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Introduction

Hostage. Captive. Slave.

For most modern people these terms are merely metaphors for our psychological or financial or political woes. We speak of being slaves to our addictions or hostages to debt or captives of what we see as an oppressive political system. If we have a spiritual worldview we may think in terms of our bondage and deliverance from sin and death. But very few of us will ever undergo the literal experience of being held hostage or being taken into slavery.

These metaphors resonate so strongly with us however because for much of human history, the struggle to be free from captivity and slavery was a very real, literal experience. The ever-present threat of war, conquest and capture made the prospect of being taken hostage or sold into slavery a realistic fear for people of all countries and classes. By the late 17th century, the time period covered in this book, the explosion of commercial trade made merchant and cargo ships attractive targets and their crews ready sources of slave labor.

It is ironic of course that the peak of the attacks against European Christians occurred at the same time as the development of the Atlantic slave trade that brought millions of Africans to the New World. While it is fashionable in some academic circles to suggest that the attacks against Europeans were justified, and perhaps in retaliation for the abuse of Africans, it should be noted that the same Islamic rulers who were enslaving Christian sailors were also capturing and selling black Africans to the European slave traders. During the years 1500-1750 it is estimated that 12-15 million African slaves made the Atlantic crossing, while 1.25-1.5 million Europeans were enslaved on the Barbary Coast.¹ This fact wasn't lost on a later generation of abolitionists: U.S. Senator Charles Sumner in 1853 caustically described the slave-holding portion of the country as "the Barbary States of America."² Even Thomas Jefferson, himself a slaveowner, warned that Virginia was becoming "the Barbary of the Union."³

Behind these statistics, however, are the stories of men facing the terrifying ordeal of

¹ Robert C. Davis, *Christian Slaves, Muslim Masters: White Slavery in the Mediterranean, the Barbary Coast, and Italy, 1500-1800*, Houndsmill: Palgrave MacMillan 2003,

² Charles Sumner, *White Slavery in the Barbary States*, Boston: John P. Jewett and Company, 1853. pg. 11

³ Thomas Jefferson, *Writings*, vol. iv, pg. 333. Cited in Sumner, *White Slavery in the Barbary States*, pg. 11

capture, often followed by abuse, torture, and years of starvation and forced labor while their families and governments struggled, usually in vain, to win their freedom. The families of the hostages were faced with the knowledge that their loved ones almost certainly would not be returning to them, but nevertheless spent years raising ransom money and petitioning the government for help, refusing to give up hope of being reunited with their husbands and sons. As Cotton Mather notes in *The Goodness of God*, his joyous sermon celebrating the return of a group of long-held seamen, the miraculous nature of their deliverance was evidenced by the fact that “In former years, the lions den, in that part of Barbary where you have been cast, had this unhappy character upon it: *few or none returned.*”

Although 17th century sailors were, like their counterparts today, a hardy lot, even the sturdiest of seamen would have difficulty surviving on the diet described in *A True Account of the Captivity of Thomas Phelps*, an English ship master who endured a year of captivity under Moroccan King Moulay Ismail before escaping with four other captured slaves: “their bread, which was made of barley, but black, and withal it stunk, the corn being kept seven years under ground before us.” This was hardly the kind of nutrition required for work in the cement factories of Meknes or for rowing pirate galleys. It is little surprise that between 15 to 30

percent of all captives died of starvation or related diseases.⁴

On top of that misery was the ever-present threat of violence at the hands of their masters, or in the case of the unfortunate slaves of Meknes, at the hands of Moulay Ismail himself. While that king is rightfully regarded as one of the most effective rulers in Moroccan history, he frequently displayed murderous outbursts that can only be considered either psychotic or demonic. Phelps relates how after being beaten and stoned by his captors following an audience with the King, he was assured by his fellow slaves that he had gotten off easy: “that none can be secure in his presence for that the varying of a look, a small spot in the garment, or any such inconsiderable circumstance will raise such a caprice in the Emperor’s noodle, without any other provocation, as to endanger all the heads before him, and it is very rare if the company escapes with one or two only beheaded or lanced through the body.”

⁴ Davis, pgs. 16-19

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***A True Account of the Captivity
of Thomas Phelps at Machaness
at Barbary,
And of his strange escape in
company of Edmund Baxter and
others, as also of the burning of
two of the greatest pirate ships
belonging to that kingdom, in the
river of Mamora, upon the
thirteenth day of June, 1685.***



For those hostages surviving their initial capture and enslavement, the next major hurdle was raising the ransom that might buy their freedom. For the average seaman, this was an impossible task: sailors, both on military and merchant ships, were not paid a monthly salary, but rather received a lump sum at the successful conclusion of their voyage. When the ship went down or was captured, their wages went with it, along with any chance of redeeming themselves. These unfortunate souls often ended their days at the oars of a slave galley.

In the aftermath of the Crusades, several religious orders were founded for the purpose of ransoming Christians kidnapped by Muslims, with the primary intent of saving them from forced conversion. These orders, such as the Trinitarians, the Redemptorists, and the Lazarites, operated up until the time of the French Revolution, when their assets were seized and their property confiscated. The priests and brothers of the orders would often conduct ransom negotiations on behalf of the captive's family, take up collections to pay the required sum, and sometimes even offer themselves as collateral, allowing the hostage to travel home and raise the needed funds.

After the Reformation, however, sailors from Protestant countries like England were unlikely to receive aid from these religious sources. Their families were left to raise the money on their own, a task that often took years and that was often unable

to be completed before the captive's death. By the 17th century, family members were regularly petitioning Parliament for help; in 1625, a group of "distressed wives of neere 2,000 pore mariners" petitioned King Charles I to make ransom arrangements with Morocco in order to free the men. A mission was eventually sent, but returned in 1627 with only 197 released hostages.⁵

In the years preceding the English Civil War portions of the Ship Money collected on behalf of the King were set aside for the redemption of captives in the Barbary States, and the failure to obtain their release has been cited as an indirect cause of the war.⁶ In 1641, "An Act for the Relief of the Captives, taken by Turkish, Moorish and other Pirates, and to prevent the taking of others in time to come," was passed by Parliament, authorizing an additional one percent tax on all imported and exported goods for three years, in order to raise the funds to ransom English sailors enslaved in North Africa.

During the Interregnum, Parliament was active on behalf of the captives, passing an "Ordinance for Collections to be made for relief of Captives in Algiers" in 1643; the "Ordinance for the Redemption of Captives in Algiers" in 1644;

⁵ "Still waiting for an apology from the shores of Tripoli," An Englishman's Castle,

<http://www.anenglishmanscastle.com/archives/003430.html>

⁶ Nabil Matar, *Britain and Barbary, 1589-1689*, Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2005, pg. 48-51.

and yearly continuing resolutions up until 1654. Sadly though, these efforts resulted in only a few hostages returning home.

By the 1680s, the time of Thomas Phelps' capture, ransom arrangements were mainly handled by merchants operating in the commercial centers of the Barbary States, but even a large sum such as the one hundred and fifty pounds offered for Phelps was often unable to win a hostage's freedom. And in some cases, such as the unfortunate 1680 incident related by Phelps, the ransom was paid, only to be pocketed by Moulay Ismail, who then resold the redeemed captives back into slavery to new masters.

This incident, which inspired some disturbingly anti-semitic remarks from Phelps, was a typical example of how the tyrannical rulers of the Barbary States would set their oppressed minorities, the Christians and Jews, against each other, reducing the risk of their rising up against their common enemy. During the reign of Moulay Raschid, Moulay Ismail's brother and predecessor, Jews were expelled from many areas of Morocco and their towns and synagogues destroyed. Moulay Ismail ordered these to be rebuilt; with the constant threat of slaughter hanging over their heads, the Jewish leaders complied, using the only available labor force: the Christian slaves.⁷

⁷ Louis de Chenier, *The Present State of the Empire of Morocco*, 1788

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***A Pastoral Letter to the English
Captives in Africa***

By Cotton Mather, 1698



Cotton Mather (1663-1728)

The early colonial settlers were no strangers to captivity and slavery; many were abducted by hostile Indians, never to be heard from again. Cotton Mather was deeply affected by the outbreak of King Philip's War (1675-76) as he was attending Harvard College --- more than a dozen towns were completely destroyed, with their inhabitants slaughtered or sold into slavery. Cotton's father, Increase Mather called for a colony-wide day of prayer and fasting to beseech God for victory over the enemy, and when Philip was shot dead a week later, Cotton believed it was a "providential stroke."⁸

New England was also plagued by pirates, both in the Atlantic and West Indies, as well as the Barbary Pirates of North Africa. Mather preached frequently against piracy, calling on the perpetrators to repent before it was too late. He ministered to several imprisoned pirates before their execution, often aiding the families of the condemned men. Still, it was the victims of piracy that received his fullest attention and prayers.

In this letter written to a group of New England sailors captured in the 1680s and 90s, he expresses the determination of the community to exhaust all means to bring them home safely. He offers

⁸ Kenneth Silverman, *The Life and Times of Cotton Mather*, New York: Harper and Row, Publishers, 1984, pgs. 19-21

encouragement to the enslaved men and urges them to hold fast to their Christian faith, even unto death if necessary. This letter is meant to be both comforting and challenging, assuring the men that they are remembered and loved, while at the same time reminding them that their present suffering, however grievous, is nothing compared to the eternity of suffering awaiting those who abandon their God.

We are distressed for you, O our Brethren, we are distressed for you!

Our neighborhood is, with bitter anguish, pouring out the Lamentations that were of old heard among the people of God. In Lam 1:18, *The Lord is righteous, for I have rebelled against His commandment: Hear I pray you, all people, and behold my sorrow; My young men are gone into captivity.* And when we consider what a dreadful and what a doleful, and how inexpressibly miserable captivity it is that you have gone into, the lamentations of our sorrow do indeed become inexpressible. But though we cannot express the agony of mind that seizes us, when we do at full tables and in our soft lodgings, with all our friends about us call to mind, as we often do, *How 'tis with*

you? Yet we would express a little of that affection that we bear you by letting you know, *That we remember you.*

And the remembrance which we have of you causes us *Without ceasing to make mention of you in our prayers,*⁹ and our ardent and constant cries unto the God of all Grace, that you may have grace to help you in your time of need, so it puts us upon writing unto you those things which may help to instruct and strengthen and comfort you in the midst of your terrible temptations. Jeremiah the Prophet thought it his duty to write a letter unto those of his people that were carried captives by a bitter and hasty nation. And from a sense of duty it is that we now send a letter unto you, for your consolation in that captivity where you are now languishing under bitter and heavy afflictions. Indeed, when the Israelites of old were in the cruel and grievous hands of their Egyptian taskmasters, we read *They harkened not unto Moses, for anguish of spirit and for cruel bondage.*¹⁰ But we hope that all the anguish of spirit and cruel bondage, which you suffer from worse than Egyptian taskmasters, will not hinder you from hearkening to those admonitions which must now be given you.

Now in the first place, we must let you know that we are still very much concerned for your *being*

⁹ Romans 1:9

¹⁰ Exodus 6:9

*preserved faithful unto the death*¹¹ in that Christian faith which you have hitherto professed. We earnestly beg of God for you, that whatever miseries you undergo, you may not, in a vain hope of deliverance from those miseries, renounce the Christian religion. Those wretched *renegados*¹² who have abandoned the Christian religion in expecting thereby to mend their condition in this world have not always had their expectation answered; the dreadful vengeance of God hath sometimes filled them with confusion, by causing their oppressors afterwards to slight them, and vex them and more barbarously than before to multiply oppressions upon them. Or if you should get any abatement of your daily burdens by becoming apostates from the Christian religion, yet the jealous God can smite you with such horror of conscience in this world for your apostasy, as would be more intolerable than all the torments you ever yet endured; and He will certainly punish it with the vengeance of eternal fire in the world to come, where the smoke of your torments will ascend for ever and ever.

We do, with a most unutterable sympathy, feel your miseries, and we would gladly do and

¹¹ Revelation 2:10

¹² A renegade or apostate, a person who allows themselves to be converted, even under duress. Besides the spiritual danger of converting to Islam, apostates also became ineligible for ransom assistance from religious orders such as the Redemptorists and the Mathurians, organized specifically to redeem Christian captives.

spend all we can to rescue you from them. Nevertheless, we would rather you should endure all manner of temporal miseries than incur eternal ones. We had rather a Turk or a Moor should continually trample on you than that the Devil should make a prey of you. The great God hath said concerning His Christian religion, *If any man draw back from it, my Soul shall have no pleasure in him.*¹³ Nor can you do a thing more displeasing to our souls or destructive to your own than to backslide from that holy religion. Truly, it's being as called it, a holy religion. That one thing is enough that to give you an everlasting assurance of it's being the Way of Truth, and the only religion worthy to be embraced and maintained with a reasonable man.

¹³ Hebrews 10:38