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The Contribution of Biblical Joseph to the Economic Development of Society: Lessons for the Nigerian Youth

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INTRODUCTION

In every society, the role of the youth in economic development cannot be over-emphasized. Young people are active, vibrant, energetic and full of innovations. However, some observers have said that youthful age constitutes great challenges. According to Harris, youthful age is the age of education and experience gathering. He explains that human beings pass through four stages in life, the age of education (cradle to 25 years), the age of experience (26-40 years), the age of power (40-60 years) and the age of immortality (60-death)¹. For him, youthful age is between 18-40 years which falls under the ages of education and experience². What this implies is that young people should be pursuing education and experience. This will enable them contribute meaningfully to societal development.

Education enables the youths to acquire knowledge and skills whereas experience helps them to gain mastery of developmental processes toward economic stability; this is to say that youth play very important role in economic development in the society. For instance, most workforces in Nigeria involve young people. In the industrial sector, they form a greater number of workforces; it is the young people that are mostly factory hands, lower and middle class labour force. Imagine that there were no youth, the growth and future of any society would be at stake.

Another area of interest is in the agriculture that produces food to feed the nation. As observed by O'Donovan, enthusiasm, energy and physical strength are other significant qualities of youth (Prov. 20:29)³. Farming whether mechanized or manual requires strength and skill from the farmer. The strength and enthusiasm of the youth could be directed to engage in agricultural pursuit, the result will be appreciated.

O'Donovan also notes,

The most obvious fact about today's youth is that they are the future of the next generation- whether in the nation, in the local society or in the Church. There is no one more important to influence to train, encourage and disciple for the Lord than the youth of a nation⁴.

His view is to show that the youths should be cared for, trained and exposed to useful opportunities of development⁵. Moreover, any culture in context that does not consider the importance of young people lacks future and Churches that concentrate only on the adult and their contributions today

while their youth are left to follow worldliness will in future struggle with existence.

This paper is designed to examine the contributions of Joseph as a youth to the economic development of the society in his time. It will draw out lessons from the story of Joseph to empower Nigerian young people in career development for economic growth of the society today.

THE STORY OF JOSEPH

The story of Joseph in the Bible is cast in Genesis 37-50. Joseph was the eleventh son of Jacob. Being the first son put to birth by Jacob's most loved wife, Rachael and the son of his old age, Joseph became Jacob's favourite (Gen.37:3). Moreover, special attention given to Joseph than his other brothers put him at rival with them. His father gave him a special coat described as "richly ornamented robe" (NIV) or "tonic of many colours" (NKJV) (Gen. 37: 3). Joseph's two dreams made the brothers to hate him the more. The first was when he and his brothers were binding sheaves of corn in the field. His sheaf unexpectedly rose up while that of his brothers gathered around it and bowed down to it. In his second dream, he saw the sun, moon and eleven stars bowed down to him (Gen.37:7-9). Etok admits that dream was one of the recognized channels of revelation in the Old Testament as such Joseph's dreams cannot be considered lightly⁶. Joseph's parents and brothers held that his dreams were true message from God that will come to pass. But the brothers considered it an insult for them to become subjects to the little brother hence they plot to kill him so that the ambition of Joseph will also be exterminated.

At seventeen, Joseph was sent to visit his brothers who were grazing their father's flock near Dothan. When the brothers saw him from afar, they conspired to kill him but Reuben; the eldest brother warned them not to shed blood.⁷ Reuben proposed that he be thrown into a cistern with the hope of rescuing him latter. But when he left them a while, in his absence and based on Judah's plea, they sold him to a Midianite (Egyptian) who was also a trader. They went home to deceive his father with the evidence of Joseph's coat that wild animals devoured him.

While Joseph was a slave in Egypt, he feared God and was honest. The Lord was with Joseph and prospered him (Gen. 39:2). Potiphar noticing that Joseph was a gracious youth; he brought blessing to all aspects of Potiphar's life; his house and crops inclusive (Gen.39:5), made Joseph in charge of his affairs. At Potiphar's house, Joseph came face to face with temptation any young man would face namely sexual immorality but he did not consent to it. Joseph considered above all that sleeping with Potiphar's wife is a sin before God (Gen. 39:10). But he was unjustly flung into the prison due to the fabricated falsehood of Potiphar's wife. But God's blessing

followed him wherever he went. In the prison, he was put in charge of Pharaoh's prisoners except Pharaoh's chief cup bearer and baker to whom he served and interpreted their dream while they were in prison.

From prison, Joseph was brought to interpret Pharaoh's dreams. In one night Pharaoh dreamed that seven sleek and fat cows emerged from the Nile River while seven ugly and gaunt cows came up to eat up the sleek and fat cows. Also, he dreamed that he saw seven ears of healthy corn growing in a single stalk, then seven other ear of corn growing very thin and scoured by east wind swallowed up the healthy ones (Gen. 41:2-7). He responded that the two dreams marked the first seven years of plenty in Egypt followed by seven years period of severe famine. He went on to advise Pharaoh to set up task force to collect and store food against the years of great famine but that a discerning wise man should be put in charge. Pharaoh looked around and saw no one as wise, discerning and in light of God's spirit as Joseph. So Pharaoh commissioned Joseph to the task and next in command, that is, all Egyptians apart from Pharaoh were under Joseph (Gen.41:44).

The concluding verses of Genesis 41 records that there was famine in Egypt and other nations around them (the Ancient Near East) after the seventh year of great plenty. Joseph sold the food he had worked hard to store to Egyptians and neighbours to avert famine in Egypt.

Although scholars like Thomas Mann say that the story of Joseph contains folklores, coloured by popular imagination and embellished with themes drawn from the oral tradition of the Near East⁸. It is worthy of note that biblical stories are more than fictions. They are interesting and edifying stories that culminate to teach good precepts, morality, spirituality and the will of God for the people. Anderson accepts that "biblical account of the story of Joseph agrees with the historical setting of the second millennium as such, must have been handed down from those who knew the historical situation of the Delta very well"⁹. Delta area of Egypt was occupied by the Israelites. It is possible that generations of Hebrews were involved in the retelling of this story. Etok puts that Biblical account is not a mere story but history hence his caption "History of Joseph"¹⁰ to explicate the fact that as history, it becomes the embodiment of facts of the past worthy of emulation in the present time. The Nigerian youth can draw spiritual and moral lessons from this story to grow in their pursuit of economic development.

Some other Examples of Youths with challenging features in the Bible

Moses: His contribution to society began at a very youthful age. He was born at the time when King Pharaoh of Egypt commanded that all Hebrews who bore new male children should be thrown into the Nile while the female ones kept alive. A Hebrew woman from the tribe of Levi gave birth to Moses and tried to hide the baby in the face of this policy (Exo. 1). The daughter of

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Pharaoh rescued the baby and adopted baby Moses. Moses grew up and had passion to help those who were maltreated in Egypt. But he did this in a wrong way by incidentally killing an Egyptian. Out of fear, he escaped to Middian where he served Jethro (Priest of Middian) by keeping his flock. It was in the course of this assignment that God called him and used him to deliver the Israelites from Egyptian captivity. Other contributions of Moses includes appointment of Judges (Exo. 18:13-26), receiving the law from God, conducted census (Num. 1), he admonished Israel to keep obeying God (Deut 4) and consecrated Joshua to succeed him (Num. 27).

Wherever Moses was found, he contributed to the betterment of people's lives and the entire society. These are his areas of economic development and contributions;

- Passion to help the less privileged as he fought to liberate those who were being maltreated.
- Hard work and service as he accepted to work as a Shepherd under Jethro.
- Obedience to God's call and what God called him to do.
- Leadership/administrative skills, as he appointed Judges to assist his administration.

David: He was a chosen king by God. God sent Samuel to Jesse's house in Bethlehem to anoint one of his sons. David was always keeping his Father's flock (1Sam. 1:6). He was eventually called up and anointed to be the next king of Israel. In 1Samuel 17, he heard about how Philistines were defeating the Israelites, he came out to fight for his people and eventually defeated Goliath and the Philistines. Saul tried to kill him, but to no avail. He was later made King of Judah while Saul's son Ishbosheeth became king of Israel (1Sam 25). He later defeated Ishbosheeth in battle and united the kingdom of Israel again. He showed kindness to Mephibosheth, Jonathan's son and Saul's grandson. His main contributions were as follows:

- Hard work and service as he took care of his father's sheep at tender age.
- Fought for the welfare of the entire Israel against their enemies, the Philistine.
- United the divided kingdom of Israel again.
- He fought many wars, defeated the enemies, and brought peace to Israel again.

Josiah: He was the son of King Amon of Judah. He succeeded his father at the age of 8 and ruled for 31 years. He was the youngest king in Israel (2Kings 22). He used the book of law Hilkiah found in the temple to effect great reformation in Israel. He destroyed foreign gods and idolatry in the land and reinforced true worship of God in the land. His major contribution

was the value re-orientation and reformation in Israel. He helped Israelites to live a moral life and embraced God once again.

Nehemiah: He was a wine steward of the Emperor of Persia, Emperor Artaxerxes. When he received information about the destruction of Jerusalem, he had a burden to go and rebuild Jerusalem. He prayed and fasted for the forgiveness of his people and obtained approval from the king to travel to Judah to rebuild the city. He went and mobilized the Jews for this work. He faced opposition especially from Samballat and Tobiah who mocked them and discouraged them. Nehemiah remained dogged as he moved on with the work. He succeeded in rebuilding the city of Jerusalem after 52 days and facilitated the return of the Jews from exile (the Book of Nehemiah). His contributions include:

- Fasting and praying for his people who were in exile
- Using his contributions, connections and resources to facilitate the rebuilding of Jerusalem
- Helping the Jews to return from exile into their home land.

Esther: She was a young lady that followed her uncle, Mordecai into exile in Persia. Her uncle made her join the group of girls to the king's palace for the contest of choosing the next Queen. She eventually emerged as the Queen of the land. When Haman plotted to destroy the Jews, Esther convinced the king to reverse the plan. She gathered the Jews for three days prayer/fasting which paid off. Her major achievement was selfless destruction in a strange land. She was humble and obedient to her uncle (the book of Esther).

Daniel: He was a young man that was among the Hebrew exile in Babylonia under King Nebuchadnezzar. He interpreted dreams for the king which no sorcerer could. He also interpreted strange hand writing on the wall. The King gave him gifts and high position. When king Darius took over from Nebuchadnezzar, he was incited to make a decree that would incriminate Daniel. Daniel was a man of prayer and devotee to God. He was thrown into the den of Lions and Daniel was not devoured. Daniel was gifted in visions. He saw several visions which symbolized the rise and fall of several empires and victory of God and God's people. His contributions include:

- Using his gifts of vision and interpretations to help the nation grow.
- To contribute his administrative skills in running the affairs of the land
- Holding fast to God Almighty and praying always even in the face of threat
- Using his gift of vision to predict the future event in the land (the book of Daniel).

On the other hand, there are several references in the Bible referring to the youth. In the Old Testament, the statue of children and youths was rated same with women. Despite their economic involvement, they were hardly recognized as key players of economic development because the society was culturally venerating the place of the adult men only. Children, youths and women were somehow seen as properties of the adult men and as weaker vessels. But because God can sometimes make use of what is considered "a weak instrument" by humans. Etok holds that the theme of God's use of weak human instruments is prominent in the Bible especially in the book of Judges. For example, among the Judges, Ehud was a common man, Deborah and Jael were women, Gideon was an unknown youth, Jephthah was a bastard outlaw and Sampson was an amoral giant¹¹. In the New Testament, Jesus raised the stature of Children and Youths¹³. Olu Alana supports this view and posited that children, the youths, the poor, the weak, women and all the marginalized elements of the populace constituted the bottom rung of the Jewish Society of Jesus' days¹³. These clusters of people in the society were the prime concern constantly addressed in the preaching and teachings of Jesus.

In the New Testament, Jesus in his teachings and dealings has raised the status of youth for effective contribution on economic development of the society. In Mark's Gospel, chapter five, verses thirty- five through forty-three, Jesus raised to life a twelve year old youth, Chapter Seven, verses twenty-four through thirty, he healed the daughter of the Syrophoenician's woman. In chapter nine (9-14), Jesus healed the epileptic boy. Alana portrays that Jesus' healing to these youth is as a result of the love and compassion for the young people¹³. In addition, this healing was possible because Jesus was aware of the role of young people as the future of next generation. He decided to keep them alive, healthy and strong so that with vigor and strength, they could build their society, economically, religiously, morally, politically and socially.

In the teachings of Jesus, the parable of the prodigal son (Luke 15:11-31), and the ten virgins (Matt. 25:1-13) although parables of Kingdom, were examples of his message to the youth, if they must redeem their generation, they should not be wayward and unconcern but God expects them to be discipline, prompt, courageous and lively. On this note, Paul advised Timothy to flee youthful desire and pursue righteousness (2Tim. 2:22). It is generally conceived in every culture that youth are symbols of continuity. Even in the culture of the New Testament where the activities of Jesus were encapsulated.

ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT AS A CONCEPT

Walter Rodney conceives development from individual and group levels. In the individual level, development is the increase in the skill of a person and capacity for material well-being. At group level, development is the external relationship for the well-being of the people¹⁴. From this sense, it is clear that development is used in an exclusive economic sense. Therefore Rodney defines economic development as the increase in capacity of members of the society¹⁵. This depends on the way such society understands the law of nature (science) and diversifying tool (technology) to harness available resources for the well-being of the people¹⁶.

Economists would measure economic development in increase in the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) of any society. It is calculated based on the per capital income of the nation's population. But in clear terms, economic development is the increase in skills, food security, access to basic needs of life like water, food, shelter, health, education, job and security. Once these are improving and poverty level is reducing, we can say that economic development is taking place.

The Panoramic Review of Economic Development in Nigeria

As Odu and others observe, Nigeria is a country endowed with abundant human and material resources. The country has land area of 1923, 773km² with varied vegetation and quality soil types for agriculture. The country is blessed with mineral resources. It is one of the leading producers of petroleum products. Between 1960 and 1973, Agriculture was the mainstay of Nigerian economy. It contributed 80% of the total earnings. From 1973, crude oil became the mainstay of Nigerian economic resources; people started getting jobs in the oil sector. Agriculture was on the decrease until 1986 when Structural Adjustment Policy (SAP) was introduced¹⁷. SAP came into Nigeria to foster industrial development. This was so because the civil war of 1967 had destroyed the economy to a deplorable extent¹⁸.

After the civil war, Industries were developed, export processing zones were established across the country and the private sectors involvement in the economy was enhanced; more private schools emerged and private companies. In 1994, Structural Adjustment Programme (SAP) was reversed because of the 1993 crisis arising from the annulment of June 12 election (Abiola's Election). Since then, political instability continued to affect the country's economic development.

In 1999, the military handed over power to civilian rule, which was being led by President Obasanjo. His major economic development was in the area of telecommunication development. GSM communication system entered into Nigeria which created a lot of employment opportunities. Otoghagua reports that between 1999 and 2007 when President Obasanjo

ruled, more crisis and poverty rocked the country. His tenure was characterized by huge cases of corruption and election rigging¹⁹. These vices can hamper economic development.

From 2007 till date, the YaAdua and Goodluck Jonathan Presidency had tried to remedy the economic situation of the country. But YaAdua died in office achieving only amnesty for the Niger Delta Militants. Goodluck Jonathan is commended among all Nigeria's Presidents for engaging youth on programmes for both youth and economic development in Nigeria. He removed subsidy from oil sector and channeled the funds towards job creation and infrastructural development. He established the Subsidy Reinvestment Programme (SURE-P), Youth with Innovation (YOUWIN) and Entrepreneurship development by the National Directorate of Employment. Jonathan also embarked on massive infrastructural Development – road construction, rail transportation rehabilitation, rehabilitation of airports and Agricultural development programmes. Above all, he created grounds for free, fair and credible elections in Nigeria when he declared that “the ambition of one person is not worth the blood of Nigerians”²⁰. All these efforts of the Goodluck administration brought about economic development as Nigeria rose to the position of the largest economy in Africa with the highest GDP above countries in Africa such as South Africa. Today Nigeria's economy is driven by the oil and agricultural sector. The privatization of the power sectors and encouragement of Small and Medium Scale Enterprises (SMEs) have given rise to a robust economic development in Nigeria.

LESSONS FOR NIGERIAN YOUTHS

From the biblical Joseph and other youths in the Bible examined in the paper The biblical youths so far examined reveals that there are several lessons for Nigerian youths could learn and apply to enhance economic development of Nigeria. Nigerian youths are already doing a lot to support the economic development of Nigeria in the areas of skill development, education, entrepreneurial activities, entertainment industries, industrial sector, banking sector, oil sector and even in politics. However, there are distinctive qualities worthy of emulation from the Bible. They are:

1. Consistent prayers and trust in God. What informed the successes of Joseph as a young man was his firmness in trusting and relying on God. Daniel prayed three times daily; David used names of God to defeat Goliath and so on. If any Nigerian youth must make meaningful contribution(s) to our economy, she/he needs to put God first in all endeavours in prayer and also depends on divine biddings found in the scripture.

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2. Honesty in business is another lesson that Nigerian youth can learn from the portrait of Joseph. For Instance, Joseph was found to be honest in the home of Potiphar. He was made in charge of his master's affair including Potiphar's house and crops. Nigeria needs youth like Joseph who can be trusted to work honestly and be channels of blessing to the economy of the nation.
3. Hard work and diligence were prevalent traits in the life of Joseph. If he was not hard working, he would not have entered Egypt as a Hebrew slave, and became its prime minister. He was the hero of his age, the saviour of his country, the most successful man of his day. In the *Bible Illustrator*, Joseph became so great because he was so good and he was a noble man because he was a thorough man of God²¹. If not hard work in form of storing up surplus food against days when there will be food shortage, Egypt would have been in difficulty with severe famine like other nations and Israelites and people from nations of the Near East would have found it difficult to survive.
4. Youthfulness should not be seen as an excuse for ineffectiveness in Nigerian economy. Joseph and other youth were called by God and they acted on their conviction that they can do what was expected of them. Inadequacies and inabilities should not prompt any Nigerian youth from being available to be used as a promoter of economic development.
5. Nigerian youth should learn to emulate Joseph and other biblical youths on proper use of divine mandate. Joseph had the opportunity to commit sexual immorality with his master's wife because he was in charge of Potiphar's estate. But he was conscious of the limit of his power. Mushibi in *African Bible Commentary* affirms this point that divine authority in the Bible makes it clear that individuals are not responsible to themselves and should not engage in affairs that promote selfish tendencies²². Youths in Nigeria should shun selfness and other sinful acts such as armed robbery, kidnapping, embezzlement and vices of any kind prevalent today.
6. Other characteristic traits of Joseph were talent/skills identification, development and utilization. Most of the biblical youths examined here used their talents. For instance, Joseph and Daniel and others interpreted dreams and made it. Talents are gift from God. They are deposited in the life of every person. It is important for every youth to identify his/ her talent/ gift, develop and use it to enhance

development of the Nation. Nigerian Youths should pursue their area of calling, develop themselves there for excellence.

7. Biblical teaching on youth and young people admonishes parents and adult to take up responsible roles such as to train, disciple, mentor the young ones exemplarily and preparing them to meet up the future challenges. Alana admits that “most African adult are often too critical of the youth in the church”²³. Obio supports this view too²⁴. Some adult sometimes criticize young ones negatively and complain about their dressing, youthful discussions and dances rating them as worldly. They should not abandon them rather imbibe the biblical principles of bringing them up in the way of the Lord following the example of Joseph and other youths mentioned in this paper.

CONCLUSION

Biblical youths like Joseph, Daniel and others made meaningful impacts in their generation. Some of the qualities that helped them includes putting God first, effective use of their talents and hardwork/service. The adult Christians in the Bible, Paul, Eunice did not resent the youths but gave them godly instructions to help them become useful in the society. If Nigerian youths and adult should follow these examples, young people are likely to contribute more meaningfully to economic developments of our nation

END NOTES

1. Hebert Harris. *The 12 universal laws of success*. Willington: life skills Inst. Inc., 2004. p.26.
2. Ibid. p.26.
3. Wilbur O'Donovan Jr. *Bilical Christianity in Mordern Africa*. Carlisle: Peternoster Publishing, 2000, p. 206.
4. Ibid. pp.206-207
5. Ibid. p.206.
6. Sylvanus Etuk, *Hebrew History and Religion: The Covenanted People*. Port Harcourt: University of Pourt Harcourt Press, 1995. p.52
7. Blood signifies life and life belongs to God. So God alone has power take away the life of human Beings. Etuk puts that “no one has right to shed blood but God” p.53.
8. Thomas Hann cited in Bernard Anderson, *Understanding the Old Testament*, Eaglewood: Prentice –Hall 1966, p.30.
9. Bernard Anderson., *Understanding the Old Testament*, Eaglewood: Prentice –Hall 1966, p.30.

10. Sylvanus Udo Etok. *Hebrew History and Religion: The Covenanted People*. Port Harcourt: University of Port Harcourt Press, 1995. Pp136-137.

11. Ibid, p.137

12. Olu Emmanuel Alana. “Jesus’ Teaching on Children and Youths in the Synoptic Gospels” in *Biblical Studies and Youth Development in Africa*. Biblical Studies series No. 8, ed. S. O. Abogunrin. Ibadan: Nigerian Association of Biblical Studies (NABIS), 2011. pp. 201.

13. Ibid, pp. 201-205

14. Walter Rodney, *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa*. London: Bpgle- L’Ouverture, 1972, p.10.

15. Ibid

16. Ibid

17. Ushie E. N. Odu and Others. *Major Issues in Nigerian Political economy*. Calabar: Ushie Printing and Publishing, 2001. pp. 17-19.

18. Ibid

19. E. Otoghagua. *Regimes of Nigerian Head of States*. 3rd ed. Benin City: Otoghagua Ent., 2007. P. 377.

20. The statement, “the ambition of one person is not worth the blood of any Nigerian” was made by President Goodluck Jonathan during the release of 2015 presidential election result. He made a phone call to Buhari, the flag bearer of APC and his opponent conceding defeat so that peace will reign in Nigerian soil.

21. *The Biblical Illustrator* Copyright © 2002, 2003, 2006 Ages Software, Inc. and Biblesoft, Inc.).

22. Patrick Mushibi, “Authority and the Bible” in *African Bible Commentary*. Adeyemoed. Nairobi: WordAlive, 2006.

23. Olu Emmanuel Alana. p.205.

24. Bassey Obio. *Youth and Vision: How to Fulfill your Destiny*. Unpublished Book still in press, 2010. p.13.

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