THE IMPOSSIBILITY OF THE NIGERIAN RICH TO PASS THROUGH THE EYE OF THE NEEDLE: A SOCIO-SCIENTIFIC ANALYSIS OF THE RICH YOUNG RULER IN THE SYNOPTIC GOSPELS

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DOI: https://doi.org/10.64633/wissj.v10i7.06

Keywords

Rich Young Ruler, Socio-Scientific Criticism, Prosperity Gospel, Nigerian Elite, Wealth Ethics

Abstract

Research Problem: *Nigeria's extreme inequality is increasingly legitimised by prosperity gospel interpretations that portray elite wealth as divine favour while obscuring systemic exploitation. Conventional readings of the Rich Young Ruler reduce Jesus' command to personal piety, neglecting structural dimensions of wealth in first-century Palestine and contemporary Nigeria.*
Methods/Theory: *The study employs a qualitative theological design integrating socio-scientific criticism, historical-critical exegesis, and redaction criticism. The patron-client model and limited-good economy framework examine wealth, status, and patronage networks across Synoptic accounts (Matt. 19:16–30; Mark 10:17–31; Luke 18:18–30), dialoguing with Nigerian socio-economic realities.*
Results: *Findings reveal that the Ruler's wealth was inseparable from structures of status, patronage, and economic inequality. Jesus' command to sell and distribute possessions extends beyond personal charity or voluntary poverty to challenge systems that preserve wealth and privilege. The "eye of the needle" functions as a radical critique of wealth structures that are incompatible with Kingdom values, undermining prosperity-gospel equations of material abundance with divine favour.*
Conclusion: *Triadic exegetical reading connects first-century socio-economic contexts with contemporary Nigerian inequality, extending interpretation beyond individualistic frameworks toward a structural wealth ethic that demands restorative justice.*
Key Contribution to Knowledge: *This study bridges biblical scholarship and African public theology, demonstrating how institutional capture perpetuates moral apathy and offering a framework for understanding wealth as a mechanism of control rather than blessing.*
Recommendation: *Nigerian theologians and Christian leaders should reject the prosperity gospel legitimisation of inequality and embrace redemptive wealth theology prioritising marginalised communities' dignity over elite preservation.*

Introduction

Nigeria's extreme wealth inequality is more than an economic issue; it is a spiritual crisis. The dominant prosperity gospel often sanctifies this divide, framing elite accumulation as a divine blessing while ignoring the poverty of the majority. This creates a jarring contradiction in a deeply Christian society that celebrates leaders whose wealth frequently stems from corruption and exploitation. Historically, the church has softened the blow of this reality by interpreting the story of the Rich Young Ruler through an individualistic lens. Patristic, Reformation, and modern evangelical readings have turned a radical political critique into a gentle lesson on personal humility or detachment. By spiritualizing the text, these interpretations shield the wealthy from accountability and ignore the structural injustice at the heart of the biblical narrative.

While there is ample scholarship on biblical ethics and African politics, few connect the two. No study has rigorously applied socioscientific criticism, specifically models of patronage and "limited good", to map ancient power dynamics onto Nigeria's modern neopatrimonial systems. Existing research keeps these worlds separate, missing the opportunity for a confrontation between scripture and current socioeconomic realities. This study addresses that gap. It seeks to expose how the prosperity gospel legitimises unjust wealth by ignoring the systemic nature of exploitation. To do this, it aims to reexamine the Synoptic narratives through a socioscientific lens, map those findings onto the Nigerian context, critique the prosperity gospel's distortion of wealth, and propose a "theology of redemptive wealth." This new framework moves beyond performative charity, demanding instead a transformative dismantling of the structures that keep people in bondage.

Literature Review

Before addressing the Nigerian context, there is an acknowledgement of how the text has been domesticated. Scholars have recognised Clement's treatise "The Rich Man's Salvation" as a paradigm for early Christian reflection on wealth and money. As Ulrich (2024) argues, the tractate responds to the spiritual anxiety of wealthy Christians in Alexandria who feared that their possessions might bar them from salvation. Clement assures them that wealth is not inherently evil, but its ethical value depends on whether it fosters love of neighbour and detachment from passion. Ulrich highlights Clement's use of the category τὰ ἐκτός, morally indifferent things, and stresses that this theological framework, rooted in eschatological hope and love of neighbour, shaped broader Patristic thinking and persisted into the fourth century. Patristic interpreters took divergent paths, but Clement of Alexandria provided the ultimate escape hatch for the wealthy. In Quis Dives Salvetur, he allegorised the text, arguing that wealth itself was neutral and that the command to "sell all" referred only to purging the passion for wealth from the soul, not the literal divestiture of assets (Clement of Alexandria, 1885). This manoeuvre has haunted Christian ethics ever since, allowing the church and its wealthy benefactors to accumulate fortunes while claiming spiritual poverty.

During the Reformation, Calvin and Luther viewed the text primarily through the lens of the Law. They saw Jesus' command as a tool to convict the man of his inability to keep the Law perfectly, thereby driving him to grace (Calvin, 1960). While this protects the doctrine of justification, it risks stripping the ethical demands of the Kingdom of their tangible,

socio-economic bite, turning a radical call to justice into a psychological prelude to faith.

In contemporary evangelical scholarship, the debate has shifted toward the "Gospel according to Jesus." Scholars like John F. MacArthur and Walter J. Chantry argue that Jesus' command to sell possessions is an essential element of the gospel message itself, equating the demand to forsake wealth with the requirement of repentance (Chantry, 1970). However, as critics like Rick Ritchie point out, this conflates the specific, socio-historical demand placed upon a first-century Jewish patron with a universal soteriological condition for all believers (Ritchie, 1992). It individualises a systemic issue. By turning the command to sell possessions into a universal requirement for salvation, MacArthur and Chantry miss the specific socio-political critique Jesus is levelling at the man's role as an exploitative elite.

No aspect of this pericope has engendered more desperate apologetics than the "eye of the needle." To soften the blow of Jesus' hyperbole, a persistent myth emerged in the 19th and 20th centuries suggesting that the "Needle's Eye" was a small pedestrian gate in Jerusalem's walls. According to this folklore, a camel could only pass if it was unloaded and forced to crawl on its knees (Plaut, 1959). To be unequivocally clear: this hypothesis is pure fiction. There is zero archaeological or historical evidence for such a gate. As W. Gunther Plaut demonstrated decades ago, Jesus was employing a deliberate, shocking hyperbole. The camel (kamelos) was the largest animal commonly seen in Palestine; the needle's eye was the smallest opening. The contrast is absolute. Jesus is not offering a difficult but achievable path; he is stating an utter impossibility. The text demands acceptance of this hyperbole: for those whose identity, security, and power are rooted in elite wealth, entering the Kingdom of God is humanly impossible.

To understand why it is impossible, one must turn to socio-scientific criticism. Pioneered by scholars like Bruce J. Malina (2001) and Halvor Moxnes (1988), this approach reads the New Testament through the lens of cultural anthropology. In this worldview, society operated on the concept of "limited good." Wealth was not seen as something that could be creatively expanded through innovation; rather, all desirable goods were finite in supply (Malina, 2001). Therefore, if a person became extremely wealthy, it was universally assumed that they had acquired their wealth at the expense of others. Wealth was not a sign of God's blessing; it was a sign of exploitation. To be "rich" (plousios) in the first-century Mediterranean was, by definition, to be "avaricious," because one could only become rich by extracting the labour and land of the poor (Hanson and Oakman, 2011).

In the Nigerian context, there is a massive wall of theological resistance. Views on wealth are heavily dominated by the Prosperity Gospel, championed by figures such as David Oyedepo and E.A. Adeboye. This theology posits that poverty is a curse, and wealth is the birthright of the believer, secured through the "seed" of tithes and offerings (Ojo, 2006). Scholars like Ruth Marshall and Matthew Ojo have critically analysed this "political spirituality," noting how Pentecostal capitalism has fused with state corruption, creating a class of "Big Men" who use religious platforms to justify their illicit wealth (Marshall, 2009).

The biblical metaphor of the camel and the eye of the needle has historically functioned as a warning against the spiritual peril of wealth. In the Nigerian socio-political context, however, this metaphor transcends spiritual allegory to describe a structural reality: the entrenched wealth of political and economic elites is so deeply intertwined with corruption, moral abdication, and institutional capture that

passage through the narrow threshold of justice appears virtually impossible. Drawing on prophetic, political, and exegetical analyses, this synthesis examines why the Nigerian rich remain blocked from the "eye of the needle," engaging the works of Boloje (2023), Oyekunle (2015), Ojo et al. (2022), and Inyaregh (2024).

Both Boloje (2023) and Inyaregh (2024) ground their critiques in biblical ethics, framing Nigeria's wealth-corruption nexus as a profound spiritual failure. Boloje's reading of Micah reveals how Nigerian leaders and religious figures deploy distorted theological justifications to legitimise greed, severing the covenant between divine justice and communal well-being (Boloje, 2023). Similarly, Inyaregh's exegesis of Luke 12:16–21 portrays Nigerian elites as contemporary "rich fools" who hoard wealth, frequently stolen from public coffers, while ignoring eschatological accountability. The "eye of the needle," in this framework, represents the narrow path of generosity and being "rich toward God" (Inyaregh, 2024, p. 56). The impossibility of passage stems not from wealth itself, but from the elite's refusal to realign their stewardship with divine ethics. As Inyaregh (2024) asserts, Nigerian rich fools are "deadlier than the one in the parable because they hoard palliatives... pad budgets... and refuse to increase the salaries of civil servants" (p. 58), thereby making moral passage structurally blocked. Arguing from that standpoint, though intertwined with the Lukan narrative but not specifically about the RYR. However, the message is driven home.

Oyekunle's (2015) analysis complements this ethical diagnosis by exposing the political philosophy that sustains Nigeria's corrupt elite. He argues that Nigerian politicians operate within a Machiavellian framework where "the end justifies the means," and morality is deliberately divorced from power acquisition (Oyekunle, 2015, p. 179). This amoral politics renders the "eye of the needle", symbolising transparent governance, virtually impassable. Power is treated as an end in itself, pursued through electoral malpractice and godfatherism (Oyekunle, 2015). Consequently, even when democratic institutions exist, they are subverted to serve private interests. Oyekunle (2015) warns that unless Nigerian elites "jettison the Machiavellian notion of separating morality from politics," the nation will remain trapped in a cycle of corruption (p. 186). The needle remains closed not by divine decree alone, but by a political culture that rewards ruthlessness over righteousness.

The structural dimension of this impossibility is meticulously documented by Ojo et al. (2022). These scholars argue that Nigeria's war against corruption has failed not due to an absence of laws, but because of "weak institutional structure," politicised anti-corruption agencies like the EFCC, and a compromised judiciary (Ojo et al., 2022, p. 12). When institutions meant to act as the "needle" filtering out corruption and ensuring accountability are themselves captured, passage through the threshold becomes irrelevant for the elite. Ojo et al. (2022) note that anti-corruption efforts often serve political vendettas rather than justice, with cases ignored when presidential allies are implicated (p. 7). This institutional capture ensures that the Nigerian rich face no meaningful deterrent. As Ojo et al. (2022) conclude, "the greatest challenge of Nigeria is not primarily corruption but mainly weak institutional structure" (p. 12), meaning the mechanism that should enforce passage through the needle is itself broken.

Collectively, these authors illustrate that the impossibility of the Nigerian rich passing through the eye of the needle is neither accidental nor purely theological. It is a convergence of distorted religious ethics, Machiavellian political culture, and institutional failure. Boloje's prophetic critique,

Inyaregh's exegetical warning, Oyekunle's political philosophy, and Ojo et al.'s institutional analysis converge on a single truth: wealth in Nigeria has become a barrier to moral and national renewal. The "eye of the needle" thus functions as both a diagnostic metaphor and a call to radical transformation. It demands theological repentance (Boloje, 2023; Inyaregh, 2024), political realignment toward public morality (Oyekunle, 2015), and institutional decoupling from partisan interests (Ojo et al., 2022). Until wealth is decoupled from corruption, institutions are insulated from political capture, and leadership is reoriented toward communal flourishing, the needle will remain impassable. Camping with Inyaregh and Ojo, in corroboration, Salter (2024) argues that economic reasoning is most appropriate as a graphic tool that clarifies the tradeoffs and consequences of certain institutional arrangements. It should not serve as a moral compass in its own right. Normative guidance, especially in a Christian framework, must come from Scripture, tradition, and moral theology. It should not be grounded in assumptions embedded in cost-benefit analysis or efficiency metrics. This underscores the value of beginning with theological reflection, even when considering policy debates. Treading in the same path, Pahman (2025) notes, Orthodox social thought, especially as expressed through ascetic practice, offers a vision of economic life oriented toward neighbourly love, spiritual formation, and restraint, rather than efficiency or material accumulation.

The literature reviewed lacks a triadic exegetical analysis and the hermeneutical skills necessary to explore the Synoptic Gospels in relation to the gospel of Jesus to the RYR, thereby aligning the Mediterranean context with the Nigerian experience. A significant gap exists in examining how moral decay specifically drives institutional weakness, or conversely, how institutional capture perpetuates moral apathy. However, existing research often treats the biblical text and the socio-economic reality in separate silos. The gap this study fills is the direct, rigorous exegetical confrontation between the socio-scientific reality of the RYR's wealth and the structural realities of the Nigerian elite.

Materials and Methods

This study employs a qualitative approach, integrating biblical exegesis, socioscientific theory, and contemporary African public theology. Thematic analysis synthesises these diverse fields into a coherent argument rather than merely listing sources.

Source selection adhered to three criteria: publications from 1970 to 2024 were valued to engage both foundational socioscientific models and modern theological discourse; the geographic scope was limited to literature on first-century Palestine and contemporary Nigeria to ensure contextual parallels; and thematic relevance was required, focusing on wealth ethics, patronage, the prosperity gospel, systemic corruption, or socioscientific criticism.

Data collection involved systematic searches across major academic databases, including ATLA Religion Database, JSTOR, and Scopus. Specific keyword combinations such as "Rich Young Ruler," "socioscientific criticism," "prosperity gospel," "neopatrimonialism," and "African public theology" guided the search. Additionally, snowball sampling traced citations backwards from foundational works to build a comprehensive library of relevant material.

Data analysis followed a three-step coding process. Open coding extracted key arguments regarding wealth, power, and ethics. Axial coding identified relationships between biblical exegesis and current socioeconomic realities in Nigeria. Finally, selective coding crystallised core themes: structural extraction,

theological justification, and redemptive transformation.

Theoretical framework

This study is anchored by three interconnected socio-scientific models: the patron-client framework, the limited-good economy, and honour-shame dynamics.

The Patron-Client Model (Elliott, 1995; Moxnes, 1988a) reveals how power works through transaction. A patron controls resources and hands them out to clients in exchange for loyalty and public praise. It's not charity; it's a trade of security for submission. The "Limited Good" Economy (Malina, 2001) suggests that in ancient agrarian societies, wealth wasn't infinite. If someone got rich, it usually meant someone else had to lose out. Extreme wealth was seen as inherently extractive, built on the deprivation of others. Finally, Honor-Shame Dynamics (Hanson & Oakman, 2011) show how social status is maintained. People gain standing by giving gifts and receiving public recognition, creating a cycle where generosity is less about kindness and more about maintaining power.

While these models are foundational for understanding Mediterranean antiquity, applying them directly to postcolonial Africa requires critical adaptation. The Mediterranean model assumes a static agrarian economy, whereas Nigeria operates a volatile, oil-dependent neopatrimonial state. Critics might argue that applying ancient models to modern contexts risks anachronism by ignoring modern capitalist innovation. However, this study argues that in the Nigerian context, patronage transcends mere social organisation. It functions as a theological idol and a mechanism of state capture. The "limited good" worldview remains a lived reality for the Nigerian masses, who intuitively recognise extreme elite wealth as inherently extractive rather than creatively generated. By combining these models, the study demonstrates that the ancient mechanics of extraction are not historical curiosities but active structural realities in contemporary Nigeria.

Exegetical Analysis of the Synoptic Narrative on the Rich Young Ruler and the "Eye of the Needle"

Even though the narrative is present in all three Synoptics, a comparative analysis reveals crucial redactional nuances, particularly in Luke's account, which heighten the socio-political stakes and expose the systemic nature of the ruler's wealth. This story appears in all three Synoptic Gospels, with parallels in Mark 10:17–30 and Matthew 19:16–30. Rather than getting bogged down in debates about how these texts relate to one another, it is enough to note what scholar Yan Yang (2012) observes. While the Lukan version closely follows Mark, it includes subtle but significant differences. The researcher chose Luke's account because it sits at the heart of his broader teaching on wealth and materialism. Although Luke remains largely faithful to his Markan source, his few redactional changes are deliberate and important. This is especially true given that Luke addresses the proper use of wealth to his community more extensively than the other Gospel writers.

These small variations have shaped interpretations of the text for centuries, dating back to Origen. As Christopher M. Hays (2009) asserts, "the Third Gospel's wealth ethics are some of the most demanding in the Bible." Moreover, this passage (Luke 18:18–30) stands as one of the longest single treatments of an ethical issue in the Gospels (Mullins, 2010). In these instructions, Luke reflects not only Jesus' teachings but also the concerns of his own disciples and community. Daniel J. Harrington (2007) rightly points out that a key goal of Luke's Gospel and Acts was to urge wealthy Christians to care for the poor and share their resources.

Luke's inclusion of this story fits his recurring theme of reversing fortunes and challenges the idea that the rich can easily enter the kingdom of God (cf. 19:1–10). Interestingly, the popular title "Rich Young Ruler" is not found in any single Gospel tradition. While all three agree on the man's wealth, Matthew adds that he was young, and Luke identifies him as a ruler, both adjustments from Mark's simpler description of a "certain man."

Matthew identifies the man as "young" (neaniskos), emphasising his vigour and the tragedy of a life lived for the wrong treasures (Matthew 19:20). Mark adds the vivid detail that the man "ran up and knelt before him," highlighting his urgency and initial reverence (Mark 10:17). But it is Luke who provides the most explosive socio-political framing. Luke alone identifies the man as a "ruler" (archōn) (Luke 18:18). In the context of first-century Palestine, a ruler was not merely a man with money; he was a member of the local aristocracy, deeply embedded in the Roman imperial system, responsible for administering justice, collecting taxes, and managing the agrarian economy (Green, 1997). Furthermore, Luke intensifies the wealth description. While Mark and Matthew simply say he had "great possessions," Luke states he was "extremely rich" (sphodra plousios) (Luke 18:23).

Perhaps the most telling detail is what Luke omits. In Mark 10:21, it is expressed that "Jesus, looking at him, loved him." This detail paints the RYR as a sympathetic figure, a lost sheep whom Jesus affectionately tries to rescue. Luke entirely omits this verse. Why?

This omission is highly deliberate and deeply significant. To the Lukan community, and to the peasants of first-century Palestine, a "ruler" who was "extremely rich" was not a sympathetic figure; he was a patron who had likely built his wealth on the exploitation of the poor. Luke could not portray Jesus as looking upon an oppressive patron with affection. By removing the Markan "love," Luke strips the man of his sympathetic veneer, presenting him instead as a systemic oppressor who needs to be unmasked. Jesus is not offering a gentle invitation to a lost sheep; he is issuing a subversive demand to a corrupt elite. The text forces us to ask: Can Jesus love a system of exploitation? Luke's redaction suggests that when wealth is built on the blood of the poor, the prophetic response is not affection, but confrontation.

When the ruler claims to have kept the commandments since his youth, Jesus responds, "One thing you lack" (Luke 18:22). The command that follows is specific: "Sell all that you have and distribute to the poor." Krupamaria (2016) asserts that the last pericope in Luke's Gospel in which Jesus explicitly calls one to follow him is the challenge to the rich ruler (Lk 18:18-30), who rejected the invitation. The pericope shows that a disciple of Jesus must take a radical stance toward possessions and be prepared to abandon the values of this world to become a disciple of Jesus and gain eternal life. Detachment from earthly goods is necessary for a strong attachment to heavenly things. The ruler stumbled because he thought that he could attain eternal life by fulfilling the law. But God is more concerned about our interior disposition than the external observance of the law.

The Greek word for distribute is diadidōmi, which means to apportion or divide among various parties (Arndt and Gingrich, 1957). This is a critical distinction from mere almsgiving (didōmi or eleēmosynē). Almsgiving is a vertical act of charity from a superior to an inferior, which paradoxically reinforces the social hierarchy and the honour of the giver. Diadidōmi, however, implies a horizontal levelling. It is the dismantling of the patron's hoarded capital and its return to the community. As scholars like Christopher Hays (2010) and James Metzger (2007) note, this is

not about the ruler becoming a generous patron; it is about him ceasing to be a patron altogether. Jesus is demanding the liquidation of his socio-economic power.

When the ruler walks away, sad, Jesus turns to the crowd and delivers the fatal blow: "How difficult it is for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God!" (Luke 18:24). The crowd's astonishment ("Then who can be saved?") reveals their underlying theology: they believed wealth was a sign of divine favor (Hays, 2010). Jesus shatters this first-century prosperity gospel. Wealth is not a sign of God's blessing; in a system of limited good, it is a sign of systemic theft, and it acts as a massive anchor dragging the soul away from the Kingdom.

A Socio-Scientific Reading of the Rich Young Ruler

To truly grasp the weight of Jesus' command, we must view the RYR through the socio-scientific models of first-century Mediterranean society: patronage, honour, and the limited good. One must strip away the modern, capitalist assumptions about wealth creation and look at the agrarian, extractive economy of antiquity.

In the agrarian economy of first-century Palestine, land was the primary currency. The elite, including the priestly aristocracy and local rulers, controlled the vast majority of the arable land (Hanson and Oakman, 2011). They did not work this land; they extracted surplus from the peasants through exorbitant rents, tithes, and taxes. The RYR's wealth was not the result of hard work, innovation, or divine blessing; it was the result of structural extraction. His wealth was his power. It bought him his status as a "ruler," it secured his honour in the public square, and it allowed him to participate in the patronage system. As K.C. Hanson and Douglas Oakman (2011) explain, the elite dominated other families, leasing land to labourers and lending to artisans, creating a web of dependency that ensured the poor remained in perpetual debt.

The patron-client relationship held together the Mediterranean world. A patron (the RYR) possessed resources (wealth, land, political influence). A client (the poor peasant) lacked these resources and needed them to survive. The patron would provide the client with protection, loans, or access to land. In return, the client provided labour, a portion of the harvest, and, crucially, honour. The client had to praise the patron publicly, follow him, and vote for him (Elliott, 1995).

This system was inherently exploitative. It kept the poor in perpetual debt and ensured the elite remained in power. When Jesus tells the RYR to "sell all and distribute to the poor," he is telling him to dismantle his patronage network. He is telling him to give up his clients, his land, his political influence, and his honour. He is demanding that the ruler practice "general reciprocity", giving without the expectation of return or the demand for honour, a concept that was entirely alien to the Mediterranean patronage system (Uwaegbute, 2019). Uwaegbute (2019) stresses the need for patrons to practice general reciprocity, giving without the expectation of return, to humanise the relationship between rich and poor.

Why did the ruler walk away sad? It was not merely because he liked his nice clothes or his comfortable bed. He walked away because Jesus was asking him to commit social suicide. To divest himself of his wealth was to lose his identity as a "ruler." It meant stepping down from the patronal hierarchy and becoming a landless peasant himself.

In a society where integrity was the paramount value, losing one's wealth meant losing one's respect. The ruler faced an ultimate choice: maintain his respect and power in the eyes of society, but lose eternal life; or embrace the shame of poverty in the eyes of society, but gain treasure in heaven

(Moxnes, 1988). He chose the former. His sadness (perilypos) was the grief of a man realising that his gods were not in the temple, but in his ledger. His possessions possessed him.

Nigerian Contextual Analysis: The Modern "Rulers"

If the first-century RYR was a patron whose wealth was built on structural extraction, who are his modern equivalents? The parallels between first-century Palestine and contemporary Nigeria are not merely superficial; they are structurally identical. The socio-scientific models of antiquity map perfectly onto the neo-patrimonial realities of the Nigerian state.

Nigeria's elite class, comprising political officeholders, mega-church founders, and corporate oligarchs, operates precisely within a neo-patrimonial system. Political elites capture state resources and distribute them to their "clients" (thugs, voters, and party loyalists) in exchange for loyalty and protection (Ekeh, 1975). Religious elites operate similarly. The "Big Man" pastor acts as a spiritual patron. He provides access to God, miracles, and "breakthroughs." In return, the congregation (the clients) provides their money, their labour, and their absolute, unquestioning loyalty.

Adegboyega (2012) argues that just as the first-century ruler extracted surplus from the peasants, the Nigerian elite engages in what economists call "rent-seeking" and resource capture. The immense wealth of the Nigerian political class is rarely generated through productive economic activity or innovation. It is extracted from the national treasury, from oil revenues, and from the systemic corruption of the state.

The "limited good" worldview still haunts the Nigerian imagination. When a politician builds a massive mansion while his constituency lacks basic healthcare, the public knows, intuitively, that this wealth was not created; it was taken. The wealth of the Nigerian elite is inextricably linked to the poverty of the masses. It is wealth built on structural injustice, mirroring the agrarian extraction of first-century Palestine.

How does the elite justify this? Prosperity theology provides the ultimate ideological cover. By framing wealth as a divine right and poverty as a result of demonic attack or lack of faith, the prosperity gospel absolves the elite of any moral responsibility for the structural inequalities they perpetuate (Giffard, 2001). If a pastor's private jet is a sign of God's anointing, then the congregation's poverty is a sign of their spiritual inadequacy. This theology sacralizes greed and transforms the church into a marketplace of patronage, where God is the ultimate patron, the pastor is the broker, and the tithe is the bribe to secure divine favour. It is the exact theological equivalent of the crowd's astonishment in Luke 18:26, assuming that extreme wealth must be a sign of God's salvation.

Why the Nigerian Rich Cannot Pass Through the Eye of the Needle

Drawing on the exegetical and socio-scientific analysis, we can now articulate exactly why the Nigerian rich, in their current socio-economic paradigm, cannot pass through the eye of the needle. This is not a matter of personal piety; it is a matter of structural and theological impossibility. We must develop this around seven major scholarly arguments.

The primary reason the Nigerian rich cannot enter the Kingdom is that their wealth is fundamentally illegitimate. Jesus' command to the RYR was rooted in the prophetic tradition of justice, which demanded that ill-gotten wealth be returned to the poor (Isaiah 58; Amos 5). In Nigeria, extreme wealth is almost always tied to the looting of the state, the exploitation of labour, or environmental

degradation in the Niger Delta. You cannot enter the Kingdom of God while holding onto the stolen goods of the poor. The "eye of the needle" is a blockade against structurally unjust wealth. As Metzger argues, only the elimination of personal wealth coupled with a fair distribution of resources can be received as good news by the poor; anything short of this allows the elite to retain control of capital (Metzger, 2007).

The prosperity gospel preaches "stewardship," but the practice is pure attachment. The Nigerian elite view wealth as a personal possession to be hoarded, displayed, and used to secure legacy, rather than a communal resource to be managed for the common good. The RYR's tragedy was that his possessions possessed him. The Nigerian elite is equally possessed. The fear of losing wealth drives them to engage in increasingly ruthless protection of their status, mirroring the RYR's sorrowful departure. They are trapped in what the uploaded texts describe as an "obsessive love of possessions," where the heart becomes earth-bound.

In the Mediterranean world, patronage was a social necessity; in Nigeria, it is an idol. The "Big Man" syndrome requires the elite to constantly display their wealth to maintain their honour. To "sell all and distribute" would mean stepping off the pedestal. It would mean becoming vulnerable. The Nigerian elite worship at the altar of patronage because it is the only mechanism that guarantees their survival and status in a predatory state. To abandon patronage is to abandon their god. They cannot practice the "general reciprocity" that Jesus demands because their entire social identity is built on the transactional extraction of honour and resources from their clients (Uwaegbute, 2019).

Discipleship in the Synoptic tradition involves taking up the cross, which means embracing shame and marginalisation. The Nigerian elite, however, uses wealth to avoid shame at all costs. Prestige is the ultimate goal. When Jesus says it is easier for a camel to pass through a needle than for a rich man to enter the Kingdom, he is highlighting the absolute incompatibility between the pursuit of worldly prestige and the path of the cross. The Nigerian elite wants the crown without the cross, the resurrection without the crucifixion. They seek the honour of the archōn without the humility of the ptōchos (the poor).

Prosperity theology has effectively rewritten the "eye of the needle" out of the Nigerian biblical consciousness. By preaching that God wants all his children to be billionaires, the prosperity gospel normalises greed and demonises the ethical demands of Jesus. It creates a theological environment where the RYR's refusal to sell his assets would be celebrated as a "level of faith" to hold onto his "seed." This theology makes repentance structurally impossible because it redefines the sin of greed as the virtue of faith. It is a theological mechanism designed to protect the elite from the prophetic critique of the Gospel.

When confronted with their wealth, the Nigerian elite often point to their philanthropy. They build churches, fund scholarships, and distribute food during elections. But this is not the diadidōmi (distribution) that Jesus demanded. This is patronage. Philanthropy in Nigeria is often a mechanism for laundering reputation and securing political votes. It does not challenge the systemic structures that create poverty; it merely manages the symptoms to ensure the elite can continue their extraction. Jesus did not ask the RYR to give a percentage to the poor; he asked him to liquidate his entire portfolio. Philanthropy without justice is just a bribe to the conscience. It maintains the hierarchy of the patron-client relationship rather than dismantling it (Moxnes, 1988).

More so, the Nigerian rich are masters of religious performance. They are the chief

stewards of their churches, the founders of mega-ministries, and the most vocal public Christians. Yet, this performance masks a profound ethical void. Like the RYR who claimed to have kept all the commandments since his youth, the Nigerian elite can point to their tithes, their fasting, and their church buildings. But Jesus' response to the RYR exposes that religious performance cannot substitute for Kingdom ethics. You cannot buy your way into the Kingdom with a tithe extracted from the poor. The ruler's tragedy was that he mistook his adherence to the external mechanics of the law for the internal reality of justice and love for his neighbour.

Theological and Ethical Implications

The theological and ethical implications of the Nigerian rich failing to pass through the eye of the needle call for a radical reorientation of interpretation. Such a reorientation demands a departure from individualised and spiritualised readings of the passage in favour of a robust public theology that engages the structural realities of wealth, justice, and social responsibility.

Moxnes (1988) frames Jesus' "Kingdom Economics" as a direct counter to imperial extraction, prioritising symbiosis and power-sharing over hierarchy. This demands that the church reject prosperity theology in favour of a radical ethic where wealth serves the community, not personal gain. In the same line of thought, Metzger (2007) interprets the Rich Young Ruler narrative as a call for systemic redistribution, not just charity. He argues that Jesus demanded the divestment of sociopolitical power, urging elites to dismantle oppressive structures like corruption and patronage. For Nigeria, this means shifting focus from individual aid to institutional justice, changing the laws and systems that perpetuate poverty rather than merely alleviating its symptoms.

The core message here is that the Kingdom of God transcends a spiritual concept. It is a radical economic and social revolution. It flips the script on imperial logic, which thrives on hierarchy and hoarding, replacing it with a vision rooted in equality and sharing. This means the church must stop preaching prosperity as a sign of favour and instead embrace Jesus' subversive call to true stewardship: identifying that everything belongs to God and is meant to liberate the poor, not enrich the few.

Ethically, this demands more than occasional charity; it requires active dismantling of the systems that keep people in poverty. For the Nigerian church, this looks like fighting for living wages, demanding transparency in how money is handled, and challenging corruption at every level. This is moving beyond handing out fish to breaking the monopolies that control them. True justice is not merely managing private assets well. It advocates redistributing power and resources so that everyone can thrive.

Towards a Theology of Redemptive Wealth in Nigeria

Leaving the Nigerian elite in the sorrow of the Rich Young Ruler is neither a sufficient theological response nor an adequate ethical conclusion. The text ends with Jesus' assertion: "What is impossible with man is possible with God" (Luke 18:27). If the structural impossibility of the rich entering the Kingdom is the human reality, what does the "possible" reality of God look like in Nigeria? It requires a Theology of Redemptive Wealth.

For many African theologians, the conversation about wealth and poverty isn't just an economic debate; it's a spiritual and communal crisis. They reject the Western idea that success is a solo journey and failure is a personal flaw. Instead, they offer a vision where spirituality and daily survival are deeply intertwined, anchored in three powerful voices:

John Mbiti, Kwame Bediako, and Emmanuel Katongole.

John Mbiti reminds us that in traditional African thought, there is no wall between the physical and the spiritual. Life is holistic. His ethics are rooted in Ubuntu, the profound truth that "I am because we are." In this worldview, your wealth is not yours alone; it belongs to the community. Extreme poverty, then, is not just a lack of money. It is a rupture in the social fabric, a silence where there should be harmony. If one person starves while another feasts, the whole community is sick.

Kwame Bediako takes this further by looking at the scars left by history. He argues that faith cannot ignore the "lived reality" of Africans, the deep wounds of colonisation and the crushing weight of economic inequality. For Bediako, the Gospel is not an escape from these realities, but a force to heal them. True liberation means using the transformative power of Christ to build a society where every person can live with dignity and flourish. Faith, here, is active healing.

Emmanuel Katongole challenges the church to stop copying corrupt political and economic systems. In works like A Future for Africa, he speaks of a theology of lament, crying out to God in the face of war, disease, and endless poverty. But his message is also one of fierce hope. He points to the "stories of Bethany": small, local communities that practice radical hospitality and sharing. These aren't grand gestures; they are quiet acts of love that embody what the kingdom of God looks like on the ground.

Together, these thinkers teach us that the church's response to poverty must go beyond charity. It demands structural change, a reimagining of justice, and the faithful building of the common good.

Practical models of redemptive wealth must shift from rent-seeking to ethical entrepreneurship and cooperative models. Investments should be directed toward sectors that elevate the community, such as agriculture and healthcare, aligning with the Lukan vision of shared resources. Furthermore, philanthropy must be dissociated from patronage, practising the general reciprocity that Jesus required, giving spontaneously without the anticipation of political or religious return. The church must model a society where wealth is distributed, power is crushed, and the downtrodden are elevated.

The church in Nigeria must become the prophetic voice that it was called to be. This means the pulpits must stop preaching the prosperity gospel and start preaching the Kingdom of God. Pastors must be willing to lose their "clients" (congregants) by preaching the hard, subversive truths of the gospel of Jesus. The church must model a counter-community where wealth is shared, power is flattened, and the marginalised are elevated. It must become a "thaumaturgical utopian community" that reflects an inaugurated eschatology, challenging the limited-good worldview with the abundant grace of God.

Conclusion

The crisis Nigeria is facing today is not just about money but about the spiritual lie that has convinced society to sanctify exploitation. For too long, a compromised prosperity gospel has blessed the powerful while ignoring the suffering of the many. This study calls for a radical shift in how we read scripture and live out our faith. By mapping the ancient struggles of wealth onto today's Nigerian reality, we've seen that the "eye of the needle" is not a test of personal humility but a stark warning against systemic injustice.

The Rich Young Ruler was not just greedy. He was part of an oppressive system. Today's Nigerian elites operate within that same neopatrimonial trap, where wealth is built on extraction rather than service. The barrier to the Kingdom is not merely gluttony. It has to

do with the structural capture of justice by the powerful. But there is hope. Redemption begins when the wealthy choose to be "rich toward God" by actively dismantling these systems and serving their communities. In this way, the narrow gate becomes a pathway to national renewal.

Future work must move beyond theory. We need to hear directly from those in power about their views on wealth, and we must celebrate the stories of Nigerian churches that are already practising this "redemptive wealth" where faith means fighting for justice, not merely blessing the status quo.

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