British vice-consul at Lokoja, with some of Crowther's sons and men sent by the Nupe king. Fell tried to negotiate, and then decided that paying such a ransom would only encourage more kidnappings. He urged Crowther and his party to run for the ship's boat. As they pushed off, Abokko's men opened fire with muskets and poisoned arrows. Fell was hit in the side by a barbed arrow. He died as the ship came near Lokoja.

Crowther wrote: "It would have been more satisfactory to me, had such been the will of God, had I been shot and my dead body taken to Lokoja instead of his."

It was not a pious phrase. He meant it. He had not planned an escape by force; others arranged it, and he "yielded." He had been ready to wait, and to trust God for his release. Another man had died for him. Paul told the elders of Ephesus, in the verse at the head of this chapter: "I hold not my life of any account as dear unto myself, so that I may accomplish my course." Crowther held his own life cheaply. He found it much harder to accept that someone else had given his.

A Year of Troubles

The kidnapping was one of a series of blows. Not long before, the station at Gbebe had been destroyed in a local war, and a grass fire had burned the

mission buildings at Onitsha. At Idda it turned out that the king had been bought off by Abokko and had been promised a share of the ransom, and the station there was abandoned. And in October 1867, at Abeokuta, where Crowther had begun his work twenty years earlier, the Egba, angry at British policy in Lagos, turned on the missionaries and expelled them from the city. Churches were sacked. The converts were scattered.

"Though the last year was closed with a chapter of most painful events in connection with our mission," Crowther wrote to Venn, "yet I look above to the Hand which has ever overruled similar affairs which had happened in times past to His honour and the advancement of His own cause. May He give us more faith to trust Him." Of the scattered Christians of Abeokuta he said: "they are all scattered; but though it is night with us now daylight shall come."

Sympathy with All Classes

"but sanctify in your hearts Christ as Lord: being ready always to give answer to every man that asketh you a reason concerning the hope that is in you, yet with meekness and fear"
— 1 Peter 3:15, ASV

A Bishop's Charge

In the Church of England a bishop gives his clergy, from time to time, a formal address called a charge, setting out his teaching on the work of the ministry. Crowther's first charge was printed in London in 1866. Its title page calls it "A Charge delivered on the banks of the River Niger in West Africa, by Samuel Adjai Crowther, D.D. Oxon. (Native Missionary Bishop)." It begins "My dear beloved Brethren," and calls the occasion "the first gathering together of the Bishop and Clergy in this Mission." There were only a handful of them, and every one was an African.

It is a remarkable document. In a few dozen pages, Crowther set out what he had learned in twenty-five years of mission work about how the gospel should be preached to the peoples of West Africa. Later charges, in 1869, 1874, and 1885, filled out the picture. Together they are the nearest thing we have to his theology of mission, and much of what they say still repays reading.

The Gospel First

He began with the history of the mission and its modest results: after nine years on the Niger, a hundred and forty-six baptisms, eighty-nine communicants, and a hundred and forty-nine children in school. He quoted Thomas Fowell Buxton's watchword, "the Gospel and the Plough," and called it "worthy to be written in letters of gold." He believed in teaching crafts, farming, and trade alongside the gospel. But he was firm about the order: "the Gospel primarily; Industry, as the hand-maid to the Gospel."

He had been told by some Europeans that he should stop teaching Africans to read and write and teach them carpentry and cooking instead, and that once their material lives were improved they would be ready for Christianity. One adviser had told him that unless he did so, he would never give a farthing to the mission. Crowther answered with a sharp irony. Look at England, he said, the first nation in the world in wealth, science, and invention. Had all these advantages made the men who gave such advice more willing to receive the gospel? "I fear there are no such effects. Neither themselves, nor many who maintain such an opinion, are found near the doors of the places where the Gospel is preached: it is to them foolishness." Material progress did not make people Christians. Only "the faithful preaching of the Gospel, which is the power of God unto salvation to every one that believeth," could change hearts, "both at home and abroad."

Preaching Like Christ

How should the gospel be preached? His model was Christ himself: the Sermon on the Mount, the parables, the discourses. "Sublime and lofty as the sentiments therein expressed are; yet they are so simple, that every

heathen can understand them; and so appropriate, that every one can see himself represented in them." He told his clergy: "Imitate Christ, then, to reach the understanding, and not to move the feelings only; speak to the people as they are able to bear it."

Then came the heart of his method:

> *Again, in preaching, divest yourself of a disposition to dispute with Mahometans, or to censure heathens; rather be possessed with the feelings of sympathy with all classes of hearers.*

And of the worshippers of the old gods, among whom most of his clergy worked: "them you must not censure as ignorant, stupid, and foolish idolators; your dealing with them must be that of sympathy and love, as you would deal with the blind who errs out of the way."

He went further. The missionary should "take advantage of any principles which they themselves admit." The sacrifices that the people offered to their gods, which many missionaries simply condemned, were for Crowther "a foundation for our preaching." People who already understood that sin required a sacrifice could be shown the sacrifice of Christ. Paul had done the same at Athens, when he began from an altar "To an Unknown God."

The verse at the head of this chapter is Peter's advice to Christians living among people who did not share their faith: "being ready always to give answer to every man that asketh you a reason concerning the hope that is in you, yet with meekness and fear." Paul put it another way: "Let your speech be always with grace, seasoned with salt, that ye may know how ye ought to answer each one" (Colossians 4:6, ASV). That was Crowther's method exactly. He was ready to give an answer, and he gave it with meekness.

The Muslims

He applied the same principle to Islam, which was spreading southward from the Fulani states of the north into the lands of the Niger. He did not believe that Islam was true. He believed that Muhammad was not a prophet and that the Qur'an was wrong about Christ. But he believed that argument and abuse would never win a Muslim. The missionary should preach Christ fully and plainly to Muslims and leave the result to God. "We must leave the results to the Disposer of all hearts."

He was scathing about Christians who tried to compete with Muslim scholars on their own ground. Many Africans wore charms made by Muslim teachers, scraps of paper with verses of the Qur'an written on them, sewn into leather pouches. People asked him for scraps of the Bible to wear in the same way, and some Europeans told him it would do no harm to give them. He refused. At a great missionary meeting in Exeter Hall, London, in 1873, Crowther said: "I would rather let the Mohammedans take possession of the field ... than that we should use cunningly devised frauds to deceive souls." When an old chief at Bida asked him for paper charms to protect his horse, Crowther told him he had ridden the same horse for twelve years without a single charm, only washing, grooming, and feeding it well.

Polygamy

On one subject Crowther was unbending. Most of the men of the Niger who were wealthy enough had several wives. Some Europeans, among them the explorer Richard Burton, defended the custom as suited to Africa, and some churchmen had argued that a man with several wives should be baptised, so long as he took no more. Crowther rejected this. He argued at

length, from Genesis and from the teaching of Christ and Paul, that marriage was the union of one man and one woman.

His main argument, though, was not only from Scripture. It was about women. The system, he said, "has enslaved the female population of the countries where it prevails." Of the women of the harems he wrote: "They are reasonable beings, in whom God has planted certain rights and feelings." He would not baptise a man with several wives, but he would baptise the wives of such a man, since they had not chosen the arrangement.

This is one of the hardest questions in the history of African Christianity, and Christians have answered it differently. Some African churches later came to accept polygamous converts. It is fair to note that Crowther's position meant, in practice, that some men who wanted to be baptised were refused. He held his position out of conviction, not convenience, and he held it for African women's sake as much as for any other reason.

No Compulsion

He was insistent that no one should be forced. "They are never compelled to do anything," he said of the people among whom his clergy worked; "we leave the matter to their own deliberate consideration; they are never urged to cast away their idolatrous objects of worship." Converts must come of their own will, or not at all.

And he was humble about the hardest question a missionary is asked: what becomes of those who die without ever hearing the gospel? He refused to pronounce. "With all submission, I will remark that it is not the will of God to reveal unto us what shall become of such persons." He pointed his clergy instead to Abraham's question: "shall not the Judge of all

the earth do right?" (Genesis 18:25, ASV). Their task was not to judge the dead but to go to the living.

Africa and Its Customs

In later charges he spoke about African culture. "Christianity does not undertake to destroy national assimilation," he said in one; "where there are any degrading superstitious defects, it corrects them." The gospel did not require Africans to become Europeans. It required them to become Christians, and a great deal of their own way of life could remain.

He also warned against the opposite mistake. By 1869 the cry "Africa for the Africans" was being raised in Sierra Leone and Lagos, and some were saying that the missions should be handed over entirely to Africans, with no more European help. Crowther called the slogan "Africa for the Africans alone" "great ignorance, not to say unpardonable selfishness." He believed that Africa still needed European men and money, and that the young African churches were not yet strong enough to stand alone. "We are but a Church in embryo," he told his clergy at Onitsha in 1874; "we must derive nourishment from the mother." It is a striking position, given what would happen later. He did not want Europeans out. He wanted them as partners.

A Man of His Time

It would be wrong to present Crowther's charges as modern documents. He shared many of the assumptions of his time. He could quote the missionary hymn that speaks of "the heathen in their blindness" who "bow down to wood and stone." He spoke of "the foolish heathen." He told his clergy to speak to the people "as to children." He wrote harshly about the

greed of some chiefs and the dishonesty of some traders. In his journals he could write about Islam with a sharpness and contempt that his public counsel of gentleness did not show.

But when all that has been said, the charges remain the work of a man who knew his people from the inside, who respected them, and who had thought more carefully than almost any missionary of his day about how the gospel should come to them. His central word was sympathy. It was a word he had earned. He had been a heathen boy, a slave, and a stranger, and someone had shown him sympathy. He asked his clergy to show the same.

Cotton Gins and Gin

"And he will judge between the nations, and will decide concerning many peoples; and they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning-hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more."
— Isaiah 2:4, ASV

The Gospel and the Plough

Crowther believed that honest trade could help to end the slave trade. It was not an original idea. Thomas Fowell Buxton had argued it in the 1830s, and David Livingstone would make it famous with his call, at Cambridge in 1857, for "commerce and Christianity." The reasoning was simple. The African rulers who sold captives to the coast did so because captives were the one thing European buyers would pay for. If they could sell palm oil, cotton, ivory, and shea butter instead, and get the same guns, cloth, and salt in return, they would have less reason to raid their neighbours for slaves. And a people who could grow and sell their own produce would be less easily exploited.

Crowther took this seriously and practically. In 1851, at Abeokuta, he began a small experiment with cotton. The mission bought a saw gin, a machine for separating cotton fibre from its seeds, and a deaf and dumb boy named Thomas Craig turned out to love working the gin, which

everyone else avoided as too laborious to turn all day. He worked most of the five hundred pounds that were the first clean cotton produced at Abeokuta. From that small beginning, Crowther wrote nine years later, the chiefs and people of Abeokuta had begun "consigning their cotton to merchants in England of their own choice, being taught ... to develop the resources of their own country."

On the Niger he did the same. At the mission station at Gbebe there were cotton gins and a press for making bales. When a messenger came from the Nupe king, who suspected the mission of hostile intentions, Crowther showed him the schoolroom, the gins, and the bales, and sent him back with a message:

> *that we are Anasara; there, pointing to the schoolroom, we teach the Christian religion; pointing to the cotton gin, I said this is our gun; and to the clean cotton puffing out of it, that is our powder; and I said the cowries which are the proceeds of the operation are the shots which England, the warmest friend of Africa, earnestly desires she should receive largely.*

"This is our gun." It is a vivid picture of the prophet's vision at the head of this chapter, in which the nations "beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning-hooks." Crowther had seen what guns had done to the Yoruba country. He wanted the peoples of the Niger to fight with cotton gins instead.

The Royal Geographical Society

By the 1870s he knew the Niger better than any other living person, African or European. On 11 June 1877 he read a paper on the river to the Royal Geographical Society in London. He described its geography, its

peoples, its trade routes, and its politics, and gave a survey of thirteen languages met along the Niger and the Benue. Hausa, he said, was "to Africa, what the French is to Europe," a common tongue of trade that could carry the gospel far. He described the Fulani wars and the Nupe kingdom, and told the society that he had given a Hausa trader a letter for an old white man he had heard of far to the south-east, hoping it might reach David Livingstone. The trader brought it back undelivered; the white man, he had heard, was dead. "Whoever it might be," Crowther said, "the trial to communicate was worth making."

He argued that legitimate commerce would in time be "a silent but a sure death blow" to the domestic slavery of the interior, and gave as evidence that more than a thousand slaves had bought their freedom with money earned in the Lagos trade. The society later gave him a gold watch.

He also did not hesitate to criticise European traders. The closing of the river's outlets by the Delta chiefs, he said, was partly the fault of "civilized interested influence also." Some of the Europeans on the coast were no better than the people they called savages. Years before, in his journals, he had written of an English captain who ill-treated his Kru sailors: "what recommendation can it be to the character of civilized Englishmen, who come to civilize ... Africa? ... 'Physician, heal thyself.'"

The *Henry Venn*

For years he had asked for a mission steamer, so that he would not have to travel in trading ships and gunboats. In March 1878 one was sent out, named after the man who had made him a bishop. The *Henry Venn* was built on the Clyde and launched as a "temperance ship," carrying no alcohol. It was managed by a lay agent of the society named J. H. Ashcroft,

who also took charge of the mission's business affairs. That arrangement, as we shall see, would bring trouble.

Gin

The greatest evil of the trade on the Niger, in Crowther's view, was not slaves but spirits. European traders, with spirits shipped mostly from Hamburg, poured cheap gin and rum into the Delta and up the river. It was the easiest thing to sell and the most profitable. Crowther had seen what drink did in the villages. In 1886 a town on the Niger complained that he had not brought a case of gin to open a meeting, as the traders did. "I told them plainly," he wrote, "that it is against God's religion to give them poison to drink, therefore they must never expect any from me." The prophet had pronounced a woe on the man who did exactly what the traders were doing: "Woe unto him that giveth his neighbor drink, to thee that addest thy venom, and makest him drunken also" (Habakkuk 2:15, ASV).

He was not alone among African rulers in his view. The Muslim Emir of Nupe, Maliki, sent Crowther a letter, through one of Crowther's African clergy, which was translated from the Hausa and preserved:

> *Salute Crowther, the great Christian minister. ... it is about Barasa (rum or gin), Barasa, Barasa, Barasa — my God, it has ruined my country, it has ruined our people very much, it has made our people become mad!*

The Emir had forbidden its sale in his kingdom. He begged Crowther to ask the society to ask the Queen to stop the traders bringing it. "For God and the prophet's sake," he wrote, "he (Crowther) must help us in this matter." In December 1884 the society sent a deputation to the Foreign

Office to plead against the liquor trade on the Niger. Little came of it. The liquor traffic was too profitable, and it paid too much of the cost of governing the coast.

It is a striking scene: a Muslim emir and an Anglican bishop, united against the gin of Christian Europe.

The Company

Crowther's hopes for commerce were not entirely fulfilled. The trade that came up the Niger in the 1870s and 1880s was dominated by British firms, and after being merged into a single company they were chartered in 1886 as the Royal Niger Company, with power from the British government to govern the river. The company's interest was profit, not the welfare of the peoples of the Niger. It fought wars, imposed monopolies, and in time handed over its territory to the colony of Nigeria. The trade that Crowther had hoped would free Africa from the slave trade became, in part, the road by which Africa was brought under colonial rule.

He did not live to see all of that, and it is not fair to blame him for it. His vision was of African farmers and traders freely selling their own produce, "consigning their cotton to merchants ... of their own choice." What came instead was a trading monopoly under a foreign flag. The prophet's vision of swords beaten into ploughshares was not fulfilled on the Niger in his lifetime. But the vision was right, and so was his refusal to bring gin.

The Delta Churches

"Surely the wrath of man shall praise thee: The residue of wrath shalt thou gird upon thee."
— Psalm 76:10, ASV

Dandeson

The work in the Niger Delta became, in the 1870s and 1880s, the most fruitful part of Crowther's diocese, and much of it was done by his youngest son. Dandeson Coates Crowther was named after a lay secretary of the missionary society in London. He had shared his father's captivity at Abokko's village and refused to leave him. On 19 June 1870, in St. Mary's Church, Islington, in London, the parish where his father had gone to school as a young man, Samuel Crowther ordained his son deacon. The text was Paul's word to Timothy: "Suffer hardship with me, as a good soldier of Christ Jesus." Page called it "the first time that a black Bishop had ordained his black son." In 1878, by Stock's account (1876 in some modern accounts), Dandeson became Archdeacon of the Lower Niger, which meant chiefly the Delta, with his base at Bonny.

The Delta was a hard field. Its trading towns, Bonny, Brass, New Calabar, and Okrika, were rich and proud, ruled by great trading Houses whose heads were among the most powerful men on the coast. Their wealth had once come from the slave trade and now came from palm oil.

They were suspicious of anything that might upset the order on which their power rested, and Christianity, with its refusal of the town's jujus and its insistence that slaves and masters were equal before God, threatened that order at its root.

Persecution at Bonny

In Bonny the chiefs turned against the Christians in the 1870s. Converts were beaten, starved, and killed. When the persecution was at its height, Crowther went to Bonny himself. He sat for hours under a tree waiting for the chiefs to meet him, and when they did, he spoke plainly. "I struck at the root at once," he wrote. Some of the English traders, among them a captain named Boler, took the side of the mission. Slowly the persecution eased.

The converts' faith was simple and strong. One of them said: "Jesus has taken charge of my heart, and padlocked it. The key is with Him." A persecuting chief named Hart, on his deathbed, warned his people against the idols. St. Stephen's Church at Bonny, first opened on New Year's Day 1872, was reopened in 1880, and a chief named Squiss gave it a clock.

The Bonny chiefs also passed a law that twins, who had been killed there as elsewhere in the Delta, should be handed over to the mission instead. When one set of twins was born, a crowd came to seize them, and Dandeson stood at the door facing them while the pastors escaped through a window with the babies. The surviving twin was baptised Theodora Kezia Powell. Later the juju priest who had led the crowd was himself baptised.

Brass and Akassa

At Brass, further west, a chief named Thomas Spiff held firm through years of persecution. One of the persecutors, a chief named Oruwari, was

eventually converted, and explained his change of heart with rueful honesty: "Those whom we persecuted ... are growing fat, ... we ... are growing lean." At Akassa, at the mouth of the Nun, the chiefs declared: "God be true, Juju be lie."

The greatest event at Brass was the conversion of its king. Ockiya had renounced his household gods at the end of 1876 and handed three of them over to the mission. For three more years he prepared for baptism. He was required to keep only one wife, and he did. On Advent Sunday 1879 he was baptised, taking the name Josiah Constantine. He died two weeks later, calling on Christ. In 1883 Dandeson went to England to buy two iron churches for Brass, and when they arrived, two of the Christian chiefs, William Kennmer and Christopher Iwowari, fixed the first plates.

At Okrika, the Christian wife of a chief named Atorodibo refused to be chalked by the juju priest. That night enemies from Okoni ambushed the market women and killed nearly all of them. She was taken captive, and when she told her captor of the God of heaven he secretly paddled her home. In June 1881 Crowther confirmed converts at Nembe. In a village called Ayambo, the missionaries reported, there were no idols left at all, and they called it "the land of Israel."

Onitsha

On the upper river, the work was harder. Onitsha, the first station, went through many troubles. In 1875 Crowther found some of the men at the trading posts, some European and many of them educated Africans, arguing from the Old Testament that polygamy was allowed, and some of the women converts hiring out their slaves as prostitutes. He preached against the traders from the pulpit. He also sent home some of the teachers

from Sierra Leone whose "former habits" had made them unfit for the work. The mission was not a church of saints, and he knew it.

At one point the chiefs of Onitsha demanded that he order the Christian converts to go back to their old religion. He stood before them with a Bible in his hand and said: "to command these converts to return to idolatry is out of my power. I cannot do it, and I dare not do it." It was the answer Peter and John had given the rulers of Jerusalem: "Whether it is right in the sight of God to hearken unto you rather than unto God, judge ye" (Acts 4:19, ASV).

In October 1879, after attacks on British traders, a Royal Navy gunboat, HMS *Pioneer*, shelled and burned Onitsha. The mission moved for a time across the river to Asaba. It was another of the episodes that tied the mission, in the minds of the Niger peoples, to British power, and it was not one that Crowther could prevent.

He went on working at translation. He had begun learning Igbo in the 1850s. In 1875 he chose the Isuama dialect as the standard for Igbo translation, because it seemed to be understood most widely. The choice was debated, and later translators chose differently, but it was the beginning of Igbo as a written language of the church. At Kipo Hill, a new station far up the river near Egga, the bishop, now nearly seventy, made bricks with his own hands.

The Wrath of Man

The verse at the head of this chapter is one that Crowther quoted about Bonny. It comes from a psalm celebrating God's victory over the enemies of his people. "Surely the wrath of man shall praise thee: The residue of wrath shalt thou gird upon thee." The persecution meant to destroy the church

had in the end made it stronger. The persecutors had become converts, and the martyrs had become seeds.

It would be too simple to say that the Delta churches grew only through persecution, or only through the courage of their members. They grew also because Christianity offered things that the old order did not: education, contact with the wider world, a religion in which slave and master stood equal, and freedom from the fear of the jujus. Some people came to church for those reasons and not for love of Christ, and Crowther knew it. But the courage was real. Men like Joshua Hart, the protomartyr of Bonny, and women like the chief's wife at Okrika, paid for their faith with their lives or risked them. Years before in Freetown, Crowther had been silenced by a Shango drummer who charged that the Christians there lived no better than the heathen, and he had admitted that "the charge was too true." The Christians of the Delta were answering that charge.

By the 1880s the Delta churches were largely supporting themselves. They were led, under the bishop, by an African archdeacon, and staffed by African clergy and teachers. They were, as nearly as any church in Africa at the time, what Henry Venn had dreamed of. They would soon be tested in a way that no one expected.

Asano

"Set me as a seal upon thy heart, As a seal upon thine arm: For love is strong as death; Jealousy is cruel as Sheol; The flashes thereof are flashes of fire, A very flame of Jehovah. Many waters cannot quench love, Neither can floods drown it: If a man would give all the substance of his house for love, He would utterly be contemned."
— Song of Songs 8:6-7, ASV

The Other Half of the Story

Most of this book has followed Samuel Crowther up rivers, into kings' courts, and across the sea to England. It has said little about the woman who stayed behind. That is partly the fault of the sources. Crowther's journals are the journals of a travelling man, and his wife appears in them mostly as someone he left on the shore. We have none of her letters. But the silence does not mean that she was unimportant. For fifty-one years the missionary's journeys rested on her.

Asano had been a slave child like him, rescued from a slave ship like him, and landed in Sierra Leone the same year as him. They had grown up in the same mission world, learned in the same schools, and married in 1829 when he was a young schoolmaster of about twenty-two. From 1830 the society's reports list her as "Susanna Crowther, school-mistress." She taught in the schools of the colony while he taught, and later kept the home

at Abeokuta and at Lagos while he travelled. When he sailed with the Niger Expedition in 1841, he left her, as he wrote, "near her confinement, and four children." When he went to England for ordination, and again and again up the river, she stayed.

Jesse Page, who wrote with the help of the family, put it simply. During her husband's long journeys as explorer and as bishop, "Mrs. Crowther felt her part was to spare him, and faithfully fulfil the not less sacred ministry of home and children."

The Children

They had six children, usually listed as Samuel, Abigail, Susan, Josiah, Juliana, and Dandeson. We have met some of them already. Samuel, the eldest, drew the little map that his father showed to the Queen. Juliana, as a small girl, was carried on the march up to Abeokuta in 1846, and a letter she wrote from there in 1849 survives. Dandeson shared his father's captivity in 1867 and became Archdeacon of the Delta. Abigail married Thomas Babington Macaulay, an African clergyman who founded the CMS Grammar School at Lagos. It was Abigail who nursed her grandmother at the end, and Abigail who was with her father when he died. Her son, Herbert Macaulay, born in 1864, became a pioneer of Nigerian nationalism, and is often called its father. The slave boy from Osogun was the grandfather of one of the first men to demand that Nigeria govern itself.

The family remembered the home as a strict one. Crowther's household, they told Page, was "very strict in discipline and in the observance of religious truths, which may be said to be bordering on a puritanic method." No one missed church, class, or prayer meeting without giving a reason. Once one of the sons disobeyed his schoolmaster,

was punished, and ran home in tears expecting sympathy. His father took him back to school himself, found out what had happened, and had the schoolmaster give him a dozen strokes of the birch in front of the other pupils, with a lecture that a schoolmaster was to be obeyed "in all things lawful and right." It is not a story that modern parents will admire. It is typical of Victorian households, black and white, and it was told by his family with pride.

The Blucher Shoes

But the same father was, as Page put it, "a bright and entertaining father among his children." In the evenings they gathered round his knees to hear stories of Osogun: of monkeys and rats, of the great family farm where he had hoed his heaps for the yams and then sat in the shade laughing at the slower boys. He taught them Yoruba proverbs and the fables that the language is full of.

Their favourite story was about his first shoes. At Fourah Bay (the family's account dates it to the 1830s, which cannot be quite right, since by then he had been to London and was a married schoolmaster), he and three other students were made monitors, and to mark their new dignity they were given shoes, heavy army boots from the soldiers' barracks called "Blucher shoes," to wear to church every Sunday. None of them had ever worn shoes. When they laced them up in the dormitory that evening, none of them could take a step, and the pupils laughed at them. Crowther, as he told it, crawled to a corner, knelt, and then stood up holding on to the wall, and walked round and round the room with his hand on the wall until he could let go. The others followed. For months afterwards they would walk barefoot to church, carrying the shoes, and put them on at the church porch. Later they bought their own boots, "and were careful to buy those

that made noise and creaked as we stepped with them, to our great delight and the admiration of our pupils." He acted it out, and the children clapped and shouted.

It is a small story, but it tells us something. The bishop who was received by the Queen and given a doctorate by Oxford never forgot that he had once been a boy who could not walk in shoes. He did not tell the story with embarrassment. He told it as a joke against himself.

Eighteen Months

In the late 1870s Susan fell seriously ill. For eighteen months, as he wrote in 1880, his mind was "exercised ... at the bedside of my dear sick wife." He had hoped that she would recover in time for him to make his annual visitation of the Niger. She did not, and he faced the hardest choice of his ministry. On the one hand was his duty to his dying wife. On the other was the mission, which, as he wrote, was at that very time "disorganized in various ways which threatened its prosperity." He chose his wife. "I was obliged to perform the first duty of charity at its proper place, for 'charity begins at home.'"

For a man who had given his life to the mission, and who had so often left his family to go up the river, it was a significant decision. The mission could wait. His wife could not. He saw the illness, too, as part of God's dealing with them both, "a rod in the Father's hand to correct and cure the soul."

They celebrated their golden wedding. Page, writing later, says that after it she was taken ill again while her husband was up the Niger on the *Henry Venn*, and that when he returned to Lagos he found her at the point of death. "It was," he said, "one of her earnest wishes, during her long illness, that she might die in my arms, and this was granted her, though she never

knew it, for she lay unconscious till her death." Susan Crowther died at Lagos on 19 October 1880. Page says that he "mourned her loss with secret tears, and went about his work again."

The words at the head of this chapter come from the Song of Songs, the Bible's great poem of married love. "Many waters cannot quench love, Neither can floods drown it." Asano and Ajayi had both been carried across the waters in slave ships. The waters had separated them from their homes and families. They had not separated them from each other. The Proverbs describe the worthy wife in words that Crowther's children might have used of her: "Her children rise up, and call her blessed; Her husband also, and he praiseth her" (Proverbs 31:28, ASV).

The timing of her death was cruel. In the same weeks, a report on the state of the Niger Mission, written by a European missionary, reached Lagos for the bishop's comments. It was the beginning of the long trial that would darken the last decade of his life. He had to face it without her.

His Mother

Three years later another death followed. His mother, Afala, baptised Hannah, had lived her last years under his roof at Lagos. She had kept to the end the resolution she had made when he found her again in 1846: that her son was "no longer my son, but the servant of God," and that he must go about his work without worrying about her. He was up the Niger when she died, in October 1883, at an age thought to be ninety-seven. Abigail, her granddaughter, was with her. The old woman told Abigail not to write to her father about her illness, for fear of troubling his mind in his work. Near the end she said to her: "You are as good as your father's being at home; keep near to me, you have a great work to do."

He learned of her death when he came down the river. Writing in February 1884, he was thankful that she had been "spared to us so long in the midst of so many adverse changes in her course of life," and that she had come at last "to know the Saviour in whom she placed her trust as her Good Shepherd to the end of her life." He told the story of her last words, he said, "that you may know what value she placed on my missionary work among our heathen countrymen."

Caleb's Prayer

Between these two griefs he wrote one of the most hopeful letters of his life. On 26 February 1883, at Bonny, he wrote to his clergy of the good way the Lord had led him. He was about seventy-five. "I have been blessed with unbroken health," he wrote, "that I have not been laid aside any day, week, month, or year from pursuing my duty, which is a rare blessing." It was not quite true, since his journals record fevers, but it was how the years felt to him.

He told them that he had often made two "timid requests" in prayer, which he feared might "savour of selfishness." The first was Caleb's. When the Israelites divided the promised land, Caleb, at eighty-five, reminded Joshua of the promise that Moses had made him forty-five years before, when he had been one of the spies: "And now, behold, Jehovah hath kept me alive, as he spake, these forty and five years ... As yet I am as strong this day as I was in the day that Moses sent me" (Joshua 14:10-11, ASV). And Caleb asked for the hill country, where the giants lived in great fortified cities.

Crowther had first gone up the Niger in 1841, a little over forty years before. The mountain he asked for, he said, was "the countries of the Niger territory." The great fenced cities were "the strongholds of

Mohammedanism and heathenism, fenced with deluding religions and strong shackles of slave system." His second request was that before he was laid aside, every station should have a good and permanent church, so that his successors would be able to build a church that supported itself.

It is the prayer of an old man who does not think of himself as old. He had lost his wife. He would soon lose his mother. The trial of his mission had begun. And he asked God, like Caleb, for more hill country.

The Gathering Storm

"Brethren, even if a man be overtaken in any trespass, ye who are spiritual, restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness; looking to thyself, lest thou also be tempted."
— Galatians 6:1, ASV

A Mission Stretched Thin

This chapter and the next tell the hardest part of Crowther's story. They are hard in two ways. They are painful, because they end with an old man's life's work taken apart around him. And they are difficult to tell fairly, because the two sides have been told very differently. The missionary society's own historians, writing soon after, presented a necessary if regrettable cleansing of a corrupt mission. Nigerian historians, and in time the Church of England itself, have presented a betrayal. The truth, as best it can be found, includes things that both sides would rather leave out.

Begin with the problem, which was real. By the late 1870s the Niger Mission stretched from the Delta to Lokoja and beyond, over some three hundred miles of river, among many peoples and languages. Its stations were staffed almost entirely by African clergy, catechists, and schoolmasters, most of them recruited from Sierra Leone. Some were men of great devotion. Others were not. They lived far from any supervision, among trading posts where money, drink, and women were easily had, and where

the example set by many European traders was bad. The bishop visited each station at most once a year, and for years he had no boat of his own. Paul had written of "that which presseth upon me daily, anxiety for all the churches" (2 Corinthians 11:28, ASV). Crowther knew the feeling. It was impossible for one man, however faithful, to know what was happening in every station.

He was also, by temperament, lenient. He found it hard to believe the worst of the men he had trained, and hard to dismiss them when he did. Where the evidence was uncertain, he gave them the benefit of the doubt. Where a man had fallen, he hoped for his repentance. Some of his letters from these years show both his seriousness about sin and his instinct for mercy. Of converts who had been drawn, under pressure from the chiefs, into heathen rites, he wrote in 1885 that "our severe punishment to maintain Christian discipline must be moderated with sympathy and guided by due allowance for the measure of knowledge and experienced Christian principle which the converts possessed." That is the spirit of the verse at the head of this chapter: "restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness." But gentleness can become weakness, and some of his own friends thought it had.

Ashcroft and Wood

The first sign of trouble came through the mission's business affairs. In 1878 the society sent out the steamer *Henry Venn* with a European lay agent, J. H. Ashcroft, to manage it and to take charge of the mission's money and supplies. It was a sensible arrangement in some ways, since the bishop had no training in accounts, but it meant that the finances of his own diocese were in someone else's hands.

At about the same time the society set up a committee at Lagos to oversee the mission, and asked the Rev. J. B. Wood, an experienced English missionary in the Yoruba country, to visit the Niger stations and report. Wood's report on his first visit, in 1880, was unfavourable. It brought a series of charges against the African agents. Wood himself, according to the society's historian Eugene Stock, thought that some of the charges "might be false or exaggerated," but he found "a manifest lack of real spirituality and evangelistic zeal among them." Some later Nigerian historians have argued that the charges were forwarded to London before the accused had any chance to answer them. The report was sent to the bishop for his comments. It reached him, as Stock recorded, just when he was "suffering the sorest of bereavements." His wife died that October.

Madeira

In the early months of 1881 the society called a conference on the island of Madeira, halfway between England and West Africa. Crowther, Dandeson, two other African clergy, and Ashcroft met the society's lay secretary and another senior clergyman there. Wood could not come. They agreed on a series of reforms, including a training institution at Lokoja and the appointment of an English clergyman as secretary of the mission, who would live on the Niger and be, in Stock's words, "the Bishop's friend and counsellor."

The man chosen was Thomas Phillips, a graduate of Dublin in middle life who had been in business. After some theological study in London he was ordained deacon by an English bishop, and then, in 1882, a few weeks later, ordained priest by Samuel Crowther, who was in England that year. Stock called it "this first ordination of an Englishman by a Negro bishop." It was a moment that Henry Venn would have loved. The slave boy from

Osogun laid his hands on the head of an Englishman and made him a priest of the Church of England.

Phillips lasted nine months on the Niger. He found the difficulties great, returned to England, and resigned when the society would not fully accept his views. After his return, the society took stronger steps. In 1883 the society went further. Some agents against whom there was no trustworthy evidence for a church trial were simply let go, as a society may let go any paid employee. It was a distinction that mattered: they were not found guilty of anything. They were no longer wanted.

The Crime at Onitsha

Then came a scandal that could not be explained away. In September 1882 the London newspapers reported that two agents of the Church Missionary Society had been convicted at Sierra Leone of treating a girl at Onitsha so cruelly that she died. For a few days the society's friends in England feared that two young English missionaries had become murderers. In fact the two men were Africans. One was a schoolmaster whom Crowther himself had dismissed for bad conduct, but who, out of pity, had afterwards been taken on again as a clerk or storekeeper. The other was an interpreter. The crime had been committed about five years earlier, and it was Wood who had helped to bring the men to justice.

It is important not to leave this out. A girl died. Her killers were employed by the mission. And one of them was employed only because mercy had been shown to a man who did not deserve it. No source suggests that Crowther knew of the crime. But it was the kind of failure that lenient, thinly spread supervision made possible, and it gave his critics a terrible example.

In April 1883 the Duke of Somerset used the case to attack the society in the House of Lords. Earl Cairns rose at once to defend it, and the new Archbishop of Canterbury, Edward Benson, made his first speech as primate in its support. But the damage was done. The Niger Mission had become, in the minds of many in England, a byword for scandal.

"I Did Not Shut Mine Eyes"

Crowther did not pretend that all was well. He listed the cases in which he had himself suspended or dismissed agents, and wrote: "Surely I think these facts must show that I did not shut mine eyes to the faults of the agents of the Niger Mission during a period of now over twenty-five years." When one of the tutors of his own training institution, an able and apparently respectable man, was found guilty of adultery, he wrote from Lokoja in October 1884: "This is another proof that we are apt to be misled by the outward appearance or intellectual qualifications of men; whereas the Lord looks into the heart."

He agreed that the mission needed better men, and said so. "None but the best and well qualified of the sons of the African churches," he wrote in 1884, "whose hearts are fired with ardent zeal," should be employed as agents. "They should be decided spiritual men, because spiritual men can only teach spiritual things." But he would not accept that the answer was to replace African agents with Europeans. The answer was to choose and train Africans better.

In February 1884, in a letter that shows how deeply the criticism had hurt him, he offered to step aside. "If others are delicate to tell me of my incompetency in the superintendence of the Niger Mission," he wrote, "it is my duty to relieve their minds of that delicacy. I am ready to yield place to others to act as leading managers of the Niger Mission. I am willing, as long

as my health lasts, to labour as a pioneer in opening fresh grounds, while the already established stations can be worked by superior intellects and better managers." The society would not hear of it.

Hamilton

For a few years things improved. In place of Phillips the society sent James Hamilton, an older missionary who had served in Sierra Leone and understood African work. He travelled with the bishop from station to station, holding inquiries and dismissing agents where the evidence was sufficient. According to Page, he found the bishop "always ready to concur in any suggestion for improvement and the better supervision of the work." A new *Henry Venn* replaced the old one. Archdeacon Henry Johnson, a gifted African scholar who had been given an honorary degree by Cambridge, worked at Lokoja, preaching at times with four interpreters beside him. The Delta churches were growing and largely paying for themselves.

Hamilton and Crowther showed that it was possible for an English secretary and an African bishop to reform a mission together, with firmness and without contempt. It was a lesson that the next generation did not learn.

Gentleness and Looking to Thyself

Paul's instruction to the Galatians has two halves. The first is about the one who has fallen: "restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness." The second is about the one who restores: "looking to thyself, lest thou also be tempted." Crowther's critics accused him of neglecting the first half, of letting fallen men stay fallen, and to some extent they were right. But they were soon to

neglect the second half entirely. Those who judged his mission most harshly did not look to themselves. They did not ask whether their own certainty, their own zeal, or their own assumptions about Africans might lead them into sin.

Onitsha, 1890

"For it was not an enemy that reproached me; Then I could have borne it: Neither was it he that hated me that did magnify himself against me; Then I would have hid myself from him: But it was thou, a man mine equal, My companion, and my familiar friend. We took sweet counsel together; We walked in the house of God with the throng."
— Psalm 55:12-14, ASV

A New Generation

In the late 1880s a new kind of missionary began to arrive in Africa. They were young, well educated, and intensely earnest. Many came from Cambridge. Many had been shaped by the holiness movement associated with the Keswick Convention, with its call to a life of complete consecration, and by a fresh wave of missionary zeal in the English universities. They were ready to give up everything for Christ, and many of them did, dying of fever within months of landing. They also had very high standards, for themselves and for everyone else, and very little patience.

Two of them came to the Niger. John Alfred Robinson, a Cambridge graduate, became secretary of the mission in 1887. Graham Wilmot Brooke, a former cadet of the Royal Military Academy at Woolwich, longed to reach the Sudan, the great Muslim belt of Africa north of the Niger, and

planned to reach it from the river. Together they drew up a plan for a new mission to the Hausa and the Muslim north. They meant to live as simply as the people, in local dress, and to renounce any claim to British protection. Their courage and self-denial were real. So was their low opinion of the African Christians they found at Lokoja.

The society accepted their plan and reorganised the Niger Mission around it. The Upper Niger, from Lokoja northwards, became the base for the new Sudan party. The Lower Niger and the Delta became a separate mission, with three English missionaries, one of whom, F. N. Eden, was its secretary. Both were to remain, in name, under the bishop. Some African agents on the upper river were moved or removed to make room for the new arrangements. Archdeacon Henry Johnson was asked to go to Lagos to await instructions.

On 20 January 1890, at a great valedictory meeting at Exeter Hall in London, the new missionaries were sent out. Crowther, who had been in England while the plans were made, was on the platform, and gave them his blessing. In February they all sailed for West Africa together, the old African bishop and the young Englishmen who would take his mission apart.

Lokoja

At Lokoja the Sudan party set to work with great energy. Stock, who admired them, described their work as partly "a work of correction." They judged the Lokoja congregation unsatisfactory, and believed, in phrases they borrowed from the prophet Jeremiah, that they must "root out" and "pull down" before they could "build" and "plant." They examined the African agents, kept some whom they judged truly godly, and got rid of

others. Their letters home, printed in the society's magazine, were full of zeal and full of criticism.

Their standard was that of the committee's own words: missionaries must be "vessels meet for the Master's use." The phrase comes from Paul: "If a man therefore purge himself from these, he shall be a vessel unto honor, sanctified, meet for the master's use, prepared unto every good work" (2 Timothy 2:21, ASV). No one could object to the standard. The question was who was to judge, and how, and with what mercy.

The Meeting at Onitsha

In August 1890 the new committee for the lower mission met at Onitsha. Its members included the English missionaries, Bishop Crowther, Archdeacon Dandeson Crowther, and another African clergyman, the Rev. J. Boyle. Stock's account of what happened is brief and careful. The two sides "entirely failed to agree as to either the policy or the personnel of the Mission." The English members succeeded in carrying the dismissal of certain agents. They did not think it enough. So "the Secretary, acting for the C.M.S., gave separate notice, in its name, of suspension of some others from its employment." Stock adds: "It is needless now to mention names."

Nigerian historians, working from the society's own archives, have filled in what Stock left out. Among those suspended were African clergy whom Crowther had himself ordained, and they were suspended in his presence. Among them was a veteran clergyman, Charles Paul, who had served the mission for decades. And among them was the bishop's own son, the Archdeacon of the Delta, Dandeson Crowther. The English secretary, it seems, claimed the power to act for the society regardless of the committee. The old bishop, by these accounts, rose trembling to his feet to dissociate himself from what had been done, and withdrew from the committee.

He did not resign as bishop, and he was not removed. Popular accounts sometimes say that he was deposed or forced out. He was not. He remained Bishop of the Niger until he died. But he had seen his clergy suspended over his head by young men who had been in Africa a few months, and his authority over the mission that he had founded had been badly broken.

The psalm at the head of this chapter is David's lament over betrayal by a friend. "For it was not an enemy that reproached me; Then I could have borne it." Crowther had faced enemies all his life: the raiders who burned Osogun, the slave-dealers of Lagos, the chiefs of Bonny, Abokko. He had borne them. What he found hardest to bear came from his own side, from members of his own society and his own church, men he had blessed at Exeter Hall and sailed with to Africa. "We took sweet counsel together; We walked in the house of God with the throng."

The Report

The news caused a storm on the whole West African coast, and deep division in London. The society's committee sent a solemn letter to all its agents and congregations in West Africa, promising an impartial inquiry and restating its principles. A special sub-committee sat for many weeks. Eden and Brooke came to England to explain themselves. Stock, who was there, wrote that in twenty-five years there had been no question on which the committee had been so divided.

The report was issued in January 1891. On the individual cases, the action taken in Africa was "confirmed in some cases and reversed in others." On the state of the mission, it made admissions on both sides. It confessed "the inadequacy of the provision made for the superintendence of the Mission." It found that "the moral and spiritual condition of the congregations generally has in it at the present time much that is extremely

lamentable." And it added: "it is but just to the Bishop to say that from the commencement of the Mission most serious difficulties have beset him and surrounded every station."

"Both sides on the Niger," Stock wrote, "were grievously disappointed." The young Englishmen thought the society had not gone far enough. The Africans thought it had endorsed an injustice. Crowther, according to Stock, "was also deeply dissatisfied with the Society's decisions, although it was his full purpose to accept and act upon them."

"Too Severe"

The young men did not live long. Robinson died in June 1891. Brooke died in March 1892. Eden resigned at the end of 1891. Their Sudan mission collapsed.

Eight years later Stock gave his judgement. "Robinson and Brooke — Brooke especially — were severe in their judgment of their African fellow-workers," he wrote. "They were, indeed, too severe. They did not make sufficient allowance for racial weaknesses, and they were not patient enough with those who, like the venerable bishop himself, honestly differed from them. Their campaign against the evils on the Niger undoubtedly alienated the minds of many West Africans from the C.M.S., and it was long before confidence was restored."

It is a revealing sentence. Stock thought the young men were wrong to be so harsh, though in the next breath he defended them, crediting their severity with the mission's later improvement. But even in correcting them he speaks of "racial weaknesses," as if Africans as a race were weaker than Europeans. That assumption, held even by the kind, was the real enemy of Crowther's work. When Venn had made him a bishop in 1864, the society had believed that Africans could lead their own churches. By 1890 many in

the society no longer believed it. The historian J. F. Ade Ajayi called these years "the turning of the tide." The problems on the Niger were real. But the way they were handled, by young Englishmen overruling an old African bishop and his clergy, showed that something had changed in the way the society thought about Africans.

There were Christians on both sides who acted in good faith, and there was sin on both sides. Some of the African agents had been unfit for their work, and some had done great wrong. Crowther had been too slow to act. But the society had also failed him, by giving him an impossible task, by leaving him without support for years, and then by allowing young men who barely knew Africa to humiliate him and his clergy in public. The report of 1891 admitted part of this. It would take more than a century for the Church of England to admit the rest.

The Delta Pastorate

"Enlarge the place of thy tent, and let them stretch forth the curtains of thy habitations; spare not: lengthen thy cords, and strengthen thy stakes."
— Isaiah 54:2, ASV

The Delta Answers

The Christians of the Niger Delta did not accept what had happened at Onitsha quietly. Their archdeacon, by the Nigerian accounts, had been suspended. Their bishop had been humiliated. Many of them had suffered persecution for their faith, and had built and paid for their own churches. They did not see why a committee of young Englishmen should now decide who was fit to be their pastor.

Their answer was not to leave the Church. It was to stop taking the society's money. The congregations of Bonny and the neighbouring towns, led by Archdeacon Dandeson Crowther, declared that they would support their own churches and clergy themselves. With some help from sympathisers in Lagos, they raised the funds, and, as Stock recorded some years later, "they have never again looked to the Society for pecuniary help."

They asked their bishop to make it official. After consulting the members of the churches, they put a formal application into his hands, asking that the Delta be made a self-supporting native pastorate, like the

pastorates that already existed in Sierra Leone and Lagos. Crowther sent it on to London with his full approval. Some modern historians say he had drafted the scheme himself in the spring of 1891. His letter supporting it spoke of the opportunities opening in the Delta, and of its unhealthiness for Europeans, and concluded that the suggestion "is providential that the Delta district should be made a native pastorate to be worked entirely through native agency, towards the expenses of which they resolved to contribute."

It was, in fact, exactly what Henry Venn had hoped for thirty years before. Page himself quoted Venn's hope "that in course of time the churches in the Niger Mission shall become self-supporting, as those in the Colonies are." Venn had called it the "euthanasia" of a mission: the point at which the missionaries could step aside because the church they had planted could stand on its own. The Delta churches had reached it, not in the peaceful way Venn had imagined, but in the midst of a quarrel.

Not a Secession

The society's leaders in London were not pleased. Page, who wrote as the society's friend, admitted "a little natural regret" that the proposal "should come at a time when some misunderstanding was felt on the Niger." Stock wrote that "coming just then, it had more the appearance of a secession than was pleasant."

But he was careful to add: "it was in no sense a secession from the Church of England, and only a temporary alienation from the Society." This matters, because the Delta Pastorate is sometimes described today as the first African breakaway from the Anglican Church. It was not. The Delta Christians had no wish to leave the Church of England, its Prayer Book, its creeds, or its bishops. They asked for the Archbishop of

Canterbury's counsel, and received it. They left the control of a missionary society, not the Church.

Other African Christians in those years did leave. In Lagos the Native Baptist Church was formed in 1888, and in 1891 a group of Lagos Christians left the mission churches to form the United Native African Church. The treatment of Crowther was one of the grievances that fuelled that movement. Crowther himself never encouraged it. The Delta Pastorate was his answer to the same pain: to stay in the Church, and to take responsibility for it.

Bonny, 1892

Crowther did not live to see the pastorate inaugurated. On 29 April 1892, four months after his death, it was formally begun at Bonny, with services of thanksgiving at St. Stephen's Church and St. Clement's. The preachers were the Rev. J. Boyle, who had sat beside the bishop at Onitsha, and Archdeacon Dandeson Crowther.

Dandeson's sermon has survived in part. He said that God seemed to wish "in these latter days to extend the name and knowledge of His beloved Son by simple, inexpensive means, using local instruments to carry it into the interior." By forming the pastorate, he said, "the people make the religion their own, and are already feeling the responsibility of taking the Gospel with them everywhere they go." The ordinary Christians of the Delta, traders and fishermen and canoe-men, were carrying the gospel up the creeks where the missionaries could not easily go. "It may be said that they are weak, yet they act as pioneers for us."

It is the voice of his father. Samuel Crowther had always believed that Africa would be won chiefly by Africans, and that the strength of a church

lay not in its buildings or its foreign support but in its members' sense that the faith was their own.

Reconciliation

The breach with the society did not last. When Joseph Sidney Hill, chosen as the next bishop, was sent out by the Archbishop before his consecration to visit the stations and ascertain the position of the new pastorate, the Delta Christians received him warmly. It received his successor, Herbert Tugwell, in the same way. Both, according to Stock, were "loyally received by them as their 'overseers.'" In 1896, after conferences in London and Lagos, a formal constitution was agreed, setting out the pastorate as a self-supporting branch of the Church of England, governed by its own church councils under a bishop. Page credited the settlement to Bishop Hill, Bishop Tugwell, Archdeacon Crowther, and James Johnson of Lagos, who would himself become an assistant bishop a few years later. In time the pastorate came back into closer relations with the society.

Dandeson Crowther remained Archdeacon of the Delta for decades, and lived until 1938. Stock, writing in 1899, called the Delta Pastorate "the most encouraging thing" in the Niger region, "a practically independent African Church." By then even the society's own historian could see it as a success.

The Planter and the Increase

The prophet's words at the head of this chapter are addressed to a barren woman, told to prepare for more children than she can imagine. "Enlarge the place of thy tent ... spare not: lengthen thy cords, and strengthen thy stakes." A century earlier, William Carey had preached on the same text

when he called English Baptists to send missionaries to the world. The churches of the Niger Delta were one of the answers. From a handful of converts at Bonny in 1864, persecuted and despised, had grown a church that paid for its own clergy, sent its own members as evangelists into the interior, and stood firm when its founders were wronged.

Crowther did not see the full harvest. Few pioneers do. Paul said of the church at Corinth: "I planted, Apollos watered; but God gave the increase" (1 Corinthians 3:6, ASV). Crowther had planted. Dandeson and the pastors of the Delta watered. The increase was yet to come.

"Good Night"

"I have fought the good fight, I have finished the course, I have kept the faith:"
— 2 Timothy 4:7, ASV

The Stroke

Samuel Crowther had been remarkably strong. He had survived the fevers that killed so many of his European companions, the wreck at Jebba, the captivity with Abokko, and fifty years of travel by canoe and steamer in one of the unhealthiest climates on earth. In 1883 he had thanked God for "unbroken health." He was now in his eighties, as nearly as anyone could tell, and still travelling.

In the summer of 1891, at Bonny, it ended. As he got up from his desk, he had a stroke. In October he described it in a letter to a friend in England: "I was laid aside by a sudden attack of paralysis, as I got up from my desk, which paralyzed my right hand and leg and affected my speech for many days, so that I could not speak audibly." The doctor ordered a change of air, and he left Bonny on 25 September and reached Lagos three days later, to stay at the house of his daughter Abigail Macaulay. "I am thankful to say that I am improving," he wrote, "hoping to be all right again in a few weeks. ... Wishing soon to recover my health, to spend the remainder of my

days in the service of our Divine Master." In a later letter he apologised for his shaky handwriting.

A missionary who called on him found him slowly recovering but not himself. For hours he would sit in thought, looking out across the sea.

Stock, the society's historian, was frank about the cause. "In his case," he wrote, "as in Robinson's, death was certainly hastened by anxiety and disappointment. For he on his part was also deeply dissatisfied with the Society's decisions, although it was his full purpose to accept and act upon them."

The Last Weeks

He did not stop working. On Christmas morning he walked to Christ Church, Lagos, for the last time. In the last days of December Archdeacon Hamilton, his old friend from the years of reform, landed at Lagos and spent an hour with him. Then he took the bishop on his arm to a meeting to send out seven schoolmasters from the training institution. At the end, the old man stood up and gave them his blessing, as Page put it, "tenderly, fatherly, with slow and faltering speech." It was his last act of public service. The next day he spent much of the time on diocesan business with his visitors. He spoke of going back to Bonny in the first week of January, and wrote to the British consul for the Oil Rivers, who happened to be in Lagos, to ask for a passage in his steamer.

Hamilton and another visitor from the society brought him, in those last days, what Stock called "the assurance of the Committee's unabated respect and affection." There had been a letter from the society's secretary in London, too, which his daughter read to him more than once. In an old diary, after his death, was found the draft of a reply, written in a feeble hand

and never sent. A pencil note said that the doctor had forbidden him to write any more.

The letter is confused in places, as a letter written after a stroke might be. But its last lines are clear. The secretary seems to have sent him a memorandum about his good character, and he wrote that it was an answer to his prayer, that the God who had called him first from among his people "may give me grace to set a good example for others to follow." And then: "Since my appointment to the superintendent of the Niger Mission in 1857 to the present I never refuse any suggestion made by the committee for the improvement of the Niger Mission. Though I am single-handed, I like to be improved by the ideas of others."

It is a humble ending to a long correspondence. He did not defend himself. He did not accuse anyone. He simply said that he had always been willing to learn.

"Good Night"

Abigail Macaulay, in whose house he spent his last days, wrote down afterwards what happened on the last day of the year. Here is her account, in part.

> *He was up as usual on the morning of the 31st, dressed, and went through the morning devotions as he did every day; then had his tea after seven o'clock. About eight o'clock he sent to call me to read a letter to him. I took the letter and read it, and said: "Father, I have read this letter to you several times." He said: "I have read it too."*

She left him sitting at the table with his Prayer Book, his hymn book, and some papers, and went to see about his breakfast. Later that morning an old Christian woman named Emma Taiwo came to visit him, and came back in

haste to say that something was wrong. Abigail ran in just in time to catch him before he fell from the sofa. It seems he had had another stroke. The doctor was sent for. He spoke little after that, but answered when spoken to. In the afternoon he was helped to his bedroom. He took his medicine patiently, and when she asked about his cough he said, "No pain."

> *At midnight when I came in to give him his medicine he sat up and said he hoped it was the last dose. He lay down, and as I covered him I said, "Good night, father," and he said, "Good night." Half an hour later I heard movements in his room and saw father just lying down, and I jumped on the bed, for I saw he was dying. "Father! father!" I cried. He heaved a sigh, and all was over. He passed away at a quarter to one in the morning.*

His daughter's account places his death, strictly, in the first hour of 1 January 1892. His memorial, his biographers, and the church calendars that remember him all give the date as 31 December 1891. Either way, he died at the turn of the year, quietly, in his daughter's house, with his daughter beside him.

His last word was "Good night." It is a word of trust. The psalmist said: "In peace will I both lay me down and sleep; For thou, Jehovah, alone makest me dwell in safety" (Psalm 4:8, ASV). The boy who had lain awake in chains the night before he was taken to market, and the old man who had slept on a ridge of earth in Abokko's camp with his cap under his head, lay down at last in peace.

The Funeral

He was buried on 1 January 1892, at Lagos. The funeral service was held at Christ Church, and the address was given by the Rev. James Johnson, one

of the most outspoken African clergymen of his generation. The Governor of Lagos and most of the senior European officials attended. Ten clergymen, African and European, walked before the coffin, which was strewn with ferns and frangipani. He was laid in the grave beside his wife and his mother, and the mourners sang together, "Hush, blessed are the dead."

Six years later a marble monument was unveiled over the grave by the Governor. Its inscription called him "a native of Osogun," the first student of Fourah Bay College, and a servant of the Church Missionary Society for sixty-two years. It gave his age as "about 89 years." No one knew his birthday. The inscription's estimate would put his birth around 1802, several years earlier than most modern historians think likely. The uncertainty is itself part of his story. He had been born into a world without written records, and had spent his life giving that world a written language.

The Successor

The society chose an Englishman to succeed him. Joseph Sidney Hill, a gentle and able man who had served in West Africa and New Zealand, was consecrated in St. Paul's Cathedral on 29 June 1893, twenty-nine years to the day after Crowther's consecration at Canterbury. The diocese was enlarged to take in the Yoruba country, and renamed Western Equatorial Africa. With Hill two African clergymen, Charles Phillips and Isaac Oluwole, were consecrated as assistant bishops. It was a gesture of goodwill, and it was received as one. But it was also a sign of what had changed. In 1864 an African had been made the bishop. In 1893 Africans were made the assistants.

Hill barely began the work. He sailed in November 1893, reached Lagos in December, and within a month he and his wife were both dead, as so many Europeans before him had died. It would be many decades before another African was made a diocesan bishop in the Anglican Church in Nigeria.

Paul wrote to Timothy near the end of his life, in the words at the head of this chapter: "I have fought the good fight, I have finished the course, I have kept the faith." He was writing from prison, with many of his friends gone and some of them turned against him. It was not a triumphant ending, in the world's eyes. But he knew what he had done, and to whom he had done it. So did Samuel Crowther.

A Weaned Child

"Jehovah, my heart is not haughty, nor mine eyes lofty; Neither do I exercise myself in great matters, Or in things too wonderful for me. Surely I have stilled and quieted my soul; Like a weaned child with his mother, Like a weaned child is my soul within me."
— Psalm 131:1-2, ASV

The Man Himself

We have followed Samuel Crowther's life from Osogun to Lagos. Before we ask what it meant, it is worth pausing to look at the man himself: what he was like to live with, how he prayed, and what kept him going. The sources are uneven. Much of what we know of his character comes from his family and admirers, and they remembered what they wanted to remember. But there is also his own voice, in fifty years of journals and letters, and it is consistent.

Humility

Everyone who knew him spoke first of his humility. It was not a pose. It showed itself in small things. When he was addressed in letters as "My Lord," as English bishops were, he had his son add a postscript to his reply: "Please address me Right Reverend Bishop, and never as My Lord." If there was only one chair in a room and a schoolmaster came in, the bishop would

get up and give him his seat. Dandeson once asked him why. "People, seeing me standing," he said, "will very soon go and get me another seat, but will not be so quick, if ever they did think of getting one for a schoolmaster."

He answered every letter himself, by hand, however trivial, and kept copies of both his letters and the replies. Looking up once from a pile of letters from people he did not know, he said: "These sort of letters should be carefully answered to lead the writers to a higher aim and nobler thoughts." He taught his children to say "thank you" for the smallest kindness.

Paul told the Philippians to do "nothing through faction or through vainglory, but in lowliness of mind each counting other better than himself" (Philippians 2:3, ASV). Crowther took the instruction almost literally. The psalm at the head of this chapter is one of the shortest in the Bible. "Jehovah, my heart is not haughty, nor mine eyes lofty." The psalmist compares his soul to a weaned child with its mother: no longer crying for what it wants, but content to be near her. It is a picture of a man who had stopped demanding things of God and of others, and had learned to rest.

"I Know My Place"

His humility had a harder side, and it should not be passed over. In January 1884, in the middle of the troubles over the mission, he wrote to the society's secretary a letter that is painful to read today:

> *I know my place as negro, but I have ever paid my respects to Europeans, whether old or young, missionaries or those in secular occupations, as the race of our benefactors, to whom we owe our bodily freedom and the spiritual privileges of the glorious liberty of the Christian religion.*

He went on to ask for more European missionaries, to be "the chief workers under the superintendence of the European secretary," because "the Europeans are better managers, their actions and report will be better confided in both out here and in England. We shall be content to work under their direction as in former years."

How should we read this? It would be too simple to say that Crowther had absorbed the racism of his age and believed Africans inferior. His whole life argued the opposite, and so did much of what he wrote. He insisted to the end that Africa would be evangelised chiefly by Africans. He had trained, ordained, and defended an African clergy, and he protested when they were suspended over his head. He told the Royal Geographical Society that European interests shared the blame for closing the Delta's rivers, and in his journals he rebuked Englishmen whose conduct shamed the civilisation they claimed to bring.

But it would also be too simple to say that the letter meant nothing. It was written by a man under great pressure, trying to save his mission by conceding what he could. And it reflects something real in him: a deep and lasting gratitude. He had been taken off a slave ship by English sailors, taught his letters by an Englishwoman, and made a bishop by English churchmen. "I owe so much to their fathers," he said, when asked why he was so respectful to Europeans of every kind. That gratitude was genuine and honourable. But it also made it hard for him to stand up to Europeans when they were wrong, and some of them took advantage of it. The man who knew his place was surrounded, at the end, by younger men who were quite sure of theirs.

Prayer

He prayed constantly, and in the manner of an Anglican of his day: morning and evening prayer from the Prayer Book, family prayers, the Psalms. On the last morning of his life he went through his devotions as usual, and sat at his table with his Prayer Book and hymn book beside him. But he also prayed in the moment, silently, in times of danger. Once, when he feared that the Nupe king was about to order the mission out of Lokoja, he prayed, again and again, the prayer that Nehemiah prayed before the king of Persia. Nehemiah, asked by the king what he wanted, "prayed to the God of heaven" before he answered (Nehemiah 2:4, ASV). "The silent ejaculation of Nehemiah before Artaxerxes," Crowther wrote, quoting Nehemiah's words, "'Grant him mercy in the sight of this man,' was most applicable in my case, and was frequently offered." To his surprise, the king raised the matter himself, and told him that the mission should stay. Crowther wrote in his journal: "This is an instance of an answer to prayer: 'Before they call I will answer; and while they are yet speaking, I will hear.'"

He believed that prayer was the chief tool of a missionary. As he had told the Christians of Freetown in 1864, just after his consecration, "the habit of prayer for help from above" is the weapon that prevails most in the work of the ministry, and "we are better fitted when we feel our incompetency to change a sinner's heart." It was the conviction of a man who had tried for decades to change hearts and knew he could not.

Patience

His patience was remarkable, and some thought excessive. A young African clergyman, J. Boyle, remembered an occasion in 1874 when he and another new missionary, fresh from college, accompanied the bishop on a visit to a

king. They had sent word ahead, but no one came to meet them. They were shown to a verandah and kept waiting for a long time. The young men were indignant at the insult to their bishop. Crowther was calm. "My young friends," he said, "you have to bear and forbear with these people. ... In dealing with them you have to be armed with a threefold coat of mail called Patience."

He also said, in the same breath, that the people were at best "nothing better than children" in some of their actions. It is the language of his time, and he used it of the people he loved and served. But the heart of the remark was not contempt. It was patience, and patience was the virtue that his critics lacked. The young men of 1890 had many virtues, but patience was not among them.

Scripture and Humour

His Bible was the foundation of everything. He knew it so well that in Abokko's village, with no book to read, he and Dandeson took comfort on the Sunday by repeating passages of it from memory. His letters and journals are full of it, not as decoration but as the natural language of his thought. When something good happened, he raised his Ebenezer, the stone that Samuel set up after a victory, saying "Hitherto hath Jehovah helped us" (1 Samuel 7:12, ASV). When something bad happened, he looked, as he wrote in 1868, "above to the Hand which has ever overruled similar affairs."

He was also funny, in a quiet way. His children remembered the performance of the Blucher shoes. His answer at Bonny, when he was offered a haunted patch of bush for a mission, was a joke: "leave us and juju to settle the remaining palaver." He knew when not to take himself seriously, which is rarer in bishops than it should be.

An Eli?

Stock, in his history, admitted that Crowther might have been "an Eli in exercising discipline too lightly." Eli was the old priest of Shiloh whose sons behaved disgracefully and whom he failed to restrain. It was a pointed comparison. But Stock added at once: "he was an Eli, too, in simplicity and sincerity of character." And he wrote that Crowther "lived in an atmosphere of suspicion and scandal, yet no tongue, however malicious, of white man or black man, ventured to whisper reproach against his personal reputation."

There is another side of Eli worth remembering. When the boy Samuel came to him with a hard message from God, Eli did not argue. He said: "It is Jehovah: let him do what seemeth him good" (1 Samuel 3:18, ASV). According to his son, those were the words that Crowther used in 1864, when Venn pressed the bishopric on him. They were the words of a weaned child.

Essentially African, Essentially Missionary

"After these things I saw, and behold, a great multitude, which no man could number, out of every nation and of all tribes and peoples and tongues, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, arrayed in white robes, and palms in their hands;"
— Revelation 7:9, ASV

Collapse

For a few years after Crowther's death, it looked as if his life's work had failed. In 1890, Stock recorded, the Niger Mission had "a Bishop, nine Native clergy, and nine English missionaries." By 1893, after the suspensions, the resignations, the deaths, and the withdrawal of the Delta churches, its staff was listed as three Englishmen, one of whom soon went home, and three African clergymen. "So disastrous a change," Stock wrote, "was unparalleled in the Society's history since the fatal early days of Sierra Leone." The young men's mission to the Sudan had collapsed with them. The first African bishop of modern times in the Anglican Church had been succeeded by an Englishman, and the Englishman had died soon after reaching Africa.

Stock, who belonged to the side that had judged Crowther, still wrote in hope that the Master Himself would perhaps have said, "The Mission is not dead, but sleepeth."

What Remained

It was not dead. Much of what Crowther had built could not be undone by a committee.

There was the Yoruba Bible, completed in 1884 by the team he had led and inspired, and the written Yoruba language that he, more than anyone, had given its shape. There was the beginning of written Igbo, and of Nupe, and word lists and grammars of a dozen other languages. There were the churches of the Delta, self-supporting and self-governing, which had survived persecution and would survive the quarrel with the society. There were congregations along the Niger, small and often struggling, from Onitsha to Lokoja. There were African clergy he had trained and ordained. And there was the example of his life, which nobody could take away.

Stock recorded a small incident from 1894. A missionary of the society was preaching in a street in Calcutta, in India, when an African man appeared in the crowd and began begging the people to accept Christ, of whom he had learned, he said, from "the sweet words of a black bishop called Crowther." It is the kind of story that missionary histories like to tell, and we cannot know more about the man. But it is a reminder that the seed Crowther sowed travelled further than anyone could trace.

The Historians

In the century after his death, as the missionary era ended and Africa's nations became independent, historians began to look at Crowther again. The Nigerian historian J. F. Ade Ajayi, in a study of the Nigerian missions published in 1965, showed how the crisis of 1890 had grown out of a change in European attitudes to Africans, and how Crowther's generation of African Christians had become the educated elite of a new Nigeria. E. A.

Ayandele, another Nigerian historian, admired Crowther but did not flatter him, judging him weak as an administrator and a disciplinarian. The Scottish historian Andrew Walls called him probably the most widely known African Christian of the nineteenth century. Lamin Sanneh, the Gambian-born scholar of mission, made him the great example of his argument that Bible translation, by treating African languages as worthy of the word of God, dignified African cultures and prepared the way for African churches to stand on their own.

These historians did not agree on everything. But they agreed that Crowther's personal integrity was never in question, that the mission had real weaknesses, and that the way the crisis of 1890 was handled was unjust and had lasting consequences. Walls summed up Crowther's legacy in a phrase: a Christian faith that was "essentially African and essentially missionary." Crowther was African through and through, and never pretended otherwise. And he was a missionary through and through, who believed that the faith that had set him free must be carried to others.

"It Was Wrong"

In 2014, a hundred and fifty years after Crowther's consecration, a service of thanksgiving and repentance was held in Canterbury Cathedral, where he had been made a bishop. The Archbishop of Canterbury, Justin Welby, preached. He called Crowther "the apostle of Nigeria," and said: "We in the Church of England need to say sorry that someone was properly and rightly consecrated Bishop and then betrayed and let down and undermined. It was wrong."

It had taken more than a century, and it came from the same church and the same cathedral. Crowther would probably have been embarrassed by it. He never asked for an apology, and never spoke publicly against those

who had wronged him. But the apology was not really for his sake. It was for the sake of the truth, and of the African churches who had carried the memory of his treatment for generations.

The Harvest

The greatest change came after all the historians and archbishops. When Crowther was born, there were hardly any Christians in the lands that are now Nigeria. When he died, there were a few thousand, in scattered congregations, many of them nominal. Today Nigeria has one of the largest Christian populations in the world, and its Anglican church is among the largest provinces of the Anglican Communion, with many more worshippers on a Sunday than the Church of England. Most of the world's Christians now live in the global South, and Africa has more Christians than any other continent. The churches of Africa send missionaries of their own across the world, including to Britain.

Crowther did not cause all this, and it would be foolish to claim that he did. Many other people, African and European, and many other movements, from independent African churches to the great revivals of the twentieth century, played their part. But in a real sense he stood at its beginning. He was the first African bishop of the Anglican Church in modern times, and the man through whom many Africans first heard the gospel in their own language. The pattern he believed in, of African churches led by Africans, supported by Africans, and carrying the gospel to their neighbours, is the pattern that prevailed.

Jesus said: "Except a grain of wheat fall into the earth and die, it abideth by itself alone; but if it die, it beareth much fruit" (John 12:24, ASV). Crowther's work seemed to fall into the earth and die in 1891. The fruit came later.

He is remembered today in many ways. The Episcopal Church in the United States and the Church of Nigeria commemorate him on 31 December, the traditional date of his death. There is a university in Oyo that bears his name. His grandson, Herbert Macaulay, is honoured as a father of Nigerian nationalism. And every Sunday, in Yoruba and Igbo and a hundred other languages, African Christians read the Scriptures in their own tongue, as he spent his life to make possible.

Every Nation and Tongue

Crowther used a verse from the Psalms which many African Christians of his century took as a promise for their continent: "Princes shall come out of Egypt; Ethiopia shall haste to stretch out her hands unto God" (Psalm 68:31, ASV). In the Bible, Ethiopia stood for the lands of Africa beyond Egypt, and he believed he was living to see the promise fulfilled.

The vision at the head of this chapter goes further. It is John's vision of heaven, of "a great multitude, which no man could number, out of every nation and of all tribes and peoples and tongues, standing before the throne and before the Lamb." Every tongue: Yoruba and Igbo, Nupe and Hausa, Ijaw and English. Every people: the Egba and the Oyo, the chiefs of Bonny and the slaves of Brass, the Emir of Nupe's people and the congregations of Islington. In that multitude, the distinctions that divided the Niger Mission in 1890 will count for nothing.

Samuel Ajayi Crowther was taken from his home in chains, sold six times, and put on a slave ship bound for the Americas. He was set free by strangers, taught by strangers, and made a Christian by people who did not know his language. He spent the rest of his life making sure that his own people would hear the gospel in theirs. He was wronged at the end, and did not complain. He died saying "Good night." He was essentially African and

essentially missionary. And he is, we may believe, somewhere in that multitude, with a palm in his hand.

Appendix A: Lessons from the Life of Samuel Ajayi Crowther

> *"Remember them that had the rule over you, men that spake unto you the word of God; and considering the issue of their life, imitate their faith."*
> *— Hebrews 13:7, ASV*

The lessons below gather the themes of this book so that readers can return to them. Samuel Crowther would have been uncomfortable being held up as an example. He preferred to point, as he so often did, to "the Hand which has ever overruled." Each lesson therefore rests on Scripture, not on his example alone. The letter to the Hebrews tells us to consider how those who went before us lived and died, and to imitate their faith, not every detail of their lives.

1. God Writes Straight With Crooked Lines

The day he was taken from Osogun in chains was, Crowther wrote, the "unhappy" day which he was later taught "to call blessed." He never pretended that the slave trade was good. He saw that God had brought good out of it. "As for you, ye meant evil against me; but God meant it for good" (Genesis 50:20, ASV).

2. God Sees the Fatherless

A boy who lost his home, his family, and his name at about thirteen was not lost to God. Twenty-five years later he found his mother again. "Thou hast been the helper of the fatherless" (Psalm 10:14, ASV).

3. Freedom Is for Service

He was set free from one kind of slavery and gave himself to another, the service of Christ, which he called "perfect freedom." "For freedom did Christ set us free: stand fast therefore, and be not entangled again in a yoke of bondage" (Galatians 5:1, ASV). The freedom was never for himself alone.

4. Gifts Are Received, Not Earned

When he was praised as proof of what an African could achieve, he turned Paul's question on himself: "who maketh thee to differ? and what hast thou that thou didst not receive?" (1 Corinthians 4:7, ASV). Humility is simply the truth about where our gifts come from.

5. People Need the Word in Their Own Language

He spent his life giving the Yoruba, and then other peoples of the Niger, the Scriptures in their own tongue. At Pentecost every hearer asked, "how hear we, every man in our own language wherein we were born?" (Acts 2:8, ASV). The gospel is meant to be heard as a mother tongue, not a foreign one.

6. Preach With Sympathy, Not Scorn

He told his clergy not to dispute with Muslims or to mock the worshippers of the old gods, but to speak "with the feelings of sympathy with all classes of hearers." "Let your speech be always with grace, seasoned with salt" (Colossians 4:6, ASV).

7. Africa by Her Own Children

He believed, from 1841 onwards, that Africa would be evangelised chiefly by Africans. Every church, in every land, is meant to grow its own leaders. "The little one shall become a thousand, and the small one a strong nation" (Isaiah 60:22, ASV).

8. Hard Providences Are Not the End

Wrecked at Jebba, robbed and held for ransom by Abokko, burned out at Onitsha and Gbebe, he kept writing: "though it is night with us now daylight shall come." "We are pressed on every side, yet not straitened; perplexed, yet not unto despair" (2 Corinthians 4:8, ASV).

9. Home Is Also a Calling

When his wife was dying, he gave up his annual visitation of the Niger to stay with her, and let the mission wait. "Charity begins at home," he said. "If any provideth not for his own, and specially his own household, he hath denied the faith" (1 Timothy 5:8, ASV).

10. Gentleness Must Not Become Neglect

His mercy to men who had fallen was real, but it allowed some unworthy men to stay, and a mission run on mercy without close oversight once employed men who did terrible wrong. Leaders are called to restore the fallen gently and to guard the flock faithfully. “Restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness; looking to thyself, lest thou also be tempted” (Galatians 6:1, ASV).

11. Zeal Without Patience Does Harm

The young men who judged his mission were sincere, devoted, and ready to die. They were also, as the society’s own historian later wrote, “too severe.” Zeal for purity that forgets humility becomes its own sin. “The wrath of man worketh not the righteousness of God” (James 1:20, ASV).

12. Suffer Wrong Without Bitterness

He was wronged at the end of his life by his own side. He protested and withdrew from the committee, but he did not turn bitter. His last letter, a draft he never sent, said only that he had always been willing “to be improved by the ideas of others.” “Who, when he was reviled, reviled not again; when he suffered, threatened not; but committed himself to him that judgeth righteously” (1 Peter 2:23, ASV).

13. Churches Can Repent

More than a century later, the Church that had wronged him said, in the cathedral where he was consecrated, “It was wrong.” Institutions, like

people, can confess their sins. “If we confess our sins, he is faithful and righteous to forgive us our sins” (1 John 1:9, ASV).

14. The Seed Is Not the Harvest

At his death his mission seemed to have collapsed. A century later, the churches of Nigeria were among the largest in the world. Faithfulness is measured by God, not by what the faithful live to see. “Except a grain of wheat fall into the earth and die, it abideth by itself alone; but if it die, it beareth much fruit” (John 12:24, ASV).

Appendix B: Chapter-by-Chapter Study and Reflection Guide

"But be ye doers of the word, and not hearers only, deluding your own selves."
— James 1:22, ASV

This guide is for personal reflection, small groups, or a reading course of about twenty-four weeks. Its purpose is not to make Samuel Crowther an object of admiration, but to let his life hold up a mirror in which readers can examine their own discipleship under Scripture. Groups may find it helpful to begin each session with the chapter's opening verse and to end with prayer. Several chapters raise hard questions about slavery, race, mission, and the failures of the Church. They are meant to be discussed honestly, not settled quickly.

Introduction - The Bishop and His Biographers

Central idea

Crowther's own letters and journals are the surest guide to his life; later biographers added legend on one side and prejudice on the other.

Scriptures to revisit

Habakkuk 2:2; Proverbs 18:17.

Reflection

1. Why does it matter whether a Christian biography is accurate? 2. How can we honour a hero without hiding his faults or his wrongs?

Chapter 1 - Ajayi of Osogun

Central idea

God knew and shaped a boy born into a world of war and slave-raiding, before anyone recorded his birthday.

Scriptures to revisit

Psalm 139:13-16; Acts 17:26-27.

Reflection

1. What does it mean that God knows us before anyone else does? 2. What in your own background has God used that you once thought was only a loss?

Chapter 2 - The Unhappy, Blessed Day

Central idea

The day he was enslaved was the day God began to lead him, though he did not know it.

Scriptures to revisit

Genesis 50:20; Matthew 6:13; Romans 8:28.

Reflection

1. Crowther called the day of his capture both “unhappy” and “blessed.” Can both be true? 2. How should we speak about great evils that God has brought good out of?

Chapter 3 - Myrmidon

Central idea

Freedom came to him through strangers on a British warship, an act of justice he never forgot.

Scriptures to revisit

Isaiah 61:1; Luke 4:18.

Reflection

1. Who has been an instrument of freedom in your life? 2. What does it mean to “proclaim liberty to the captives” today?

Chapter 4 - Samuel Crowther

Central idea

In Sierra Leone the rescued boy became a new person in Christ, with a new name, a new calling, and a wife who shared his story.

Scriptures to revisit

2 Corinthians 5:17; John 8:36.

Reflection

1. What changed, and what did not change, when Ajayi became Samuel? 2. Why did he call the service of Christ "perfect freedom"?

Chapter 5 - The Niger, 1841

Central idea

A disastrous expedition convinced him that Africa must be evangelised chiefly by Africans.

Scriptures to revisit

Acts 1:8; 1 Corinthians 1:27-29.

Reflection

1. What can be learned from a mission that failed? 2. Who are the people best placed to carry the gospel in your own community?

Chapter 6 - “Who Maketh Thee to Differ?”

Central idea

His ordination made him a sign of what Africans could do, and he answered praise by pointing to grace.

Scriptures to revisit

1 Corinthians 4:7; Luke 14:22.

Reflection

1. How do you respond to praise? 2. What did the Shango drummer’s charge teach Crowther, and what does it teach the Church?

Chapter 7 - The Helper of the Fatherless

Central idea

God brought him back to his own people and gave him his mother again after twenty-five years.

Scriptures to revisit

Psalm 10:14; Psalm 68:5-6.

Reflection

1. Have you seen God restore something you thought was lost for ever? 2. What did his mother mean when she said, “You are no longer my son, but the servant of God”?

Chapter 8 - In Our Own Language

Central idea

He gave the Yoruba the Scriptures in their mother tongue and a written language to read them in.

Scriptures to revisit

Acts 2:8; Revelation 7:9.

Reflection

1. Why does it matter to hear God’s word in your own language? 2. How might translation be a form of love?

Chapter 9 - The Pleiad

Central idea

A voyage in which no one died showed the Niger could be opened, and showed his patient method with chiefs and Muslims.

Scriptures to revisit

Psalm 121:7-8; Colossians 4:5-6.

Reflection

1. How did Crowther speak with Muslims and with chiefs? 2. What can we learn from his patience?

Chapter 10 - Wrecked at Jebba

Central idea

A shipwreck left him stranded for a year, and he kept working.

Scriptures to revisit

2 Corinthians 4:8-9; Philippians 4:11-13.

Reflection

1. How did Crowther use his time while stranded? 2. What would it look like for you to keep faith through a long interruption?

Chapter 11 - Africa's Own Children

Central idea

Venn and Crowther shared a vision of African churches supporting, governing, and extending themselves.

Scriptures to revisit

Isaiah 60:22; 2 Timothy 2:2.

Reflection

1. What is a "self-supporting, self-governing, self-extending" church? 2. Is your church raising up its own leaders?

Chapter 12 - "I Am Not Worthy"

Central idea

He accepted the bishopric reluctantly, and his consecration was both a triumph and a sign of limits.

Scriptures to revisit

1 Samuel 2:8; 1 Peter 5:2-3.

Reflection

1. Why did Crowther refuse at first? 2. What do the newspaper reactions reveal about the prejudices of the time, and of ours?

Chapter 13 - A Bishop in a Canoe

Central idea

As bishop he lived dangerously, and in captivity he was fed by slaves.

Scriptures to revisit

Acts 20:24; 1 Kings 17:6.

Reflection

1. What did the kindness of Abokko's slaves mean to him? 2. Why did he wish he had died instead of Fell?

Chapter 14 - Sympathy with All Classes

Central idea

His charges to his clergy taught the gospel first, preaching like Christ, and sympathy instead of scorn.

Scriptures to revisit

1 Peter 3:15; Genesis 18:25.

Reflection

1. What does it mean to preach "with sympathy" to people of other religions? 2. Where does his teaching show him to be a man of his time?

Chapter 15 - Cotton Gins and Gin

Central idea

He hoped honest trade would end the slave trade, and he fought the liquor traffic alongside a Muslim emir.

Scriptures to revisit

Isaiah 2:4; Habakkuk 2:15.

Reflection

1. Why did Crowther call the cotton gin “our gun”? 2. Where do trade and faith meet in your own life?

Chapter 16 - The Delta Churches

Central idea

Persecution in the Delta produced strong, self-supporting churches.

Scriptures to revisit

Psalm 76:10; Acts 4:19-20.

Reflection

1. How did persecution strengthen the Delta churches? 2. Where might you need to say, “I cannot do it, and I dare not do it”?

Chapter 17 - Asano

Central idea

Behind his journeys stood a wife and family who made them possible.

Scriptures to revisit

Song of Songs 8:6-7; Proverbs 31:28-29; Joshua 14:10-11.

Reflection

1. Who made your own work possible, unseen? 2. What is the "hill country" you are still asking God for?

Chapter 18 - The Gathering Storm

Central idea

The mission had real problems, and his gentleness was both a virtue and a weakness.

Scriptures to revisit

Galatians 6:1; 2 Corinthians 11:28.

Reflection

1. When does mercy become neglect? 2. Why is it important not to leave the Onitsha crime out of the story?

Chapter 19 - Onitsha, 1890

Central idea

Young missionaries humiliated an old African bishop and his clergy, and the society's own historian later called them "too severe."

Scriptures to revisit

Psalm 55:12-14; 2 Timothy 2:21; James 1:19-20.

Reflection

1. What went wrong at Onitsha, on both sides? 2. How can zeal for purity become a sin?

Chapter 20 - The Delta Pastorate

Central idea

The Delta churches answered injustice by taking responsibility for themselves, not by leaving the Church.

Scriptures to revisit

Isaiah 54:2; 1 Corinthians 3:6.

Reflection

1. Why does it matter that the Delta Pastorate was not a secession? 2. How should Christians respond when their church wrongs them?

Chapter 21 - “Good Night”

Central idea

He died humbly, without bitterness, still willing to learn.

Scriptures to revisit

2 Timothy 4:7; Psalm 4:8.

Reflection

1. What do his last letter and his last words tell you about him? 2. How would you like to finish your own course?

Chapter 22 - A Weaned Child

Central idea

His character was marked by humility, prayer, patience, and gratitude, though his deference to Europeans had a cost.

Scriptures to revisit

Psalm 131:1-2; Philippians 2:3; Nehemiah 2:4.

Reflection

1. How do you read his letter “I know my place as negro”? 2. What is the difference between humility and letting others wrong you?

Chapter 23 - Essentially African, Essentially Missionary

Central idea

His work seemed to die with him, but it bore fruit in the churches of Africa.

Scriptures to revisit

Revelation 7:9; John 12:24; Psalm 68:31.

Reflection

1. What does Archbishop Welby's apology teach about institutional repentance? 2. What seed are you sowing that you may not see grow?

Appendix C: Chronology of the Life and Times of Samuel Ajayi Crowther

"So teach us to number our days, That we may get us a heart of wisdom."
— Psalm 90:12, ASV

The dates below are meant as orientation. Dates taken from Crowther's own letters and journals, or confirmed by the missionary society's records, are given plainly. Where the sources disagree, the disagreement is noted. Dates given only by Jesse Page are followed unless they are plainly wrong.

c. 1807 - Birth

Ajayi is born at Osogun, in the Oyo country of the Yoruba, in what is now south-western Nigeria. The year is unknown. Estimates range from about 1802 (his gravestone) to about 1810; this book follows the common estimate of about 1807. His mother, Ibisomi, bore the title Afala.

1821 - Captured

Early in the year, as he dated it, Osogun is attacked by raiders in the wars that follow the collapse of the Oyo empire. He is enslaved and passed from owner to owner, and eventually sold to Portuguese slavers at Lagos.

7 April 1822 - Rescued

The slave ship carrying him is stopped off Lagos by HMS *Myrmidon* and HMS *Iphigenia* of the Royal Navy's West Africa Squadron.

17 June 1822 - Sierra Leone

He is landed at Freetown and sent to the mission village of Bathurst, under Mr. Davey. Mrs. Weeks, the wife of a missionary, teaches him.

11 December 1825 - Baptism

Baptised Samuel Crowther by the Rev. J. Raban.

1826-1827 - England

He visits England with the Daveys and attends the parish school in Liverpool Road, Islington.

1827 - Fourah Bay

He becomes, as tradition records, the first student entered at the new Christian Institution at Fourah Bay, Freetown.

21 September 1829 - Marriage

He marries Asano, baptised Susan Thompson, a Yoruba girl freed from another slave ship in October 1822.

1829-1841 - Teacher

Schoolmaster at Regent and Wellington; from 1834 a tutor at Fourah Bay. In February 1837 he writes the letter describing his capture and rescue.

1841 - The Niger Expedition

He sails as a catechist with J. F. Schön on the government expedition up the Niger. Forty-two Europeans die within about two months. At Fernando Po on 2 November he writes that Africa can chiefly be benefited "by her own Children."

1842-1843 - Ordination

He studies at the Church Missionary College, Islington. His *Vocabulary of the Yoruba Language* is published. He is made deacon by the Bishop of London on 11 June 1843, and ordained priest in October.

December 1843 - Return to Africa

He lands at Freetown on 2 December 1843 and preaches his first sermon in Africa the next day. On 9 January 1844 he leads the first public service in Yoruba.

17 January 1845 - Badagry

He reaches Badagry with Henry Townsend and C. A. Gollmer.

August 1846 - Abeokuta

He enters Abeokuta on 3 August. On 21 August he is reunited with his mother after twenty-five years.

February 1848 - His Mother's Baptism

His mother is baptised Hannah, among the first converts of the Abeokuta mission. Sources give the day as 5 or 6 February.

1851 - England Again

He meets Lord Palmerston, and on 18 November is received at Windsor by Queen Victoria and Prince Albert, and recites the Lord's Prayer in Yoruba. In December the Royal Navy attacks Lagos.

1854 - The Pleiad

He sails with Dr. W. B. Baikie up the Niger and the Benue. The voyage returns on 4 November without a single death.

1857 - The Dayspring

He sails on 29 June to found the Niger Mission, with an all-African staff. Onitsha is reached on 26 July and a station founded. On 7 October the *Dayspring* is wrecked near Jebba, and the party is stranded for a year.

14 September 1862 - First Fruits

The first baptisms of the Niger Mission, at Gbebe near the Confluence.

29 June 1864 - Consecration

Consecrated in Canterbury Cathedral as bishop of "the countries of Western Africa beyond the limits of our dominions," after receiving the degree of Doctor of Divinity from Oxford. He holds his first ordination at Lagos on 22 August, and begins the mission at Bonny.

1866 - The First Charge

His first charge to his clergy is printed in London. Further charges follow in 1869, 1874, and 1885.

1867 - A Year of Troubles

Easter Day: the chiefs of Bonny renounce the worship of the sacred lizard. In September he and Dandeson are held for ransom by Abokko near Idda; on 28 September they escape, and William Fell is mortally wounded. In October the missionaries are expelled from Abeokuta.

19 June 1870 - Dandeson Ordained

He ordains his son Dandeson deacon at St. Mary's, Islington.

1873 - Death of Henry Venn

Venn, his friend and patron, dies.

1875-1876 - Igbo and the Delta

He chooses the Isuama dialect as the standard for Igbo translation. Dandeson becomes Archdeacon of the Lower Niger (1876 in modern

accounts; Stock gives 1878). King Ockiya of Brass gives up his household gods.

c. 1877 - Crime at Onitsha

A girl dies after cruel treatment by two African employees of the mission, one of them a dismissed teacher whom the bishop had re-employed. The case comes to trial in 1882.

11 June 1877 - Royal Geographical Society

He reads a paper on the Niger to the Society in London.

1878 - The Henry Venn

The mission steamer arrives, with J. H. Ashcroft as lay agent in charge of the mission's business affairs.

1879 - Brass and Onitsha

Onitsha is shelled and burned by HMS *Pioneer* in October. King Ockiya of Brass is baptised on Advent Sunday.

1880 - Wood's Report; Susan's Death

J. B. Wood reports unfavourably on the mission. Susan Crowther dies at Lagos on 19 October, after fifty-one years of marriage.

1881 - Madeira

A conference at Madeira agrees reforms, including an English secretary to live on the Niger.

1882 - Phillips

He ordains Thomas Phillips priest in England, the first ordination of an Englishman by an African bishop. In September the London papers report the conviction at Sierra Leone in the Onitsha case.

1883 - Attacks and Losses

On 26 February he writes his "Caleb" letter from Bonny. On 12 April the Duke of Somerset attacks the society in the House of Lords. Several agents are let go. His mother dies at Lagos in October.

1884 - The Yoruba Bible

The complete Bible in Yoruba is published. In January and February he writes the letters "I know my place as negro" and "I am ready to yield place to others"; the society declines. In December the society protests to the Foreign Office against the liquor trade.

1886 - The Royal Niger Company

The British trading firms on the Niger are chartered as the Royal Niger Company.

1887 - Robinson

J. A. Robinson becomes secretary of the Niger Mission.

1890 - The Crisis

On 20 January, at Exeter Hall, he blesses the new missionaries; all sail in February. In August, at a committee meeting at Onitsha, African agents and clergy are dismissed or suspended, among them Archdeacon Dandeson Crowther. The bishop withdraws from the committee.

January 1891 - The Report

The society's report confirms some suspensions and reverses others, admits inadequate supervision, and declares the situation on the Niger "extremely lamentable."

1891 - Stroke

Robinson dies in June. In the summer the bishop suffers a stroke at Bonny. He moves to Lagos, arriving on 28 September, and stays with his daughter Abigail Macaulay. The Delta churches decline further money from the society and ask to become a self-supporting pastorate; the bishop forwards their request with his approval.

31 December 1891 - Death

He dies at Lagos, at a quarter to one in the morning according to his daughter's account, which would strictly make the date 1 January 1892. He is buried on 1 January beside his wife and mother.

29 April 1892 - The Delta Pastorate

The self-supporting Niger Delta Pastorate is inaugurated at Bonny.

1893-1894 - The Successor

Joseph Sidney Hill is consecrated Bishop in Western Equatorial Africa on 29 June 1893, with Charles Phillips and Isaac Oluwole as African assistant bishops. Hill dies at Lagos in January 1894.

1896 - The Pastorate Constitution

A formal constitution settles the Delta Pastorate as a self-supporting branch of the Church of England.

4 August 1898 - Memorial

A marble monument is unveiled over his grave at Lagos.

1938 - Death of Dandeson

Archdeacon Dandeson Coates Crowther dies at Freetown.

2014 - Repentance

At a service of thanksgiving and repentance in Canterbury Cathedral, 150 years after the consecration, Archbishop Justin Welby says of Crowther's treatment: "It was wrong."

Appendix D: Notes on Sources and Method

"it seemed good to me also, having traced the course of all things accurately from the first, to write unto thee in order ... that thou mightest know the certainty concerning the things wherein thou wast instructed."
— Luke 1:3-4, ASV

This appendix explains where the story told in this book comes from, how the sources were weighed, and which popular claims have been corrected. It is written for readers who want to check the story for themselves, and for anyone who will retell it.

Crowther's Own Writings

Samuel Crowther is unusual among the missionaries of his century in that so much of his own voice survives. Wherever possible, this book has let him speak for himself. The principal writings used are these, all now in the public domain:

- His letter of February 1837 to the Rev. William Jowett, describing his capture, enslavement, and rescue. It was printed as an appendix to the *Journals of the Rev. James Frederick Schön and Mr. Samuel Crowther, who, with the Sanction of Her Majesty's Government, Accompanied the Expedition up the Niger, in 1841* (London, 1842).

The same volume contains his own journal of the 1841 expedition and his letter from Fernando Po on native agency. Jesse Page later reprinted the 1837 letter with a number of small errors, so this book quotes it from the 1842 printing.

- *Journal of an Expedition up the Niger and Tshadda Rivers* (London, 1855), his account of the *Pleiad* voyage of 1854.
- *The Gospel on the Banks of the Niger* (London, 1859), with J. C. Taylor, the journals of the *Dayspring* expedition and the founding of the Niger Mission.
- *A Charge Delivered on the Banks of the River Niger in West Africa* (London, 1866), his first charge to his clergy.
- His paper on the Niger read to the Royal Geographical Society on 11 June 1877 and printed in its *Proceedings*.
- His letters and later charges, as quoted by Jesse Page and Eugene Stock.

The Biographers

Jesse Page wrote two popular lives, *Samuel Crowther: The Slave Boy Who Became Bishop of the Niger* (1888) and *The Black Bishop: Samuel Adjai Crowther* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1908). The second was written with the help of Crowther's family, and it preserves many letters and family memories that are found nowhere else, including Abigail Macaulay's account of her father's death and the story of the Blucher shoes. Page is indispensable, but he must be read with care. He wrote at the family's request, but with the society's co-operation and as its friend, and he smooths over the crisis of 1890, giving almost no names and no details. He sometimes paraphrases letters rather than quoting them exactly, and several of his dates are wrong or inconsistent. He also imagines Crowther's

inner feelings freely, and writes in the language of racial superiority common in his time. This book has used Page for facts and quotations that can be checked or that are plausible, and has marked family stories as family stories.

Eugene Stock's *History of the Church Missionary Society* (3 volumes, London, 1899) is the society's official history, written by a man who was on its staff through the crisis. It is generally reliable on dates and on what the society decided, and it is honest in places, admitting that the young missionaries were "too severe." But it tells the story from the society's side, and it too uses the racial language of its time. A short American missionary booklet on Crowther, published at Hartford, Connecticut, in 1903, has not been relied on, as it contains too many errors.

Modern Historians

This book has drawn facts and interpretations, but not text, from the work of modern historians, especially:

- J. F. Ade Ajayi, *Christian Missions in Nigeria 1841-1891: The Making of a New Élite* (1965), and his edition of the 1837 letter in P. D. Curtin, ed., *Africa Remembered* (1967).
- E. A. Ayandele, *The Missionary Impact on Modern Nigeria 1842-1914* (1966).
- Andrew F. Walls, "The Legacy of Samuel Ajayi Crowther," *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 16:1 (1992).
- Lamin Sanneh, *Translating the Message: The Missionary Impact on Culture* (1989).
- Jehu Hanciles, *Euthanasia of a Mission* (2002), and his work on Dandeson Crowther.

- G. O. M. Tasie, *Christian Missionary Enterprise in the Niger Delta 1864-1918* (1978).
- P. R. McKenzie, *Inter-religious Encounters in West Africa* (1976), on Crowther's approach to Islam and African religion.
- Emmanuel Egbunu, "Racial Tension in Mission," *Anvil* 36:3 (2020).

These scholars have been read for what they establish, and are named in the text where their judgements are reported. Nothing from their books has been reproduced beyond short phrases.

Corrections to Popular Accounts

Crowther's story is often retold, and some common claims are wrong or uncertain. This book has taken the following positions.

- **His birth year is unknown.** Popular accounts give 1806, 1807, 1809, or 1810 with confidence. His gravestone implies about 1802. No record exists. This book says "about 1807" and means it as an estimate.
- **"The first African bishop."** He was the first African bishop of the Anglican Church, and the first African consecrated a bishop by the Church of England. He was not the first African bishop in history; the ancient churches of North Africa and Ethiopia had African bishops for centuries.
- **"The first African Anglican priest."** He was not. Philip Quaque of Cape Coast was ordained in the Church of England in 1765. Crowther was, in Stock's words, "the first African clergyman of our day," and the first African ordained for the Church Missionary Society's work in West Africa.

- **The name of the slave ship.** It is usually given as the *Esperança Feliz*. Crowther's own letter does not name it. The name rests on mission tradition.
- **He did not meet Asano on the slave ship.** She was freed from a different ship, some months later.
- **His mother's baptism.** Sources disagree on whether it was 5 or 6 February 1848, and on who baptised her. This book says only February 1848.
- **"Never ill."** Page wrote that Crowther's constitution was proof against fever. His own journals record bouts of fever and dysentery.
- **The kidnapping by Abokko** took place in September 1867, as his diary and the letters of the time show, not 1868, as he said himself ten years later.
- **The Onitsha crime was real.** Some modern retellings present all the charges against the Niger Mission as racist fabrications. A girl was killed at Onitsha by two of the mission's African employees, about 1877, and they were convicted at Sierra Leone in 1882. No source suggests that the bishop knew of the crime, but one of the men, dismissed by him, had later been re-employed out of pity.
- **He was not deposed.** Popular accounts sometimes say that he was removed from his bishopric in 1890. He was not. He withdrew from the mission's finance committee in protest, and remained bishop until his death.
- **Numbers of clergy dismissed.** A figure of "twelve of fifteen African pastors" dismissed circulates widely. This book has not been able to verify it, and does not use it. Stock's own figures for the collapse of the mission's staff between 1890 and 1893 are given in Chapter 23.
- **The Delta Pastorate was not a secession from the Anglican Church.** It was a withdrawal from the financial control of the

missionary society. It remained part of the Church of England, and in time came back into closer relations with the society.

- **The date of his death.** His memorial and his church commemorations give 31 December 1891. His daughter's account puts his death at a quarter to one in the morning, strictly 1 January 1892.
- **The 2014 apology.** Archbishop Justin Welby's words at Canterbury were spoken in a sermon at a service of thanksgiving and repentance. This book has not found a separate formal resolution of apology by the Church Missionary Society, though the society's own journal has since published a Nigerian archbishop's account of the crisis as a racial injustice.
- **Commemoration.** The Episcopal Church in the United States and the Church of Nigeria commemorate him on 31 December. He does not appear in the national calendar of the Church of England.

Language

The nineteenth-century sources describe Africans in terms that are offensive today, and some of them, including Page and at times Stock, assume that Africans are an inferior race. Crowther himself sometimes used the language of his time, speaking of "heathen" and "savages" and of the people as "children." This book has quoted such language only where it was necessary to show what Crowther faced or how he thought, and has tried to make clear where it stands. The terms "heathen" and "idolatry" are used, as Crowther used them, to describe religious practice from a Christian point of view, not to judge the worth of the people who practised it.

Scripture

All Scripture quotations are from the American Standard Version (1901). Crowther himself read the Authorized (King James) Version in English, and where he quotes Scripture in his own words, his wording has been kept.

Method

This book is not a work of original research in archives. It is an attempt to tell a true story accurately, for general readers, from the published sources. Where the sources are uncertain, the book says so. Where they disagree, it has preferred Crowther's own contemporary writings to later recollections, and contemporary records to family memory. Where a detail rests only on a family story or on Page's imagination, it has been marked as such or left out. No conversations have been invented. Every quotation attributed to Crowther or to anyone else comes from the sources named above, except Archbishop Welby's words, which are from his sermon at Canterbury on 29 June 2014 as reported by Anglican News and quoted in *Anvil*.

© Ochorus. An Ochorus Original biography, free to read and share.

This edition was prepared by Ochorus, a free library of Christian classics.

Read it online, free, at https://ochorus.com/books/samuel-ajayi-crowther-a-life/

More free classics at ochorus.com