


Assessing the quest for miracles in Nigeria from the economic perspective

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In recent times, the quest for miracles among Nigerian Christians has become a social menace as many have fallen victim to fake miracle workers. The article studied the quest for miracles in Nigeria against the purpose and significance of miracles in the New Testament (NT), and sought to appraise this behaviour as a possible effect of the poor economic situation in the country. It applied the reader-oriented and descriptive methods. The work found that the manner of the quest for miracles by many Nigerian Christians indicates their lack of understanding of the essence of miracles in the NT. This wrong perception also explains the frantic efforts by some pentecostal preachers to work miracles, including commercialisation of miracles and certain occult practices. The essay concluded that Nigerian Christians wrong attitude towards miracles is an effect of the high rate of poverty in the country. The menace can, therefore, be ameliorated by addressing the economic situation. Government should change its corrupt attitude towards the economy while the church has to educate their members about the teaching of the Bible on miracles, and direct her preaching against corruption and its perpetrators.

Contribution: The article is a contribution to the discourse on the controversies on miracles. It argues that Nigerian Christians' perception of miracles contradicts the essence of miracles in the NT, and that this perception and the practices involved are an effect of the poor economic situation in the country.

Keywords: quest for miracles; New Testament; Pentecostal preachers; poverty in Nigeria; Nigerian Christians.

Introduction

The term 'miracle' came from the Latin word *miraculum*, which means [a marvel] (Cotter 2009:99). This implies that etymologically a miracle is 'something astonishing, amazing, wonderful and marvellous' (Iwuagwu 2018:66). However, from the biblical point of view, a miracle is an 'extraordinary event that constitutes an inexplicable manifestation of God's power' (Powell 1989:638). Hence, Iroegbu (2005:8) opines that a miracle is 'an extra ordinary event ... produced by God in a religious context as a sign of the supernatural'. In recent times, the quest for miracles among Nigerian Christian preachers and the general public has reached an alarming rate. As Nigerians move about in search of miracles, acclaimed miracle performers 'seek by hook or crook to work miracles' (Antwi 2016:1). The quest has, in fact, led to the multiplicity of competing 'denominations, prayer houses, imposing billboards and posters, crusades, [and] miracle programmes' (Iwuagwu 2018:64). It is also demonstrated in the unceasing advertisements on radio and television for miraculous deliverance (Iwuagwu 2018:64). As described by Ademiluka (2007a):

[T]he atmosphere ... is charged with the clamour for miracles. Everywhere is filled with the talk of miracle.... Flyers abound advertising miracle crusades. Miracle centres and gardens are also common. There are signposts everywhere advertising miracle churches. Radio and television stations also have their miracle hours. Nigerians besiege churches and mountains for vigils in search of miracles.... The media are replete with controversies concerning the validity and source of miracles.... [M]any Christians have moved from their original churches to those ones that claim to perform miracles. (p. 97)

The quest for miracles has indeed become a social menace in that many have fallen victim to prophets and pastors in their search for miraculous deliverance from one problem or the other. So much has been written on this subject from various perspectives, including the social, theological, ecumenical and literary perspectives. However, this article is predicated on the fact that in their

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search for miracles, many Nigerian Christians have missed the essence of miracles as understood in the New Testament (NT), thereby having a wrong perception of miracles from the biblical perspective. Therefore, the article attempts to study the quest for miracles in Nigeria against the purpose and significance of miracles in the NT and seeks to appraise this attitude as a possible effect of the poor economic situation in the country.

In NT scholarship, the question of the historicity of the miracles of Jesus has been a controversy, and a variety of opinions have emerged in that regard. For instance, for the school of thought represented by Rudolf Bultmann, the ancient worldview in which events were explained in terms of demon possession or miracles are obsolete (Blomberg 1984:425). This school is thus opposed to supernaturalism, 'with demythologizing the only intellectually defensible alternative' (Blomberg 1984:425). In view of the focus of this article, however, it does not delve into this controversy but adopts a narrative reading for the study of the miracles of Jesus. Rather than questioning the historical truth of a text, Narrative Analysis treats it in its story form, inviting 'the reader to explore the dimensions of the narrative in its final form' (Oosthuizen 1994:85). The corollary of Narrative Reading is the 'reader response' approach, which appraises the impact of the text on the reader (Cranford 2002:159). Thus, applying the reader-oriented method, in this work the question of the historicity of the miracles of Jesus is considered irrelevant, especially as it is not a concern for Nigerian miracle performers. For them, their ministries are authenticated by their miracles just as Jesus' miracles bore witness to his calling. For the quest for miracles in Nigeria, the article employs the descriptive method. As used here, it simply means to 'describe a phenomenon and its characteristics' (Nassaji 2015:130). Sequentially, the article examines the purpose and significance of miracles in the NT, the quest for miracles in Nigeria and the economic background of the quest for miracles.

The purpose and significance of miracles in the New Testament

In the NT, three Greek words are used regularly to refer to miracles, namely *τερας*, *σημειον* and *δυναμις*. *Τερας* emphasises the wonderfulness of an event, while *δυναμις* connotes divine power (Pax 1970:586). According to Mundle, Hofius and Brown (1976:621), *σημειον* 'stresses the functional aspect of an event as a sign', thereby referring to the symbolic character of miracles. In the Gospel of John, *σημειον* is consistently used for 'miracle', which is an attempt to indicate that the miracles of Jesus 'signify truths concerning Christ' and his ministry (Monday 2021:2). The four Gospels present Jesus as a miracle worker. In his miracles, two major categories emerge, of which healing is the more numerous. There are three types of healing, namely cures of ailments, exorcisms, 'where demons are cast away', and raising the dead (Monday 2021:2). The second group is nature miracles, such as cursing the fig tree (Mk 11:12–14, 20–25 & *pars.*), changing water into wine (Jn

2:1–11), feeding the 5000 (Mk 6:42–44 & *pars.*) and stilling the storm (Mk 4:35–41; *pars.*) (Blomberg 1984:428–431).

According to Hardon (1954:251), miracles serve a purpose higher than merely astonishing the witnesses. Rather, it is to indicate an extraordinary intervention of God through which he confirms 'the teaching or sanctity of the person through whom the prodigy is worked'. For instance, in the Old Testament (OT), miracles were the instruments employed by Yahweh to liberate the Israelites from the Egyptian bondage, thereby bearing witness to the calling of Moses and Aaron. Miracles were the signs and wonders through which God ratified the 'divine commission' of Elijah and Elisha (Hardon 1954:229). Thus, besides their intrinsic function as spontaneous divine signs, miracles are also 'extrinsic signs which God uses ... to testify in favor of some person whose sanctity He wants recognized' (Hardon 1954:253). Kolawole (2020:27) opines that miracles have the significance of 'testifying to the authenticity of God's messengers who bring his revelation to humanity'. As expressed by Carson (1991:87), when miracles happen, they give 'evidence that God is truly at work' in the activities of his messenger.

With the opening of the NT, miracles bore witness to the coming, the person and calling of Jesus and his relationship with God (Hardon 1954:229). Subsequent to the miraculous birth of Jesus, some of his miracles served to prove that he was indeed the expected Messiah. For instance, being in prison and possibly in doubt about Jesus' mission, John the Baptist sent his own disciples to ask Jesus if he really was the Messiah. Apparently citing the promise in the prophecy of Isaiah, Jesus responded:

Go and tell John what you hear and see: the blind receive their sight and the lame walk, lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear, and the dead are raised up, and the poor have good news preached to them. (Mt 11:4–5, RSV¹; cf. Is 26:19; 29:18–19; 35:5–6; 61:1)

In other words, Jesus' miracles were an indication 'that God's promise to Israel is being fulfilled' in himself (Antwi 2016:13). And while some doubted, Jesus' miracles 'convinced many that He was the Messiah' (Monday 2021:5). As Hardon (1954:255) puts it, they testify 'divine approval to the heavenly mission of the Son of God among men'. Jesus' miracles did not only prove that he was God-sent but also indicate his union with God and that a close relationship existed 'between the works of the Father and the works of the Son' (Monday 2021:5). This is demonstrated, for example, in the healing of the man who had been sick for 38 years. Responding to the Jews' query for performing healing on the Sabbath, Jesus told them:

The Son can do nothing of his own accord, but only what he sees the Father doing. ... For the Father loves the Son, and shows him all that he himself is doing; and greater works than these will he show him, that you may marvel. (Jn 5:19–20; cf. 14:10)

1. Unless otherwise stated, all quoted Bible references are from the Revised Standard Version (RSV).

Furthermore, the miracles of Jesus are consistently linked with his proclamation of God's kingdom. This is seen in Matthew's portrayal of Jesus as 'preaching the gospel of the kingdom and healing every disease and infirmity' (4:23). Moreover, included in Jesus' 'programmatic statement of his mission' are healing the brokenhearted and giving recovery of sight to the blind (Lk 4:18). In Mark 1:15, the evangelist sees in the exorcisms of Jesus an 'announcement of the imminent arrival of the kingdom of God' (Blomberg 1984:427). In this way, like parables, 'miracles are metaphors of the kingdom' (Blomberg 1984:427). Jesus' miracles are also an extraordinary manifestation of God's attributes, notably his power and mercy (Hardon 1954:253). For instance, when Jesus healed the paralytic at Capernaum, the witnesses glorified God who had given such power to men among them (Mt 9:8). Seeing the widow of Nain whose only child had just died, Jesus 'had compassion on her' and raised her son from death. In the feeding of 5000 people, Jesus had 'compassion on the crowd, because they have been with me now three days, and have nothing to eat' (Mt 15:32). To this end, Antwi (2016:13) opines that while some of Jesus' miracles point to God's power, in some instances he was moved with pity 'to demonstrate his compassion with humanity'.

Nonetheless, the ultimate purpose of Jesus' miracles seems to be precisely stated in Mark 16:20. After Jesus' ascension his disciples 'went forth and preached everywhere, while the Lord worked with them and confirmed the message by the signs that attended it'. That is to say that the miracles were meant to prove the veracity of the gospel message. In other words, all the healings, exorcisms, among others were 'incidental and a by-product to [this] true purpose' (Monday 2021:5). From the NT perspective, therefore, the emphasis of miracles is 'on the proclamation of the word of God' and not on the miracles themselves (Antwi 2016:14). In summary, Jesus' miracles were to prove 'that he was the messiah, to exhibit the glory and the sovereignty of God, to show the compassion of God for humanity and to authenticate his proclamation' (Antwi 2016:13).

After Jesus' departure, miracles continued to happen in the early church (Ac 3:1–10; 5:12). Before he ascended into heaven, Jesus gave to his disciples the power to perform miracles 'as a pledge of His assistance and a proof' of the authority of the church (Hardon 1954:229; cf. Mk 16:17). It is noteworthy, however, that even in the days of Jesus, there were miracles that were not from God. For instance, miracle healers existed outside the circle of Jesus' disciples (Mk 9:38–40). In the days of Paul, in Ephesus, some 'Jewish exorcists, presumably magicians, attempted' to cast out demons using Jesus' name (Antwi 2016:14; cf. Ac 19:13–17). The case of Simon the magician indicates that some thought that miracle power could be purchased apparently for pecuniary purposes (Ac 8:3–25). All these go to testify that in NT times 'not all wonders [were] miracles from God' (Antwi 2016:14). This is further seen in the fact that Jesus himself was accused of performing miracles by the power of Beelzebub

(Mt 12:22–37 & *pars.*), which suggests that certain persons 'worked miracles in the name of Beelzebub,² other spirits or magic' (Antwi 2016:14). This accusation is best understood against the backdrop of the fact that Jesus' healing techniques 'were common to magicians' in the Graeco-Roman culture within which he operated (Cunningham 1990:17; cf. Smith 1993:128). So, for some of his witnesses, Jesus was just another magician. Therefore, in anticipation of the next section of this article, 'the ability to perform a miracle does not alone indicate and guarantee that the thaumaturgist is a man of God' (Antwi 2016:14). Also, in anticipation of the discussion of the quest for miracles in Nigeria, 'one characteristic shared among all the miracles of Jesus is that he delivered benefits freely and never requested or accepted any form of payment for his healing miracles' (Monday 2021:2). The section below examines the quest for miracles in Nigeria against the purpose and significance of miracles in the NT.

The quest for miracles in Nigeria

The quest for miracles in Nigeria is explicable within the context of the 'emergence of the charismatic movements [with their] emphasis on the healings and exorcisms [of] Jesus' (Antwi 2016:4). Their earliest appearance was witnessed in the Aladura³ Pentecostal movement that arose amid 'the global 1918 pandemic' of influenza, responding to the disease virtually with prayer and consecrated water (Fagunwa 2020:57; cf. Alana 1994:2; Omotoye 1996–1999:64). Nonetheless, the current wave of the quest for miracles is best understood in the context of neo-Pentecostalism with its emphasis on prosperity and miracles. The prosperity gospel had originated from the 20th century three-wave changes that 'occurred in American Christianity' (Kitaue 2015:42), namely Pentecostalism with the evidence of tongues speaking, pioneered by Charles Fox Parham (1873–1929) and championed by William Joseph Seymour (1870–1922), the faith prosperity movement of Essek William Kenyon (1867–1948) and the signs and wonders movement organised by Peter Wagner and John Wimber (Kitaue 2015:42; cf. Hunt 2000:331). Prosperity preaching arrived Nigeria in the mid-1980s (Kitaue 2015:50), and its emphasis has been on financial abundance and miracles, but in this article, the focus is on the latter. As a matter of fact, miracle 'became a specific feature of Pentecostalism that differentiates it from other' Christian denominations (Ukah 2011:48). Iheanacho (2009:107) observes that in 'Pentecostal Charismatics every minister ... is a vision seer and a miracle worker, or pretends to be one'. The Pentecostal stress on miracles, perhaps, derives from their conception of ill health to comprise not only the physical but also the spiritual, 'psychological, socio-economic [and] political' (Kalu 2008:265). While medicine may cure physical illness, the other forms will usually require divine intervention. In fact, Pastor Enoch Adebeye, General Overseer of the Redeemed Christian Church of God (RCCG), teaches that

2. Possibly a corruption of Baal-zebul, the local deity of Ekron (2 Ki 1:2–3). In early Judaism, Baal-zebul was 'appropriately applied' to Satan (Keener 1993:80).

3. In Nigeria, 'Aladura Churches' collectively refers to the Cherubim and Seraphim Church (C&S), Church of the Lord (Aladura), Christ Apostolic Church (CAC) and the Celestial Church of Christ (CCC) (Komolafe 2016:39).

illness is a product of the devil's mischief, and a true Christian should not accommodate sickness and the Holy Spirit in their body simultaneously. When sickness occurs, it requires a divine solution (Adeboye 1994:10). With this manner of belief, basing Christian living 'on the performance of miracles is almost unavoidable' (Endong 2015:19). It is, therefore, no surprise that the belief in miracles takes a central place in the teaching of the neo-Pentecostal pastors. They seem to believe that 'signs and wonders legitimize' them as God-sent (Endong 2015:19). For instance, Femi Emmanuel, founder of Livingspring Chapel, states that 'Miracle is the crux of the gospel. Gospel minus miracles becomes ridiculous. Christianity is the religion of signs and wonders' (Ukah 2011:49). As expressed by Pastor Chris Oyakhilome of Christ Embassy, miracles are the preacher's credentials. 'If you preach Jesus Christ and he sent you, he will back up your claims' with miracles. If God does not support the preacher's claims with miracles, they have to find out if they are truly called (Ukah 2011:49). Ukah (2011) asserts about the neo-Pentecostal churches that:

[Being] in stiff competition among themselves for membership, [m]iracles [are their] unique selling proposition (USP). ... Miracles [are] ... the most important product offered religious consumers, something special and convincing to attract attention and precipitate the possible switching of allegiance from one church to another. Miracles as UPS also provide legitimation for the activities of church owner-founders, the proof of their divine call to mission. (p. 48)

Thus, in neo-Pentecostal Christianity, miracle performance becomes a necessity for recognition. For any ministry to 'appeal to the common folk and the cream of the society' (Manus 1989:665), 'it must be linked with the manifestation of miracles' (Thompson & Kolawole 2020:90).

Therefore, apparently to win people to their churches, neo-Pentecostal pastors engage in the advertisement of miracles through various means. The incessant crusades are, perhaps, the most regular avenue for advertising miracles in Nigeria. In most cities in the southern and central regions, everyday one comes across posters announcing crusades where 'miracles, deliverance and breakthrough' are bound to happen (Ademiluka 2007a:106). Iwuagwu (2018) states that:

It is common place in Nigeria of today to be overwhelmed in public places by the sight of billboards, banners, posters and fliers publishing crusades, programs and churches where miracles take place. The social, print and electronic media are not left out as potent medium in this advertisement for miracles. Many television channels are devoted to the promise and display of ... miracles. (p. 68)

Miracles are also advertised through the names of churches, such that the word 'miracle' or one connoting miracle appears in the name of the church. Examples abound, including Mountain of Fire and Miracles Ministries, Salvation and Healing Power Int'l, Rhema Deliverance Mission, Freedom and Deliverance Ministries, Jesus Victorious Miracles Ministry, among others. (Ademiluka 2007a:106). Miracles are advertised for virtually all areas of human life, including

deliverance from not only physical and spiritual illnesses and problems but also unemployment and particularly poverty (Iwuagwu 2018:68). Asamoah-Gyadu (2005:80) proposes that Pentecostal advertisement for miracles is consequent upon the search by the general public. In other words, as people move about looking for miracles sometimes even for things for which miracles are not needed, this puts pressure on the leaders to seek to work miracles by all means. But the situation seems to be the other way round: the advertisements for miracles cause people to go about looking miracles. It is in response to the advertisements that 'thousands of people flock to [the designated] venues expecting miracles even for what they can accomplish without needing a miracle' (Iwuagwu 2018:69).

Claims of miracles abound in Nigeria, particularly among Pentecostal preachers. The claims involve making the barren to have children, healing from all kinds of diseases, including even deadly ones like human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) and/or acquired immunodeficiency syndrome (AIDS) and even raising the dead (Ademiluka 2007a:99). While the validity of all the claims cannot be proved, certainly all cannot be false. On the contrary, testimonies abound of people who have received 'miracles of healing ... and deliverance from' all kinds of problems (Antwi 2016:4). To this end, Ademiluka (2007a:100) asserts that 'there are reports [of miracles] that sound real and convincing'. Nonetheless, the scholar admits that in Nigeria the question of the validity of miracles 'has generated so much controversy in the church' (Ademiluka 2007a:106). However, as will be shown shortly, the controversy is not only on the validity of miracles but also about some untoward and bizarre practices.

In Nigeria, crusades are the usual venues for miracles. Many churches hold regular crusades for evangelisation, but among the Pentecostals miracles appear to be the centrepiece of these programmes. While the crusades of many churches go unannounced on air, the big ones relay theirs on television, of which 'airing of miracles takes [the] large chunk' (Obayi & Edogor 2016:17). In fact, many Pentecostal pastors own satellite channels on which they broadcast religious programmes, particularly miracles. Perhaps, the most prominent in respect of miracle broadcast are Chris Oyakhilome of Christ Embassy and the late T. B. Joshua of Synagogue. According to Ukah (2011:53), Oyakhilome started his television ministry in 1996 through which was aired the programme Atmosphere for Miracles (ATM), running every day on some 20 television stations until the ban of miracle demonstration on television by the Nigerian Broadcasting Corporation (NBC) in 2004. T. B. Joshua's channel, Emmanuel Television, is also popularly known for demonstration of healing miracles.

While many Nigerians converge at the miracle centres and others claim on television to have received all sorts of miracles, at the same time all manners of criticism have trailed the miracles. To start with, many have criticised the habit of emphasising miracles over and above evangelism.

According to Asaju (1987/88:30-31), this amounts to substituting signs and wonders for the salvation of souls, which is the primary objective of Jesus' mission. Many Nigerians doubt the veracity of most of the miracles displayed on television, and the doubt arises from various perspectives. In the first place, miracle claims are so common that people wonder if they can all be true. Iwuagwu (2018:69) opines that 'frivolous miracle claims have raised more questions than answers [hence] worshippers [are] reluctant to accept anything as a miracle'. Some interpret the abundance of miracle claims as a fulfilment of the biblical prophecy that 'in the last days many would deceive even the elect with miracles' (Ademiluka 2007a:108; cf. Mt 24:24). Apart from the issue of commonness, there is also the popular talk about fake or 'stage-managed [miracles] by Nigerian pastors' (Iwuagwu 2018:69). Some miracle performers recruit gangs of people to assist them in stage-managing miracles. For instance, in 2016 the Police in Enugu State arrested an allegedly notorious syndicate that specialised in collaborating with 'pastors to fake miracles' (Iwuagwu 2018:69). A miracle-working pastor hires them to engage some persons to feign having certain health problems. Having obtained the details about the 'patients', during a miracle programme the pastor prophesies in accordance with the details, prays for them and 'they will testify to their [instant] healing' (Iwuagwu 2018:69). *The Punch* of 14 March 2020 reported a video clip of one of the miracle-working pastors 'performing what appeared like a miracle' on a woman. It happened that another video clip was in circulation showing the same woman 'claiming she had the same problem as another unidentified pastor prayed for her' (Folarin 2020).

Also common are allegations that some Pentecostal pastors use 'magical powers and cultic mediums to manipulate and cajole their credulous adherents' (Magbadelo 2004:15; cf. Iwuagwu 2018:69). One of the reasons for this allegation is the healing practice of some pastors whereby the healer touches the head of his patients and they fall down instantaneously. Sometimes, objects like handkerchiefs, rings or olive oil are used 'to achieve similar effects on their victims' (Ademiluka 2007a:110). Such practices have become suspect so much that the Pentecostal Fellowship of Nigeria (PFN) has had to warn the public on the dangers of 'infiltrators who had modernised cultism' by injecting the name of Jesus into it (Ademiluka 2007a:111). Ukah (2011:53) asserts that 'the arrowheads of the miracle group' are Chris Oyakhilome and T. B. Joshua, both of whom have been criticised on several occasions by other prominent pastors of 'epitomising thinly veiled occult healing practices'. Until his death in 2021, T. B. Joshua was commonly alleged to be running an occult centre, where some other pastors visited for 'power to boost their healing ministries' (Ademiluka 2007a:111). Both of Oyakhilome and Joshua, however, responded that Jesus was the source of their power (Ademiluka 2007a:111), while to their admirers, their accusers are only being jealous and envious (Ukah 2011:53).

It got to a point that the types of miracles and the manner by which they were being shown on television became

worrisome to the Nigerian public, and many viewers actually complained that the programmes were an 'insult on their intelligence' (Ademiluka 2007a:111). It was, therefore, a welcome development to many when in 2004 the NBC banned the broadcasting of miracles on the broadcast media. By this prohibition, it became unlawful for broadcasters to air 'miracles on television in a way which is not provable and believable' (Obayi & Edogor 2016:17). Leaders of several denominations welcomed the ban because, to them, the miracle performers were not preaching the gospel but advertising miracles in order to woo more people to their churches and satisfy their desire for money (Obayi & Edogor 2016:17). Some also said that the practice was bringing reproach to the church of God. The leadership of the PFN likened fake miracles to fake drugs, thereby lumping miracle advertisement with 'money laundry, advance fee fraud ... and sundry corrupt practices' (Ukah 2011:52). There was, then, the need for government intervention in order to protect the public from the effects of the greed of these preachers. It is important to note, though, that the ban has not been much effective in removing miracles from air. This is because in Nigeria, advertisements from Christian organisations are 'the main source of revenue to many commercial radio and television stations' (Effiom 2005:99). Ukah (2011:50) states that advertisement and sponsored programmes from religious bodies 'provide more than 40% of the revenue of both government' and private media houses. Hence, the operators are naturally reluctant to abide by any control measures that might rob them of revenue from that sector. At the same time, religious bodies are ready to pay money to keep their programmes on air. More important, however, is private ownership of satellite channels by religious organisations that need not operate from Nigeria. For instance, Oyakhilome's miracle programmes have remained on air, being broadcast from Ghana and South Africa (Ukah 2011:53). T. B. Joshua's Emmanuel Television 'is also hosted from South Africa' (Ukah 2011:53).

The foregoing analysis indicates that the perception of miracles in Nigeria clearly contradicts the purpose and significance of miracles in the NT. As seen in the previous section, the essence of miracles in the NT was that they proved the veracity of the gospel message, and very importantly, they were initiated by God himself; that is, 'God is the prime mover' (Resane 2017:6; cf. Mk 16:20). The miracles in themselves were merely a by-product of this purpose. From the NT perspective, therefore, the main quality of a miracle is 'its divine orchestration as opposed to human demonstration' (Resane 2017:6). The perception of miracles by many Nigerian miracle workers differs significantly from this. Most often, 'miracles are human initiated', with worshippers looking on to the preacher rather than God (Resane 2017:6). The preachers' intention is not to spread the gospel but to attract attention and 'convince their audience that they have the ability to communicate with the spiritual realm' (Antwi 2016:5). In other words, the concentration is on the miracles and not the word of God (Antwi 2016:6). This perception is also a departure from the NT purpose of miracles to exhibit God's sovereignty and compassion for

humanity. The focus on miracles instead of the gospel explains the frantic and inordinate efforts to work miracles, such as miracle stage-managing and the resort to occult practices. The miracle workers' intention also justifies the accusation of commercialisation of miracles through advertising, which is another contradiction to the NT purpose. Magbadelo (2004:16) asserts that these preachers 'pursue their pre-occupation as a commercial venture, [utilising] any means to accumulate profits'. 'With catchy and animating words, [they] advertise for harvest of miracles, which turn out to be harvest of money' (Iheanacho 2009:107). According to Iheanacho (2009:107), oftentimes their miracles 'attract financial charges' in cash and/or kind, in addition to using magical means 'to draw large crowds to their churches'. Similarly, Iroegbu (2005:19) states that some modern-time miracle workers perform miracles at 'the financial cost of the beneficiaries'. This attitude was not found in Jesus' ministry, as he charged nobody any fees. Instead, Jesus was entirely altruistic. 'When he had solved their problems he pastorally sent them away to do better for themselves and for others' (Iroegbu 2005:19). It is not only that Jesus never received any reward for his miracles; he also did not advertise them. 'His miraculous acts happened unpretentiously and spontaneously without any call towards himself' (Resane 2017:6).

Paul's condemnation of Simon the magician also indicates that biblically miracles are not meant for self-aggrandisement (Ac 8:3–25). In the section below, the article examines how the quest for miracles in Nigeria is precipitated by the economic situation.

The economic background of the quest for miracles

For some time now, the economic situation in Nigeria is such that it is capable of inducing the quest for miracles as described above. Van Scheepers (2010:164) observes that in the sub-Saharan Africa, many households and individuals live below the poverty line in that their 'incomes are insufficient to provide for basic needs', the proposition that is highly applicable in Nigeria. Retrospectively, poverty in Nigeria has often been traced to the mismanagement of the economy arising from the discovery of crude oil in the 1970s. Before the discovery of petroleum 'agriculture was the main stay of Nigeria's economy' (Oni 2014:206). With the discovery, however, the agricultural sector was neglected, which has since 1980 led to the recession from which the country has not recovered (Ademiluka 2007b:29). The first major characteristic of the recession is the resort to external borrowing by successive governments, such that the country has been consistently indebted to the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and such 'other monopoly capitalist clubs in Paris and London' (Obafemi 1994:49). To offset the debts, government has embarked on policies that have rather impoverished the populace. An example is the Structural Adjustment Programme (SAP) introduced by the Babangida administration (1985–1992). 'SAP led to the removal of petroleum subsidy, privatization/commercialization of public enterprises, and the liberalization

of trade and exchange system' (Mohammed & Ibrahim 2020:2). The devaluation of the Naira by SAP has rather rendered it worthless in that it has steadily depreciated so much that today \$1 (US) exchanges for over N700. This astronomically high rate of inflation has shot up prices of goods and services beyond the reach of the common man. Structural Adjustment Programme has also been accountable for the unprecedented rate of unemployment and retrenchment in Nigeria, as many local industries have had to fold up because of the high prices of raw materials and related goods and services (Ademiluka 2007b:30). More than harsh policies, however, the main factor that has ruined the Nigerian economy is corruption among the ruling class. Chinweuba (2019:41) notes that 'members of the ruling class and their cronies [divert] the highest level of resources ... to their own private uses'. The result of this behaviour is 'abject poverty at the doorsteps of many' (Osinowo, Sanusi & Tolorunju 2019:3). Poverty arises from corruption as it 'diverts government spending away from socially valuable goods' (Ajisafe 2016:160), thereby creating the unprecedented unemployment in Nigeria. Hence, as reported by the United Nations (UN) in 2016, 'over 80 million (or 64%) of the [Nigerian] population [lived] below the poverty line' (United Nations 2016). This fact is supported by the World Poverty Clock when it reveals that Nigeria has the highest rate of extreme poverty in the world, 'with 86.9 million Nigerians living in extreme poverty in 2018' (Iheonu & Urama 2019:1).

This is the economic situation that is being exploited by the miracle preachers and which induces the search for miracles by many Nigerians. In other words, the failure of government to successfully address poverty 'has motivated a good number of Nigerians' to put hope in prophecies of miracle rather than in political propaganda (Endong 2015:21). Mbe (2002:368) theorises that when a group of people are being deprived of essential needs of life, religion offers doctrinal alternatives, either by which these needs are considered to be of insignificant value or through which they are believed to be achievable. Thus, in Nigeria, Pentecostal preachers 'artfully adapt their messages to the deplorable socio-economic situation' of the Nigerian masses by advertising the alternative of miracles as the means by which they can address poverty (Endong 2015:20). And they have had a high degree of success due to the economic situation. Many attend church and Christian programmes mainly 'to seek a solution to their socio-economic problems' (Adeyanju & Babalola 2017:27). In this way, miracle preachers 'have remarkably been feasting on the psychology of the masses' (Endong 2015:20), as they dangle the choice of 'miracle and prosperity to millions of unemployed Nigerians' (Magbadelo 2004:16). Poverty also makes Nigerians to fall for miracle preaching in that many 'find it difficult to [foot] hospital bills' (Owoeye 2012:104). Hence, for Nigerians who are too poor to afford drugs, miracle preaching churches have 'replaced both doctor and pharmacy' (Ukah 2011:50). Another way in which the economic situation precipitates the quest for miracles is that many have resorted to establishing churches 'as a means of escaping poverty and joblessness' (Ojo & Babajide 2020:82).

and thereafter 'claim the power of miracle healing' (Ukah 2011:50). It is therefore correct to say that the quest for miracles is 'an effect of the rampant poverty' in the land (Ademiluka 2007a:109).

Conclusion and recommendations

The quest for miracles in Nigeria has indeed become a social menace in that many have fallen victim to fake miracle workers. The quest also indicates that many Nigerian Christians have a perception of miracles that is contrary to the purpose and significance of miracles in the NT. The miracles of Jesus and those of the apostles were initiated by God himself and meant to prove the truth of the gospel message. In other words, the miracles in themselves were merely a by-product of this purpose. On the contrary, the miracles of many Nigerian preachers are human initiated, with the recipients focusing on to the preacher rather than God. Their intention is not to spread the gospel but to attract human attention. The focus on miracles instead of the gospel explains the frantic efforts to work miracles, such as miracle stage-managing and the resort to occult practices. Another significant departure from the NT altruistic example is the commercialisation of miracles by Nigerian miracle workers. This wrong attitude towards miracles is explicable against the background of the economic situation in Nigeria in which mismanagement and corruption, particularly on the part of the ruling class, have precipitated an unprecedented rate of poverty among the citizenry. This economic situation is being exploited by the miracle preachers, who feast on the psychology of the masses by making them to believe in miracles as the only solution to their socio-economic problems. The quest for miracles in Nigeria, then, is an effect of the rampant poverty in the land.

Therefore, the right approach towards changing Nigerian Christians' attitude to miracles is to address the economic situation. This is mainly the responsibility of government but, as discussed above, in Nigeria 'poverty is not the result of chance, destiny or fate [but of] the bad will of men and women' holding political power (Adeyanju & Babalola 2017:26). That is why government has not been able to honestly and successfully address poverty. The church cannot eradicate the wrong practices of its members about miracles, especially as many church leaders are involved in these practices. Nonetheless, there are still a few steps that can be taken by individual denominations to address the problem of the quest for miracles. Where to start is to educate their members about the teaching of the Bible on miracles so that they are not easily deceived by miracle workers. Perhaps more importantly, the church should care more about the economic condition of its members. It is true that the church in Nigeria, as in other places, has been catering for the welfare of its members in several ways, especially in the occasional provision of materials like 'food, clothes, and shelter for the homeless' (Mbofana 2017). In fact, some churches engage in other activities 'focused on the economic empowerment of women and young people' (Jegade 2020:140). But the church now has to do more than all these. In view of the fact that in

Nigeria, poverty is a result of corruption on the part of the ruling elite, the church has to be more alive to the biblical injunction 'to plead the cause of the needy [and] rescue the oppressed' (Ademiluka 2019:9; cf. Ps 82:4). In other words, the church should take firm action against corruption by 'speaking out and standing up against' its perpetrators (Mbofana 2017). As Kruger (2009:424) puts it, preaching should not only focus on the needs of the poor but also challenge 'their exploitation and oppression by those in position of power and wealth'. Pieterse (2012:19) also opines that 'preaching should show concern for justice to the poor'. Showing concern for justice to the poor in the Nigerian context would mean to 'undo the ways that we ... deny [economic] access and opportunities to the vulnerable' (Fuhlbruck 2016). When Nigerian Christians apply the correct teaching of the Bible on miracles, and government discharges its economic responsibility towards them, such that they are gainfully engaged, they will be less dependent on miracles and more dependent on God.

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