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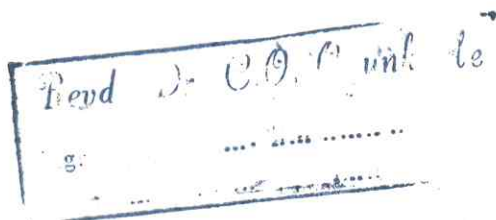
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## **IMPRECATION IN JUDGES 17:1-6 AS A PANACEA FOR THEFT CASES IN THE AFRICAN CONTEXT**

*By*

**Caleb O. Ogunkunle,**

### **Introduction**

The prevalence of theft cases in the African society is a serious concern to well meaning people of the continent. The numerous cases of theft menace in the religious place of worship especially in the church are major headache to pastors, evangelists and church leaders of various denominations. It is a known fact that pastors now warn their members during worship and special programme to take care of their personal items like mobile phones as theft cases have been repeatedly announced. The issue that is agitating the mind is how to curb cases of theft in our society in general and in the place of worship in particular. In other words, can there be a permanent solution to this act? What role(s) can religious leaders play in the eradication of this evil act?

Therefore the thrust of this paper upon which the objective is based is examination of imprecation in Judges 17:1-6 as a means of controlling theft cases in our society. The historical exegetical method is adopted and with corroborated empirical research on imprecation. The word 'curse' and 'imprecation' are used interchangeably in the paper.

### **Various Reactions to Imprecation in the Bible**

The concept of curse or imprecation which is found primarily in the Psalter is a major theological issue as biblical scholars have not agreed on the propriety of its presence in the bible. First, dispensationalists reject outrightly imprecatory passages in the scripture on grounds that they express feelings that are contrary to what they think it ought to say. Kirkpatrick is a strong dispensationalist whose approach to the scripture is to draw a sharp destination between the old and new testaments. Writing on imprecatory Psalms, Kirkpatrick says:

The Psalms must be viewed as belonging to the dispensation of the Old testament: they must be estimated from the stand point of the law, which was based upon the rule of retaliation, and not of the gospel, which is animated by the principle of love, they belong to the spirit of Elijah, not of Christ: they use the language of the age which was taught to love its neighbors and hate its enemies<sup>1</sup>.

Second, the conservative scholars are naïve about the imprecatory passages in the sense that they believe the whole Bible, yet their interpretation of imprecation is different. C.S. Lewis is one of the respected scholars who strongly disagree with the use of imprecation. He refers to imprecatory Psalm as 'devilish', 'diabolical', 'terrible' or 'contemptible'<sup>2</sup>. He argues that imprecatory Psalms contain a spirit of hatred and the only way to deal with it is to leave them alone<sup>3</sup>. Craigie, while discussing the theological perspectives of the book of Psalms, points out that there are theological problems in reading the Psalter and making it relevant and meaningful. He refers to the imprecatory Psalm as "problematic passages: so-called individual laments where the sentiments of the Psalmists seem to be harsh, unloving, vindictive and hard to the gospel and to Jesus' injunction that we should love even our enemies"<sup>4</sup>.

Third, the Roman Catholic on the basis of moral and religious ethics, excluded part or the whole of imprecatory Psalms from their daily reading as seen in the *Liturgy of the Hour*<sup>5</sup>. While Psalms 58, 83 and 109 are completely excluded.

from the *liturgy of the hours*; parts of the following Psalms are also excluded:

- Psalm 35 has verses 3 8, 30-21 and 24 26 excluded<sup>6</sup>
- Psalm 59 has verses 8-9 and 11 15 excluded<sup>7</sup>
- Psalm 69 has verses 22 28 excluded<sup>8</sup>
- Psalm 137 has verses 7 8 excluded<sup>9</sup>
- Psalm 139 has verses 19 22 excluded<sup>10</sup>

Finally, there are scholars who have a positive perspective on imprecatory passages in the Bible. Perhaps, the chief advocate for the use of imprecation or imprecatory psalms in the last century is Albert Barnes who argues that "what we consider as wrong, harsh and vindictive should be understood in the spirit of the age in which the Bible was composed"<sup>11</sup>. He argues further that "imprecatory Psalms are a mere record of what actually occurred in the mind of the Psalmist and are preserved for us as an illustration of human nature when partially sanctified"<sup>12</sup>. H.C. Leupold warns scholars against making sharp pronouncements against writers of imprecatory passages, especially as the New Testament writers make similar imprecations as found in Acts 8:20; 23: 2. II Timothy 4:14, etc. He contends that David, to whom many of the imprecatory psalms are attributed, showed an exemplary spirit of tolerance and forgiveness, especially toward Saul<sup>13</sup>. James E. Adams has done a simple but thorough work on imprecatory Psalms. He argues that the Psalms are not just words of men but God's revelation of Himself and His attributes. Hence, the Psalms must be accepted as God's divine word rather than raising questions and objections to them<sup>14</sup>. He argues further that imprecatory Psalms are not meant for personal use and we need to understand how the Psalmist, Jesus Christ and Apostles understood and used them<sup>15</sup>.

For the purpose of this paper we intend to lean towards the last group, as they seem to have a balanced view having shown understanding and appreciation of the presence of imprecation in the Bible. We believe strongly that the presence of imprecation in the scripture should not raise any doubt on the authority and authenticity of the Bible. Imprecatory Psalms are

part of the canonical scriptures, which have been accepted by the Christian Church down through the ages. Indeed, imprecation is embedded in the Bible and great men of God from Genesis to Revelation have used it.

### **Exegesis of Judges 17:1-6**

The book of Judges derives its name from the Hebrew word *shophetim* which is used to describe the activities of its main characters. These Judges were raised up by God to deliver the Israelites from their enemies whenever they called upon Him. In the Hebrew Bible (Masoretic Text), Judges is the second book of the 'Former Prophets', following Joshua and preceding Samuel and Kings. Structurally, the book of Judges is divided into three major parts namely, the incomplete conquest of Canaan (Judges 1:1-2:5) Israel in the period of the Judges (Judges 2:6 16: 31); and appendices (Judges 17:1-21: 25)<sup>16</sup>. Our passage, Judges 17:6 belongs to the third part which constitutes an epilogue that gives illustrations of the religious apostasy and social degradation that characterized the period of the Judges. It was a period when "there was no king in Israel and everybody did as he saw fit" (Judges 17:6; 18:1; 19:1; 21:25). The epilogue is sub-divided into two parts, that is, Micah's household and the Danite migration (Judges 17:1-18:31); and the outrage at Gibeah and the punishment of the Benjamites (Judges 19:1-21; 25)<sup>17</sup>.

In this text, that is Judges 17:1-6, a case of theft was established, whereby Micah stole the precious silver of his mother. Also, the immediate reaction of the mother was noted. The mother invoked a curse upon the thief who incidentally was her son. The son was afraid of the imprecation of the mother hence immediate confession was made.

Micah is the shortened form of *mikhayihu* which means 'who is like Yahweh', Micah was a common Hebrew name. Apart from the Micah, there was also Micah of Moresheth, that is, one of the so called Minor Prophets. Furthermore, there was a Micaiah, the son of Imlah a prophet in Israel in the days of Ahab (I Kings 22:8-28; II Chro. 18:3-27) who came from the hill

country of Ephraim which Joshua gave to the people of Joseph when they got to the Promised Land (Jos. 17:14-18)<sup>18</sup>. Incidentally, Tola one of the Judges also lived in the same hill country (Judges 10:1). Micah represented by type of people found in the Israelite society at the time of Judges. He was introduced in an unfavourable light, a thief who stole a large amount of silver from his own mother. The eleven hundred shekels of silver, was a huge amount as it has the equivalent of thirty pounds or thirteen kilograms<sup>19</sup>. Indeed, the amount stolen meant so much to the mother who immediately pronounced a curse.

The Hebrew words used for curse are 'arar', 'alah', *qalal*, *qablah*, and *za'am*<sup>20</sup>. The one used by the mother of Micah is *alah* which in its verb form means either to swear, take an oath before God (I Kgs. 8:31; II Chro. 6:22; Hos. 4:2; 10:2) or to curse as used in this context (Judges 17:2)<sup>21</sup>. The curse invoked by the mother of Micah was similar to the one pronounced by the angel of the Lord on Meroz (Judges 5:23); the one by Saul on the men of Israel when he asked them not to taste food before he avenged himself on his enemies (I Sam. 14:24); and the one invoked by Nehemiah on men of Judah who married from other nations apart from Israel (Neh. 13:25). Technically, the word curse in the light of the above Hebrew words is an expression of judgment, threat, warning, etc. the concept of imprecation is understood in this paper as an expression of displeasure and judgment against evil which is still a problem in the contemporary African Society<sup>22</sup>.

Perhaps the curse on her son is justified in the light of Deuteronomy 27:16 which says "cursed is the man who dishonor his father or mother". The word *alah* is used mainly in a legal situation as a proof of guilt (Num. 5:16-28): ratifying of a treaty (Gen. 26:28-29); as a means of judgment (Jer. 29:18; 42:18); and even as the means of protecting one's property (Judges 17:2)<sup>23</sup>. It is highly probable that the invocation of curse by the mother in the presence of her son suggests that she suspected him that the amount stolen was too much to let go. Obviously, every society considers the power of a curse to be

very real. For the Hebrew in particular, a curse is not just "a mere sound on the lips but an agent sent forth...an active agent for hurt"<sup>24</sup>.

Micah's response "I have that silver with me, I took it" is very instructive. It is an admission that he stole the item and he was afraid of the curse placed on him. The Hebrew verb *ligahthiy* is *Qal* perfect first person singular of *laqah* and it has several meanings which includes "to take or take in the hand; to take and carry along with one self; to take from or away with the purpose depriving someone else of his or her property which was dear to her. Indeed, this is a serious crime (Prov. 19:26; 28:24).

As a reward of such prompt confession, his mother neutralized her curse with blessing. She said "The Lord bless you, my son". The Hebrew verb *barakh* was used by the mother which means "to kneel, bless and it can be used of God, men or things"<sup>25</sup>. In this context, the verb is used in blessing the son by the mother whose silver was stolen. A similar expression is found in Genesis 14:19 where Melechizedek blessed Abraham; Ruth 3:10 where Saul blessed David for his concern for him. Some other passages where the same word is used are Gen 27:33; Num. 22:12; Deut. 7:14; 28:3, 6:33, 24; 1 Sam. 25:33 6:25; 1 Kgs. 2:45; Isa. 19:25; Jer. 17:7 and 29:14. Obviously there is power in every spoken word particularly when such words come from one's parents, priest, prophet and other men and women whom God has appointed over the individual. Also the effective use of imprecation by the mother of the Micah to restore her stolen silver is established in Judges 17:1-6<sup>27</sup>.

#### **Theft Cases in the African Society**

Moral evil, which ordinarily is preventable, is unfortunately prevalent in the African society. Moral evil has its root in lust, greed and hatred in man. It involves the will, choice and action of man, the free moral agents. Evil manifests itself in various ways, especially in stealing as researched in this paper<sup>28</sup>.

The cases of theft in the African society are becoming increasingly alarming as demonstrated in various newspaper and internet reports. Some of the captions read thus: "renowned preacher, Rev. P. F. Owa shot by robbers"<sup>29</sup>; "Gunn

kidnapped seven persons in Onitsha, Anambra State amidst the worsening security situation in the commercial city<sup>30</sup>. The Economic and Financial Crimes Commission (EFCC) alleged that Ibori stole N9.1 billion belonging to the state. He was arraigned on a 103 count charge<sup>31</sup>; "Armed men attack one Oyo ANPP lawmaker, injured his aged mother and went away with over two million naira";<sup>32</sup> Azeez Soetan, the leader of a 3 man car snatching gang confessed that "we stole cars with master keys made by welder"<sup>33</sup> and also "Okada robbery gang meets Waterloo"<sup>34</sup>. A member of the armed robbery syndicate that specializes in snatching vehicles at gun point confesses: we he says;

We started with 419, I know Ismail as a magician, although he claims to be a herbalist, while Akin is a professional armed robber, Ismail and I started as 419 duping people on the pretext of providing solutions to their problems. Some of our victims are those who are desperate to get rich by any means. We also assisted many men and women spiritually to enter into a forced relationship with their targets to become lovers. We also helped people to find cure to their ailments. My duty then was to cure them. We made good money from the business, but later a friend introduced the idea of vehicle snatching to us. Initially we hesitated, but when they assured us that it was an easy job, we graduated from 419 to armed robbery work. We snatched vehicles and took them across borders<sup>35</sup>.

In Ghana, an Accra Circuit Court was reported to have remanded in prison custody a 45 year old Nigerian businessman for defrauding an American firm of 20,000 Euros and issuing a dud cheque. The man whose plea was taken is alleged to have issued a bank of Ireland cheque to pay for 16 laptop computers, 200 HP desk jet ink cartridges and a HP scan jet. The prosecutor said further investigations revealed that the Family Health Plan International which he owns did not exist and the name of the company was used as a conduit pipe for the importation of stolen computers<sup>36</sup>.

Peter Hammond while writing on criminalization of South African quoted the statistics from the nations Ministry of Safety and Security that in 2007, "111,528 vehicles were reported stolen in South Africa, of which 42,152 (40%) were recovered. Police investigated 44,222 stock theft cases which resulted in 7,980 court cases"<sup>17</sup>. Giving reason why crime is growing in South African he says:

For every 1000 crime reported in South African, only 430 criminals were arrested. Of these, only 77 are convicted and barely 8 of these are sentenced to 2 or more years imprisonment. It also calculated that South African convicts have a 94% recidivism rate (that is 94% of all persons released after serving a sentence immediately become involved in crime again)<sup>18</sup>.

In other words, there is failure of the criminal justice system. The laws are so protective of the criminals and so ineffectively enforced. This means that people commit crime easily because crime is not punished quickly enough (Eccl. 8:11).

#### **Panacea for theft**

The Bible is very clear on the issue of theft. The eighth commandment says "You shall not steal" (Exodus 20:15) also, Exodus 22:1-3 says:

If a man steals an ox or a sheep and slaughters it or sells it, he must pay back five head of cattle for the ox and four sheep for the sheep. If a thief is caught breaking in and is struck so that he dies, the defender is not guilty of bloodshed; but if it happens after sunrise, he is guilty of bloodshed. A thief must certainly make restitution, but if he has nothing, he must be sold to pay for his theft.

The above passage is corroborated with Proverbs 6:31 which says: "yet if he (thief) is caught, he must pay sevenfold, though it cost him all the wealth of his house".

Obviously, Government of each nation in African is trying to control the menace of theft cases through law enforcement agents. But then the perpetrators of this evil seem to be on the increase in spite of their understanding of Biblical injunctions as

stated in the above passages. Perhaps the reason for the non-challant attitude to the biblical injunctions is the emphasis that is placed on grace as an attribute of God. It is with this background that this paper is advocating for the use of imprecation as means of controlling theft cases in the African society. This is equally known as *aale* in the traditional Yoruba society. *Aale* is a special curse that is made of charms and incantation which is visibly placed on an item or on the farm whereby another person will not steal the item. Stealing of item that has *aale* on it is a serious offence and may lead to death of the thief. This is the method that was effectively used by the mother of Micah as discussed above. In other words, the invocation of imprecation by the mother made him to quickly return the stolen item.

Incidentally, Christian Churches in recent times have been making use of imprecation to check theft cases and other vices in the place of worship. It was reported of Bishop David Oyedepo who in 2003 Shilo Programme said authoritatively that anyone with stolen item(s) should return such items otherwise the person will return with the problem of the owner of the item(s). This imprecatory statement by the man of God made several people to bring back the stolen items to the altar<sup>39</sup>.

Furthermore, in order to determine the genuineness of imprecatory prayer, it has been used to control bad habit in one of my classes. The case happened in October 2005 in the early period of mobile phone when people used it indiscriminately. It was made clear to the students that they should not receive calls during the class including me as lecturer.

Some students thought that the use of mobile phone was not possible. From that day and for the next three class sessions, I discovered a student in the class flashing my number indiscriminately with his mobile phone with a view of testing me. One day the student repeated this evil act and I was irritated and disturbed. After calming down a little, I said it is obviously that the student doing this is not a serious person and that he would not be serious until he changed his bad habit. This was a strong pronouncement that has element of imprecation. I further said that the only way out of the curse is that the individual should see

me after the class to apologize for this evil act. After my pronouncement, the class was silent for the rest of the period. Immediately after the class, three students followed me. The first two asked for clarification in the day lesson. Afterward, the third student confessed to me that he was the one who had been flashing my number in the class. He apologized asked for forgiveness and that I should reverse my pronouncement by praying for him. I was elated that he confessed. I told him that I had nothing against him and thus prayer for him for success in life in general and in his academic pursuit in particular. He became very happy and he did very well in the course. The student had since remained my very good friend.

### **Analysis of the Questionnaire**

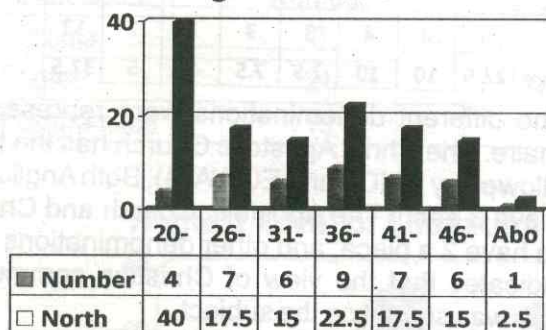
In an attempt to find out the awareness and people's understanding of imprecation as a panacea for the theft cases in the African Society, a questionnaire was administered on the subject among Master Degree students of United Missionary Church Africa Theological College, Ilorin on 27<sup>th</sup> - 30<sup>th</sup> July 2009. The same questionnaire was also administered among the Christian Studies and Comparative Religious Studies Master Degree Students in the Department of Religions, University of Ilorin. The choice of these classes of students was premised on the fact that several of them were involved in Pastoral work within Ilorin metropolis and that they represent various denominations that are in the city.

Ten variables were prepared for the questionnaires. Questions 1-4 deal with demographic information from the respondents like age, denomination, sex and highest level of education. Question 5-10 deal with issues relating to imprecation against theft cases in the society. 45 sheets of questions were administered and 40 respondents participated faithfully. The analysis of data was made by using simple percentage as follow:

### Question 1: Age Distribution

| Age      | Number | Percentage |
|----------|--------|------------|
| 20-25    | 4      | 40         |
| 26-30    | 7      | 17.5       |
| 31-35    | 6      | 15         |
| 36-40    | 9      | 22.5       |
| 41-45    | 7      | 17.5       |
| 46-50    | 6      | 15         |
| Above 50 | 1      | 2.5        |

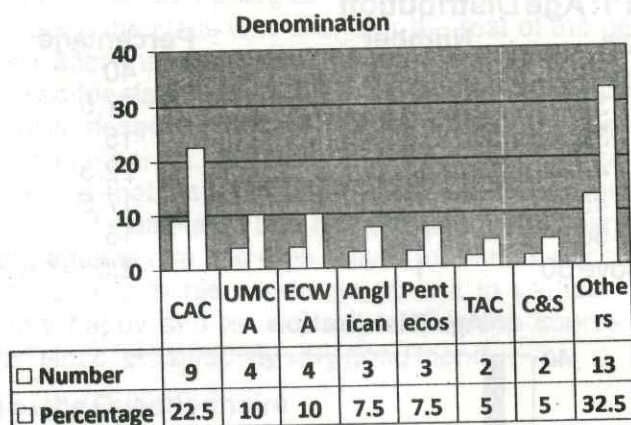
Age Distribution



The above table shows that majority of respondents were adult as nobody is below 20 years of age. This indicates that they were matured and responsible individuals; hence, their judgment on the subject can be regarded as valid and reliable.

### Question 2: Denomination

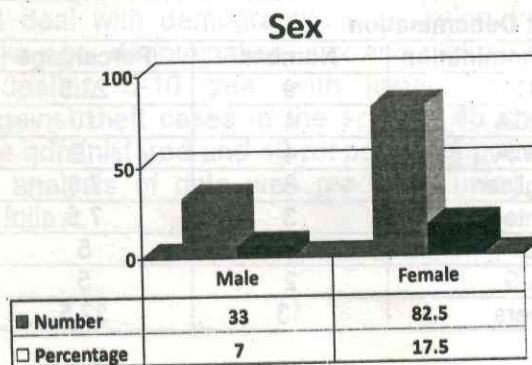
| Denomination | Number | Percentage |
|--------------|--------|------------|
| CAC          | 9      | 22.5       |
| UMCA         | 4      | 10         |
| ECWA         | 4      | 10         |
| Anglican     | 3      | 7.5        |
| Pentecostal  | 3      | 7.5        |
| TAC          | 2      | 5          |
| C & S        | 2      | 5          |
| Others       | 13     | 32.5       |



Twenty one different denominations were represented in this questionnaire. The Christ Apostolic Church has the highest number (9) followed by UMCA and ECWA (4). Both Anglican and Pentecostal have 3 each; The Apostolic Church and Cherubim and Seraphim have 2 a piece; and other denominations have 1 each. This indicates that the view of Christian community in Ilorin metropolis was sought on the subject.

### Question 3: Sex

| Sex    | Number | Percentage |
|--------|--------|------------|
| Male   | 33     | 82.5       |
| Female | 7      | 17.5       |

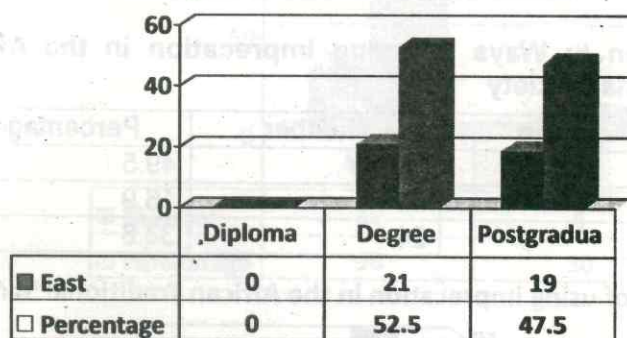


The analysis shows a significant difference between the male and female respondents, that is, 82.5% and 17.5% respectively. The wide different can be explained on the ground that majority of the master students both in the Seminary and even in the Department of Religions (Comparative and Christian Studies units) are male.

#### Question 4: Highest level of Education

| Education    | Number | Percentage |
|--------------|--------|------------|
| Diploma      | 0      | 0          |
| Degree       | 21     | 52.5       |
| Postgraduate | 19     | 47.5       |

Highest Level of Education

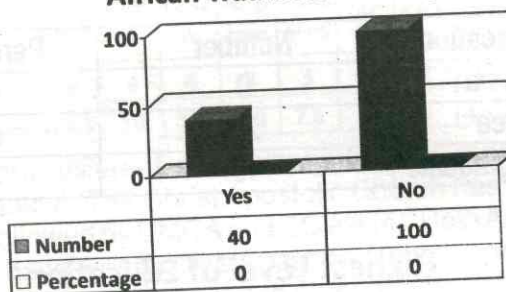


The above table shows that majority of the respondents are graduates, that is, 52.5%. Incidentally, a significant number of respondents, 47.5% have Masters' Degree in various disciplines. This implies mainly to the respondents in the Seminary. They already have their vocation but then they like to be trained theologically.

**Question 5: Awareness of the use of imprecation in the African traditional society**

| Response | Number | Percentage |
|----------|--------|------------|
| Yes      | 40     | 100        |
| No       | 0      | 0          |

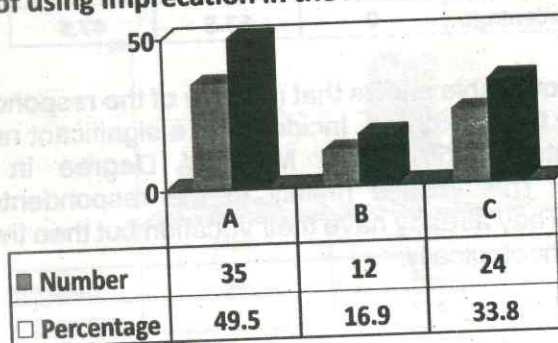
**Awareness of the use of imprecation in the African Traditional Society**



**Question 6: Ways of using imprecation in the African traditional society**

| Group | Number | Percentage |
|-------|--------|------------|
| A     | 35     | 49.5       |
| B     | 13     | 16.9       |
| C     | 24     | 33.8       |

**Ways of using imprecation in the African Traditional Society**

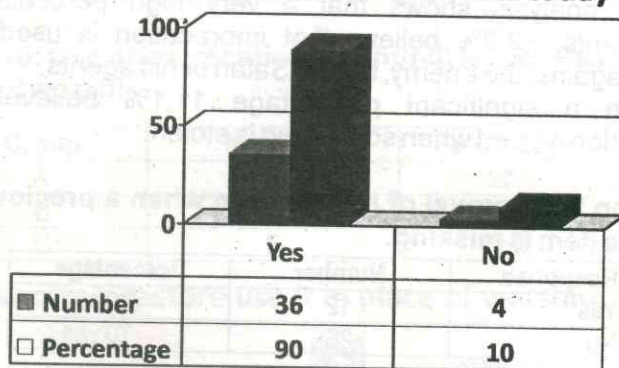


The above analysis indicates that majority of the respondents, 49.3% believe that imprecation is used in the traditional society when one's item is stolen. A significant percentage of the respondents, 33.8% believe that imprecation is used in the African traditional society.

**Question 7: Awareness of the use of imprecation in Churches today**

| Response | Number | Percentage |
|----------|--------|------------|
| Yes      | 36     | 90         |
| No       | 4      | 10         |

**Awareness of its use in Churches today**

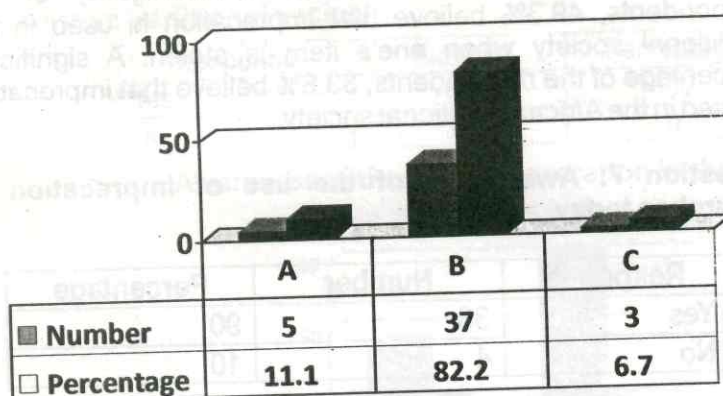


The analysis shows that majority of the respondents, that is, 90% are aware of the use imprecation in our Churches.

**Question 8: When imprecation is used in Churches today**

| Response | Number | Percentage |
|----------|--------|------------|
| A        | 5      | 11.1       |
| B        | 37     | 82.2       |
| C        | 3      | 6.7        |

### When it is used in Churches today



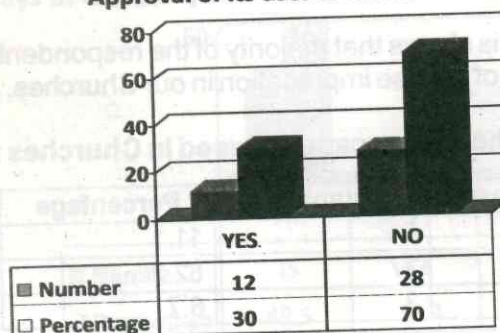
The analysis shows that a very high percentage of respondents, 82.2% believe that imprecation is used while praying against the enemy, that is, Satan or his agents.

Also a significant percentage 11.1% believes that imprecation is used when something is stolen.

### Question 9: Approval of imprecation when a precious and valuable item is missing.

| Response | Number | Percentage |
|----------|--------|------------|
| Yes      | 12     | 30         |
| No       | 28     | 70         |

### Approval of its uses when item is stolen

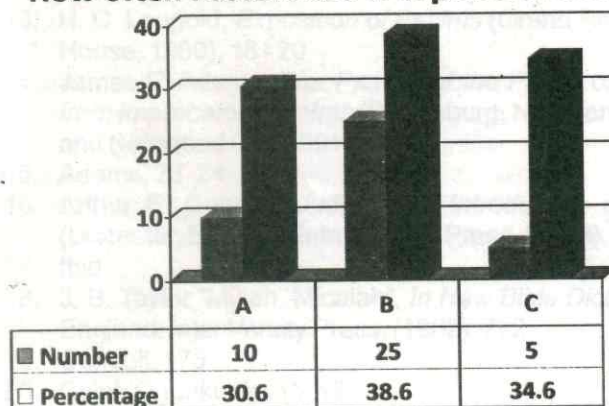


The above table shows that a very high percentage of the respondents 70% did not approve of the use of imprecation when a precious and valuable item is stolen while a significant percentage, 30% approved of it. The reason why majority of the respondents discountenanced the use of imprecation when an item is stolen is centred on the argument that imprecation is used primarily against Satan or his agents as noted in question 9 above, in other words, many people argue that imprecation should not be used against human being as it is not ethically right to pray for the destruction of another person. Also, the many respondents argue that Christian are now at the dispensation of grace and that we serve a merciful God who is not interested in the death of sinners. They further argue that Christian should leave vengeance for God who is able to dispense it appropriately (Rom. 12:19).

**Question 10: Use of imprecation by Church leader/Pastor in the place of worship**

| Group | Number | Percentage |
|-------|--------|------------|
| A     | 10     | 25         |
| B     | 25     | 62.5       |
| C     | 5      | 12.5       |

**How often Pastore use it in place of worship**



The analysis shows that majority of the respondents 62.5% confirm that their Pastors/Leaders use imprecation irregularly during worship service. A significant percentage, 25% agree that their Pastors use imprecation during worship service while insignificant percentage 12.5% said that their Pastors never use imprecation.

#### **Concluding Remarks**

It is discovered from Judges 17:1-6 and contemporary African society that imprecation is a panacea for curbing theft cases in the society. Therefore, it is recommended that religious leaders should occasionally make use of imprecation during worship service with the purpose of checking the wicked ones. Incidentally, some people are advocating for the liturgical use of imprecatory passages for the purpose of controlling evil in society<sup>40</sup>. However, caution must be taken on the liturgical use of imprecation. It is possible for some selfish individuals to abuse its use as they invoke it indiscriminately. Christian community must be educated not to wait until an imprecation is invoked before confession is made and restitution is carried out.

### Endnotes

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3. Lewis, 27-29
4. Peter C. Craigie, *Psalms 1-50*, WBC (Waco, Texas: Word Books Publishers, 1985), 41
5. James P. Mahoney (ed.) *The Liturgy of the Hours According to the Roman Rite*, IV, Ordinary time, Weeks 18-34. (New York: Catholic Book Publishing Co., 1975).
6. Mahoney, 750-752
7. Mahoney, 912
8. Mahoney, 1046-1049
9. Mahoney, 1145-1146
10. Mahoney, 1168-1170
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12. Barnes, xxxvii. For a summary of its six points, see C. O. Ogunkunle, "Imprecatory Psalm: Their Forms and Uses in Ancient Israel and Some Selected Churches in Nigeria", A Thesis in the Department of Religious Studies, submitted to the Faculty of Arts in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy, University of Ibadan, Ibadan, Nigeria, January 2000, 45-50.
13. H. C. Leupold, *Exposition of Psalms* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1969), 18-20
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15. Adams, 23-24
16. Arthur E. Cundall, *Judges: An Introduction and Commentary* (Leicester, England: Inter-Varsity Press, (1968), 50.
17. Ibid
18. J. B. Taylor "Micah, Micaiah", *In New Bible Dictionary* (Leicester, England: Inter Varsity Press, (1962), 772
19. Cundall, 176
20. Caleb Ogunkunle, 15-16