

## **“Naked I came ... and naked I shall return:” Relating Job 1:20–22 to the Nigerian Economic Context**

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### **Abstract**

*The narrator in the book of Job gives the impression that Job remains blameless before God in spite of his innocent suffering. Therefore, Job is commonly employed as an appeal to people in suffering situations. But Job’s words in 1:21, “Naked I came and naked shall I return” apparently became an aphorism among the Jews relating to attitudes toward wealth (Eccl. 5:15; 1 Tm. 6:7). Hence, the adage is relevant in the context of economic suffering, particularly in Nigeria, where the majority of the people suffer poverty. This article therefore examines the pastoral relevance of Job 1:20–22 in the Nigerian economic context. It applies the historical-critical and descriptive methods, adopting a synchronic reading of the book of Job. The work found that Job’s reaction to the loss of his wealth indicates that there is a correlation between righteousness and possessions, which implies an inextricable connection between people’s faith and their economic status. For this reason, preaching cannot afford to ignore the economic condition of its recipients, as is largely the case in Nigeria. The book of Job encourages Nigerian Christians in Job’s condition to have faith in God that their fortunes can change like that of Job. Its pastoral relevance in Nigeria demands that preaching should address the injustice of corruption that has pauperised majority of Nigerians.*

**Keywords:** Job; Innocent suffering; Nigerian economy; Corruption; Pastoral response

### **Introduction**

The book of Job belongs to the Old Testament group of writings called wisdom literature, along with Proverbs and Ecclesiastes. The book recounts the story of Job, a gentile who loses all his possessions in one day, as well as children and health, in spite of his righteousness before God. There is no certainty concerning the author, date and historical context of the book, but liberal scholarship reckons it to be an anonymous work (Longman & Dillard 2006:225), a “folktale of a righteous sufferer” apparently intended to be symbolic of the suffering of Jews exiled in Babylon (Clines 1994:460). Many believe that in its canonical form the book is meant to engage the reader in the subject of innocent suffering. Longman and Dillard (2006:224) observe that “suffering is at the heart of the book of Job”, and since all men and women know the experience of suffering, the book has a universal appeal. According to Foudy (n.d.:3), the book aims to engage people of faith in theological discussion “regarding the suffering of the blameless”. It is thus meant to be an example of innocent suffering for the purposes of God (Utley 2014:11). As expressed by Clines (1994:460), the book of Job speaks to sufferers in Job’s situation. According to the narrator in chapter one, Job was not only

righteous but also very rich, with ten children and great possessions. But calamity struck, and Job lost all his children and wealth in one day. Having received all the reports, Job declared: “Naked I came from my mother's womb, and naked shall I return; the LORD gave, and the LORD has taken away; blessed be the name of the LORD” (1:21, RSV).<sup>1</sup> The phrase “Naked I came and naked shall I return” seems to have become an aphorism among the Jews relating to attitudes toward the possession of wealth. A variant of it appears in Ecclesiastes 5:15, where the Preacher treats the accumulation of riches as foolishness, as the rich will not take anything with them when they die. Similarly, in 1 Timothy 6:7, Paul states that contentment is better than accumulation of wealth because we brought nothing into this world and we shall take nothing out of it, thereby indicating that “material things are transitory” (Constable 2021:122). Therefore, in view of its application in this way, and particularly from Job’s context, the aphorism is relevant to the context of suffering from the economic perspective. It is in this regard that Job 1:20–22 becomes relevant in Nigeria in the context of the poor economic situation of the majority of the people. It is relevant in that in their calamity, like Job, many Nigerians give up and simply resign to fate.

Therefore, the aim of this article is to examine Job 1:20–22 in light of the hopeless economic condition of many Nigerians, a good number of whom are Christians. It also assesses the pastoral response in Nigeria to the situation of this group of people in Job’s situation. In other words, the essay investigates how Nigerian Christians in Job’s condition at the loss of his wealth conduct themselves and how popular preaching responds to their plight. The study applies the historical-critical approach to the study of the text and the descriptive method to the discussion of the poverty situation in Nigeria. The article adopts a synchronic approach to the text, recognising the non-historical nature of the book of Job. Synchronic reading belongs to the so-called modern literary approach, which “treats the Bible as a finished product, as a ... unified whole” (Lusk 2004). It re-emphasises the literary quality of the biblical narrative, paying little “attention to questions of historical reference” (Longman & Dillard 2006:40; cf. Moore & Kelle 2011:169). The purpose of synchronic reading is to make the biblical text to speak to the present (Mann 2011:8) in order to apply it to the reader’s life and circumstances. Thus, adopting the synchronic approach, this article makes Job’s loss of his possessions speak to the poverty situation of the Nigerian masses, particularly the Christians. The work begins with an examination of the book of Job from the historical-critical perspective, after which follows an exegesis of Job 1:20–22. Next, the article attempts to identify Job’s condition in the poverty situation in Nigeria and ends with an assessment of the pastoral response towards Nigerians in Job’s condition.

### **The book of Job in the historical-critical perspective**

Most scholars agree that the book of Job is not a historical material or “a biography of a man called Job” (Mare 2012:2), thereby recognising in it essential elements of folk literature. Andersen (1976:34) and Westermann (1981:6), for instance, identify the dramatic qualities of the book while others observe “a coherent plot development” in the entire book (Roper 2005:768). In developing this plot, the author employed an

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<sup>1</sup> Unless otherwise indicated, all Bible references quoted are from the Revised Standard Version, RSV.

apparently well-known folktale about a pious sufferer to dramatically illustrate the “conflict between the orthodox doctrine of retribution and people’s actual experiences” (Roper 2005:768; cf. Clines 1989:lvii). Mare (2012:2) suggests that behind the story of Job might be a real experience of suffering but the story itself is fictional, given particularly “the omniscience of the narrator”, who knew even what transpired in the council of God and the angels (cf. Jb 1:6–12; 2:1–6).

Modern scholarship generally assigns a date in the post-exilic period as the time of the composition of the book of Job, probably not later than the second century BCE (Roper 2005:757; Clines 1989:lvii). The post-exilic date is usually based on the book’s dwelling on “the theology of divine retribution”, which is common among the exilic prophets (Roper 2005:759). It is also argued that the concepts of Satan and angelology align the book with post-exilic literature (Bezuidenhout 1996:13). While scholars may agree on a date range for the book of Job, most would agree with Habel (1985:40) that the “identity of the author remains a complete enigma”. As earlier seen, Longman and Dillard (2006:225) assert that the book is an anonymous work. It seems evident that the author attempts “to isolate Job from the Israelite context,” making him to have lived in Uz, somewhere in the East (Bezuidenhout 1996:11). But Bezuidenhout (1996:11) opines that the book unequivocally “breathes an Israelite spirit”. In agreement with this view, Schmid (2008:6) observes that the book of Job indicates that the author had “a high degree of scholarly knowledge” not only about Israelite texts and subject matters but also those of Egypt, Mesopotamia and Greece, which suggests that the author was probably a scribe from the Jerusalem temple. Therefore, the book must have been written in Jerusalem, most probably in the Persian and Hellenistic period (Schmid 2008:4). Nonetheless, as Habel (1985:42) plausibly remarks, the value of the book of Job goes beyond issues of precise date and socio-historical setting. For Habel,

Consistent with the orientation of traditional wisdom thinking, the author of Job has created an artistic work with universal dimensions rather than a text directed at a particular historical situation or theological issue alive in Israel at a specific time. ... [Hence,] while the cumulative evidence may tend to suggest a post-exilic era, the book's literary integrity, paradoxical themes [and] heroic setting ... are pertinent for students of wisdom and life in any era. (Habel 1985:42)

Hence, the rest of this article examines the relevance of Job’s condition at the loss of his wealth to the economic situation of the Nigerian masses. The section below attempts to assess Job’s reaction to the loss of his possessions.

### **Job at the loss of his wealth: An exegesis of Job 1:20-22**

The purpose of the narrator in the prologue (Jb 1–2) is to prove that Job is upright and will always remain blameless before God (Mare 2012:2; cf. Jb 1:1). Hence, in spite of all the calamities inflicted on him by Satan, rather than cursing God, Job blesses God (Timmer 2017:12; cf. v.21). Even after the loss of all his wealth and the death of all his children, even amidst excruciating pain, according to the narrator, “Job had said nothing sinful with respect to God” (Timmer 2017:12; cf. 1:21; 2:10). It was in this condition that “Job arose and rent his robe and shaved his head, and he fell upon the ground and worshiped” (v. 20). Here the narrator presents a combination of mourning

and worship in that tearing of one's garment and shaving were elements of mourning in ancient Israel (Clines 1989:34–35). According to Ademiluka (2009:9), on hearing the news of the death of somebody, the first reaction of the deceased's relative "was to tear [his] garment" (cf. Gn. 37: 34; 2 Sm. 1: 11). Among other rites, mourners also shaved their heads and beards (Ademiluka 2009:9; cf. Olyan 1998:616; Is. 22: 12; Jr. 16: 6; 41: 5; 47: 5; 48: 37; Ezk. 7: 18; Am. 8: 10). Utley (2014:22) recognises the combination of mourning and worship in Job 1:20 as an indication that "Job is extremely sad but not bitter". However, it is more plausible to assess Job's reaction here against the plan of the narrator in the bid to demonstrate that Job is indeed blameless and righteous, his acceptance of all his calamities indicating that he did no sin (Mare 2012:3). Some modern readers might want to see Job in verse 20 as being "very fatalistic in his response to this tragedy" (Mare 2012:3). In other words, Job accepts his fate without bitterness as he has no power to change it.

Perhaps Utley derives the idea that Job was not bitter from verse 21, where he says, "Naked I came from my mother's womb, and naked shall I return; the LORD gave, and the LORD has taken away; blessed be the name of the LORD." Utley's (2014:23) perception that Job is not bitter may derive from the fact that "Job did not assign blame" to anybody, not even his attackers. Instead, Job worships God because he recognises him as "the ultimate source" of all things, including his troubles. In this way, Job proves false Satan's suggestion that he would curse God if he lost all his possessions (Utley 2014:23; cf. 1:10–11). But Job's state of mind is perhaps better understood when the phrase "Naked I came ... and naked shall I return" is juxtaposed with his mourning mood in verse 20. Having torn his clothes and shaved his head, with this lamentation Job seems to see himself "on the verge of death" (Pelham 2016:4). This means that "Naked I came ... and naked shall I return" can be conceived as "his deathbed speech" (Pelham 2016:4). Pelham captures Job's mind condition in verse 21 succinctly thus:

Recognizing that his life ... has been a gift ... from God, Job is ready to let go of his claim to possess it.... Having lost his ... possessions, Job ... has become ... a "naked man," that is to say, a "non-man," a man who has ceased to exist and is only waiting for his last breath to gasp from his lips.... The loss of his children, servants, and livestock is not a tragedy that he must live with, but a signal to Job that his end has come. (Pelham 2016:4–5)

This perception of Job's state of mind is more clearly indicated in chapter three, where Job curses the day of his birth, wishing it could be "erased from existence" (Timmer 2017:12). Timmer (2017:12) notes that Job's words in chapter three "are explicitly identified as a curse" with the terms קלל (3:1) and ארר (3:8). Commenting on Job 3:3–10, Watson (2005:322) states that the passage "expresses the much more limited wish never to have been born," uttered by someone undergoing intense suffering. Similarly, Clines (1989:79) opines that the text's "function is to bewail [Job's] unhappy lot". Therefore, the subsequent chapters of the book of Job do not support the narrator's conclusion in verse 22 that "In all this Job did not sin or charge God with wrong." Timmer (2017:12) is then correct when he opines that while Job's words in chapters 1–2 are "repeatedly affirmed by the narrator, those approvals do not continue" from

chapter three onward. This is clearly shown in portions where Yahweh condemns Job’s speech as utterly unwholesome (e.g., 38:2, 8; 40:2, 8). Hence, Gault (2016:148) plausibly affirms that Job is characterised in the prose sections of the book as one who fears God, maintaining his righteousness amidst his suffering, while the poetic sections depict him as committing repeated assault on God. In fact, due to the literary differences between the poetic (3:1–42:6) and the prose (1–2; 42:7–17) sections, many believe that the former was written by an ancient author and the latter was “added by a later editor” (Utley 2014:8).

Thus, contrary to the narrator’s claim that Job remained blameless before God amidst his troubles, Job’s own words demonstrate that the loss of his possessions had a devastating effect, not only on his person but also on his faith. It is in this regard that the text is relevant in Nigeria in the context of the poverty situation of many Christians. Hence, the following section relates Job’s condition at the loss of his wealth to the Nigerian situation.

### **Identifying Job’s condition in the poverty situation in Nigeria**

Poverty can be defined in various ways, depending on the context in which it is being discussed. With respect to this article, it is a condition in which someone lacks the basic needs of life such as food, water or shelter (Children International 2018). In a situation where a household lacks these basic items, it is said to be in absolute poverty (Pettinger 2017). According to Children International (2018), Africa is the poorest continent on earth, most of the “poorest countries in the world [being] in Africa”. The ten countries with the highest population living in extreme poverty are said to be all in sub-Saharan Africa (Packtor 2015), with “47 percent of the population [living] on \$1.90 a day or less” (World Hunger Education Service [WHES] 2016). Scheepers (2010:164) affirms that there are African households and individuals who live below the poverty line in that their incomes are insufficient to provide for basic needs.

Scheepers’ observation is very much applicable to Nigeria. Retrospectively, poverty in Nigeria has often been traced to the mismanagement of the economy arising from the discovery of crude oil in the 1970s. Before the discovery of petroleum, “agriculture was the main stay of Nigeria’s economy” (Oni 2014:206). Unfortunately, the agricultural sector was neglected as a result of the oil boom. But in 1980, the oil revenue began to dwindle, resulting in a recession from which the country has not recovered. Since then, the reaction of successive governments has been to resort to external borrowing to support public expenditure, which has resulted in Nigeria being consistently indebted to the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and such other “monopoly capitalist clubs in Paris and London” (Obafemi 1994:49). To this end, since the early 1980s, the economic situation has been characterised by government policies geared towards defraying external debts. The policy that has had the most negative impact on Nigerians is the Structural Adjustment Programme (SAP) introduced by the Babangida administration (1985–92). “SAP led to the removal of petroleum subsidy, privatization/commercialization of public enterprises, and the liberalization of trade and exchange system” (Mohammed & Ibrahim 2020:2). Ademiluka (2007:30) explains that rather than improve the condition of Nigerians, SAP further worsened their situation. For instance, its devaluation of the Naira has rendered it worthless in that it has steadily depreciated to the extent that today \$1

exchanges for over ₦700. This astronomically high rate of inflation has shot up the prices of goods and services beyond the reach of the common man. SAP has also been responsible for the unprecedented rate of unemployment and retrenchment in Nigeria, as many local industries have had to fold up due to the high prices of raw materials and related goods and services. Privatisation, as recommended by SAP, translates to the sale of public establishments to politicians and government functionaries.

More than harsh policies, however, the main factor that has ruined the Nigerian economy is corruption amongst the ruling class, as occurs in Africa at large, where the roots of poverty are commonly traced to “the rulers – the political elites who contrive to keep their fellow citizens poor while enriching themselves” (Scheepers 2010:165). In Nigeria, it is not merely the case that theft goes on in the state apparatus but that “the state is itself the main apparatus of theft” (Caccia 1993:82). As Chinweuba (2019:41) puts it, the ruling class and their associates extract and expropriate the highest levels of the nation’s resources. In addition, the institutions of the state saddled with the responsibility to maintain sanity have consistently “promoted the bourgeois’ agenda,” protecting it against the proletariat’s protest (Ojo & Babajide 2020:81). It is therefore correct to describe Nigeria as a nation with the wealth in the hands of a few and “abject poverty at the doorsteps of many” (Osinowo, Sanusi & Tolorunju 2019:3). That corruption by the ruling class is the major cause of poverty in Nigeria is buttressed by the fact that many dignitaries have been indicted for stealing and mismanagement of funds in recent times. According to Ademiluka (2019:9), they include a “former head of state, former governors, legislators, ministers and other highly placed government functionaries”. Poverty arises from corruption as the latter diverts public expenditure away from “socially valuable goods” (Ajisafe 2016:160). As projects are not funded jobs are not created, and the result is the unprecedented unemployment in Nigeria. In this regard, Ademiluka (2007:37) declares:

It is as if there has been a permanent embargo on employment. The number of graduates roaming the streets desperately in search of jobs increases yearly by the thousands. Groups of retirees and retrenched workers have joined the number of beggars on the streets.

Similar to unemployment is poverty due to non-payment of salaries. Due to the mismanagement of the resources, the allocations to the states from the Federal Government have been so much reduced that most states cannot pay their workers’ salaries (Adeyanju & Babalola 2017:26). This accounts for the situation where sometimes workers and pensioners are owed “their entitlements ranging from one to 36 months” (Godwin 2017). It is needless to say that when people are jobless or denied their entitlements, they lack the means to meet their essential needs. In Africa, by virtue of the extended family system, when one person is maltreated in this way, the resulting hunger is felt not only by their immediate family but also by their numerous dependants and beneficiaries. That is why in Africa unemployment has an exponential effect on poverty. The UN reports indicate that in 2016 “over 80 million (or 64%) of the [Nigerian] population [lived] below the poverty line” (United Nations 2016). According to the World Poverty Clock, Nigeria has the highest rate of poverty in the world, “with 86.9 million Nigerians living in extreme poverty in 2018” (Iheonu &

Urama 2019:1). It is noteworthy that government has put in place some anti-corruption agencies, such as the Economic and Financial Crimes Commission (EFCC) and the Independent Corrupt Practices Commission (ICPC). Unfortunately, their impact is hardly felt, as corruption has rather been on the increase in the country. Several reasons account for their failure, the most important being the fact that the operators of the commissions themselves have been shown to be collaborators for corruption. Another factor is that the agencies have “suffered the dearth of funds” (Ishaya 2017:88). Corruption is also the major factor responsible for the failure of the poverty alleviation programmes which successive governments have put in place (Onah, Okwuosa & Uroko 2018:3; Ononogbu et al. 2016:386).

Therefore, Job’s state of mind at the point when he preferred to die is identifiable in the poverty situation of Nigerians. In their poverty, some Nigerians indulge in behaviours that depict a state of mind similar to that of Job, which affirms that poverty is “associated with exclusion, isolation ... helplessness and hopelessness” (South African Depression and Anxiety Group [SADAG] 2017). It is no surprise then that in 2012 statistics of the World Health Organisation (WHO) showed that “6.5 per cent of [Nigeria’s population] committed suicide” (Rising cases of suicide in Nigeria 2016), and many of the cases have been interpreted as a psychological effect of poverty. This perception is most probably correct because according to Bantjes et al. (2016), suicidal behaviour is often “consciously initiated by individuals in response to their subjective psychological experience” arising from environmental factors such as poverty. That some of the suicide cases in Nigeria may be the result of poverty is also confirmed by the fact that “approximately 75% of suicides occur in low- and middle-income countries (LMICs) where rates of poverty are high” (Bantjes et al. 2016; cf. Clayton 2018). Moreover, some concerned Nigerians have compiled lists of suicide cases, attributing some of them to poverty. In this regard, one analyst narrates that:

One man, a father of four reportedly committed suicide by hanging in Oke Aro area of Akure, the Ondo State capital. The deceased, identified as Dayo, reportedly took his life when he found it difficult to fend for his family.... In Osogbo in Osun State, a 27-year-old man, identified as Adekola Busari, hanged himself over his indebtedness to a microfinance bank ... while, a man in his 50s hanged himself in Dutse Makaranta in [Abuja], due to his inability to meet up with his family responsibilities. (Rising cases of suicide in Nigeria 2016)

Commenting on the issue of suicides in Nigeria, Rev. Dr. William Okoye, General Overseer of All Christians Fellowship Mission, Maitama, Abuja, expressed concern over hunger and poverty in Nigeria which, according to him, had increased the cases of suicide. The clergyman warned that if urgent steps were not taken by the Federal Government, “the rate at which people commit suicide because of poverty and hunger could increase” (Olorok 2016). Similarly, Primate of the Church of Nigeria Anglican Communion, Most Rt. Rev. Nicholas Okoh, lamented that “the rate of suicide attempts among Nigerians recently is becoming worrisome,” and appealed to Nigerian leaders to pay more attention to the harsh economic situation in the land (Onyedika-Ugoeze 2017). Thus, like Job at the loss of his possessions, some Nigerians see the end of their

economic suffering only in death. Like Job, they believe that “as long as [they remain] alive, there is no way out of [their] dilemma” (Timmer 2017:14).

It has been demonstrated in this section that as a result of the dire economic situation in Nigeria, many Nigerians are in a condition similar to that of Job at the loss of his wealth. It is in this regard that the narrative can be made to speak to the present in the Nigerian economic context. Hence, the section below assesses the pastoral response to Nigerians in Job’s condition.

### **Pastoral responsibility in Nigeria towards those in Job’s condition**

To begin with, it is important to note that the prologue of the book of Job subtly indicates an inextricable correlation between righteousness and possessions. Pelham (2016:4) opines that the idea that “identity is created by possessions” is seen in the narrator’s opening description of Job (1:1b). Job is a blameless and upright man, who fears God and always turns away from evil. But instead of demonstrating Job’s righteousness in terms of his character, the narrator presents a list of possessions that make Job “the greatest of all the people of the East” (Pelham 2016:4; cf. Jb 1:3b). Thus,

[Job’s possessions] are parts of Job’s self, existing to contribute to his identity instead of possessing identities in their own right.... Job is righteous, [n]ot by what he does, but by what he has, given that what he has is what makes him who he is. (Pelham 2016:4)

This explanation implies that Christians and their faith cannot be separated from their economic status. The inseparable connection between people’s faith and their possessions is amply shown in contemporary Nigeria in the fact that many attend Christian programmes not necessarily for instruction but “to seek a solution to their socio-economic problems” (Adeyanju & Babalola 2017:27), just as some establish churches in order to escape poverty and joblessness (Ojo & Babajide 2020:82). In other words, poor Nigerians seek God for their means of livelihood because they need a means of livelihood to be able to serve God. It is for this reason that preaching cannot afford to ignore the economic condition of its recipients. On the contrary, in Nigeria, as in many parts of Christendom, Job is commonly applied “only to promote catharsis” (Timmer 2017:14); that is, preachers often employ Job’s experience mostly “to encourage the grieving to express themselves honestly before God” (Timmer 2017:14). Stressing devotion to God while ignoring the plight of sufferers is the most conspicuous characteristic of preaching in Nigeria, especially in the mainline churches. In other words, the church has rather been passive about the pauperisation of the masses in the bid to prepare Christians to inherit the kingdom of God. To this end, preparation for heaven as against hell is the main focus of most sermons rendered in the church, crusade grounds, music, on radio and television (Ademiluka 2015:27). The common reason for this attitude is the doctrine that Christians should focus on things above; “our ultimate goal is to inherit the kingdom of God; if we suffer here, we will enjoy in paradise” (Clawson 2008). In the neo-Pentecostal denominations, on the other hand, the poor are taught to devote themselves to God’s service through giving in order to have abundance “because poverty is proof of unrighteousness while prosperity is

proof of God’s favour for the righteous” (Ademiluka 2022:3). In this way, rather than ameliorating the condition of the poor, they are being drained of the little they have “even when they could hardly afford it” (Ononogbu et al. 2016:379). This means that, in Nigeria, preaching is rarely focused on the prevalent poverty in the land and the responsibility of government to address it.

However, the teaching that sufferers should only be devoted to God amidst their suffering does not adequately represent the purpose of the book of Job because, as already discussed, Job himself “goes far beyond catharsis and calls for the end of his suffering, which he expected to find only in the grave” (Timmer 2017:14). This is not to say that the text of Job teaches believers to simply and impatiently “await death as an escape,” for that implies abandoning God (Timmer 2017:14). It instead attempts to correct Job’s fatalistic approach. In chapters 38–41, God speaks out of the whirlwind, castigating Job’s folly in challenging the wisdom of the creator of all things, as expressed by Frankel (n.d.:8), “for denying God’s equity and goodness, and assuming that he could fathom God’s ways.” In response to the divine speeches, Job submits to God’s will, affirming that God’s ways are good and just, even though not always comprehensible by man (Fox 2005:351–366). “I have uttered what I did not understand, things too wonderful for me, which I did not know” (42:3; cf. 40:3–5). Thus, formerly confident in his complaints and arguments against God, Job has now abandoned self-dependence, trusting completely in God. Job now accepts that God is infinitely perfect in all his ways and therefore that God’s plan for him “is infinitely perfect” (Fuller 2013:53). In Mare’s (2012:4) interpretation, understanding God in this way puts Job’s relationship with God on a higher level than it has been hitherto placed. Hence, upon Job’s repentance, God restores his fortunes, which is a demonstration of God’s good and gracious nature (Frankel n.d.:10). Several other interpreters agree that the restoration of Job’s wealth is a sign of God’s grace, not a reward for his righteousness (Habel 2004:35). As Carson (2006:155) puts it, Job’s change of fortune should not be understood as a reward for his continued faithfulness but simply “blessings given as God’s free gift.” In a way, then, the narrator uses Job’s life as a repudiation of the theology of retribution, the doctrine that prosperity is reward for righteousness while suffering is punishment for sin (Guinan 1986:7) or that one’s destiny in life is indicative of whether one is righteous or ungodly. Holding this belief, Job’s friends attributed his tragedy to some hidden sin in his life, but Job protested, insisting that he did not sin and was therefore not being punished. In Job 42:7–8 the author confirms that Job’s friends, the proponents of retributive theology, were wrong; that is, God “does not reward or punish [based] on good or bad behaviour” (Mare 2012:4–5). For Nigerian Christians in Job’s condition, then, rather than being encouraged to abandon God, the book teaches them to put their trust and hope in God. They should not see their economic condition as a punishment from God but note that with faith in God their circumstances can change as in the case of Job.

Moreover, discussing suffering in the book of Job has to be done in the context of the Bible as a whole (Timmer 2017:18), wherein “commitment to justice [is] the overarching principle” (Ademiluka 2019:7). In the prophets, particularly, “being poor became synonymous with being oppressed” (Jegade 2020:133). Fuhlbruck (2016) rightly observes that in the Bible the instruction to do justice is usually in favour of the vulnerable. In the Old Testament, prophetic preaching condemns injustice, always

taking the side of “the poor and humble” (Pieterse 2012:18). Mbofana (2017) buttresses this point by calling attention to numerous biblical texts that enjoin rulers to defend the needy. For instance, Proverbs 31:8–9 commands them to “open your mouth for the speechless...and plead the cause of the poor and needy”, while in Psalm 82:3, judges are instructed to “defend the poor and fatherless, and do justice to the afflicted and needy” (Mbofana 2017). The New Testament similarly demonstrates that the concern for the poor was the focus of Jesus’ gospel, which for him meant having the “sense of social responsibility for the poor” (Apata 1993:52; cf. Lk. 4:18). This concern is seen in Jesus’ proclamation that he had come not only to save the soul but also to “rescue the suffering from institutionalized injustice” (Fuhlbruck 2016; cf. Lk. 4:18–20). Jesus also taught his followers to have sympathy for the needy, which is the burden of the Parable of the Good Samaritan and the sayings on neighbourliness (Ademiluka 2019:8; cf. Mt. 25:40; Mk. 12:28–34; Lk. 10: 29–37). This means that the gospel has implications not only for the individual sinner to be saved but also for sufferers to be rescued from their suffering (Fuhlbruck 2016).

As earlier discussed, poverty as a result of injustice also characterises the poverty situation in Nigeria. As expressed by Adeyanju and Babalola (2017:26), in Nigeria poverty is not the result of chance, destiny or fate but of “the bad will of men and women rooted in social injustice”. Therefore, when considered from the point of view of the whole Bible, and in view of the fact that in Nigeria economic suffering stems from injustice, the pastoral relevance of Job in Nigeria goes beyond preaching patience in the midst of suffering. Rather, it demands that “preaching should show concern for justice to the poor” (Pieterse 2012:19). Showing concern for justice to the poor in the Nigerian context would mean ensuring economic access and opportunities to the vulnerable (Fuhlbruck 2016). In this regard, Mbofana (2017) emphasises that it is good for Christians to donate food, clothes, and other materials to the needy, but the demand of the Bible calls for more than that. Christians should take more firm action against injustice by “speaking out and standing up against perpetrators of oppression and injustice” (Mbofana 2017). According to Kruger (2009:424), preaching should not only focus on the needs of the poor but also challenge “their exploitation and oppression by those in position of power and wealth.”

To this end, the church in Nigeria has a pastoral responsibility to identify more with its members who are in Job’s condition by intervening in their economic deprivation. As expressed by Orji (2011:166), the church “should renounce the public perception of deep-rooted corruption.” It should be mentioned, though, that apart from distributing clothes and food to the poor, the church in Nigeria engages in other activities to help the poor. For instance, the Christian Rural and Urban Development Association of Nigeria (CRUDAN) operates a number of programmes with a view to empowering poor people (Jegade 2020:140). Similarly, the People Oriented Development Programme of Evangelical Church Winning All (ECWA) is involved in agricultural practices “focused on the economic empowerment of women and young people” (Jegade 2020:140). But the church now has to do more than all these. It has to be more alive to the biblical injunction “to plead the cause of the needy, to rescue and deliver the oppressed, and to correct oppression” (Ademiluka 2019:9). There are several methods that the church can utilise to achieve this goal, which include,

[N]on-violent methods of social activism ... such as official statements from institutions [like] the Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN) [to] confront unjust and exploitative policies of government.... The church can also provide an alternative voice through the establishment of ... independent media. To call the attention of government to the economic plight of its members, the church may also use other non-violent approaches such as public protests, rallies and marches.... Gospel musicians, preachers on radio and television should also be encouraged by the church to expand their focus to include the clamour for social justice. (Ademiluka 2019:9; cf. Uchegbue 2013:149)

Christian literature writers, biblical scholars and theologians should be encouraged to write critiques on the nation’s economy (Ademiluka 2015:29). This approach by the church will not only help towards liberating the poor but will also make its prophetic message more effective when the church is “pragmatic in attending to the living conditions of its members” (Ademiluka 2019:9). Dwelling on this point, Kruger (2009:410) opines that preaching on God’s love, hope, and redemption may be powerless in the face of hunger. Headley and Kobe (2017) put it succinctly when they say that the significance of the Christian message is rediscovered when the church engages “with societal problems such as social and economic inequality”.

It is noteworthy that occasionally the church and/or its leaders do engage government on the issue of corruption, “denouncing bad governance, corruption and poverty” (Ojo & Babajide 2020:82). For example, through periodic statements the Catholic Church has warned about the negative effects of corruption (Onah, Okwuosa & Uroko 2018:6; cf. Ishaya, 2017:90). However, these efforts have not been very effective because some church leaders continue to romance with the corrupt political class in manners which suggest that the church endorses the very practices it condemns (Orji 2011:166). With this attitude, any criticism from such leaders “will not be taken seriously” (Ojo & Babajide 2020:82).

## **Conclusion**

The book of Job is commonly employed as an appeal to people in suffering conditions. However, although the narrator attempts to prove that Job remains blameless before God amidst his troubles, Job’s own words in 1:20–22, and particularly from chapter three onwards, demonstrate that the loss of his possessions has a devastating effect on his faith. In other words, Job’s reaction to the loss of his wealth indicates that there is an inextricable correlation between righteousness and possessions. In Nigeria, preaching largely ignores the poverty-stricken hearers, rather admonishing people to seek only the kingdom of God. But this pastoral approach does not represent the purpose of the book of Job. The book in its canonical form encourages believers in Job’s condition not to accept their situation as a punishment from God. They should have faith in God that their circumstances can change like that of Job. Therefore, in Nigeria the pastoral relevance of Job goes beyond preaching patience amid suffering. Rather, it demands that preaching should show more concern for justice to the poor, which the church can achieve by adopting several non-violent methods. This approach will not only help towards liberating the poor but will also make the message of the church more effective in the Nigerian society.

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