

ANALYSIS OF JAMES 2:1–7 AND ITS RELEVANCE FOR CURBING SOCIO-ECONOMIC INEQUALITY IN NIGERIA

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.22983029>

Abstract

This study examines James 2:1–7 and its relevance for addressing socio-economic inequality in Nigeria. In the early Christian assembly, James condemned προσωποληψία (partiality), whereby wealthy visitors received preferential treatment while the poor were humiliated and displaced. The same pattern of deference to wealth persists in many Nigerian congregations, mirroring and legitimating a wider national crisis of inequality. Despite being one of Africa’s largest economies, Nigeria exhibits a paradox of plenty: a narrow elite captures substantial wealth through corruption and patronage while approximately 133 million citizens, representing 63% of the population, live in multidimensional poverty. The study employs a grammatico-historical exegetical method situated within the model of African biblical hermeneutics, moving through contextualization and appropriation. It first establishes the literary and historical context of the pericope, identifying its genre as paraenetic wisdom deploying diatribal and protreptic rhetoric, and locating it within the argumentative structure of James 2:1–13. It then offers a lexical, syntactical and rhetorical analysis of the passage, attending to προσωποληψία, the disputed genitive construction in verse 1, the ἐσθῆς λαμπρά of the wealthy visitor, the verdict κριταὶ διαλογισμῶν πονηρῶν, and the divine election of οἱ πτωχοὶ τῷ κόσμῳ. The exegesis yields six theological inferences. These are subsequently brought into critical correlation with Nigeria’s empirical realities, including multidimensional and monetary poverty, Gini trends, regional disparity, youth unemployment, elite capture, administrative bribery and extractive institutional arrangements. The study argues that James 2:1–7 furnishes a transformative ethic capable of curbing systemic inequality when applied to both ecclesial practice and public life, and it proposes recommendations at congregational, societal and discipleship levels. It concludes by calling the Nigerian church to renounce partiality and to become a credible agent of economic justice.

Keywords: Partiality; socio-economic inequality; Nigeria; Epistle of James; poverty; elite capture; African biblical hermeneutics.

Article Information

Article Type:
Research Article

Received:
03 July 2026

Accepted:
15 Sep 2026

Published:
26 Sep 2026



1. Introduction

Nigeria presents one of the most striking instances of the paradox of plenty in the contemporary world. It is among the largest economies on the African continent and is richly endowed with petroleum, natural gas, arable land and human capital, yet it sustains levels of deprivation that rank among the most severe globally. The National Bureau of Statistics (2022) reported that 133 million Nigerians, constituting 63% of the population, are multidimensionally poor, experiencing simultaneous deprivations across health, education and living standards. The World Bank (2025) records that the share of Nigerians living below the international extreme poverty line of \$3.00 per person per day rose from 34.7% in 2018/19 to 41.8% in 2022/23. Regional divides are pronounced, youth unemployment is acute, and public resources continue to flow disproportionately toward a politically connected minority (Mayah et al., 2017; Odozi & Oyelere, 2022).

This configuration is not accidental. It reflects what Acemoglu and Robinson (2012) describe as extractive institutional arrangements, in which political and economic institutions are structured to transfer resources from the many to the few and in which those who control the state possess both the means and the motive to resist reform. Nigeria's dependence on petroleum rents has intensified this dynamic, producing the familiar pathologies of the resource curse: fiscal volatility, the atrophy of productive sectors, and the conversion of political office into a mechanism of private accumulation (Auty, 1993; Watts, 2004).

What renders this situation theologically significant is the position of the Christian church within it. Nigeria contains one of the largest Christian populations in the world, and Christianity exercises substantial influence over public discourse, electoral behaviour and social imagination (Marshall, 2009; Obadare, 2018). Yet despite the gospel's emphasis upon the equal dignity of persons, partiality grounded in wealth and social station persists within many Nigerian congregations. Wealthy politicians, contractors and business figures frequently receive preferential treatment in seating, recognition, access to the pulpit and appointment to leadership, while poorer members are marginalised (Ige, 2017). Ukah (2008) and Obadare (2018) have documented the reciprocal relationship that has developed between religious and political elites, in which spiritual legitimation is exchanged for patronage. Such internal favouritism contradicts biblical teaching and simultaneously disables the church's capacity to speak credibly against the inequality that surrounds it. A community that reproduces the stratifications of its society cannot plausibly summon that society to abandon them.

2. Literary and Historical Context of James 2:1–7

James the Just, traditionally the brother of Jesus and leader of the Jerusalem church, is the purported author (Allison, 2013). Traditional attribution places the letter in the early 40s to early 60s CE, before his martyrdom in 62 CE (Moo, 2000), making it among the earliest New Testament documents (McKnight, 2011). Critical views include pseudonymous composition in the late first or early second century; Dibelius (1976) saw it as a compilation without a clear authorial situation. Allison (2013) notes arguments against the traditional view (polished Greek, Hellenistic rhetoric, developed Jesus' tradition) and for it (Semitic colouring, undeveloped Christology, lack of Gentile focus, Palestinian Jewish wisdom affinities). The question is not decisive for this study. The socio-

economic realities addressed, vulnerability of labourers, dominance of wealth, courts as tools of the powerful, persisted throughout the first century in Palestine and the eastern Mediterranean. Exegetical conclusions do not depend on resolving authorship.

Addressed “to the twelve tribes in the Dispersion” (1:1), the letter targets the Jewish-Christian diaspora outside Palestine (Moo, 2000). The phrase identifies recipients ethnically and geographically while invoking the eschatological hope of Israel’s restored tribes, framing them as the renewed people of God in exile. They faced economic distress and social dislocation (McKnight, 2011). The economic profile includes day labourers whose wages are withheld (5:4), modest itinerant traders (4:13–16), and those in acute need (2:15–16). The wealthy appear mainly as external oppressors, though 1:10–11 and 2:2–3 suggest some contact or presence. Edgar (2001) argues the community’s self-understanding as the elect poor made its deference to wealth in 2:2–4 especially incongruous.

The letter combines Jewish wisdom literature and Hellenistic paraenesis—ethical exhortation reminding readers of acknowledged obligations (Allison, 2013). Paraenesis uses traditional material, maxims, and imperatives to promote integrity (Popkes, 2001). Dibelius (1976) inferred a lack of sustained argument from this form, but the view has been widely rejected; paraenesis allows coherence, as in James 2:1–13. James 2:1–7 employs the diatribe (direct address, rhetorical questions, hypothetical scenarios, imagined interlocutors) to challenge assumptions (Johnson, 1995) and functions as protreptic discourse urging practice matching profession (McCartney, 2009).

Verses 2–4 ground the prohibition of verse 1; verses 5–7 confirm it from God’s character and experience. The study treats 2:1–7 as a coherent sub-unit of thesis, reason, and proof, completed in 2:8–13.4.4 Place within the Letter. James 2:1–7 applies the command of 1:19–27 to be doers of the word (Moo, 2000). It negatively illustrates pure religion (1:27), visiting orphans and widows and remaining unstained by the world, by showing a community that dishonours the vulnerable and adopts worldly valuation. It opens the unit on authentic faith (2:1–13), condemning partiality in the messianic assembly (Johnson, 1995). Addressing deference to wealth supplies the moral foundation for faith and works in 2:14–26 (McKnight, 2011). The illustration of dismissing a needy brother (2:15–16) continues the assembly scene: professed faith fails to produce action toward the poor. Genuine faith issues in mercy and justice (McKnight, 2011).

The assembly faced acute class tension: wealthy oppressors (landed proprietors, creditors, or merchants) exploited poor labourers, including through legal action (Moo, 2000). Being dragged into court (2:6) reflects Roman legal realities, where litigation favoured the wealthy and connected; for a dependent labourer, a summons often equalled a verdict. Batten (2010) situates the scene in benefaction conventions. In a patronage economy, a person of means implied potential benefaction, and preferential seating was the expected honour exchange. The assembly’s behaviour in 2:3 follows ordinary social protocol; James condemns a normal practice, requiring the community to violate entrenched expectations. Mongstad-Kvammen (2013) reads it within the Roman imperial order: the assembly internalised imperial honour hierarchy, and James resists this. The wealthy visitor bears imperial status markers; deference reproduces imperial values in a community confessing an alternative Lord.

James draws on the Holiness Code, especially Leviticus 19:15 forbidding partiality in judgment (Mongstad-Kvammen, 2013). Johnson (1995) shows Leviticus 19:12–18 underlies much of James; 2:8 explicitly cites Leviticus 19:18 (love of neighbour) as the royal law. Leviticus 19:15 addresses judges; its application to seating implies the assembly exercises a judicial function and renders a corrupt verdict. James aligns with the Jesus tradition, particularly the Beatitudes, noting God has chosen the poor to be rich in faith and heirs of the kingdom (McKnight, 2011). Bauckham (1999) observes that James reformulates rather than quotes Jesus sayings; the link to Luke 6:20 and Matthew 5:3 in 2:5 is paradigmatic. The prophetic tradition (Amos 2:6–8; 5:10–12; Isaiah 3:14–15) supplies divine indictment of oppressors of the poor, while the Anawim tradition of the Psalms establishes the poor as objects of divine regard (Wachob, 2000).

3. Exegetical Analysis of James 2:1–7

a) Prohibition of Partiality in the Faith of the Glorious Lord (James 2:1)

Ἀδελφοί μου, μὴ ἐν προσωπολημψίαις ἔχετε τὴν πίστιν τοῦ κυρίου ἡμῶν Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ τῆς δόξης.

The analysis begins with the thesis stated in verse 1, in which the author issues a direct prohibition against προσωπολημψία, “partiality” or “favouritism” (Mongstad-Kvammen, 2013). The vocative Ἀδελφοί μου establishes the familial register that governs the passage and is rhetorically significant: the community addressed is a kinship group, within which the differentiation of members by external status is inherently anomalous.

προσωπολημψίας. McKnight (2011) explains that this term, a Christian neologism, literally denotes “face-taking” and refers to the rendering of judgments on the basis of external appearance — wealth, dress, status, rather than upon the person. The formation derives from the Septuagintal rendering of the Hebrew idiom *nāśā’ pānīm*, “to lift the face,” which in judicial contexts denotes the improper showing of favour. The word group appears in the New Testament predominantly in assertions that God shows no partiality (Acts 10:34; Romans 2:11; Ephesians 6:9; Colossians 3:25), which establishes the theological premise of the prohibition: impartiality is a divine attribute, and partiality within the assembly is therefore not merely unkind but a misrepresentation of God’s character. The plural προσωπολημψίας is noteworthy. It suggests not a single episode but a range of discriminatory practices, indicating that the scenario of verses 2–4 is illustrative of a pattern rather than exhaustive of the offence.

The construction of the prohibition. The construction μὴ ... ἔχετε with the present imperative most naturally prohibits a continuing practice, implying that the behaviour was already occurring. The phrase ἔχειν τὴν πίστιν denotes the holding or practice of the faith, so that the prohibition concerns not an isolated act but the manner in which the community’s faith is held. Partiality is presented as a mode of possessing faith that is incompatible with its object.

τὴν πίστιν τοῦ κυρίου ἡμῶν Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ τῆς δόξης. The genitive construction is disputed. Johnson (1995) argues that the phrase functions as a subjective genitive, referring to the faith that Jesus himself exhibited and taught, which was intrinsically impartial. On this reading, partiality contradicts the pattern of Jesus’ own fidelity. The alternative objective reading, favoured by Moo (2000) and McKnight (2011), takes the phrase as faith directed toward Jesus Christ, and is

supported by the general Jacobean usage of πίστις for the believer's trust. A third possibility treats the genitive as general or adjectival, denoting Christian faith as such.

The exegetical stakes are less severe than the debate suggests, since on any reading the point stands that partiality is incompatible with the faith in question. The subjective reading nonetheless yields a sharper argument: it grounds the prohibition in the concrete practice of Jesus, who received the marginalised and refused the honour protocols of his society, and thereby makes the community's deference to wealth a departure from the pattern of its Lord rather than merely a breach of an abstract principle.

τῆς δόξης. The placement of this genitive at the close of the clause is grammatically awkward and has generated several proposals: that it modifies κυρίου ("our glorious Lord"), that it stands in apposition to Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ ("Jesus Christ, the Glory"), or that it qualifies τὴν πίστιν. Mongstad-Kvammen (2013) observes that the suspension of δόξης until the end of the sentence produces emphasis, so that the "weight" of the exalted Christ renders worldly distinctions irrelevant. The observation is theologically apt whichever syntactical solution is adopted. The term δόξα translates the Hebrew *kābôd*, whose root sense is weight or gravity, and its deployment here establishes a contrast that governs the whole passage: over against the true weight of the glorified Christ, the assembly has been assigning weight according to gold rings and bright clothing. The community's error is fundamentally an error of measurement.

b) The Assembly Scenario and Its Verdict (James 2:2–4)

ἐὰν γὰρ εἰσέλθῃ εἰς συναγωγὴν ὑμῶν ἀνὴρ χρυσοδακτύλιος ἐν ἐσθῇτι λαμπρᾷ, εἰσέλθῃ δὲ καὶ πτωχὸς ἐν ῥυπαρᾷ ἐσθῇτι ... καὶ οὐ διεκρίθητε ἐν ἑαυτοῖς καὶ ἐγένεσθε κριταὶ διαλογισμῶν πονηρῶν;

The *ratio*, or reasoning that grounds the prohibition, is supplied in verses 2–4 through a vivid hypothetical scenario involving two visitors to a συναγωγή (McKnight, 2011).

συναγωγή. The choice of this term rather than ἐκκλησία, which James employs at 5:14, is significant. It may denote the physical gathering of a Jewish-Christian assembly and is frequently adduced as evidence of the letter's early date and Jewish milieu. It also carries juridical overtones, since the synagogue functioned as a venue for the adjudication of community disputes. This resonance prepares for the verdict of verse 4: the assembly that has gathered as a court has rendered judgment.

The two visitors. Allison (2013) describes the entrance of an ἀνὴρ χρυσοδακτύλιος, a "gold-fingered" man, ἐν ἐσθῇτι λαμπρᾷ, in shining clothing, contrasted with a πτωχός, a poor man or beggar, ἐν ῥυπαρᾷ ἐσθῇτι, in filthy clothing. The description is constructed entirely from visual markers. Nothing is reported of either man's character, conduct, need or faith; the assembly responds solely to what can be seen, which is precisely the definition of "face-taking" supplied in verse 1.

The term χρυσοδακτύλιος is rare and vivid. Gold rings functioned in Roman society as insignia of rank, and their display was regulated by convention and at points by law. While most scholars see the visitor simply as a wealthy guest, Mongstad-Kvammen (2013) identifies him as a

Roman equestrian seeking political office, indicated by the *toga candida* and the gold insignia ring. The proposal is contested and rests upon a particular construal of λαμπρά, which elsewhere denotes brightness or splendour rather than specifically the whitened toga of a candidate. Even if the specific identification is not accepted, the underlying point is well founded: the man's appearance signals his position within an imperial hierarchy of honour, and the assembly's response constitutes recognition of that hierarchy. The πτωχός denotes not merely the person of modest means, for which the term πένης was available, but the destitute, the one reduced to dependence. The juxtaposition is therefore maximal, spanning the full range of the social order.

The differential treatment. McKnight (2011) draws attention to the assembly's biased response: the wealthy visitor is offered a good seat, σὺ κάθου ὧδε καλῶς, while the poor man is directed to stand or to sit by a footstool, ὑποπόδιον. The Greek registers the discrimination with precision. The rich man receives the emphatic pronoun σύ, an invitation to be seated, an adverb of place indicating proximity, and the qualifier καλῶς. The poor man receives σύ, an imperative to stand, and a demonstrative of distance, ἐκεῖ, followed by the alternative of the floor. Three variables — posture, proximity and comfort — are differentiated simultaneously.

The phrase ὑπὸ τὸ ὑποπόδιόν μου carries an additional resonance. The footstool is an image of subjugation in the Septuagint and in early Christian usage, most familiarly in Psalm 110:1, where enemies are placed beneath the feet of the messianic king. To seat a poor believer beneath a footstool is to assign him, within the assembly of the Messiah, the position that Scripture reserves for the defeated.

The verdict: κριταὶ διαλογισμῶν πονηρῶν. Johnson (1995) concludes that in making these distinctions the community has become κριταὶ διαλογισμῶν πονηρῶν, “judges with evil thoughts,” having adopted the corrupt standards of the surrounding world. The construction is best understood as a genitive of quality, describing judges characterised by evil reasoning.

The verb διεκρίθητε in the preceding clause is significant. The root διακρίνω, “to distinguish, discriminate, make a distinction,” is cognate with κριταί and, in the middle-passive, carries in James the sense of wavering or being divided (1:6). The wordplay is deliberate: by discriminating among persons, the community has become divided within itself, and the double-mindedness that James condemns throughout the letter (1:8; 4:8) manifests here as social discrimination. The community's outward partiality is the visible symptom of an inward instability. The rhetorical question form ensures that the community itself must render the verdict. James does not pronounce them guilty; he constructs the case so that they cannot avoid pronouncing it upon themselves.

c) The Divine Election of the Poor (James 2:5)

Ἀκούσατε, ἀδελφοί μου ἀγαπητοί· οὐχ ὁ θεὸς ἐξελέξατο τοὺς πτωχοὺς τῷ κόσμῳ
πλουσίου ἐν πίστει καὶ κληρονόμους τῆς βασιλείας ἧς ἐπηγγείλατο τοῖς ἀγαπῶσιν αὐτόν;

In verse 5 James supplies the *confirmatio*, appealing to the divine perspective on election. The imperative Ἀκούσατε and the intensified vocative ἀδελφοί μου ἀγαπητοί mark a shift in register from forensic interrogation to earnest appeal, and they signal the theological centre of the passage.

οὐχ ὁ θεὸς ἐξελέξατο. Wachob (2000) observes that the rhetorical question draws upon the Anawim tradition, in which the πτωχοὶ τῷ κόσμῳ are the specific objects of divine favour. The negative particle οὐχ anticipates affirmative assent: the community is presumed already to know this. The argument therefore does not introduce new information but confronts the assembly with the incompatibility between what it confesses and what it does.

The verb ἐξελέξατο, in the aorist middle, is the standard Septuagintal term for divine election, used of God's choice of Israel, of Zion and of David. Its application here to the poor of the world constitutes a deliberate transfer: the category by which God's elective activity is defined is economic rather than ethnic or dynastic.

τοὺς πτωχοὺς τῷ κόσμῳ. The dative τῷ κόσμῳ is most plausibly a dative of reference or respect: those who are poor with respect to the world, that is, by the world's reckoning. Some interpreters construe it as a dative of sphere. In either case James does not spiritualise the poverty. McKnight (2011) clarifies that these are people who are economically destitute, whom God has chosen to be πλουσίους ἐν πίστει, rich in faith, and κληρονόμους τῆς βασιλείας, heirs of the kingdom. Edgar (2001) argues that any attempt to reduce this poverty to a purely religious humility empties the passage of the force required by its immediate context, which concerns clothing, seating and litigation.

πλουσίους ἐν πίστει. The phrase effects a reversal rather than a compensation. James does not say that the poor, though materially deprived, possess an inward consolation. He says that God has chosen them to wealth of a different order, and the juxtaposition of πτωχοὺς and πλουσίους within a single clause enacts rhetorically the inversion it describes. The dative ἐν πίστει may indicate the sphere in which their wealth consists or the means by which it is held; the former is more probable.

κληρονόμους τῆς βασιλείας. The language of inheritance introduces an eschatological horizon and a further irony. The poor, who in the present order inherit nothing — for the landless labourer is by definition excluded from inheritance — are designated heirs of the kingdom. The relative clause ἧς ἐπηγγείλατο τοῖς ἀγαπῶσιν αὐτόν grounds this in divine promise and echoes James 1:12, binding the passage to the letter's wider theology of endurance and reward. Johnson (1995) notes that this teaching enacts the Jesus tradition, particularly the Beatitudes, and functions to shame the assembly for dishonouring the very people God has chosen to honour. The internal trust (πίστις) of the poor is thereby set in direct opposition to the worldly values operative in the assembly (Mongstad-Kvammen, 2013). The argument is an *a fortiori* one: if God has conferred the highest honour upon the poor, the assembly's withholding of the lowest honour, a seat, is a direct contradiction of divine judgment.

d) The Irony of Honouring Oppressors (James 2:6–7)

ὁμοῖς δὲ ἡτιμάσατε τὸν πτωχόν. οὐχ οἱ πλούσιοι καταδυναστεύουσιν ὑμῶν καὶ αὐτοὶ ἔλκουσιν ὑμᾶς εἰς κριτήρια; οὐκ αὐτοὶ βλασφημοῦσιν τὸ καλὸν ὄνομα τὸ ἐπικληθὲν ἐφ' ὑμᾶς;

The analysis concludes in verses 6–7, which expose the irony of the community's favouritism by reference to its own experience.

ὁμοῖς δὲ ἡτιμάσατε τὸν πτωχόν. Moo (2000) highlights the force of this indictment. The emphatic pronoun ὁμοῖς, set adversatively against ὁ θεός of verse 5, constructs a direct antithesis: God honoured, you dishonoured. The verb ἡτιμάζω is the precise antonym of τιμάω and belongs to the vocabulary of honour and shame that structured Mediterranean social relations. In such a culture, the public withdrawal of honour was a substantive injury, not a matter of hurt feelings. The aorist indicative reports the action as accomplished fact, shifting from the hypothetical mood of verses 2–4 and indicating that the scenario, though framed conditionally, describes what the community has actually done.

καταδυναστεύουσιν and ἔλκουσιν. Moo (2000) observes the sting of the reversal: the very class the assembly fawns upon is the class that oppresses them and drags them into court. The verb καταδυναστεύω is used in the Septuagint of the oppression of the vulnerable by the powerful, notably in the prophetic denunciations, and thereby aligns the wealthy of James's day with the oppressors indicted by Amos and Isaiah. The verb ἔλκω denotes physical dragging and is used in Acts of the forcible seizure of persons; its use here conveys the coercive character of litigation in which the parties are grossly unequal. The present tense of both verbs indicates ongoing, habitual action rather than isolated incidents. The term κριτήρια, "courts," completes a chain running through the passage. The assembly became κριταί in verse 4; the rich drag them before κριτήρια in verse 6. The community, in adopting the world's standards of judgment, has replicated within itself the very institution by which it is oppressed.

βλασφημοῦσιν τὸ καλὸν ὄνομα. McKnight (2011) emphasises that these wealthy elites are the ones who blaspheme the noble name invoked over the believers. The participle τὸ ἐπικληθὲν ἐφ' ὑμᾶς reflects a Septuagintal idiom denoting ownership: the name called over a people marks them as belonging to God. The reference is most plausibly to baptism, at which the name of Christ was invoked over the candidate. The climax of the argument is thus theological rather than sociological. The final indictment of the rich is not that they exploit the poor, grave as that is, but that they revile the name by which the community is identified. Mongstad-Kvammen (2013) suggests that naming these oppressors constitutes a step toward decolonising the minds of believers who have been seduced by Roman status systems. The tragic inconsistency is complete: the assembly grants honour to a group that ridicules its Messiah and exploits its members.

4. Theological Inferences from James 2:1–7

Six inferences follow from the exegesis. They are stated here without reference to Nigeria, in keeping with the methodological sequencing of this paper.

- a) **Partiality contradicts the nature of faith in the glorious Lord Jesus Christ.** The prohibition in verse 1 establishes that προσωποληψία is incompatible with genuine faith. Because faith is oriented toward the exalted and glorious Christ, discrimination rooted in worldly distinctions such as wealth or appearance undermines the integrity of that faith. The incompatibility is not merely ethical but ontological: to hold the faith partially is to hold a different faith.
- b) **Human judgment within the believing community is corrupted when it adopts worldly criteria of value.** The scenario of verses 2–4 reveals that preferential treatment of the rich alongside dishonour of the poor constitutes evil judgment. Discrimination of this kind mirrors

the value system of the surrounding society rather than reflecting the impartial character of God's kingdom. The community does not merely fail to be distinctive; it actively reconstitutes itself as a tribunal operating on corrupt principles.

- c) **Evaluation by external appearance is a failure of measurement grounded in a failure of worship.** The suspension of τῆς δόξης in verse 1 establishes the criterion of true weight. A community that assigns significance according to gold rings and bright clothing has not merely made a social error but has misapprehended where glory resides. Partiality is therefore a disorder of vision before it is a disorder of behaviour, and its remedy lies in the recovery of a right estimate of Christ.
- d) **God's sovereign election reverses worldly hierarchies by choosing the poor to be rich in faith and heirs of the kingdom.** Verse 5 affirms that God deliberately selects the economically poor as recipients of divine favour, granting them spiritual wealth and kingdom inheritance, thereby inverting conventional social valuations and exposing the emptiness of status-based distinction. This inference carries a positive obligation as well as a negative prohibition: the community is required not only to refrain from dishonouring the poor but to accord them the honour God has already conferred.
- e) **Deference to the rich is ironic and self-contradictory, because the wealthy in view function as oppressors and blasphemers.** Verses 6–7 disclose the paradox that the class receiving honour from the community is the class responsible for oppressing its members and reviling the name invoked over them. The inference generalises beyond the first-century situation to any circumstance in which a community extends honour to those whose accumulation depends upon the impoverishment of its own members.
- f) **Partiality is a structural as well as a personal sin.** The passage does not treat favouritism as an isolated failure of individual courtesy. The plural προσωπολημψίας, the juridical framing of the assembly, the intertext of Leviticus 19:15 addressed to judges, and the linkage of the community's internal judgments to the external courts of verse 6 together indicate that James is concerned with a system of evaluation embedded in communal practice. The remedy correspondingly requires the reform of practice and structure, not merely the correction of attitude.

5. Socio-Economic Inequality in Nigeria

I. Framing the Paradox

The contemporary socio-economic landscape of Nigeria is defined by a profound paradox of plenty, in which substantial natural resource wealth coexists with deep and expanding deprivation (World Bank, 1996). Despite possessing one of Africa's largest economies, a majority of the population contends with poverty while a narrow elite accumulates considerable wealth (Mayah et al., 2017). This section examines the empirical dimensions of that inequality, its systemic causes, and its broader consequences.

A methodological caveat is necessary at the outset. Poverty and inequality estimates vary according to the measure adopted, the survey instrument used and the period covered, and Nigerian

data are further complicated by long intervals between household surveys and by revisions to international poverty lines. Figures are therefore reported here with their source, basis and date specified, and readers should treat cross-temporal comparisons with appropriate caution.

II. The Empirical Landscape

- a) **Multidimensional and monetary poverty.** The National Bureau of Statistics (2022) reported that 63% of Nigerians, amounting to 133 million people, are multidimensionally poor, experiencing simultaneous deprivations in health, education and living standards. The multidimensional approach, developed by Alkire and Foster (2011) and resonant with Sen's (1999) capability framework, captures dimensions of deprivation that income measures alone obscure, and its adoption represents a methodological advance in Nigerian poverty measurement. Monetary poverty is comparably severe: the World Bank (2025) records that the proportion of Nigerians in extreme poverty rose from 34.7% in 2018/19 to 41.8% in 2022/23 on the \$3.00 per person per day line.
- b) **Inequality trends.** The Gini index was estimated at 33.9 in 2022/23, a modest decline from 35.1 in 2018/19 (World Bank, 2025). This apparent improvement requires careful interpretation. The World Bank (2025) attributes the movement not to the poor catching up but to a generalised decline in household welfare in which those at the upper end of the distribution sustained proportionally larger losses as a consequence of macroeconomic shocks. Odozi and Oyelere (2022) reach a convergent conclusion, describing a pattern of falling measured inequality alongside rising poverty and marked regional heterogeneity. Measured inequality can fall while welfare deteriorates, and the Gini coefficient is in this instance a poor guide to social outcomes.

A further limitation deserves note. Household surveys characteristically under-capture the incomes and assets of the very wealthy, whose holdings are frequently offshore, informal or concealed. Measured Gini coefficients therefore probably understate the true concentration of Nigerian wealth, a consideration that bears directly on the analysis of elite capture below.

- c) **Regional disparity.** Nigeria is sharply divided spatially. Approximately 65% of the nation's poor, some 86 million people, reside in the North, while 35%, approximately 47 million, reside in the South (National Bureau of Statistics, 2022). In 2022/23 the monetary poverty rate in the northern zones stood at 57.4%, compared with 21.2% in the southern zones (World Bank, 2025). These disparities reflect long-standing differentials in educational provision, infrastructure investment and agricultural productivity, compounded in the North East by prolonged insecurity and displacement.
- d) **Youth unemployment.** Unemployment is a critical driver of inequality. The national rate stood at 33.3% in late 2020, while the rate for young people aged 15 to 24 reached 53.4% (National Bureau of Statistics, 2022). The crisis is compounded by an economy generating far fewer jobs than the approximately 1.8 million young people entering the labour market annually (Mayah et al., 2017). It should be noted that Nigeria's labour force statistics were subsequently revised following a change in methodology, producing substantially lower headline unemployment figures that reflect altered definitional thresholds rather than improved labour market

conditions; the underlying problem of underemployment and low-quality informal work persists.

III. Root Causes: Elite Capture and Institutional Decay

The evidence indicates that Nigerian poverty results not from an absence of resources but from their misallocation and appropriation within a culture of rent-seeking (Mayah et al., 2017).

- a) **Corruption and weak institutions.** Ikharehon and Omoregie (2012) characterise corruption in Nigeria as a pervasive condition that many rationalise as a survival strategy, and they trace its institutionalisation within public agencies across successive administrations since independence. The most authoritative recent evidence is supplied by the joint survey of the National Bureau of Statistics and the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (2024), which documents the scale of administrative bribery. That survey estimates that approximately NGN 721 billion, equivalent to roughly 0.35% of gross domestic product, was paid in cash bribes to public officials during 2023. It further reports that a majority of appointments to public sector positions involved bribery, nepotism or both, with the consequence that entry into public office frequently functions as an investment expected to yield returns through subsequent extraction.

The distributional consequences are regressive. Bribery operates as a levy on access to services that should be provided freely or equitably, including healthcare, utilities and administrative documentation, and this levy falls most heavily upon those least able to bear it. The cumulative effect is the hollowing out of public institutions, the erosion of the rule of law, and a systematic transfer of resources from the general population to a small number of office-holders (National Bureau of Statistics & United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, 2024).

A claim widely circulated in Nigerian public discourse holds that some \$20 trillion was stolen from the national treasury between 1960 and 2005. This figure cannot be substantiated and is implausible on its face, since it exceeds Nigeria's cumulative national income over the period by a very large margin. Its persistence is itself instructive, indicating both the depth of public conviction regarding elite predation and the weakness of the evidentiary infrastructure available for assessing it. The argument advanced here rests instead upon the documented estimates of the National Bureau of Statistics and United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (2024) and upon the sectoral analyses of Mayah et al. (2017).

- b) **Elite capture of resources.** Political power is deployed to direct the allocation of wealth toward vested interests (Mayah et al., 2017). This is most evident in the petroleum sector, which historically supplied the large majority of government revenue while suffering extensive theft and inefficiency; Mayah et al. (2017) record losses of some \$3.9 billion to pipeline vandalism and crude oil theft between 2013 and 2015 alone. Acemoglu and Robinson (2012) supply the theoretical frame: extractive institutions concentrate power and resources in the hands of a narrow group, generate resistance to the inclusive reforms that would threaten that group's position, and thereby reproduce themselves across political transitions. Watts (2004) analyses the specific dynamics of petroleum governance in the Niger Delta, where resource extraction has produced environmental degradation and violent contestation alongside minimal local benefit.

- c) **Regressive fiscal arrangements and political finance.** The tax system frequently burdens the poor while permitting multinationals and wealthy individuals to benefit from waivers and exemptions of questionable justification (Mayah et al., 2017). Campaign financing by wealthy backers contributes to the capture of institutions, which then operate in the interests of their patrons rather than in support of inclusive growth (Mayah et al., 2017; Alaye & Ogunbanwo, 2024).
- d) **Historical and structural factors.** Dependency-theoretical analyses locate Nigerian inequality within a colonial legacy of resource extraction and labour exploitation that established patterns of dependency persisting after independence (Alaye & Ogunbanwo, 2024). Structural imbalances continue to privilege urban centres over rural areas, particularly in the provision of health and education (Evans & Kelikume, 2019).

IV. Consequences

The consequences of entrenched inequality extend well beyond material deprivation. Evans and Kelikume (2019) establish empirical linkages between poverty, unemployment, inequality, corruption and poor governance on the one hand and militancy, terrorism and communal violence on the other, indicating that inequality in Nigeria carries direct security implications. Educational exclusion reproduces disadvantage across generations. Health outcomes diverge sharply by region and income. Confidence in public institutions erodes, which in turn reduces tax compliance and further weakens state capacity, completing a self-reinforcing cycle.

Nigeria thus remains, in Ikharehon and Omoregie's (2012) formulation, a country straddling two economic worlds: too rich to be poor, yet too poor to be rich for the great majority of its citizens. Breaking this cycle requires more than aggregate economic growth; it demands transformational leadership and a decisive shift away from institutions that reward rent-seeking toward those securing the participation and welfare of all citizens (World Bank, 1996; Acemoglu & Robinson, 2012).

V. The Religious Dimension

Any analysis addressed to the church must reckon with the church's own position within this configuration. Marshall (2009) and Obadare (2018) document the deep entanglement of Nigerian Pentecostal authority with political power, in which religious legitimation is exchanged for access and patronage. Ukah (2008) traces the emergence of large religious organisations as significant economic actors in their own right. Ige (2017) documents the persistence of preferential treatment for the wealthy within Nigerian congregations.

The implication is uncomfortable but unavoidable. Partiality in Nigerian churches is not simply a residue of cultural deference awaiting correction by better teaching; it is functionally integrated into a wider patronage economy from which ecclesial institutions themselves derive benefit. Any programme of reform that does not acknowledge this will underestimate the resistance it will encounter.

6. Theological Inferences Applied to the Nigerian Context

The exegetical findings of James 2:1–7 furnish a direct theological critique of the partiality that sustains Nigerian inequality. The six inferences of Section 4 supply a basis for confronting elite capture, corruption and the systemic exclusion of the poor.

- a) **Partiality as a Contradiction of Faith in the Glorious Christ:** James 2:1 establishes that favouritism grounded in wealth or status cannot coexist with genuine faith in the glorious Lord Jesus Christ. In Nigeria, where political and business elites routinely receive preferential treatment in churches, public institutions and the distribution of resources, this principle exposes a fundamental inconsistency. When congregations reserve premium seating, leadership office, public recognition or programme benefits for the wealthy while marginalising the poor, they deny the impartial character of the faith they profess. The application requires the rejection of any practice that measures human worth by external markers of success and the grounding of common life instead in the glory of Christ, before which class distinction is rendered insignificant. The point extends further than congregational practice. If partiality is a mode of holding the faith rather than an isolated act, then a church whose institutional survival depends upon elite favour has compromised not merely its conduct but its confession.
- b) **The Corruption of Judgment by Worldly Criteria:** Verses 2–4 demonstrate that biased treatment of rich and poor produces evil judgment. The same dynamic is visible in Nigerian socio-economic structures, where decisions regarding contracts, appointments and public expenditure consistently favour the connected few. The assembly scene in James corresponds closely to the preference accorded to politicians and business figures in both ecclesiastical and national arenas, and the survey evidence that a majority of public sector appointments involve bribery or nepotism (National Bureau of Statistics & United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, 2024) represents the institutionalised form of precisely the discrimination James condemns. The correspondence is more than analogical. In James, the assembly's internal judgments replicate the external courts before which its members are dragged; in Nigeria, ecclesial patronage replicates and legitimates state patronage. The text accordingly demands that believers reform the criteria by which persons are evaluated, replacing patronage-based judgment with impartial assessment in church governance, charitable allocation and public advocacy.
- c) **The Failure of Measurement:** James locates the root of partiality in a misapprehension of where true weight resides. This diagnosis has particular purchase in a context where the display of wealth functions as the dominant idiom of significance and where prosperity is widely construed as evidence of divine approval. Where affluence is taken to signify God's favour, honouring the wealthy appears not as a compromise but as an act of piety, and the critical capacity of the congregation is disabled at its root. The recovery of a right estimate of Christ's glory is therefore not a devotional supplement to social reform but its precondition.
- d) **Divine Election of the Poor as a Reversal of Hierarchy:** Verse 5 declares that God has chosen the poor of the world to be rich in faith and heirs of the kingdom. This reversal directly confronts a national reality in which 133 million people live in multidimensional poverty while

a few elites command a disproportionate share of national wealth (National Bureau of Statistics, 2022; Mayah et al., 2017). The passage insists that economic destitution does not disqualify anyone from divine honour and indeed marks those upon whom God has set particular regard. The practical consequence is a positive obligation. The church is called to honour the poor not merely through episodic charity but by recognising their central place within the community of faith and by supporting arrangements that restore dignity and opportunity to the economically excluded. Concretely, this means the presence of poor members in governing structures, the allocation of resources according to need rather than influence, and the framing of church programmes around the capabilities of the marginalised rather than the preferences of donors.

- e) **The Irony of Honouring Oppressors:** Verses 6–7 expose the irony of honouring the very rich who oppress believers and blaspheme the name of Christ. In Nigeria this irony is stark. Political and economic actors who divert public funds, inflate contracts and perpetuate deprivation are frequently celebrated within Christian circles, granted platforms, and accorded titles and recognition. The documented scale of administrative bribery and resource diversion (Mayah et al., 2017; National Bureau of Statistics & United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, 2024) means that in many instances the wealth being honoured is directly constituted by the impoverishment of the congregation's own members. James's rhetoric unmask this contradiction. By naming the wealthy as oppressors and blasphemers, the text equips the church to speak truthfully about elite capture rather than euphemistically. Rather than courting the powerful, the believing community is called to distance itself from those whose conduct increases the suffering of the poor, thereby restoring credibility to its witness. This does not entail the exclusion of wealthy persons from the community, James addresses the rich elsewhere as subject to exhortation, but it does entail the refusal of honour to unjust gain.
- f) **Structural Sin and Structural Response:** Because James treats partiality as embedded in communal practice rather than merely in individual attitude, the response he implies is correspondingly structural. Exhortation alone is insufficient where the arrangements of congregational life continue to encode deference. This inference authorises and indeed requires the institutional measures set out in Section 9: transparent finance, inclusive governance, published criteria for appointment and assistance, and public advocacy. It also legitimates Christian engagement with questions of fiscal policy, anti-corruption enforcement and public service delivery, since these constitute the structural form of the honour and dishonour that James addresses.

7. Recommendations for Curbing Socio-Economic Inequality

The theological findings of this study call for concrete action. If partiality contradicts faith in Christ, and if God honours the poor, then the Nigerian church must translate these convictions into deliberate practices that challenge inequality both within its own life and in the wider society. The following recommendations are organised at three levels, followed by consideration of obstacles.

- a) **Congregational Level:** Local congregations may begin by abolishing the visible signs of partiality described in James 2:2–4. This includes ending the reservation of premium seating for wealthy members, politicians and dignitaries at services and events, and discontinuing the

practice of public recognition calibrated to the size of financial contribution. Leadership structures should reflect genuine inclusion, with qualified members from poorer backgrounds intentionally nominated to boards, committees and pastoral teams, and with criteria for appointment published and applied consistently.

Congregations should develop sustained pro-poor programmes extending beyond occasional relief. These may include vocational and skills training, savings and micro-credit schemes, educational scholarships and health support directed toward the most vulnerable. Such programmes should be designed with the participation of those they serve, in keeping with the capability approach's insistence that development consists in the expansion of people's real freedoms rather than in the transfer of goods (Sen, 1999).

A regular expository preaching series on James 2:1–13 would assist in reshaping congregational values, teaching that authentic faith expresses itself in impartiality and justice. Catechesis for new members should include instruction on the incompatibility of favouritism with Christian confession. To ensure integrity, churches require transparent accountability mechanisms covering pastors and leaders, including independent finance committees, audited and published accounts, and periodic review of how resources are allocated and whether favouritism has influenced decisions. Given the entanglement documented by Ukah (2008) and Obadare (2018), congregations should further adopt explicit policies governing the acceptance of large donations and the granting of platforms to political figures, particularly during electoral periods.

- b) **Societal Level:** The church's responsibility extends beyond its own membership. Christian leaders and denominational bodies should engage in measured, evidence-based advocacy for policies promoting economic justice, including strengthened anti-corruption enforcement, progressive and effectively administered taxation, the removal of unjustified fiscal waivers, and improved access to quality education and healthcare in underserved regions. Advocacy should be grounded in credible data and directed at specific measures rather than expressed in general moral appeal, since the latter is easily absorbed without consequence.

Partnerships with reputable non-governmental organisations and civil society bodies working on poverty reduction can extend impact and supply technical expertise that individual congregations lack. Denominational research capacity should be developed so that church interventions are informed by evidence and subject to evaluation.

Wealthy Christian business owners and professionals bear particular responsibility. They may model ethical practice by paying fair wages, meeting tax obligations fully, refusing to participate in the bribery documented by the National Bureau of Statistics and United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (2024), avoiding exploitative contracting, and investing in community development. Where Christian elites deploy influence in support of inclusive economic policy rather than in defence of personal privilege, they directly reduce the elite capture that sustains inequality.

- c) **Individual and Discipleship Level:** Lasting change begins with personal transformation. Individual believers should examine their own dispositions and repent of any tendency to defer

to the rich or to overlook the poor. Discipleship programmes should cultivate solidarity with the poor through sustained relationship, shared meals, mutual learning and joint participation in congregational life, rather than through the asymmetry of donor and recipient. Practices of financial transparency, generosity proportioned to means, and the refusal of bribery in daily professional life constitute the ordinary form of obedience to James at the individual level.

8. Conclusion

This study has demonstrated that James 2:1–7 delivers a searching critique of partiality within the Christian community. Read within its literary, rhetorical and socio-historical context, the passage prohibits favouritism as incompatible with faith in the glorious Lord Jesus Christ, exposes the corruption of judgment that deference to wealth produces, diagnoses partiality as a failure of measurement rooted in a failure to perceive where glory resides, affirms God's sovereign election of the poor as heirs of the kingdom, reveals the irony of honouring those who oppress the community and revile its Lord, and treats the whole as a structural disorder embedded in communal practice rather than as a merely personal fault.

These findings confront Nigeria's socio-economic reality directly. A nation in which 133 million citizens experience multidimensional poverty while administrative bribery operates as a regressive levy upon the poor, and in which entry to public office frequently functions as an investment in future extraction, exhibits at national scale precisely the pattern James condemns at congregational scale. That the Nigerian church has in significant measure reproduced this pattern within its own life compounds the problem, since a community that assigns honour by the criteria of the surrounding order forfeits the standing from which it might contest that order.

The study confirms that James 2:1–7 offers a transformative ethic capable of challenging both church-based discrimination and national inequality, and it has specified what that ethic requires in practice at congregational, societal and individual levels. By bringing rigorous exegesis into disciplined correlation with the Nigerian context through the tri-polar hermeneutical model, the article contributes a worked example to African biblical hermeneutics and supplies the Nigerian church with a scripturally grounded framework for social transformation.

The call is finally simple and severe. God has chosen the poor; the church is asked to agree with God. Where it does so — in its seating and its budgets, its appointments and its advocacy, its refusal of unjust honour and its embrace of those the world discounts — it becomes what James envisages: a community whose faith is visible in its judgments, and therefore a credible agent of justice and economic equity in the nation.

Article Publication Details

This article is published in the **Globenix Multidisciplinary Journal**, ISSN 3139-0870 (Online). In Volume 2, Issue 5 (September - October) – 2026. The journal is published and managed by **Globenix Publisher**.

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Acknowledgements

We sincerely thank the editors and the reviewers for their valuable suggestions on this paper.

Funding

The authors declare that no funding was received for this work.

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