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Human flourishing: Examining Mark 10:17–31 through exegetical-hermeneutical lenses

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Abstract

This article engages with the prevalent discourse on human flourishing in contemporary society. This subject has drawn much interest across disciplines. Despite the extensive discussions on this topic, not much has been done in Gospel studies. Consequently, this study aims to fill this gap by initiating an exploration of human flourishing through the exegetical-hermeneutical lenses of Mark 10:17–31. The passage, featuring the encounter between Jesus and the affluent young ruler, serves as a pivotal focal point for delving into the intersections of spirituality, materialism, and values. By incorporating exegetical and hermeneutical analyses, this research not only uncovers nuanced meanings within the biblical text but also contributes to the broader conversation on human flourishing. The article advocates for a comprehensive understanding that integrates biblical perspectives into the discourse, fostering a more holistic and inclusive dialogue on the subject.

Keywords

human flourishing; pleasure-seeking; consumerism; materialism; wealth; rich young ruler; Mark 10:17–31

1. Introduction

Human flourishing has emerged as a significant theme in contemporary theological, philosophical, and social discourse. Broadly understood, flourishing concerns what it means to live well and what constitutes a genuinely meaningful and fulfilled human life. Miroslav Volf (2015:10–15) argues that competing visions of the good life continue to shape societies and religious traditions, making questions of flourishing central to contemporary human existence. Similarly, Wright (2010) contends that

Christian theology is fundamentally concerned with the formation of authentic humanity and the cultivation of virtue in accordance with God's purposes rather than the pursuit of personal success or self-fulfilment. Within this perspective, true flourishing is inseparable from right relationships with God, others, and creation and is ultimately grounded in participation in God's redemptive purposes. Within many contemporary African societies, however, human flourishing is increasingly interpreted through the lens of economic success, social mobility, consumption, and material accumulation. Such understandings have been reinforced by global consumer culture and by forms of Christianity that associate visible prosperity with divine favour and blessing. Andreas Heuser (2016:8–12) observes that prosperity-oriented Christianity has become deeply intertwined with aspirations for economic advancement and upward social mobility across many parts of Africa. Likewise, Cornelius Niemandt (2017:210–215) argues that prosperity theology frequently operates within the logic of contemporary capitalism by celebrating abundance, achievement, and material success as indicators of divine blessing. Consequently, wealth and economic advancement are often elevated as primary markers of a flourishing life.

Recent scholarship has further highlighted the growth of consumerist orientations within African Christianity. Golo (2023:281–313) argues that consumerist prosperity churches often cultivate materialistic understandings of life that undermine communal and holistic conceptions of well-being traditionally associated with African societies. Similarly, Mashau and Kgatle (2019:3–10) contend that prosperity-oriented forms of Christianity have contributed to cultures of greed, acquisition, and excessive individualism by reducing human flourishing to economic prosperity and personal advancement. These developments raise an important theological question: Does the accumulation of wealth constitute genuine human flourishing, or does the Christian tradition offer an alternative vision of the good life? The narrative of the rich man in Mark 10:17–31 provides a particularly important lens through which to explore this question. Preserved in all three Synoptic Gospels, the account occupies a significant place within the early Christian tradition because it addresses fundamental questions concerning wealth, discipleship, eternal life, and participation in the kingdom of God (Hurtado 1989:63–76). The narrative

portrays an affluent individual who approaches Jesus seeking eternal life but encounters a radical summons to relinquish his possessions and follow him. The encounter exposes a profound tension between material security and discipleship and challenges assumptions that wealth, status, and possession constitute the foundation of a meaningful and fulfilled life. As such, the passage provides fertile ground for theological reflection on the nature of human flourishing and the relationship between wealth and participation in God's kingdom (Edwards 2002:326–338; France 2002:397–409).

Although numerous studies have explored the historical, ethical, and theological dimensions of Mark 10:17–31, comparatively less attention has been devoted to its significance for contemporary discussions of human flourishing within African contexts shaped by consumerism, prosperity-oriented spirituality, and widening economic inequalities. This article argues that Mark 10:17–31 presents a kingdom-centred vision of human flourishing that challenges prosperity-oriented conceptions of the good life in contemporary African Christianity. Through an exegetical-hermeneutical analysis of the encounter between Jesus and the wealthy man, the study demonstrates that flourishing is not grounded in material accumulation, social status, or personal achievement, but in discipleship, trust in God, generosity towards others, and participation in the community of God's reign. By bringing Mark's understanding of wealth and discipleship into dialogue with prosperity-oriented discourses of blessing and success in African Christianity, the article contends that the passage offers a critical theological corrective to consumerist and individualistic constructions of flourishing and proposes a relational, ethical, and communal vision of the good life rooted in the values of the kingdom of God. Methodologically, the study employs an exegetical-hermeneutical approach. The exegetical dimension focuses on the literary, narrative, and theological features of Mark 10:17–31, while the hermeneutical dimension explores the significance of the passage for contemporary African discussions concerning wealth, blessing, and human flourishing. In this regard, Mazamisa (1987:157) rightly observes that exegesis without hermeneutics, or hermeneutics without exegesis, risks producing a one-sided interpretation. The article therefore proceeds by first examining the literary and socio-historical dimensions of the passage, then exploring its implications for human

flourishing, and finally placing these findings in dialogue with prosperity-oriented conceptions of flourishing in contemporary African Christianity.

2. The socio-cultural, religious, economic and political context of Mark 10:17–31

This section provides a general understanding of the socio-cultural, religious, economic, and political context of the time in which the passage was written. The Gospel of Mark, including the passage in question, was likely composed in the first-century world (Oakman 2020:39–49). One of the key factors shaping the social and economic landscape of first-century Palestine was the Roman Empire's domination of the region. Roman rule brought with it a complex system of taxes and tribute, which burdened the local population and contributed to widespread poverty and social inequality. The Roman Empire also maintained a large military presence in Palestine, which further reinforced its power and control over the region (Cromhout 2020:94–102). The region of Judea was under Roman rule, with Roman governors or procurators overseeing the administration. The Roman Empire exercised control over various aspects of governance and taxation. This context had implications for the interactions between Jesus and the ruling authorities, as well as the socio-political climate of the time. Neyrey (1991:355–412) claims that in this context, wealth and status were highly valued, and many people aspired to gain wealth and power. The Roman Empire controlled Palestine, and this had a significant impact on the social and economic structures of the region. The Roman taxation system was burdensome, and many Jews resented the taxes they had to pay to their oppressors. Furthermore, the Jewish religious leaders were often seen as collaborators with the Romans, which contributed to a sense of disillusionment and unrest among the Jewish population (Malina 1996:75–78).

Against this backdrop, Jesus emerged as a charismatic religious leader who challenged the prevailing religious and cultural norms of his time. He preached a message of love, forgiveness, and humility, and he called on his followers to reject the materialistic and selfish values of the society around them. In this context, Jesus' teachings and actions were seen as revolutionary. According to Evans (2001:93–104) Jesus challenged the

social and religious status quo and called for a new way of living based on love, compassion, and humility. He also had a special concern for the poor and marginalized, and he criticised the wealthy and powerful for their lack of concern for the less fortunate. The passage in Mark 10:17–31 describes an encounter between Jesus and a wealthy man who asks him what he must do to inherit eternal life. This passage takes place in the socio-historical context of first-century Palestine, which was under Roman rule and heavily influenced by Jewish religious and cultural traditions. France (2002:399–415) asserts, that in the passage of Mark 10:17–31, Jesus challenges the wealthy man to give up his possessions and follow him, which would have been a radical and counter-cultural idea in the context of first-century Palestine. This would have challenged the prevailing cultural norms around wealth and status, and it speaks to Jesus' broader message of valuing spiritual riches over material ones (Lane 1974:363–366). The man is unable to do so, highlighting the difficulty of reconciling the values of the kingdom of God with the values of the world. According to Witherington (2001:345–357), the socio-historical context of first-century Palestine is essential for understanding the message and significance of Jesus' teachings. It provides important background for the encounter with the wealthy man in Mark 10:17–31 and sheds light on the broader social and cultural forces that shaped Jesus' message of love, compassion, and humility.

3. Narrative location of Mark 10:17–31

The narrative location of Mark 10:17–31 is crucial for understanding the encounter between Jesus and the wealthy man. It occurs within a larger section of the Gospel of Mark that focuses on Jesus' teachings about discipleship and the nature of the kingdom of God. Prior to this encounter, Jesus is teaching in Judea and discussing topics such as marriage and the covenant relationship (Hurtado 1998:165–169). He then emphasises the childlike faith and trust required to enter the kingdom of God. In the midst of this teaching, the wealthy man approaches Jesus, seeking guidance on inheriting eternal life. Jesus initially instructs him to keep the commandments, but the man is unsatisfied and asks for further instructions. Jesus then challenges him to sell his possessions and follow him, which the man finds difficult to do and departs with sorrow. Marcus

(2009:678–695) points out that following this encounter, Jesus further teaches his disciples about the challenges that the rich face in entering the kingdom of God, using the metaphor of a camel and the eye of a needle. He assures them that those who forsake everything for his sake will receive eternal life. Understanding the narrative location provides context and a deeper understanding of the encounter and its surrounding teachings.

The narrative context of Mark 10:17–31 is significant because it encompasses central themes in Jesus' teaching. It emphasises the importance of faith, trust, and humility for discipleship, while challenging followers to reject worldly values and embrace the values of the kingdom of God. Jesus' encounter with the wealthy man exemplifies this message, as he challenges the man to give up his wealth and follow him (Myers 2020:79-94). The narrative also highlights the transformative power and radical nature of the kingdom of God, which is available to all regardless of social status or wealth. Furthermore, the encounter characterises the wealthy man as a complex figure, representing societal tensions between materialism and spiritual values. Finally, the narrative context sheds light on Jesus' teachings and the broader social and cultural forces that influenced his message (Lane 1974: 363–370).

4. The general structure of Mark 10:17–31

Stein (2008) suggests that in the current narrative there are four distinct segments: firstly, the narrative of the affluent individual seeking counsel from Jesus (10:17–22); secondly, Jesus imparts teachings concerning wealth (10:23–27); thirdly, there is a pledge of reward for those who follow Jesus (10:28–30); and lastly, the account concludes with a proverb (10:31). This arrangement complicates a straightforward classification of the narrative, posing challenges to simplicity, if not rendering it nearly impossible. While scholars generally concur that 10:17–22 forms a cohesive unit introduced to Mark, and that 10:23–27 and 10:28–30 comprise traditional materials, their organisation, particularly that of 10:28–30, is likely attributable to Mark's authorship.

4.1 The macro and micro-structure of Mark 10:17–31

The macro and micro-structure of Mark 10:17–31 provides an overview of the larger literary context of the passage and the specific elements that make up the narrative. Van Aarde (1991:101–121) argues that understanding these structures is crucial to interpreting the passage and grasping its overall meaning. The macro structure of Mark 10:17–31 is best understood in the context of the larger narrative of the Gospel of Mark. This section of the gospel, which begins in Mark 8, is characterised by Jesus' teachings on discipleship, the nature of the kingdom of God, and his impending death and resurrection. Mark 10:17–31 is situated within this larger narrative and serves as a pivotal moment in Jesus' teaching on discipleship and the kingdom of God.

At a macro level, the passage can be divided into three distinct parts as suggested by Evans (2001:91–93): the encounter between Jesus and the wealthy man (verses 17–22), Jesus' teaching on the difficulty of the rich entering the kingdom of God (verses 23–27), and his promise of eternal life for those who give up everything for his sake (verses 28–31). This macro-structure divides the passage into three main sections, namely the encounter between Jesus and the rich young ruler, Jesus' teaching on the difficulty of the rich entering the kingdom of God, and the rewards of discipleship. It highlights the central themes of discipleship, faith, and the challenges and rewards of following Jesus. The structure helps to understand the narrative by providing a framework for analysing the individual events and teachings within the passage.

The micro-structure of Mark 10:17–31 focuses on the specific elements that make up the narrative. This passage is composed of a dialogue between Jesus and the wealthy man, as well as Jesus' subsequent teaching to his disciples. Keener (2002:154–155) comments that in verse 17 the wealthy man approaches Jesus and asks him what he must do to inherit eternal life. In verse 18, Jesus responds by telling him to keep the commandments. In verses 19–20, the affluent man affirms that he has kept the commandments but asks what else he must do. In verse 21, Jesus challenges him to sell his possessions and give to the poor, and to follow him. In verse 22 the rich man is unable to do so and leaves sorrowfully. In verses 23–24, Jesus teaches his disciples about the difficulty of the rich entering the kingdom

of God. In verse 25, Jesus uses the metaphor of a camel passing through the eye of a needle to illustrate this point. The disciples (v. 26–31) are astonished and ask who can be saved. Jesus responds by saying that all things are possible with God. Peter declares that the disciples have left everything to follow Jesus, and Jesus promises them eternal life. The micro-structure of Mark 10:17–31 reveals a dialogue between Jesus and the wealthy man that serves as a microcosm of the broader themes of the Gospel of Mark. The encounter highlights the importance of faith, trust, and humility in the life of a disciple, and challenges followers to reject the values of the world and embrace the values of the kingdom of God. The subsequent teaching of Jesus to his disciples emphasizes the transformative power of the kingdom of God and the radical nature of its values, as well as the importance of sacrifice and self-denial in the life of a disciple.

5. Identifying the possible theological motifs

In Mark 10:17–31, several theological motifs can be identified. These motifs help to convey deeper theological messages within the passage. Several motifs stand out in this pericope. The first and most prominent is the kingdom of God (De Silva 2004:193–200). For instance, people were bringing their children to Jesus to be blessed. We are told that the disciples rebuked the people. But when Jesus saw this, he was indignant and said, "Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these. I tell you the truth, anyone who will not receive the kingdom of God like a little child will never enter it" (Mk 10:13–15). Similarly, in this narrative of the rich young ruler after Jesus has confronted him to sell all his possessions and give to the poor and follow Jesus. Unfortunately, at that, the rich young ruler's face fell, and he went away. Gundry (1993) notes that the narrator attributes this reaction to the fact that the man had great wealth. It was in light of that reaction that Jesus told his disciples that "how hard it is for the rich to enter the kingdom of God" (Mk 10:22–23). Jesus emphasises that entering the kingdom requires a radical shift in priorities and a willingness to let go of worldly attachments. The motif of the kingdom of God points to God's reign and the values and principles that should guide the lives of believers (Hagner 2012:170).

Also, Keener (2014:154–155) points out that in this narrative, another significant theological theme is salvation and grace. The passage addresses the topic of salvation and the role of God's grace in attaining it. Jesus teaches that salvation cannot be achieved through human efforts but is made possible by God's grace. The motif of salvation highlights the importance of recognising one's spiritual need and relying on God's mercy and grace for salvation. This is followed by the deception of material possessions and the struggle for detachment faced by one who is enslaved by them. The motif of material possessions and detachment plays a significant role in the passage. The young man's attachment to his wealth becomes an obstacle to following Jesus and experiencing true spiritual fulfilment. This motif highlights the need for believers to have a proper perspective on material possessions and to be willing to detach themselves from worldly attachments to fully devote themselves to God.

Furthermore, Holladay (2005:167–170) thinks that sacrifice and discipleship are an integral focus of this passage. The motif of sacrifice and discipleship is central to the passage. Jesus challenges the young man to sell his possessions and follow him, emphasising the cost of discipleship. This motif underscores the call for believers to be willing to make sacrifices, give up worldly comforts, and wholeheartedly follow Jesus as his disciples. While Malina (2001:145–149) suggests that divine authority and the teachings of Jesus are one of the dominant themes in this section as well. The passage highlights Jesus' authority as a teacher and his teachings on eternal life and the requirements for discipleship. The motif of divine authority points to Jesus as the ultimate source of truth and guidance, and it underscores the significance of his teachings in shaping believers' lives (Boring 2007:412–413). Wealth and the kingdom of God: the motif of wealth serves as a contrasting element in the passage. Jesus emphasises the difficulty for the rich to enter the kingdom of God, highlighting the potential dangers of wealth and materialism. This motif prompts reflection on the relationship between wealth and spiritual well-being, urging believers to prioritise the kingdom of God over worldly possessions. These theological motifs contribute to the overall message and meaning of the passage, emphasising the values of the kingdom of God, the significance of God's grace in salvation, the need for detachment from worldly attachments, the call to

sacrificial discipleship, the authority of Jesus' teachings, and the careful consideration of wealth in light of the kingdom of God.

6. Implications for human flourishing

From the perspective of human flourishing, Mark 10:17–31 begins by locating goodness and ultimate fulfilment in God rather than in human achievement. The man's question concerning eternal life reflects a search for a meaningful and flourishing existence. Jesus redirects this search by affirming that true goodness belongs to God alone (Mk 10:18), thereby establishing God as the source and measure of authentic flourishing. The subsequent reference to the commandments highlights the ethical dimensions of human well-being. Prohibitions against murder, adultery, theft, and false witness, together with the command to honour one's parents, provide the moral framework within which individuals and communities may thrive. These commandments nurture trust, justice, and social cohesion, all of which are essential for flourishing human relationships (Edwards 2002:326–329; Malina 2001:145–149). The narrative subsequently reveals that external conformity to moral requirements, although important, is not sufficient for genuine flourishing. Despite his exemplary observance of the commandments, the wealthy man remains unable to embrace the life to which Jesus calls him. His attachment to wealth exposes a deeper obstacle: the tendency to locate security, identity, and fulfilment in possessions rather than in God. The man's sorrowful departure illustrates that material abundance cannot guarantee wholeness or participation in the fullness of life offered by the kingdom of God. The passage therefore warns against allowing possessions to become ultimate sources of meaning and security (Edwards 2002:333–336; France 2002:403–406).

Jesus' call to sell his possessions, give to the poor, and follow him points to a transformative vision of flourishing grounded in discipleship. Flourishing is not presented as the accumulation of resources but as wholehearted participation in God's kingdom. This entails a radical reorientation of values in which allegiance to God takes precedence over personal gain. The passage consequently portrays flourishing as a relational reality rooted in trust, obedience, and faithful following of Jesus. Such flourishing emerges not from self-sufficiency or material security but from openness

to God's transformative purposes and participation in the life of the kingdom (Donahue & Harrington 2002:304–307; Edwards 2002:336–338). The passage further demonstrates that human flourishing possesses an inherently communal dimension. Jesus' instruction to give to the poor underscores the social implications of discipleship and the responsibility of believers toward the well-being of others. In this respect, flourishing cannot be reduced to individual fulfilment or personal success. Rather, it encompasses generosity, justice, and concern for vulnerable members of society. As Vorster (2021:216) argues, flourishing personhood is characterised by love, peace, fulfilment, meaning, purpose, and active moral agency directed towards the common good. Mark's narrative therefore presents flourishing not merely as a personal achievement but as a way of life that contributes to the flourishing of others (Vorster 2021:216; Roos 2011:4). Read in this way, Mark 10:17–31 presents a vision of flourishing that integrates moral integrity, discipleship, relational well-being, and social responsibility. The passage challenges any understanding of the good life that is defined primarily by material success and instead directs attention to participation in God's kingdom. Authentic flourishing emerges through a life ordered towards God, expressed through faithful discipleship and manifested in generous concern for others. This theological vision provides an important framework for evaluating contemporary Christian understandings of wealth, blessing, and human well-being, particularly within prosperity-oriented expressions of African Christianity. It is to this contextual engagement that the discussion now turns.

6.1 Mark 10:17–31 and prosperity-oriented conceptions of human flourishing in African Christianity

The discourse of human flourishing has gained considerable prominence within contemporary African Christianity, particularly within Pentecostal and Charismatic movements influenced by prosperity theology. Prosperity theology generally teaches that faith, positive confession, obedience, and sacrificial giving are pathways to divine blessing, often manifested through material prosperity, physical health, and social advancement (Asamoah-Gyadu 2015:163–176; Bowler 2013:77–138). Within this framework, flourishing is frequently measured through visible indicators such as wealth, success, professional achievement, and upward social mobility.

The appeal of prosperity theology in Africa cannot be separated from the continent's socioeconomic realities. Asamoah-Gyadu (2022:1–3) argues that prosperity preaching resonates because it addresses people's experiences of poverty and uncertainty, as well as their aspirations for a better life. Likewise, Gifford observes that contemporary African Pentecostalism has increasingly emphasised success, achievement, and wealth in the present life rather than merely future salvation (Gifford 2004:44–61).

Against this backdrop, Mark 10:17–31 presents a significant theological challenge to prosperity-oriented constructions of flourishing. The rich man appears to embody the very ideals often associated with divine favour. He possesses wealth, social standing, and moral respectability. Yet Jesus exposes the insufficiency of these markers by revealing the man's attachment to his possessions. Despite his apparent success, he lacks the freedom required for wholehearted discipleship. The narrative therefore destabilises any assumption that wealth necessarily signifies divine approval. Rather than affirming material prosperity as evidence of blessing, Jesus identifies possessions as a potential impediment to participation in the kingdom of God (Mk 10:23–25). The command to "sell what you own and give to the poor" (Mk 10:21) redirects attention from accumulation to generosity and from ownership to discipleship.

This critique is particularly relevant in African contexts where Christianity sometimes becomes intertwined with consumerist aspirations. Asamoah-Gyadu (2015:163–170) warns that prosperity-oriented ministries may contribute to the commodification of Christianity, where religious practices become linked to economic expectations and the pursuit of success. Mark's narrative offers a contrasting vision in which flourishing is neither purchased nor measured by wealth but is found in following Jesus. Furthermore, the promise of a new community for those who leave everything for the sake of the gospel (Mk 10:29–30) suggests that flourishing is fundamentally relational and communal. Such a vision resonates with African communitarian values frequently expressed through ubuntu, where human well-being is realised through mutual care, solidarity, and interconnectedness. The kingdom envisioned by Jesus therefore challenges individualistic notions of success and instead promotes a communal understanding of life, responsibility, and belonging. Read within contemporary African Christianity, Mark 10:17–31 functions

as a corrective to prosperity-driven definitions of the good life. The text does not condemn wealth in itself; rather, it exposes the danger of allowing wealth to define identity, security, and purpose. Genuine flourishing emerges when possessions are subordinated to the demands of discipleship and the values of God's kingdom.

7. Conclusion

This article has argued that Mark 10:17–31 presents a kingdom-centred vision of human flourishing that fundamentally challenges prosperity-oriented constructions of the good life within contemporary African Christianity. Through an exegetical-hermeneutical analysis of the encounter between Jesus and the wealthy man, the study has demonstrated that authentic flourishing cannot be reduced to material accumulation, economic advancement, social status, or visible markers of success. Rather, Mark portrays flourishing as participation in God's kingdom through discipleship, trust in God, generosity, and faithful obedience to the demands of the gospel. The narrative reveals a profound tension between wealth and discipleship. Although the wealthy man appears to embody success according to prevailing social and religious expectations, his attachment to possessions ultimately prevents him from embracing the fullness of life offered by Jesus. Mark therefore exposes the inadequacy of material abundance as a sufficient basis for human flourishing and redefines the good life in terms of allegiance to God's reign. Flourishing emerges not through acquisition and self-preservation but through surrender, transformation, and participation in God's redemptive purposes. Read within the context of contemporary Africa, where persistent poverty, widening economic inequality, unemployment, and social insecurity continue to shape everyday life, the appeal of prosperity-oriented forms of Christianity becomes understandable. In many contexts, prosperity theology has offered hope, dignity, and the promise of socio-economic advancement to communities confronting structural deprivation. At the same time, however, prosperity-oriented discourses have often contributed to the elevation of wealth, consumption, and individual success as primary indicators of divine favour and human well-being. Against such perspectives, Mark 10:17–31 offers an alternative theological imagination in which flourishing is not measured by what one possesses but by one's participation in the kingdom

of God and commitment to the demands of discipleship. Furthermore, the passage resonates with African communitarian conceptions of personhood that emphasise relationality, mutual responsibility, and the interconnectedness of human life. Jesus' call to generosity and concern for the poor suggests that flourishing is never merely an individual achievement but a communal reality that entails responsibility for the well-being of others. Consequently, the text challenges individualistic and consumerist understandings of blessing while affirming a vision of life characterised by solidarity, justice, compassion, and shared human dignity. Ultimately, Mark 10:17–31 calls the church in Africa to critically re-evaluate prevailing assumptions concerning wealth, blessing, and the nature of the good life. The passage invites believers to embrace a kingdom-centred understanding of flourishing in which discipleship takes precedence over accumulation, generosity over acquisition, and faithfulness over material success. By bringing Mark's vision of flourishing into dialogue with contemporary African debates on prosperity, wealth, and human well-being, this study has shown that the passage remains a vital theological resource for constructing a more holistic, relational, and transformative understanding of human flourishing in African Christianity today.

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