



The Problem of Curses in African Christianity

BOOK REVIEW ESSAY

Adeboye, Godwin O. *Can a Christian Be Cursed? An African Evangelical Response to the Problem of Curses.* Bukuru, Nigeria: HippoBooks, 2023. Pp. xx + 99. £15.99.

Okuchukwu Venatus AKPE

ECWA Theological Seminary, Igbaja, Nigeria
Chukllinic@gmail.com

Can a Christian be Cursed?, authored by a Nigerian evangelical scholar, is a scholarly exploration on the subject of curses. Belief in the efficacy of curses is prevalent in African Christianity, as evident in sermons, movies, and publications. From his evangelical worldview, Adeboye leaves no stone untouched in interrogating the backgrounds, including African traditional beliefs, that inform African Christians' understandings and fears of curses. This book argues for a robust Christological response to the fear and problem of curses premised on the reality of Christ's atonement and full payment of our debts.

Methodologically, Adeboye addresses Christian engagement on the topic through extensive field research, pastoral experience, and thorough exposition of biblical texts. Confronting over-generalizations, poor hermeneutics, flawed and biblical exegesis, his work affirms the need for scholarly attention to contextual existential realities and issues prominent in the African contexts. Such scholarship should use a multidisciplinary methodology that neither dismisses nor undermines the experiences or lived reality of African Christians. Rethinking received tradition in light of new problems, Adeboye writes with both intellectual humility and a holism more appropriate to African contexts than the supposed rational objectivity of Western epistemology. As an African himself, he praises the quests of African churches to address the problem of curses by utilizing the Bible as its resource while addressing misuse of biblical texts.

The first two chapters lay the groundwork, highlighting the blend of African Christian experience and past introductory studies which inform his work. Chapter three addresses questions of methodology. Engaging with African theological methods and approaches as constructed by African biblical

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scholars such as David Tuesday Adamo, Musa Dube, Justin Ukpong, and Teresa Okure, among others, Adeboye selects *intercultural hermeneutics* as practiced by Elizabeth Mburu as the most appropriate approach for “theological engagement of practical issues in African contexts (27). Adeboye especially appreciates Mburu’s “four-legged interpretive hypothesis” (27),¹ asserting that its major strength is that “it easily detects and avoids syncretism because it sees biblical primacy as non-negotiable and differentiates between culture-bound values that can be negotiated and transcultural values that cannot be negotiated and must apply in all cultural contexts” (27–28).

Chapter 4 presents a biblical theology of curses and cursing drawing on both the Old and New Testaments. Adeboye recognizes that curses from a biblical perspective should “not be discussed in isolation from biblical contexts: both textual contexts and historical contexts” (33). He emphasizes that the majority of curses in the Old Testament are *conditional*, only coming into effect when certain divine prohibitions are violated, and insists that in the New Testament, curses must be understood in the context of the redemptive work of Christ. Adeboye also explores the ideas of curses in biblical social and cultural contexts in the Ancient Near East, Greco-Roman contexts. Considering important selected texts dealing with curses (e.g., Gen 3:14–19, Num 22–24, Deut 28:15–68, Psa 109 as an example of the imprecatory psalms, and Gal 3:10–14) to be mostly misconstrued by African Christians, Adeboye offers a helpful corrective through expository engagement of those texts.

Chapter 5 discusses understandings of curses, and solutions to curses, in traditional African religio-cultural contexts. Chapter 6 engages with the reality and fear of curses in African Christianity, focusing on how African Christians interpret their lived experiences and express their fear of curses. Adeboye offers a detailed description of contemporary African responses to fears of curses. These responses include name-changing, popular prayers, deliverance programs, mass migration to Pentecostal and Charismatic churches, dietary prescriptions and prohibitions, etc. Chapter 7 examines the solutions offered to the dilemmas of curses in contemporary African Christianity with specific attention to the instances of cursing/imprecatory prayers, interpretation of lived experiences, and analysis of curses in popular African sermons. Adeboye highlights key texts frequently used in discourse about curses in African Christianity; e.g., curses placed on Adam and Eve (Gen 3:14–19), curses of the patriarchs (Gen–Deut), the curse on Eli’s family (1Sam 2:30–36), the Jabez narrative (1Chr 4:9–10), the Jericho curses (Josh 6:26 and 1Kgs 16:34), and Jesus’s becoming a curse for us (Gal 3:13–14). Adeboye critically addresses the overemphasis of most African preachers’ on the experiences of biblical

¹ See “An African Hermeneutic: A Four-Legged Stool,” chapter 4 in Elizabeth Mburu, *African Hermeneutics* (Bukuru, Nigeria: HippoBooks, 2019), 65–89.

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characters while ignoring the divine purpose and historical context of the texts, the overgeneralization of personal spiritual experiences and revelations, the selective use of texts mostly picked from the Old Testament in preaching on curses, the disposition to interpret patterns and repeated occurrences in the Bible as expressions of curses, deliverance programs and spiritual solutions, spiritual offers to cure curses, and syncretism.

Chapter 8 discusses an evangelical solution to the African dilemma and fear of curses, building on central tenets of evangelicalism such as the primacy of the Bible, the centrality of the cross of Jesus, the centrality of personal conversion and repentance, and the necessity of active missions. When “rightly understood,” Adeboye argues, these “evangelical theological paradigms can be used to help Africans properly transact between their traditional beliefs [about] curses and biblical teachings” (131). Chapter 9 places curses in the context of theodicy and considers curses in the context of philosophical discussions of the problem of evil. Exploring curses as a form of moral evil, Adeboye emphasizes that “a proper understanding of moral responsibility must be entrenched in the moral consciousness of African Christians” (150), who must recognize that actions have consequences.

Chapter 10 presents contextual biblical and practical guidelines and recommendations in responding to curses, emphasizing the proper use of the imprecatory psalms, active mission, discipleship, strong and intentional pastoral care and counseling, contextual theological training and research, etc. Chapter 11 insists that while spiritual problems are real, “they are not the only real problems” (169) faced by Africans. Enumerating challenges facing the African church, Adeboye asks “how can the church in Africa make a spiritual impact that will birth a holistic transformation of Africans?” and argues that African Christians must embark on what he calls “the evangelization of orientation and worldviews” (169). In conclusion, Chapter 12 affirms God’s sovereignty and the Lordship of Christ, emphasizing God’s understanding of the peculiarity of human contextual experiences, and the unique experiences faced by Africans and Christians respectively.

Evaluation

Adeboye’s detailed work is well and clearly written. It helps readers and Christian practitioners rethink the subject of curses in the context of African Christianity. The author maintains a healthy balance between being critical, presenting relevant data, and providing practical guidelines to pastors, missionaries, and Church leaders. His quest to correct flawed hermeneutics is laudable as he points to a better way by maintaining a healthy dialogue with the African worldview while upholding a high view of the Bible. His insistence on the sacrificial work of Christ as the guide rail for African churches in their quest

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to raise liberated congregations free from the fear of curses is commendable. However, the book has a few weaknesses. First, the author's assertion that African Christians' establishment of sacred places "points to their level of fear of curses" (104) is unwarranted. Rather, this probably points to the holism common to both African Christian worldviews and traditional African worldviews. In their quests to attain wellbeing and meaningful life, many Africans, whether Christian or not, attempt to localize and appropriate divine presence through the therapeutic use of anointed sacred objects and spaces. Second, in the author's explication of the real curses plaguing the African continent in Chapter 11, little is done to connect Africa's despair with global processes marked by exploitation as evident in the colonial nation-state project in Africa. Finally, the author's argument for the need for an "evangelization of orientation and mindset" (173) in the African Church would have been strengthened with a presentation of an articulated vision of the kingdom of God which could help the African Church redefine and reimagine its *telos* in light of the bewildering issues plaguing the continent and to actualize such vision.

Conclusion

No mere introductory study, *Can a Christian Be Cursed?* addresses important questions relevant to African Christianity. Adeboye's commitment to upholding a high view of the Bible and the fundamental tenets of evangelicalism holds a central position in this work and is commendable. Due to its accessibility and practicality, this resource will serve as a hands-on resource for seminaries, missionaries, pastors, and theologians grappling with the issue of curses. It also can guide theologians grappling with theologically engagement with culturally rooted questions. I highly recommend this book.