

Religion, Spirituality and Apocalyptic Dystopia: Socio-Rhetorical Re-Reading of Jeremiah (30:7) in Dialectical Assessment of Nigeria's Socio-Political Dilemma

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ABSTRACT

The dilemma in Nigeria's socio-political development over the decades has been widespread religious affinities and spirituality. In the multi-cultural, multi-ethnic and multi-religious environment, her predominantly Christian adherence finds itself encountering more of this dilemma. This article uses Hegelian dialectics and socio-rhetorical lenses to assess Nigeria's socio-political dilemma based on Jer. 30:7. Its findings include a dissonance between religious piety and theo-praxis which crystallises into a complacency evoking an apocalypticism devoid of utopia, and which is unable to provoke a thesis or anti-thesis that could give birth to a new synthesis. It recommends a pendulum shift from mere Christian religious pietism to a religious involvement of the churches in socio-political action that could provide the needed thesis and anti-thesis for a renewed socio-political synthesis. To do so, however, it must retain the apocalyptic component of the Christian faith while actively engaged in religious cum socio-political action.

KEYWORDS: Apocalyptic, Dilemma, Dystopia, Eschatological, Synthesis, Utopia.

A INTRODUCTION

This article shows that religion, spirituality and apocalypticism influence socio-political actions and determine the trend of governance, particularly in developing countries such as Nigeria. Religion, spirituality and apocalypticism concern practical but intangible phenomena such as human attitudes and behaviour. Both religion and spirituality indirectly influence the distribution of Nigeria's commonwealth in the socio-political arena. Researchers and students of Arts or Humanities usually are at a loss when issues of either religion or

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spirituality are being analysed because of the seeming similarity in the analytical scope of the two involving ecclesial, ecological and terrestrial contexts. However, religion as a social institution is not only spiritual but also associated with a future hope of the paradisiacal or utopian consummation of all things. Our focus is on religion and spirituality as informed by apocalypticism, which paradoxically is devoid of utopia.

As a fitting introduction to this discussion the terms religion, spirituality and apocalypticism, utopia and dystopia are defined in the broadest senses of the words within the socio-political context of Nigeria.

B DEFINITIONS

The definition of some terms used in this article will facilitate a common understanding of the perspectives guiding their usages, particularly from a Nigerian perspective. Although words like synthesis, thesis and anti-thesis are used also in discussing the dystopia in Nigeria's apocalypticism, most scholars would relate to the way those words are used both in sociological or theological discourses and their definitions need not detain us. The terms defined here include *religion*, *spirituality*, *apocalypticism*, and *dystopia*.

1 Religion

Religion is an age-old concept and its definition varies in time and from one context to another. For our purposes, religion is defined as "belief in or the worship of a god."¹ A more cultural definition is that given by Clifford Geertz² as:

a set of *symbols* which acts to establish lasting moods and motivations in humans by formulating conceptions of a general order of existence and clothing these conceptions with such an aura of factuality that the moods and motivations seen as uniquely realistic.

The term "symbols" which is used in the above definition is applicable to the practices of religion, spirituality and apocalypticism. In the social sciences, religion is considered a sociological phenomenon endemic to human culture. Therefore, a relationship between religion, spirituality and apocalypticism, particularly in the realm of *praxis* could not be over-emphasised. Geertz further defines symbol as "any physical, social or cultural act or object that serves as a vehicle for conception."³ The Cross in Christianity or the Crescent in *Islam* is as much a symbol of spirituality for the respective

¹ Clifford, Geertz. *The Interpretation of Culture. Selected Essays* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), 907.

² Clifford, *The Interpretation*, p.167.

³ *Ibid.*, 15.

adherents, in the same way that a nation's flag and constitution symbolise national and political unity.

Perhaps, the same could be said of the Bible in Christianity, Koran in *Islam*, and the *Owhor* in African Traditional Religion (ATR). As Wotogbe-Weneka has rightly observed membership of any religious group in Nigeria often brings together professionals such as lawyers, engineers, politicians and so forth.⁴ On the whole, religion especially the Judeo-Christian faith, could be used to induce social and moral transformation if and when its tenets are aptly applied⁵.

2 Spirituality

In a multi-cultural, multi-ethnic and multi-religious society such as Nigeria true religion, spirituality and piety may mean different things to different peoples. The difficulty in arriving at a mutually acceptable definition of a concept is compounded even more by the fact that the lingua franca in use connotes different meanings of words to different people. In other words, there can be no absolute standards of spirituality or of its definition. Perhaps a definition such as is found in extant literature suffices in which spirituality and piety are seen as two sides of the same coin. To be spiritual is to be pious and vice versa. Based on the example of the Deuteronomist, spirituality can be understood to mean a state of mind in which one keeps constantly in mind the tenets or basic doctrines of one's faith.

Thus, spirituality would refer to the inner reflections of a religious mind expressed through prayers, singing, meditations and general piety. This may be akin to what Geertz often refers to as "mood and motivations" involving cogitations and mental processing of religious norms, values, laws and precepts⁶.

3 Apocalypticism

The definition of the word *apocalypse* is rooted in this understanding of religion and spirituality as part of human culture. Apocalypse means that which is uncovered or revealed. An apocalypse claims to be a revelation of the future.

⁴ Wellington O. Wotogbe-Weneka, "Religion: Modern Denigrators and Rehabilitators in National Development" (Inaugural Lecture; University of Port Harcourt, Port Harcourt, 2012), 58.

⁵ Subairu, Yisa S. "Religion as an Agent of Moral Transformation in Nigeria's Socio-Political System.." in Otete C. Okonbiah, Samuel C. Ango, Dele Adeogun, Rachael A. Lateju, and Samuel O. Akintola (Eds) *Godly Values and Lifestyles in the Contemporary Society: The role of Christian Education*. Lagos: Gloryline Christian Publications (2020), pp. 355–368

⁶Clifford. *The Interpretation of Culture*, 167.

The term arose from Jewish conception of history. In this article, we argue that apocalypticism is a religious reality in Nigerian Judeo-Christian circles, but which is bereft of utopia and resonates more with dystopia. In other words, people are willing to know more of the future provided they have enough time to accumulate wealth and live in general wellbeing in the now.⁷

In the classes on introduction to the New Testament, which I taught, the word apocalypse hardly was used not because students are averse to clichés and high-sounding English words but because they prefer that religious and other discourses to be contextualized and brought down to the level of their vocabulary. Instead, I would use words like unveiling or unfolding of God's eternal plans for humankind. Apocalypse therefore unveils or opens a hidden discourse, phenomenon or person.

4 Dystopia

Defining dystopia is even more difficult unless we take a round-about approach. In other words, dystopia would mean everything that utopia would not. If utopia means an imaginary state in which everything is perfect, then, dystopia as an antonym would mean an imaginary state in which everything is abnormal, imperfect and ephemeral. Accordingly, apocalyptic dystopia would then mean a future in which things go on as usual and imperfections remain a veritable part of human experiences. In a dystopia, people are simply realistic and are not trying to build mansions in the sky.⁸

In other words, dystopia is a negation of utopia. It is like idealism negated by realism. The sociological environment within which religious practices flourish could be said to be that of poverty and vulnerability. Various religious preachers build up the hopes of the people, but even this is dashed by spates of insecurity that have been prevalent in Nigeria since the advent of Muslim fundamentalist groups cum 'terrorists.' The attacks by *boko haram* groups, herdsman–farmers clashes, *Miyeti Allah* vandalism of farmlands, like militancy in the Niger Delta, do not make for social stability but instead create a volatile environment in which life is brutish, nasty and short, to use John Locke's aphorism.

Apocalypticism finds fervour among religious adherents in situations of insecurity because of the promises it offers of a better and more assured future in an eschatological sense.⁹ However, the Nigerian situation does not allow for the utopian ideals of paradise to stick with worshippers but rather a dystopia that leaves them groping for a more fulfilling empowerment to deal with the

⁷ Augustine O. Ordu, Christian Oziezi, and Kingsley O. Ebue, "Religion and Poverty Alleviation," in *Contemporary Themes in Religious Discourse* (ed. Wotogbe-Weneka, Wellington O.; Port Harcourt: Dot 7 Concepts, 2022), 144–145.

⁸ Ordu, Oziezi, and Ebue "Religion and Poverty Alleviation," 144–145.

⁹ Ibid.

oddities of present realities. Thus, spirituality and mundane life strike a balance as individuals attempt to stay close to God and enjoy his temporal blessings in an atmosphere devoid of utopia. This is our definition of dystopia.

C BACKGROUND

Having assessed the Jeremiad context, we now turn to the Nigerian context and to explore the rich data at our disposal in our quest for a clearer understanding of the impact of religion, spirituality and apocalypticism on the socio-political environment of Nigeria.

To do so, this article employs the use of scientific methods of data collection and analysis through oral discussions, media chats and print and electronic media to illustrate some of the findings. There are over 60 media houses in Nigeria, a few of which are located on university campuses and many others in metropolises, for instance, Port Harcourt. Every day the Nigerian media is agog with news from both within and outside of government and non-governmental circles.

As social institutions, however, both religion and spirituality attract less media attention, notwithstanding that they both have much in common. In tertiary institutions in Nigeria, the use of the scientific method of gathering and observation of data and its interpretation as well as the application of results from data analysed is in vogue even in the Humanities. There may be slight variations at the scientific level, including results that may or may not be replicable but the scientific method helps in understanding and interpreting human socio-political behaviours at the points in which religion, spirituality and apocalypticism converge.

Through the scientific method which involves the gathering and observation of data and its interpretation as well as the application of results from the data, religion in particular investigates issues such as its impact on socio-political realities, especially in the developing countries. The thesis here however is that religion, spirituality and apocalypticism are characterised by endemic dystopia.

A relationship exists between religion, spirituality and apocalypticism which could lead to utopia or dystopia, as the case may be. This relationship is explored through the "situation in life" of Jeremiah and his Deuteronomist counterparts. It is interesting to underscore the striking similarity between what Jerusalem represented in Jeremiah's days and what is happening in Nigeria today. We are careful however to avoid a direct extrapolation from an ancient Jeremiad context to a contemporary Nigeria, except of course through the

prism of the Cross where the Lord Jesus Christ aptly reconciled the theologies of both Old and New Testaments.¹⁰

D BED FELLOWS?

It was Claassens who drew my attention to the fact that poverty, injustice and structural violence are bed-fellows.¹¹ An additional feature of this triad in the socio-political sphere is that it heightens religious sentiments, spirituality and apocalyptic consciousness among the vulnerable and marginalised in the society including women and youth groups.¹²

Religion, whether African Traditional Religion, Christianity or Islam, influences poverty and the poverty mindset in Nigeria in countless ways. Although Islam had been practiced in the Sahel regions of Nigeria it was not until the advent of European missionaries that its presence began to gain respect.

African Traditional Religion like traditional religions elsewhere on the planet was brought into dialogue with both Christianity and Islam during the colonial and post-colonial days, and the latter often won the conversation as a result of more established religious symbols such as literature and liturgies. Today, the Nigerian constitution recognises the individual liberties of worship, association and conscience. While Christianity especially Protestantism is associated with social and political change and transformation, the same cannot be said of Roman Catholicism, Islam and African Traditional Religion.

The strictures of Max Weber's protestant ethics come alive in Nigeria's socio-political situation in which the non-Catholics and non-Muslims are prone to innovativeness and modernisation, whereas their Catholic and Muslim counterparts stick to their old ways. Generally, orthodox Christianity recognises poverty and other social ills as a challenge. Both the rich and the government have been reprimanded for taking undue advantage of the poor and vulnerable in society, who often are denied basic human rights in favour of various so-called project implementation.¹³

¹⁰ Amadi E. Ahiamadu "Justice and Peace Exemplified by the Gibeonites (Josh 9–10): Implications for Sustainable Peace in Nigeria." *African Journal of Biblical Studies* 32/1-2 (2014): 63–81.

¹¹ Juliana Claassens, "The Hidden Wounds of Structural Violence: Exploring an Intersectional Understanding of Violence in Jeremiah 4–6," *OTE* 31/3 (2018): 617.

¹² Ahiamadu, Amadi E., Akunne, Paul C. Umeh, Samuel C. "Religion and Politics" in *Contemporary Themes in Religious Discourse* (Edited by Wotogbe-Weneka, Wellington O. Port Harcourt: Dot 7 Concepts, 2021), 456–473.

¹³ Ordu, Oziezi, and Ebue "Religion and Poverty Alleviation," 144–145.

These issues contribute to the dystopia which attends the apocalyptic consciousness and make it difficult for any social thesis to provoke an antithesis, thereby falling short of the needed synthesis that should mark the dynamic path to socio-political transformation. It is further corroborated by the socio-political outworking of party politics, which necessitated the present author's earlier observation:

Although this is a far-cry from the contemporary Nigerian *sitz im leben*, there are implications that peace and justice could not be attained in an atmosphere of mutual distrust and recriminations. In multi-ethnic and multi-cultural societies such as ours, peace would be elusive where there is no mutual understanding and trust, and this in turn would be an enigma where justice and human rights are trampled upon by powerful individuals, corporate bodies, multinational companies and indeed the various arms of governmentThe point to note is that Injustice and violations of human rights under any guise will of necessity result in a truncation of the peace process and the institutionalization of violence which is what we see today in Nigeria.¹⁴

Anytime the word apocalypse or apocalyptic is used, it often refers to the book of Revelation in particular, but in general, it refers to the Bible's claims of a revelation of the future when all rights are restored, and all wrongs judged. Usually, the future is also understood to mean a new beginning from the days of some ancient saints and then passing over the times of its natural occurrence, with an end that anticipates the coming of the Messiah, the setting up of the Messianic kingdom and the end of the world.¹⁵ A dystopia, however, would negate all that apocalypticism stands for in the doctrines of Scripture. Of course, there are several apocalyptic writings not directly linked to Scripture but which paved the way for apocalypticism in the Old and New Testaments.¹⁶

The inveterate relationship between apocalypse and dystopia is a prominent feature of Jewish faith and Jeremiah highlights it in our pericope (Jer. 30:1, 7). Though associated, they are not inseparable. That is where the utopian ideals of New Testament apocalypticism comes in, as a complement and not a contradiction of the biblical apocalypse, whether in utopian or dystopian dimension.

Meanwhile, an assessment of Prophet Jeremiah's social context and situation is a fitting ally. To the Jeremiad prophecy and its potential apocalyptic dystopia, we now turn.

¹⁴ Amadi E. Ahiamadu, "Justice and Peace Exemplified by the Gibeonites (Josh 9–10): Implications for Sustainable Peace in Nigeria," *AJBS* 32/1–2 (2016): 63–81.

¹⁵ James, Orr. *International Standard Bible Encyclopaedia (ISBE)* 1 (2014): 134.

¹⁶ James. *ISBE*, 161 - 178.

E APOCALYPTIC DYSTOPIA IN JEREMIAH'S PROPHECY

Prophet Jeremiah could be linked to the Deuteronomistic historian though this is not clear in the views of most scholars. Scholars like Malan and Meyer find no difficulty in linking Prophet Jeremiah with King Josiah and thus with Deuteronomistic History.¹⁷ On the other hand some would prefer to think of Deuteronomistic History as a guild or school of scholars. Interestingly, those who prefer to discuss the authorship of the book of Jeremiah and who associate it with a Deuteronomistic Historian (or redactors) seem to be strongly convinced of their literary stance.¹⁸

For example, Bernhard Duhm (1901) clearly states that Jeremiah is a book of an unfolding personal revelation from Yahweh, rather than one that¹⁹ came together bit by bit.²⁰ Whether or not the book grew in an unfolding rather than an accretive style, as suggested by Duhm, is not nearly as important as knowing that Jeremiah is not only a historical treatise but one of considerable importance to biblical scholars, exegetes and hermeneutists.²¹

Within the Prophetic corpus in particular and Deuteronomistic History in general, the book occupies a very strategic place in both structure and content.²²

Complex as the book of Jeremiah is, it is excusable for some authors to identify a variety of redactors who put parts of the book together. Jeremiah 30 – 31, to some scholars, would sound more apocalyptic than the sections preceding it, in which case apocalypticism, as mentioned earlier is defined in its broadest sense.²³ According to Fischer,²⁴ the book is outstanding in its focus on the grievances leading to the collapse and sacking of Jerusalem. Moreover, Jeremiah as a historical person mourned the demise of King Josiah in 603 BCE and did actually record his laments in the book of Lamentation in reaction to the looming danger of exile and captivity. If Josiah is the sixth century monarch whose zeal to restore the worship of the True God in his holy Temple, and whose activities led to the discovery of the book of the Law, most probably

¹⁷ Morné Malan and Esias E. Meyer, "Jeremiah 26–29: A not so Deuteronomistic Composition," *OTE* 27/3 (2014): 913–929.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ George S. J. Fischer, "Is There Shalom or not? Jeremiah as a Prophet for South Africa," *OTE* 28/2 (2015): 351–370.

²⁰ Fischer, "Is There Shalom or not?" 351–370.

²¹ Amadi E. Ahiamadu, *Redefining Stewardship in Nigeria: A Theological, Ethical and Critical Analysis of Oil Resources Management and Land Use* (Port Harcourt: Pearl Publishers, 2019), 91–92.

²² Ahiamadu, *Redefining Stewardship*, 91–92.

²³ Malan and Meyer, "Jeremiah 26–29," 917.

²⁴ George S. J. Fischer, "Is There Shalom or not? Jeremiah as a Prophet for South Africa," *OTE* 28/2 (2015): 351–370.

the book of Deuteronomy, then; linking the Deuteronomist with Jeremiah is in the opinion of the present author a reasonable conjecture.

In this prophecy, first of all, Yahweh condemns Jerusalem for infidelity and idolatry in Jer 2:11, 27). Later in the seventh chapter, the people come into the Temple tagged a "den of robbers" and deserving of desertion. It is a society lacking *shalom*, and faced with the gloomy prospect of the Babylonian captivity. However, it is when Jer 30:1ff is read in the context of an apocalypse or a transcendental hope that the Prophet's task to "tear down and to pluck up, to destroy and to pull down, to build and to plant" (Jer.1:10) shines out and this in an atmosphere which smacks of apocalyptic utopia. Hence, Jeremiah is a Prophet worth reading today because of the lack of *shalom* prevalent in the socio-political experience not only of ancient Judah but also millennia later today's post-colonial Nigeria.²⁵

A cursory reading of the book of Jeremiah shows that the leaders' accountability not only to Yahweh but also to the people is of paramount importance to the Prophet. More is expected of the elite and less from the common people. As has rightly been observed, for any society to function properly, people need to be accountable to one another. This is true of leaders as well as of the citizenry.²⁶

Suffice it to say that the book of Jeremiah clearly depicts the failures of leadership and its consequent desecration of first the temple, then the land. The implications are as gruesome as are its ameliorations in both time and space. It is not likely that the generations guilty of this mass apostasy and who would be evacuated from the land would be the same generation that would be brought back after seventy years of captivity in a foreign land. Moreover, she would be taken so far away from the traditional homelands that returning would be irksome and even undesirable except for the divine fulfilment of an extant covenant.

On the other hand, apocalypticism in the Old Testament is never devoid of utopia and speaks more of judgment in tandem with an extant salvific process. It is possible that Jeremiah's prophecy has a double *entendre* or application in both a mediate and an immediate sense.

First, in the immediate future, looms the horrors of the Babylonian invasion and the sacking of the land and its people taken into exile – an event which turned out to be the most devastating in canonical history. The negative impact felt by Judah and Jerusalem during these sordid events is notable.

²⁵ Fischer, "Is there Shalom or not?" 351–370.

²⁶ Wilhelm J. Wessels, "Calling Leaders to Account: A Dialogue with Jeremiah 5:1–9," *Old Testament Essays* 28/3 (2015): 874.

Second, it also portrayed a more mediate and eschatological reality visible during the post-exilic end-times with its attendant restoration and jubilee (598 – 587 BCE).

Ronald Youngblood²⁷ restates the exegetical relevance of Jer. 30:7 in understanding the dual implications of apocalyptic passages in general. He cites Scriptures that point at the immediate experience of captivity (Isa. 2:11, 17, 20. Amos 5:18; 8:9) and those that point to a mediate fulfilment of experiences resonating with captivity (Jer. 30:7-8; 18; Joel 2:11; Zeph.1:14).

F A SOCIO-RHETORICAL RE-READING OF (JER 30:7) “A TIME OF JACOB’S TROUBLE”

A socio-rhetorical model, like its counterpart, the *Skopos* theory, interprets the biblical text by keeping the context’s peculiarities in mind.²⁸ It emphasises the importance of a target audience in understanding the “what” and “why” of the interpretive process.²⁹ Nigeria’s socio-political dilemma over the decades elicits a method of re-reading that is sensitive to her dilemma while at the same time fulfils its function of being natural and correct³⁰. This dilemma shall be clearer as we go on. *The Revised Standard Version of Jer 30:7* reads,

“Alas, for that day is so great, there is none like it. It is a time of Jacob’s trouble but he shall be saved out of it”

On a diachronic note, the world in which Jeremiah lived and prophesied was by far more primordial than the one in which we live now. He prophesied amidst turmoil, brigandage of an international scale with the Chaldeans posing a serious threat to national cohesion and integrity. As Claassens rightly observes from a parallel context:

One is called to engage with the overwhelming display of imperial violence that in the text is understood in terms of Divine punishment... and in terms of moral retribution according to which Divine violence is seen as a way in which “the global cosmic order is righting itself by way of retaliation or legitimate defence.”³¹

It is as if in religion, spirituality and apocalypticism the Divine presence is overwhelmingly felt either for good or for ill. A corollary to this is perhaps the “international political circumstances” which inadvertently affected the

²⁷ Roland, Youngblood. “Notes on Jeremiah and Lamentations” in Kenneth Barker (Gen. Ed): *New International Version Study Bible*. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 2004), 1115-1225.

²⁸ Ernst, Wendland. *Translating the Literature of Scripture* (Dallas: SIL), 2004.

²⁹ Naude, Jacobus A. “An Overview of Recent Developments in Translation Studies with Special Reference to the Implications for Bible Translation”, *Acta Theologia Supplementum 2* (2002): 44-69

³⁰ Ernst, *Translating*, 2004

³¹ Claassens, “The Hidden Wounds,” 622–633.

internal politics and religious life of the people of Judah. While the international scene was dominated by Assyria, Egypt and Babylon, the internal power play was being manoeuvred by human elements loyal to these external powers. The worship of foreign deities greatly obtuse what simple loyalty to Yahweh the national Deity meant, and this to the chagrin of the Prophet.

Moreover, those in Judah who had pro-Egyptian sentiments competed with others who were pro-Babylonian. It was difficult to say that since of the days of David and Solomon, Judah in particular or Israel as a whole ever enjoyed national independence in policy and production matters.³² In contemporary societies, political scientists are uncertain that any single nation could enjoy absolute internal and external independence in the true sense of the word. Nations are mutually interdependent. Hence, all socio-political associations are meant to strengthen regional and ideological solidarities. The people of Judah had to deal with the demise of King Josiah in 609 BCE at the cruel hands of Pharaoh Necho II of Egypt, the abuse of power by King Jehoiakim (609-598 BCE), the deportation of King Jehoiachaz (Shallum) to Egypt after only three months on the throne, accusations of idolatry, moral depravity and the besieging of Jerusalem by the Babylonian forces during his reign.

The people of Jerusalem and Judah-Benjamin were to learn, albeit too late, that the word of God is transparent, predictive, and true while at the same it can be misunderstood or misconstrued. As has been rightly observed, Jeremiah's apocalyptic prophecies did not cause the downfall of Judah, as much as the disobedience of Judah and Jerusalem to the clear covenant requirements of the Torah did.³³ To hold the word of God in contempt as the king of Judah did when he cut Jeremiah's scroll into pieces and burnt them in the hearth (Jer 36) was a direct affront to the almightiness of Yahweh and was sure to elicit the deportation that followed. Thus, the transcending apocalypse of salvation at the end of the captivity as portrayed in our pericope (Jer 30:7) was the last hope of the remnant and the consolation of both Jeremiah and Baruch his secretary (Jer 45).

We cannot separate the historical Jeremiah from the literary figure presented to us in the 'book.' It was clear that from Jeremiah's role as a religious leader that he was concerned about the Judean society who in his view acted unfaithfully to Yahweh the national Deity. The context of Jer 30 confirms that Jeremiah's words were not only accepted and promoted by both royalty and people but his predictions often also came true even though miscreants mistreated him for speaking forthrightly. Furthermore, his priestly descent was not in doubt just as his call to ministry.

³² Ordu, Oziezi, and Ebuo "Religion and Poverty Alleviation," 144–145.

³³ Alice Deken "Does Prophecy Cause History? Jeremiah 36: A Scroll Ablaze," *OTE* 30/3 (2017): 651.

He probably was a priest himself³⁴ but his conviction was so firm that he was undaunted while faced with the challenges of being a lone voice in the midst of idolatry and apostasy of an ailing nation. Perhaps the Nigerian prophets have much to learn from Jeremiah's experience. One of the accusations levelled against them at present is that they are not called by God – even when they proclaim God's word. This is because even the best of them are easily swayed by the vicissitudes of socio-political patronages, unlike Jeremiah. Earlier in another article published by the *African Journal of Biblical Studies (AJBS)*, I had observed that:

This problem was gravely envisaged by the Deuteronomist and his contemporaries particularly as later reflected in Ezekiel's indictment of all cadres of leadership in his time (Ezek. 8-18). The land was barren because the rulers oppressed the people. The priests profaned God's law, Israel's officials killed others in order to make money, and her prophets gave false oracles, while the generality of the people robbed and oppressed (Ezek. 22:30-31). This necessitated the search for an intercessor, one who could make up the breach and if possible stand in the gap for the land. Unfortunately, none could be found at the time. Hence the dispersion during which several Israelites and Judahites leaders including the priestly cult were taken into exile first by the Assyrians (722BCE) and later by the Babylonians (587BCE).³⁵

When the Nigerian scenario is brought into focus, we are constrained by space not to attempt a comparative analysis of the foregoing Judean situation vis a vis the contemporary Nigeria struggle for nationhood. Suffice it to say that a socio-rhetorical and critical assessment of the apocalyptic passages in Jer 30 resonates much with the socio-political reality in Nigeria which is devoid of utopia and ridden with dystopia. That simply is our thesis.

Thus, in the Masoretic text our pericope (Jer 30:7-8) in Hebrew contains the phrase transliterated as "*sarar hu yakoub*," which is translated as "Jacob's trouble."³⁶ The term *sarar* may refer to anything too narrow or confining or a place of habitation too small for the number of people living there, and which thus breeds distress, disharmony and even diseases. Thus, the time of *Jacob's trouble* refers not only to a time of commotion but also of distress, persecution, and exile into narrow dwelling places outside the covenant land.

Taking a cue from Israel during her days of national abnegation, R.K. Harrison³⁷ observes that the spiritual fortunes of Judah and Jerusalem

³⁴ Wessels, "Calling Leaders to Account," 877.

³⁵ Ahiamadu, "Justice and Peace", 63.

³⁶ Roland, Harrison K. *Introduction to the Old Testament*. (Grand Rapids: W.B. Eerdmans, 2004), 778.

³⁷ Roland, *Introduction*, 778

dwindled, yet it did not dampen the interest in, for example by Prophet Jeremiah, correcting the errors of the people, nor did it diminish his hope in an impending restoration (Jer 23:1ff; 30:3-7). The confidence of the Prophet became increasingly evident, culminating in his singular act of faith at a time of great crisis. He purchased a property and sealed it with a guarantee (Jer 32:1ff). The latter *pericope* from Jeremiah has been named the 'book of consolation.'³⁸ It depicts for Judah and Jerusalem not just release from captivity but a total reversal of fortunes.

As Mandel³⁹ has rightly observed, during Jeremiah's time (640 – 580 BCE) the popular view of religion leaned more towards ritualism as opposed to Jeremiah's strictures for obedience to Yahweh, independent of the Temple or cult. Nevertheless, the Prophet envisioned an era of apocalyptic dystopia when Israel and especially Judah and Jerusalem would be saved amidst the contradictions of neighbouring nations such as Babylon, Moab, Amon and Edom to name a few. The method by Jeremiah (30:1, 7) is to see earlier prophecies of judgment and at the end of the tunnel to hear an answer of salvation already promised in our pericope by the Lord of hosts.

What the day of the Lord represents in Amos, that is, a coming disaster, is represented by Jeremiah also as a day of trouble or commotion but both prophets also promptly captured a hope of deliverance immediately following the catastrophe (Jer 30:7-8; Amos 9:11ff). This is apocalypticism at its best, but devoid of the eschatological utopia of Trito-Isaiah.⁴⁰ It is what in this article we refer to as "apocalyptic dystopia."

G A DIALECTICAL ASSESSMENT OF NIGERIA'S SOCIO-POLITICAL DILEMMA

A renowned Nigerian author Chinua Achebe once observed that the trouble with Nigeria has to do with leadership.⁴¹ While we agree with the elder statesman, it is also important to consider that wrong leadership has resulted in the pauperisation of the masses in their socio-political settings. The International Food Policy Research Institute (2010) discussed poverty levels in Nigeria between 1980 and 2004, noting suggests that an estimated 69 million (or 54.4% of) Nigerians lived in poverty – which marked an increase of 24% from the 1980 data.

³⁸ Robert, Davidson. "Jeremiah and Lamentation" in C. L. Gibson (Gen.Eds.) *The Daily Study Bible (Old Testament) 2*. (Philadelphia: The Westminster press, 2014), 71.

³⁹ David, Mandel. *The Ultimate Who's who in the Bible – from Aaron to Zurishaddai*. (Alachua, Florida: Bridge-Logos), 2007.

⁴⁰ Gordon, McConville. "Jeremiah" in Donald Carson, R.T. France, J.A. Motyer & G.J. Wenham (eds) *New Bible Commentary (21st Century Edition)*. (Downers Grove: IVP, 1994), 694.

⁴¹ Chinua Achebe, *The Trouble with Nigeria* (Harlow: Heinemann, 1988), 1.

The report further explains that Nigeria's national poverty profile shows that the incidence of poverty has generally been on the rise since 1980 with a decade wide increase of 24% annually. Two significant dips were identified during the periods 1985 to 1992 and between 1995 and 2004. The National Poverty Index remained at 65.6% in 1996 but declined in 2004 to 54.4%.⁴² Rural poverty also surpassed urban poverty between 1980 and 2004 forcing most able bodied rural dwellers to migrate to the cities.

The sway which the Islamic Fulani holds not only over the Northern part but also over the whole of Nigeria has a long history which space does not permit us to probe.⁴³ At present the Fulani head over 90% of federal departments, ministries and parastatals. Such is the stranglehold of the Fulani on the rest of Nigeria and it has instigated forces of disintegration, dissolution and dismemberment. The call for true federalism and restructuring has gone out among the ethnic nationalities indigenous to Nigeria. Beside are the dilemmas of religious synthesis devoid of socio-political anti-thesis, the absence of which has been exacerbated by chronic poverty and vulnerability of the Nigerian economy. There is a trend of impoverishment and pauperisation that is endemic to the context.

A research report on the Shell-Ogoni crisis of 1995 shows that the impoverishment of Nigeria's rural areas is exacerbated by the operations of multinational oil extractive industries with the attendant environmental pollution, land degradation and ecological distortions.⁴⁴ In 1996, about 70% of Nigeria's rural population were poor compared to 58.8% of urban dwellers. This poverty profile began to rise such that by the decade between 2004 and 2014, the ratio increased to 5:8 instead of 5:7, according to the International Food Policy Research Institute (2010).⁴⁵

During the same decade the percentage of urban poverty declined in comparison to rural poverty with 64% of rural household experiencing poverty (a decrease of 6%) while urban poverty decreased by 15%-43%. The same study showed that poverty incidence, debt and severity were higher in all Northern zones, compared to the three Southern zones where the same indices reduced. In the Niger Delta specifically, it was shown that the rural-urban mix was higher and that cities in the South were growing more with the impoverishment of rural areas. In a similar report, the National Bureau of Statistics observed that 17 million people who were reportedly poor in 1980

⁴²Ordu, Oziezi and Ebuo, "Religion and Poverty Alleviation," 144-145.

⁴³ Chinua Achebe, *There Was a Country: A Personal History of Biafra* (London: Pearson, 2012), 47, 82, 147.

⁴⁴ Hattingh, J. "Shell International and the Ogoni People of Nigeria. Toward a Better Understanding of Environmental Justice in Africa" (Stellenbosch University Environmental Ethics Seminar Paper, 1998): 8.

⁴⁵ See Ordu, Oziezi and Ebuo "Religion and Poverty Alleviation," 144-145.

rose to 112 million in 2010.⁴⁶ The poverty level increased to 69.0% in 2010, with 73.2% rural poverty compared to an urban poverty level of 61.8%.

H APOCALYPTIC DYSTOPIA AND NIGERIA'S DILEMMA

Nigeria is located on the West coast of Africa with cultural and religious links across and even beyond the continent of Africa. In antiquity all of African peoples south of the Sahara were regarded as Ethiopians—that is Negroes.⁴⁷ The country is reputed to be one of the most populous in Africa with an estimated population of 2020 estimated population of 250 million (i.e. 2020). Interestingly, the country also has a disproportionate multiplicity of languages, cultures and religions with more than 432 ethnic nationalities. Some scholars consider this a historical consequences of the sons of God co-habiting with the daughters of men in primeval times (Genesis 1-11).⁴⁸

The population spread out as one moves from the coastal South to the "sahel" North, and from the Christian-dominated South-East and South-South to the Muslim-populated South West and North West. Moreover, the only tool that has been used to defuse the ethnic and religious diversities is holistic education embraced by both male and female. While Islamic laws allows for limited education of women, in Nigeria, such restrictions are seriously frowned at⁴⁹ education has been a tool for national unity in Nigeria.

On religion, Wotogbe-Weneka⁵⁰ stated in his inaugural lecture that "apart from the global misconception by some denigrators of religion first as the opium of the masses" and second, as comparable to childhood neurosis, Nigerians associate Nigeria's ailing economy and socio-political dystopia not with so-called globalisation but with the prevalence of mutli-cultural, multi-ethnic and multi-religious sentiments.⁵¹ A picture of the role of religion in socio-political stability in developing societies was so aptly captured in a

⁴⁶ As cited in Omonyi V. Ajulor, "Policy implementation and rural poverty reduction in Nigeria (an analysis of the national poverty eradication programme (NAPEP) in Ado-Odo Ota local government area, Ogun state)", Paper presented at 1st Annual International Interdisciplinary Conference, AIIC, Azores, Portugal, 24–26th April, 2013, 237–244.

⁴⁷ David T. Adamo, *Africa and Africans in the New Testament* (Lanham: University Press of America, 2006), 24–25.

⁴⁸ Modupe Oduyoye, *The Sons of God and the Daughters of Men: An Afro-Asiatic Interpretation of Genesis 1–11* (Ibadan: Sefer Books, 1998), 23, 79.

⁴⁹ Amadi E. Ahiamadu, "Importance of Women Education: A Nigerian Perspective," in *Godly Values and Lifestyles in the Contemporary Society: The Role of Christian Education* (ed. Otete C. Okonbiah, Samuel C. Ango, Dele Adeogun, Rachael A. Lateju, and Samuel O. Akintola; Lagos: Gloryline Christian Publications, 2020), 183.

⁵⁰ Wotogbe-Weneka, "Religion: Modern Denigrators and Rehabilitators," 10–16.

⁵¹ Ahiamadu, "Justice and Peace Exemplified."

statement credited to Billy Graham in his 1965 publication titled *World Aflame* in which he said inter alia:

The world is on fire because without God will not be able to control the flames. The demons of hell have been let loose. The fire of passion, greed, hate and lust are sweeping the world. We seem to be plunging madly into Armageddon.

The absence of a socio-political thesis in the form of a galvanising ideology—apart from religion and ethnicity—and its subsequent dystopia is a distasteful situation. A collision course in which the political elite mutually expose one another smacks of an apocalyptic dilemma in which the unknown is unanticipated as a non-existent or never-occurring reality.

This resonance is unlike what the Nigerian situation portends a dilemma in which ethnic “minorities” are calling for restructuring while ethnic “majorities” are calling for the dismemberment of Nigeria. To both groups Nigeria is a “failed” state yet her deeply religious psychology has made possible the attribution of Nigeria’s woes to an apocalyptic or invisible “arm of the Lord”. Accordingly, Nigeria’s woes necessitate God’s chastisement and could induce an anti-thesis amenable to a new synthesis leading to an apocalyptic new dawn—a new of a restoration of Nigeria to her original purpose or *raison d’état*.

Although applying an Old Testament experience to a post-modern reality may seem unwarranted, the similarities in both contexts outweigh the disparities. For instance, Nigeria’s experience of what Jeremiah called “Jacob’s trouble” has been marked by brigandage, terrorism, kidnappings, herdsmen dispossession of and sacking of peaceful and unsuspecting communities and so forth. The present political dispensation of “civilian rule” is not democracy. Such regions as the Middle Belt, South-West, South-East and South-South have been the target of ominous invasion of herdsmen and kidnappers, which has now become the order of the day in those governable parts of the Nigerian nation. It has been a hope turned sour that Nigeria has degenerated from democratic values into anarchy and misrule; yet the Constitution speaks of one indissoluble and indivisible union which has resulted in the following dilemmas.

1 Dilemma of Thesis Devoid of Anti-Thesis

It is as if an in-built social-political dynamic of thesis and anti-thesis eventually results in a disruptive synthesis. Today the story is not much different as greater numbers of Nigerians are being classified as poor on a global poverty index. The United Nations Development Programme estimated the proportion of Nigerians living in abject poverty in 2015 to be 62.6% of her total population, while the Human Development Index is put at 0.514 and ranked as

152 out of 188 poorest countries⁵² The dilemma consists in the inability of the Nigerian socio-political class to provide a thesis and anti-thesis that could have made possible a new synthesis.

Instead, political apathy and social inertia make the eruption of a fresh thesis and anti-thesis impossible. In Hegelian dialectics (Ferguson 1994:288-9), a thesis without an anti-thesis will result not only in social anomie but also in political limbo. Why is it difficult for a thriving opposition to subsist within the Nigerian political and social environment? According to Hegel (1770-1831), society is advanced through thesis, anti-thesis and synthesis⁵³.

A credible opposition is essential for a healthy democracy, just as an antithesis naturally follows a thesis and leads to a creative synthesis. Unfortunately, none of these exists, or at best is in a state of inertia as a result of what many have described as "the docility of the civil society".⁵⁴ An inchoate anti-thesis exists because of what is generally described as "a system sustained by violence"⁵⁵ and which may emerge to provide the needed dynamo for moving the Nigerian socio-political structure towards an apocalypse, even if it ends in a dystopia.

2 Stagnation as Socio-Political Dilemma

Apparently, the lack of confidence of the average Nigerian in the Nigerian state's ability to rise up to the challenges of nationhood has resulted in what Achebe describes as a "nightmare."⁵⁶ Moreover, blatant disregard of the multi-religious and multi-ethnic nature of Nigeria in matters of government patronage and appointive offices has been exacerbated at the national level, that is, the federal government level. Obviously, there is no credible and official opposition the ruling party at the federal level. Therefore, the positive forces of national cohesion, social harmony and political security are kept at bay and a state of disruptive policies and nepotism is unleashed on Nigerians.

That the Church in Nigeria has lost its prophetic voice is a reality that calls for national mourning.⁵⁷ However, there is hope of a divine intervention as witnessed at the time of Jacob's trouble and the salvation transcending it (Jer.30:7). Whether the apocalypse and hope of transformation extant in this pericope could resolve the Nigerian socio-political dilemma is not a matter for

⁵² Ordu, Oziezi and Ebuo, "Religion and Poverty Alleviation", 144-145.

⁵³ Ferguson, *A new dictionary of Theology*, 188.

⁵⁴ Ifeanyi Obulor, *Political Economy of Ethnic Militias and the Political Violence in Nigeria* (Port Harcourt: Kemuela Books, 2013), 138.

⁵⁵ Patrick B. Naagbantou, *The Last Militant: A Biography of Comrade 'Che' Cheta Ibama Ibegwura and the Struggle for Workers Rights in Nigeria, Justice and Self-Determination in the Niger Delta Region* (Lagos: Creek town books, 2015), 145-146.

⁵⁶ Achebe, *There Was a Country*, 91.

⁵⁷ Ordu, Oziezi, and Ebuo "Religion and Poverty Alleviation," 144-145.

academic conjecture. As it were, pietism is in dissonance with theo-praxis and it is difficult to forge any link between them as will be shown below.

3 Dilemma of a Disconnect between Pietism and Theo-Praxis

No country or people can rise above its pietistic and moral standards. According to Achebe the problem with Nigeria is not the absence of a "thriving Theo-praxis" but the lack of a coherent and manifest commitment to the teachings of, for instance, the Christian or Judaist faith both of which are rife with apocalypses, described by Achebe as "the will, the ability and the vision."⁵⁸ A dilemma exists in situations where ethnicity and religion are exploited to advance the course of a ruling oligarchy at the Centre and which undermines the power relations between a federal government and its state governments.⁵⁹

Such a dilemma could result in what Prophet Isaiah (Isa66:8c) called Zion's travail rivalled only by what Prophet Jeremiah (Jer 30:7) later called "a time of Jacob's trouble." In an apocalyptic sense such times calls for the enduring of severe afflictions at the end of which "she shall be saved out of it." A profound prophetic consolation is what Nigeria needs from her Judeo-Christian population at the point where their individual theologies and theo-praxis converge. Some scholars has seen convergences as the natural effect of the ecclesial reading of "the Bible with African eyes."⁶⁰

As a fitting summary, we can reflect on Israel's covenant relations with Yahweh leading to a transformation from captivity to inheritance,⁶¹ while in the case of Nigeria, there may be no such hope because no covenant relations with Yahweh exists on a national scale (cf. Jer 30:7, 17a). No apocalyptic or eschatological message sounds a similar note for Nigeria due to the dissonance earlier referred to between *belief* and *practice* in Nigeria's socio-political life. It justifies the call for a pendulum shift from pietism or *theology* to *theo-praxis* as a way to rid Nigeria of the dilemma.

I CONCLUSION

In this article, an attempt has been made to define religion, spirituality and apocalypticism from an Old Testament and a Nigerian perspective. Words like thesis, anti-thesis and synthesis have not been so defined for reasons the article makes clear. The discussion here has been strictly tailored to fit Old Testament and Nigerian perspectives. The resonance between the social world of the Bible

⁵⁸ Chinua, *The trouble with Nigeria*, 12

⁵⁹ Obulor, *Political Economy of Ethnic Militias*, 36–37.

⁶⁰ David T. Adamo, "Evolving a Biblical Hermeneutics for Social Change and Transformation in Africa," *Biblical Studies and Social Transformation in Africa* (ed. O. Abogunrin; Ibadan: NABIS, 2012), 1–3.

⁶¹ Amadi E. Ahiamadu, *Y2K Spiritual Warfare Synthesis* (Unpublished MSS, 2011), 1.

and the primordial settings of Africans has undergirded our assessment of both our pericope and the Nigerian socio-political context.

This article has also demonstrated that religion as a social institution is not only spiritual but also associated with a future hope of a paradisiacal or utopian consummation of all things. Our focus is on religion and spirituality as embraced in apocalypticism which paradoxically is devoid of utopia. Nonetheless, as social institutions, both religion and spirituality attract less media attention, notwithstanding that they both have much in common.

A socio-rhetorical model of interpretation is employed in the re-reading because of its methodological resonance with Nigerian peculiarities. Like its counterpart the *Skopos* theory, it interprets the biblical text keeping in mind the context's peculiarities. It emphasises the importance of a target audience in understanding the "whats" and "whys" of the interpretive process.

According to Fischer,⁶² the book of Jeremiah is outstanding in its focus on the grievances leading to the collapse and sacking of Jerusalem, which is reminiscent of Nigeria in its failed state. Moreover, the article underscores the apprehension of many scholars about the historicity of Jeremiah as a person. It affirms the literary recognition of the prophet as a contemporary of King Josiah. In 603 BCE, when King Josiah died, the prophet did actually record his laments in the Book of Lamentation.

On the Nigerian scene, the article points to the high poverty level and other social ills that challenge people's confidence in the Nigerian state. The underdevelopment of the dynamic processes of change has been traced to the inhibitive power of religious and ethnic sentiments, which usually drown the call for change in Nigeria's socio-political arena. Both the rich and the government have been identified as key players in maintaining a status quo that is antithetical to change and development.

All these are tied to the poverty index reflected in several national and international reports. As shown in this article, the report further notes that Nigeria's poverty profile shows that the incidence of poverty has been on the rise since 1980 with a decade-wide increase of 24% annually, besides the two significant dips in 1985-1992 and between 1995 and 2004 when it declined to 54.4%.

Some Nigerians associate Nigeria's ailing economy and socio-political dystopia not with the so-called globalisation but with the prevalence of multicultural, multi-ethnic, and multi-religious sentiments.⁶³ A picture of the role of religion in the nation's socio-political stability was so aptly captured in a

⁶² Fischer, "Is There Shalom or not?," 351–370.

⁶³ Ahiamadu, "Justice and Peace Exemplified."

statement credited to Graham in his *World Aflame*, in which he said as earlier quoted.

It recommends a pendulum shift from mere Christian religious pietism to a religious involvement of the churches in socio-political action that could provide the needed thesis and anti-thesis for a renewed socio-political synthesis. To do so, however, it must retain the apocalyptic component of the Christian faith while actively engaged in religious cum socio-political action.

Finally, it has also been shown that a synthesis of socio-rhetorical re-reading of Jeremiah's transcendental and apocalyptic vision of better days for Judah and Jerusalem smacks of a utopia, which in the case of Nigeria can only apply to some extent. The dialectical process of social change is too slow in Nigeria due to religious and ethnic inhibitions, which make opposing or contradictory views intolerable. It means that a thesis without an antithesis will not lead to a synthesis that could form the basis for a new cycle of social-political progress.

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