

Capitalist tendencies in Jeremiah 6:13-20 and the church in economically unstable Nigeria

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Abstract

This article examines the capitalist tendencies in Jeremiah 6:13–20 and their implications for Nigeria. Jeremiah 6:13–20, in particular, presents a striking critique of the pervasive greed and corruption among the leaders and people of Judah. This passage reveals the prophet Jeremiah's denunciation of materialistic pursuits and unethical practices that prioritise wealth accumulation over justice and righteousness. In Nigeria, the prophets and priests are giving prophecies for self-gain. They prophesy to the people about the number of enemies chasing them or stopping their progress in their bid to get money from the people. Families have been disintegrated because of some of these prophecies. It was on this premise that Jeremiah noted that these prophets practice deceit. This is a qualitative study using the narrative method. The data was from secondary literature. The data was analysed using content analysis. Emerged themes include: a) unrestrained greed and materialism; b) corruption and deception; c) neglect of justice; d) false security in wealth; and d) consequences of unchecked capitalism. Recommendations are discussed.

Keywords: *Capitalism, Jeremiah 6:13-20, Church, Nigeria, Materialism*

Introduction

The book of Jeremiah, a critical component of the Hebrew Bible, offers profound insights into the social, economic, and spiritual conditions of ancient Judah. Jeremiah 6:13–20, in particular, presents a striking critique of the pervasive greed and corruption among the leaders and people of Judah. This passage reveals the prophet Jeremiah's denunciation of materialistic pursuits and unethical practices that prioritise wealth accumulation over justice and righteousness. According to Jeremiah, he looked around and found that greed—the unbridled pursuit of economic gain—had displaced the love of God, as the people's chief concern.¹ These

¹ TOW Project. Injustice, Greed, the Common Good, and Integrity (Jeremiah 5-8). <https://www.theologyofwork.org/old-testament/jeremiah-lamentations/work-related-themes-in-the-book-of-jeremiah/injustice-greed-the-common-good-and-integrity-jeremiah-5-8/>. Accessed March 4, 2024

capitalist tendencies, as highlighted in the ancient text, resonate with contemporary issues faced by many societies, including Nigeria. According to Andrew , the commercialization of religion is as old as Christianity itself, and it can be both a threat and an opportunity for Pentecostals who believe that a gospel of prosperity can expand believers' abilities, lead to progress in their personal and socioeconomic lives, and create space for God to intervene miraculously in the present and future.²

In modern Nigeria, the church plays a significant role in shaping societal values and behaviors. However, it is not immune to the influences of capitalism. The intersection of faith and economic practices has led to various manifestations of wealth-oriented ideologies within the church. Thus, one could conclude that “Church is the biggest growing industry in the country” (Marshal 1993, p. 29).³ In Nigeria, the prophets and priests are giving prophecies for self gain. They prophesy to the people, about the number of enemies chasing them, or stopping their progress in their bid to get money from the people. Families have been disintegrated because of some of these prophecies. It was on this premise that Jeremiah noted that these prophets practice deceit.

Understanding the capitalist tendencies in Jeremiah 6:13–20 involves examining the historical and cultural context of ancient Judah. The passage portrays a society where greed and corruption have infiltrated all levels of leadership, leading to widespread social injustice and spiritual decay. The prophet Jeremiah condemns the unscrupulous acquisition of wealth and the neglect of true worship and ethical conduct. This critique serves as a timeless warning against the dangers of prioritising material gain over moral integrity and community welfare. In the Nigerian context, the church's relationship with capitalism is complex and multifaceted. On one hand, the church has been a beacon of hope, providing spiritual guidance, social support, and advocating for justice. On the other hand, the increasing prevalence of the prosperity gospel and the commercialization of religious practices suggest a drift towards capitalist ideologies. The clergy now sell anointing water, handkerchiefs, soap, and all manner of items. The current phenomenon is the early morning prayers that some pastors in Nigeria have started. They make these prayers for people early in the morning and send their account numbers. Nigerians, in their quest to get help out of their problems, resort to all manner of activities. Some of these Nigerian priests engage in fake miracles and prophecies. It was on this ground that Anderson,states that:

The jet-setting, lavish, and sometimes morally lax lifestyles of some of Pentecostalism's most notorious representatives, and the wiles of those religious charlatans who present themselves as specialists with miraculous powers, claim fake healings, and prey

² Andrew, D. N. From the margins to the centre. *Missionalia: Southern African Journal of Mission Studies*, 49(1), 6-20. 2021

³ Marshal, R. *Pentecostalism in southern Nigeria: An overview*. In P. Gifford (Ed.). *New dimension in African Christianity* (pp.8-39). (Ibadan: Sefer, 1993), 29

on the weakness of unsuspecting and credulous followers betrays the ethos of Christ and his most effective first century disciples.⁴

Scholars have written much on Jeremiah 6:13–20 such as Ghormley, Meyer, and Holladay.⁵ However, existing literature has failed to show the nexus between Jeremiah 6:13–20 and the church in Nigeria. This is a qualitative study using the narrative method. The data was from secondary literature. The data was analysed using content analysis. This phenomenon raises critical questions about the alignment of such practices with the core teachings of Christianity and the prophetic warnings found in biblical texts like Jeremiah. This study aims to explore the capitalist tendencies described in Jeremiah 6:13–20 and examine their parallels within the Nigerian church context. First, this study explores the capitalist tendencies in Jeremiah 6:13–20. Second, it analyses the capitalist tendencies in the church in Nigeria. Third, a hermeneutical framework is developed.

Understanding Jeremiah 6:13-20

Jeremiah is the second-longest book in the Bible, behind Psalms, and the only Old Testament work that recounts its own genesis. Jeremiah is known as the "weeping prophet" because his heart broke at Judah's transgressions. His Hebrew name is Yirmeyahu or Yirmeyah, which translates to "he whom Yahweh will establish or lift up." Showing people their sins leads to persecution. Jeremiah was denied marriage, lashed and put in stocks, rejected by his own family, sent to Egypt against his will, nearly slain by a violent mob, flogged and thrown into prison, and cast into a dirty cistern .⁶The book begins with Jeremiah's preaching to the people of Israel between 627 B.C.E. and shortly after Jerusalem fell in 587 B.C.E. This teaching is particularly associated with the people's unfaithfulness, which manifested itself in idolatry, social injustice, and other acts of treachery to their God. In light of this unfaithfulness, Israel was threatened by foreign foes, particularly the Babylonians, who are regarded as God's agents of judgement on the nation and were ultimately responsible for the destruction of Jerusalem and the exile of many Israelites to Babylonia .

The southern kingdom of Judah—sometimes referred to as "Israel"—with its capital city, Jerusalem, receives the majority of the prophetic word. Nearly a century before, Assyria conquered Samaria and the northern kingdom. Miscellaneous oracles are also directed at a few

⁴ Anderson, A.H.. The transformation of world Christianity: Secularization, globalization and the growth of Pentecostalism, *plenary paper for the society for Pentecostal Studies 44th Annual Meeting, South Eastern University*,(Lakeland Florida, 6 March 2015), 10

⁵ Ghormley, J. T. Doublets and Textual Divination in Jeremiah. In *Scribes Writing Scripture* (pp. 78-163). Meyer, F. B. (2022). *Jeremiah: priest and prophet* (Vol. 11).(Christian Publishing House, 2021). Holladay, W. L. . Prototype and Copies: A New Approach to the Poetry-Prose Problem in the Book of Jeremiah. *Journal of Biblical Literature*, 351-367.1960

⁶Zavada, J. *Introduction to the Book of Jeremiah*. Retrieved from <https://www.learnreligions.com/book-of-jeremiah-701134>, (2021, December 6).

other ancient civilisations (see 1:5). Chapters 46–51 discuss numerous of Judah's pagan contemporaries, including Egypt, Philistia, Moab, Amon, Edom, Syria, and Babylon (Jackson, 2024). Jeremiah prophesied during the administrations of five of Judah's kings, viz., Josiah (639–608 B.C.), Jehoahaz (608 B.C.), Jehoiakim (608-597 B.C.), Johoiachin (597 B.C.), and Zedekiah (597-586 B.C.). Jeremiah faithfully declared the Word of the Lord to Judah all the way to their judgement and captivity, all alone in his quiet home at Anathoth or suffering in his lone dungeon in Jerusalem⁷. Much of the Book of Jeremiah deals directly with Judah's sensitive political position in the late seventh and early sixth centuries B.C. Jeremiah, like the other prophets, despised the immorality and idolatry that dominated Judah at the time. Like them, he foresaw the kingdom's doom and, more specifically, the destruction of the Temple of Jerusalem, if the people did not change their ways. He emphasised that such change would necessitate a personal commitment to and quest for God.⁸

Capitalist tendencies in Jeremiah 6:13-20

Jeremiah 6:13–20 offers a powerful critique of the socio-economic injustices and moral decay in ancient Judah. This passage specifically highlights the pervasive greed, corruption, and materialism that characterised society, drawing a parallel to modern capitalist tendencies. Here is an analysis of the capitalist tendencies as reflected in this biblical text:

Unrestrained Greed and Materialism

In this structure, Jeremiah renounced the attitudes of the prophets and priests. In v. 13, the word **רָצַע** was used. Hebrew **רָצַע** means greedy, covetousness, gain made by violence, unjust gain, profit. Common people and religious leaders alike are shamelessly corrupt, but all they have gained through injustice will be lost. Priests and prophets assure the people that all is well, when in fact the nation is doomed.⁹ The prophet noted that all those who practice the clergy profession are covetous, duping people of their money due to their greedy nature and quest for materialism. The Hebrew word **שָׁקַר** was also used to show how the prophet and priest dealt falsely with deception, disappointment, and lies. Prophet Jeremiah gave a sweeping indictment of all societal levels, indicating that greed for material gain is not limited to a specific class but is pervasive among both common people and leaders, including religious figures. In modern capitalism, a similar pursuit of profit often drives economic activities, sometimes at the expense

⁷ Mwangi, E. *The Holy Spirit In The Book Of Jeremiah*. <https://fcfkenya.com/the-holy-spirit-in-the-book-of-jeremiah/>. Accessed 24 March, 2024

⁸The Online Library of Liberty. *The Book of the Prophet Jeremiah* (KJV). <https://oll.libertyfund.org/titles/jeremiah-the-book-of-the-prophet-jeremiah-kjv>, 2003. Accessed 19, April 2024.

⁹ Smith, Charles Ward. "Commentary on Jeremiah 6:13". *Smith's Bible Commentary*. <https://www.studylight.org/commentaries/csc/jeremiah-6.html>. 2014. Accessed 19, April 2024.

of ethical considerations and communal well-being. This is what was prevalent during the time of Jeremiah.

Corruption and Deception

The prophet lamented against the way that prophets were not telling the people the truth. Jeremiah noted that matters that were to be treated seriously were treated with levity and carelessness. The prophet usually tells the people שָׁלוֹם שָׁלוֹם (peace, peace). Hebrew שָׁלוֹם שָׁלוֹם can also mean security, prosperity, and welfare, among others. Thus, prophets, priests, and pastors tell their church members that they have security, prosperity, and a better life when, indeed, there is no security, prosperity, or better life. There is no peace, because they went on in their idolatries and daring impieties.¹⁰ Thus, Jeremiah condemns the false assurances given by those in power, who downplay the severity of societal wounds for their own benefit. In contemporary capitalist systems, this can be seen in how businesses or leaders may misrepresent facts, such as financial stability or product safety, to maintain consumer confidence and market stability.

Neglect of Justice

Prophet Jeremiah lamented that prophets and priests are not ashamed of their attitudes and actions. Instead, they feel fulfilled by their ill-gotten wealth, which was the result of their fake prophecies to the people. However, God promised that they would fall (יִפְּלוּ). Hebrew יִפְּלוּ also means to attack, collapse, perish, or waste away. God also promised to punish (פָּקַדְתִּים) these false prophets. Hebrew פָּקַדְתִּים can also mean damage, summon, or injure. These show the anger that the Lord has towards false prophets and priests. This points to the lack of moral accountability among the corrupt. In ancient Israel, there was often a disregard for justice, especially in how economic policies and practices disproportionately benefited the wealthy while marginalising the poor and vulnerable. The pursuit of profit can overshadow the need for fair and just practices.

False Security in Wealth

God calls on the people to avoid looking for prophets who promise riches and prosperity. He insisted that the reason people are having problems is because they refuse to listen (אָלַן). Hebrew אָלַן also means come, walk, accompany, follow, or patrol. This shows that the people were not willing to listen or walk in the ways that God intended. The people's refusal to follow the righteous path signifies a false sense of security derived from their wealth and material possessions. They faced judgement after judgement for their perversion of the ways of God.¹¹ In

¹⁰ Henry, M.. *Matthew Henry: Commentary on Jeremiah 6*. https://www.blueletterbible.org/Comm/mhc/Jer/Jer_006.cfm. 2006. . Accessed 26, April 2024.

¹¹ George, P. Restoring God's Way. <https://www.sermoncentral.com/sermons/sermons-about-jeremiah-6-13> 16/?keyword=Jeremiah+6%3A1316&rewrittenUrlType=scripture&searchPhrase=Jeremiah%206%3A13-16&searchPhrase=Jeremiah%206%3A13-16, 2003. Accessed 26, April 2024.

capitalism, there is often a focus on wealth accumulation as the primary source of security and success, sometimes leading to the neglect of ethical and moral considerations.

Consequences of Unchecked Capitalism

Jeremiah warns that God will bring punishment on the people. Hebrew *עָרָה* means punishment, disaster, problem, bad, evil, unhappiness, and misery. Thus, both the prophets and the members who agreed to the false prophecies of the prophet would be punished. God also made it clear that it is because of the actions of the people that he is bringing this punishment on them. God also warns that the people's sacrifices and burnt offerings they are bringing are of no use to him.

Jeremiah 6:13–20 serves as a timeless warning against the dangers of greed, corruption, and the prioritisation of material wealth over justice and righteousness. The capitalist tendencies critiqued in this passage are evident in various forms within modern economic systems, where the pursuit of profit often leads to ethical compromises and societal inequalities. By reflecting on these biblical insights, contemporary societies, including the Nigerian church, can better understand the importance of aligning economic practices with moral and ethical principles to promote a just and equitable society.

Capitalist tendencies in the church in Nigeria

The influence of capitalism on religious institutions is a phenomenon that can be observed globally, and the church in Nigeria is no exception. Capitalist tendencies within the Nigerian church have manifested in various ways, often shaping the practices, values, and social roles of these religious institutions. Ultimately, a religious platform works best when it persuades, rather than coerces. It has to provide what believers are seeking, not impose itself by force.¹² The prosperity gospel, a theological belief that financial blessing and physical well-being are the will of God for Christians, is a significant manifestation of capitalist tendencies in the Nigerian church. Preachers of this doctrine emphasise that faith, positive speech, and donations to the church will increase one's material wealth.

This belief system aligns closely with the capitalist values of wealth accumulation, individual success, and material prosperity. It promotes the idea that financial success is a sign of divine favour, encouraging congregants to seek material wealth as a primary goal of their faith journey. According to Bankole, apart from promoting poverty, it was also breeding occultism and cultic theology, greed, self-indulgence, selfishness, a lack of Christian virtues, and materialism in society. Unfortunately, the Nigerian church has increasingly commercialised religious activities and services. This includes the sale of anointed items, such as oils, water, and

¹² Times of India. *Why religion is big business: An economic lens might explain its fortunes.* <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/blogs/toi-editorials/why-religion-is-big-business-an-economic-lens-might-explain-its-fortunes/>, 2024. Accessed 26, April 2024.

other religious paraphernalia, as well as charging fees for prayers, blessings, and counselling sessions.¹³

The commercialization of religion mirrors market principles, where religious goods and services are traded for money. This commodification of faith practices suggests a shift towards viewing religious engagement through the lens of consumerism. The rise of mega-churches, often with opulent buildings and facilities, reflects a trend towards displaying wealth and success. According to Princewell, they mount big programmes such as citywide crusades, during which special offerings are collected. These churches frequently broadcast their services on television and online, showcasing their large congregations and luxurious environments.¹⁴

The emphasis on large, lavish buildings and the public display of wealth within these churches aligns with capitalist ideals of success, status, and competition. It can also lead to a culture of materialism within the congregation. There is a strong emphasis on fundraising and tithing within many Nigerian churches. Unfortunately, prophets and pastors use the money to buy helicopters and private jets when some members of the church, including committed church workers, are homeless and hungry.¹⁵ Congregants are often encouraged to give generously, with promises of divine blessings and financial returns. This focus on financial contributions and the promise of material rewards for giving reflects capitalist principles of investment and return. It reinforces the idea that financial success is directly correlated with religious faithfulness and generosity.

The emergence of celebrity pastors who brand themselves and their ministries is another manifestation of capitalist tendencies. These pastors often have significant social media followings, publish books, and run large-scale religious events. The branding of religious leaders and the creation of personal brands within the church context resemble corporate branding strategies. It highlights the interplay between religion and marketing, where religious leaders become marketable figures. While some churches accumulate substantial wealth, there is often a stark contrast between the prosperity of church leaders and the financial struggles of their congregants. This disparity can lead to socio-economic inequality within the church community. The accumulation of wealth by a few within the church, while many remain impoverished, mirrors broader capitalist economic disparities. It raises ethical concerns about the equitable distribution of resources and the church's role in addressing poverty and social justice.

The capitalist tendencies observed in the Nigerian church highlight a complex interplay between religious faith and economic practices. While the church has historically played a

¹³ Bankole, T. *Prosperity preaching among churches promoting poverty, occultism* — *Don. Punch*, 14 January, 2024

¹⁴ Princewell, A.N. Church Commercialization in Nigeria: Implications for Public Relations Practice. *Journal of Philosophy, Culture and Religion*, 28, 1-11, 2017.

¹⁵ Amara. *Give And It Shall Be Given*. <https://pmnewsnigeria.com/2011/05/27/give-and-it-shall-be-given/>, 2011. Accessed 6, May 2024.

crucial role in providing spiritual guidance and social support, the influence of capitalism has introduced new dynamics that prioritise material wealth and individual success. Oladotun mentioned that fake churches and ministries are the platforms for extreme materialism, and have predominated contemporary Nigerian Christianity because the genuine have failed to rise up to their responsibility of providing solutions to the plight of their members. These tendencies raise critical questions about the church's mission and ethical stance, challenging religious leaders and congregants to reflect on the alignment of their practices with core Christian values of compassion, justice, and community welfare.¹⁶

Jeremiah 6:13-20 and the Nigerian Church

The passage of Jeremiah 6:13–20 offers a stark denunciation of the pervasive greed, corruption, and materialism that plagued ancient Judah. The prophet Jeremiah condemns the unscrupulous acquisition of wealth, the neglect of justice, and the erosion of ethical and spiritual values among the leaders and people. This ancient critique resonates strongly with contemporary issues faced by many societies, including Nigeria, where capitalist tendencies have infiltrated various aspects of life, including the church. In Nigeria, the church plays a pivotal role in shaping societal values, providing spiritual guidance, and addressing social issues. However, the increasing influence of capitalism within the church raises significant concerns. The proliferation of the prosperity gospel, the commercialization of religious practices, and the emphasis on wealth accumulation suggest a shift towards materialistic values that mirror the very issues condemned by Jeremiah. In Nigeria, prosperity preachers mount big programmes, such as citywide crusades, where prophecies are released and special offerings are collected.¹⁷ Thus, there is a contradiction between the ethical teachings of Christianity and the capitalist tendencies observed within the Nigerian church. This includes:

In Nigeria, there is a rise of prosperity gospel preachers who equate faithfulness with financial success and material wealth, potentially leading to the exploitation of congregants and a focus on monetary gain over spiritual growth and ethical behaviour. According to Idonor;

This emphasis on mundane pleasures at the expense of spiritual value and the original tenets of promotion of truth, purity and holy living which the Church is known for has both directly and indirectly reduced the credibility and reputation of the Church such

¹⁶ Oladotun, P. God Will Supply All Your Needs According to His Glorious Riches: The Problem of Extreme Materialism among Nigerian Pastors. <https://www.crucibleonline.net/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/Final-Paul-Kowale-Materialism-in-Nigeria-.pdf>, 2020. Accessed 6, May 2024.

¹⁷ Diara, B., Onukwufor, M. & Uroko, F. 'The structural advancement of religious communities and the commercialisation of the Christian religion in Nigeria', *Theologia Viatorum* 44(1), a31, 2020. Accessed 6, May 2024.

that she is no longer being considered by many people as better than ordinary business centres in Nigeria.¹⁸

The increasing trend of commercialization within the church, where religious activities, services, and symbols are monetized, potentially undermines the spiritual integrity and mission of the church. Jeremiah warns that God was angry with this method of prophets and priests extorting from their members. The potential neglect of social justice issues as the pursuit of wealth and personal prosperity takes precedence over the church's role in advocating for the marginalised, addressing corruption, and promoting ethical conduct. Simple Christianity needs no additional fees.¹⁹ Jeremiah informs his audience that God has slated a day and time to punish those who profit from the ministry and those who allow themselves to be preyed upon. There is the erosion of core Christian ethical values, such as compassion, integrity, and community welfare, in favour of individualistic and materialistic pursuits.

The juxtaposition of Jeremiah's prophetic message against contemporary practices within the Nigerian church highlights a profound tension between religious values and capitalist influences. Jeremiah warns that even the congregants are willing to hear lies about their prosperity. Thus, Jeremiah stood against artificial worship when he saw that sacrificial offerings were taking the place of sacrificial living.²⁰ In Nigeria, people are interested in bringing offerings rather than living righteous lives. This is because the prophets no longer preach against sin but about prosperity. This is also because those who are wealthy are very much acknowledged by the prophets and priests in the church, and the poor are relegated to the background. According to Uroko, those who enriched themselves by unlawful means or heaped together great wealth would still be subject to the curse of God.²¹

Conclusion

Jeremiah 6:13–20 describes the corruption and unfaithfulness of the prophets and inhabitants of Judah, who had turned away from God. The passage states that "from the least to the greatest, all are greedy for gain; prophets and priests alike, all practice deceit" [6:13]. It goes on to say that they offer superficial peace and healing, claiming "peace, peace," when there is no peace [6:14]. This passage has relevance for the church in Nigeria, as it highlights the importance of spiritual integrity and faithfulness to God's word rather than pursuing personal gain or offering false assurances. The passage condemns greed, deceit, and a lack of true repentance among the religious leaders [6:13–15]. This is a warning against corruption and

¹⁸ Idonor, C. U. The Implications Of Commercialization In Ecclesia Communities In Nigeria. *Hofa: African Journal of Multidisciplinary Research* 5(1), 1-12, 2020.

¹⁹ Beyer, S. *The Commercialization of Christ*. <https://www.biblegrad.com/bible-bites/the-commercialization-of-christ/>, 2020. Accessed 10, May 2024.

²⁰ Luther, M "The Significant Contributions of Jeremiah to Religious Thought". <https://kinginstitute.stanford.edu/king-papers/documents/significant-contributions-jeremiah-religious-thought>, 1948. Accessed 10, May 2024

²¹ Uroko, F.C. Jeremiah 17: 11 and blood money rituals among youths in southern Nigeria. *Theologia Viatorum*, 46(1), p.162., 2022.

hypocrisy within the church. It criticises those who offer "peace" without true repentance and obedience to God [6:14]. This speaks against prosperity gospel teachings that promise blessings without holiness. The passage calls the people to "stand at the crossroads and look; ask for the ancient paths, ask where the good way is, and walk in it" [6:16]. This emphasises the need to return to biblical principles and sound doctrine rather than chase after the latest trends. Ultimately, the passage shows that God will judge those who turn away from Him, no matter their position or status [6:19–20]. This is a sobering warning for the Nigerian church to remain faithful and repentant before God. Jeremiah 6:13–20 challenges the Nigerian church to guard against greed, deceit, and false teaching and instead to pursue spiritual integrity, sound doctrine, and obedience to God's word. As a way forward, there is a need for pastors to return to the biblical standard of preaching holiness and righteousness rather than preaching about wealth and prosperity. There is a need for some non-governmental organisations and also faith-based organisations to organise campaigns that are geared towards sensitising congregants against allowing themselves to be exploited. Churches should advocate for a fair and just economic system that discourages the excessive accumulation of wealth by a few at the expense of the many. This involves teaching congregants the importance of ethical business practices, transparency, and accountability. These are the hallmarks of righteousness rather than telling the people "peace" in the midst of turbulence. Prophets and priests should preach and emulate a lifestyle of contentment and moderation. They should understand the dangers of materialism and greed and promote values such as simplicity, generosity, and community support.

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