

'FEMINIZATION' OF POVERTY:  
PROSPERITY PREACHING AND JOB 24:1-17

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**Abstract:** *Worldwide, women constitute the majority of the poor and often they are the poorest among the poor. To eliminate poverty and challenge inequality, it is insufficient to improve legislation and policy. In addition to these, gender and power relations, structures, norms and values that underpin them must be transformed. In Ghana, where 95.8% of the inhabitants define themselves as 'religious' and openly declare their affiliation for a specific religion, the role of theological reflection is critical. The aim of the paper is, therefore, to answer a crucial question: which theology for the poor? As in the OT dispute between 'retributive' and 'experiential' theology, the poor are at the centre of prosperity preaching, an ecclesiastic phenomenon in Ghana. According to this 'gospel,' wealth is a manifestation of mature faith while poverty signifies lack of faith. In this theological perspective, the poor have no place. Against this background, the article explores the causes of the popularization of prosperity preaching in Ghana and its theological consequences through a reading of Job 24:1-17. Journeying with Job, Ghanaian readers may discover the falsehood of a 'gospel' that limits the goal of life to economic prosperity and learn to become 'voice' for the voiceless.*

**Key Words:** Gender inequality; Ghana; Job 24:1-17; Poverty; Prosperity gospel

## 1. Introduction

In the past 20 years, there has been a shift in the definition of poverty from lack of what is necessary for material well-being and consequent employment of economic indicator ("less than a dollar a day") to a more comprehensive definition, incorporating cultural poverty and the exclusion of an individual from opportunities and choices that are basic to human development.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> UNDP, *Human Development Report 1997* (New York – Oxford; Oxford University Press, 1997), 2-14; [http://hdr.undp.org/sites/default/files/reports/258/hdr\\_1997\\_en\\_complete\\_nostats.pdf](http://hdr.undp.org/sites/default/files/reports/258/hdr_1997_en_complete_nostats.pdf)

Following this trend, the 1997 United Nation Development Programme (UNDP)'s report defined poverty in relationship to human rights and from a sustainable human development perspective:

Poverty can mean more than a lack of what is necessary for material well-being. It can also mean the denial of opportunities and choices most basic to human development — to lead a long, healthy, creative life, to enjoy a decent standard of living, freedom, dignity, self-esteem and respect for others.<sup>2</sup>

Elements such as long and healthy life, knowledge and standard of living were included together with “lack of political freedom, inability to participate in decision-making, lack of personal security, inability to participate in the life of a community and threats to sustainability and inter-generational equity.”<sup>3</sup> In addition to its material and cultural dimensions, poverty has also been seen as racial, and geographically circumscribed.

However, across the changing definition and attitude towards poverty, there is a factor that is tragically unchanged: the ‘feminization of poverty.’ In fact, numerous studies demonstrate that in any society around the world women are habitually paid less than men for the same job done; carry more familiar and social responsibilities and have less opportunities to be promoted to managerial levels. Often, they are the poorest among the poor.<sup>4</sup>

While many studies deal with poverty from a socio-economic perspective, the article explores the phenomenon from a theological viewpoint: poverty is a theological challenge, a *skandalon*, to theological reflection. Poverty is, in fact, ‘at the centre’ of the theological

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<sup>2</sup> UNDP, *Human Development Report 1997*, 15.

<sup>3</sup> UNDP, *Human Development Report 1997*, 17.

<sup>4</sup> Barbara Bailey, “Feminization of Poverty across Pan-African Societies: The Church’s Response – Alleviation or Emancipation,” in Peter J. Paris, ed., *Religion and Poverty: Pan-African Perspectives* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2009), 39-68; Oxfam International, “Why the Majority of the World’s Poor are Women,” <https://www.oxfam.org/en/even-it/why-majority-worlds-poor-are-women>; Alexandra Cawthorne, “The Straight Facts on Women in Poverty,” October 8, 2008; <https://www.americanprogress.org/issues/women/reports/2008/10/08/5103/the-straight-facts-on-women-in-poverty>; World YWCA, Project 21: *Christianity, Poverty and Wealth in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*; [www.aprodev.net/files/CPW/WYWCA.pdf](http://www.aprodev.net/files/CPW/WYWCA.pdf); Bill&Melinda Gates Foundation, “Challenges,” <https://www.gatesfoundation.org/What-We-Do/Global-Growth-and-Opportunity/Gender-Equality#TheChallenge>

dispute between two Old Testament theological approaches: the 'common' retributive theology and the 'experiential' theology, a theology that "embraces the pain."<sup>5</sup> While retributive theology sees poverty as a sign of sin and a curse from God, 'experiential' theology underlines the social causes of poverty and gives voice to the cry of the poor for justice.

This ancient debate is revitalised in contemporary Ghanaian Christian religious landscape by the Prosperity Gospel (PG), which offers a new interpretation of Christianity, where wealth is a sign of faith and poverty an indicator of sin and lack of trust in God.

Following the Communicative approach to African Biblical Hermeneutics, the article is organized into three steps: the first, exegesis of reality, explores the phenomenon of feminization of poverty; the second, exegesis of the text, explore the theological answers to the reality of poverty; the third and final step engages the text and reality.

## **2. Step One: Exegesis of Reality**

### **2.1 Women and Poverty**

According to the 2009 report of UNDP, women constitute:

- a) Six out of ten of world's poorest;
- b) 2/3 of the world's illiterate people;
- c) Only 18% of the world's parliamentarians are women.

The report also disclosed that one-third of all women are subjected to some form of violence. In a study on women and poverty carried out by the World YWCA, women described poverty as dehumanizing, all-embracing, and all-encompassing:

...an indivisible whole, an ongoing, day to day reality that cannot be simply defined by lack of a particular possession or amenity. Poor women experience not only lack of income and access to assets and basic services, but even more severe is the devalued social status

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<sup>5</sup> W. Bruggemann, "A Shape of Old Testament Theology I: Structure Legitimation," *CBQ* 47 (1985): 28-46; W. Brueggemann, "A Shape of the Old Testament Theology, II: Embrace of Pain," *CBQ* 47, no. 3 (1985): 395-415.

which is magnified by various forms of violence and insubordination. Lack of dignity diminishes women more than the material they lack. Poor women are demeaned and have to struggle very hard to live.<sup>6</sup>

To address this situation, a Gender Equality Strategy (2014-2017) was launched (2014-2017). This programmatic document underlined the following challenges:

- a) Women's unequal access to economic and environmental resources;
- b) Social and legal discrimination against women and girls;
- c) Disproportionate burden of unpaid work;
- d) Violence against women.<sup>7</sup>

In 2016, the Bureau of International Information Programs, United States Department of State noted

Women constitute a majority of the poor and are often the poorest of the poor... The societal disadvantage and inequality they face because they are women shapes their experience of poverty, increases their vulnerability, and makes it more challenging for them to climb out of poverty.<sup>8</sup>

In 2017, Oxfam International observed:

Gender inequality is one of the oldest and most pervasive forms of inequality in the world. It denies women their voices, devalues their work and makes women's position unequal to men's, from the household to the national and global levels... Women are still more likely than men to live in poverty.<sup>9</sup>

The same agency reiterates in May 2019:

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<sup>6</sup> World YWCA, Project 21: *Christianity, Poverty and Wealth in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*; [www.aprodev.net/files/CPW/WYWCA.pdf](http://www.aprodev.net/files/CPW/WYWCA.pdf)

<sup>7</sup> UNDP, *Gender Equality Strategy 2014-2017. The Future we Want: Rights and Empowerment* (New York: UNDP, 2014), 9-10.

<sup>8</sup> Janni Aragon and Mariel Miller, eds., "Overview," in *Women's Issues: Women in the World Today*, Bureau of International Information Programs, United States Department of State, 3; <https://openextbc.ca/womenintheworld/>

<sup>9</sup> Oxfam International, "Gender Justice and Women's Rights" (31 May 2019): <https://www.oxfam.org/en/explore/issues/gender-justice>

Every day, in every country in the world, women are confronted by discrimination and inequality. They face violence, abuse and unequal treatment at home, at work and in their wider communities – and are denied opportunities to learn, to earn and to lead. Women form the majority of those living in poverty. They have fewer resources, less power and less influence compared to men, and can experience further inequality because of their class, ethnicity and age, as well as religious and other fundamentalism. Gender inequality is a key driver of poverty. And a fundamental denial of women's rights.<sup>10</sup>

Unfortunately, after 10 years of advocacy, the situation appears unchanged as the following statistics reveal:

- a) Women make up less than 24% of the world's parliamentarians and 5% of its mayors;
- b) On average, women are paid 24% less than men for comparable work, across all regions and sectors;
- c) Nearly two thirds of the world's 781 million illiterate adults are women, a proportion that has remained unchanged for two decades;
- d) 153 countries have laws which discriminate against women economically, including 18 countries where husbands can legally prevent their wives from working
- e) Worldwide, 1 in 3 women and girls experience violence or abuse in their lifetime.<sup>11</sup>

Coming home to Ghana, in 2006 the African Peer Review Mechanism (APRM) team noted that the marginalization of women remains a real

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<sup>10</sup> Oxfam International, "Gender Justice."

<sup>11</sup> Oxfam International, "Gender Justice."

problem in the Country despite constitutional<sup>12</sup> and other legislative provisions made to protect and secure the rights of women.<sup>13</sup>

Osei-Assibey's paper on "Inequalities in Ghana: Nature, Causes, Challenges and Prospects, Pan-African Conference on Tackling Inequalities in the Context of Structural Transformation" reveals that women are more likely to be poor, particularly in the northern regions of the country and in rural areas. The two main reasons are:

- a) Disparity in asset distribution;
- b) Disparity in land holdings.<sup>14</sup>

Evidence in Ghana points to persistent gender disparities in access to and control of a wide range of assets: human capital assets (education and health); directly productive assets (labour, land, and financial services); and social capital assets (e.g., gender differences in participation at various levels, and in legal rights and protections). Despite

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<sup>12</sup> The Constitution of Ghana was adopted in 1992 and came into effect on January 7, 1993. Chapter five is entirely devoted to fundamental human rights and freedoms consistent with the International Bill of Rights. These include political and civil rights as well as economic, social and cultural rights: Article 17 states that all persons are equal before the Law:

*Article 17(2)* states that "a person shall not be discriminated against on grounds of gender, race, colour, ethnic origin, religion, creed, social or economic status."

*Article 17(4)* makes provision for special legislation or policies to address discriminatory socio-cultural, economic or educational imbalances in the Ghanaian society.

*Article 18* guarantees every citizen's right to property. *Article 22* provides that spouses shall have equal access to property jointly acquired during marriage, and that assets which are jointly acquired during marriage shall be distributed equitably between the spouses upon dissolution of the marriage.

*Article 22* also prohibits the deprivation of a reasonable provision of a spouse's estate upon death or dissolution of marriage.

<sup>13</sup> Ghana Statistic Service, *Women and Men in Ghana. A Statistic Compendium 2014* (Accra: GSS, September 2014) "Over the years the government has ratified conventions, created structures and extended support to gender work. The Republic of Ghana is also committed to global, regional and sub-regional gender equality agenda and has signed and ratified key international and regional protocols. Furthermore, Ghana is signatory to a number of instruments on gender equality, including CEDAW which emphasizes the elimination of all forms of discrimination against women and girls, the Protocol on the Rights of Women and, the African Charter on Human and People's Rights which were adopted in 2005 as well as the Beijing Platform for Action (BPFA), the International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD) and the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and Targets which guarantee women's rights. In addition, Ghana has a National Action Plan (NAP) to enhance women's leadership in the implementation of the UN Security Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace and Security. However, progress has been slow."

<sup>14</sup> E. Osei-Assibey, *Inequalities in Ghana: Nature, Causes, Challenges and Prospects*, Pan-African Conference on Tackling Inequalities in the Context of Structural Transformation – Accra, Ghana 28th -30th April 2014. <http://www.africainequalities.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/05/Ghana.pdf>

increasing participation of women in labour markets, they are disadvantaged compared to their male counterparts. In other words, female workers are more likely to be engaged in vulnerable employment than their male counterparts.

Women constitute a greater proportion of contributing family workers and own account (81%) than their male counterparts (64%). They are less likely to engage in wage employment than men, and when they do, they are more likely to hold part-time, seasonal and/or low-paying elementary jobs in the informal economy.<sup>15</sup>

Available data suggest that women tend to be paid less than men for equivalent jobs and comparable levels of education and experience. It is estimated that the average hourly earnings of women in Ghana is 57% of that of men and that regardless of the type of employment, education, age etc., women earn lower than men.<sup>16</sup> Moreover, while formal sector employment where poverty is low is highly dominated by men, women far outnumber men in non-farm self-employment and private informal employment where earnings are relatively low. In effect, gender dimension of poverty is likely to be biased against women.<sup>17</sup>

Furthermore, the Participatory Development Associates (2011), reported that unlike men, women in large parts of the savannah still face national cultural constraints on their ownership and control over a range of other assets such as livestock.

Even in Dornye, UW (where disparities are less severe), women owning livestock nevertheless lack absolute control as they still need their husbands' consent before selling" the study observed. Such encumbering and gender-based challenges leave women adversely incorporated in economic processes and overly dependent on the goodwill of their menfolk, making it so much more difficult for them to break free of poverty. Yet, women are consistently demonstrating a higher capacity to manage scant resources than men, despite the huge disadvantage they face in resource terms.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Osei-Assibey, *Inequalities in Ghana*.

<sup>16</sup> Osei-Assibey, *Inequalities in Ghana*.

<sup>17</sup> Osei-Assibey, *Inequalities in Ghana*.

<sup>18</sup> Osei-Assibey, *Inequalities in Ghana*.

The higher poverty rates among women and cultural norms contribute to the broader marginalisation of women and girls in society. The low status of women in Ghana, particularly in rural communities, is mirrored in the under-representation of women in political life

In 2013, only 11% of the 275 seats in Parliament were occupied by women; the situation was worse on local government level, where only 8.2% of District Chief Executives were women (14 of the 170).<sup>19</sup> In the current Parliament, women constitute 12.7% of the 275 MPs, against the 24% average of women parliamentarians worldwide.

At the end of this short overview, it is clear ‘poverty’ is a gender issue, and the fight against poverty is a fight in favour of women. In fact, oppressing the poor is oppressing women; ignoring the poor is ignoring women; speaking for the poor is speaking for women and working for social justice is advocating justice for women

We believe that to end poverty and challenge inequality it is insufficient to improve legislation and policy. The way forward is the transformation of gender and power relations, and the structures, norms and values that underpin them. In a context like Ghana, where 95.8% of inhabitants define themselves as ‘religious’ and openly declare their affiliation for a specific religion, the role of theological reflection is critical.<sup>20</sup> For this reason, the next step of our research answers a crucial question: which theology for the poor?

## 2.2 Overview of Contemporary Ghanaian Christianity

According to the 2000 census, 71.2% of Ghanaians identify themselves as Christians. Among them, there is a diminution in the membership of the Historic Missionary Churches (Catholics; Presbyterians Methodists Anglicans Baptists) and an increase in that of Pentecostal/Charismatic churches. The phenomenon, however, is more complex than what the numbers suggest. Asamoah-Gyadu interprets this as "pentecostalization" of African Christianity and adds: “The explosion and growth of the Pentecostal movement is the single and most

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<sup>19</sup> Osei-Assibey, *Inequalities in Ghana*. In the Northern region: 3% (EC, 2013).

<sup>20</sup> Ghana Statistical Service, *2010 Population & Housing Census: Analytical Report*, [http://statsghana.gov.gh/docfiles/2010phc/National\\_Analytical\\_Report.pdf](http://statsghana.gov.gh/docfiles/2010phc/National_Analytical_Report.pdf).



important development that has occurred within Christianity in sub-Saharan Africa since the turn of the twentieth century."<sup>21</sup>

One of the main characteristics is the shift of the focus of preaching from Christ, the cross, discipleship, ethics, holiness... to prosperity.<sup>22</sup>

Paul Gifford offers a descriptive definition of the phenomenon when he writes: "The essential point of this Gospel of Prosperity is that prosperity of all kinds is the *right* of every Christian. God wants a Christian to be wealthy. True Christianity necessarily means wealth; it inevitably brings wealth. Conversely, poverty indicates personal sin, or at least a deficient faith or inadequate understanding."<sup>23</sup>

This definition captures the existence of an equation:

<p style="text-align: center;">Sin – Ignorance – Lack of Faith      =      Suffering and Poverty</p> <p style="text-align: center;">Righteousness – Knowledge – Faith      =      Health and Prosperity</p>
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In this equation, there is no place for 'innocent' suffering and the mystery of the cross; economic prosperity becomes the 'seal' of faith, and poverty is a curse. In churches that uphold these views, the poor have no place. In fact, according to PG, it is *the will of God that all his children are rich* - a visible sign and a testimony of his blessing.<sup>24</sup>

<sup>21</sup> J. K. Asamoah-Gyadu, "I Will Put My Breath in You, and You Will Come to Life": Charismatic Renewal in Ghanaian Mainline Churches and its Implications for African 'Diasporian' Christianity," in A. Adogame – R. Gerloff – K. Hock (eds.), *Introduction Christianity in Africa and the African Diaspora: The Appropriation of a Scattered Heritage* (London: Continuum International, 2008), 193. Omenyo emphasized the same concept: «Members of the various charismatic renewal groups are determined to remain in their 'impoverished' churches and to revitalize them with the introduction of Charismatic/Pentecostal spirituality», cf. C.N. Omenyo, *Pentecost Outside Pentecostalism: A Study of the Development of Charismatic Renewal in the Mainline Churches in Ghana* (Zoetermeer: Boekcentrum Publishing House, 2002), 7.

<sup>22</sup> Prosperity gospel originated in the US from the teaching of E.W. Kenyon, Oral Roberts and Kenneth and Gloria Copeland. In Africa, one of the earliest exponents was the Nigerian Archbishop Benson Idahosa, at whose school many of the contemporary Ghanaian leaders were formed. For an interdisciplinary approach to the analysis of 'Prosperity gospel' in Africa, see A. Heuser, ed., *Pastures of Plenty: Tracing Religio-Scapes of Prosperity Gospel in Africa and Beyond* (Study in the Intercultural History of Christianity, 161; Peter Lang, Frankfurt am Main, 2015).

<sup>23</sup> P. Gifford, "Prosperity: A New and Foreign Element in African Christianity," *Religion* 20 (1990), 375.

<sup>24</sup> Prosperity Gospel is popularized through billboard, banner, bumper sticker and song. For example, a well-known Nigerian singer-songwriter expressed this theology in a song known as "Double, double." According to Uche Agu, God is a good God who, when you believe in him, doubles your every possession: money, house, car. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=>

Some advocates intimate that no believer should be ill, no one should die of sickness; and anyone who drives a cheap rather than a luxury car has not understood the gospel.<sup>25</sup>

A Ghanaian leading exponent, Duncan-Williams, reiterates the view when he writes, "...as a Christian, you should wear the best of clothing, drive expensive cars and live in comfortable houses so that the glory of God could be seen in your life, because the God you worship is expensive."<sup>26</sup> A series of texts are quoted as biblical evidence for the 'call' to prosperity (Deut. 8:18-21; Mal. 3:10-12; John 10:10).

Moreover, to achieve prosperity, faith in God is not enough. According to the 'canons' of PG, two other elements are needed:

*Positive confession:* prosperity preachers contend that "Your destiny is in your mouth!". God is the master of the world to which everything belongs; Christians are children of God and have the right to everything: health, wealth, success. They need only to ask! "...you find a text that gives a promise of what you want, say wealth, healing or miracle. You sow it in your heart by believing that this is going to happen to you... You then claim it by demonstrating an appropriate faith. That is, even though the symptoms of an illness are still there, you claim that they are already healed..."<sup>27</sup>

*Sowing 'seeds' of prosperity:* the term refers to an offer 'appropriate' to what you wish to receive: "Give one house and receive one hundred houses or one house worth one hundred times more... Give one car and the return would furnish you a lifetime of cars. In short, Mark 10:30 is a very good deal."<sup>28</sup> A favourite text is 2 Cor 9:6-11: "harvest is proportional to sowing." Donating to the church is donating to God. For this reason, many churches are extremely wealthy; some are even registered as businesses, and their founders can afford a luxurious and

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<sup>25</sup> P. Gifford, *Christianity and Politics in Doe's Liberia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 147.

<sup>26</sup> N. Duncan-Williams, "I am expensive Pastor", *Ghanaweb*, accessed on November 2, 2018. "No matter how rich you are in my church, I will not allow you to intimidate me with your wealth because you cannot even buy the perfume I use not to talk of the attire I wear," <https://www.ghanaweb.com/GhanaHomePage/NewsArchive/I-m-expensive-pastor-Duncan-Williams-222742>

<sup>27</sup> R. Jackson, "Prosperity Theology and the Faith Movement," *Themelios* 15 (1989), 21.

<sup>28</sup> Gloria Copeland *God's Will Is Prosperity* (Fort Worth: KCP Publications, 1989), 54.

often extravagant life, far away from the concrete existence of those who support them with their offerings.

The enormous diffusion of the Gospel of prosperity in sub-Saharan Africa has prompted many scholars to ask themselves: "... why a gospel that equates faith with prosperity is popular in a context of extreme poverty."<sup>29</sup> Two assumptions have been formulated:

- a) The consonance between the values proposed by the propagators of the contemporary 'gospel of prosperity' and the traditional African culture and religion;
- b) The actual or perceived contribution of PG in poverty alleviation.

In the next paragraphs, we want to examine the two hypotheses.

### 2.3 The poor in the Akan Culture

To examine the first assumption, this section explores through the analysis of some proverbs how the Akan, a Ghanaian ethnic group, perceives 'poverty.'<sup>30</sup> The aim is to answer to the following questions: what is poverty? And who are the poor in the Akan culture?

The first aspect is that poverty is seen as something negative and non-desirable (*ohia yɛ musu*): poverty is not positive (*ohia nnyɛ adepa*) and the flesh of poverty is bitter (*ohia nam yɛ wen*). Sometimes it is the work of evil: the conception that witchcraft and evil eye can cause poverty is, in fact, widespread.

The effect of poverty is reduction of a person to an 'animal' state, manifested in the lack of what is necessary for survival: protection (home) and nourishment (food).

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<sup>29</sup> L. Togarasei, "The Pentecostal Gospel of Prosperity in African Contexts of Poverty," *Exchange* 40 (2011): 342

<sup>30</sup> Cf. J.G. Christaller, *Dictionary of the Asante and Fante Language Called Tshi (Twi)* (Basel: Basel Evangelical Missionary Society, 1935); P. Appiah, A. Appiah and I. Agyeman-Duah, *Bu Me Be: Proverbs of the Akans* (Banbury, OX: Ayebia Clarke, 2007). For an in-depth analysis, see E. Amoah, "African Traditional Religion and the Concept of Poverty," in P.J. Paris (ed.), *Religion and Poverty. Pan-African Perspectives* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2009), 111-127.

- If a person becomes poor, he/she sleeps in the forest (*ehia onipa a ɔda wuramu*)
- If you are poor, you eat from the dung heap (*ehia wo a na worwi sumina-due*)
- If you are poor, you eat the goat's skin (*ehia wo a worwi aberekyeri wire*)

The above proverbs suggest that poverty is not only the loss of material possessions (home, food, clothing), but above all the loss of human dignity. Consequently, the poor has no rights (*ohiani bo mfu*); the proverb of the poor is not heard (*ohiani bu be a ennhye*); the poor cannot decide where to sleep (*ohiani mpow dabre*). In summary: the poor is powerless (*ohiani tumi nnye tumi pa*).

We can add that poverty creates social isolation; the poor has no friends (*ohiani nni yanko*) and when you are in need you sleep in the forest (*ehia wo a wo da wuram*). However, for the Akan tradition, poverty should not be a permanent state (*ehia wo a nmwu*). Hard work, ability to manage resources, sharing and prayer were tools used by peasants in traditional society and small villages to alleviate the suffering of the poor.

From the brief overview, we can appreciate how an indigenous Ghanaian culture is a fertile ground for PG for the following reasons:

*Philosophy of life as fullness*: according to indigenous Ghanaian cultures, the purpose of human existence is the ‘fullness of life,’ a gift of God to those who observe cultural norms; those who obey the moral laws and respect the ancestors. ‘Fullness’ of life indicates health, well-being, children, abundant crops and flocks.<sup>31</sup>

*The belief in retributive justice* particularly linked to the relationship with the ancestors (custodians of morality) and to the observance of taboos. Obedience and fidelity to cultural values and rituals are means of obtaining the blessing of the ancestors;

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<sup>31</sup> Cf. G. Ossom-Batsa, “Ritual as Mechanism for Securing Life and Averting Evil”, *Acta Theologica* 28, no.1 (2008), 143-160.

*The ‘lack of asceticism.’* The view of suffering as a negative reality is linked to a causal concept: sickness, death, poverty have a spiritual (ancestors; spirits) or human agents (witches; sorcerers; enemies).<sup>32</sup>

Prosperity preachers base themselves on these indigenous worldviews to attribute poverty to the work of the evil one: those who desire to embark on the journey from poverty to prosperity must be exorcised from the ‘spirit of poverty.’<sup>33</sup>

## 2.4 Prosperity Gospel and Poverty

A wide-ranging debate about the economic impact of prosperity gospel is present in Africa.<sup>34</sup> While some scholars believe that its success among the poor is triggered by its actual contribution to personal development and social transformation, others have defined it as an “impetus for delusion.”<sup>35</sup> Furthermore, the desire for wealth at any cost is alleged to promote corruption and lawlessness.<sup>36</sup> Many theologians will associate themselves with Stueckelberger in condemning that doctrine as a “modern form of ‘simony’ which provides spiritual justification for corruption.”<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> Cf. Dickson Chilogani, “Prosperity Gospel in Africa: A Response from the Book of Job,” *AICMAR Bulletin* 6 (2007), 53; P. Gifford, “Prosperity,” 383; Id., *African Christianity: Its Public Role* (London: Hurst e Company, 1998).

<sup>33</sup> Data, “Prosperity Gospel in Nigerian Context,” *ORITA: Ibadan Journal of Religious Studies* 36, no. 1-2 (2004): 95-105. Cf. D. Maxwell, “Delivered from the Spirit of Poverty? Pentecostalism, Prosperity and Modernity in Zimbabwe,” *Journal of Religion in Africa* 28, no. 3 (1998), 350-374. It is interesting to notice that while prosperity preachers use traditional beliefs as based of their teaching, they passionately reject traditional rites and beliefs often considered the ‘chain of the devil.’ As a result, the past must be cursed as a first step towards prosperity. L. Togarasei, “Cursed be the Past: Tradition and Modernity among Modern Pentecostals,” *BOLESWA* 1-2 (1998), 114-132.

<sup>34</sup> The debate does not involve only Africa. In 2009 several articles on prosperity preaching’s responsibility in the economic crisis have appeared in USA. For example, Hanna Rosin, “Did Christianity Cause the Crash?” *Atlantic Magazine*, December 2009; David Van Biema and Jeff Chu, “Does God Want you to be rich?,” *Times Magazine*, September 10, 2006. <http://content.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,1533448,00.html>

<sup>35</sup> Dada, “Prosperity Gospel in Nigerian Context,” 95-105

<sup>36</sup> E. Obadare, “Raising Righteous Billionaires: The Prosperity Gospel Reconsidered,” *Hervormde Teologiese Studies* 72, no. 4 (2016), 5-6. doi: 10.4102/hts.v72i4.3571: “Unsurprisingly perhaps, a shallow understanding of prosperity often leads Pentecostalism into a moral rabbit hole in which churches more or less license flagrant criminality.” Obadare supports his statement with many concrete examples from Nigeria’s newspapers. The situation is similar in Ghana where newspapers report constantly of criminal cases concerning pastors.

<sup>37</sup> C. Stueckelberger, *Corruption Free Churches Are Possible: Experiences, Values and Solutions* (Geneva: Globethics.net 2010), 130; Y. Wijaya, “Construction an Anti-Corruption Theology,” *Exchange* 43, no. 3 (2014): 229-230; A. Egan, “South Africa’s Prosperity Gospel

Among the positive elements, Togarasei notes the following:

*Encouraging Entrepreneurship:* Charismatic leaders encourage members to be self-employed. During a homily, the founder of Lighthouse International Chapel, Dag Heward-Mills, asked the congregation to repeat several times this prayer: “God deliver me from salary mentality.” The founder of Action Chapel International also explained in a sermon that the word ‘job’ is an abbreviation for ‘Just Over (being) Broke,’ because “being a wage-earning worker is to be just a month away from poverty.”

*Employment creations:* the riches accumulated by some of these churches are invested in schools (especially universities), banks and hospitals resulting in job opportunities for their members;

*Encouraging members to be generous:* Sometimes generosity is directed to the church's initiatives towards orphans, people living with disabilities, etc. However, voluntary work and philanthropy are not encouraged.

*Holistic approach to life:* Pentecostal/Charismatic churches regulate the entire existence of their- members. The positive aspect is that a virtuous and orderly life is encouraged: abstaining from smoking and alcohol consumption and marital fidelity have also... economic implications.<sup>38</sup>

However, many other scholars elaborate on the deficiencies present in the PG. They note the followings:

*The promise of prosperity is not realized:* A research conducted in 10 churches founded by leading prosperity preachers in Ibadan (Nigeria) revealed that the economic status of the members of the churches had not changed. In the meantime, the founders of the churches had become very rich, to the extent that four of them were able to establish

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Churches,” *Concilium* 5 (2014): 55-64. See also, H. Marquette, *Corruption, Religion and Moral Development*. Religions and Development Working Paper 42 (Birmingham: International Development Department University of Birmingham, 2010).

<sup>38</sup> D. Freeman, “The Pentecostal Ethic and the Spirit of Development,” in *Pentecostalism and Development. Churches, NGOs and Social Change in Africa*, D. Freeman, ed. (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 13.

universities. It is for this reason that Dada talks of “impetus for delusion.”<sup>39</sup>

*Prosperity Gospel takes away personal responsibility*; it blames one failure on the presence of evil. Furthermore, it promotes individualism and reduces Christianity to a ‘this-word’ faith: the eschatological dimension is, in fact, removed from the life of the believer.<sup>40</sup>

*Prosperity Gospel ignores social injustice*: “Infirmity, poverty, and high mortality indices form part of social and structural sin. Oppression and exploitation of the weak by the powerful — countries, groups or people — are realities that must trigger a cry for justice and fairness directed to God. Unfortunately, it ends by qualifying as *cursed* the poor, the sick, the dying, portraying itself more as a *liberal ideology* than as a *biblical theology* of prosperity that revalues the condition of the fallen, the poor and the sick, as reasons and stimuli that give meaning to the ministry and the Christian Service in the world.”<sup>41</sup> Moreover, the gospel of prosperity adds suffering to the pain of those who suffer by “condemning them as sinners, faithless or ignorant and bolstering those who are rich and healthy as obviously the most pious.”<sup>42</sup>

However, what is perhaps less evident but more worrisome are the *theological consequences* as the following section demonstrates.

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<sup>39</sup> Dada, “Prosperity Gospel in Nigerian Context,” 95-105.

<sup>40</sup> In his book, *Crisis in the Village*, Franklin writes that he believes “...prosperity gospel is the single greatest threat to the contemporary black church tradition,” since prosperity preaching is individualistic and denies the existence of oppressive systems, it lacks the much-needed prophetic voice that cries for change. Robert Michael Franklin, *Crisis in the Village: Restoring Hope in African American Communities* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2007), 112. Mumford reiterates the same concept: “Prosperity preaching is also very individualistic, teaching people to pray for themselves and make confessions to God on their own behalf rather than including others. Perhaps the reason adherents of the Word of Faith movement are not instructed to make confessions on behalf of others is because of a sense of Christian entitlement, the belief that only those who choose to follow particular teachings of Christ are entitled to certain benefits. Those who do not, get what they deserve. Christian entitlement sees no need to pursue social justice issues; if everyone would simply follow Christ, all social justice issues would disappear.” Debra J. Mumford, “Prosperity Gospel and African American Prophetic Preaching,” *Review and Expositor* 109, (2012), 379-380.

<sup>41</sup> J.A. Barreda, “Il vangelo della prosperità: uno schiaffo alla vera missione cristiana,” *Euntes Docete* LIX, n. 3 (2006), 163. The translation is ours.

<sup>42</sup> Chilongani, “Prosperity Gospel in Africa,” 69; Wijava, “Construction an Anti-Corruption Theology,” 229.

### 3. Step Two: Exegesis of the Text

#### 3.1 Theologies in Conflict

Prosperity preaching uncritically embraces and absolutizes *one* of the Old Testament theologies, the ‘common’ theology, better known as retributive theology. The basic concept is a narrow idea of God’s justice. Using one of Brueggemann’s favorite expressions, YHWH is portrayed “above the fray,” as a God of justice, law, and retribution who punishes and rewards according to His mysterious will. For this reason, McKnight notes that “the gospel of prosperity makes God a vending machine in which believers put in faith and out comes blessing.”<sup>43</sup> If apparently it is a theology of coherence and rationality, in reality, the mechanic conception of faith promotes a crisis by causing a rift between ‘experience’ and ‘belief.’ In fact, everyday experience tells us that not all suffering can be justified by lack of faith: what about the ‘innocent’ or ‘unjust’ suffering?

As Brueggemann has demonstrated, theological reflection affects the social context. He writes, “Theological categories are understood to have social and political counterparts so that these statement about God are also understood as statement about the *misuses of human power* and the *proper uses of human power*.”<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> S. McKnight, “The Problem of Prosperity Gospel,” March 2009, <https://www.beljefnet.com/faiths/christianity/2009/03/the-problem-for-the-prosperity-gospel.aspx>

<sup>44</sup> Brueggemann, “A Shape of Old Testament Theology I,” 33.



Theologies	God	Social Effect	Human	Consequences
<p><i>Common/ Retributive Theology:</i></p> <p>Theology of coherence and rationality</p>	<p><i>"Above the fray"</i></p> <p>Yhwh as God of justice, law, and retribution who punishes and rewards according to "his" articulated will</p>	<p>Structure Legitimation:</p> <p>Supports the <i>status quo</i>, the celebration of order</p>	<p>Security Stability</p> <p>Clear distinction between righteous and sinner; innocent and guilty</p>	<p><i>Open to exploitation</i></p> <p><i>Lack a human face:</i> no chance of forgiveness and no possible move toward newness.</p> <p><i>Unable to deal with pain</i> in terms of policies and symbols (liturgy)</p>
<p><i>Embracing Pain/Experiential Theology</i></p> <p>Theology of relationship and mystery: meeting of two freedoms</p> <p>Eg. Psa 73, Job, Imprecatory Psalms; Lamentations</p>	<p><i>"In the fray"</i></p> <p>Yhwh as free agent who has a life and interiority of "his" own</p>	<p>Pain, when brought to public speech, impinges upon every structure and serves to question the legitimacy of the structure.</p>	<p>Take risk; Acknowledge and articulate the experience of pain; Insist on God's reception of the speech and the pain; Wait for God's resolution</p>	<p>Bold protest against a legitimacy that has grown illegitimate because it does not seriously take into account the suffering reality of the partner.</p>

The consequence of retributive theology is the legitimization of structure, social and ecclesiastic: since the 'word of God' cannot be interpreted or contextualized but must be taken literally, so the 'word of the man of God,' pastor, prophet, etc. cannot be discussed or contested.<sup>45</sup> This attitude opens the door to exploitation, manipulation

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<sup>45</sup> "Pentecostal pastors have slowly emerged as substitute authorities, 'consultants' who are entrusted with the final word on a range of subjects, from the pietistic to the private. This is the specific back drop to the emergence of the Pentecostal pastor as a totalising agent, one whose word is, quite often, and often times quite literally, law." Obadare, "Raising Righteous Billionaires," 4.

and brain-washing favoured by a careful choreography.<sup>46</sup> To achieve their aim, prosperity preachers misinterpret biblical texts out of context to suit ‘their’ message.<sup>47</sup>

The last important observation is that prosperity theology is unable to deal with pain in terms of policies and symbols: suffering cannot be celebrated but must be silenced. In fact, “‘contractual theology’ of coherence and rationality offers a world in which pain need not occur; and where it occurs, pain is a failure to be corrected.”<sup>48</sup>

Therefore,

...a theology of contractual coherence must excommunicate all the pained and pain-bearers — the poor, the useless, the sick, the marginal ones — as having violated the ‘common theology.’ Indeed, the presence of pain-bearers is a silent refutation of the legitimated structures, and therefore they must be denied legitimacy and visibility.<sup>49</sup>

Lamentation ceases to be considered a biblical prayer but is silenced as a manifestation of lack of faith.

What proponents of PG seem to forget is that common theology is contested *within* the Tanak itself, before being superseded by the New Testament reflection. Texts like Psalm 73, the book of Habakkuk, Qoheleth and, above all, the book of Job, openly challenge retributive theology based on *human experience*. A different theology emerges, an *experiential theology*, that Bruggeman defines ‘Embrace of Pain.’ It is a theology of relationship and mystery, the meeting of two freedoms: God and humans. YHWH is described as a God “in the fray,” as a free agent who has a life and interiority of his own. It is a theology of bold protest that is found in the literary genre of ‘Lamentation’ - an

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<sup>46</sup> “...the hero appears on the virtual screen as a being from beyond, a true Vicar of Christ, a near perfect replica of the divine. To the prosperity followers, the Hero’s words becomes the Law, nay, the Scripture. His wish becomes command.” C.B. Peters, “The Church’s Response to Poverty: A Jungian Appraisal of the ‘Prosperity Gospel’ Phenomenon,” *Ogbomoso Journal of Theology* 14 (2009), 141-142. The author offers a vivid description

<sup>47</sup> W. Kahl, “Prosperity Preaching in West-Africa: An Evaluation of a Contemporary Ideology from a New Testament Perspective,” *Ghana Bulletin of Theology*, 2 (2007): 21-42; J.A. Barreda, “Il vangelo della prosperità, uno schiaffo alla vera missione cristiana,” *Euntes Docete* 69, no. 3 (2006): 162-163;

<sup>48</sup> Bruggemann, “Structure Legitimation, I” 43.

<sup>49</sup> Bruggemann, “Structure Legitimation, I” 28-46.

instrument to be heard.<sup>50</sup> The social effect is to question the legitimacy of structures that have grown illegitimate because they do not seriously take into account the reality of suffering. It is a theology of courage, a theology that educates to think and to denounce injustice.<sup>51</sup>

The book of Job expressed the ‘battle’ between these two theologies which represent two modalities to relate with God and with the ‘other.’ As Gutierrez underlines, “Job’s determination to seek and find leads him through a battlefield in which ‘the shots come at him from every side’... His personal courage and his trust in God impel him to follow paths *that are a challenge to the theology of his day.*”<sup>52</sup>

For this reason, the book of Job can become a journey companion for Ghanaian contemporary Christians in revisiting their relationship with God and with the poor.

### 3.2 The Poor in the Book of Job

The book of Job represents a unique case in the Wisdom Literature corpus. While the book of Proverbs approaches the problem of poverty as an issue of *personal responsibility*, the result of laziness, eccentric lifestyle and consequent ‘judgement’ from God, the book of Job embraces the prophetic tradition. Poverty arises from social injustice: the poor are victims of a corrupt and unjust system, controlled by the centers of economic, political and judicial power. In the book of Job, in fact, the term *אֲנִי־יָסוּרִים* designates the victims of economic injustice (24:4). The same term is employed in the self-defense of Job. Against the accusations of his ‘friends,’ Job describes his relationship with the *אֲנִי־יָסוּרִים* as a fatherly relationship (29:16), based on empathy and compassion (30:25), manifested in concrete action as offering protection and dignity in the gift of garments (31:19). In doing so, Job imitates the righteous action of God who saves the poor, the widow, the orphan and the foreigners (5:15).

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<sup>50</sup> “Lament are the refusals to settle for the way things are. They are acts of relentless hope which believes no situation falls outside YHWH’s capacity of transformation;” Brueggemann, “A Shape of the Old Testament Theology, II,” 402.

<sup>51</sup> Brueggemann, “A Shape of the Old Testament Theology, II,” 395-415.

<sup>52</sup> G. Gutiérrez, *On Job. God-Talk and the Suffering of the Innocent* (Maryknoll NY: Orbis Books, 2003): 93. Italics is ours.

The term לָרֵעַ is used only by the accusers of Job. Some scholars believe that the ‘friends’ represent a kind of caricature of wisdom, a caricature of the (false) wisdom teachers. Perhaps for this reason a wisdom term common in the book of Proverbs abounds in their words. It is first used in 5:16 by Eliphaz to challenge the innocence of Job concerning exploitation of the poor. The theme will become dominant from chap. 20, when Zophar quotes Proverbs remembering that the wicked who has “oppressed and forsaken the wretched, stole houses instead of building them” (20:19) will be deprived by God of their own wealth.

In the same way, Elihu uses לָרֵעַ to illustrate the divine care towards the poor. God is impartial in his judgment (34:19); but he listens to the cry of the poor rising to him as a denunciation of any form of oppression (34:28). To these accusations, Job responds by ‘swearing’ to have always responded to the need of the poor (31:16).

Lastly, we can note that in the dialogues with the ‘friends’ only Job uses רָעַי to describe the daily realities of the poor, their suffering that now he shares in: the miserable are obliged to hide (24:4); infants are torn from their mothers’ embrace and used as collateral (24:9; cf. 2 Kings 4:1-7); they are killed in the darkness (24:14).<sup>53</sup> Finally, in the last occurrence of the term (29:12), Job declared in his defense that when God had blessed him with wealth and power, he listened to the cry of the poor and responded to their need.

After this general overview, we can now focus our attention on chap. 24, where the book proposes one of the most lucid analyses of the situation of the poor present in the Tanak, transformed into a violent accusation to the oppressors and to God who, with his ‘indifference’ (24:1.12), assumes the role of accomplice

### 3.3 Job 24: 1-17

<sup>1</sup>Why are times for judgment not reserved by Shaddai? Even those close to Him cannot foresee His actions. <sup>2</sup>People remove boundary-stones; they carry off flocks and pasture them; <sup>3</sup>they lead away the donkeys of the fatherless and seize the widow's bull as a pledge;

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<sup>53</sup> Interestingly the resumption of the term in the cycle of Elihu that reechoes the language of the Psalter to emphasize God's action in the help of oppresses (רָעַי; cf. Psa. 34:28; 36:6, 15).

<sup>4</sup>They chase the needy off the roads; All the poor of the land are forced into hiding. <sup>5</sup>Like the wild asses of the wilderness, they go about their tasks, seeking food; The wilderness provides each with food for his lads; <sup>6</sup>They harvest fodder in the field, and glean the late grapes in the vineyards of the wicked. <sup>7</sup>They pass the night naked for lack of clothing, they have no covering against the cold; <sup>8</sup>They are drenched by the mountain rains, and huddle against the rock for lack of shelter. <sup>9</sup>They snatch the fatherless infant from the breast and seize the child of the poor as a pledge. <sup>10</sup>They go about naked for lack of clothing, And, hungry, carry sheaves; <sup>11</sup>Between rows of olive trees they make oil, And, thirsty, they tread the winepresses. <sup>12</sup>Men groan in the city; The souls of the dying cry out; Yet God does not regard it as a reproach. <sup>13</sup>They are rebels against the light; They are strangers to its ways, and do not stay in its path. <sup>14</sup>The murderer arises in the evening to kill the poor and needy, and at night he acts the thief. <sup>15</sup>The eyes of the adulterer watch for twilight, Thinking, "No one will glimpse me then." He masks his face. <sup>16</sup>In the dark they break into houses; By day they shut themselves in; They do not know the light. <sup>17</sup>For all of them morning is darkness; It is then that they discern the terror of darkness.

The text is generally considered part of the third cycle of dialogues between Job and his ‘friends’ (chaps. 21—27).<sup>54</sup> Though the textual unit is accepted by majority of scholars, the problem of its structure and attribution to the narrative characters represents a hermeneutic challenge.<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>54</sup> For an extensive *status quaestionis* see the followings: C. Kuhl, “Neurere Literarkritik des Buches Hiob,” *ThR* 21 (1953), 277-281; J. Lévêque, *Job et son Dieu: Essai d'exégèse et de théologie biblique* ÉtB (Paris, Gabalda, 1970), 215-229; M. Witte, *Vom Leiden zur Lehre: der dritte Redegang (Hiob 21-27) und die Redaktionsgeschichte der Hiobbuches*, BZAW 230 (Berlin-New York: W. de Gruyter, 1994), 7-55; 239-247.

<sup>55</sup> Some authors reconstruct the text by changing the order of the verses respect to the MT. For example, Alonso Schökel moves 24:18-24 after 27:1-7, while Ravasi places the same verses after 27:13-22: the two scholars agree, however, to attribute 24:18-24 to Zophar. Cfr. L. Alonso Schökel and J.L. Sicre Diaz, *Giobbe*, *Commenti Biblici* (Roma: Borla, 1985), 429; G. Ravasi, *Giobbe*, *Commenti Biblici* (Roma: Borla, 1984): 32. J.H. Hartley, *The Book of Job*, NICOT (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1988), 53, attributes 23:1 — 24:25 to Job preserving the order of the MT. David J. A. Clines, *Job 21-37*, *Word Biblical Commentary* 18a (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 2006), rewrites the text following poetic criteria: “In this commentary, the view has been taken that 24:18–24 belongs to Zophar, not Job, that 26:2–14 belongs to Bildad, not Job (vv. 2–4 preceding Bildad’s 25:2–6), and that 27:7–23 belongs to Zophar, not Job (24:18–24 fitting in after 27:17). In this way, speeches that are roughly equal (except for Job’s last) can be reconstructed for the interlocutors: 23:2–24:17 (Job, thirty-three lines), 26:2–4 + 25:2–6 + 26:5–14 (Bildad, eighteen lines), 27:2–6, 11–12 (Job, seven lines), 27:7–17 + 24:18–24 + 27:18–23 (Zophar, twenty-two lines).”.

24:1-17 presents a pessimistic triptych of a society divided into oppressors and oppressed. At the beginning and in the center comes the appeal to God: an almighty God (יְהוָה) unable to guarantee justice (24:1), because he is deaf, even to the groan of the dying (24:12).

The second part shows the contradiction between light and darkness: why does the light of God fail to expose the occult evil of מְרִי-יָאֵוֶר (24:13), the rebels against the light? The final part represents a bitter reflection on the behavior of God that abandons mankind to the perversity of the powerful and oppressors (vv. 2-11); murderers (v. 14), adulterers (v. 15), thieves and raiders (vv. 16-17); and egoists (vv. 21-22).

Thus, the pericope could be structured as follows:

1: Introduction: The Almighty does not act

2-12: The destruction of the poor

V. 12: The Indifference of God

13-17: The work of the enemies of light

18-24: The impunity of the wicked

vv. 21-22: God does not care about the living

25: Appeal to God

Verse 1: though the verse presents textual problems, scholars agree on its meaning. Proceeding the ironic critique of the theology of retribution, Job interrogates God on the day of judgement, the universal day of accounting. “God’s failure to provide regular days for judgement has two harmful outcomes: it dismays the pious who suffer oppression, and it encourages wrongdoers in their belief that they will never be called to account. As an absentee governor of the world of humans, standing aloof above the fray of human affairs, God is charged by Job with irresponsibility and cosmic mismanagement.”<sup>56</sup> The denial of God transforms human history into a chaotic succession

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<sup>56</sup> Clines, “Quarter Days Gone,” loc. 3061-3322; Hartley, *The Book of Job*, 345. Cf. F. Festorazzi, “Riflessioni Sapienziali,” in L. Pacomio (ed.), *Dizionario Teologico Interdisciplinare* (Torino: Marietti, 1977), 3: 92.

of events, devoid of logic: even the basic rule of retribution is absent: to leave the evil unpunished seems to suggest a tacit blessing.

Verses 2-12 offer one of the most effective portrayal of oppression in the Old Testament. The chain of violence begins with the violation of a fundamental right: the ownership of the land, what gives 'personhood' on a social and religious level. No one can appropriate the land of the other because the owner is God and humans enjoy only the usufruct. The accusation of the prophets against the land-landiary property (Amos 6:1-7; Mic 2:1-5; Isa 5:8; Ezek 7:5-26; etc.) and the severe rules for the protection of borders (Deut 19:14; 27:17) are at the service of the protection of the person: without land, a person becomes a slave.<sup>57</sup>

Against this backdrop, we appreciate the second accusation against those who 'steal' the tools to work the land: the donkey and the ox (vv. 2-3). The crime is made even more appalling because it is perpetrated against those who are deprived of protection, the orphan and the widow (Exod 22:21-23; Deut 24:17; 27:19).

Deprived of the land and the means of subsistence, the poor are driven out and pushed aside: the verse re-echoes Amos 2:7, directing the reader towards a legal interpretation of the text: the systematic violation of justice. The poor are forced to hide, to become invisible (Judg 5:6; Amos 5:11-13) while the rich oppressors lead a life of luxury based on the exploitation of the miserable. Although the Torah indicates many laws in protection of the *גֵּרִים*, and the prophets have repeatedly proclaimed God's option of justice and the protection of the poor, God does not intervene.<sup>58</sup>

From v. 5 onwards the text builds up a picture of anger and realism: the poor evicted, robbed and deprived of the justice go hungry;<sup>59</sup> homeless, they are exposed to the harsh weather. Even

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<sup>57</sup> Clines, "Quarter Days Gone," loc. 3061-3322, asks the question about the identity of those who move the borders and steal the flocks: they are not 'thieves, they do not operate in the night concealed in darkness. They are people who belong to the same community of the poor: "Probably they offered loans, perhaps to usury; Surely, they have the law on their side. In summary, they belong to the same social class of which Job was part."

<sup>58</sup> Hartley, *The Book of Job*, 347.

<sup>59</sup> Hartley, *The Book of Job*, 347. "They are forced to gather grain from fields already harvested. They have to glean in the miser's vineyard. The owner is labeled 'wicked' because after the initial harvest he is supposed to allow the poor to glean freely in his field (Lev19:10; Deut

infants are torn from their mothers and used as collateral. Though naked and hungry, they must carry the sheaves of the rich: like animals, they are forced to operate the heavy grinding mills that produce oil and with their mouths dry from thirst they squeeze the grapes to produce wine to gladden the banquets of the rich. The irony is that wheat, oil and wine represent the gift of God to support mankind (Hos 2:11, 24)!<sup>60</sup>

Job's overview now moves to the city where violence reigns unchallenged: “On this bleak landscape of campaigns full of the suffering of the exploited, of cities affected by violence and blood, it reigns absent, indifferent and sublime God.”<sup>61</sup>

Verses 13-17 open with a pronoun without antecedent (הַמְּרִיבִים). Who are being referred to? Who are the rebels against the light (מְרִיבֵי אֵוֶר)? While the majority of commentators see a reference to the murderers, thieves and adulterers presented in the following paragraph, Borgonovo interprets it as, “A fictional divine judgment, accusing the poor of having turned against the light.”<sup>62</sup> It is of course a ‘fierce irony’ immediately clarified by the presentation of the ‘true’ rebels, those who constantly are enveloped in darkness, to perpetrate their actions unpunished: “Their dark work is judged in ethical perspective, revealing the negative connotation of the night; on it, as on the *Še’ol*, the power of God seems limited. In the darkness, not only the human’s eye (v. 15b), but even the divine’s eye seems to become blind.”<sup>63</sup> Against this background, the contrast between the poor and ‘the professionals of the night’ could not be more vivid: the poor know the fear of darkness (v. 17b) while the true ‘rebels’ seek it to act undisturbed (v. 15b).<sup>64</sup>

#### 4. Step Three: Engagement

The exegetical analysis has disclosed that Job moved from ‘common theology’ to ‘embracing the pain’ when he realized that his friends

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24:12). Under this condition there is little possibility of these poor gathering much food for their own families.”

<sup>60</sup> Hartley, *The Book of Job*, 347

<sup>61</sup> Ravasi, *Giobbe*, 564

<sup>62</sup> Borgonovo, *La notte e il suo sole*, 167. The translation is ours.

<sup>63</sup> Borgonovo, *La notte e il suo sole*, 169. We can clearly refer to the three commandments (Exod 20:13-15; Deut 5:17-19) strengthened by the resumption of the same verbs (רָצַח; נָאֵף; גָּבַהּ).

<sup>64</sup> Borgonovo, *La notte e il suo sole*, 169.



preferred to repeat ideas they learnt in the past, instead of turning to the concrete existence of living persons, asking questions and, in this way, opening themselves to a better understanding of God and God’s words. He starts by ‘lamenting’ his suffering and the injustice he experienced. Based on his experience, and his faith in the living God, he challenged and gradually dismantled the common theology.

In the search for God, Job’s vision broadens. He reflects on plight of ‘others’, the poor, and their undeserved suffering.<sup>65</sup> He recalled the requirement of the covenant that real belief in God entails solidarity with the poor. This creates a bridge with God, a God whom as Job knows in the depths of his heart, wants justice. The meeting with the poor becomes, therefore, for Job a further motivation for a deeper insight into divine justice and an unlimited encounter with a new image of God.

The encounter with the book of Job reveals the limits of Prosperity Gospel:

- a) A limited image of God: a god so ‘just’ to become deeply ‘unjust;’
- b) Consecration of structure — church; pastor; ‘man of God,’ etc. — with risk of personality- cult and exploitation;<sup>66</sup>
- c) Demonization of poverty and blaming of the poor: if poverty is demonic, then the poor are ‘possessed,’ or punished by God for sins committed by themselves or by relatives;
- d) Lack of awareness of the social causes of poverty: on our continent, political corruption, social oppression, injustice *create* poverty. PG silences consciences; it does not educate to speak for those who have no voice, to be responsible for the destiny of the nation, and to denounce injustice.<sup>67</sup> Richards summed

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<sup>65</sup> Gutiérrez, *On Job*, 31-38.

<sup>66</sup> “This nascent centrality of Pentecostal pastors is not without its implications. Socially speaking, for instance, it translates into the contemporary situation in which the pastor is a widely sought after existential micromanager – a blend of ecclesiastical supervisor, financial coach, marriage counsellor, travel advisor, all-purpose celebrity, and last but not least, and as we have seen all too frequently from a stream of media reports, object of erotic fascination” Obadare, “Raising Righteous Billionaires,” 4.

<sup>67</sup> “On this evidence, Pentecostal spirituality offers no realistic path out of the economic crisis in Africa. To its identified critical blind spots – faux individuation, ethical sloppiness, susceptibility of being a regulatory valve for the state, neglect of structural barriers to upward mobility – may be added the fact that it has developed no cogent political economy to speak of. The

up this position by stating that Prosperity Gospel is politically irrelevant.<sup>68</sup> Perhaps that is why the churches in Ghana are silent as far as social justice is concerned.

## 5. Conclusion

Journeying with Job, Ghanaian readers may discover the falsehood of retributive theology and of a ‘gospel’ that limits the goal of life to economic prosperity. They may realize the silence to which retributive theology condemns them and the consequent rampant corruption and indifference that destroy Ghanaian culture and society. With Job, the readers can learn to break the silence and to raise their voices to become ‘voice’ for the many voiceless, women and men who conceive poverty as stigma and socio-religious alienation. And, perhaps, their voices may challenge and oblige our churches to become centers of education about relationship (with God and others), social justice and hope.

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prosperity gospel has no lever – historical or philosophical – on which it might be grounded.” Obadare, “Raising righteous billionaires,” 8.

<sup>68</sup> W. Richards, “An Examination of Common Factors in the Growth of Global Pentecostalism: Observed in South Korea, Nigeria and Argentina,” *Journal of Asia Mission* 7, no. 1 (2005) 85-106.

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