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AN EXEGETICAL STUDY OF RUTH CHAPTER ONE AND THE EGREGIOUS "JAPA" SYNDROME IN MODERN NIGERIA

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Abstract

This paper explores the parallels between the narrative of Ruth chapter one and the *Japa* syndrome, a term describing the mass emigration of Nigerians, especially youths, in search of better opportunities abroad. The family of Elimelech decided to leave Bethlehem for Moab to escape hunger. To them, escape was the best option than enduring scarcity. However, what they encountered in Moab became worse than what drove them away from home. The same is true of many Nigerian youths who see the current political, social and economic hardship in the land as a thing that should be avoided rather than endured. Through an exegetical analysis, there are many lessons from the experience of Elimelech's family for Nigerian youths who are constantly seeking opportunities because they believe that life is always better abroad. In addition, Ruth's loyalty and commitment despite adversity are examined as lessons for young people facing modern challenges. The study emphasizes the importance of resilience, faith, and responsible decision-making, contrasting these values with the pursuit of greener pastures. It advocates for personal growth and commitment to community building, encouraging youths to contribute positively to national development.

Keywords: Young people, exegetical study, Ruth, "Japa" Syndrome, modern Nigeria

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Introduction

This study exegetically examines immigration in Ruth Chapter 1 and the dangers of the *Japa* syndrome in Nigeria. It is well known that many embassies in Nigeria are inundated with people who are intent on leaving the country by any means necessary. This desire to leave the country, locally known as *Japa syndrome*, is due to the distress and traumatic experiences that Nigerian youths and other citizens are forced to endure due to poor leadership. Those who do not want to travel to other countries have their reasons for doing so, but most young people who are no longer able to cope with the current paradoxes in the country, have decided to migrate to countries where they believe they will be more secure. Unfortunately, due to the desperation of this sudden travel, many young people who do not have proper documentation or sufficient funds to process their visas often choose to enter the country through land or sea borders as irregular immigrants.

Japa Syndrome is akin to Elimelech and his family's decision to move from Bethlehem in Judah to Moab because there was a temporary famine in the land of Israel (Ruth 1:1). They ended up settling in Moab without knowing what awaited them (Hinson 69). In this case, one family decided to *Japa* while the rest of the nation waited in Bethlehem. Their experiences and how their trip ended after staying in a foreign country for about 10 years indicate that their trip did not yield the desired results or benefits (Ogba 215). Those who remained at home appear to be better off than the Elimelech family who immigrated to a foreign land.

Japa is a Nigerian term which refers to the speed at which Nigerians are leaving the country for other countries in the world. It also means to flee or leave the country (Ajibokan 27-28). Therefore, a person who successfully travels is said to have *Japa*. This type of travel is often unplanned, spontaneous and unsuspecting. The driving force is to be able to leave the country and go anywhere other than Nigeria by any means necessary. Although some organizations and authorities are trying to curb this ugly phenomenon, the government has not shown the necessary resolve to combat the menace (Sowore 25). There are contradictions between the government and ministries on this issue. Responding to a question on Channels TV regarding his opinion on the mass exodus of Nigerian doctors, Chris Ngige, a former federal minister of labor in the Buhari administration, noted that despite the number of doctors leaving the country, Nigeria still has enough at home (www.ChannelTv.com). The implication of this is that the government has not been able to come to terms with the dangers inherent in losing indigenous-trained doctors to Japa syndrome. The government did not mind what such action portends in terms of future development, productivity and on Nigeria`s international repute. This paper seeks to bring out the undeniable negative effects of this development for a developing nation such as Nigeria. This study examines biblical migrations and exegetically examines the first chapter of the Book of Ruth, taking note of the socio-cultural background of the pericope, to highlight and compare the corollary as well as possible paradoxes in the text and the situation of Nigeria. Efforts were also made to review what some scholars have done concerning international travels and the possible effects it produces on any nation. The root causes and the effects of Japa are discussed, and various efforts by both governmental and non-governmental organizations to curb the unplanned mass exodus of citizens to other countries are mentioned. The paper further examines the painful experience of illegal immigration in

Africa and its impact on African countries and the lessons that young people should learn from Japa syndrome.

Exegetical Examination of Biblical Migrations

Migration, according to the Advanced Dictionary of Modern English is defined as movement (especially of people) from one place to settle in another, especially from one's home country (1023). The movement of people and individuals from one country to another is as old as human history (Ikegbu 67-68). People move from place to place for a variety of reasons, including searching for food, shelter, adventure, trade, and more. Reports of migration are found in both the Old and New Testaments of the Bible. The Bible knows about immigrants, foreigners, wanderers, refugees, and it also knows about the people it describes (Musekula, 21-23).

Some examples of immigrants from the Bible include:

a. Abraham left Ur of the Chaldeans (Genesis 12:1ff). According to Ogba the history of the Israelite patriarchs began with Abraham (or his father Terah) of the city of Ur in Mesopotamia (present day Iraq) (Genesis 11:27-30) (220). For seemingly hidden reasons, the family left home and moved to the city of Harran, about 900 Kilometres northwest. The cities of Ur and Haran in Mesopotamia have important shrines dedicated to the worship of the moon god "Sin" which some Old Testament scholars have suggested may explain the movement from Ur to Haran (Adeyemo 1632). This strongly suggests that Abraham and his family were originally Gentiles (Arvid 74; Hinson 71). Ogba further claims that the city of Ur is only mentioned in the Hebrew manuscript of Genesis 11. The Greek translation (the Septuagint) noted that Abraham's original homeland was in the "land of the Chaldeans," which was much closer to Haran in northern Syria than Ur, near the Persian Gulf. Other accounts suggest that Abraham`s roots were much stronger in Haran than in Ur, for when he later sent for a wife for his son Isaac, he told his servants to go to `the country where I was born` and this turned out to be Ur, but the area around Haran (Gen. 24:4).

The book of Genesis chapter 12:10-2 tells how Abram moved to a different part of the Fertile Crescent, travelling into the land of Palestine. Hinson states that this movement was in response to a divine call by God to Abram to leave his father`s house to a place he was going to show him (431).

> Now the LORD said to Abram, “Go from your country and your kindred and your father`s house to the land that I will show you. I will make you a great nation, and I will bless you, and I will make your name great, and I will make you a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and I will curse those who curse you and all the nations of the earth will be blessed in you (Genesis 12:1-3).

Hinson added that God's purpose in calling Abraham was that "in him all the families of the earth should be blessed." God's purpose here is to create a community of people who are dedicated to His service, who can learn to serve Him in every changing situation of life, and

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who can share their knowledge of Him with others. In response to this divine call, Abraham left Haran as God commanded him to a country that God would later show him and he departed with his wife, servants and Lot with him. It was a journey of faith yet in obedience to a divine mandate and eventually, Abraham was able to fulfill the reasons for which God called him and why he left his land and people for a strange land.

b. Jacob and his children moved to Egypt (Gen. 46:1ff.). “Then God spoke to Israel in the visions of the night, and said, “Jacob, Jacob!” And he said, “Here I am”. He said, “I am God, the God of your father; do not fear to go down to Egypt, for I will make of you a great nation there. I will go down with you to Egypt, and I will surely bring you up again (Gen. 46:2-4a). Jacob was still not sure whether Joseph was alive according to the report of the children. `I hope they are not up to another game`? I'm sure he was thinking to himself. It was like midnights talk to truly believe that Joseph was alive and ask his family to come to Egypt (Ogba 231). But he first went to Beersheba to offer a sacrifice to the Lord who had saved his son. Then he had a night vision in which a voice claiming to be his grandfather's God encouraged him to go to Egypt without fear. These positive words must have reminded Jacob that God had shown him kindness and showed his fathers that God was in control of all situations (Adeyemo 1560). Jacob was initially anxious and reluctant to go to Egypt, but the trip was part of God's plan. In Egypt, God fulfills his promise to transform Abraham's descendants into a great nation (Genesis 46:4a). In the end, Jacob left Canaan and headed for Egypt, taking with him 66 people: his sons, daughters, daughters-in-law, and grandchildren, in addition to the three who were already waiting in Egypt.

c. Elimelech and his family immigrated to Moab (Ruth 1:1-22). The third Biblical immigrant example is the family of Elimelech, which is the basis of this study. A notable difference between Elimelech's travels and those of Abraham and Jacob is that Elimelech travelled of his own volition due to a temporary famine in Bethlehem, whereas Abraham and Jacob travelled at God's directive. In other words, there was no plan for the trip unless God initiated it. While Abraham and Jacob's journey to a foreign land was a profitable adventure, Elimelech's journey ended in disaster.

d. Joseph and his family left Bethlehem for Egypt (Matthew 2:13-15). “Now when they departed, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream and said, “Arise! Take the little child and his mother and flee to Egypt; Remain there until I bring you the word, and say to you,” for Herod will seek the child to destroy him.” Schofield describes the flight of Joseph and his family to Egypt, the subsequent massacre of innocents (Matthew 2:16-18), and their return and the settling in Nazareth (Matthew 2:19-23) as emphasizing the theme of fulfillment. Joseph was told by the angel of the Lord to take the baby Jesus and flee to Egypt because King Herod was trying to find a way to kill Jesus (154). He planned to remain in Egypt until it was safe for them to return to Palestine (possibly after Herod's death). The purpose of the flight was completely clear; it was for the safety of the newborn Messiah. Joseph moved to Egypt with his wife Mary and his baby Jesus to fulfill the Bible's words, "Out of Egypt I called My Son" (Matthew 2:15b).

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Socio-cultural Background and Exegesis of Ruth Chapter 1:1-22

The Book of Ruth was named after a young woman from the country of Moab whose story it tells. Elimelech (Elimelech is a Jewish name that means my God is King), with his family relocated from Bethlehem (The name Bethlehem, when translated, means the home of food or bread) to Moab in the days of judges to escape hunger in their land. Elimelech's wife was named Naomi (which means my pleasant one). The couple had two sons, Marlon (infirmity) and Tyrion (incapacitated). The two sons married Moabite women, but they too died, leaving behind their mother Naomi and two Moabite stepdaughters, Oprah and Ruth. Naomi decided to return to her country since everything appeared to be against her and Ruth decided to accompany her. When they arrived at Bethlehem, her family home village, it was the time for Barley's harvest. They were well received and Naomi told the story of her painful sojourn to Moab. The book of Ruth gives a picture of life in the time of the Judges which was too peaceful and settled to be true account of life in those times. It suggests that Israel was at peace with Moab to have warranted the exit of the Elimelech family from Bethlehem to Moab but this was far from being the case in the time of Judges.

Judges 2:12-30 tells us that during the reign of Othniel, the Israelites did evil in the sight of the Lord and were delivered into the hands of Eglon, king of Moab. Eglon attacked Israel and captured Palm City. The Israelites submitted to Moab for 18 years until God appointed Ehud, a left-handed man, as a judge. King David then allowed his parents to remain with the king of Moab for security reasons and established peaceful relations with them (1 Samuel 22:3-4). But that could be because he was a descendant of Ruth and fell out of favor with the king of Israel. The period of the Judges was characterized by moral decline. This may have been responsible for the drought and famine which the Israelites experienced. The drought, which resulted into famine, was God's chastisement of the people for their disobedience and for forsaking Him to serve other gods. It was also their disobedience that made their heavens to be closed (MacDonald 2102).

What Israel needed was repentance from their sins. Israel was delivered from the bondage of the Moabites when God raised another Judge, Ehud, a left-handed man from Benjamin following their cry to God for mercy (Judges 3:15ff). Elimelech should not have left the Promised Land, least of all to settle in Moab. He should have remained with his brothers east of the Jordan River. Painfully, he led his family from the land of the living to the place of death and barrenness (MacDonald 2107). After the death of Elimelech, his sons married Moabite wives. Marlon married Ruth (4:10) and Tyrion married Orpah. Part of the contradiction in the nature and history of Elimelech's family was in the marriages of his sons. Although the Moabites are not specifically mentioned in Deuteronomy 7:1-3 as people with whom the Israelites were not to marry, it is clear from later texts that they were included in the Law. (Ezra 9:1-2; Neh. 13:23-25). The Law also provided that the Moabites would not be accepted into the congregation of the Lord until the tenth generation (Deuteronomy 23:3). One can say that in the case of Ruth that grace overruled. Ruth's descendant later gave birth to David, who became the greatest King of Israel (Clark-Hyman 43).

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Naomi goes through many twists and turns in her life and eventually returns to Judah. She returned home for two reasons. First, she heard that Bethlehem had an abundance of food. However, it was because of the enormous sins of the people of Judah, the land refused to part with its produce. Now that the people have realized and turned to God under a new leader (judge), the country can grow (Helen 63-4). Secondly, Naomi did not want her family's history to be lost or forgotten in a foreign land. If one no longer feels comfortable in a foreign country, the best option is usually to return home (Ogba 79). Her two daughters-in-law decided to accompany her. But she urged them to return to their home, especially now that she had no son to marry and her husband had died. Eventually, Orpah kissed her mother-in-law and returned while Ruth remained adamant about going back.

The different attitudes that these three widows represent are worthy of mention. Naomi was a widow who had suffered much grief and was stripped of all her earthly joy by the divine judgment of God. Her migration to Moab may have been the greatest mistake her family made and all that befell her may also have been a lesson for attempting to escape God`s punishment (Harrison 97). In the case of Orpah, perhaps having considered the wise words of her mother-in-law, proved to be a leaving widow, choosing the easiest and the most convenient course. On the contrary, Ruth turned out to be a faithful widow and continued to stand by Naomi despite her disappointment. We do not know what motivated Ruth to give up on her mother-in-law's pleas, but it may have been her love for the old widow, who had endured much adversity in a foreign land. When Ruth chose Naomi, she knew the challenges that lay ahead. She was to be separated from her family and go to a place where there was no one to care for her and her mother-in-law (Hinson, 82). She chose Naomi's destination, home, people, God, and even her burial place.

When Ruth arrived in Judah, it was the time of the barley harvest, or first fruit, to prove that her return was motivated by God. When she returned, her city received her happily, but her husband and her two sons who had gone with her were absent. The villagers were happy to see her again and gave her a warm welcome. Naomi became emotional and she replied, "Don't call me Naomi (fun), call me Mara (bitter)". She told how the Almighty treated her badly in the country where she was staying. She left with a full stomach (with her husband and children), but returned empty (widowed and without children). Anderson and Hinson describe Elimelech's migration to Moab as a thoughtless and miscalculated venture (43 & 76). Elimelech's life was a paradox. He left the house of bread and shelter and perished in a foreign land. This serves as both a lesson and a warning for our times.

"Japa Syndrome" in Modern Nigeria

The world has become a global village. This is made possible by digital revolution which the world is currently experiencing (Chukwuka 2022). The creation and use of the internet, television and other social media has made it possible for people to be able to know what goes on in other countries. Through the deployment of various digital platforms, Nigerians are able to interact with other global citizens concerning opportunities and prospects which exist in the world. Comparing what goes on in other countries where political leaders are responsible and responsive with the experience in Nigeria, the temptation and urge to travel abroad becomes

irresistible. Also, the long endurance and hope that things will soon get better in Nigeria has not been realized instead, things get from bad to worse (Ikegbu 22). This situation has made many people to consider foreign trip as a veritable alternative.

Many Nigerians, especially the youths opt to japa, if given the opportunity because of the state of things in the country. Till now, there are many citizens who seek for opportunity to exit the country. There are many reasons why Nigerians are travel abroad en-mass these days. Some of them are:

a. Poor governance: Poor governance in Africa, particularly in Nigeria, is a major cause of the mass exodus of people from the country. Political leaders have not been able to effectively deliver dividends of democracy to citizens. The obvious contradictions and persistence of endemic poverty amidst affluence remain a major challenge for African leaders (Sowore 12). There is no area of leadership where the people can say that political leaders have made a real effort in this area, and there have been failures in almost every area, leaving some citizens with no option but to travel abroad.

b. Poor and inadequate infrastructure: Infrastructural facilities such as electricity and well-maintained roads are taken for granted in developed countries, but in Nigeria they are luxuries
c. Unemployment/Underemployment: Many graduates in Nigeria are unable to secure jobs in the country, mainly because there are few jobs which are also treated as the birthright of politicians and their cronies (Ugumba, 56). The unemployment rate in Nigeria is increasing day by day. This is because governments at all levels have failed to create jobs for the graduates that Nigeria's numerous tertiary institutions produce every year. Statistics from the Nowa Omoigui Center for Advancement of Arts, History and Medicine recently showed that Nigeria has the highest unemployment rate in the world (Ihonvbere 433). Similarly, many workers are said to be underemployed because their pay is not enough to take them home. This makes the temptation to look for more lucrative work as a supervisor very likely (Sowore 15)

d. Insecurity: Insecurity in Nigeria, especially terrorism by Boko Haram and ISWAP in the Northeast, banditry in the Northwest, banditry and kidnapping in the North-Central, insurgents in the Niger Delta, ESN/IPOB operations, and unknown identities in the Southeast has forced people to leave their homes. Due to armed groups, insecurity has become an incurable disease that must not go away. This security situation has forced many Nigerians to be housed in refugee camps in different states. Many people are international refugees in different countries. The harrowing stories about the ruthlessness of these illegal armed men are enough to scare people. Many Nigerians have fled to different countries in search of safety.

e. Nigerian job conditions: Nigeria's working conditions are characterized by long hours, low pay, and poor safety standards, leaving workers vulnerable to illness, injury, and financial insecurity. Many lack basic benefits like health insurance, paid time off, or retirement plans, leading to a high incidence of workplace accidents and injuries. This leaves many trapped in their jobs and unable to improve their economic situation.

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f. The urgency for success: Nigeria's strong cultural emphasis on success and achievement puts pressure on young people to succeed quickly and make a name for themselves. This pressure is compounded by the belief that success is easier to achieve in developed countries, leading many to leave the country and pursue their dreams abroad. However, this can lead to a lack of investment in Nigeria's future and risky behavior as individuals seek to achieve their goals at any cost.

Possible effects of Japa Syndrome on Nigeria

The following are the results and effects of the mass exodus of Nigerians to foreign lands.

1. Nigeria is facing a significant challenge with the brain drain phenomenon, as its best and brightest citizens are leaving the country in large numbers to seek opportunities abroad. This is evident in the alarming statistic that over 15,500 Nigerian doctors have migrated to other countries in the past five years alone (Ileyemi 6-7) and the impact of this trend on the country's future cannot be overstated.

2. Nigeria's international reputation has been negatively affected by the high number of citizens seeking travel visas to foreign countries, which has led to a perception that Nigerians are not able to develop their own country and are instead fleeing to other nations. The willingness of many Nigerians to take on low-paying jobs abroad has further damaged the country's image.

3. The loss of Nigeria's best and brightest to other countries presents a significant challenge to the country's development, as their expertise is needed to drive national progress, particularly at a time when the educational system is being neglected by political leaders.

4. The "japa syndrome" has caused an identity crisis among Nigerian youths who have left the country, with many taking on the nationality of other countries as a form of protest against bad governance in Nigeria.

5. The risks associated with illegal immigration have resulted in the tragic loss of many Nigerian youths who attempt to cross into Europe through land borders, and this trend needs to be addressed urgently.

6. Due to the high demand to travel among Nigerians, a significant proportion of the population has unfortunately become victims of various criminal activities such as prostitution, terrorism, drug trafficking, and kidnapping. Many people have been exploited by criminal organizations and forced to engage in illegal activities. As a result, a considerable number of them have been imprisoned during their travels overseas.

Ruth Chapter 1 and Japa Syndrome: Lessons for Nigerian Youths

The following are the lessons for Nigerian youths:

1. An overseas trip that is not planned can bring unpleasant consequences. Hence, one must plan their international travel rather than make impulsive decisions. This planning should

involve personal growth, acquiring a solid education, and familiarizing oneself with global opportunities.

2. Nigerian youths should be aware that going abroad is not always as glamorous as they may think. Many Nigerians have been deceived by many false agents/ sponsors who promise one thing but deliver another. Travelling abroad without a concrete plan can lead to frustration and disappointment.

3. Unfortunately, many Nigerian youths have lost their lives while attempting to travel abroad, especially those who choose to do so as illegal immigrants. It is essential for individuals seeking to immigrate to foreign lands to follow the appropriate legal channels instead of resorting to dangerous illegal routes that put their lives at risk.

4. Despite the challenges and hardships faced by average Nigerians at home, there are still ample opportunities for self-realization within the country. Many youths have found success and financial stability by providing various services and creating job opportunities.

5. Naomi decided to return home after she suffered untold hardship in a foreign land. On her return, she was able to find meaning in life without ending the entire dynasty in her land of sojourn. Therefore, Nigerian youths, especially those illegal immigrants, who find themselves in an unbearable situation should seek help to return home rather than wait to perish in a foreign land.

6. The negative perception of Nigerians abroad has led to hostility from some global citizens. As a result, Nigerian immigrants often face racial discrimination, which can escalate into mob

7. There is no condition that is permanent as seen in the life of Elimelech and the family. The bad situation that forced them to travel to another country abated after some time. Similarly, the tough socio-economic situations prevailing in Nigeria at the moment will not last forever.

Conclusion

This study has effectively addressed the risks associated with spontaneous, unplanned, and unnecessary emigration, both from a biblical and Nigerian perspective. It has been established that the decision of Elimelech's family to migrate from Bethlehem to Moab did not yield the desired outcomes. It is likely that if they had stayed in their homeland like other citizens, Elimelech and his sons would not have perished. The level of bereavement suffered by Naomi was a setback to the original purpose of their exodus. Enduring hunger would have been preferable to the magnitude of misfortune experienced by the family. Similarly, the situation surrounding the "Japa syndrome" in Nigeria is deeply distressing and better left to the imagination than experienced firsthand. The loss of lives in the treacherous journey across the high seas from Africa to Europe has become alarmingly common. It is challenging to accurately determine the number of illegal immigrants who drown daily in their desperate attempt to leave the continent. However, it is important to note that not all forms of emigration are negative. Some countries, like China, organize overseas travel for their citizens to acquire

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knowledge, skills, and expertise to contribute to the development of their nation upon their return.

However, the Nigerian government, at all levels, has failed to recognize the danger of losing their brightest minds to other countries, especially when many young people view education as a scam and are unwilling to fully engage in their studies. Additionally, the various tiers of government in Nigeria have not shown enough remorse for the countless Nigerians who lost their lives in pursuit of better opportunities abroad. The value placed on human life in Nigeria has become so low that the increasing death toll no longer moves the hearts of the country's leaders.

The problem of Japa syndrome can be solved by addressing the root causes already outlined in this paper. These include but not limited to insecurity in the land, high rate of unemployment, failure of political leadership, the inability of politicians to fulfill their campaign promise to work for the good of the masses and poor working condition coupled with poor infrastructures that should drive development, poor remuneration and underemployment for the working class. A deliberate and concerted effort on the part of government to improve infrastructures and living condition of citizens will help to halt the mass exodus of Nigerians abroad. Things will take a new turn when Nigerian political class decides to deliver to Nigeria the full benefit of democratic governance. The japa syndrome points to the fact that Nigeria is losing her best brains to the outside world and this will no doubt slow the nation in her effort to develop. The incessant loss of human lives to international banditry by illegal immigrants and fraudsters taking advantage of naïve citizen who want to travel at all cost will cease if government rises up to her responsibility of providing good governance and giving priority to the welfare of the citizens.

There are many lessons to be learned from the Japa syndrome, which has affected numerous individuals. The majority of illegal migrants originate from rural areas, placing the responsibility on local governments in Nigeria to educate their citizens about travelling abroad. It is unacceptable to leave citizens vulnerable to fraudsters who exploit international travel to deceive and defraud innocent and uninformed Nigerians. Africa, especially Nigeria, possesses favorable natural resources and climate that can provide hardworking individuals with opportunities for meaningful employment.

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