

# Prosperity in the Old Testament<sup>1</sup>

by

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Prosperity Theology is a theological problem in Nigeria and beyond. Prosperity Theology is a theology that teaches that a Christian will be prosperous if he or she is faithful. The focus of this theology is, as its name suggests, prosperity. Many studies have warned against the dangers of this theology. Femi Adeleye's *Preachers of a Different Gospel*, for example, is an excellent study of this subject.<sup>2</sup>

A quick reading in the Old Testament might suggest that this part of the Bible supports Prosperity Theology. The words "prosperity" and "prosperous" occur at significant times in different English translations of the Bible. For example, the *New International Version* (NIV)<sup>3</sup> says that if Joshua follows the Book of the Law, he will be "prosperous and successful" (Josh 1:8). So does the Old Testament indeed teach Prosperity Theology? This paper will examine this question.

## Hebrew words for "prosper" and "prosperity"

There are a variety of Hebrew words for "prosper" and "prosperity." This study will consider only a few.

A basic Hebrew word for "prosper" is *tsaleach*. In the Qal it means to "advance" or "prosper"; in the Hiphil it means to "make prosperous," "bring to successful issue" or "show, experience, prosperity."<sup>4</sup> The word is used about 65 times in the Hebrew Old Testament.

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<sup>1</sup> This paper was first presented to the Jos-Bukuru Theological Society in December 4, 2013.

<sup>2</sup> Femi Adeleye, *Preachers of a Different Gospel* (Bukuru: African Christian Textbooks, 2011).

<sup>3</sup> All English translations of the Bible are taken from the *New International Version*, occasionally modified to reflect better the sense of the Hebrew.

<sup>4</sup> F. Brown, S. Driver, C. Briggs, *A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975), p. 852.

The word is used in a variety of ways in the Old Testament. It is used about 8 times of the Spirit of God or an evil spirit coming mightily on a person (e.g., Judg 14:6,9; 1 Sam 10:10; 11:6). Four times Genesis 24 talks of the success of the journey of Abraham's servant (Gen 24:21,40,42,56). The word is used 4 times of the false prophets' and Micaiah's advice to King Ahab to go into battle and be successful (1 Kgs 22:12,15; 2 Chr 18:11,14).

Of interest to our study, though, is the link between righteous living and prosperity. The first psalm tells us that whatever the righteous person does "prosper" (Ps 1:3). But the wicked person, according to Deuteronomy, "will be unsuccessful" in everything that he or she does (Deut 28:29). In the book of Joshua, as we have seen, God tells Joshua that he will be "prosperous and successful" if he keeps the law (Josh 1:8). King David tells his son Solomon to "keep the law of the law of Yahweh your God. Then you will have success" (1 Chr 22:12-13).

The historical writers used *tsaleach* in their retelling of Israel's history. The righteous person is the one who will normally succeed. Three times in the Potiphar story we read that God prospered and gave success to Joseph (Gen 39:2,3,23). The post-exilic historians tell us that righteous persons often succeeded. Solomon, for example, "prospered" (1 Chr 29:23). King Abijah warned King Jeroboam that he would not succeed (2 Chr 13:12). But good King Asa's people "built and prospered" (2 Chr 14:7). King Jehoshaphat told his people to believe in the prophets and they would "be successful" (2 Chr 20:20). Righteous King Hezekiah "succeeded in everything he undertook" (2 Chr 32:30). But wicked King Jehoiachin and his offspring would not succeed (Jer 22:30). However, Nehemiah told his opponents, "The God of heaven will give us success" (Neh 2:20). The theological message is that the righteous person will be prosperous or succeed.

This usage is paralleled by the Hebrew word *sakal*. This word is used mostly in the Hiphil form where it sometimes means to "prosper" or "have success."<sup>5</sup> In a few key passages in Deuteronomy and the Deuteronomistic History, we see a close link between obeying the law and prosperity. In Deuteronomy, Moses says, "Carefully follow the terms of this covenant, so that you may prosper in everything you do" (Deut 29:9). (The covenant here is the Sinaitic covenant.) In the first chapter of Joshua, *sakal* is used in collocation with *tsaleach*: "then you will be prosperous and successful" (Josh 1:8). David's final words to his son Solomon were a reminder to walk in God's ways and to keep his law "so that you may prosper in all you do" (1

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<sup>5</sup> Brown, Driver and Briggs, *A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament*, p. 968.

Kgs 2:3). Later in this history we learn that Hezekiah “trusted in Yahweh, the God of Israel. . . . And Yahweh was with him; he was successful in whatever he undertook” (2 Kgs 18:5-7).

This brief survey of only two Hebrew words suggests a link between faithful living and prosperity. Apparently, a righteous person should be prosperous.

### **The Sinaitic covenant**

There are a variety of covenants in the Old Testament: the Noahic covenant, two Abrahamic covenants, the Davidic covenant and others.<sup>6</sup> But perhaps the most basic Old Testament covenant is the Sinaitic covenant.

The Sinaitic covenant was formed after the exodus from Egypt. (The purpose of the exodus was not primarily social liberation but the precondition for entering into a covenant relation with Yahweh.), Exodus 19-24 describe the formation of the covenant. After receiving the law, young bulls were killed and their blood was used to seal this bilateral agreement. This blood was sprinkled both on Yahweh’s altar and on the people to ratify the bilateral covenant. This blood was called “the blood of the covenant” (Ex 24:8), a term much later used by Jesus in the Last Supper (cf. Mk 14:24, par.).

The terms of this covenant or agreement are spelled out in detail in the book of Deuteronomy. Deuteronomy 28 is particularly relevant. The words suggest a prosperity theology:

If you fully obey Yahweh your God and carefully follow all his commands I give you today, Yahweh your God will set you high above all the nations on earth. . . . You will be blessed in the city and blessed in the country. The fruit of your womb will be blessed, and the crops of your land . . . . You will be blessed when you come in and when you go out. . . . However, if you do not obey Yahweh your God . . . all these curses will come upon you and overtake you: You will be cursed in the city and cursed in the country. . . . The fruit of your womb will be cursed and the crops of your land . . . (Dt 28:1-19).

Is this not prosperity theology?

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<sup>6</sup> See T. Palmer, *A Theology of the Old Testament* (Bukuru: ACTS, 2011), pp. 60-68.

The theology of the Sinaitic covenant is the theology of the book of Deuteronomy and the so-called Deuteronomistic History (Joshua, Judges, Samuel and Kings). This theology is also the theological presupposition for most of the Latter Prophets (the 3 Major and 12 Minor Prophets).

### **When the righteous suffer**

But everyday life teaches us that the righteous do not always prosper. Sometimes the righteous suffer. Is the book of Deuteronomy then wrong?

The classic example is the book of Job. Job was “blameless and upright; he feared God and shunned evil” (Job 1:1). And yet he suffered.

So Job’s three “friends” reminded him of the Sinaitic or Deuteronomistic theology. Eliphaz starts the accusations: “Consider now: Who, being innocent, has ever perished? Where were the upright ever destroyed?” (Job 4:7). Bildad continues: “Surely God does not reject a blameless man or strengthen the hands of evildoers” (Job 8:20). Zophar adds: “Yet if you devote your heart to [God] and stretch out your hands to him . . . then you will lift up your face without shame” (Job 11:13-15).

The theology of Job’s three friends was Sinaitic or Deuteronomistic theology. Their theology was prosperity theology. But God in the book of Job powerfully reminds these “friends” and Job that the Sinaitic rule is a rule of thumb. There are exceptions to the rule. We can’t take the conditions of the Sinai covenant too literally. Life is too complicated for that.

Wisdom literature in particular reminds us of this complexity. The book of Job is of course wisdom literature. The book of Ecclesiastes laments the fact that there is too much oppression in the world which causes the suffering of the innocent. “Again I looked and saw all the oppression that was taking place under the sun: I saw the tears of the oppressed and they have no comforter” (Eccl 4:1).

### **A Christian perspective**

So what does a Christian do with Deuteronomistic theology and the Sinai covenant?

Our first observation is that the Christian is not under the Sinai covenant but rather under the new covenant. The book of Jeremiah suggests that the Sinai covenant was replaced by the new covenant:

"The time is coming," declares Yahweh, "when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah. It will not be like the covenant I made with their forefathers when I took them by the hand to lead them out of Egypt, because they broke my covenant, though I was a husband to them," declares Yahweh (Jer 31:31-32).

There are similarities (continuity) and dissimilarities (discontinuity) between the two covenants. Both covenants are relational, establishing a relationship between God and his people. I believe that both covenants are conditional: faith and obedience are conditions for membership in both covenants, although justification is by faith alone.

Further, both covenants suggest that being in a good relationship with God will result in blessings. The question is whether these blessings are physical or spiritual, or perhaps both. In addition, are the blessings necessarily present or also future?

The wisdom psalm 37 suggests a longer or eschatological perspective. "A little while, and the wicked will be no more . . . . But the meek will inherit the land and enjoy great peace (*shalom*)" (Ps 37:10-11).

This psalm points us to the Sermon on the Mount where Jesus said: "Blessed are the meek for they will inherit the earth" (Mt 5:5). This promise seems to be spiritual and eschatological.

But must we spiritualize the entire Gospel? African Christian theologians have accused "missionary theology" as being too other-worldly.<sup>7</sup> Both formal and non-formal African Christian theology has emphasized the physical dimension of salvation in addition to—and sometimes at the expense of—spiritual salvation. (Non-formal African Christian theology can be found in the prayers, songs and sermons of African Christians.)

### "Shalom" as wholistic prosperity

A prominent Old Testament word relating to prosperity is *shalom*. It occurs 237 times in the Hebrew Old Testament.<sup>8</sup> The NIV sometimes translates *shalom* as prosperity. For example, in Isaiah 45:7 in the NIV, Yahweh brings "prosperity" (*shalom*) and creates "disaster" (*ra*).

<sup>7</sup> See, for example, Alan Boesak, *Farewell to Innocence* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1977), pp. 20-26.

<sup>8</sup> F. Stendebach, "Shalom" in *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*, ed. G. Botterweck et al. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006) 15:15.

Shalom in the Old Testament is more than peace or the cessation of hostility. Gerhard von Rad says: "At root it means 'well-being,' with a strong emphasis on the material side."<sup>9</sup> Elsewhere von Rad says that "*shalom* designates the unimpairedness, the wholeness, of a relationship of communion, and so a state of harmonious equilibrium, the balancing of all claims and needs between two parties."<sup>10</sup> Again, shalom is "associated with the notions of intactness, wholeness, and well-being, of the world and of humanity."<sup>11</sup>

Its usage can be illustrated by a few examples. In Genesis 37:14, Joseph is instructed to check on the *shalom* or well-being of his brothers and the flocks. Remarkably, in 2 Samuel 11:7, David asked Uriah about the *shalom* of his general Joab and the *shalom* of the soldiers and the shalom of the war! Psalm 122 contains a prayer for the *shalom* of Jerusalem, its walls, life within its citadels, and its people (Ps 122:6-8). The wholistic nature of *shalom* can be seen in these examples.

Often in the Old Testament shalom is the result of justice and righteousness. Psalm 72 is a prayer for righteousness in the reign of the king. If the king reigns with justice and righteousness, "prosperity" (NIV) or a wholistic well-being will be the result (Ps 72:3,7).

Gerhard von Rad reminds us that shalom is a central element in the prophets' eschatological expectation. An example is a name of "the Messianic Child" in Isaiah 9:6, "prince of peace." "The name tells us that . . . the Messiah is the Guarantor and Guardian of peace in the coming Messianic kingdom."<sup>12</sup>

The description of the ideal state of *shalom* does not always contain the word *shalom*. The classic passage of Isaiah 11 describes the rule of the messianic king with justice and righteousness. The result will be a state of *shalom* where the dangerous animals will live with domestic ones and "the earth will be full with the knowledge of Yahweh as the waters cover the sea" (Is 11:9). The first verses of Isaiah 2 contain another vision of a state of *shalom*.

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<sup>9</sup> G. von Rad, "Shalom in the OT," in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, ed. G. Kittel, trans. G. Bromiley (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964), 2:402.

<sup>10</sup> G. von Rad, *Old Testament Theology*, trans. D. Stalker (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 2005), 1:130.

<sup>11</sup> F. Stendebach, "Shalom," p. 19.

<sup>12</sup> G. von Rad, "Shalom in the OT," 2:405-406.

Nicholas Wolterstorff says: "Shalom is the human being dwelling at peace in all his or her relationships: with God, with self, with fellows, with nature."<sup>13</sup> Neil Plantinga defines shalom as "the way things ought to be." Conversely, "sin is culpable shalom-breaking."<sup>14</sup> Wolterstorff says that shalom is both a divine and human imperative: "Shalom is both God's cause in the world and our human calling. . . . We are workers in God's cause, his peace workers. The *missio Dei* is our mission."<sup>15</sup>

## Conclusion

The Torah and the Deuteronomistic literature lay down the general principle that a righteous person will usually be prosperous. But Wisdom Literature reminds us that this prosperity will not always be automatic or immediate.

To some extent the New Testament spiritualizes this prosperity. But African theologians have cautioned against an over-spiritualization of this prosperity.

The Old Testament ideal of *shalom* reminds us of the wholistic nature of prosperity. A righteous person will be in a good relation with God, with one's neighbor and with the rest of creation. This is true prosperity.

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<sup>13</sup> N. Wolterstorff, *Until Justice and Peace Embrace* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983), p. 69.

<sup>14</sup> Cornelius Plantinga, *Not the Way It's Supposed to Be: A Breviary of Sin* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), pp. 10, 14.

<sup>15</sup> N. Wolterstorff, *Until Justice and Peace Embrace*, p. 72.