

THEOLOGICAL UNIVERSITY KAMPEN

LEARNING OBEDIENCE THROUGH SUFFERING: AN EXEGETICAL LENS ON  
CHRISTOLOGICAL SUFFERING IN HEBREWS 5:1-10 AND YORUBA CHRISTIANS  
PERSPECTIVES IN NIGERIA.

A MASTER THESIS PROPOSAL

SUBMITTED TO

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## ABSTRACT

This thesis investigates the attraction to a suffering-free gospel by contemporary Yoruba Christians aided by messages by Yoruba Indigenous Churches and Pentecostal leaders in Nigeria. The study argues that suffering for a Christian is the means by which we learn obedience to the Father's will and by it exercise the spiritual graces inherently hidden in us. Given the universal reality of suffering, Yoruba Christians can respond to their experiences of existential suffering of hardship and pains by being sensitive to observe the Christological suffering of Christ in Hebrews 5 and how Christ, though he was Son but learned obedience through suffering and by this same tool of suffering achieved perfection and maturity.

Suffering is not an end in itself but a means to an end. The study examines the exegesis of Hebrews 5:1-10 and compares the exegetical interpretation to the Yoruba Christians perspectives that has over the centuries been highly influenced by the Yoruba traditional religion and beliefs. There are arguments about who is responsible (the cause) for the suffering of people and especially Yoruba Christians, however many Yoruba Christians hold the views that Satan (Esu) one of the Yoruba deities and ancestral spirits and mysterious powers are in charge of Christian suffering.

This study responds by suggesting a more positive and theologically sensitive Christological approach and response to suffering with a critical eye for learning obedience through the crucible of suffering. Perhaps as a paradigm to solve the problem of the misuse of spiritual heritage in Nigeria. The results of this study perhaps point to the reality, reason, purpose, and eschatological hope that obedience learned through suffering contributes to the lives of Christians.

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## CHAPTER

### 1.0 INTRODUCTION

Suffering is part of the human experience and has various causes that include economic, social, natural, political, and religious factors; these propel human efforts to find solutions and answers to the question of existential suffering. Experiences of hardship, toil, and even persecution because of one's beliefs are persistent problems across human space. My interest and motivation to research on the theme of suffering centers on how the author of the book of Hebrews in chapter 5 connects the suffering of Christ, the Son of God to obedience learned through suffering. "During the days of Jesus' life on earth, He offered up prayers and petitions with fervent cries and tears to the One who could save Him from death, and He was heard because of His reverent submission. Son though He was, He learned obedience from what He suffered and, once made perfect, He became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey Him." (Hebrews 5:7-9). Since, according to this text, suffering apparently was the means by which the sinless Christ became mature and completely obedient to God, it is to be expected that his followers will experience, and even require suffering in the process of their obedience to God.

This research argues that suffering as a follower of Christ is a vital aspect of the process of our obedience, and sanctification, as evidenced by Hebrews 5:7-9 of the Christian's suffering in relation to that of Christ's own suffering. This writer is not advocating for suffering; that Yoruba Christians should with open arms embrace suffering and pains in their lives. Rather believers need to take a biblically critical look at the suffering problem to gain a formational, and transformational view. In this thesis, the writer wants to show that the growing drive among contemporary Yoruba Christians in some African/Yoruba Indigenous Pentecostal Churches and denominations towards a suffering-free gospel may be an illusion but is yet to be proved through theological research. A gospel that outrightly rejects suffering may be "throwing away the baby with the bath water": the idiomatic

the expression implies an avoidable error in which something good or of value is eliminated when trying to get rid of something unwanted.<sup>1</sup> Life, however, is full of crises and Christians are not exempt from them. Suffering, as part of life, will be burdensome when we possess an incorrect theology and respond in the wrong way. There is a song that has long been sang in the mid-late 20<sup>th</sup> century among Yoruba Christian believers in Yoruba Indigenous and Pentecostal churches which goes like this; “Today O, I will lift up my voice in praise. For I know you (God) are always there for me. Almighty God, You are my all in all. No matter what I face. When trouble comes my way, I will praise you, Lord.” Today’s churches have altered this gospel song, losing its original meaning, as they adapt it to their own inclinations. By replacing the word “trouble” with “success,” they have missed the crucial and intended message. While anyone can praise God during times of success, it takes a true Christian to praise God amidst suffering, which is the essence of the song.<sup>2</sup> This innocent-sounding chorus reflects the increasing desire among numerous Yoruba Christians to live without suffering, driven by their belief in being favored as God’s children. The change in the song is simply a reflection of their theology of suffering – seeking a life free from suffering.

African people are plagued with a gamut of human suffering higher in proportion compared to that of the Western world. Matthew Michael an evangelical scholar, affirms that though situations of pain and suffering exist in other parts of the world, the African continents seem to have a monopoly on human problems.<sup>3</sup> Tesfai Yacob, an African scholar, affirms that the manifestation of suffering on a large scale in the contemporary world is hard to miss.<sup>4</sup> In Michael’s view, the despicable human situations prevalent in the African continent including Yoruba Christians always pose a challenge to the theological discourse on the divine

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<sup>1</sup> Elizabeth Jewell, *The Pocket Oxford Dictionary and Thesaurus*, 2nd edition (ed. 2006), 53.

<sup>2</sup> <https://ng.opera.news/ng/en/entertainment/d2eed7e4846ef6879a842d16f49d5a65> (Accessed on 2-7-2023).

<sup>3</sup> Matthew Michael, *Christian Theology and African Traditions*. 1st ed., (The Lutterworth Press, 2013), 88.

<sup>4</sup> Tesfai Yacob, *The Scandal of a Crucified World: Perspectives on the Cross and Suffering*. (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1994), 1.



characteristics of God. The problem of reconciling human suffering with the idea of a loving God arises when we have a narrow understanding of love and view ourselves as the center of everything. However, if we recognize God as the center, argues Michael, it becomes possible to reconcile human suffering and the divine attribute of love.<sup>5</sup> In Yorubaland, due to the profound hardships experienced by many Yoruba Christians, the act of questioning divine love and justice within an unjust world is not only common but familiar. For the believers suffering always lead to the problem of theodicy question, it underscores the relationship between suffering and the problem of theodicy. Many Christians, facing challenging economic, marital, and terrible health circumstances that hinder their humanity, are particularly inclined to question God's wisdom, love, knowledge, and power. Yacob argues in the same light that suffering is increasingly raising deep questions and these queries are probably becoming the sources of intensive theological engagement and thinking in the field of African Christian theology.<sup>6</sup> It has been observed that many Christians today perceive suffering as a hindrance or obstacle to faith since they believe in a God that is divine, all-powerful, and benevolent.

Vincent Mulago asserts in his work titled "Vital Participation" that God is the great Transcendent One: His life is an inexhaustible source from which beings draw their life. He is generous, he gives of his superfluity without ever exhausting or impoverishing himself; He, therefore, claims nothing material or tangible in return.<sup>7</sup> Yoruba Christians, having recognized the stark contrast between their belief in the transcendent Supreme God and the actuality of their suffering, consequently reject or resist any suffering they encounter. The problem of suffering is one of the most serious difficulties for both Christian believers and scholars and the task of reconciling

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<sup>5</sup> Michael, *Christian Theology*, 89.

<sup>6</sup> Tesfai, *The Scandal*, 2.

<sup>7</sup> Vincent Mulago, *Vital Participation. Biblical Revelation and African beliefs*. Ed. Dickson, Kwesi A., and Ellingworth, Paul, (London, Lutterworth Press, 1969), 156.

intellectually a God who is both all-powerful and good with the presence of evil in the world offers a real challenge for Christian reflection.<sup>8</sup>

It must be stated at this point that this study is not about theodicy; attempting “to resolve the problem of evil and suffering in the world or in the defense of the justice and righteousness of God in the face of the fact of evil”<sup>9</sup> rather it focuses on existential suffering that pertains to the subjective experience of deep anguish, despair, or meaninglessness that individuals may encounter as a result of existential questions about life's purpose, identity, or the human suffering.

John Hick in his work titled “Evil and the God of Love” attempts the definition of suffering as that state of mind in which we wish violently or obsessively that our situation were otherwise.<sup>10</sup> Hick’s point underscores the fact that suffering is not desirable and those experiencing any form of suffering desire a solution that will change their suffering state. Are there, not some desirable and valuable things that can be obtained from suffering?

The Suffering Son who became obedient to the will of the Father must be our point of reference for a sound theological conversation on Christian’s response to pain and suffering. Kwame Bediako in his book *Jesus in Africa: The Christian Gospel in African History and Experience* contends that our Christian affirmation about the Cross of Christ: “presents to us Jesus’ motivation to suffer for the purpose of forgiveness and redemption is the very expression of the divine mind and the logic of the divine love.”<sup>11</sup>

## 1.1 PROBLEM STATEMENT

Lucien Richard, a professor of theology and philosophy in Boston, affirms that suffering appears to be one of the common denominators in the life equation of human experiences and perhaps the most baffling aspect of humanity’s relationship with God.<sup>12</sup> Richard further describes

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<sup>8</sup> Charles H. Talbert, *Learning through Suffering: The Educational Value of Suffering in the New Testament and in Its Milieu*, Zacchaeus Studies, New Testament, (Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical Press, 1991), 9.

<sup>9</sup> John Hick, *Evil and the God of Love*, (Palgrave Macmillan Publishers, New York, 2010), 6.

<sup>10</sup> Hick, *Evil and the God of Love*, 318.

<sup>11</sup> Kwame Bediako, *Jesus in Africa: The Christian Gospel in African History and Experience*, Theological Reflections from the South, (Yaoundé, Cameroun: Editions Clé, 2000), 42.

<sup>12</sup> Lucien Richard, *What Are They Saying about the Theology of Suffering?* (New York: Paulist Press, 1992), 1.

suffering as one of personal and existential in nature and always provokes fundamental questions from Christians probing ‘self’: Why me? Why do things always go wrong in my life?<sup>13</sup> Michael gives attention to the relationship between the divine attributes of God and the African context of suffering. He avers that it is the context of suffering and pain that sets the theological formulation, understanding, and comprehension of the divine Being. African Yoruba who face despicable problems often challenge the divine goodness of God with respect to their sufferings, and pains by asking questions like “Does God actually know what I am passing through?” “What is the need of passing through such and such a problem?” Or “What is the divine purpose for going through pain and suffering?” In such moments, the person asking the question is directly questioning the wisdom of God, that is, his ability to use the best possible means to obtain the best desired divine results.<sup>14</sup> One frustrating aspect of suffering for many Yoruba believers is their inability to find reason or purpose for their suffering experiences. Richard contends that suffering may not be meaningless after all, however, finding meaning in our suffering in Christ is the path to victory rather than seeking a suffering-free gospel theology. Examples of suffering for Yoruba Christians that trigger this research interest are illnesses with unknown causes or terminal ones, accidents, death of a child or loved one, barrenness, and poverty.

As a denominational pastor of the Baptist extraction, my years of work have revealed to me that these types of suffering are the most difficult test of faith for any believer. How can a suffering believer in Christ accept the biblical reality that in suffering lies great virtues of spiritual value? This may be difficult to comprehend. It is difficult to recognize God’s hand acting in our broken world. God is only good in the worldview of Yoruba Christians if all is good and well with them since as believers they occupied a privileged position in the scheme of God, if not for anything but the strong feeling of God’s love. Some African/Yoruba Christians influenced by traditional

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<sup>13</sup> Richard, *What are They Saying, I*.

<sup>14</sup> Michael, *Christian Theology*, 88-90.

beliefs hold the notion that many cases of suffering are caused by some wicked lesser deities, spirits, and some unidentified ancestral spirits. For this group of Yoruba believers, this idea separates God from the equation of human suffering and puts God in severe opposition to these causal agents. One would ask then, is God not the indirect cause of suffering given he conferred the deities with powers to afflict humans? What then is God's role in human suffering if given he is not the cause?

I will argue that the idea of Christ's obedience learned through suffering would produce a more adequate understanding of a sound Christological suffering theology for Yoruba Christians and how they can appropriate learning in situations of suffering as the findings of this research may point out. I will further argue that, in opposition to a God detached from our experience of suffering, God participates in our suffering for believers in Christ.

## 1.2 OBJECTIVES

The long-term goal of this research is to develop in the Christians the right understanding of why God allows suffering and pains in their lives by learning how Jesus gained obedience, discipline, and maturity through the things he suffered.

1. Identify and learn the meanings of obedience through suffering in the life of Jesus and the believer's participation in Christ's suffering.
2. To develop the understanding in Yoruba Christians that suffering whatever nuance it may take is a means to an end and not an end in itself.
3. For Yoruba Christians to appropriate the Christological and theological perspectives in our responses to suffering.

### 1.3 RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The main question of the research is:

How can Hebrews 5 contribute to a contextual understanding of obedience learned through suffering among Yoruba Christians in Nigeria?

The sub-questions are;

1. What does suffering mean to contemporary Yoruba Christians in Nigeria within their socio-religious context?
2. How do Yoruba Christians in Nigeria interpret the concept of obedience learned through suffering in the reading of Hebrews 5:1-10 within their Christological beliefs?
3. What can contemporary Yoruba Christians learn from Hebrews 5:1-10 perspectives on the transformative power of suffering in the pursuit of obedience and spiritual growth?

### 1.4 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The primary research method for this research is a literature review by examining and analyzing the exegetical, theological, and philosophical investigations into the problem of specific existential suffering such as poverty, sickness, marital problems, and emotional pains using the biblical text in Hebrews 5:1-10.

### 1.5 RESEARCH PURPOSE

This research aims to help Yoruba Christians correct some Christological perspectives presumed to be wrong and encourage those positive while proposing some new ones rooted in the Bible, focusing on the suffering of Christ as a means to learning obedience, perfection, and glorification rather than seeking a suffering-free gospel. This will be achieved first, by looking into the meaning and nature of suffering in Yoruba Christian beliefs and that of traditional religious perspectives and see if there are relationships between the two views. Secondly, I will do an

exegetical interpretation of Hebrews 5:1-10 by examining the concept of learning obedience through suffering within the biblical context. Thirdly, I will explore the comparative analysis of Christological suffering in learning obedience in Hebrews 5 pericope with perspectives of Yoruba Christians in Nigeria. Lastly, I will explore interactions between the author of the Epistle to the Hebrews, and his addressees and compare with suffering and obedience found in Yoruba sociocultural and religious beliefs alongside with Christian theological framework among Yoruba Christians. By intertwining these two perspectives, the essay aims to shed light on the intersection between biblical teachings and cultural perspectives, offering insights into the role of suffering in learning obedience using Christ's attainment of absolute obedience through suffering to obtain salvation for those who obey him.

#### 1.4 DELIMITATION AND LIMITATION

This thesis has certain delimitations and limitations. Firstly, it focuses specifically on the interpretation of Hebrews 5:1-10 and the Yoruba Christian perspective on the theme of suffering and obedience, without extensively exploring other biblical passages or theological viewpoints. Secondly, it centers on Yoruba Christians in Nigeria, potentially excluding the experiences and perspectives of Christians from other cultural backgrounds or geographical locations. Lastly, the thesis acknowledges the complexity of the topic but may not be able to comprehensively cover all aspects of the subject matter due to space and scope constraints.

## CHAPTER 2

### 2.0 SUFFERING IN CONTEMPORARY YORUBA CHRISTIAN PERSPECTIVES.

In this chapter, I will look at the Yoruba beliefs that are related to the existential suffering phenomenon, and the Yoruba Christian worldview about the meaning and the nature of suffering by highlighting some Yoruba perspectives both from traditional religion and Christian points of view. I will argue how Yoruba traditional beliefs intertwined with their Christian beliefs shape their meaning of suffering. Then I will examine the various causes of suffering and how Yoruba Christians respond to it.

#### 2.1 AN OVERVIEW OF YORUBA RELIGIOUS BELIEFS

In this section I want to set the stage by discussing the Yoruba religious worldview but first who are the Yorubas? Joseph Atanda, a Professor in Nigeria History with an emphasis on Yorubaland in Western Nigeria asserts that the Yoruba people are one of the major ethnic groups of modern Nigeria and they effectively occupy the whole of Ogun, Ondo, Oyo, Ekiti, Lagos, and a substantial part of Kwara State.<sup>15</sup> Oladele Balogun in his “A Philosophical Defence of Punishment in Traditional African Legal Culture: The Yoruba Example” affirms that aside from Nigeria, the Yoruba are also found in sizeable numbers in the southeastern part of the republic of Benin, Togo, and Dahomey in West Africa, and have been able to maintain their identity and preserve their traditional religious heritage.<sup>16</sup> Adelumo P. Dopamu in his work, “Esu, The Invisible Foe of Man: A Comparative Study of Satan in Christianity, Islam, and Yoruba Religion” asserts that the Yoruba possess a strong belief in spirits that cause, stir, and prompt human beings to do good or evil.<sup>17</sup> The Yoruba are highly religious, and everything in the Yoruba

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<sup>15</sup> Joseph Atanda, *An Introduction to Yoruba History*, (Ibadan University Press, 1990), 1.

<sup>16</sup> Oladele Balogun, “A Philosophical Defence of Punishment in Traditional African Legal Culture: The Yoruba Example”, *The Journal of Pan African Studies*, Vol. 3, 3, (2009), 44.

<sup>17</sup> Adelumo P. Dopamu, *Esu, The Invisible Foe of Man: A Comparative Study of Satan in Christianity, Islam and Yoruba Religion*, (Ijebu Ode: Sebiotimo, 2000), 1.

society has a religious undertone and they interpret every event of their lives from a religious viewpoint. The concept and the meaning of suffering by a person or group of people will largely be determined by their worldview.<sup>18</sup>

Essentially, this worldview will define a people's beliefs, behavior, and practices. The Yoruba way of thinking presupposes a particular way the Yoruba people look at the world. This often is the force behind their existence.<sup>19</sup> Matthew Michael, a scholar in Christian theology and African spirituality asserts that a people's tradition has a great influence in shaping their worldview and giving meaning to reality. "The power of traditions as the origin of worldview cannot be underestimated, therefore we must take seriously the challenge that the African worldview poses to biblical Christianity in Africa. The Christian faith must engage the African people at the level of their worldview."<sup>20</sup> It is imperative to engage the African religious belief system from a broader perspective and then focus on the subject of suffering among the Yoruba in the Southwest of Nigeria. The African continent has nearly a billion inhabitants with varied ethnic and cultural groupings, there are a few certain beliefs that find common ground among all the various groups.

According to Bolaji Idowu, a theologian and leader of the Methodist Church in Nigeria, well known for his ethnographic and theological studies of the Yoruba people affirms that some of the central issues in Yoruba religion can be understood in terms of five fundamental beliefs or basic themes described as the structure of Afrel.<sup>21</sup> These include belief in God; belief in

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<sup>18</sup>Worldview is defined as the comprehensive framework of one's basic beliefs about things." So worldview is a matter of beliefs that a person or a group of people hold about the world and the realities they claim – a claim to some kind of knowledge, "cognitive claim." There is an African traditional worldview, just as there is an African Christian worldview and Yoruba traditional religion basic beliefs, and in the same vein there are Yoruba Christian basic beliefs based on some cognitive knowledge that each group claims about the world, human experiences of realities such as sufferings, pains, sicknesses, poverty, good life, and even about God. The basic beliefs anyone or Yoruba people hold about various realities as stated tend to form a framework or pattern they hang to in certain ways. Albert M. Wolters, *Creation Regained: Biblical Basics for a Reformational Worldview*, (Wm. Eerdmans Publishing, Grand Rapids, Michigan, 2008), 2-3.

<sup>19</sup> Michael, *Christian Theology*, 11.

<sup>20</sup> Michael, *Christian Theology*, 11.

<sup>21</sup> Bolaji E. Idowu, *African Traditional Religion*, (London: SCM Press, 1973), 139.



divinities; belief in spirits; belief in ancestors; belief in mysterious powers.<sup>22</sup> I will now discuss some of the Yoruba beliefs as they relate to the existential problem of suffering.

### I. BELIEF IN GOD (OLORUN/OLODUMARE)

One important question to be answered here is how the Yoruba people view God in relation to human existential suffering in their basic belief about God. John David Yeadon Peel, a British Africanist, sociologist, and historian of religion in Africa, particularly in Nigeria in his book “Religious Encounter and the Making of the Yoruba” asserts the Yoruba belief in God, whom they associate with heaven or the sky (*orun*), who stood as the ground of being or the ultimate author of things, was general among the Yoruba.<sup>23</sup> Among his common name is “Olorun” - translated to mean “Lord of heaven” and rendered in English as “God.” The name “Olorun” is spoken and used by adherents of traditional religion, and Christianity.<sup>24</sup> Joseph Omosade Awolalu, a Nigerian scholar in theology and religion, and P. Adelumo Dopamu argue that the name “Olorun” depicts God as the author of all things, visible and invisible, the Head or Overlord of all in heaven and on earth.<sup>25</sup> They argue further that because the name is associated with “orun” (heaven, sky) some scholars have erroneously concluded that God is distant and remote and not concerned about the suffering of humanity. Idowu argues that since the attributes of the Yoruba God are good, “Olodumare” cannot be held responsible, within the Yoruba worldview, for the existence of evil (suffering) because, as the saying goes, “Olorun ko s’ebi; rere lo mi se (The Lord never does evil, only good).<sup>26</sup> The question then is, if God is not responsible for existential suffering, who does? It must be stated here that the focus of this study is not to investigate this but to find out how Yoruba Christians can understand suffering from a

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<sup>22</sup> J. Omosade Awolalu and P. Adelumo Dopamu, *West African Traditional Religion*, (Ibadan, Onibonjo Press and Book Industries, 1979), 34, 240.

<sup>23</sup> J.D.Y. Peel, *Religious Encounter and the Making of the Yoruba*, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2003), 116.

<sup>24</sup> Peel, *Religious Encounter and the Making of the Yoruba*, 116.

<sup>25</sup> Awolalu and Dopamu, *West African Traditional Religion*, 39.

<sup>26</sup> Bolaji E. Idowu, *Olodumare: God in Yorba belief*, (London: Longman, 1962), 68.

conversation with Hebrews 5 and how to respond to the problem of existential suffering in the most transformational ways.

However, the name “Olorun” is constantly found on the lips of the Yoruba people and it is used in ejaculatory prayers:<sup>27</sup> “May God take care of us throughout the night;” “Deliver me, O Olorun!”<sup>28</sup> To whom is prayer in the traditional religions of Africa addressed? W.F. Aylward Shorter in his article “Prayer in the Religious Traditions of Africa” affirms that Africans including the Yoruba address God in their prayers and the major themes include healing from sicknesses, good life devoid of poverty, deliverance from barrenness, and so on.<sup>29</sup> The prayer asks for life and health and all that is necessary for them. See a copy of the prayer below:

Supreme Being, owner of all things,

I pray thee, give me what I need,

Because I am suffering,

And also my children (are suffering);

And all things that are in this country of mine.

I beg thee for life,

The good one, with things,

Healthy people with no disease,

May they bear healthy children.

And also to women who suffer because they are barren,

Open the way by which they may see children.

(Give) goats, cattle, food, and honey.

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<sup>27</sup> In Christian piety, an ejaculation, sometimes known as ejaculatory prayer or aspiration, is “a short prayer, in which the mind is directed to God, on an emergency.” Afflicting pains and suffering provoke this kind of prayer. Brown, John Newton (1844). *The Encyclopedia of Religious Knowledge*. Brattleboro, VT: Joseph Steen and Company, 493. Accessed on 20/7/2023.

<sup>28</sup> Awolalu and Dopamu, *West African Traditional Religion*, 122.

<sup>29</sup> W.F. Aylward Shorter, *Prayer in the Religious Traditions of Africa*, (Oxford University Press (Nairobi, Kenya, 1975), 231.

And also the troubles of the other lands

That I do not know, remove.<sup>30</sup>

Evidently, to the Yoruba people, it is God – “Olorun” who is able to relieve them from suffering experiences. Hence, the belief about the “Olodumare” and when they suffer from the hand of powerful humans, they simply plead their case with “Olorun” for the right verdict.

Idowu avers that the Yoruba believe that “Olodumare” is the perfect arbiter.<sup>31</sup> “Olodumare” rightly rewards the sufferers and punishes the offenders<sup>32</sup> (who inflict suffering on others). Therefore, the Yoruba say, “Oba adake dajo” – “The King who passes verdict in silence. As mentioned above the Yoruba belief in the existence of “Olodumare”/”Olorun” – the Supreme Deity who controls the affairs of people in the universe. “Olodumare” has intermediaries, called divinities, who stand between him and human beings in different distinct offices.

## II. BELIEF IN DIVINITIES

The Yoruba belief includes not only the Supreme Being but numerous divinities called “Orisa” who affect their realities of life. Dutch theologian, M.E. Brinkman affirms that the presence of lower deities does not threaten the Supreme God; rather these divinities complement the belief in him.<sup>33</sup> Lesser gods therefore serve the Supreme Being and worshipping them implies worshipping him. The Yoruba believe that these divinities affect and influence the behaviors and fortunes of people either positively or negatively. Idowu asserts that in the Yoruba religion, these divinities are believed to possess attributes of “Olodumare”, making them offsprings of God.<sup>34</sup> Awolalu affirms that the Yoruba people of Nigeria seem to have the most numerous divinities in Africa and the majority of these divinities are worshipped for prosperity, good health, wealth,

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<sup>30</sup> Shorter, *Prayer in the Religious Traditions of Africa*, 231.

<sup>31</sup> Idowu, *Olodumare*, 42.

<sup>32</sup> Idowu, *Olodumare*, 42.

<sup>33</sup> M.E. Brinkman, *The Non- Western Jesus: Jesus as Bodhisattva, Avatara, guru, prophet, ancestor or healer?* (London: Equinox, 2009), 21.

<sup>34</sup> Idowu, *Olodumare*, 62.

and success which are all antidotes for existential suffering.<sup>35</sup> David T. Adamo in his article affirms that a few of them are venerated for power, healing, and prosperity<sup>36</sup> as will be discussed below.

- a. “Obatala”: According to Ulli Beier in his book “Yoruba Myth” asserts that “Obatala” is the first, the highest, and arch-divinity who is recognized as the deputy of “Olodumare.” He is a popular artist who possesses creative and procreative powers.<sup>37</sup> Dopamu in the article “Yoruba Myth” avers that Obatala was commissioned by God to create the solid earth, equip it, and mold the physical form of man.<sup>38</sup> He further mentions women suffering from barrenness usually take their petition to him so that they may be blessed with children.<sup>39</sup>
- b. “Orunmila”: Mbiti argues that “Orunmila”, the primordial divinity amongst the Yoruba people, has all the wisdom and is in charge of pleading for riches, good health, power, and blessing for the worshippers.<sup>40</sup> Gehman asserts that “Orunmila” knows everything about human beings and divinities because he was with “Olodumare” during creation. Except for Olodumare, no one has greater insight and understanding of the future than “Orunmila.”<sup>41</sup> Gehman argues further that “Orunmila” possesses the power to decipher the past, the present, and the future.<sup>42</sup> This divinity is linked to diviners such as “Babalawo” who consults for Yoruba that are in suffering situations seeking solutions to existential challenges.
- c. “Osun”: Osun is the goddess of river Osun which flows through the town of Osogbo in Yorubaland where she is actively worshipped. Osun is noted for her benevolence. She is

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<sup>35</sup> J.O Awolalu, *Yoruba beliefs and sacrificial rites*, (Longman, London, 1979), 20.

<sup>36</sup> David Adamo, ‘*The African background of the prosperity gospel*’, *Theologia Viatorum* 45. 1. (2021), 5. <https://doi.org/10.4102/tv.v45i1.71>

<sup>37</sup> Ulli Beier, *Yoruba Myths*, (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1980), 15.

<sup>38</sup> P. Adelumo Dopamu, “Yoruba Religious System”, *Africa Update*, Vol. VI, Issue 3, (Summer 1999),

<sup>39</sup> Dopamu, “Yoruba Religious System”,

<sup>40</sup> Mbiti, *Concept of God in Africa*, 21-8.

<sup>41</sup> Richard J. Gehman, *African Traditional Religion in the Light of the Bible*, (ACTS Books, Bukuru, 2013), 109.

<sup>42</sup> Gehman, *African Traditional Religion*, 109.

called the mother of children and barren women usually approach her through her priests and priestesses in order to be free from the problem of barrenness.<sup>43</sup> Such women are given water from the “Osun” shrine or river to drink. Besides the gifts of children, D. Badejo in his *“Osun Seegesi: The Elegant Deity of Wealth, Power and Femininity”* opines that “Osun” also confers material blessings on people as well as total well-being.<sup>44</sup>

- d. “Esu” (Satan): “Esu” is another divinity in Yoruba belief and has a complex identity among scholars. While some Yoruba religious scholars see “Esu” as being bad, negative, and the cause of much evil and suffering in the world others argue on the contrary. Many Yoruba Christians assume that he is responsible for their calamities and predicaments. Hence, it is important for this study to investigate this complex divinity in terms of his contributions to suffering or otherwise. Segun Ogungbemi, a Professor of Philosophy in the Department of Religion Adekunle Ajasin University, Southwest Nigeria, in an article “A Comparative Study of Olodumare, the Yoruba Supreme Being and the Judeo-Christian God” affirms that “Esu remains the most complex divinity in the Yoruba theology of beings.”<sup>45</sup> Idowu asserts that “Esu” is primarily a special relation officer between heaven and earth, the Inspector-General who reports regularly to “Olodumare” on the deeds of the divinities and men, and checks and makes reports on the correctness of worship in general and sacrifices in particulars.<sup>46</sup> According to Kola Abimbola, Jacob Olupona, and Toyin Falola, in their “Esu: Yoruba God, Power, and the Imaginative Frontiers” argue that “Esu” or “Elegbara” possesses the power of the deity, and command fear, awe, and respect from his worshippers. They further contend that the

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<sup>43</sup> Dopamu, “Yoruba Religious System”,

<sup>44</sup> D. Badejo, *Osun Seegesi: The Elegant Deity of Wealth, Power and Femininity*, (Africa World Press, Inc., Trenton, NJ. 1996), 73-82.

<sup>45</sup> Segun Ogungbemi, “A Comparative Study of Olodumare, the Yoruba Supreme Being and the Judeo-Christian God”, *Yoruba Studies Review*, Volume 1, Number 1, (Fall 2016), 54.

<sup>46</sup> Idowu, *Olodumare*, 80.

characterization of “Esu” as both good and evil is what makes him to be loved and hated by the Yoruba.<sup>47</sup>

- e. “Ela”: One other divinity that is worthy of recognition in Yoruba traditional religion is “Ela. This deity appears to be obscured in contemporary literature of Yoruba theology argues Ogungbemi. According to Idowu, the name “Ela” means ‘Safety’ or “One who keeps in safety”, “Preservation” or “Salvation” or “Savior.”<sup>48</sup> He is assigned the position of “Prime Minister” by “Olodumare” because he is endowed with the wizardry of governing over a very turbulent human community. Idowu further explains that “Ela” is the spirit of truth, rightness, and amicable living among the inhabitants of the earth.<sup>49</sup> One incredible fact about “Ela” is the fact that he is vehemently opposed to “Esu.” Idowu affirms that “Ela” is opposed to the evil work of “Esu” and engages himself in obstructing him or undoing his evil deeds (of afflicting with suffering) against humans.<sup>50</sup> Evidently, this may suggest a constant war between these two divinities, and they are against each other. It appears “Ela” is totally good and positive while “Esu” is a mix of both good and evil. “Esu” promotes and does afflict with suffering, “Ela” on the contrary undo the suffering and promote good life.

Evidently, these deities or divinities are believed to possess powers and authorities mediate between the Supreme Being; “Olodumare” and humans, they receive worship, rituals and sacrifices from worshippers and responsible for suffering or otherwise of those who disobey. Esu is the divinity invested with power to bring the wrath of Olodumare and other divinities upon the disobedient in the community.<sup>51</sup> Suffering such as sicknesses, barrenness, poverty and others consequences of their displeasure. Peter Yakubu Otijele, a Nigerian Baptist theologian, affirms

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<sup>47</sup> Segun Ogungbemi, “Esu: The Phenomenon of Existence.” In Toyin Falola (ed.) *Esu: Yoruba God, Power and the Imaginative Frontiers*, (Durham: Carolina Academic Press, 2013), 86.

<sup>48</sup> Idowu, *Olodumare*, 106.

<sup>49</sup> Idowu, *Olodumare*, 103.

<sup>50</sup> Idowu, *Olodumare*, 103.

<sup>51</sup> A.O. Adalokun, *Sawonjon: History and Culture of a Traditional Yoruba Town*, (Ibadan: Statco, 2002), 32.

that whether they are primordial or deified gods, the Yoruba believe that they are intermediaries between human beings, Olodumare, and other spiritual beings.<sup>52</sup>

### III. BELIEF IN SPIRITS

The Yoruba like many other groups in Africa believe in the world of the spirits. Spirits as is understood in Yoruba traditional religion are apparitional entities that form a separate category of beings from divinities.<sup>53</sup> Idowu affirms that they are different from ancestral spirits however this category of spirits is often thought of as abstract powers, shades, or vapors, which can take human shape but are immaterial and incorporeal beings.<sup>54</sup> They can take any form if they wish to be seen. According to African belief, everything has a spirit of its own. Spirit can inhabit any object such as trees, mountains, human beings, rivers, forests, rocks, and anything they wish to inhabit or possess.<sup>55</sup> Traditional Yoruba belief has it that these ghost spirits are the spirits of dead persons who died a sudden death or were not buried properly, and as such wander around on earth, living aimlessly in the world. *Abiku* spirits are another group known in Yoruba traditional belief. *Abiku* is translated to mean “born to die.”<sup>56</sup> Repeated infant death in a family is attached to the spirit of “*abiku*.” There are also spirits of witches that the Yoruba traditional belief system considers very powerful and wicked however, they could be protective of their own and considered to be loyal to them as well. It is very clear that this belief is also common among Yoruba Christians, because these spirits can hinder their progress in life and in many cases can also inflict suffering on Christians.

### IV. BELIEF IN ANCESTORS

One essential divinity venerated by the Yorubas in Africa is an ancestor. According to D. Stinton, the belief in ancestors is central to Yoruba traditional religion and it is a very important pillar of

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<sup>52</sup> P.Y. Otijele, “Understanding the African Worldview: A Religious Perspective,” *Ogbomoso Journal of Theology*, 6:1-16. (December 1991), 9.

<sup>53</sup> Adamo, “The African background,” 5.

<sup>54</sup> Bolaji Idowu, *African traditional religion: A definition*, (Fountain Press, Ibadan, 1991), 173-4.

<sup>55</sup> Idowu, *African traditional religion*, 174.

<sup>56</sup> Idowu, *African traditional religion*, 177.

religion practiced by the Yoruba in Africa.<sup>57</sup> J. Beyers affirms that ancestors are sacred and powerful.<sup>58</sup> Awolalu and Idowu both argue that ancestors in Yoruba traditional belief constitute the closest link between the world of the living and the spirit world, and they are believed to be seriously interested in the welfare of their living descendants.<sup>59</sup>

Yoruba Christian's view of the belief in ancestors is observed in the practices of Yoruba Indigenous Churches. Ayegboyin affirms that there is an obvious reluctance of the Aladura Churches to ascribe the title of an ancestor ("Iserun" in Yoruba) to Jesus because they reason that such titles will belittle His divine nature as the son of God.<sup>60</sup> Ayegboyin point is clear, that the Aladura churches believe in principle that Jesus is their ancestor however, could not give that title to him because it will reduce his dignity as the Son of God. Although, as earlier said, an arm of the Aladura Church movement is involved in the veneration of ancestors, many of these Churches generally loathe this practice. Besides, A. Anderson in his article "African Pentecostalism and the Ancestors: Confrontation or Compromise?" argues that ancestors are perceived in some Yoruba churches as evil spirits or demons taking the form of dead parents who are long gone, need to be confronted and expelled as they will only lead to further misery, and bondage leading to suffering.<sup>61</sup>

## V. BELIEF IN MYSTERIOUS POWERS

The last but not the least is the belief in mysterious powers by the Yoruba people who are adherents of the tradition. M.A. Adetunmibi in his work avers that one of the reasons why Yoruba religion is still much alive is the practice of magic, power, and medicine.<sup>62</sup> Dopamu identifies

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<sup>57</sup> D. Stinton, *Jesus of Africa: Voices of contemporary African Christologies*, (Pauline Publications Africa, Nairobi, 2004), 133-4.

<sup>58</sup> J. Beyers, "What is Religion? An African Understanding", HTS 66, 1, (2010), 1-19. <https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v66i1.341>

<sup>59</sup> Awolalu, *Yoruba beliefs and sacrificial rites*, 63-8. Idowu, *African traditional religion*, 178-188.

<sup>60</sup> Deji Ayegboyin, "L'Oruko Jesu: Aladura Grass-roots Christology", *Journal of African Christian Thought*, Vol. 8, no.1 (June, 2005), 13.

<sup>61</sup> A. Anderson, "African Pentecostalism and the Ancestors: Confrontation or Compromise?" *Missionalia*, (April, 1993), 21.

<sup>62</sup> M.A. Adetunmibi, "Yoruba Spiritual Heritage and its implications for the Yoruba Indigenous Churches in Nigeria" (PhD Dissertation, North-West University, South Africa, 2017), 45.



the different mysterious powers Yoruba believed in such as “oogun”, “egbogi” or “isegun” (magic, medicine) and “oogun ika” or “oogun ibi” (sorcery, bad magic), and “aje”, “eye,” “osonga” (witchcraft).<sup>63</sup> Sorcery is the use of bad or evil magic to kill or harm people, or to cause misfortune to people or society. This use can be out of spite or to avenge a wrong done. Some types of sorcery include “abilu” (evil magic that brings a drastic change in the fortune of a person), “apeta” (invocation shooting), “efun” (evil magic that makes a person behave abnormally), and “isasi” (evil magic that makes a person act as one who is insane).<sup>64</sup>

Witchcraft is the utilization of certain inherent psychic power in people to cause harm or havoc to people or property. It is a will-power, emanating from within people, for the purpose of achieving evil ends without the use of any tangible apparatus. In Yorubaland, witches (aje) are usually believed to be women.<sup>65</sup>

Here, it is clear that both sorcery and witchcraft are regarded as a reality among the Yoruba. This belief is also widespread among the Yoruba Christians in Aladura churches and some Pentecostal Christians as well. They are usually regarded as forces of evil and used as explanations for social pressures and misfortunes in society. People usually consult a “babalawo” (diviner) or “onisegun,” “oloogun,” “elegbogi” (magician, medicine-man,) for relief from hardship, suffering, and protection against death.

One can safely conclude that Yoruba believe in the power of spirits and mystical forces that can control a person’s well-being and cause suffering.<sup>66</sup> Life problems that can lead to hard suffering such as illness, barrenness, poverty, and death can be brought upon a hapless victim through magic, witchcraft, or sorcery.<sup>67</sup>

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<sup>63</sup> Dopamu, “Yoruba Religious System”, 9.

<sup>64</sup> Dopamu, “Yoruba Religious System”

<sup>65</sup> Dopamu, “Yoruba Religious System”

<sup>66</sup> Yusuf Turaki, ‘*African Traditional Religions as a Basis for Understanding Spiritual Conflict in Africa, Deliver Us From Evil: An Uneasy Frontier in Christian Mission*, ed. A Scott Moreau et al, (MARC Books Published by World Vision International, Monrovia, CA, 2002), 167.

<sup>67</sup> Samuel W. Kunyihop, *Witchcraft, Africa Bible Commentary*, (Zondervan Nairobi, Kenya, 2006), 374.

## 2.2 MEANING AND NATURE OF SUFFERING IN YORUBA CHRISTIAN CONTEXT

According to Kofi Appiah-Kubi, existential suffering such as sickness, poverty, barrenness, delay in getting married, and other misfortunes in African society is often attributed to the violation of a taboo or machinations of malicious or sometimes displeased ancestral spirits. In many Yoruba-based Pentecostal Churches, where Christians present themselves for deliverance premised on the demonic attack by evil spirits through the ancestral link is a common phenomenon. Prayers are offered to separate the sufferers from the ancestral spirits and break the spiritual connection in the spiritual realm. Other causes may be the evil eye, witchcraft, possession by an evil spirit, or a curse by a sorcerer or an offended neighbor.<sup>68</sup> It is generally believed that the victim himself may not be the offender, but may suffer from the mistake or offense of a kinsman, or relative. For the Yoruba there is a strong relationship between the spiritual and the physical, in fact, the spiritual is stronger and controls the physical. So whatever a man experiences physically must have a spiritual undertone. The same is true between the sacred and the secular, and between the mind and the body. Suffering existential challenges is regarded as a misfortune that evidently involves the whole person. On this, Appiah-Kubi avers that there is a direct relationship between the sufferer, the spiritual world, and society.<sup>69</sup> What is Yoruba Christian understanding of the nature of suffering?

This section focuses on the Christian view of the nature of suffering. On the nature of suffering from African and by extension Yoruba Christian perspectives, John Waliggo categorized suffering into four major categories which I will mention briefly and analyze to see if there is

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<sup>68</sup> Kofi Appiah-Kubi, *A Reader in African Christian Theology*, ed. John Parratt, (SPCK London, 1997), 71.

<sup>69</sup> Appiah-Kubi, *A Reader in African Christian Theology*, 71.

any correlation or relationship with Yoruba traditional religion's views on human existential suffering.

### 1. Self-Inflicted Suffering

Much of the suffering we experience in and around us is self-inflicted. Through sin, misbehavior, ignorance, lack of self-control, laziness, narrow-mindedness, and malice we inflict suffering on ourselves. A teenage girl who stubbornly refuses to take heed of her parent's advice against pre-marital sex may one day find herself suffering because of the "unwanted" and "unplanned" pregnancy. From this single instance of self-inflicted suffering her entire life may become one vicious circle of suffering. An example is human sin and individual sin alone cannot explain the existence of suffering.<sup>70</sup> Talbert affirms this as one of the views of suffering that are found in both Testaments of the Christian Bible: suffering as the consequence of sin.<sup>71</sup>

### 2. Suffering Caused by Others

Much of the suffering we are experiencing in Africa is inflicted on innocent people by a few selfish individuals or groups or societies of people. A situation where a wealthy few oppress the many poor or a majority of particular religion suppresses the minority of other faith adherents.<sup>72</sup>

### 3. Suffering on Behalf of Others

Some persons may find much joy as to suffer in sacrifice for the one they love. Sharing with someone who has nothing demands a sacrifice, but it brings much joy to both. Every day people make sacrifices and suffer for those they love. For instance, many mothers, in critical situations, have made an option for their children to live instead of themselves.<sup>73</sup>

### 4. The Mysterious Suffering of the Innocent

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<sup>70</sup> John M. Waliggo, "African Christology in a Suffering Situation" in *Faces of Jesus in African*, ed., Robert Schreiter, (Orbis Books Publisher, Maryknoll, NY, 1997), 165-6.

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<sup>72</sup> Waliggo, "African Christology in a Suffering Situation", 166-7.

<sup>73</sup> Waliggo, "African Christology in a Suffering Situation", 168.

Sometimes the innocents suffer and the most frustrating part is that you observe the wicked happiest and most successful in life. These innocent sufferers have asked many unanswered questions like, what good and just God could do this to me? Was it useless, then, to have kept my heart clean, to have washed my hands in innocence? (Psalms 73:13).<sup>74</sup>

Waliggo further mentions that Christians should resist, and fight vehemently against the first two categories in our lives and society in general but avers that Christians ought to positively and dynamically accept and utilize the last two categories as a means to our growth to Christian maturity.<sup>75</sup>

There are quite a number of common grounds between the Yoruba traditional views and African/Yoruba Christian views put forward by Waliggo. First, some for non-Christians and Yoruba Christians, self-inflicted suffering comes as a result of misbehavior and disobedience to the rules and instructions of their faith practices. It is the belief of non-Christians that some deified spirits and mysterious powers may be responsible especially “Esu.” Secondly, other people can suffer the consequences of someone's disobedience to the ancestral spirits if certain rites and rituals are not adhered to in a family. The case of powerful humans causing suffering to other less privileged members of a community was mentioned. Such sufferers seek redress from Olodumare through the divinities as stated earlier in this chapter.

## 2.2 CAUSES OF SUFFERING IN YORUBA CHRISTIAN PERSPECTIVES

Having looked at the meaning and nature of suffering, it is important to investigate the causes of suffering among Yoruba Christians. Osadolor Imasogie, a Baptist ecumenical theologian and philosopher affirms that the African Yoruba perspective acknowledges that nothing occurs by mere chance; there is always a cause behind every event, it is therefore important to identify the spiritual etiology behind each experience, particularly when it involves suffering.<sup>76</sup> When some

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<sup>74</sup> Waliggo, “African Christology in a Suffering Situation”, 168.

<sup>75</sup> Waliggo, “African Christology in a Suffering Situation”, 165.

<sup>76</sup> Osadolor Imasogie, *Guidelines for Christian Theology in Africa*, (African Christian Press, Achimota, Ghana, 1983), 60.

Yoruba Christians experience hardship and suffering, it is usually attributed to several primary factors which include spiritual powers, sorcery, an enemy, one's destiny, a spell (whether from the past or current), or a powerful object. Many contemporary Yoruba Christians attribute their existential suffering to traditional religious beliefs. On this Deji Ayegboyin and Solomon Ishola argue that members of Yoruba Christians believe that success, achievement, and good health are the result of divine favor and that suffering and sickness are the result of witchcraft, sinning against "Olodumare", the ancestors, or breaking of the taboos.<sup>77</sup>

The Yoruba Christian belief that his/her life of suffering may be due to the working of an enemy is depicted in the Yoruba proverb which states, only a dead man has no enemy. So, when his/her experience of suffering seems prolonged, the question that often comes to mind is not "why" but "Who is responsible?" It is for this reason that a prophet or priest is consulted to identify the enemy and prayers are offered to redress the situation for the sufferers. In the case of non-Christians, a "Babalawo" (diviner) is consulted and when the specific enemy is identified, the Ifa priest then prescribes required rituals, sacrifices, and offering to appease the enemy and seek redress. The enemy could be a member of one's family who may employ the services of a sorcerer to cast a spell or to prepare a charm to induce emotional, financial, or physical reverses resulting in severe suffering. At other times the enemy may simply be a rival who is envious of a person's progress and who out of jealousy would decide to use witchcraft, evil charms, or poison to get at the victim and make them suffer.<sup>78</sup> "Esu" (Satan): In both Yoruba traditional religion and Christianity, there is a common belief that "Esu" is one of the divinities that cause many calamities and suffering bedeviling Yoruba people.

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<sup>77</sup> Deji Ayegboyin and Solomon Ishola, *African Indigenous Churches: An Historical Perspective*, (Greater Heights Publisher, Lagos, 1997), 22-23.

<sup>78</sup> Peel, *Religious Encounter and the Making of the Yoruba*, 80.

## 2.40 YORUBA CHRISTIAN WAYS OF RESPONDING TO SUFFERING

In the previous section, we have been able to establish some of the causes of suffering among Yoruba Christians, based on cultural, religious, and Christian perspectives. I will now turn to ways by which Yoruba Christians respond to the existential problem of suffering. How do Yoruba traditional religion and Yoruba Christians understand and react to the problem and experience of suffering? I will blend together in this part both Yoruba traditional religion with the Christian theological perspective in the situation of suffering. I here want to mention some responses to suffering by the Yoruba Christians. I will mention four different responses:

### 1. Response to Suffering by Offering Sacrifices.

One of the ways Yoruba people respond to the experience of existential suffering is by appeasing divinities and spirits that are the causes of their suffering by offering sacrifices. Is there any relationship between suffering and sacrifices? Awolalu Omosade claims that the Yoruba traditional religion as an influential religion among the Yoruba and beyond, has a sacrificial system as one the core of its beliefs and practices.<sup>79</sup> In the view of John Mbiti, some existential miseries like bad health (sicknesses), death, poverty, barrenness, and many misfortunes being experienced by individuals have religious undertones. The same is true for the community at large, prayer may ask for rain, peace, the cessation of epidemics and dangers to the nation, success in war or raids, the acceptance of sacrifices and offerings, and fertility for people, animals, and crops.<sup>80</sup> The spirits are believed to be behind many of the sufferings people are passing through, this results in offering sacrifices such as food, objects, or the lives of animals

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<sup>79</sup> Omosade J. Awolalu, "Yoruba Sacrificial Practice", *Journal of Religion in Africa*, Vol. 5, Fasc. 2 (1973): 81. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/1594756>. (Accessed on 2023-03-20).

<sup>80</sup> John S. Mbiti, *Introduction to African Religion*, (Praeger, New York, 1975), 55-56. [https://books.google.nl/books?redir\\_esc=y&id=4wL0y9fUEB8C&q=blood#v=snippet&q=blood&f=false](https://books.google.nl/books?redir_esc=y&id=4wL0y9fUEB8C&q=blood#v=snippet&q=blood&f=false) (Accessed on 2023-04-01).

to God, the ancestors, or spirits for the purpose of achieving the individual or general well-being of the society.<sup>81</sup> Tokunbo Adeyemo in his book “Salvation in African Tradition” avers that sacrifice is traditionally understood as a means of communion between humanity and the deity.<sup>82</sup> He further asserts that “Sacrifices and offerings are acts of restoring the ontological balance between God and man, the spirits, and man, and the departed and the living. When this balance is upset, people experience misfortunes, and sufferings, or fear that these will come upon them. Sacrifices and offerings help, at least psychologically, to restore this balance.”<sup>83</sup> Adeyemo seems to point out the relationship between suffering and sacrifice. Suffering in the Yoruba tradition is a distortion of the ontological balance and only by offering sacrifices could this balance be restored and maintained. Hence the saying: *Riru ebo lo ngbe Ni, airu ki igb’ enia*. This translated to mean, offering sacrifice helps a man, but refusal could result in untold hardship.<sup>84</sup>

The offering of sacrifice as a way of responding to the situation of suffering has been affirmed to be a common practice among Yoruba Christians in Yoruba Indigenous Churches. Ray Benjamin in his empirical research “Aladura Christianity: A Yoruba Religion” affirms the obvious ways and means by which the Yoruba traditional religion finds answers to life questions because of suffering and the same is true for the Aladura churches.<sup>85</sup>

## 2. Response to Suffering by Seeking Salvation.

The Yoruba people have wrestled with this need for salvation. Michael argues that though there is much difference between the biblical understanding of salvation and the Yoruba traditional one, there is a converging interest in the theme of salvation because almost every act of religious

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<sup>81</sup> Makanjuola S. Mepaiyeda, “The Interface between Sacrificial Rites in Yoruba Religion and African Indigenous Churches”, *Biblical Studies Journal*, 1, 2 (2019): 17. <https://www.biblicalstudies.in/wp-content/uploads/2019/09/17-25-THE-INTERFACE-BETWEEN-A-CRIFICIAL-RITES-IN-YORUBA-RELIGION.pdf>. (Accessed on 2023-03-28).

<sup>82</sup> Tokunboh Adeyemo, *Salvation in African Tradition*, (Evangel Publishing House, Nairobi Kenya, 1997), 33.

<sup>83</sup> Adeyemo, *Salvation in African Tradition*, 33.

<sup>84</sup> Omosade J. Awolalu, “Yoruba Sacrificial Practice”, *Journal of Religion in Africa*, Vol. 5, Fasc. 2 (1973): 81. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/1594756>. (Accessed on 2023-03-20).

<sup>85</sup> Benjamin C. Ray, “Aladura Christianity: A Yoruba Religion,” *Journal of Religion in Africa*, Vol. 23, Fasc. 3 (Aug., 1993): 268. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/1581109>. (Accessed on 2023-04-11).

practice in terms of ritual, festivity, sacrifice, exorcism, divination and other religious experiences of the Yoruba people come from the deep desire of the Africans to attain some form of salvation or deliverance from existential problems and suffering of their world.<sup>86</sup> According to the Wordsworth Dictionary of Beliefs and Religions, salvation is an indispensable element in all religions. It can be defined as “the deliverance of humankind by religious means from sin or evil, the restoration of human beings to their true state, and the attainment of eternal blessedness.”<sup>87</sup> All religions also have a belief that people must be saved from something: it can be salvation from sin, hell, dangers, poverty, and anything that is unpalatable within life. John Mbiti asserts that the concept of salvation in most African traditional religions has to do with physical and immediate protection from the danger of death, sicknesses, and poverty which are all threats to living good life.<sup>88</sup> Mercy Amba Oduyoye’s *Hearing and Knowing: Theological Reflections on African Christianity* affirms that the investigation into the phenomenon of religious transformation in Africa shows two major reasons that motivate Africans (including Yoruba) people to embrace salvation as offered by Christianity: evidently, both are spiritual and material struggles.<sup>89</sup> These two struggles in Oduyoye’s view cannot be divorced, one from the other. The Yoruba Christians seek divine protection from forces of evil, and wicked spirits responsible for causing human sicknesses, death, accidents, poverty, and barrenness.

### 3. Response to Suffering through Prayers

Richard Burgess in his work “Nigerian Pentecostal Theology in Global Perspective” asserts that the Yoruba traditional religion attaches much importance to the efficacy of prayer and that it is one viable instrument through which humans can influence the gods and make them favorably

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<sup>86</sup> Michael, *Christian Theology*, 168.

<sup>87</sup> Rosemary Goring, “Salvation” in *The Wordsworth Dictionary of Beliefs and Religions*, (Herefordshire: Wordsworth Editions, 1995), 455.

<sup>88</sup> John Mbiti, “Some Reflections on African Experience of Salvation Today” in *Living Faiths and Ultimate Goals*, Geneva: World Council of Churches, (1974), pp. 1-138.

<sup>89</sup> Mercy Amba Oduyoye, *Hearing and Knowing: Theological Reflections on African Christianity*, (Orbis Books, Maryknoll, NY, 1998), 98.



disposed to them in situations of seeking relief from the pangs of suffering.<sup>90</sup> Burgess elucidated further on this when he said that there are two key elements in the Yoruba traditional spirituality; ... “the first is the continuing belief in an invisible world (orun) of benevolent and malevolent powers constantly interacting with the visible material world (aye) and the second dominant belief is the efficacy of prayer”.<sup>91</sup> Evidently, it is clear from Burgess’ view that, because of the activities of these powers and their struggles with one another as mentioned elsewhere in this thesis, the world is an evil place to dwell in, and one must seek the protection of the benevolent spirits over the malevolent ones in order to avoid or seek relief from suffering through prayer. Therefore, the Yoruba religious rituals of prayer are intended to attract benevolent powers and repel malevolent ones.

#### 4. Response to Suffering through Exorcism

Deji Ayegboyin a scholar in Church History mentions exorcism as another response of Christians to the problem of suffering. He asserts that one of the concerns of many Yoruba Christians is to be delivered from all physical pain and from oppression by evil spirits.<sup>92</sup> According to Ayegboyin, exorcism is a “specific act of binding and releasing, performed on a person who is believed to be possessed by a non-human malevolent spirit.”<sup>93</sup> Prayer for exorcism includes identification of the evil spirits responsible for the specific suffering a believer is passing through, rebuking the demons, and throwing out of the evil spirits through the invocation of the name of Jesus.<sup>94</sup>

Professor Andrew Olu Igenzoza, Rector of Crowther Graduate Theological Seminary Abeokuta, Southwest of Nigeria argues that exorcism is a familiar practice in Africa's traditional religion.

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<sup>90</sup> Richard H. Burgess, “Nigerian Pentecostal Theology in Global Perspective. *PentecoStudies*, Vol. 7/2, (2008), 45. <https://doi.org/10.1558/ptcs.v7i2.29>

<sup>91</sup> Burgess, “Nigerian Pentecostal Theology in Global Perspective”, 45.

<sup>92</sup> Ayegboyin, “L’Oruko Jesu, 11-21.

<sup>93</sup> Deji Ayegboyin, “...But Deliver us from Evil...”, *The Riposte of the MFM and its Implications for the “Reverse in Mission”*, 46.

<sup>94</sup> Ayegboyin, “...But Deliver us from Evil...”, 46.

He asserts that “Once it has been established through divination that an evil spirit has been responsible for an undesirable condition in traditional Africa, exorcism usually takes place through a comprehensive approach which would often include placatory sacrifice, incantation, medication, adjuration, homeopathic magic and various forms of rituals and taboos”<sup>95</sup> in order to ameliorate the suffering experience.

What is evidently clear from all of these writers is that Yoruba (Christians and non-Christians) has a worldview of dealing with existential anxieties which may result from suffering and pains. This in some ways may also define personhood in the Yoruba belief system. Among many families within the Yoruba ethnic background, those who are not possessing any kind of power, or wealth, enjoy good health, have riches, and not bearing children in marriage are considered to be under a spell or curse and are therefore suffering. These sufferers could seek redress or a change of their ill fortune from these divinities through sacrifices in order to ameliorate their suffering. A close examination of African religion, tradition, and culture, especially the religion of the Yorubas, demonstrates that the gods, religion, tradition, and cultural value define existential goodness in all dimensions, including good health, money, power, and total well-being however, reject suffering.

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<sup>95</sup> Andrew Olu. Igenozu, “Exorcism in the Ministry of Jesus and Demonology in the African Context”, in S.O Abogunrin et al (eds.), *Biblical Healing in African Context*, Ibadan: The Nigerian Association for Biblical Studies., 2004, 146.

## CHAPTER 3

### 3.0 CHRISTOLOGICAL SUFFERING PERSPECTIVES IN HEBREWS 5:1-10

In this chapter, I want to analyze a section from the book of Hebrews 5. The goal is to do an overview of the book of Hebrews and do an exegesis of chapter 5:1-10 pericope. I will lay the background to the Epistle of Hebrews by looking at who the author is, who the audience or recipients were, the suffering situations they were in and its nature, and the purpose of the letter. Then I will exegete the Hebrews 5:1-10 pericope and investigate the relationship between suffering and obedience from the pericope and lastly, I will look at the educational value of suffering for contemporary Yoruba Christians in situations of suffering existential pains.

### 3.10. AN OVERVIEW OF THE EPISTLE TO THE HEBREWS

The book of Hebrews is magnificently distinct among the writings of the New Testament argue both Donald Hagner and Peter O'Brien.<sup>96</sup> Hebrews stands as a lengthy sermon, possibly the most exceptional Christian sermon ever recorded. It intertwines biblical explanation and encouragement, embodying the essence of a profound sermon. Its vocabulary exhibits sophistication, while its teachings can be challenging to comprehend. However, at its core, its message is straightforward. It explores the profound theological meaning behind the early Christian declaration of faith that "Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures" (1 Cor. 15:3).<sup>97</sup> Hagner's opinion aligns with Harrington's that the Letter to the Hebrews is theologically insightful however, only very little is known about its origin, author, and first

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<sup>96</sup> Donald A. Hagner, *Hebrews, New International Biblical Commentary*, (Hendrickson Publishers, Massachusetts, 1990), 1. Peter T. O'Brien, *The Letter to the Hebrews, The Pillar New Testament Commentary*, ed. D.A. Carson, (Wm. B.Eerdmans Publishing, Grand Rapids, Michigan, 2010), 1.

<sup>97</sup> Harrington, *What Are They Saying*, 1.

readers.<sup>98</sup> The questions are who wrote the Letter to the Hebrews? Who were the Hebrews or recipients? Lastly, what was their situation at the time the letter was written to them?

### 3.11 AUTHORSHIP

Who wrote Hebrews? This is an age-long question New Testament scholars have grabbled with till now. Since there is no claim to authorship in the letter itself, the authorship of Hebrews is disputed among scholars. Although part of the Corpus Paulinum, Hebrews seems not to be written by Apostle Paul, nor does it address the Hebrews. Daniel Harrington in his book “What Are They Saying about the Letter to the Hebrews?” argues that Apostle Paul was not the author of the Epistle to the Hebrews, it is a sermon in written form (see 13:22), and it is originally addressed to early Christians (most likely Jewish Christians).<sup>99</sup> Its language and theology are quite different from what we find in Paul's letters. We do not know exactly who the author was. In fact, the early Christian writer Origen said, “Whoever wrote Hebrews, only God knows.”<sup>100</sup> The question of who is responsible for this complex homily that ends like a letter has no clear answer. There is no reference within the work which allows us to identify its author. Hence, Hebrews is anonymous. Nevertheless, Christians today can understand and use what the author wrote.

### 3.12 THE AUDIENCE AND THEIR SITUATION OF SUFFERING

The identity of the recipients is as mysterious as the identity of the author. James W. Thompson argues that ancient Christian writers assumed that the homily was addressed to Jewish Christians, as the title “To the Hebrews” suggests.<sup>101</sup> Hagner affirms the Jewish Christian readership.<sup>102</sup>

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<sup>98</sup> Hagner, *Hebrews*, 1.

<sup>99</sup> Daniel J. Harrington, *What Are They Saying about the Letter to the Hebrews?* (Paulist Press, New Jersey, 2005), 1.

<sup>100</sup> Harrington, *What Are They Saying*, 1.

<sup>101</sup> James W. Thompson, *Hebrews, Paideia: commentaries on the New Testament*, (Baker Academic, Grand Rapids, Michigan, 2008), 7.

<sup>102</sup> Hagner, *Hebrews*, 4.

What was the situation of the readers before and after the Letter was written to them? On this, Thompson, argues that in the book, there are many references that directly relate to the readers' circumstances and that the author uses these references in the exhortations to provide the most convincing evidence of the historical situation of the readers. The author mentions the need to correct false teaching only once (in 13:9) in relation to their situation, but he never suggests that the readers are Jewish Christians who are tempted to return to Judaism. Instead, he presents a coherent picture of the challenges faced by his community at the time. To understand the community's current situation, we can examine (1) the implied narrative of their history, (2) explicit statements about their circumstances, (3) warnings about future dangers, and (4) possible allusions to their situation. By combining this information with insights from historical and sociological analogies, we can gain a better understanding of the readers' predicament.<sup>103</sup> David Arthur deSilva's "Despising Shame, Honor Discourse, and Community Maintenance in the Epistle to the Hebrews" provides in clear terms the nature of the readers' suffering situations.<sup>104</sup> He mentions that this Jewish Christian community has been victims of the loss of their honor at the hands of a hostile society, exposed to public shame (10:33), suffered verbal assaults on their standing and physical abuse of their person, some have suffered the loss of their property (10:34), and some afflicted with imprisonment or maltreatment (13:3).<sup>105</sup> However, argues Hagner that, despite their honorable past, there is evidence that their commitment was weakening, possibly due to the looming threat of new persecution, although they hadn't experienced martyrdom before, it now seemed like a real possibility (10:35f.; 12:4).<sup>106</sup>

### 3.13 PURPOSE OF THE LETTER

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<sup>103</sup> Thompson, *Hebrews*, 8.

<sup>104</sup> David A. deSilva, *Despising Shame, Honor Discourse, and Community Maintenance in the Epistle to the Hebrews*, (Society of Biblical Literature, Atlanta, GA, 2008), 4.

<sup>105</sup> deSilva, *Despising Shame*, 4.

<sup>106</sup> Hagner, *Hebrews*, 5

The book tasked its first audience with an unflinching or unqualified commitment, unfaltering perseverance, and a readiness to suffer for one's faith in the face of life's daunting challenges. Christ's death on the cross is seen in sacrificial terms throughout the New Testament. The sacrificial death of Christ receives an incomparable emphasis in the Epistle to the Hebrews, where the author links Christ's death to his priestly role. By referring to Christ as the great high priest, the author of Hebrews "introduces a new and exceedingly valuable picture into the Christian understanding of Christ's work."<sup>107</sup> The epistle also throws light on the relationship between the new and old covenants, the interpretation of the OT (especially, the Torah), and the subject of faith. Throughout his work, the author of Hebrews gives the OT sacrificial system a Christian meaning, closely linking it to the Christ event.

In this study, we explore Priestly Christology as explicated in the epistle of Hebrews. According to Kevin B. McCrudden the Epistle to the Hebrews in the New Testament is one of the texts that talks about the Christ-event in a theologically complex way.<sup>108</sup> Though the concept of perfection is not the focus of this thesis however, it is worthy of mention in the light of how Christ's suffering, and death relate to Jesus himself and the believers. This writer is of the opinion that the concept of perfection is related to the themes of suffering and obedience. The question here is; how is suffering and learning obedience connected to Christ's perfection? Norman Young in his article "Suffering: A Key to the Epistle to the Hebrews" affirms that Christ's perfection is the qualification that his suffering gives him to help or to save others in their struggle to remain faithful to God in a context of suffering of existential problems.<sup>109</sup> Christ, as the Son was perfected, (became matured) through suffering.

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<sup>107</sup> Leon Morris, *The Cross in the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: W. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1972), 284.

<sup>108</sup> Kevin B. McCrudden, "The Concept of Perfection in the Epistle to the Hebrews" in *Reading the Epistle to the Hebrews: A Resource for Students*, ed. Eric F. Mason, Kevin B. McCrudden, (SBL Press, 2011), 209.

<sup>109</sup> Norman H. Young, "Suffering: A Key to the Epistle to the Hebrews", *Australian Biblical Review*, 51, (2003), 55. <https://core.ac.uk/download/pdf/234110114.pdf>. Accessed on 23-7-2023.

However, understanding the idea of perfection in Hebrews is difficult for two reasons. First, there are many examples from the ancient world that talk about perfection, but it's unclear if Hebrews uses those examples in a random way. Second, because we are not sure about the exact context of Hebrews, it's challenging to interpret its teachings about Christ and the passages that mention perfection. For instance, in 13:22, the author describes the main part of the letter as words of encouragement in the light of the recipients' suffering.<sup>110</sup> McCrudden argues that while we cannot be completely certain about the reason behind the writing of Hebrews, there are enough clues in the text to suggest that it was written to comfort a group of discouraged Christians in the first century. In Hebrews 10:32-36, there is a clear mention of persecution, where the community faced ridicule from society (10:32) and had experienced difficulties in the past (10:34). These experiences threatened to weaken their hope in their future destiny (10:34-35). The pastoral intention of Hebrews is also evident in its structure. The author repeatedly urges the community in 4:14 and 10:23 to hold on firmly to their "confession" (*homologian*). Additionally, Hebrews 4:14-16 and 10:19-25 surround the central section of the letter that talks about the high-priestly work of Christ. This framing indicates that the author's main concern is to encourage the community. The letter's rhetorical style also suggests a pastoral motivation behind its writing.<sup>111</sup> Hebrews combines elements of two types of speeches described by Aristotle: epideictic and deliberative. Among these, Hebrews seems to align more closely with epideictic speeches, which were meant to praise and celebrate people or things in the present. In contrast, deliberative speeches aimed to persuade the audience about future actions. The Christology in Hebrews is mostly celebratory, especially when it comes to the high status of Christ. Various passages emphasize Christ's exalted position (1:1-4; 4:14; 7:26; 8:1, 6; 10:19-21). This celebratory

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<sup>110</sup> McCrudden, "Concept of Perfection," 209.

<sup>111</sup> McCrudden, "Concept of Perfection," 210.

Christology likely aimed to evoke pride and pleasure among the listeners at that time, while also addressing a communal issue of declining commitment among the believers.<sup>112</sup>

In the following section, I will focus on the human life of Jesus within the Hebrews' pericope and specifically, how suffering led to learning obedience.

I will now investigate further the topic of suffering and learning obedience by doing an exegesis of Hebrews 5:1-10.

### 3.2 EXEGESIS OF HEBREWS 5:1-10

#### VERSE 1.

“Every high priest is selected from among the people and is appointed to represent the people in matters related to God, to offer gifts and sacrifices for sins” (New International Version, NIV).

The high priests of Israel were taken from among men because they were appointed for men in things pertaining to God. “To do for them what is to be done with God or which are to be done with him.”<sup>113</sup> According to Paul Ellingworth, this presupposes that God is involved in the selection or appointment and not the community.<sup>114</sup> This is made clearer in verse 4 however, that the action of God is presupposed. The high priest is set aside or apart from others in order to act on their behalf in matters related to God. The general qualifications for the office of a high priest, F.F. Bruce in his commentary affirms that a high priest must be able to sympathize with those he represents and be divinely appointed to his office.<sup>115</sup> Bruce further mentions, as pointed out by Ellingworth and Owen, that the high priest represents men and women where their responsibility to God is concerned and therefore necessary that he should be a human being.<sup>116</sup>

Aaron and his successors represent this in the Old Testament, they represented the nation of

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<sup>112</sup> McCrudden, “Concept of Perfection,” 210.

<sup>113</sup> John Owen, *An Exposition of the Epistle to the Hebrews*, Ed. W.H. Goold, (The Banner of Truth Trust, Edinburgh, 1991), 442.

<sup>114</sup> Paul Ellingworth, *The Epistle to the Hebrews: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, (W.B. Eerdmanns Publishing, Grand Rapids, Michigan, 1993), 272.

<sup>115</sup> F.F. Bruce, *The New International Commentary on the New Testament: The Epistle to the Hebrews*, ((W.B. Eerdmanns Publishing, Grand Rapids, Michigan, 1990), 118.

<sup>116</sup> Bruce, *Epistle to the Hebrews*, 118.



Israel in the presence of God, they were themselves Israelites, and were conversant with the precarious conditions of suffering under which the people lived, and exposed to the same pressures and trials.<sup>117</sup> Alan C. Mitchell in his work titled *Hebrews* states that the verb ‘*lambanein*’, which at its root means “take,” is used to express how the high priest is “chosen from among mortals.”<sup>118</sup> The sense is that the high priest is part of the human race, but is then set apart. This is clear from the meaning of “take” in Lev 8:2 in reference to Aaron and his sons, and then again in Num 8:6 referring to the Levites, who are to be taken from among the Israelites and cleansed. Regarding “on their behalf,” the Greek text translated literally reads “on behalf of humans,” ‘*hyper anthropōon*.’ The phrase parallels “from among humans,” ‘*ex anthropōon*’, in the first part of the verse, creating a nicely balanced clause, “taken from among humans and appointed on behalf of humans.” The author shows the mediatory role of the high priest and his solidarity with those on whose behalf he offers sacrifice.<sup>119</sup> The priest stand between God and the people, who understands the suffering and plight of the people and he is able to on the behalf of the people offer sacrifices to God. Their sinful disobedience can be the reason for their suffering and the priest prescribe the type of sacrifice that will be acceptable to God.

## VERSE 2.

“He is able to deal gently with those who are ignorant and are going astray since he himself is subject to weakness” (NIV).

The verb ‘*metriopathein*’, not extant in the LXX, means “moderate one's feelings”<sup>120</sup> The high priest can moderate his anger with those who are unknowing or who have gone astray. The Greek verb ‘*agnoein*’ means to be unaware of or not understand. According to Lev 5:17 even if someone should commit a sin out of ignorance, guilt is still incurred, so the sin has to be expiated (cf. Lev

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<sup>117</sup> Bruce, *Epistle to the Hebrews*, 119.

<sup>118</sup> Alan C. Mitchell, *Hebrews*, Sacra Pagina Series, ed. Daniel J. Harrington, (Michael Glazier Book, Liturgical Press, Collegeville, Minnesota, 2007), 107.

<sup>119</sup> Mitchell, *Hebrews*, 107.

<sup>120</sup> BDAG, 643; Wilhelm Michaelis, ‘*metriopatheo*’, TDNT 5:938.

22:14).<sup>121</sup> With respect to the weakness of the high priest, the writer uses the verb ‘perikeisthai’, which means “wrap around” (BDAG 648) or “surround” (Heb. 12:1). Accordingly, the author emphasizes the solidarity of the high priest with humanity.<sup>122</sup> Owen avers that “The high priest is one who is fit and able to bear moderately and quietly with the failings, miscarriages, and sins of those whom he executes his office, not breaking out into any anger or excess of indignation against them by reason of their infirmities.”<sup>123</sup> The high priest shows compassion to those who are ignorant and lost. There are two ways to understand these words: first, as a way to distinguish certain individuals among the people of God who are ignorant and lost, and second, as a description of the object of this compassion. In the first sense, it means that the high priest's compassion is primarily directed towards these individuals, encouraging them to seek his help in times of distress. In the second sense, it includes all the people of God. While there are varying degrees of ignorance and mistakes among believers, those who are most affected by them are encouraged to seek relief from the high priest. In general, all the people of God experience some level of ignorance and wandering, which can lead to discouragement. Therefore, the Holy Spirit presents the qualification of a high priest as necessary to provide relief and support for them.<sup>124</sup> Ellingworth argues moderate as used in this context may be read on one level as a stylistic variant for ‘sympatheō’, moderate in 4:15, and ‘pathein’ suffer in 5:8.<sup>125</sup> He advocates for a weaker synonym than the statement about Christ in 4:15 and 5:7-10: “every high priest ... has some fellow-feeling for” those who are weak and have gone astray.<sup>126</sup> Evidently, Christ satisfied the condition to be a sympathetic high priest but he is not subject to weakness like the Jewish priests. Though he suffered like any human being he himself is sinless. The weakness that sin imposed

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<sup>121</sup> Mitchell, *Hebrews*, 108.

<sup>122</sup> Mitchell, *Hebrews*, 109.

<sup>123</sup> Owen, *Exposition of the Epistle to the Hebrews*, 454.

<sup>124</sup> Owen, *Exposition of the Epistle to the Hebrews*, 456.

<sup>125</sup> Ellingworth, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, 275.

<sup>126</sup> Ellingworth, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, 275.

on the human flesh did not apply to Christ because he was without sin. Therefore he is able to help those who suffer as a result of their human weakness.

VERSE 3.

“This is why he has to offer sacrifices for his own sins, as well as for the sins of the people” (NIV).

Why must the high priest offer sacrifice for his own sin first is the question that pops up from the reading of this verse? The background to this verse is the fact that the high priest is human and therefore has weakness just like the people he represents before God. Alan Mitchell says; “The antecedent of ‘this’ is weakness.”<sup>127</sup> According to the Old Testament, on the Day of Atonement, the high priest had the responsibility to perform sacrifices for his personal transgressions (Lev 16:6; cf. 4:3-12; 9:7), the sins committed by his household (Lev 16:6, 11), and the sins of the community (Lev 16:15; cf. 4:13-21; 9:7). Moreover, the high priest was also required to make atonement for the sanctuary, the tent of meeting, and the altar (Lev 16:16-18, 20, 33). Owen references two reasons why the high priest is obligated to offer sacrifices first and foremost for himself. Firstly, it is due to his moral vulnerabilities and weaknesses, which entail obedience and susceptibility to sin. Secondly, it is in accordance with God's command and appointment, as He has specifically instructed and designated that the high priest should offer sacrifices for his own sake.<sup>128</sup> For one, man cannot satisfactorily atone for himself, just as he cannot be the judge in his own case. Someone has to be appointed to adjudicate for man.

VERSE 4.

“And no one takes this honor on himself, but he receives it when called by God, just as Aaron was” (NIV).

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<sup>127</sup> Mitchell, *Hebrews*, 109.

<sup>128</sup> Owen, *Exposition of the Epistle to the Hebrews*, 471.

This verse presumes that the high priest has no honor of his own except by virtue of the one who appointed him over the people. Hagner submits that the office of the high priest is not entered into freely or by personal volition, God alone chooses a person for this honor.<sup>129</sup> The example of the Aaronic priesthood, who was appointed by God as the prototypical high priest (see Ex. 28:1).<sup>130</sup> In Gareth Lee Cockerill’s *Epistle to the Hebrews*, the author affirms that a legitimate high priest is not self-appointed but is called by God – a divine label of authorization.<sup>131</sup> On top, Cockerill asserts the dignity of the high priesthood by referring to it as “this honor.”<sup>132</sup>

There is an honor tag attached to the position of a priest. Anyone occupying the position needs God’s approval and the strength of godly characters in order to access this honor. In this contemporary time, many leaders both within and outside the church have failed in character and are now seeking to buy honor.

#### VERSE 5-6.

“In the same way, Christ did not take on himself the glory of becoming a high priest. But God said to him, ‘You are my Son; today I have become your Father.’” And he says in another place, ‘You are a priest forever, in the order of Melchizedek.’” (NIV).

This verse highlights the comparison and contrast between vv. 1-4 (“every high priest”) and vv. 5-10 (“so also, the Christ”). The first part focuses on “Aaron,” while the second part emphasizes “a high priest forever, according to the order of Melchizedek,” according to Cockerill.<sup>133</sup> The

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<sup>129</sup> Hagner, *Hebrews*, 80.

<sup>130</sup> Donald A. Hagner, *Encountering the Book of Hebrews: An Exposition*, (Baker Publishing, Grand Rapids, Michigan, 2002), 83.

<sup>131</sup> Gareth Lee Cockerill, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament. (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2012), 237.

<sup>132</sup> Cockerill, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, 237.

<sup>133</sup> Cockerill, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, 237.

general description of the old high priest gives way to a narration of this new High Priest's saving work.<sup>134</sup>

In this pastoral epistle, the author introduced Christ's sonship in 1:1-3 and his high priesthood in 2:17-18. In 4:14, he merged the two, stating "Since we have a great high priest... the Son of God." In Heb. 5:5-6, the writer provides Scriptural support for this merger, combining Ps 2:7 and Ps 110:4. Hebrews incorporates three key divine oracles directed to Christ: Ps 2:7, Ps 110:1, and Ps 110:4, representing his sonship, exaltation, and priesthood, respectively. He unites Ps 2:7 and Ps 110:1 in Chapter 1, and Ps 2:7 and Ps 110:4 in Heb 5:5-6. This demonstrates that the one addressed as Son and invited to God's right hand is also addressed as Priest "forever."<sup>135</sup> We have already noted the messianic character and widespread Christological application of Ps 2:7 and Ps 110:1. The writer of Hebrews builds on this Christian consensus when he discerns the divine oracle proclaiming Christ's priesthood in Ps 110:4. He can join this verse to Ps 2:7, although it comes from "another place," because both are God's oracles to the Son. The "one who spoke" (aorist participle) in Ps 2:7 also "speaks" (present tense) the proclamation of Ps 110:4. The historical present "speaks" adds vividness and puts emphasis on the divine affirmation of the Son's priesthood without implying that God's speech was continuous or that this second declaration occurred at a different time.<sup>136</sup> The author's aim major reason for joining Ps. 110:4 with Ps. 2:7 is to affirm that Christ's priesthood is founded upon his sonship.<sup>137</sup>

The priesthood office is highly honorable however, Christ's honor is superior to that of Aaron. According to Mitchell, Christ, like Aaron, did not glorify himself by becoming a high priest but they were both called to the priesthood and didn't take the role upon themselves.<sup>138</sup> While there

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<sup>134</sup> Thus the change from the present tense of general description, which dominates vv. 1-4, to the aorist, which characterizes vv. 5-10.

<sup>135</sup> Cockerill, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, 238.

<sup>136</sup> Cockerill, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, 238.

<sup>137</sup> "The purpose of vv. 5f. is to bind together the titles of Son and (high) priest as being equally conferred on Christ by God, as Scripture attests" (Ellingworth, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, 282).

<sup>138</sup> Mitchell, *Hebrews*, 109.

is a similarity in how they became priests, there is also a difference. In verse 4, the priesthood is described as an honor, but here it is a matter of glory. The author previously described Jesus as crowned with honor and glory in 2:9. The LXX of Ps 95:7 attributes “glory and honor” to the Lord, while the Hebrew version (96:7) mentions “glory and strength.” In Exod 28:2 (LXX), God instructs Moses to create a holy vestment for Aaron “for honor and glory,” and in 28:40, tunics and sashes are made for the same purpose. First Maccabees 14:21 also mentions the “glory and honor” of the high priests and other priests in Israel. While “glory and honor” may have been associated with the high priest's office, in Hebrews, it is linked to Jesus' priesthood.<sup>139</sup>

Psalm 2:7 as quoted by the author stressed the unique Sonship of Christ as the messianic king by divine decree. Psalm 110:4 refers to one who is a priest forever, in the order of Melchizedek. This is the same person addressed in Psalm 110:1. Melchizedek was both a king and a priest (Gen. 14:18). Jesus is also a king and priest and so corresponds to Melchizedek. To sum it up, Jesus is the Son of God by divine decree and has been raised to the right hand of God, he is at the same time appointed by God to be a priest forever in the order of Melchizedek.<sup>140</sup> The peculiarity of Melchizedek is that he has no genealogy; no beginning and no end and Christ's priesthood is likened to him – an everlasting, no-ending priesthood forever. Indicative of a high priest who will always be available.

#### VERSE 7.

“During the days of Jesus’ life on earth, he offered up prayers and petitions with fervent cries and tears to the one who could save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverent submission” (NIV). Compare English Standard Version (ESV).<sup>141</sup>

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<sup>139</sup> Mitchell, *Hebrews*, 109.

<sup>140</sup> Hagner, *Hebrews*, 80-1.

<sup>141</sup> ESV verse 7, “In the days of his flesh, Jesus offered up prayers and supplications, with loud cries and tears, to him who was able to save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverence.”

To distinguish Jesus' priesthood from that of the Levitical priests, the author focuses on the earthly Jesus and his sufferings. Mitchell asserts that the humanity of Jesus has been significant in previous comparisons, particularly in 2:10-18, where his earthly sufferings qualified him as the High Priest.<sup>142</sup> The author primarily highlights Jesus' humanity in relation to his suffering, specifically referring to the "days of his flesh" as the period of his Passion and death. This is reinforced by the mention of "flesh" in 10:20, symbolizing the means through which believers can access the "sanctuary of blood."<sup>143</sup> The mention of "loud cries" (Meta kraugēs ischyras) and "tears" (dakruōn) likely refers to Jesus' prayers in the Garden of Gethsemane (Matt 26:36-46; Mark 14:32-42; Luke 22:39-46) and on the cross before his death (Matt 27:46; Mark 15:34). These instances demonstrate Jesus' genuine suffering and emphasize his solidarity with humanity. Similar descriptions of desperate prayers can be found in Hellenistic Judaism, as seen in Pss 39(38):12, 116(114):8, and 3 Macc 5:6-8.<sup>144</sup>

In both Hebrew Bible and Hellenistic Judaism the idea or notion that God could deliver a person from the pang of death is common. In the reference to "and he was heard because of his reverent submission" the author of the Hebrews is assertive that Jesus' prayer was heard because of his reverent submission. However, interpreting this part of the verse has posed challenges. If Jesus prayed to be saved from death and his prayer was heard, why did he still die? Different explanations have been proposed. Some suggest that Jesus' prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane was for God's will to be done, which was indeed heard. Others argue that Jesus prayed to be delivered from the power of death, which was accomplished through his resurrection. Considering the tradition in Acts 2:24, the latter option appears more favorable.<sup>145</sup> If the latter was favored, the argument then is, the author did not make any mention or allusion to resurrection. We should not forget that we are looking at the human side of Jesus (in the days of

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<sup>142</sup> Mitchell, *Hebrews*, 110.

<sup>143</sup> Mitchell, *Hebrews*, 110.

<sup>144</sup> Mitchell, *Hebrews*, 110.

<sup>145</sup> Mitchell, *Hebrews*, 111.

his flesh readily comes to mind).<sup>146</sup> We must explore all possibilities to the question; how was his prayer answered or heard? This aspect is key to this thesis because it would probably give direction and energy to the questions this research is trying to answer.

Hagner in tackling the confusion in v. 7 introduces a variation to the argument by some scholars; “he prayed to be delivered from the fear of death (Calvin). There have even been desperate speculation that a negative has been inadvertently dropped from the text, so it should read “he was not heard” (von Harnack, without any manuscript evidence). But if so, then the final words of the sentence, “because of his reverent submission,” make little or no sense.”<sup>147</sup>

In the garden, Jesus prayed to avoid the suffering and death he would face, yet he also prayed for the Father’s will to be done instead of his own. This prayer is of utmost significance to Jesus. The author likely refers to the tradition of Jesus in the garden, where his ultimate prayer of obedience to the Father’s will was heard. It was through this obedience that he went to the cross, “learning obedience” and “becoming the source of eternal salvation” (vv. 8-9).<sup>148</sup> Ellingworth in his argument asserts that:

“the author of Hebrews insists so strongly on the positive results of Christ’s suffering and death (2:9, 14; 9:15) that it is antecedently improbable that he would speak here of Christ’s attempting to avoid them. Even if the reference is solely or mainly to Gethsemane, Jesus’ prayer (the content of which is not specified in Hebrews included both the petition, to be protected from death, and also the act of submission to the Father’s will. In Hebrews, the following words confirm that the suffering which led to his “learning” (v.8) and “being perfected” (v.9) had already begun, thereby suggesting that Jesus prayed for safe deliverance out of death at the end.”<sup>149</sup>

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<sup>146</sup> The author is not concerned with later theological reflection about the assumption of Christ’s human nature into heaven, yet here as elsewhere (especially 2:14-18) he clearly expresses the thought that Christ’s experience of human life, and especially of suffering and death, was essential to his saving work (Ellingworth, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, 287).

<sup>147</sup> Hagner, *Encountering the Book of Hebrews*, 85.

<sup>148</sup> Hagner, *Encountering the Book of Hebrews*, 85.

<sup>149</sup> Ellingworth, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, 288.



Ellingworth further affirms that the relationship between vv. 7 and 8 could resolve the impasse by proposing a simpler translation thus: “In the face of the cross, Jesus fervently prayed to God, seeking rescue from the power of death. God heard and answered these prayers because Jesus humbly submitted to His will. Through his agonizing prayers and acceptance of God's will, Jesus learned obedience, a necessary lesson even for God's Son.”<sup>150</sup> This interpretation highlights the relationship between verse 8 and both the act of offering prayers and the clause indicating God's response which carries equal grammatical and contextual significance. Other explanations, such as Jesus praying to overcome the fear of death, for obedience to the Father's will, for his enemies, or for deliverance from death prior to the crucifixion, place varying degrees of strain on the text.<sup>151</sup> It is evident from biblical insight and the intent of the author that Christ's prayers to “the one who was able to save him from death” were not prayers expressing a desire to escape the suffering of the cross and the grave. After all, he predicted his own suffering of death many times throughout the Gospels and said that death was the purpose for which he was sent into the world (John 12:27). Jesus did not pray in order to be saved from dying; he prayed in order to be saved out of death and was heard through the resurrection. Jesus's prayer to be saved from death was a prayer to be raised from the grave. The One who was able to save Jesus from death answered his prayer when he delivered him from death in the resurrection.

#### VERSE 8-10.

“Son though he was, he learned obedience from what he suffered and, once made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him and was designated by God to be high priest in the order of Melchizedek” (NIV)

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<sup>150</sup> Ellingworth, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, 290.

<sup>151</sup> Ellingworth, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, 291.

This section of the exegesis is essential to this thesis; for it deals with the relationship between suffering, learning, and obedience.

Verse 8 is key not only to this passage but as well to the understanding of Christology and discipleship in Hebrews. Why was it necessary for Jesus to learn obedience through suffering? Hagner argues that Jesus as God's son was not exempted from suffering and that his obedience was not accomplished in an ideal circumstance but was learned in the school of suffering.<sup>152</sup> L. Timothy Johnson, argues that the conjunction *kaiper* in "Even though he was a Son" (*kaiper on huios*) as usual sets up a contrast (cf. Phil 3:4; 2 Pet 1:12; and Heb 7:5; 12:17) between one situation, that of being a Son, and another, learning from what is suffered. But why is it set up as a contrast? If we read the statement in light of the entire letter, especially 12:4–11, we might be tempted to change it to "because he was a Son" (if the Greek would allow such a change, which it does not).<sup>153</sup> We must understand the contrast in terms of what the author of Hebrews has already said about "the Son." When we scan those earlier statements, we realize that apart from 2:10, which anticipates the present passage by speaking of the perfection of the Son through suffering, every other statement concerning the Son focuses on his exalted status (see 1:2, 5:8; 3:6; 4:14; 5:5). The reader who has heard of the Son that he made the universe can now hear of his learning through suffering "even though he was a Son" as an appropriate contrast. Johnson further explains the following rhetorical phrase which flourishes on a common theme in Greek moral discourse, emphasizing the interconnectedness of learning and suffering. Hebrews states that one "learned" through the experience of suffering. The association between learning and suffering can be traced back to the Greek tragedians.<sup>154</sup> James A. Fowler in dealing with the nature of being states that;

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<sup>152</sup> Hagner, *Hebrews*, 81-2.

<sup>153</sup> L. Timothy Johnson, *Hebrews: A Commentary*, (Westminster John Knox Press, Louisville, Kentucky, 2006), 147.

<sup>154</sup> Johnson, *Hebrews: A Commentary*, 147.

“Ontologically one with God the Father in the Triune Godhead, and inherently and intrinsically divine, He functioned as a man having emptied Himself of the independent function of divine prerogatives of operational action (cf. Phil. 2:7), and “He learned obedience from the things which He suffered.” Divine function, operating as it does in the omniscience of knowing all things, has nothing to “learn.” Neither does the absolute sovereignty of divine function “listen under” (Greek word *hupakouo*) another in “obedience.” But having chosen to function as a man in identification with all mankind, Jesus the Son “kept increasing in wisdom and stature, and in favor with God and man” (Lk. 2:52) as a young man, and continued to “learn obedience” in all the experiences of earthly, human existence. In the context of the most intense pressures of temptation unto disobedience and sin (4:15), Jesus responded in the “obedience of faith” (cf. Rom. 1:5; 16:26), “obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross” (Phil. 2:8), allowing “the obedience of the One” (Rom. 5:19) to be the basis of righteousness for all men. For 33 years in time “the man, Christ Jesus” (I Tim. 2:5) “listened under” God in obedience and was receptive to all that God the Father wanted to do in Him by faith.”<sup>155</sup>

James W. Thompson argues that the phrase “although he was a Son” means that even though Jesus was a Son, he was not like ordinary sons who learn through suffering. Nevertheless, Jesus learned obedience through the suffering he experienced. This part of the text also suggests the upcoming discussion about the community's suffering, which the author sees as a way for them to learn.<sup>156</sup> It is the most natural thing in the world for a son to learn obedience by suffering; indeed, our author makes this very point in Ch. 12:5ff. But it is not any ordinary son that he is speaking about here, but the Son of God: “Son though He was” that is to say, Son of God though

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<sup>155</sup> James A. Fowler, *A Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews: Jesus Better than Everything*, (Published by C.I.Y. Publishing California, 2006), 153-4.

<sup>156</sup> James W. Thompson, *Hebrews, Paideia: Commentaries on the New Testament*, (Baker Publishing, Grand Rapids, Michigan, 2008), 116.

He was even He was granted no exemption from the common law that learning comes from suffering.<sup>157</sup>

John Calvin, a reformed theologian in his commentary speaks of the two main reasons or purposes why Christ had to suffer. The first purpose of the suffering of Christ was that in this way He should be made accustomed to obedience: not that He was forcibly compelled to it, or had any need of such practices, in the way that fierceness of oxen or horses is tamed. He was more than willing of his own accord to give the Father the obedience due to him.<sup>158</sup>

Verse 9. "And having been made perfect." The second purpose (so-called remoter purpose) of Christ's suffering according to Calvin was that in this way He was initiated into His priesthood. The author implies that enduring the Cross and dying was a sacred consecration for Christ, highlighting that all His sufferings were connected to our salvation. Calvin argues further that this shows that His sufferings do not take away from His dignity, but actually bring Him glory. If we value our salvation, we should honor its Author greatly. This passage not only talks about Christ as an example but also states that His obedience erases our transgressions. He became the One who brought us salvation by making us righteous in God's eyes, counteracting Adam's disobedience with His own obedience. The word "sanctified" fits better in this context than "made perfect." The Greek word used, 'teleiothis' can mean either. Since the passage is about the priesthood, it is appropriate for the writer to mention sanctification. In another place, Christ Himself speaks like this (John 17.19), "For their sakes, I sanctify myself." It is evident from this that it refers to His human nature in which He fulfilled the role of a Priest and suffered.<sup>159</sup>

To benefit from the obedience of Christ, we must imitate it. The apostle suggests that the rewards of His obedience are only received by those who are obedient themselves. By saying this, he

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<sup>157</sup> Bruce, *Epistle to the Hebrews*, 127.

<sup>158</sup> John Calvin, *The Epistle of Paul to the Hebrews and The First and Second Epistle of St. Peter*, Calvin's Commentaries, trans. William Johnston, ed. David W. Torrance and Thomas F. Torrance, (Wm. B. Eerdmanns Publishing Company, Grand Rapids, Michigan, 1976), 65-6.

<sup>159</sup> Calvin, *The Epistle of Paul to the Hebrews*, 66.

encourages us to have faith, as we can only have a share in Christ and His blessings if we accept them through faith. Additionally, the use of the term “to all” emphasizes that anyone who pays attention to and obeys the Gospel of Christ is not excluded from salvation.<sup>160</sup>

### 3.3 EXEGETICAL INTERPRETATION OF SUFFERING IN HEBREWS 5

Charles H. Talbert in his book “Learning Through Suffering: The Educational Value of Suffering in the New Testament and in Its Milieu” observes the following about the Hebrews’ understanding of Christians’ suffering. The addressees have suffered (10:32-34, the former days) and are suffering still (12:2-4) and in the midst of their adversity, they are exhorted to endure.<sup>161</sup> There are four reasons given for such endurance. (1) Judgement connected with the Parousia of Christ is coming soon. Those who shrink back are destroyed but those who have faith keep their souls (10:37-39). “Therefore do not throw away your confidence, which has a great reward” (10:35). (2) The readers have models of endurance in the pre-Christian heroes of faith (11:1-12:1) and in Jesus who perfected faith (12:2-3) to emulate in their suffering. “Consider . . . so that you may not grow weary or faint-hearted” (12:3). (3) The hearers are to understand their sufferings as divine discipline (12:5-11) and training (12:11), and as such, evidence of divine love and acceptance. The distinctive Jewish perspective on sufferings as divine education comes into play here. God’s people are educated through the painful correction of their misdirection. (4) The recipients of the homily are to identify with Christ and, like Moses, share the abuse Christ experienced (13:13), in view of the future hope (13:14).

In summary, the book of Hebrews provides insight into the understanding of Christians’ suffering. The recipients of the message have already experienced suffering in the past and are currently enduring it. They are encouraged to persevere for four reasons. First, judgment is

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<sup>160</sup> Calvin, *The Epistle of Paul to the Hebrews*, 67.

<sup>161</sup> Charles H. Talbert, *Learning Through Suffering: The Educational Value of Suffering in the New Testament and in Its Milieu*, (The Liturgical Press, Collgeville, Minnesota, 1991), 72-3.

coming when Christ returns, and those who give up will be destroyed, while those who have faith will be saved. Second, they have examples of endurance in the heroes of faith and in Jesus to inspire them. Third, they are to view their suffering as divine discipline and evidence of God's love. Fourth, they are to identify with Christ and endure suffering, keeping their focus on future hope.

### 3.4 EXEGETICAL INTERPRETATION OF OBEDIENCE IN HEBREWS 5

How did the recipient of the message view Christian obedience? Johnson observes that it is through recognizing that Jesus' obedience is a manifestation of his faith that we can grasp the intended point in Hebrews.<sup>162</sup> Discerning individuals recognize that genuine learning is experiential and entails a certain degree of suffering. Hebrews establishes the Son's close connection with humanity by highlighting his learning through experience, akin to their own process (2:17; 4:15; 5:2). However, Hebrews takes a unique approach by attributing a specific attitude, obedience (*hypakoe*), to Jesus' learning from his experiences of sufferings. The true significance of this term goes beyond its frequency of use in the text. The noun appears only here, and the verb '*hypakouein*' ("to obey") is found only in the subsequent verse and in 11:8.<sup>163</sup> Evidently, accepting the point in Hebrews involves recognizing that Jesus' obedience is a result of his faith. People who are sensitive understand that genuine learning involves experiences and sometimes suffering. Hebrews emphasizes the close connection between Jesus and humanity by highlighting his experiential learning, similar to their own process.

### 3.5 EDUCATIONAL VALUE OF SUFFERING AND OBEDIENCE IN HEBREWS 5

I have looked at the sufferings of Jesus and of Christians in Hebrews, always with the question in view: What does this discourse say about the educational value of suffering?

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<sup>162</sup> Johnson, *Hebrews: A Commentary*, 147.

<sup>163</sup> Johnson, *Hebrews: A Commentary*, 147.

Charles H. Talbert in his book “Learning Through Suffering: The Educational Value of Suffering in the New Testament and in Its Milieu” observes the following from both Jesus and Christians learn through suffering:

One, Jesus is said to have learned obedience through what he suffered (5:8 - *emathen aph' hon epathen ten hupakoen*). Two, Christians are said to be educated/disciplined (12:5-6-*kurios paideuei*) by God through what they suffer. There is a significant difference between the learning that takes place in the two instances. Christians are understood as children whose misdirection is corrected by the pain of suffering. In this sense their suffering is educational. This, of course, reflects the widespread Jewish view of divine discipline as heavenly instruction leading to holiness. Christ, however, is presented as one who “in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin” (4:15). He learned obedience through what he suffered (5:8). This suffering was not a correction of his misdirection but rather the arena in which his development was enabled, as an athlete's skill is developed by the stress of training. Here it is the Greco-Roman understanding of education through suffering as that is mediated through a Jewish text like 4 Maccabees that comes into play. Within one Christian document, both backgrounds are utilized to speak of the educational value of the suffering of Jesus and his followers.<sup>164</sup>

In simple words, both Jesus and Christians learn through suffering. Jesus learned obedience through his own suffering, while Christians are disciplined by God through the suffering they experience. The difference lies in the purpose of the learning. Christians’ suffering corrects their mistakes and teaches them, similar to the Jewish belief in divine discipline for holiness. By Jesus’ suffering and obedience, we have the privilege and the grace of salvation. He is the Highest Priest who offer himself up as atoning sacrifice to secure our salvation.

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<sup>164</sup> Talbert, *Learning Through Suffering*, 73.

## CHAPTER 4

### 4.0 APPRAISAL OF LEARNING OBEDIENCE THROUGH SUFFERING IN HEBREWS 5:1-10 AND YORUBA CHRISTIAN IDEAS

In this chapter, I will compare Christ's suffering leading to obedience as presented by the author of the Epistle to the Hebrews with the Yoruba Christian perspectives. First, I will draw out some similarities on the topic of suffering between the Yoruba traditional religion and Christianity. Second, I will look at some suffering motives deductible from the similarities. Lastly, I will compare these suffering motives to the Christological suffering and learning of obedience in Hebrews 5:1-10 and how each can be adopted by the Yoruba Christians and various participants in the conversation. Then I shall draw some inferences for the application for Yoruba Christians in situations of suffering and for Yoruba Pentecostal leaders.

#### 4.1 SIMILARITIES BETWEEN YORUBA TRADITIONAL AND CHRISTIAN VIEWS ON SUFFERING

Yoruba traditional believers and Christians both recognize the presence of suffering as reality. What are some areas of similarities between these two religious traditions? Firstly, Yoruba traditional religionists and Yoruba adherents of Christianity share much common ground: success is seen as a sign of divine favor and suffering as a punishment to bring the sufferer back again to a proper relationship with God.<sup>165</sup> For instance, the Yoruba traditional religion believes that pain and suffering are a form of punishment for sin or wrongdoing. Actions, such as violating taboos and social norms, are believed to cause ancestors to curse the living through illnesses and hardships. Individuals found guilty of major ethical or legal violations in the Yoruba faith are often forced to undergo rituals as a means of purification and transformation. On their side, Yoruba Christian tradition believes also that suffering is a result of mankind's

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<sup>165</sup> J. D. Y Peel, *Christianity, Islam, and Orisa Religion, Three Traditions in Comparison and Interaction*, (University of California Press, 2016), 49.



erroneous actions and disobedience to biblical commands. Suffering is commonly associated with divine punishment for sin.<sup>166</sup>

Secondly, the cause of suffering in the views of both traditions is predominantly attributed to Satan. Some scholars of African/Yoruba religion have argued that “Esu”<sup>167</sup> translated as Satan is not totally responsible for human suffering. According to Dopamu, “It is true that Esu possesses many Satan’s qualities in having influence over the world of men and women, in his domination of lives of many people, and in his desire to do evil, to bring evil, to act evil, to cause evil, to instigate evil, to behave evil, to encourage evil.”<sup>168</sup> He however concludes that the Yoruba do not have an all-evil being to which one can wholly attribute evil, pain, and suffering.

Thirdly, common to both traditions is the mediator between God and man. Both religions believe in the existence of an intermediary who communicates with God on behalf of mankind<sup>169</sup>. For the Yoruba traditional religion, the various divinities act as mediators between God and suffering humans. It is also believed that ancestral beings who died in previous generations can act as intermediaries between their living descendants and these divinities. On the other side, Yoruba Christianity believed in the mediatory role of Christ, who identified himself with those suffering in his life.

Fourthly, in responding to the experience of suffering, both the Yoruba traditional religion and Christianity engage in prayer rituals of many kinds in order to seek relief from the hardship of suffering. It has been established earlier in section 2.4 of this thesis that Yoruba traditional religion engages and believes in the efficacy of prayers, therefore prayer is used for attracting benevolent spirits and dispelling malevolent spirits responsible for certain kinds of suffering.

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<sup>166</sup> See 2.21 above (Waliggo, 165-6).

<sup>167</sup> Esu is a proper name for a Yoruba god of justice. Sometimes it is wrongly translated as “the devil” or “Satan”. The Yoruba god, Esu, however, is neither of these. He is a deity without any relation with either the devil or Satan in the Christian or Islamic religion. Babalola Balogun, “Ibi: An Examination of the Yoruba Traditional Existentialist Conception of Evil” in *Thought and Practice: A Journal of the Philosophical Association of Kenya (PAK) New Series*, Vol.6 No.2, December 2014, pp.55-73

<sup>168</sup> P. A Dopamu, *Esu: the Invisible Foe of Man*, (Ijebu-Ode: Shebiotimo Publications, 2000), 42.

<sup>169</sup> See section 2.11.

Similarly, Yoruba Christians also practice prayers especially imprecatory prayers in order to defeat the enemies or evil spirits (agents) responsible for the suffering.<sup>170</sup>

Lastly, closely linked to prayer is exorcism which both religious traditions practice, which is a means of casting out the sickness, attack of the spirit of death, the spirit of poverty, the spirit of barrenness, and the spirit of retrogression from the suffering individual. In Yoruba traditional religion, once the person suffering existential problem consults an “Ifa” priest and the cause of the suffering is established by divination then some rituals are prescribed in terms of placatory sacrifice, incantation, medication, adjuration, homeopathic magic, and various forms of rituals and taboos”<sup>171</sup> in order to ameliorate the suffering experience.<sup>172</sup> On the other side, Yoruba Christians through Yoruba Indigenous Churches practice exorcism. It is commonly believed that some sufferings are linked to wicked ancestral spirits, and some strange wicked spirits are cast out of Christians to break the spiritual connection between the sufferer and the evil spirits. Once this is done, the person is released from the bondage of suffering.

#### 4.2 COMPARATIVE APPRAISAL OF SUFFERING MOTIVES TO CHRISTOLOGICAL SUFFERING AND LEARNING OBEDIENCE IN HEBREWS 5:1-10

In this section, I want to compare the various subjects and topics that came up in the previous section on existential suffering from both Yoruba religious and Christian traditions to Christ -the high priest and the Son of God, who learn obedience through the things he suffered in the Epistle to the Hebrews 5:1-10. I will also show how different conversation groups and partners adopt different positions, and then draw my conclusion.

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<sup>170</sup> See section 2.14.

<sup>171</sup> Andrew Olu. Igenoza, “Exorcism in the Ministry of Jesus and Demonology in the African Context”, in S.O Abogunrin et al (eds.), *Biblical Healing in African Context*, Ibadan: The Nigerian Association for Biblical Studies., 2004, 146.

<sup>172</sup> See section 2.12

A review of the structure of Hebrews 5:1-10 will be necessary before proceeding to the comparison as a reminder and setting for this conversation. First, in Heb 5:1-4 the author explains that a high priest mediates between the people and God with sacrifices; he expounds on this with three criteria for the high priest:

(i) He must be gentle with the ignorant and wayward because he himself is subject to weakness (Heb 5:2);

(ii) He must offer sacrifice for his own sins and for those of the people (Heb 5:3); and

(iii) He takes office by the call of God, not on his own initiative (Heb 5:4).

The author then proceeds in a chiastic or reverse order manner in Heb 5:5-10 to show how Jesus meets these three criteria. This will be done in reverse order:

**Third criterion:** He takes office by the call of God, not on his own initiative (Heb 5:4).

In Heb 5:5-6, the author shows that God installed Jesus as a high priest thus fulfilling the third criterion by appealing to statements of divine oath in Scripture. The author previously read Ps 2:7 and Ps 110:1 together in Heb 1:5-14. He now returns to Ps 2:7, interpreted in Hebrews as a statement addressed to the Son, and reads with it Ps 110:4, here understood as bestowing a priesthood on the figure addressed in Ps 110:1 and Ps 2:7.<sup>49</sup> Though only the words of God in Ps 110:4 are quoted, omitting the narrative remarks found in the psalm, the author of Hebrews can construe this statement as a divine appointment because it clearly is God's eternal oath in its original context.

**Second criterion:** He must offer sacrifice for his own sins and for those of the people (Heb 5:3).

The second criterion is presented as fulfilled in Heb 5:9, where one reads that Jesus himself becomes the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him, that is, he offers the sacrifice of himself. As is stressed later in the book, no sacrifice need be made on his own behalf, clearly distinguishing Jesus from Levitical priests.

**First criteria:** He must be able to be gentle with the ignorant and wayward because he himself is subject to weakness (Heb 5:2)

Finally, the first criterion is affirmed for Jesus in Heb 5:8-9. Jesus is said to have learned obedience through his sufferings, echoing the assertion in Heb 4:15 (and foreshadowed in Heb 2:5-18) about the significance of his experience of the human plight. This experience has prepared him to be sympathetic toward the people, and in this way, he has been made perfect, or prepared, for his role of priestly intercession. I will now discuss the comparative analysis in the following section. How does the conversation in Hebrews 5 address the suffering themes or topics that came from both Yoruba religious tradition and the Christian faith's understanding of suffering? Some of the issues raised are critical to this thesis and if well understood will effect a paradigm shift in our sensitivity to the reason, purpose, and meaning of Christian suffering. These common themes are;

#### 4.21. IDENTITY

The first subject of comparison is identity as observed in the reading of Hebrews 5. The first condition that Christ fulfilled was his ability to identify with the weakness and frailty of the people he represent before God (5:2, 8-9). Christ identified with humanity as mentioned earlier in chapter 3 of this thesis<sup>173</sup> but how did the addressees of this epistle identify with Christ in comparison to Yoruba Christians? The author of the letter to the Hebrews ascertains Christ as the high priest who was ordained by God, and a suffering priest. The Messiah suffered to identify with the weakness of the people he represented in the courtroom of God and became obedient through suffering to save humanity. Young argues that in a sense, the sanctifier and the sanctified are united in a shared humanity and a shared experience of suffering, and Jesus' own experience

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<sup>173</sup> See section 3.2

of suffering and testing qualified him to be a gracious priestly intermediary to those who themselves were experiencing suffering.<sup>174</sup>

Yoruba Christianity identifies Christ as the central focus of their faith, and can easily accept the truth of Christ's suffering. Onaiyekan affirms that poor illiterates, and suffering Yoruba Christians have orally expressed the most profound Christological insights demonstrating their deep faith in Christ.<sup>175</sup> One can see evidently, believers can follow Christ in their extreme suffering condition, since Christ suffered and endured it, they are also willing to participate in suffering like Christ and endure it. Christ has become our example in enduring suffering.

C. A. Aigbadumah, quoted Stanley M. Burgess, Grey B. Mcger, and Patrick Alexander "that the two foci of the Christian gospel resolve into two interwoven questions; who is Jesus? And what was the meaning or accomplishment of His life? How any religious group thinks about Jesus of Nazareth and responds to the evangelical (i.e., "gospel"), bearing questions about his identity and significance tells us much about the group as it does about Jesus."<sup>176</sup> Deji Ayegboyin, a scholar in Christian History and former President of the Nigerian Baptist Theological Seminary, Ogbomoso asserts that a consideration of Aladura<sup>177</sup> Christology shows that these churches established across many parts of the Yorubaland have responded to the revelation of the person of Jesus in unique ways that are pragmatic, functional, and contextual, reflecting their own understanding and experience of the "one who went about doing good" (Acts 10:38).<sup>178</sup> For the Yoruba Christians including the Aladura churches, Christ in his suffering, leading to the cross and eventual death identify with their weaknesses and existential sufferings and concretely takes steps to help mitigate and lightens their sufferings. This stance is grounded in the truth expressed

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<sup>174</sup> Young, "Suffering: A Key to the Epistle to the Hebrews", 54.

<sup>175</sup> Onaiyekan, "Christological Trends," 358.

<sup>176</sup> C. A. Aigbadumah, "Jesus the Healer: A Theological Reflection on the Role of Christology in the Growth of the Mountain of Fire and Miracles Church in Nigeria," (PhD-Thesis – Research external, graduation internal, Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam, 2011), 150.

<sup>177</sup> See section 2.4.

<sup>178</sup> D. Ayegboyin, "L'Oruko Jesu: Aladura Grass-Roots Christology," *Journal of African Christian Thought*, Vol.8, 1, June 2005, 11- 21.

in the exhortation of the Hebrews author to the addressees “He is able to deal gently with those who are ignorant and are going astray since he himself is subject to weakness” (Heb. 5:2). The concept of identity is closely attached to the readers’ experience in their identity with Jesus. Therefore, Yoruba believers are united with Jesus through His suffering and resurrection. Because He suffered, Yoruba believers could look to Jesus and be encouraged because He has been presented as superior over the prophets (1:1-3), angels (1:4-2:18), Moses (3:1-6), and the priesthood (4:14-7:28). He is the Mediator of the new and better covenant (8:10-18), and has identified Himself with them.

On the other hand, the Yoruba religious tradition claims that the divinities who assist Olodumare in running the affairs of humans play a mediatory role which is not the same as identifying with the weakness and frailty of the people in suffering. For instance, Benson Ohihon Igboin, a scholar in Religion argues that the Yoruba traditional “Esu” is the inspector general of rituals is a universal belief; that he blesses and also punishes is undeniable.<sup>179</sup> That he is feared by both humanity and other deities of his category is an established belief. It is my submission that the mediatory role of divinities in Yoruba tradition plays no part in identifying with the plights of those who are justly or unjustly experiencing suffering, hence the awe and fear Yoruba accord him as alluded to in this thesis elsewhere. Christians identifying with Christ in his suffering can also identify with him in his resurrection in eternity.

#### 4.22. HONOR AND SHAME

The honor theme surfaces in Heb 5:4 “and no man takes this honor to himself, but he who is called by God just as Aaron was” and in the suffering experiences of the addressees. How did Jesus deal with the challenge of honor and shame given the fact that as Son, he has to learn obedience through suffering? This comparative topic focuses on how the community or others

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<sup>179</sup> Benson Ohihon Igboin, “Olodumare and Esu in Yorubá Religious Thought” *Yoruba Studies Review* (2021), 223. <https://www.semanticscholar.org/paper/Olo%CC%81dumare-and-Esu-in-Yoruba%CC%81-Religious-Thought-Igboin/0a12ae6fa76a6bc3c05ff8873d6494283b04a323>. Accessed on 23-6-2023

see the person suffering or the self-image of the person in a situation of suffering in relation to learning obedience. David deSilva in his work “Despising Shame: Honor Discourse and Community Maintenance in the Epistle to the Hebrews” mentions that:

Williams provides material useful as a corrective for another central tenet of Malina’s construction of first-century Mediterranean reality: personality was essentially dyadic rather than individualistic. This view of human personality is taken to be a correlate of an honor/shame culture. According to this model, Mediterranean people are “other-oriented people who depend on others to provide them with a sense of who they are.” Thus Jesus’ questions in Matt 16:13 and 15 are viewed as sincere attempts on the part of Jesus to formulate his identity based on the feedback of significant others. The concern of these people “was how others thought of them (honor), not how they thought of themselves (guilt).”<sup>180</sup>

This view is also held by Yoruba Christians especially as it relates to situations of suffering. For instance, in the case of barrenness, the suffering believer’s (feeling shame) situation is authenticated by women within the church or community who have children (honor).

In Yoruba tradition, there is an interdependent relationship between the person suffering and the enemy. Abimbola Adedokun in his article “I Am Hated, Therefore I Am: The Enemy in Yoruba Imaginary” argues that the Yoruba sense of self depends on the existence of an antagonizing other, a causal agent of suffering, whose hatred is vital for their self-perception. For example, a Yoruba proverb likens a woman with children to an enemy of a barren woman, just as a hard-working person is the enemy of a lazy one (abiyamo, òtá àgàn; sísésísé, òtá òlẹ). In this context, the identity of a person is intertwined with that of another.<sup>181</sup>

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<sup>180</sup> David Arthur deSilva, *Despising Shame: Honor Discourse and Community Maintenance in the Epistle to the Hebrews*, (Society of Biblical Literature, Atlanta, 2008), 23.

<sup>181</sup> Abimbola Adedokun, “I Am Hated, Therefore I Am: The Enemy in Yoruba Imaginary,” in *Yoruba Studies Review*, (Volume 3, No. 1, (2018), 214. <https://doi.org/10.32473/ysr.v3i1.129928>

The important lesson from this theme of honor and shame is seen first in the fact that it is God who bestows honor – no one but he who calls. Second, honor can be achieved through suffering if we remain faithful to God.

#### 4.23. PRAYER

The next comparative topic is seen in Heb 5:7 “Who in the days of his flesh ... offered up prayers and supplication .... With cries and tears to Him who was able to save him from death, and he was heard because of his godly fear.” I here consider prayer as a theme in suffering and Jesus exemplifies this by offering up prayer, appealing to God to save him. It has been established elsewhere in this thesis<sup>182</sup> that he did not offer prayer to escape the anguish of pains and suffering of death on the cross rather it was a supplication to be saved from death after dying. The author of the Epistle to the Hebrews and the Yoruba Christian theology perceive prayer as a tool for seeking divine intervention from the excruciating pains caused by suffering experienced by Christ and Christians as well. However, according to the author of Hebrews Christ’s prayer was not seeking to escape death but rather to overcome him who has the power of death.<sup>183</sup>

David Adamo, a scholar of religion and theology, examined modern-day Christianity’s treatment of the enemy in rituals of prayers in situations of suffering.<sup>184</sup> In Nigeria, imprecatory (invocation of a curse upon the agent of the suffering) prayers have become a fixture in many Aladura churches founded predominantly for the Yoruba Christians but Mountain of Fire and Miracles Ministries (MFM) took it up several notches higher by building their spiritual energy and industry around the enemy (causative agent of suffering) and their desire for victory over them. In one of the many anecdotes Pastor Daniel Olukoya (General Overseer) shared about the enemy attacking the Christians, he gives a somewhat detailed picture of how the enemy operates against the Christians this way; “A brother once had a serious problem leading to suffering. Everything

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<sup>182</sup> See section 3.2

<sup>183</sup> Reference to exegesis in chapter 3.

<sup>184</sup> David Adamo, “Decolonizing Psalm 91 in an African perspective with special reference to the culture of the Yoruba people of Nigeria,” *Old Testament Essays*, 25, no. 1, (2012), 9-26.



turned upside down in his life and he did not know what to do about the situation. He became confused and tired of living. However, God gave him a revelation after a session of aggressive prayer warfare. The Lord took him to a graveyard in his dream. An angel of God led him to a particular grave and smote it three times and asked the occupier of the grave to come out and hand over what he took from the brother when she was alive. The woman obeyed. That was how the brother collected his virtue from the wicked woman, which was as good as forgotten. This brother's example shows that you can recover your blessings from the grave even if the person that stole it died years ago (Olukoya)."<sup>185</sup>

Evidently, prayer patterns in both the Yoruba Indigenous Churches and Indigenous Pentecostal Churches have taken the dangerous form of imprecation without recourse to the divine purpose in suffering situations. Many Yoruba Christians have been disappointed because their prayers were not answered as against the promise by Pentecostal pastors as their suffering situation persists unabated. Biblically and theologically sound teachings were not taught instead their energy was directed toward prayers alone. Prayer is the biblical way of making our requests and anguish and suffering known to God, and Christians need to pray according to biblical patterns. Jesus' example of prayer did not seek to destroy his enemies but to do the will of God.

#### 4.24. OBEDIENCE

Obedience is another topic or subject from the discussion of suffering as experienced by Jesus in Heb 5:8. Obedience is a due consideration of, a ready compliance with authoritative commands.<sup>186</sup> The Son "learned obedience" from the things which He suffered, and having been made faultless, He became to all those obeying Him the source of eternal salvation." He exercised the "obedience of faith" in receptivity to God's activity in him for every moment in time for 33 years, "without sin" (4:15).<sup>187</sup> Furthermore, the Christian recipients must continue to "listen

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<sup>185</sup> Adalakun, "I Am Hated", 224. <https://doi.org/10.32473/ysr.v3i1.129928>

<sup>186</sup> Owen, *Hebrews*, 522.

<sup>187</sup> James A. Fowler, *Hebrews: A Commentary*, 155.

under” (Greek word *hupakouo*) the Lord Jesus in the dependence of submission in order to continue to be receptive to the dynamic activity of the Savior in faith. But let it be noted that Christ’s obedience (5:8) allows for, and becomes the basis of, the Christian’s obedience.<sup>188</sup> The living, saving “Obedient One,” Jesus Christ, lives in the Christian individual, providing everything necessary for the Christian to “listen under” and respond in the “obedient faith” in order to allow the indwelling Christ to live out His life in them (cf. 10:7-18).<sup>189</sup> On the side of Yoruba traditional religion, obedience is vital to adherents they will live a good life and secure the blessings of the deities. It has been pointed out that hardship and suffering are the result of disobedience to perform ritual requirements and worship of ancestral spirits.<sup>190</sup>

#### 4.25 LEARNING/EDUCATIVE

In Hebrews 5:8 the author mentions the topic of “learning” obedience through suffering. The question here is: what is the educational value of obedience through suffering? What did Christ learn through the suffering he went through in his life in the flesh? Moreover, what educational value did addressees learn through their suffering? In like manner, what is the educational value of suffering that Yoruba Christians have in their daily life experiences?

Jesus learns in his humanity however, his divinity has no need to learn since he knows all things. Christ was presented as one who “in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin” (4:15). His learning obedience through what he suffered was not correction of his misdirection, err, or muff but rather the arena in which his development was enabled argues Talbert.<sup>191</sup> Owen agrees but further categorized learning in three ways; first, to learn materially means acquiring the knowledge of our duty, and realizing what is required of us, which we might not have known or properly considered before. The psalmist illustrates this, recounting how affliction led him to understand and embrace God’s will and the necessary diligence in fulfilling it (Ps. 119:67).

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<sup>188</sup> James A. Fowler, *Hebrews: A Commentary*, 156.

<sup>189</sup> James A. Fowler, *Hebrews: A Commentary*, 156.

<sup>190</sup> See section 2.2

<sup>191</sup> Talbert, *Learning Through Suffering*, 73.

However, Jesus, being divine, did not have to learn obedience as he already knew and understood the entirety of his mission and God's commands. All of it was ingrained in his heart, and no divine directive was unfamiliar or forgotten to him. Second, to learn formally means being guided, instructed, directed, and helped in carrying out the required acts of obedience. We, as imperfect individuals, gradually acquire this wisdom through the teachings of the Word and the refining process of afflictions, as God deems fit. However, unlike us, the Lord Christ did not and could not learn obedience in the same way. He possessed an inherent fullness of grace, truth, and wisdom, which constantly inclined, directed, and enabled him to fulfill all acts of obedience flawlessly. His readiness of will and mind for obedience was always perfect, never lacking. And lastly, to learn by experience means knowing by suffering it in action, just as Christ "tasted death" by undergoing it, gaining an actual understanding of its essence. This specific obedience refers to willingly enduring great, difficult, and terrible trials with patience, endurance, and faith for deliverance. Only by suffering and exercising these graces could he truly experience such obedience, especially in circumstances like his own. This experiential learning is vital and comforting for us because if he had merely known obedience theoretically, it would not have brought us the same compassion or empathy.<sup>192</sup>

On the other hand, Christian learning is said to be educated/disciplined (12:5-6 – *kurios paideuei*) by God through what they suffer. Talbert opines that Christians are understood as children whose misdirection is corrected by the pain of suffering, therefore in this sense, their suffering is educational.<sup>193</sup>

#### 4.26 SPIRITUAL FORMATION

In this comparative topic, I will examine the formational development impact of suffering on the life of the suffering Christ and that of Yoruba Christians. As earlier stated, suffering was the

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<sup>192</sup> Owen, *Hebrews*, 524

<sup>193</sup> Talbert, *Learning Through Suffering*, 73.

arena through which Christ's development was enabled and therefore learned obedience. What is the relationship between suffering and obedience in the case of Christ learning obedience through what he suffered?

Throughout his life, Jesus endured a wide range of sufferings, as mentioned elsewhere. Through these experiences, he gained a firsthand understanding of obedience. Sufferings themselves are not inherently instructive, but believers can learn from them objectively and occasionally. External circumstances can be misused or utilized for a positive purpose. Christ learned obedience from his sufferings because they gave him a chance to practice spiritual qualities like humility, self-denial, meekness, patience, and faith. These spiritual qualities were always a part of his nature, but he could only fully develop and demonstrate them only through the experiences of suffering.<sup>194</sup>

On the other hand, Yoruba Christians use the occasion of suffering to practice and engage in spiritual warfare, exorcism, and deliverance prayers<sup>195</sup> rather than making it a special opportunity to develop qualities for spiritual formation and discipline such as humility, self-denial, meekness, patience, and faith. Jesus, too, learned obedience through his sufferings, which provided the occasion to manifest these virtues that were inherent in his holy nature but required situations of suffering to be exercised fully.

#### 4.27 SALVATION

Lastly, the theme of salvation was discussed in section 2.4 and we see this in Hebrews 5:9 that the suffering and obedience of Jesus achieved a salvific purpose for those who obey him. Therefore, Heb 5:9 supposedly could mean Jesus is the author of eternal salvation to all who believe in Him through his obedient suffering of persecution and death.

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<sup>194</sup> Owen, *Hebrews*, 525.

<sup>195</sup> See section 2.11

Owen affirms the salvific nature of Christ's obedient suffering by making reference to what was effected and the special design of God for man.<sup>196</sup> There appeared to be two things God aimed at and accomplished in the suffering of Christ; 1) that Christ might be “made perfect”, and 2) with respect to believers, that Christ might be to them the “author of eternal salvation.”<sup>197</sup>

Evidently, suffering has redeemable implications both for now and the future. This distinguishes Christ suffering from the nature of Christian's suffering.

On the side of the Yoruba traditional faith, suffering for them has no salvific effect. The Christian faith however has hope of being redeemed from the pangs of pain and suffering at the resurrection of the saints of Christ if they remain steadfast and endure the suffering and persecution that face them.

#### 4.3 WHAT CAN YORUBA CHRISTIANS LEARN IN RELATION TO LEARNING OBEDIENCE THROUGH SUFFERING FROM HEBREWS 5:1-10?

In this section I shall seek to answer the question; “what can suffering Yoruba Christians and Pentecostal leaders learn from the reading of the Letter to the Hebrews 5:1-10 pericope?”

The following lessons can be drawn from the Epistle to the Hebrews as encouragement and warnings to individual Yoruba Christians in circumstances of pain, and suffering at existential levels and pastoral leadership of Pentecostal churches:

1. Yoruba Christians should remain faithful to Christ in their suffering: The writer of Hebrews used past events as a strong warning that the Jewish Christian audience does not fall into the danger of apostasy. Matthew Thiessen in his article argues rightly that the readers’ present situation is an extension of Israel’s wilderness period.<sup>198</sup> The readers

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<sup>196</sup> Owen, *Hebrews*, 531.

<sup>197</sup> Owen, *Hebrews*, 531.

<sup>198</sup> Matthew Thiessen, “Hebrews and the End of the Exodus.” *Novum Testamentum* 49, no. 4 (2007): 353–69. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25442571> Accessed on 17-7-2023.

are at the doorstep of the land of rest; thus, they should manifest endurance and faithfulness. Yoruba Christians today, amidst suffering, should view their experiences as part of Israel's historical continuity and proof that they are God's children, entitled to the long-awaited promise.

2. Yoruba Christians should focus on the suffering-reward experience: Scott Cunningham in his book "Through many tribulations: The theology of Persecution in Luke-Acts" found that persecution in Luke and Acts provides evidence of Christians being legitimate heirs of God's blessings.<sup>199</sup> The book of Hebrews similarly presents a consistent suffering-reward motif. The Epistle to the Hebrews frequently connects suffering with future reward. Christ's obedience through suffering (5:8) and eventual death crowned him with glory and honor (2:9), and he destroyed him who has the power of death (2:14), he is able to release those who are in bondage (2:15) and has become the author of eternal salvation to those who obey him (5:9). Evidently, Yoruba Christians through obedience and suffering, may enter the eschatological rest promised to God's people (4:9; 10:36). They have a better and an enduring possession in heaven (10:34) and a great reward (10:35). Though they endure hardships on earth, God has prepared for them a city whose builder and foundation is God (10:10, 16). Their present sufferings assure them that they are the sons and daughters of God, and by enduring the chastisement of God, their suffering will yield the peaceable fruit of righteousness (12:11).
3. Yoruba Christians should seek spiritual development through suffering: Sonship does not exempt from suffering, hence Christ as Son did not escape suffering. Furthermore, suffering does not mar sonship, but rather disobedience. Christ as the Son learned obedience through suffering in order that all the inherent graces in him could be

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<sup>199</sup> Scott Cunningham, *Through Many Tribulations: The Theology of Persecution in Luke-Acts*, Journal for the Study of the New Testament, (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1997), 337-8.

developed toward fulfilling divine purpose and glorifying the Father. Yoruba Christians experiencing adversities should identify with Christ and emulate him by learning the spiritual value of suffering through the development of the Christian virtues stipulated in the Scripture. When our suffering lingers it must be because there is still room for our growth toward God through the situation.

4. Yoruba Christians should use prayer to seek the will of God in obedience through suffering rather than a means of imprecation and escape: Christ's prayer is a model for Yoruba Christians in situations of suffering. However, contemporary Pentecostals' practice of prayer is based primarily on dislodging the enemy, breaking the yoke of bondages such as barrenness, poverty, illnesses, and the spirit of death. The emphasis is not on making Yoruba Christians acquainted with the person of Jesus Christ or growing towards Christ-likeness.<sup>200</sup>
5. Suffering has redemptive and redeemable power. Our suffering may linger for a while here but not too long we shall be fully redeemed from the power of the suffering.

Imprecatory prayer, “an invocation of judgment, calamity, or curse uttered against one’s enemies, or the enemies of God”<sup>201</sup> is also very common with Yoruba Christians who are suffering and believe that many times a human enemy is responsible for their predicaments.<sup>202</sup>

In this chapter, I have examined the similarities and differences between learning obedience through suffering in the Epistle to the Hebrews and the Yoruba Christians’ ideas setting Christ as our example of a suffering high priest who shared in our humanity’s weakness and died for our salvation. Believers who obey him by remaining faithful to him in their experiencing of pains and suffering on this earth have the promise to share in his glory also in the eschaton. Suffering,

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<sup>200</sup> Aigbadumah, “Jesus the Healer”, 70-1.

<sup>201</sup> Carl Laney, “A Fresh Look at the Imprecatory Psalms,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 138 (Jan-Mar, 1981): 35-6. <https://www.semanticscholar.org/paper/A-Fresh-Look-at-the-Imprecatory-Psalms-Laney/9745acbe42b1402827b82438da0b1b8a761dd4af?sort=relevance&pdf=true>. Accessed on 16-7-2023.

<sup>202</sup> See 4.23 above.

therefore, serves as a growth therapy and a preventative measure against spiritual weakness and falling away, motivating believers to endure and remain faithful, while also increasing their anticipation of the promised future reward. Thus, Yoruba Christians should maintain a positive outlook amid their suffering.



## CHAPTER 5

### 5.0 CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

#### 5.1 CONCLUSION

In this final chapter, I will draw conclusions limited to this thesis's findings from previous chapters. In this thesis, I have attempted to investigate the prevailing Yoruba traditional religion and Christian view on suffering cum suffering-free gospel from existential hardships among Yoruba Christians to biblical and Christological learning of obedience through suffering in the Epistle to the Hebrews 5:1-10. In doing this, I have investigated the meaning and nature of suffering experienced by Yoruba Christians, the causes or factors responsible through the lens of Yoruba culture mixed with limited Yoruba traditional religion, and the Yoruba Christian's responses to these sufferings.

While it is clear from the creation narrative that God is not the author of suffering, there is evidence he does transform the problem by giving it an edifying purpose. James A. Saunders is cited in Jos Luyten's work as providing eight answers to the problem of suffering, however, three are of interest to this work; disciplinary, mysterious, and eschatological.<sup>203</sup>

Sensitivity to learning obedience to God in the midst of suffering and threatening death as exemplified by Christ can help our understanding of how Christ and first-century Christians gave meaning to their experiences of suffering for being Christian. Myriam Klinker-De Klerck, a Dutch reformed scholar of the New Testament argues for the positive meaning attributed to suffering in most of the New Testament texts is contextual.<sup>204</sup> Research on the topic of Christian suffering points out that some New Testament texts, without denying the painfulness of Christian suffering, offer a positive interpretation of it. Epistle to the Hebrews points to the graces that

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<sup>203</sup> Jos Luyten, "Perspectives on Human Suffering in the Old Testament" in *God and Human Suffering*, ed. Jan Lambrecht and Raymond F. Collins, (Louvain, Belgium: Peeters Press, 1990), 2.

<sup>204</sup> Myriam Klinker-De Klerck, "Suffering in the New Testament from a perspective of honor and shame" in Conference Paper, Amsterdam New Testament Research Colloquium on the 18th of May 2018. (Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam), May 2018, 9.

accrued to Christ in suffering, therein learned obedience and became the author of eternal salvation to all who obey him. The positive meaning attributed to suffering for Christians consists in certain functions or goals it can fulfill: it can educate, strengthen fellowship, establish or reinforce communion with Christ, and proclaim the gospel.

In conclusion, since Yoruba believers cannot be separated from their worldview influenced by their cultural background the link between the Christian faith and the Yoruba traditional religion should be redefined to appreciate the reasons, and purpose of suffering.

## 5.2 RECOMMENDATION

This work has advocated for a more sensitive and transformational Christological response to issues of suffering covering identity, prayer, spiritual formation, obedience, and salvation. However, there are still areas of suffering that can be worked on such as suffering due to persecution which is prevalent in northern Nigeria. I recommend looking into the suffering of persecuted Christians in northern Nigeria.

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