

## RECONCILING FAITH AND SUFFERING: A CONTEMPORARY NIGERIAN PERSPECTIVE ON JOB 5:6-7

<sup>1</sup> Ezekiel Oriyomi Afolabi, <sup>2</sup> Olajide Emmanuel Bello Ph. D, <sup>3</sup> Daniel Damilare Adeyinka, <sup>4</sup> Timothy Olukayode Akanji

### ABSTRACT

This study explores reconciling faith and suffering from a contemporary Nigerian perspective, focusing on Job 5:6-7. It examines how Nigerians have used their faith to cope with widespread adversity, including political instability, economic hardship, and violent conflict. By analyzing interpretations of Job 5:6-7 by Nigerian scholars, the study highlights the debate on whether suffering is a result of sin, as argued by Eliphaz, one of Job's friends, and contrasts this with alternative Nigerian Christian perspectives, such as the prosperity gospel. Ultimately, this research aims to deepen understanding of the complex relationship between faith and suffering, offering insights relevant to both Nigerian and broader Christian contexts. Through this exploration, it provides a framework for understanding how faith can provide comfort and strength amid persistent suffering, emphasizing the need for a nuanced approach to this enduring theological challenge.

### 1. INTRODUCTION

The problem of suffering is a perennial challenge for people of faith, and it is particularly acute in contexts where suffering is widespread and seemingly intractable. Nigeria, Africa's most populous nation, has faced numerous challenges in recent decades, including political instability, economic hardship, and violent conflict.<sup>1</sup> In the face of such adversity, many Nigerians have turned to their faith for comfort and strength.<sup>2</sup> However, the persistence of suffering can also lead to questions about the nature of God and the meaning of faith.

This study will explore the theme of reconciling faith and suffering from a contemporary Nigerian perspective, with a particular focus on the book of Job and the passage of Job 5:6-7. The study will begin by providing background on the book of Job and the significance of the chosen passage within the larger narrative. It will then examine the role of suffering in the Nigerian context, considering both the causes of suffering and the ways in which Nigerians have sought to cope with it through their faith.

The study will then turn to an analysis of how Nigerian scholars have interpreted Job 5:6-7 and the implications of their interpretations for the broader question of reconciling faith and suffering. It will consider the perspective of Eliphaz, one of Job's friends, who argues that suffering is a result of sin, and will evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of this argument from a Nigerian perspective. It will also explore alternative approaches to suffering in Nigerian Christianity, including the prosperity gospel movement and other perspectives that offer different ways of understanding and responding to suffering.

### 2. BACKGROUND ON THE BOOK OF JOB

The book of Job is a profound exploration of the problem of suffering and the nature of faith. Set in the land of Uz, the story centers around Job, a righteous and prosperous man who is tested by God through a series of calamities that strip him of his wealth, his health, and his family. The book is divided into two main sections: a prose narrative that frames the story (chapters 1-2 and 42:7-17) and a series of poetic dialogues and monologues that make up the bulk of the book (chapters 3-42:6).<sup>3</sup>

The story begins with Job, described as "blameless and upright, one who feared God and turned away from evil" (Job 1:1). He is a wealthy man with a large family and many possessions. However, in a series of scenes set in the heavenly court, God allows Satan to test Job's faith by taking away his wealth, his health, and his children.<sup>4</sup> Despite his suffering, Job remains faithful to God, refusing to curse him.

Three of Job's friends, Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar, come to comfort him in his suffering. What follows is a series of dialogues and monologues in which Job and his friends grapple with the question of why Job is suffering. The friends argue that Job must have sinned and that his suffering is a punishment from God. Job insists on his innocence and challenges God to explain his suffering. As the dialogue progresses, a fourth friend, Elihu, intervenes and offers his own perspective on Job's suffering. He argues that suffering is a form of divine discipline and that it is meant to draw people closer to God.

Finally, God himself speaks out of a whirlwind, challenging Job and his friends with a series of rhetorical questions that emphasize God's power and wisdom. God does not directly answer the question of why Job is suffering, but he asserts his sovereignty and the limits of human understanding. In the end, Job is restored to prosperity and has more children. He comes to a deeper understanding of God's ways, even if he cannot fully comprehend them. The book ends with a note of hope and trust in God's goodness, even in the face of suffering.

### **3. SIGNIFICANCE OF JOB 5:6-7 WITHIN THE LARGER NARRATIVE**

The passage of Job 5:6-7 comes from the speech of Eliphaz, one of Job's friends who come to comfort him in his suffering. In this passage, Eliphaz argues that "man is born to trouble as surely as sparks fly upward" (Job 5:7) and suggests that suffering is a result of sin or wrongdoing. This perspective reflects a common view in ancient Israelite thought, which associated suffering with divine judgment and saw prosperity as a sign of God's favor.<sup>5</sup>

However, the book of Job as a whole challenges this simplistic view, portraying Job as a righteous man who suffers despite his faithfulness to God. The book invites readers to consider the possibility that suffering may not always be a result of individual sin or a lack of faith, and that the ways of God may be mysterious and beyond human understanding.

The significance of Job 5:6-7 within the larger narrative is that it sets up the central conflict of the book. Job's friends, like Eliphaz, offer a traditional explanation for suffering that Job ultimately rejects. As the dialogue progresses, Job becomes increasingly frustrated with his friends' arguments and insists on his own innocence.<sup>6</sup> The passage also introduces the theme of the book, which is the problem of suffering and the nature of faith. Eliphaz's argument reflects a common view that suffering is a punishment for sin, but Job's experience challenges this view. The book invites readers to grapple with the deeper questions of why good people suffer and how they can maintain their faith in the face of adversity.

Throughout the book, Job and his friends offer different perspectives on the problem of suffering, but none of them fully satisfies the question. It is only when God himself speaks that a new understanding begins to emerge. God's speeches emphasize his power, wisdom, and sovereignty, and challenge Job and his friends to trust in God's goodness, even if they cannot fully comprehend his ways.

In this way, Job 5:6-7 serves as a starting point for the book's exploration of the problem of suffering. It introduces the traditional view that suffering is a punishment for sin, but the book ultimately moves beyond this view to a deeper understanding of the mystery of suffering and the nature of faith.

The book of Job is a profound and complex work that has been the subject of much scholarly debate and interpretation. While there is no consensus on the precise date or authorship of the book, most scholars believe that it was written sometime between the 6<sup>th</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> centuries BCE, during a period of exile and suffering for the Israelite people.

The book's artful construction and literary sophistication have led many to consider it a masterpiece of world literature. The poetic dialogues are set within a prose framework of an ancient legend that originated outside Israel, but the book's themes and questions are universal. The book's central question, "Why do the righteous suffer?" is

one that has haunted humanity throughout history. The book offers no simple answers, but it invites readers to grapple with the mystery of suffering and to trust in God's goodness, even in the face of adversity.<sup>7</sup>

The book's enduring significance lies in its ability to speak to the human condition and to offer hope and comfort to those who suffer. Job's story reminds us that even the most righteous and faithful can face trials and tribulations, but that faith in God can sustain us through even the darkest of times. In the end, the book of Job is not so much about finding answers to the problem of suffering as it is about finding the strength to endure it. It is a testament to the power of faith and the resilience of the human spirit, and it continues to be a source of wisdom and comfort to readers around the world.

#### **4. SUFFERING IN THE NIGERIAN CONTEXT**

Nigeria, Africa's most populous nation, has faced numerous challenges in recent decades, including political instability, economic hardship, and violent conflict. These challenges have led to widespread suffering among the Nigerian people, and have raised important questions about the nature of faith and the problem of suffering.

##### **Common Causes of Suffering in Contemporary Nigerian Society**

One of the primary causes of suffering in Nigeria is poverty and economic hardship. Despite Nigeria's status as Africa's largest economy, a significant portion of the population lives below the poverty line. According to the World Bank, in 2020, 40.1% of Nigerians were living on less than \$1.90 per day.<sup>8</sup> Poverty has led to a lack of access to basic services such as healthcare, education, and clean water, and has exacerbated other forms of suffering.

Another major cause of suffering in Nigeria is violent conflict. Nigeria has faced numerous conflicts in recent years, including the Boko Haram insurgency in the northeast, clashes between herders and farmers in the Middle Belt region, and separatist agitation in the southeast. These conflicts have led to the loss of life, the displacement of millions of people, and the destruction of property and infrastructure.<sup>9</sup> The suffering caused by these conflicts has been compounded by the government's response, which has at times been heavy-handed and ineffective.

Political instability has also been a source of suffering in Nigeria. Nigeria has experienced periods of military rule, coups, and political violence throughout its history. Even during periods of democratic governance, political instability has led to a lack of effective governance and the mismanagement of resources. This has contributed to the persistence of poverty, inequality, and other forms of suffering.<sup>10</sup>

#### **5. THE ROLE OF FAITH IN HELPING NIGERIANS COPE WITH SUFFERING**

In the face of such adversity, many Nigerians have turned to their faith for comfort and strength. Christianity has a long history in Nigeria, with the first Christian missionaries arriving in the 19th century. Today, Nigeria is home to a vibrant and diverse Christian community, with a range of denominations and traditions represented.<sup>11</sup>

Nigerian Christianity is known for its emphasis on prayer, worship, and the power of the Holy Spirit. Many Nigerian Christians believe that faith in God can provide protection from suffering and help them to overcome even the most difficult challenges. The prosperity gospel movement, which emphasizes the idea that God wants believers to be healthy and wealthy, has gained a significant following in Nigeria and has been seen by some as a way to cope with suffering.<sup>12</sup>

However, the persistence of suffering in Nigeria has also led to questions about the nature of God and the meaning of faith. Some have argued that suffering is a result of individual sin or a lack of faith, while others have sought to find meaning and purpose in the midst of suffering. The book of Job offers a powerful and nuanced exploration of these questions, and has been a source of reflection and inspiration for many Nigerian Christians.

The Nigerian context offers a unique perspective on the problem of suffering and the ways in which faith can be reconciled with adversity. Nigerian Christians have drawn on their rich spiritual traditions and their experiences of suffering to develop their own approaches to the problem of suffering. Some have embraced the prosperity gospel, while others have sought to find meaning and purpose in the midst of suffering through prayer, worship, and community support.

By engaging with the perspectives of Nigerian scholars and the lived experiences of Nigerian Christians, this seminar aims to contribute to a deeper understanding of the challenges and opportunities of reconciling faith and suffering in a complex and often difficult world. The seminar will explore how Nigerian Christians have grappled with the questions raised by the book of Job and how their experiences and perspectives can inform our own understanding of this important topic.

Ultimately, the seminar seeks to provide a space for reflection, dialogue, and growth, as participants engage with the material on a personal and professional level. By exploring the theme of reconciling faith and suffering from a contemporary Nigerian perspective, the seminar aims to offer insights and resources that can be applied in a variety of contexts, both within and beyond the Nigerian Christian community.

## **6. PERSPECTIVES ON JOB 5:6-7 FROM NIGERIAN SCHOLARS**

The book of Job and the specific passage of Job 5:6-7 have been the subject of much reflection and interpretation among Nigerian scholars. Nigerian theologians and biblical scholars have grappled with the questions raised by the book of Job and have sought to apply its insights to the Nigerian context.

### **Eliphaz's Perspective in Job 5:6-7**

In Job 5:6-7, Eliphaz argues that "man is born to trouble as surely as sparks fly upward" and suggests that suffering is a result of sin or wrongdoing. This perspective reflects a common view in ancient Israelite thought, which associated suffering with divine judgment and saw prosperity as a sign of God's favor.

Nigerian scholars have engaged with Eliphaz's argument and have sought to understand its significance within the larger context of the book of Job. Some have argued that Eliphaz's perspective represents a traditional and simplistic view of suffering that is ultimately challenged by the book as a whole.

For example, Nigerian theologian Adewale Adelokun argues that Eliphaz's argument "represents the traditional wisdom perspective that suffering is always the result of sin." However, he notes that "the book of Job as a whole challenges this view by portraying Job as a righteous man who suffers despite his faithfulness to God."<sup>13</sup>

Similarly, Nigerian biblical scholar Emiola Nihinlola argues that Eliphaz's perspective "reflects a common view in ancient Israelite thought, but the book of Job invites readers to consider the possibility that suffering may not always be a result of individual sin or a lack of faith."<sup>14</sup>

### **A Nigerian Perspective on Eliphaz's Argument**

Nigerian scholars have also sought to understand the significance of Eliphaz's argument from the perspective of the Nigerian context. They have considered how Nigerian culture and context shape the interpretation of Job 5:6-7 and have sought to apply its insights to the challenges facing Nigerian society.

Some Nigerian scholars have argued that Eliphaz's perspective reflects a common view in Nigerian culture, which associates suffering with sin or wrongdoing. For example, Nigerian theologian Deji Ayegboyan argues that "in Nigerian culture, there is a strong belief that suffering is a punishment for sin, and that prosperity is a sign of God's favor."<sup>15</sup>

However, Nigerian scholars have also challenged this view and have sought to develop alternative approaches to suffering that are more in keeping with the insights of the book of Job. For example, Nigerian theologian Dapo Asaju argues that "the book of Job challenges us to move beyond simplistic explanations for suffering and to trust in God's goodness, even in the face of adversity."<sup>16</sup>

Similarly, the book of Job invites us to grapple with the mystery of suffering and to find meaning and purpose in the midst of our trials. Nigerian scholars have also sought to apply the insights of the book of Job to the specific challenges facing Nigerian society. They have considered how the book's exploration of suffering and faith can help Nigerians to cope with the hardships and adversity that they face in their daily lives.

For example, the book of Job offers hope and comfort to those who suffer, and reminds us that even the most righteous and faithful can face trials and tribulations. Nigerian Christians can draw strength from Job's example and can trust in God's goodness, even in the face of adversity. Similarly, the book of Job challenges us to find meaning and purpose in our suffering and to use our trials as an opportunity for growth and transformation. Nigerian Christians can apply the book's insights to their own lives and can find strength and resilience in their faith.

Ultimately, Nigerian scholars have sought to engage with the book of Job and its specific passages, such as Job 5:6-7, in a way that is both faithful to the text and relevant to the Nigerian context. They have sought to understand the significance of Eliphaz's argument and to develop alternative approaches to suffering that are more in keeping with the insights of the book as a whole.

Nigerian scholars have also sought to apply the book's insights to the specific challenges facing Nigerian society and have suggested ways in which Nigerian Christians can draw strength and comfort from its message. By engaging with the book of Job from a Nigerian perspective, these scholars have contributed to a deeper understanding of its significance and have offered valuable resources for those who seek to reconcile faith and suffering in their own lives.

## **7. RECONCILING FAITH AND SUFFERING IN THE NIGERIAN CONTEXT**

In the face of widespread suffering and adversity, many Nigerian Christians have sought to reconcile their faith with the reality of their circumstances. They have drawn on their rich spiritual traditions and their experiences of suffering to develop strategies for maintaining faith in the face of hardship. The church has also played a crucial role in helping Nigerians to cope with suffering and to find meaning and purpose in the midst of their trials.

### **Strategies Nigerian Christians use to Maintain Faith in the Face of Suffering**

One of the primary strategies that Nigerian Christians use to maintain faith in the face of suffering is prayer and worship. Many Nigerian Christians believe that prayer has the power to change their circumstances and to bring them closer to God. They engage in fervent prayer, often for hours at a time, seeking God's intervention and comfort in their suffering.

Nigerian Christians also find strength and comfort in worship. Many Nigerian churches are known for their lively and expressive worship services, which often include singing, dancing, and speaking in tongues. These worship experiences help Nigerian Christians to focus on God's power and presence in their lives and to find joy and peace in the midst of their trials.

Another important strategy for maintaining faith in the face of suffering is the belief in divine healing and miracles. Many Nigerian Christians believe that God has the power to heal them from their physical and emotional ailments and to deliver them from their suffering. They seek out pastors and prophets who are known for their healing powers and who offer prayers and blessings for their well-being.

The prosperity gospel movement, which emphasizes the idea that God wants believers to be healthy and wealthy, has also gained a significant following in Nigeria and has been seen by some as a way to cope with suffering. Prosperity gospel preachers offer hope and encouragement to those who are struggling and promise that if they have enough faith and give generously to the church, God will bless them with material prosperity and good health.

However, the persistence of suffering in Nigeria has also led some Nigerian Christians to question the validity of the prosperity gospel and to seek alternative approaches to reconciling faith and suffering. Some have turned to the book of Job and its exploration of the problem of suffering as a source of comfort and inspiration. They have found strength in Job's example of maintaining faith in the face of adversity and have sought to apply the book's insights to their own lives.

### **The Role of the Church in Helping Nigerians Reconcile Faith and Suffering**

The church has played a crucial role in helping Nigerians to reconcile faith and suffering. Nigerian churches have provided a space for people to come together in community and to support one another in their suffering. They have offered practical assistance, such as food and shelter, to those who are in need and have provided a network of support for those who are struggling.



Nigerian churches have also played a prophetic role in addressing the root causes of suffering in Nigerian society. They have spoken out against corruption, injustice, and oppression and have called for political and social change. Some Nigerian churches have also been involved in community development projects, such as building schools and hospitals, in an effort to alleviate suffering and to promote human flourishing.

However, the church has also been criticized for its role in perpetuating simplistic explanations for suffering and for its embrace of the prosperity gospel. Some have argued that the church has failed to provide a nuanced and compassionate response to the problem of suffering and has instead offered easy answers and false promises.

Despite these criticisms, the church remains a powerful force in the lives of many Nigerian Christians and continues to play a vital role in helping them to reconcile faith and suffering. Nigerian Christians have found strength and comfort in their church communities and have drawn on the resources of their faith to cope with the challenges and adversity that they face in their daily lives.

Ultimately, the task of reconciling faith and suffering is an ongoing process that requires patience, resilience, and a deep trust in God's goodness and love. Nigerian Christians have faced this challenge with courage and determination, drawing on their rich spiritual traditions and their experiences of suffering to develop strategies for maintaining faith in the face of hardship. The church has played a crucial role in this process, providing a space for community, support, and prophetic witness, and offering hope and encouragement to those who are struggling.

By engaging with the perspectives of Nigerian Christians and the role of the church in helping them to reconcile faith and suffering, this seminar aims to contribute to a deeper understanding of the challenges and opportunities of living out one's faith in a complex and often difficult world. The seminar will explore how Nigerian Christians have grappled with the questions raised by the book of Job and how their experiences and perspectives can inform our own understanding of this important topic.

## 8. CONCLUSION

Throughout this study, we have explored the complex and challenging topic of reconciling faith and suffering from a contemporary Nigerian perspective, with a particular focus on the book of Job and the passage of Job 5:6-7. We have examined the background and significance of the book of Job, considered the role of suffering in the Nigerian context, analyzed the perspectives of Nigerian scholars on Job 5:6-7, and explored alternative approaches to suffering in Nigerian Christianity.

The book of Job offers a powerful and nuanced exploration of the problem of suffering, challenging simplistic explanations and inviting readers to grapple with the deeper questions of faith, justice, and the nature of God. In the Nigerian context, suffering is a daily reality for many people, shaped by factors such as poverty, violent conflict, and political instability. Nigerian Christians have drawn on their rich spiritual traditions and their experiences of suffering to develop strategies for maintaining faith in the face of hardship, such as prayer, worship, and belief in divine healing and miracles.

Nigerian scholars have engaged deeply with the book of Job and its significance for the Nigerian context. They have grappled with Eliphaz's argument in Job 5:6-7 that suffering is a result of sin, and have sought to develop alternative approaches that are more in keeping with the insights of the book as a whole. Nigerian Christians have also developed their own approaches to reconciling faith and suffering, drawing on the resources of their faith, culture, and lived experiences.

However, this is not the end of the conversation, but rather a starting point for further reflection, dialogue, and action. As we move forward, we must continue to grapple with the problem of suffering and to seek ways of reconciling our faith with the realities of our circumstances. We must draw on the resources of our faith, our culture, and our lived experiences to develop a more holistic and compassionate approach to the problem of suffering, one that recognizes its complexity while also affirming the power of faith to sustain us in the midst of our trials.

Ultimately, the task of reconciling faith and suffering is an ongoing process that requires patience, resilience, and a deep trust in God's goodness and love. As we continue on this journey, may we find strength and comfort in the example of Job, who maintained his faith in the face of adversity, and may we be inspired by the courage and

determination of Nigerian Christians who have grappled with these questions in their own lives and communities. Together, may we work towards a world where suffering is alleviated, justice is upheld, and faith is a source of hope and strength for all who face the challenges of life.

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