

Unravelling Asaph's Puzzle: A Socio-Rhetorical Reading of Psalm 73 on the Prosperity of the Wicked and Its Relevance for Nigerian Society

Matthew Vanen Chiangi PhD

Department of Religion and Philosophy University of Mkar, Mkar

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ABSTRACT

This article employs socio-rhetorical criticism to provide a contextual reading of Psalm 73, a theological and existential reflection on the apparent prosperity of the wicked. Attributed to Asaph, the psalm traces the psalmist's movement from envy, doubt, and a near collapse of faith to renewed confidence in God's justice following his encounter with God in the sanctuary. The study argues that Psalm 73 provides a significant theological resource for engaging contemporary Nigerian realities, particularly systemic corruption, the ostentatious display of ill-gotten wealth, distortions of prosperity theology, and the marginalisation of the righteous and the poor. By examining the psalm's inner, intertexture, social and cultural, ideological, and sacred textures, the study demonstrates how personal crisis, communal perceptions of prosperity, and theological conviction interact within the psalm's rhetoric. Rather than equating Asaph's experience with contemporary Nigerian realities, the article establishes a hermeneutical bridge through which the psalm's theological and rhetorical dynamics illuminate analogous experiences of injustice and moral disorientation in Nigeria. It proposes a Christian response characterised by Reformed public theology, ethical resistance to corruption, and pastoral engagement with disillusioned believers. The article contributes to biblical scholarship by demonstrating the usefulness of socio-rhetorical criticism for contextual exegesis and to Nigerian contextual theology by showing how Psalm 73 can function as a theological resource for confronting injustice while sustaining faith, moral integrity, and responsible Christian engagement in society.

Keywords: Psalm 73, Socio-rhetorical criticism, Prosperity theology, Asaph, Divine justice.

INTRODUCTION:

The Human Quest for Justice

The human quest for justice is a fundamental and universal concern. Across religious and philosophical traditions, there is a deeply rooted expectation that good should be rewarded and evil punished. Within the Judeo-Christian tradition, this expectation is closely associated with the character of God as just and sovereign. The apparent contradiction between this theological conviction and human experience, however, poses a persistent challenge to faith: the wicked often prosper while the righteous suffer. Such disparity can generate profound theological and existential questions concerning the justice of God and the moral order of the world.

The tension between divine justice and the apparent prosperity of the wicked is one of the enduring problems addressed in religious thought and is closely related to the problem of theodicy. The Book of Psalms gives this struggle a particularly personal and emotive expression through its collection of prayers, laments, praises, and reflections on human experience before God. Psalm 73 is a significant example. Rather than presenting an abstract theological argument, the psalm offers an intensely personal account of the psalmist's struggle with the apparent success of the wicked. The psalmist observes the arrogant and ungodly enjoying prosperity, security, and freedom from the troubles experienced by others, while he himself suffers despite his commitment to purity and faithfulness. His confession, "Surely in vain I have kept my heart pure" (Ps. 73:13, NIV), poignantly expresses the depth of his crisis. Yet the psalm does not end in despair. The psalmist's encounter with God in

the sanctuary becomes a decisive moment of reorientation, through which he gains a renewed understanding of the destiny of the wicked, the value of faithfulness, and the nature of true prosperity.

The tension depicted in Psalm 73 has significant points of contact with contemporary Nigerian society. Nigeria possesses substantial human and natural resources, yet the country continues to grapple with corruption, economic inequality, poverty, insecurity, and inadequate public services. The conspicuous display of wealth, including wealth acquired through questionable or illicit means, often exists alongside widespread socioeconomic hardship. Adebani and Obadare (2013), among others, draw attention to the complex relationship between corruption, power, and public life in Nigeria. These realities provide a contemporary setting in which the theological problem articulated by the psalmist remains intelligible: why do individuals who engage in corrupt or unjust practices appear to prosper while honest citizens struggle to meet their basic needs? This similarity should not be understood as a direct equivalence between Asaph's historical circumstances and contemporary Nigeria. Rather, Psalm 73 provides theological and rhetorical categories through which analogous experiences of injustice, inequality, and moral disorientation may be examined.

The dilemma is further complicated by strands of contemporary prosperity theology that associate material abundance with divine blessing and, conversely, may interpret poverty or material deprivation as evidence of inadequate faith, spiritual failure, or demonic influence (Gifford, 2004; Ukah, 2008). When such interpretations are applied uncritically, they risk legitimising the wealth of individuals whose prosperity may have been acquired through corrupt or exploitative practices while placing disproportionate responsibility for poverty upon those who suffer it. Such interpretations can therefore intensify rather than resolve the crisis of faith experienced by believers who observe a persistent disparity between righteousness and material success. Psalm 73 offers a significant corrective because its rhetoric refuses to make present material circumstances the final measure of divine favour, righteousness, or human flourishing.

Although Psalm 73 has received considerable attention in biblical scholarship, there remains a need for contextual readings that bring its theological reflection on prosperity, suffering, justice, and faith into sustained dialogue with contemporary Nigerian realities. In particular, greater attention is needed to how the psalm's rhetorical movement from perplexity and envy to renewed perspective and trust in God can challenge contemporary assumptions that equate material prosperity with divine approval. A socio-rhetorical reading is especially appropriate because it enables the text to be examined not only as a personal expression of faith but also in relation to its inner texture, intertexture, social and cultural, ideological, and sacred dimensions. Such an approach makes it possible to consider how the psalm's rhetoric addresses both the internal crisis of the worshipper and wider social assumptions concerning prosperity, righteousness, and divine justice.

Therefore, this article addresses this gap through a socio-rhetorical reading of Psalm 73 and an exploration of its relevance for Nigerian society. It argues that the psalm provides theological and rhetorical resources for critically engaging the apparent prosperity of the wicked, resisting the tendency to equate wealth with divine favour, affirming confidence in God's justice, and sustaining faithful ethical action amid social inequality and corruption. The article does not claim that Psalm 73 offers a direct solution to Nigeria's complex structural problems. Rather, it identifies theological and ethical principles within the psalm that can inform Christian reflection and public engagement. The article therefore distinguishes between the theological claims of Psalm 73 and the constructive normative implications developed from those claims through a Reformed public-theological perspective. The latter provides the study's constructive theological response, encouraging ethical resistance to corruption, solidarity with the marginalised, and pastoral engagement with disillusioned believers.

By bringing Psalm 73 into critical conversation with the Nigerian context, the study demonstrates how the resolution of Asaph's "puzzle" can contribute to a more balanced Christian understanding of prosperity, suffering, justice, and faithful living.

Scope of the Article

The scope of this article is twofold. First, it offers a focused exegesis of Psalm 73 through the multi-layered approach of socio-rhetorical criticism, examining the text's inner texture, intertexture, social and cultural texture,

ideological texture, and sacred texture. This approach seeks to situate the psalm within its ancient context while also attending to the ways in which its theological message may be brought into dialogue with contemporary realities. Second, the article explores the relevance of Psalm 73 for contemporary Nigerian society, particularly in relation to corruption, socioeconomic inequality, the conspicuous display of ill-gotten wealth, prosperity theology, and the struggles of those who seek to live faithfully amid injustice.

The article therefore moves from the psalmist's crisis concerning the apparent prosperity of the wicked to the transformation of his perspective through his encounter with God in the sanctuary. It then considers how this movement from perplexity to renewed trust can provide theological and ethical resources for faith, resistance to injustice, and hope in the Nigerian context. While Psalm 73 has been examined from various historical-critical, literary, canonical, and theological perspectives, this study focuses specifically on how a socio-rhetorical reading can facilitate constructive dialogue between the psalm's ancient social and theological world and contemporary Nigerian realities. In doing so, it seeks to demonstrate that Psalm 73 can function as a significant theological resource for reflecting on justice, prosperity, suffering, and faithful living in contemporary Nigeria.

Research Methodology and Hermeneutical Framework

The primary methodological framework for this study is socio-rhetorical criticism, particularly as developed and elaborated by Vernon K. Robbins (1996, 2002). Socio-rhetorical criticism is an interdisciplinary hermeneutical approach that examines biblical texts as complex communicative phenomena embedded within literary, social, cultural, ideological, and theological contexts. Rather than reducing interpretation to a single dimension of the text, the approach attends to the multiple ways texts communicate meaning within their historical, social, and rhetorical contexts and how those meanings may be brought into dialogue with contemporary contexts.

This approach is particularly appropriate for Psalm 73 because the psalm combines personal experience with communal perceptions of justice, prosperity, suffering, and faithfulness. The psalmist's struggle is simultaneously psychological, social, moral, and theological. His crisis emerges from observing the apparent prosperity of the wicked and comparing it with his own experience of suffering and faithfulness. The resolution of the crisis, moreover, involves not merely an inward psychological adjustment but a transformed understanding of God, the destiny of the wicked, and the value of remaining faithful. Socio-rhetorical criticism therefore provides a framework for examining how these interconnected dimensions contribute to the psalm's overall rhetorical movement from crisis to renewed trust.

The analysis in this study focuses on five interrelated textures: inner texture, intertexture, social and cultural texture, ideological texture, and sacred texture (Robbins, 1996). These textures are not treated as isolated analytical categories; rather, each contributes to understanding how Psalm 73 constructs its argument and shapes the reader's perception of prosperity, suffering, justice, and faithfulness. Inner texture examines the psalm's literary and rhetorical features, including repetition, contrasts, progression, imagery, metaphor, questions, emotional expressions, and shifts in perspective. These features reveal how the psalmist's crisis is rhetorically constructed and how the movement from envy and doubt toward renewed faith is communicated. Intertexture examines the psalm's engagement with other texts, traditions, and scriptural motifs, helping to clarify how its theological claims participate in and extend broader biblical patterns concerning the righteous, the wicked, divine judgment, and trust in God. Social and cultural texture examines the social world reflected in the psalm, including perceptions of wealth, status, power, suffering, and communal expectations concerning the righteous and the wicked. This texture helps explain why the prosperity of the wicked constitutes such a serious challenge to the psalmist's faith and provides a basis for responsible dialogue with analogous social perceptions in contemporary Nigeria.

Ideological texture examines the competing assumptions and value systems embedded within the psalm. It is particularly useful for identifying the tension between the expectation that faithfulness to God should correspond with well-being and the observable reality that the wicked may prosper while the righteous suffer. This texture demonstrates how the psalm challenges a simplistic equation between material prosperity and divine approval and redirects attention toward God's justice and the ultimate destiny of the wicked. Sacred texture explores the psalm's theological dimension, particularly its understanding of God's presence, justice, guidance, judgment,

and covenantal faithfulness. It is especially significant for interpreting the sanctuary experience in verses 17–28, where the psalmist's perception of reality is transformed and his relationship with God becomes the basis for renewed confidence. Together, these textures illuminate not only what Psalm 73 says but also how its inner texture, intertexture, social and cultural, ideological, and sacred dimensions work together to produce its movement from perplexity to trust.

The study employs this framework through a close reading of Psalm 73 and then brings the results of the textual analysis into constructive dialogue with contemporary Nigerian realities. Existing scholarship has examined Psalm 73 from historical, literary, theological, and canonical perspectives (e.g., Brueggemann, 1984; Goldingay, 2007), while other studies have addressed corruption, prosperity theology, and social ethics within African and Nigerian contexts (e.g., Biwul, 2022; Amunnadi & Ezeugwu, 2019). However, there remains room for a sustained socio-rhetorical engagement with Psalm 73 that specifically considers how its treatment of prosperity, suffering, injustice, and faithfulness can illuminate contemporary Nigerian experience. This study therefore employs socio-rhetorical criticism not merely as a descriptive method but as an interpretive bridge between the ancient rhetorical and theological world of Psalm 73 and the social and ethical challenges confronting contemporary Nigerian society.

A Socio-Rhetorical Reading of Psalm 73 on the Prosperity of the Wicked

Psalm 73 has attracted considerable scholarly attention because of its combination of personal lament, wisdom reflection, and theological reflection on the apparent prosperity of the wicked. Biwul (2022) describes the psalm as possessing a twofold character: it is highly personal while also having a fundamentally communal dimension. Drawing on earlier scholarship, he situates Psalm 73 among texts that address the problem of evil, the suffering of the righteous, and the justice of God. The psalm presents the experience of a righteous individual who struggles to reconcile faith in God's justice with the apparent success of those who disregard God. Its extensive use of personal pronouns gives the psalm an intimate and confessional character, while its eventual movement toward public testimony points beyond the individual to the faith community.

The psalmist's crisis is particularly evident in his admission that his feet had almost slipped because of his envy of the arrogant and his observation of the prosperity of the wicked (Ps. 73:2–3). VanGemeren (2008) and Wendland (1998) draw attention to the depth of this crisis, which involves a serious challenge to the psalmist's confidence in the traditional understanding of divine justice. The apparent contradiction between the psalmist's commitment to righteousness and the prosperity enjoyed by the wicked raises fundamental questions about whether faithfulness to God has any meaningful value. The decisive turning point occurs when the psalmist enters the sanctuary of God (v. 17). There he gains a different perspective on the destiny of the wicked and the meaning of his own relationship with God. The sanctuary experience therefore provides the decisive counterpoint to his earlier doubt and becomes the basis for renewed theological understanding.

Brueggemann (1984) interprets the Psalms as expressions of an active and often strenuous relationship between human beings and God. Psalm 73 exemplifies this dynamic particularly well: the psalmist does not conceal his confusion or suppress his protest but brings his struggle honestly before God. The psalm therefore demonstrates how faith may include periods of disorientation without necessarily ending in abandonment of God. Its final movement toward confidence, divine presence, and communion illustrates a transformation in the psalmist's understanding of prosperity and well-being. Although the psalm is attributed to Asaph, traditionally associated with the Levitical musical and liturgical ministry, the precise historical circumstances of its composition remain uncertain. Its wisdom features also invite comparison with other psalms concerned with the apparent success of the wicked, particularly Psalms 37 and 49.

The social setting presupposed by Psalm 73 is one in which the conventional expectation that righteousness should lead to well-being and wickedness to suffering appears to have been contradicted by experience. The wicked are portrayed as enjoying health, security, wealth, and freedom from the ordinary troubles of human existence (Ps. 73:4–12), whereas the psalmist experiences suffering despite his commitment to purity and faithfulness (vv. 13–14). The resulting tension is not merely philosophical but existential. The psalmist's

experience forces him to reconsider inherited assumptions about the relationship between righteousness, prosperity, and divine favour.

Psalm 73 has long been a focal point of biblical scholarship because of its sophisticated literary structure and its engagement with the apparent contradiction between faith and experience. Questions concerning its date and historical setting remain debated. Some interpreters, taking the Asaphic superscription seriously, have associated the psalm with the pre-exilic period and the Asaphic tradition. Others have proposed a later setting, drawing attention to its wisdom themes and the apparent reflection on a theological problem that could have become especially acute in periods of communal and social instability (Brueggemann, 1984; Goldingay, 2007). Rather than resolving this historical debate, the present study focuses on the rhetorical and theological world constructed by the psalm and on the ways in which its treatment of prosperity, suffering, justice, and faith can be brought into dialogue with contemporary Nigerian realities.

Theologically, Psalm 73 offers a profound exploration of the problem of theodicy. Brueggemann's treatment of the Psalms highlights the legitimacy of disorientation and protest within Israel's faith tradition. Psalm 73 gives concrete expression to this dynamic through the psalmist's struggle with the apparent contradiction between God's goodness and the prosperity of those who act arrogantly and unjustly. Goldingay (2007) similarly draws attention to the psychological realism of the psalm, particularly the role of envy and the difficulty of maintaining confidence in God's justice when observable circumstances appear to contradict it. The sanctuary experience in verse 17 constitutes the decisive moment of reorientation. The psalmist's circumstances have not necessarily changed, but his understanding of those circumstances has been transformed by a renewed awareness of God's presence, judgment, and purposes.

From a literary perspective, Psalm 73 may be read in three broad movements: the psalmist's crisis (vv. 1–14), the turning point associated with his entry into the sanctuary (vv. 15–17), and the resolution of his crisis (vv. 18–28). For the purposes of this study, this structure is particularly useful because it corresponds to the psalm's rhetorical movement from confidence, through disorientation and doubt, to renewed trust. The first movement presents the apparent prosperity of the wicked and the resulting crisis of the righteous individual. The second introduces the sanctuary as the setting for a decisive change in perception. The third reassesses the destiny of the wicked while affirming the psalmist's relationship with God.

The psalm's rhetorical power is also evident in its extensive use of contrasts. The wicked are portrayed as prosperous, secure, healthy, arrogant, and apparently free from the difficulties experienced by others (vv. 4–12). In contrast, the psalmist describes his own experience in terms of continual suffering and perplexity (vv. 13–14). At the height of his crisis, he describes himself as like a "brute beast" before God (v. 22). Following his encounter with God in the sanctuary, however, the language changes significantly. The psalmist moves from observation and envy toward confidence in God's presence, guidance, and ultimate justice: "you hold me by my right hand," "you will guide me with your counsel," and "earth has nothing I desire besides you" (vv. 23–25, NIV). The rhetorical movement is therefore not simply from doubt to certainty but from a distorted evaluation of prosperity to a renewed understanding of what constitutes true blessedness.

This movement demonstrates why socio-rhetorical criticism is particularly useful for interpreting Psalm 73. Inner texture illuminates how contrasts, emotional language, repetition, and shifts in perspective construct the psalmist's crisis and its resolution. Intertexture helps locate the psalm's reflections on the righteous, the wicked, judgment, and trust within wider biblical and theological traditions. Social and cultural texture explains how assumptions about wealth, status, security, and communal expectations intensify the psalmist's crisis. Ideological texture exposes the competing value systems underlying the question of whether righteousness is worthwhile when the wicked prosper. Sacred texture, finally, shows how the sanctuary encounter reorients the psalmist toward God's presence, justice, guidance, and ultimate purposes. Thus, the five textures do not function merely as descriptive categories; together they explain how the psalm's rhetoric moves the worshipper from perplexity toward renewed trust.

These dimensions also provide a responsible basis for bringing Psalm 73 into conversation with contemporary Nigerian society. The psalm does not directly describe Nigeria, nor should Asaph's historical circumstances be

equated with contemporary Nigerian realities. Nevertheless, its treatment of prosperity, injustice, suffering, envy, divine justice, and faithful endurance provides theological and rhetorical resources for examining analogous experiences of moral disorientation. In a context where conspicuous wealth acquired through corrupt or exploitative practices may exist alongside poverty and marginalisation, Psalm 73 challenges the assumption that visible prosperity necessarily signifies divine favour and redirects attention toward justice, faithfulness, and the ultimate sovereignty of God.

Studies on Theodicy and the Prosperity of the Wicked

The problem with which Asaph wrestles in Psalm 73 is part of a broader biblical reflection on the apparent contradiction between divine justice and human experience. The wisdom literature addresses this tension in different ways. The book of Job provides an extensive exploration of the problem through the suffering of a righteous man whose experience challenges conventional assumptions about retributive justice. Job's friends interpret his suffering within a rigid cause-and-effect framework in which suffering is presumed to indicate sin. Job, however, resists their explanations and maintains his integrity before God. The book thus exposes the inadequacy of explaining suffering solely in terms of individual wrongdoing.

Ecclesiastes similarly challenges simplistic assumptions about the relationship between righteousness, wickedness, and earthly outcomes. The observation that "there is a righteous man who perishes in his righteousness, and there is a wicked man who prolongs his life in his evildoing" (Eccl. 7:15, ESV) illustrates the apparent disorder of human experience. Like Job and Psalm 73, Ecclesiastes acknowledges that observable circumstances do not always correspond neatly to conventional expectations concerning divine justice.

The same tension appears in the prophetic literature. Jeremiah asks, "Why does the way of the wicked prosper? Why do all who are treacherous thrive?" (Jer. 12:1, ESV), explicitly expressing a question central to Psalm 73. Habakkuk likewise protests the apparent triumph of injustice and questions God's use of Babylon as an instrument of judgment against Judah (Hab. 1:2–17). These texts demonstrate that the prosperity of the wicked and the suffering of the righteous were not merely individual psychological concerns but communal theological questions. Israel's faith tradition therefore accommodated honest protest in the face of experiences that appeared inconsistent with convictions concerning God's justice.

Modern scholarship recognises that these texts do not necessarily provide a single systematic solution to theodicy. Rather, they preserve diverse responses to the tension between divine justice and human experience. Brueggemann (1984), for example, emphasises the dialogical character of the Psalms, in which disorientation, protest, confidence, and praise coexist within Israel's relationship with God. Psalm 73 exemplifies this dynamic: the psalmist does not resolve his crisis by denying the reality of injustice but through a transformed perception following his encounter with God in the sanctuary.

The psalm's resolution involves renewed recognition of the destiny of the wicked and the enduring value of communion with God (Ps. 73:18–28). Its emphasis is therefore not simply on predicting future judgment but on reorienting the psalmist's understanding of prosperity and blessedness. What initially appears to be the success of the wicked is exposed as unstable, while God's presence becomes the true source of security and fulfilment. Psalm 73 consequently challenges the assumption that material success necessarily signifies divine favour, a theological corrective that is particularly relevant to contemporary contexts in which wealth and prosperity may be interpreted as evidence of God's blessing.

Overview of Socio-Rhetorical Criticism and Its Application to Psalms

Socio-rhetorical criticism, particularly as developed by Vernon K. Robbins (1996, 2002), is an interdisciplinary approach that examines biblical texts through multiple "textures." It considers literary and rhetorical features alongside social, cultural, ideological, intertextual, and theological dimensions, exploring both what texts communicate and how they construct meaning within particular communities.

For this study, five interrelated textures are central:

1. **Inner texture:** This examines vocabulary, repetition, contrasts, imagery, rhetorical development, and other internal features. In Psalm 73, it highlights the movement from confidence and crisis to renewed trust.
2. **Intertexture:** This examines the ways a text interacts with other texts, traditions, and cultural materials. In Psalm 73, it helps locate the psalm's reflections on the righteous, the wicked, divine judgment, and trust within broader biblical traditions.
3. **Social and cultural texture:** This considers the social world, values, practices, and assumptions reflected in the text, including perceptions of wealth, righteousness, status, suffering, and communal expectations. It also facilitates dialogue between the psalm's social world and contemporary Nigerian realities.
4. **Ideological texture:** This examines beliefs, values, interests, and perspectives concerning power, justice, prosperity, and social order. In Psalm 73, it exposes the inadequacy of equating material prosperity with genuine blessedness.
5. **Sacred texture:** This focuses on the text's claims concerning God, divine activity, worship, and faith. In Psalm 73, it is expressed particularly through the sanctuary experience and the recognition that "it is good to be near God" (v. 28, NIV).

The value of this approach lies in holding together dimensions that can otherwise be separated in biblical interpretation. Psalms are literary compositions, expressions of human experience, and products of social worlds, ideological statements, intertextual engagements, and theological acts of communication. This makes socio-rhetorical criticism particularly appropriate for Psalm 73, where personal crisis is closely connected with questions of prosperity, justice, social status, and divine presence. Pleins (2000) similarly demonstrates the importance of attending to poverty, justice, economic life, and social relationships in biblical interpretation.

For the present study, these five textures provide an integrated framework for interpreting Psalm 73 and bringing its theological and rhetorical insights into dialogue with contemporary Nigerian realities. They are not treated as isolated categories; rather, their interaction clarifies how the psalm constructs its argument concerning prosperity, suffering, justice, and faithful living.

Nigerian Scholarship on Corruption and Biblical Interpretation

Nigerian scholarship has extensively addressed corruption, poverty, inequality, governance, and the structures that sustain them. Adebani and Obadare (2013) examine the relationship between political power, wealth, and public life, particularly how prebendal practices become embedded within political and social structures. Jega (2007) similarly highlights institutional weaknesses and governance practices that undermine accountability and democratic development. These studies provide an important social context for considering why corrupt practices can appear to reward some individuals while disadvantaging others.

From a biblical and theological perspective, Biwul (2022) offers an important contextual reading of Psalm 73 in contemporary Nigerian society. He connects the psalmist's experience of the prosperity of the wicked with the oppression, poverty, and marginalisation experienced by disadvantaged Nigerians. His analysis demonstrates that Psalm 73 can function as a resource for interpreting economic, political, social, religious, and psychological dimensions of oppression (Biwul, 2022, pp. 424–429).

Adamo (2015) likewise emphasises the importance of contextual biblical interpretation in African communities, encouraging engagement with issues such as poverty, injustice, political instability, and suffering. Amunnadi and Ezeugwu (2019) similarly associate poverty in Nigeria with structural injustice, oppression, and greed, highlighting the contradiction between the country's resources and the economic hardship experienced by many citizens.

These studies provide an important foundation for the present research, but a specific opportunity remains. The contribution of this study is not simply to apply Psalm 73 to Nigeria, since Biwul (2022) has already established that contextual connection. Rather, it extends the discussion through a focused five-texture socio-rhetorical

analysis of the psalm. Particular attention is given to how the textures interact to challenge the assumption that material wealth necessarily indicates divine favour and to illuminate contemporary Nigerian experiences of corruption, inequality, poverty, prosperity theology, and the struggle to remain faithful amid injustice.

Socio-Rhetorical Reading of Psalm 73

Applying the five textures of socio-rhetorical criticism adopted in this study reveals Psalm 73 as a rhetorically constructed response to a crisis involving wealth, righteousness, justice, and divine favour. The psalm moves from personal perplexity to renewed confidence through the psalmist's encounter with God in the sanctuary.

Inner Texture: The Rhetoric of Crisis and Resolution

The inner texture of Psalm 73 is marked by a movement from confidence through crisis to renewed trust. The psalm can be broadly divided into three movements: crisis (vv. 1–14), turning point (vv. 15–17), and resolution (vv. 18–28). It begins with the affirmation, “Surely God is good to Israel, to those who are pure in heart” (v. 1, NIV), followed by the contrasting confession, “But as for me, my feet had almost slipped” (v. 2). This contrast introduces the spiritual instability that drives the psalm.

The crisis centres on the apparent prosperity of the wicked (vv. 3–12). They enjoy security, freedom from ordinary troubles, and increasing wealth despite their arrogance and oppression. Their circumstances therefore appear inconsistent with their conduct. The psalmist consequently questions the value of his own faithfulness: “Surely in vain I have kept my heart pure and washed my hands in innocence” (v. 13). His struggle is thus more than personal envy; it concerns the apparent failure of the moral order in which he has trusted.

The turning point occurs when he enters the sanctuary and declares, “Then I understood their final destiny” (v. 17). Worship provides a setting in which he can reassess the wicked's prosperity in light of their ultimate destiny. The imagery of slipping is subsequently reversed: “Surely you place them on slippery ground” (v. 18). The psalmist also acknowledges his own earlier misunderstanding (vv. 21–22) and shifts his attention from the success of the wicked to God's presence: “Yet I am always with you; you hold me by my right hand” (v. 23). His declaration, “Whom have I in heaven but you?” (v. 25), marks the climax of this transformation and redefines prosperity in relational rather than merely material terms.

Intertexture: Psalm 73 within the Wider Biblical Tradition

Psalm 73 participates in a wider biblical conversation concerning the apparent prosperity of the wicked and the suffering of the righteous. Its questions resonate with Psalm 37, which contrasts the apparent success of evildoers with confidence in God's justice, and Psalm 49, which challenges reliance on wealth in the face of mortality. The psalmist's question concerning the prosperity of the wicked also recalls Jeremiah 12:1 and Habakkuk 1:2–4, where God's justice is questioned in the presence of apparent injustice. Wisdom traditions represented in Job and Ecclesiastes likewise challenge simplistic assumptions that righteousness necessarily produces immediate material blessing. Psalm 73, however, develops these concerns through the sanctuary experience, where the psalmist's perception is transformed. The intertexture therefore contributes to the interpretation by showing that Asaph's crisis is part of a broader biblical struggle with divine justice, while the sanctuary provides the rhetorical and theological turning point from perplexity to renewed trust.

Social and Cultural Texture: Wisdom, Covenant, and Justice

Psalm 73 participates in Israel's wisdom tradition, particularly its concern with the relationship between human conduct and life's outcomes. Proverbs often associates righteousness with blessing and wickedness with destruction (Prov. 10:2–3), while Job and Ecclesiastes challenge simplistic assumptions about such correspondence. Psalm 73 similarly acknowledges the apparent success of the wicked while maintaining confidence in God's justice.

The psalm also resonates with Israel's covenantal expectations. The blessings associated with obedience in Deuteronomy 28:1–14 provide a relevant background to the psalmist's perplexity: if faithfulness is associated

with divine favour, why do the wicked prosper while the righteous suffer? Psalm 73 complicates an immediate cause-and-effect understanding of blessing and punishment by directing attention to God's larger purposes.

Its social dimension is equally significant. The wicked are portrayed not simply as wealthy but as arrogant and oppressive (vv. 6–11). Their prosperity is therefore a social and moral problem. The psalmist is also conscious of communal responsibility, admitting that speaking carelessly could have betrayed “your children” (v. 15). His personal crisis thus has implications for the wider community of faith, while the sanctuary provides a context for theological reorientation. The social and cultural texture therefore shows that the psalmist's crisis is shaped not only by personal envy but also by communal expectations concerning righteousness, prosperity, justice, and covenantal faithfulness.

Ideological Texture: From Envy to Trust

The ideological texture of Psalm 73 emerges through competing understandings of prosperity. Initially, the visible success of the wicked appears desirable, while the psalmist's faithfulness seems unrewarded. His envy therefore exposes a value system that measures well-being through wealth, security, and status.

The sanctuary encounter challenges this framework. The apparent prosperity of the wicked is revealed as unstable, while the psalmist discovers that relationship with God provides a more enduring foundation for security and hope. The movement from envy to trust consequently involves a transformation in the criteria by which prosperity is evaluated. Material abundance is no longer treated as an ultimate indicator of divine favour or human well-being.

This reorientation is significant for contemporary societies in which wealth and influence may be interpreted as signs of success or divine blessing. Psalm 73 challenges such assumptions by distinguishing apparent prosperity from enduring well-being.

Sacred Texture: The Theology of Divine Presence

The sacred texture of Psalm 73 culminates in the psalmist's renewed understanding of God's presence. His sanctuary encounter does not explain every instance of injustice; rather, it transforms his perception of his circumstances within his relationship with God.

This transformation is expressed through the emphasis on divine presence and guidance: “you hold me by your right hand” and “you will guide me with your counsel” (vv. 23–24). God becomes the psalmist's “portion” (v. 26), and the psalm concludes, “But as for me, it is good to be near God” (v. 28). The resolution therefore lies not simply in the downfall of the wicked but in the recognition that communion with God is the highest good.

Psalm 73 thus responds to the problem of theodicy without claiming to explain every instance of suffering. It reorients the believer's understanding of prosperity, justice, and security through trust in God's presence and sovereignty. This provides a theological basis for examining contemporary Nigerian experiences in which the visible prosperity of corrupt or unjust persons raises questions about divine justice and the meaning of true prosperity.

Asaph's Puzzle and the Nigerian Context

The crisis that nearly caused Asaph to stumble resonates with experiences in contemporary Nigeria. Although the historical and cultural contexts of Psalm 73 and Nigeria differ significantly, meaningful parallels can be identified in the apparent prosperity of the wicked, the frustration of the righteous, and the difficulty of reconciling visible injustice with confidence in divine justice. Psalm 73 therefore provides a theological resource for reflecting on corruption, inequality, and the display of ill-gotten wealth in Nigerian society.

Parallels between Psalm 73 and Nigeria's Social Realities: Corruption and Ill-Gotten Wealth

One direct parallel is the psalm's concern with the apparent prosperity of the wicked. In Nigeria, this concern is reflected in corruption and the misuse of public resources. Resources intended for infrastructure, healthcare, education, and other public services may be diverted through corrupt practices (Adebanwi & Obadare, 2013; Jega, 2007), while individuals associated with political and economic power sometimes accumulate considerable personal wealth. The conspicuous display of such wealth through luxury vehicles, expensive residences, lavish ceremonies, and other forms of consumption can intensify perceptions that dishonesty and political influence are rewarded while integrity is neglected.

This situation can produce a dilemma similar to Asaph's confession: "Surely in vain I have kept my heart pure" (Ps. 73:13). Citizens who struggle to meet basic needs may look at the visible prosperity of corrupt individuals and question whether righteousness is worthwhile. The problem is therefore not merely economic but also psychological and theological. Biwul (2022) observes that oppressive conditions can produce emotional distress, discouragement, and helplessness among disadvantaged people. Persistent exposure to injustice may weaken resistance to oppression and generate resignation.

The political environment can further deepen this perception. Osaji (2016) highlights challenges associated with political competition, electoral manipulation, and struggles for political power in Nigeria. Such realities can contribute to an environment in which political influence and material success appear attainable through practices that undermine justice and accountability. The resulting spectacle of corruption can shape how citizens understand success, fairness, and ethical conduct.

The parallel with Psalm 73 does not imply that ancient Israel and contemporary Nigeria are identical contexts. Rather, the connection lies in the recurring experience of observing injustice and questioning the value of righteousness. Psalm 73 challenges the assumption that present prosperity is the ultimate measure of blessedness and directs attention toward God's justice and presence.

Prosperity Theology and Its Distortions

The Nigerian context is further complicated by forms of Pentecostal Christianity commonly described as the "prosperity gospel" or "health and wealth gospel." Although prosperity preaching draws upon legitimate biblical themes concerning blessing, some expressions develop a transactional understanding of faith in which material wealth is closely associated with divine favour, strong faith, generous giving, and positive confession. Conversely, poverty or sickness may sometimes be interpreted as evidence of inadequate faith, personal sin, or demonic influence. Such interpretations can make material prosperity a presumed indicator of divine approval.

This becomes particularly troubling when wealth acquired through questionable or corrupt means is treated as evidence of God's blessing. A wealthy politician or businessperson may be socially admired because of material success, regardless of how that wealth was obtained. Prosperity theology can therefore reinforce the assumption challenged by Psalm 73: that visible prosperity necessarily signifies divine favour. It can also burden poor and disadvantaged people by attributing their circumstances primarily to spiritual inadequacy. Gifford (2004) argues that prosperity-oriented Christianity can operate within broader social and economic structures in ways that may reinforce inequalities, while Ukah (2008) examines the commodification and institutionalisation of Pentecostal religious practices in Nigeria. Psalm 73 offers a corrective by refusing to make material prosperity the ultimate measure of blessedness.

Marginalization of the Righteous/Poor

The psalmist's confession that he was "senseless and ignorant" and "a brute beast" before God (vv. 21–22) reflects the depth of the psychological crisis produced by his circumstances. A comparable frustration may be experienced by Nigerians who seek to maintain integrity within social environments where corruption and patronage appear to provide advantages. Such individuals may encounter limited opportunities, exclusion from networks of influence, or difficulty competing within systems perceived as unjust. The poor are particularly

vulnerable because socioeconomic disadvantage can be intensified by unequal access to opportunities and public resources.

Psalm 73 portrays the wicked as arrogant and oppressive, while the psalmist struggles to understand why they appear to prosper. This dynamic provides a useful basis for reflecting on contemporary Nigerian inequality. Biwul (2022) highlights the oppressive effects of corruption and its capacity to produce disadvantage and discouragement, while Amunnadi and Ezeugwu (2019) and Jega (2007) draw attention to poverty, inequality, and governance challenges in Nigeria. Such conditions can leave disadvantaged citizens questioning whether integrity and faithfulness are worthwhile.

Asaph's Resolution as a Theological Resource for Nigerian Christians

Against this background, Asaph's movement from crisis to resolution offers an important theological resource for Nigerian Christians. His resolution is not passive resignation but a reorientation of perspective through his encounter with God. By recognising the instability of the wicked's apparent prosperity and rediscovering the value of God's presence, Asaph moves beyond envy and despair toward renewed trust. For Nigerian Christians, this movement provides a basis for resisting the equation of wealth with divine favour, maintaining integrity amid unjust circumstances, and pursuing faithful ethical action while trusting in God's ultimate justice.

The pivotal moment is his entry into the "sanctuary of God" (v. 17), where he gains a renewed understanding of the destiny of the wicked. In the Nigerian context, the church can similarly provide a setting for theological reflection in which wealth and power are evaluated in light of God's purposes rather than treated as unquestionable signs of success or divine favour. Asaph's experience demonstrates that a transformed perspective can free believers from the envy and despair generated by observing the prosperity of the wicked.

Trust in God's Ultimate Justice

Asaph's resolution is grounded in confidence that God's justice, although not always immediately visible, is ultimately certain. He recognises that the wicked stand on "slippery ground" and are brought to ruin (vv. 18–20). This provides an important resource for Nigerian Christians living amid corruption, inequality, and apparent injustice. Trust in divine justice does not imply passive acceptance of wrongdoing; rather, it frees believers from pursuing material security through unethical means. Christians can therefore choose integrity even when it does not guarantee immediate material success, trusting that faithfulness before God is not ultimately in vain. Such confidence can encourage Christians in government, business, the church, and civil society to resist corruption and pursue justice. Biwul (2022) similarly emphasises the importance of hope in sustaining a pastoral theology capable of responding to oppressive circumstances.

Reorienting Genuine Blessedness

A significant element of Asaph's resolution is his reorientation of what constitutes genuine blessedness. He declares, "Whom have I in heaven but you? And earth has nothing I desire besides you" (v. 25), and describes God as "the strength of my heart and my portion forever" (v. 26). The psalm therefore relativises material wealth by presenting communion with God as the believer's enduring good. For Christians in the Nigerian context, this provides a corrective to interpretations of prosperity that equate material wealth with divine approval. Material possessions may provide temporary security, but they cannot constitute the believer's ultimate source of identity, satisfaction, or hope.

Moskala (2016) similarly interprets Psalm 73 as a movement beyond simplistic understandings of prosperity toward deeper faith grounded in relationship with God. The psalmist's hope extends beyond present circumstances as he anticipates being received into glory (v. 24), while his commitment to "tell of all your deeds" (v. 28) gives his transformed perspective a communal dimension. His encounter with God therefore leads not to withdrawal but to renewed testimony and faithful engagement. For contemporary Nigerian Christians, Asaph's resolution calls for a reorientation of values in which God, rather than material wealth, becomes the ultimate good and the foundation for ethical living.

Implications for Faith, Ethics, and Social Responsibility

Asaph's journey has important implications for Christian faith and action in Nigeria. First, it validates the honest expression of doubt and lament. The church should provide spaces where believers can voice frustrations concerning injustice without being accused of lacking faith. Psalm 73 demonstrates that questioning and lament can occur within a genuine relationship with God and may become part of renewed faith.

Second, the psalm calls for strong ethical commitment. If ultimate security is found in God rather than material wealth, believers are freed to pursue integrity even when it involves personal sacrifice. This includes refusing corrupt practices, resisting injustice, and contributing to a more equitable society. Faithfulness should therefore be expressed not only through personal devotion but also through ethical conduct and social responsibility.

Third, Psalm 73 has implications for public theology. The Nigerian church must engage realities such as corruption, poverty, inequality, and the misuse of power rather than restricting the Christian message to private spirituality. A faithful public theology should challenge the idolatry of wealth, defend the dignity of disadvantaged people, and encourage responsible participation in society.

Theological and Practical Implications: Theodicy in Contemporary Nigeria

The socio-rhetorical reading of Psalm 73 provides resources for a Nigerian theological response to the problem of theodicy that is both honest and hopeful. Kuka (2011) notes positive features of Nigerian social life, including accommodation and ecumenical tendencies, while also acknowledging challenges posed by political and religious interests. These values can be undermined by ethnic, political, and religious divisions that contribute to exclusion and injustice.

Psalm 73 does not offer a simplistic explanation for suffering. It neither denies the prosperity of the wicked nor dismisses the pain of the righteous. Instead, it holds these realities together while directing believers toward God's justice and presence. For contemporary Nigeria, this provides a theological basis for acknowledging suffering honestly while resisting despair. The psalm therefore encourages Christians to combine trust in God with ethical responsibility, hope with resistance to injustice, and personal faith with concern for the wellbeing of society.

RECOMMENDATIONS

A Nigerian theodicy should begin with the honesty evident in Asaph's lament. It should acknowledge the pain and frustration generated by corruption and injustice while directing believers toward hope in God's sovereignty and justice. Such hope should not encourage withdrawal from society but strengthen Christians to pursue justice faithfully while entrusting the ultimate outcome to God.

1. Role of the Church in Responding to Societal Injustice

The Nigerian church should provide a community in which honest lament is permitted. Believers should be able to express pain, doubt, and frustration without being accused of spiritual weakness. Psalm 73 demonstrates that lament can be an authentic expression of faith.

The church should also strengthen theological formation concerning wealth, justice, and prosperity. Biblical teaching should challenge interpretations that equate material abundance automatically with divine favour or poverty with spiritual failure. It should also exercise a prophetic witness by speaking against corruption, exploitation, and practices that undermine human dignity. Without becoming an instrument of partisan politics, the church should promote transparency, accountability, justice, and concern for the poor and vulnerable.

2. Encouragement for Believers Facing Disillusionment

For Nigerian Christians discouraged by corruption and apparent injustice, Psalm 73 offers significant encouragement. Asaph demonstrates that doubt, envy, and frustration can be brought honestly before God

without necessarily resulting in the abandonment of faith. The psalm also encourages believers to distinguish between apparent and enduring prosperity. The success of the wicked may appear attractive, but it is neither permanent nor the ultimate measure of blessedness. Believers who maintain integrity despite hardship can therefore find their security not in material achievement but in God's presence.

3. Relevance for Biblical Counselling and Public Theology

Psalm 73 is valuable for pastoral counselling because it provides language through which believers can process anger, doubt, disappointment, and envy. Counsellors can help disillusioned Christians move from honest lament toward renewed trust grounded in God's presence and faithfulness.

For public theology, Psalm 73 provides theological resources for confronting corruption and injustice. Its emphasis on God's justice challenges social arrangements that permit exploitation and the concentration of resources in the hands of a few. Nigerian churches can therefore advocate transparency, accountability, protection of vulnerable people, and responsible governance while maintaining confidence in God's ultimate justice.

CONCLUSION

This socio-rhetorical reading of Psalm 73 has sought to unravel Asaph's puzzle and demonstrate its continuing relevance to the crisis of faith and justice in contemporary Nigerian society. The study has shown that the psalm is more than a personal lament; it is a theological and rhetorical response to the tension created by the apparent prosperity of the wicked and the suffering of the righteous. Its inner texture reveals Asaph's movement from envy and doubt to renewed trust. Its intertexture situates this struggle within wider biblical traditions concerning righteousness, prosperity, suffering, and divine judgment. Its social and cultural texture highlights assumptions concerning wealth, status, righteousness, and justice, while its ideological texture exposes the inadequacy of measuring blessedness by material success. Its sacred texture ultimately directs attention to God's presence, guidance, and justice as the foundation of enduring security.

The Nigerian context demonstrates the continuing significance of this tension. Corruption, socioeconomic inequality, the conspicuous display of wealth, and distortions of prosperity theology can create profound disillusionment among Christians who seek to live faithfully. Psalm 73 does not deny these realities or provide a simplistic explanation for them. Instead, it offers a theological perspective through which believers can distinguish apparent prosperity from genuine blessedness and recognise God, rather than material accumulation, as their ultimate good and source of security.

The study further argues that this theological reorientation has ethical and social implications. Nigerian Christians are called to maintain integrity even when corruption appears to provide greater rewards, while the church is challenged to become a community of honest lament, theological formation, and prophetic witness. Psalm 73 therefore connects personal faith with social responsibility, encouraging believers to resist injustice while trusting in God's ultimate justice. This response, however, does not imply that theological reflection alone can resolve Nigeria's structural problems; rather, it provides resources for sustaining faithful Christian engagement with them.

The study contributes to biblical and contextual theology by demonstrating how socio-rhetorical criticism can facilitate responsible dialogue between the ancient world of the Psalms and contemporary Nigerian realities. It shows that Psalm 73 can function not only as devotional literature but also as a resource for theological reflection on corruption, prosperity, suffering, justice, and ethical action. In this respect, the psalm offers both critique and hope: critique of systems and ideologies that equate wealth with divine favour, and hope grounded in the enduring presence and justice of God.

Further research could extend this approach to other psalms of lament and disorientation, such as Psalms 10, 37, 49, and 77, and explore their relevance across different African contexts. Such studies could contribute to a broader biblical theology of justice and hope. Asaph's journey from perplexity to renewed trust reminds the

Nigerian church that faithfulness does not depend upon the immediate triumph of righteousness but upon confidence in God and commitment to faithful living amid injustice.

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