

Isaac's Approach to Economic Recession in Genesis 26:1-4, 12-16 in the Context of Nigerians' Search for Greener Pastures Abroad

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Abstract

The phenomenon of migration has been recorded to be a part of human history. Humans migrate for different reasons, such as economic, social, religious, academic, and security purposes. The Bible contains accounts of humans who migrated for similar reasons. One of such persons was Isaac. In Genesis 26: 1-4, Isaac migrated from the land of Canaan to dwell among the Philistines because of the economic recession in Canaan. The study examined Isaac's approach to economic recession in his days with a view to examining and reflecting on the Nigerian society. This study explored the responses of individuals, society and government in Nigeria to the issue of economic recession. The study adopted historical and exegetical methods. It was discovered that in the Bible times, before and during the time of Isaac, there were cases of economic recession and there was movement of humans as a response to this challenge. This is also the case in Nigeria today. There are strong indications that many Nigerians emigrate in search for greener pastures due to the economic downturn in the country. Findings indicated that visa applications by Nigerians to embassies of the United States, the United Kingdom, Canada and the United Arab Emirates have increased in the past 12 months. The goal of this paper is to educate Nigerians that migration is not always the only solution to economic recession, there are other ways out, but it takes insight, innovation, divine guidance and direction to discover and access them. This study, therefore, recommended that, for Nigeria to drastically discourage her citizens from moving out of the country, she should ensure security of lives and properties, and provide better jobs so as to create a safe and conducive environment for her citizens.

Keywords: Abroad, Approach, Economy Recession, Famine, Greener Pastures, Nigerians

INTRODUCTION

It is an undeniable fact that recession is as old as the world. This is because nations across the globe have experienced recessions at one time or the other in their national history. The response of individuals, nations and leaders to this challenge has not been the same. Sometimes, the causes of recessions are difficult to find. However, according to Femi Adesina, past governments are to blame for Nigeria's economic recession under Buhari. The recession that came in 2016 was inevitable. Nobody could have stopped it due to some actions and inactions of

the government that left (Adesina, 2021). There are different types of recessions, but the one that this study intends to consider is the economic recession.

It is expedient to define the two basic principles that constitute the fulcrum of this study. These are: economic recession and greener pastures. According to C.A. Alisi, economic recession is a period of general economic decline usually as a contraction in the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) for six months (two consecutive quarters) or longer. The period is usually marked by high unemployment, stagnant wages and fall in retail sales, accompanied by high increase of inflation and resulting in low purchasing power of many people. When a country is in the phase of recession, the economy fails to utilize its resources effectively (Nwachukwu, 2020). Mailafia is of the opinion that economic recession stagnates increase in wages and raises the number of people on low pay as well as increases unemployment and underemployment (Mailafia, 2017). The National Bureau of Economic Research (NBER, 2008) defines recession as a significant decline in economic activity spread across the economy, lasting more (Alisi, 2013) than a few months, normally visible in a real Gross Domestic Product (GDP), real income, employment and industrial production and wholesale-retail sales. Eneji *et al*, 2013 observed that the current economic crisis confronting Africa's most populous country has had a catastrophic and debilitating effect on the generality of the Nigerian populace. Sadly, economic recession is a period when employers, both public and private sectors of the economy, are compelled to place embargo on further employment while others adopt either retrenchment or pay cut as a survival policy (Omololu, 1990).

Greener pastures is an idiomatic expression used to refer to a change that is for the better. It can be used to refer to a job, a country or even a romantic partnership (Webster, 1975). The emphasis in this study is on relocating to a more promising country.

In the Bible times, there were cases of economic recession. One of them is that which happened in the time of Isaac in Genesis 26: 1-4. This study explored Isaac's approach to economic recession in his days. This paper also examined how Nigerians are responding to the economic recession that has bedeviled the Nigerian nation today.

ISAAC'S APPROACH TO ECONOMIC RECESSION IN GENESIS 26:1-4, 12- 26

Reflection of Economic Recession in Genesis 26: 1-4 in the Nigerian Society

The last two decades have proven extremely thorny for the Nigerian economy. The economic situation was so bad that the Central Bank of Nigeria (CBN) and the Minister of Finance issued Communiqué No. 109 of the Monetary Policy Committee Meeting of Monday and Tuesday 19th and 20th September, 2016, and announced that the Nigerian economy was in recession. The set of macroeconomic data released by the National Bureau of Statistics (Afolabi, 2017) also proclaimed that the economy was in bad shape and has indeed slid into recession, contracting to -2.06 percent in the second quarter of 2016 after an initial negative growth of -0.36 percent in the first quarter of the same year. Since then, the term "economic recession" has become a subject of commentary by different shades of analysts and public affairs commentators, and has also been a daily song on the lips of every Nigerian (Noko, 2016). It comes as no surprise that economic commentators, Onyinye Nwachukwu and Chux Ohai, in their article, lamented the acute poverty and hunger being experienced by Nigerians as a result of the downturn of the economy (Nwachukwu, 2018).

On Thursday, October 7, 2021, a woman identified as Yusuf Bosede Khadija reportedly committed suicide at Okuhapa in Obangede, in the Okehi Local Government Area of Kogi State over her inability to cater for her children. She could not watch the children suffer in hunger. So,

she jumped into a well (saharareporters.com). Due to recession, many are anxious, worried, stressed and ill. Mental ill-health is rampant today. A man lost sanity, killed wife, son and 6 other people recently (saharareporters.com).

Unsurprisingly, finding work and escaping economic hardship are the most frequently cited reasons for considering emigration. The most likely destinations for potential emigrants are North America and Europe; only small minorities consider other African countries. In February, a civil servant, Ayo Oludejim, a geologist, emigrated to Canada with his wife and three children through its immigration scheme. He described Canada as “next to heaven.” Dr. Osahon Enabulele wrote concerning the medical doctors:

More medical practitioners seek opportunities abroad. The immediate former National President of the Nigerian Medical Association, Dr. Osahon Enabulele, who confirmed this development, said: The challenges facing the professionals still remain and an average of 650 doctors leave the country annually. Last year for instance, about 640 doctors left the country. Currently, there are close to 3,500 Nigerian doctors in the UK and 5,000 in the US. (Omooba, 2016)

Factors responsible for economic recession include: lack of policy directions on the part of government, drop in price of crude oil, over-reliance on crude oil, lack of economic diversification, state of violence among the constituent units and military groups, greed, unfavourable exchange rate, and corruption (Ikpor, 2016). To combat corruption, the Nigerian government promulgated the under-listed laws: The National Drugs Law Enforcement Agency (NDLEA); Money Laundering Act of 1995; Advance Free Fraud (otherwise known as 419) and related Offences Act of 1995; Banks and Other Financial Institutions Act of 1991; and Miscellaneous Offences Act of 1985 (Samuel, 2020).

FACTORS RESPONSIBLE FOR NIGERIANS’ EMIGRATION

Research by Crawley, Düvell *et al.* recorded several different reasons for migration mentioned by survey respondents along the Central Mediterranean route. They listed, amongst others: intergenerational conflicts related to family and marriage, religious obligations, lack of livelihood opportunities, etc. (Crawley, 2021). The International Organization for Migration (IOM), migration profile on Nigeria also stresses that the enduring outbreaks of intrastate violence in the forms of ethno-religious, political, criminal and resource struggles are key drivers in the decision to leave Nigeria. The most challenging, however, has been the rise of influence and power of the Boko Haram, particularly in the north-eastern region of the country (Isiugo-Abanihe, 2014). The motivation to flee because of conflict or security issues in the country is often ignored. Migrants frequently say that they ‘seek a better life’, and migration is their way of achieving this (Cummings, 2015).

In the chosen passage, there is a similar scenario, where Isaac, the son of Abraham, intended to leave his location at Gerar and go to Egypt because of the famine in the land. But God instructed Isaac not to leave where he was but to remain, promising to bless him. The promise was accomplished later in the chapter. In fact, God so prospered him that he became the envy of the Philistines (Genesis 26:12-14). The question this paper seeks to answer is: “can’t we make our own grasses green? In other words, is travelling abroad the only solution to economic recession?

Isaac was the second of the patriarchs of Israel, the only son of Abraham and Sarah. Although Sarah was past the age of childbearing, God promised Abraham and Sarah that they would have a son and Isaac was born. Isaac got married to Rebecca; the union was blessed with twins- Esau and Jacob. The descendants of Jacob are known today as Israel. In both the Old and the New Testaments, God is called the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob because with them God's relationship of promise and purpose was fixed for all those who descended from them.

Israel as a nation is a very dry country, particularly in the area around Beer Lahai Roi in the Negev where Isaac lived (Genesis 24:62, 25:11b), and thus it was not surprising that famine would strike again (Adeyemo, 2006). It appears that Isaac considered going to Egypt as his father had done. Egypt was a prosperous country in ancient times and the abundance of water in the Nile meant that it was spared the worst of famines. However, the Lord explicitly told Isaac not to go down to Egypt (Genesis 26:2) but to stay in the land of Canaan (Genesis 26:3). God may have said this to avoid Isaac experiencing the same difficulties as his father had in Egypt (Adeyemo, 2006). So, instead of going to Egypt, Isaac went to Abimelech, king of the Philistines, in Gerar (26:1, 6). Abimelech was the standard title for the kings of that region. Just like Isaac, many Nigerians are leaving the country to search for greener pastures in other countries due to economic recession in Nigeria.

CHALLENGES ISAAC ENCOUNTERED AT GERAR AND HARDSHIPS OF NIGERIAN EMIGRANTS

1. Death Threat Resulting in Fear which Led to Lying

Isaac's wife, Rebekah, was beautiful (26:7). Isaac was nervous when moving into a new environment with such a beautiful wife (12:12, 20:11). Isaac thought that the safest way to avoid trouble because of her was to claim that she was a blood relative. In that way, the worst that would happen would be that someone might ask to marry her. There would be no need to murder her husband before doing so. Therefore, when the men of Gerar asked Isaac about Rebekah, he said, she is my sister (12:12, 20:11).

In like manner, some Nigerians, in processing visa and even upon arrival overseas, involve themselves in all kinds of unwholesome activities like faking documents, buying passports belonging to other people, and falsifying international passports and identity. To prolong their stay in Europe and avoid being deported, some contract marriages with European women. Through such marriage, a migrant can procure resident permit and even work permit. But all are deceptions to gain favour and security like Isaac.

2. Wicked Acts against Isaac

Isaac, a refugee, rapidly became one of the richest men in the country. The Philistines expressed their envy by depriving Isaac of water for his animals. They stopped up the wells that Abraham's servants had dug, filling them with earth (26:15). What wickedness! Many Nigerians suffer greater hardships while on transition and even while on the other side. Week-in, week-out, local and international media are awash with stories and pictures of bodies of Nigerians and Africans washed ashore by the tide in the Mediterranean Sea. The hazardous crossing of the Mediterranean by Nigerian migrants on perilous boats has been catastrophic. So many people have perished while the few that survived ended up in detention or on political asylum. According to UNHCR data (2014), in an article titled, "Missing Migrants Project," by the end of

2016, a total of 5,098 migrants were recorded to have lost their lives at sea while trying to cross the Mediterranean.

In a MEDMIG research project by Crawley et al. in 2015, which involved interviewing migrants arriving in Italy and Malta, over 75 percent of them reported to have faced violence en route Italy. Majority of those who experienced some form of abuse reported Algeria, Niger and foremost Libya as the primary locations (Crawley, 2016). The main risk associated with the route is the conditions when driving through the desert. On crammed pick-up trucks which are often overloaded with up to 100 persons, migrants risk falling off. The lack of food and water along the dry and hot route are common for this particular leg of the journey. While a lot of research focuses on the deaths in the Mediterranean Sea, which is by no means less significant, some experts believe that fatalities in the desert could reach even higher numbers (Malakooti, 2021). Apart from dehydration, starvation and the risk of falling off speeding trucks, it seems to have become common for smugglers to leave migrants behind in the desert when these become ill and risk contaminating the rest of the group (Malakooti, 2021). Other risks migrants face include random detentions by smugglers when crossing the desert, being exposed to exploitation and abuse by smugglers, robbery, and kidnapping for ransom during their journey. (https://www.iom.int/sites/default/files/situation_reports/file/Europe-MediterraneanMigration, 2015).

Apart from health problems, psychological or physical in nature, migrants can also face abuse and exploitation within migrant communities. Especially for Nigerian nationals, cases were reported where women were recruited for sex work by other Nigerian migrants (Malakooti, 2021). Olukayode, a resident in London, observed that many medical doctors, engineers, lawyers and accountants are performing demeaning jobs such as cab driving, cleaning and security jobs in European cities. There is an urgent need for the Nigerian government to restore the dignity of Nigerians that is being daily eroded by uncontrolled migration (Olukayode, The Nigerian Guardian, February 22, 2004).

Mrs Dolapo Ajakaiye, a Human Resource Manager, described her experience in her book titled "Greener Pastures: A Reflection of Challenges Migrants Pass Through in the Foreign Land":

In Nigeria we have the family network. It's your mother, your mother-in-law, cousins, friends, etc. The first shock I got in the UK was when I wanted to go for a job interview and I wanted my neighbour to look after my three-year-old daughter, she asked me to pay her 5 pounds. I was shocked. I had to pay from nothing that I did not have. I started learning. She explained her plight further, When I got to a stage when my student visa expired. I went to renew it but I couldn't. And I found myself at that point in time where they told you that I can't renew (Dolapo, 2021).

Some who entered illegally live in dilapidated buildings situated far from the 12 cities from where they go to town to do odd jobs, while those who do not have jobs roam the street of Dubai, taking pictures in centers of attractions and posting them on their Facebook page for people back at home to see (Sunday Magazine, November 26, 2017).

3. Deportation

Isaac's wealth became such a threat that Abimelech told him to move away; you have become too powerful for us (26:16). So he moved away from the town (26:17-26). A number of Nigerians have been deported because of minor mistakes, even at times for unjustifiable reasons, while some are either enslaved or incarcerated (jailed). The data by the U.S. Homeland

Security's sub-unit, the Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE), published on Track, a global tracking website, show that between 2003 and 2018, out of the 5,892 Nigerian nationals deported, 3,019 - making 51% - have a record of criminal convictions, while the remaining 2,783 have no record of criminal charges. In the larger scope, Nigerians, being the largest African population in the U.S., make up 15% of the 20,178 African immigrants that have been deported (Babatunde, Premium Times, July 1, 2020).

Furthermore, it has a negative impact on the nation. As noted by Docquier, F. and A. Bhargava, in a study tagged, "Medical Brain Drain: Physicians' Emigration Rates, 1991–2004", migration has profound effect on economic development, which could be negative or positive. For instance:

1. Brain drain occurs when significant numbers of highly skilled nationals leave their countries of origin to seek employment or establish businesses abroad. It has a negative effect on the economies of developing countries, because the skills of remaining nationals are not sufficient to grow industries, academia and other sectors of the economy.
2. Brain waste occurs when skilled migrants engage in menial occupations abroad, resulting in deskilling.
3. Brain gain can be achieved through the return of individuals who gained skills abroad through temporary migration.

The challenge before the Nigerian government is to reverse brain drain, or, at the very least, mitigate its effects on social and economic development, while optimizing brain gain and minimizing brain waste of nationals abroad (Docquier, 2014).

There are at least three things that stand out from what the Lord told Isaac in the passage.

1. I am the God of your father Abraham (20:24a). God is not just identifying Himself; He is also reaffirming His commitment. As the Lord was with Abraham, so He will be with Isaac. As His power was seen in the life of Abraham, so it will also be seen in the life of Isaac.
2. Do not be afraid, for I am with you (26:24b). With the opposition that Isaac just received from the herdsmen of Gerar, he had reasons to be afraid. However, with the Lord on his side, he had no cause to fear. The Lord visits those He cares for and assures them of His presence.
3. I will bless you and will increase the number of your descendants for the sake of my servant Abraham (26:24c). The Lord reaffirms His promise to Abraham (12:2, 15:5, 17:5-6) and to Isaac also (26:4). He knows our weaknesses and comes to encourage us when we could easily be discouraged.

He planted crops in that land and in the same year reaped a hundredfold, because the Lord blessed him (26:12)

No matter the weather or other enemies of crops, where the hand of the Lord is, there is bound to be a good harvest. The Lord blesses those who place their trust in Him. Isaac was at Gerar because the Lord had ordered him to stay there for a while, saying "and I will be with you and will bless you" (16:3a). He is thus in the Lord's place, at the Lord's time and for the Lord's purpose. So the Lord looked after him and his wealth continued to grow until he became very wealthy (26:13). Isaac might have thought that he would become rich by going to a rich country like Egypt. But the Lord gave him far more than he would have found in Egypt because he trusted the Lord and listened to Him. It is an important step of faith in a difficult test such as a

famine! When a challenge comes, Christians must be patient (Rm. 12:12) and discern God's way so as to act wisely rather than rushing to an easy solution.

ISAAC'S RESPONSE TO ECONOMIC RECESSION

1. Obedience to Divine Instruction.

"Do not go down to Egypt," God told Isaac (Genesis 26:2).

Do not descend into Egypt as a result of famine, v2. Egypt was the house of bondage where they were held captive before deliverance and it stands for a place of backsliding, sin and the world where it takes extra grace to practice Christianity. Any place, practice or activity you are not led to by God is your Egypt. Abraham, Isaac's father, made the same mistake and it was catastrophic (Genesis 12:10-19). The appeal and apparent prosperity of Egypt were so compelling that Isaac forgot at first; he wanted to travel down to Egypt. In times of economic hardships, it is always logical, appealing and natural to think first of Egyptian (the world) methods and approach before thinking of spiritual implications. As the end of wrong decisions during economic turndown were disastrous for the father of faith and his son Isaac, so will it be for all saints who follow the same example.

Obedience is an essential part of God's covenant with humanity. God commits Himself to fulfill His promises, but He also expects His people to live in obedience to Him. Seek for divine direction as to what to do and adhere to it. What saved Isaac and his family was that he heard the clear voice of God on the matter. God may ask you to relocate or He may just open your mind to ideas of what to do to prosper ((Kwakpovwe, 2021). Dolapo Ajakaiye, a Human Resource Manager who trains Nigerians in the diaspora and a number of foreigners, opined that if you are led to travel abroad, do your research well. She continued,

What am I going there to do? What visa status am I going with? A lot of people come on visiting status visa and at the end they want to stay. You have lost it from day one because there is no way forward for you. Ask yourself: If I am coming on a student visa, do I have money to pay for my fees? Even though they give you right to work for 20 hours per week, those 20 hours is not for you to pay your fees. It is for you as a student to be able to pay for your utility bills and other minor things (Dolapo, 2021).

2. Trusting God and His Word.

"I will bless you," God promised Isaac (Genesis 26:3).

Psalm 37:19 says "In times of disaster they will not wither; in days of famine they will enjoy plenty." Isaac trusted God and God fulfilled His word; "The man became rich and his wealth continued to grow until he became very wealthy." Indeed, times are hard, but in such a time, God wants man to trust Him for guidance, direction, provisions and help in all areas. The patriarchs and matriarchs of faith trusted Him, and they were not put to shame.

3. Hard Work

"Isaac planted crops" (Genesis 26:12).

"Isaac had so many flocks and herds" (Genesis 26:12).

Also, Nigerians need to start looking inwards on how to make our nation a better place, instead of running away from it. Nigerians have unique talents and until everyone begins to use them to their fullest, greener pastures may not be seen. There's no place like home and Nigeria is the

home, a peculiar nation that God has endowed with bountiful resources that everyone can harness and prosper. When Nigerians' potentials are nurtured and utilized, Nigerian will blossom into something very beautiful that everyone would be proud of. "We can make our grasses green if we decide to water it"(Dolapo, 2021). But this calls for hard work.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The European Union leaders should replicate the European technological transformation in Africa. Europe is like an umbilical cord to Africa. Europeans should take pride in developing Africa.

Africa and indeed Nigeria must put their house in order. Nigeria is naturally well endowed and with highly enterprising citizens. Leaders should stop monopolizing the resources of the country.

The essence of leadership is to grow the economy to be able to sustain the burgeoning population. Nigerians can replicate Europe's example through selfless leadership.

The Nigerian government should strengthen its educational sector, improve its infrastructural deficit and revive the economy to engage its large population productively.

Nigerians should engage themselves in self-reorientation on what they consider valuable to them.

There should be a societal reorientation. Material possession is being prioritized over diligence, hard work, consistency; these should discontinue.

The government should be proactive in performing its role. They should be more pragmatic in revamping the economy.

Herder-farmer conflict should be tackled head-on to encourage farmers to return to the field and save the country from the impending famine.

Everyone should return to work; there is dignity in labour. But how can people work in an insecure environment? Even domestic investors are not expanding because of fear of insecurity. Therefore, government must tackle insecurity.

Urgent population control is needed as a practical measure to reduce poverty in Nigeria.

The government should partner with the private sector in achieving the much-needed industrialization and the acquisition of production technologies to speedily facilitate job creation. The Nigeria government needs to restore the dignity of Nigerians being eroded by uncontrolled migration. If indeed the youths are the human capital of the nation, they should not be allowed to be carted away into the 21st century trans-Saharan slavery.

CONCLUSION

Running away from one's native country may not necessarily bring about the solution to the problems of economic recession (poverty, suffering or lack of gainful employment). Today,

some are running away from many third world countries to the developed world with the idea that "money grows on trees" there. Many of such people get stranded; some get involved in crimes and are imprisoned. The solution to this and any other similar problem is to seek the face of God in prayer and faith and receive definite guidance and instruction. Many, in their desperation to leave their country, go to countries where there is no true worship of God. For such believers, they simply lose their faith. And keeping one's faith in God in the midst of challenging economy or otherwise (like Isaac did) must be of topmost priority to Christians.

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