

ONWUKA: *Hoping against Hope (Romans 4:18-21) and the Quest for a Sustainable Democratic Governance in Nigeria*

HOPING AGAINST HOPE (ROMANS 4:18-21) AND THE QUEST FOR A SUSTAINABLE DEMOCRATIC GOVERNANCE IN NIGERIA

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Abstract

This paper explored St Paul's presentation of Abraham's unflinching trust in God in the face of 'hopeless' situation and daunting challenges as model for Nigerians in their quest for a sustainable democratic governance. Hoping against hope summarizes the situation of Abraham in his quest for a child of his own, seen from human perspective on account of the dysfunctional conditions of his and his wife's reproductive systems. He surmounted all these on account of his trust on God's promise rather than on human factors. Similarly, the collusion of Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC), the Judiciary and the Legislature in subverting the democratic will of the people makes the emergence of sustainable democratic governance in Nigeria a mirage. Is all hope lost? With critical analysis of the chosen text using historical critical method of exegesis and the application of its fruits to the Nigerian political context using contextual method, this paper argued that as what sustained Abraham and led him to the attainment of his heart's desire was not material conditions but his hope in God's promise, so also what will liberate Nigerians from the present political quagmire are not present political institutions but an unflinching trust in God and his promise. Consequently, the paper recommended firm trust in God, active participation in electoral processes and rejection of all forms of electoral malpractices.

Keywords: Hope, Faith, Nigeria, Democratic Governance, Promise, Election

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1. Introduction

Hope constitutes an important aspect of human life as it gives basis for the present by reasonable projecting into the future without losing sight of the past. As Pope Francis notes in *Spes non Confundit* (Hope does not disappoint), ‘in the heart of each person, hope dwells as the desire and expectation of good things to come, despite our not knowing what the future may bring’². Hope directs human heart to future good despite present challenges. It is not baseless optimism but future expectation anchored on solid base. Christian hope is a theological virtue by which humans enabled by grace of God expects eternal life and means to attain it confident on divine assistance³. It does not deceive or disappoint because it is anchored on the love of God.

St Paul, in Romans 4:18-21, reflects on the nature of the faith of Abraham as part of his argument that God justifies humanity on the basis of faith in Jesus Christ and not on the basis of the work of the Law. He sees in Abraham a shining example that God justifies or reckons one as righteous on the basis of faith. Relying on Gen 15:6 he argues that Abraham’s righteousness was gratuitous as it was based on his faith and not on his good works. Romans 4:18-21 is Paul’s presentation of the faith of Abraham which may be summed up as ‘hoping against hope’. Abraham trusted in God and on his promise of becoming the father of many nations even when his body and that of his wife were as good as dead.

Nigeria as a nation can draw some inspiration from the faith of Abraham as presented by St Paul in Romans 4:18-21 in her quest for democratic governance. The hope of Nigerians is to have democratic governance which is a product of free and fair election and which guarantees good governance, security of life and property, rule of law, economic growth and human development among others. However, a number of factors have made this hope elusive. The paper aims at exploring how St Paul understanding of Abraham’s hope even under daunting challenges could

² Pope Francis, *Spes Non Confundit: Bull of Indiction of the Ordinary Jubilee of the Year 2025*, no. 1 www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/bulls/documents/20240509_spes-non-confundit-bollajubileo2025.html

³ For more on this, see *The Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 1817, (Nairobi: Pauline Publications, 1995) 442.

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be a source of inspiration for Nigerians in their quest for democratic governance. Using the historical critical and contextual methods, this paper argues that Nigerians' quest for democratic governance can be realised if Nigerian's hope is not anchored on human institutions and material things but on God.

The work is divided into four parts. The first deals with the literary background of Romans 4:18-21, the second, the exegesis of Romans 4:18-21, while the third focuses on Nigerian Quest for Democratic governance and the fourth, on the synthesis: Romans 4:18-21 and Nigerian Quest for Democratic governance.

2. Literary Background and Context of Romans 4:18-21

The Letter to the Romans was addressed to the Christians in the imperial city of Rome by Paul⁴. He directed it to a Christian community he neither founded nor visited but only intended to visit on his way to Spain (Rom 15:23). His motive for scripting such a missive generally considered as one of his greatest epistles is subject of debate among scholars. In his prescript (Rom 1:8-5) and travelogue (Rom 15:13-33), he indicated some motives behind his intended visit which include sharing some spiritual gifts with his addressee and being strengthened mutually by their faith (Rom 1:11), working fruitfully among them as of the rest of the gentiles (1:13), receiving support from them for his mission in Spain (15:23-24). He also solicited their prayers that he might escape the unbelievers in Jerusalem (15:30-31). Comparing all these with the content of the letter raises question on the actual motive behind the letter. Some scholars regard Romans as the apostle's last will and testament, the summary of his theological thought among others⁵. C.H. Dodd considers Romans as a letter of introduction⁶ while Jerwell understands it as a letter indirectly addressed

⁴ Most scholars today agree that the Letter to the Romans was written by St Paul. According to Cranfield, no responsible criticism denies Pauline origin of Romans {C.E.B. Cranfield, *The Epistle to the Romans*, The International Critical Commentary, vol I, I-VIII (London: T & T Clark, 1975) 2; see also James D.G. Dunn, *Romans 1-8*, Word Biblical Commentary 38A (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1988), xxxix; Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *Romans: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, The Anchor Bible 33, (New York: Doubleday, 1993) 41}.

⁵ Fitzmyer, *Romans*, 74

⁶ C.H. Dodd, *Epistle of Paul to the Romans*, (London: Collins, 1959) xxv.

to the church of Jerusalem⁷. James D.G. Dunn identified three motives behind the letter as missionary, apologetic and pastoral⁸. Today a number of scholars are of the view that Paul has multiple reasons which can be summarised as follows: to introduce himself and the gospel he preaches to the church of Rome against the backdrop of bad impression many Jews, especially those in diaspora had of him; to seek support for his mission to Spain; to solicit for prayer and understanding from the Christians of Rome in view of his coming visit to Jerusalem knowing the close relationship between Christians in Jerusalem and those in Rome and to treat some pastoral issues in the Christian community of Rome⁹.

Romans 1:16-17, as attested by many scholars¹⁰, constitute the thesis statement of the Letter or what Paul set out to prove, namely that the gospel as he understands it is God's saving power for humanity, especially those who embrace it with faith as it reveals his saving justice obtainable solely through faith. To accomplish this, he examines the fate of humanity prior the dawn of the gospel (Rom 1:18-3:20), the transformative effect of the gospel (Rom 3:21-4:25), the benefits of life within the gospel (Rom 5:1-8:39), the future of the Israelites with respect to the gospel (Rom 9:1-11:36), and the demands the gospel makes on those who embraced it (Rom 12:1-15:13). Romans follows Paul usual organisational pattern of doctrine-exhortation with Rom 1:18-11:36 serving as doctrine and 12:1-15:13 as exhortation. The doctrinal section is made up of three parts: Rom 1:18-4:25; 5:1-8:39 and 9:1-11:36. Romans 1:18-4:25 can be subdivided into 1:18-3:20 and 3:21-4:25 with the former dealing with the state of humanity prior to the coming of Christ and the later with the saving righteousness that comes with the coming of Christ.

Romans 4:1-25 is Paul's further elaboration of the thesis he stated in Rom 3:21 that the righteousness of God comes through faith in Jesus Christ and not through the works of the Law. Using Abraham as an example he argues

⁷J. Jerwell, 'The Letter to Jerusalem' in K.P. Donfried, ed. *The Roman Debate* (Peabody 1991) 53-64.

⁸ Dunn, *Romans*, lv-lvii

⁹ Fitzmyer, *Romans*, 79.

¹⁰ See Fitzmyer, *Romans*, 253; Cranfield, *Romans*, 87; Jean-Noel Aletti, 'Romans', *The International Bible Commentary* (Collegeville, Minnesota: The Liturgical Press, 1998) 1553-1600, 1554.

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that he was reckoned righteous on the basis of faith and not on the basis of the works of Law. He based his exposition on the analysis of Gen 15:6, the only text that links Abraham's righteousness with his faith focusing on four key terms: faith/believe, reckoned, righteousness and promise. After brief introduction (vv. 1-2) and the citation of the key text (v.3), he dwelt on the three terms faith/believe, reckon and righteousness in verses 4-12 maintaining that Abraham's faith cannot be seen as work because it is gracious just as divine forgiveness of a sinner is, and his righteousness is not based on circumcision because he received it before he was circumcised. In Rom 4:13-17 he states that divine promise to Abraham and his descendant is not also based on the Law, i.e. on the basis of things to be done but on grace. He then concludes his exposition by examining the nature of Abraham's faith (Rom 4:18-21) and its implications for his Christian audience (Rom 4:22-25).

3. The Analysis of Romans 4:18-21

The Text

18. *Hos par'elpida em'elpidi episteusen eis to genesthai auton patera pollōn ethnōn kata to eirēmenon houtōs estai to sperma sou, 19 kai mē asthenēsas te pistei katenoēsen to heastou sōma (ēdē) nenekrōmenon, hekatontaetēs pou hupachōn, kai tēn nekrōsin tes mētras Sarras. 20 eis de tēn epangelian tou theou ou diekrithē tē apistia all' enedunamōthē tē pistei, dous doksan tō theō 21 kai plērophorētheis hoti ho epēngeltai dunatos estin kai poiēsai.*

Translation of the Text

18. He who against hope believed on the hope that he would become father of many nations according to the saying: 'thus shall your offspring be', 19. and while not weakened in faith he took notice his own body which was already (as good as) dead since he was about hundred years and the deadness of the womb of Sarah, 20. but on account of the promise of God, he did not waver in faith, rather he was strengthened in faith giving glory to God 21. and being fully convinced that the one who promised is capable of accomplishing it. (Translation is mine)

The Structure of Romans 4:18-21

Romans 4:18-21 may be structured as follows:

Verse 18: The thesis statement: Hoping on the promise of God even when it appears impossible

Verse 19a: 1st apparent impossible condition: the dead condition of Abraham's body

Verse 19b: 2nd apparent impossible condition: the death condition of Sarah's womb

Verse 20a: 1st expression of faith: firmness on the promise of God

Verse 20b: the result of it: made strong in faith

Verse 20c: the second expression of faith: gave glory to God

Verse 21: the basis for the hope/faith: convinced that God is capable of delivering on his words

Analysis of Romans 4:18-21

Romans 4:18-21 is part of the argument of Rom 4:1-25 meant to prove that Abraham was reckoned righteous on the basis of faith and not on basis of works; an argument carried forward through exegesis of Gen 15:6. This section dwells on the nature of the faith of Abraham, on the basis of which he was reckoned as righteous. Rom 4:18-21 gives a graphic description of the faith of Abraham which is based on the promise God made to him that he would be father of many nations. It shows how Abraham clung on to this promise even when the conditions of its realisation appeared impossible.

Hoping on the Promise of God even when it appears impossible (Rom 4:18)

Verse 18 is a synthesis of what Paul wants to prove in this pericope. It is made up of three parts: the nature of Abraham's faith, its content and basis. The nature of Abraham's faith is expressed with the verb *episteusen* and the prepositional phrases *par'elpida ep'elpidi*. The verb, *pisteuō* with its cognates (*pistis, apistia*) occurred four times within the pericope, (v. 18a; 19a; 20a and 20b) showing its centrality. The root *pist-* often translates the Hebrew root *אמנ* which means trust either on person or things connected with person. *Pisteuein* has two major nuances: to consider something to be true and therefore worthy of one's trust or to believe something, and to entrust oneself to an entity in complete confidence or to believe in¹¹. Both

¹¹ Frederick W. Danker, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and the Other Early Christian Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 816-817.

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are related because the trust one has on someone makes one to believe his or her words. In this verse, *episteusen* describes the disposition of Abraham towards the promise of God which he considers to be true and worthy of trust on account of trust he has on God. Abraham therefore has firm trust in God and on his promise.

In this verse, the verb *episteusen* is moderated by two prepositional phrases: *par' elpida ep'elpidi* which help to bring out the nature of Abraham's faith. The first, *par' elpida* which can be rendered either as beside hope or beyond hope is circumstantial indicating the situation under which Abraham trusted in God. Beyond hope means that the situation has gone beyond what one can hope for while beside hope also means that the situation does not give room for hope. Therefore, whether it is understood as beyond or beside hope, the idea is the same. Abraham found himself in the situation, humanly speaking, there is no reasonable ground for hope. The phrase *ep'elpidi* on the other hand stands in contrast to *par' elpida* and indicates the basis of Abraham's faith. It means 'on hope' or 'on the basis of hope'. Abraham therefore believed and hoped on the promise of God even when humanly speaking, there is no ground for such hope. Abraham's faith is unwavering reliance on the promise of God in the face of all odds¹². The noun *elpis* calls for a little elaboration because of its centrality in this work. It occurs twice in this pericope, all in this verse and is most often rendered as hope while its verbal form *elpizō* is rendered as 'to have hope' or 'to hope'. It appears about 53 times in the New Testament with greatest occurrence being in Pauline letters (36 times), especially in Romans (13 times). LXX often used its verbal form to translate the Hebrew verbs בָּטַח 'to trust' (see Eccl. 9:4; Jer 17:7), חָכַה 'to wait for' and אָמַן 'to trust'. In OT to hope is to trust and to be confident in what God will do¹³. In the NT its understanding, especially, in religious sphere is rooted in the OT. It embraces expectation, trust and patient waiting¹⁴. Paul uses the word in two ways: first in sense of what may be regarded as sure hope, hope that does not fail. This is hope that is based on God or his promises. Its basis is

¹² Fitzmyer, *Romans*, 386.

¹³ R. Bultmann, 'The OT View of Hope' in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, Abridged in one volume, ed. Geoffrey Bromiley, (Grand Rapids, Michigan: W.B. Eerdmans, 1985) 230.

¹⁴ J.M. Everts, 'Hope' in *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters* (Downers Grove, Illinois: Intervarsity Press, 1993) 415.

God's faithfulness in the past. This type of hope goes hand in hand with faith. The second is what may be presented as simple hope or secular understanding of hope. This is the hope that things will turn out as we humans expect them. In the prepositional phrases *par'elpida ep'elpidi*, Paul uses hope in two ways. In *par'elpida* he employs it in the secular sense of human expectation¹⁵. In *ἐπ' ἐλπιδι*, he uses it in the sense of hope that is based on God. For him therefore, whereas from human expectation, there is no ground of hope, yet Abraham still hoped because his hope is not based on human expectation but on God.

The content of Abraham's faith is presented thus: *eis to genesthai auton patera pollōn ethnōn*. The phrase, *eis to genesthai* poses some challenges as can be seen from different ways different versions translate it¹⁶. While the preposition *eis* with articular infinitive is used often to express either purpose or result, it can also be used exegetically or to throw more light on what is said¹⁷. This is how it is used here to throw more light on the content of Abraham's believing. When there seems to be no ground for that, Abraham believed on the hope that he would become father of many nations. Against some suggestions, Abraham did not believe in order to or so that he may become father of many nations. It is not indicating the purpose of believing, nor the result but the content of what he hopes to become.¹⁸

The promise is that he will be the father of many nations. This promise was first made in Gen 12:2-3 and repeated in Gen 15:5; 17:4-5; 18:18 and 22:17-18, though sometimes in a slightly different form. St Paul bases his

¹⁵ Dunn sees in *par'elpida* and *ep'elidi* a contrast between Greek understanding of hope characterized by uncertainty and Jewish understanding of it which is based on God. (*Romans*, 219).

¹⁶ NAU renders it as indicating result 'so that he might become'; NAS renders as purpose, 'in order that he may become' while NRS translates it as indicating content 'that he will become'.

¹⁷ Daniel B. Wallace, *The Basics of New Testament Syntax: An Intermediate Greek Grammar* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 2000) 264.

¹⁸ For more on this, see Bultmann, 'Faith in Judaism' *TDNT*, VI, 196-228, 206. However, Cranfield and Fitzmyer are of the view that it should be seen as consecutive (so that) and therefore that he believed so that he may become (Cranfield, *Romans*, 247; Fitzmyer, *Romans* 387).

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argument on Gen 15:6 because of the link the text makes between Abraham's faith and his righteousness. Abraham was worried that he was growing old and wondered how God's promise to him would be fulfilled since he had no children. God reassured him by taking him outside in the night and showing him the stars and saying: 'thus shall your offspring be' (Gen 15:5). On the basis of this promise, Abraham trusted God and this faith he expressed was reckoned to him as righteousness (Gen 15:6). Paul here cited this incident as a proof that Abraham was reckoned as righteous before God on the basis of faith and not on the basis of work. Paul's position seems to be in contrast with the popular Jewish understanding of the basis of Abraham's righteousness which many attribute to his obedience to God (1 Mac 2:52; Sir 44:19-21).

The Apparent Impossible Conditions (Rom 4:19)

In verse 19, Paul analyzes the faith of Abraham from his then human conditions and gives two reasons why his situation is considered as *par' elpida* (beyond or against hope). The verse is made up of two parts: the resilience of Abraham's faith, and two conditions that should have weakened it. The resilience of Abraham's faith is indicated with the expression, *mē asthenesas* (negative particle with aorist participle of *asteneō*). *Asteneō* here stands for personal incapacity¹⁹ not from sickness but from situation in which one finds oneself. Its negation with *mē* shows that it does apply to Abraham. The phrase *tē pistei* is used here as dative of reference rather than of instrument. It means that Abraham was not weakened with reference to his faith. In other words, the situation he found himself did not weaken his faith. Two situations are presented: the deadness of his body and that of the womb of Sarah. The two situations are governed by the verb *katenoesen* from *katanoeō*, to think deep, to take notice, to consider. The variant reading has '*ou katenoesen*' he did not consider. The senses of the two readings are almost the same. The first (*katenoesen*) indicates that though Abraham took cognisance of his condition, his faith was not weakened on account of it while the second (*ou katenoesen*) indicates that Abraham did not allow the thought of the deadness of his body to weaken his faith.

¹⁹ See *astheneo* in Danker, *Greek-English Lexicon of New Testament*, 142.

The expression to *heautou sōma nenekrōmenon... kai tēn nekrōsin mētras Sarras* (his own body having been dead ... and the deadness of the womb of Sarah) are rather metaphorical. The body of Abraham and the womb of Sarah are not dead, rather they as good as dead with respect to reproductive function. This is because they have long passed the age of child-bearing. Abraham was about 100 years and Sarah, though her age was not given had long also passed the age of childbearing. From human perspective, hoping that a couple like Abraham and Sarah will bear children is like stretching human expectation beyond its limit or expecting what is impossible. Abraham manifested his faith by not being weakened by this consideration. As Dunn will put it, faith is strong precisely because it looks solely to God. It does not deny historical reality but it is not weakened by it²⁰.

The Firmness of Abraham's Faith on God's Promise (Rom 4:20)

Verse 20 shifts focus from weak human factors to God's promise which is basis of Abraham's faith. This shift is indicated with the contrastive use of the particle *de*. The verse consists of three parts: the unwavering nature of Abraham's faith, its growth in strength and its result: giving glory to God. The term *epangelia* (promise) used for the first time within the pericope already occurred three times in the immediate context of Rom 4:13-17 (Rom 4:13, 14, 16) and it is also implied in the expression *kata to eirēmenon* (according to the saying) in verse 18. In Rom 4:13-17 Paul earlier argues that divine promise is not based on the law because that will make it accessible only through human work but on faith so that it can remain a free gift. The divine promise as presented in this pericope is: 'thus shall your offspring be' interpreted as promise of becoming father of many nations. According to Gen 15:5, God made this promise after showing Abraham the stars of heaven. Though its implication is uncountable number of descendants, Gen 17:6 reinterprets in the sense of nations thus: 'I will make nations of you'. Paul may have adopted this interpretation because it favours his perception of Abraham as the father not only of the Jews (the circumcised) but also of the Gentiles (the uncircumcised, Rom 4:11).

²⁰ Dunn, *Romans*, 220.

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The firmness of Abraham's faith in the promise of God is indicated with the verb *diakrinō* (to differentiate or to distinguish) used here in its passive form *diakrīnēsthai*, 'to doubt', or 'to waver'. It literally means to be divided within oneself²¹. The expression *ou diakrīthē* shows that Abraham was not divided within himself and therefore he was not in doubt or hesitant. This portrays the mood or frame of mind of Abraham with respect to divine promise. *Apistia* indicates an option open to Abraham which he did not succumb to. It stands here for lack of faith rather than faithlessness. Some rather see it as rejection of God's promise²². Naturally, the deadness of Abraham's body and that of the womb of Sarah would have caused him to doubt on the possibility of the promise but he did not succumb to that. Instead of being reduced to doubt Abraham was rather strengthened in his faith. The verb *enedunamuthē* is divine passive showing that the strengthening of his faith comes from God while *tē pistia* (dative of reference) shows that the strengthening was with reference to his faith²³. By focusing on the promise of God rather than on the weakness of his body and that of his wife, his faith was strengthened. The expression, to give glory to God is often used to indicate human submission to the will of God through doing the right thing (see Josh 7:19; 1 Sam 6:5; John 9:24). According to Cranfield, a man gives glory to God when he acknowledges God's truthfulness and goodness and submits to his authority²⁴. What Paul may have meant by giving glory to God is that Abraham's act of faith in the face of daunting human conditions is a form of honour to God.

The Basis of Abraham's Hope (Rom 4:21)

The pericope concludes by stating the basis of Abraham's hope. The hope of Abraham is that he would be the father of many nations based on the promise 'thus shall your offspring be'. The verse is made up of two parts: the conviction of Abraham and the basis of the conviction. In this verse, his faith is presented with positive term unlike in verses 19 and 20 where it described in negatives as (*mē asthenēsas*) not weakened and (*ou*

²¹ See *diakrinō* in *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament*, p. 231. See also Matt 21:21; Mark 11:23; Rom 14:23.

²² Cranfield, *Romans*, 248.

²³ Some scholars understand the phrase either as dative of respect or of instrument without any real change in meaning because whether it is the faith that strengthened or the strengthening is done through it, the idea is the same (Dunn, *Romans*, 221).

²⁴ Cranfield, *Romans*, 240.

diekrithē) not wavered. The verb plērophoreō which occurs six times in the NT (Luke 1:1; Rom 4:21; Rom 14:5; Col 4:12; 2Tim 4:5, 17) here means to be fully convinced just as in see also Rom 14:5. Abraham is not only convinced but fully convinced. This shows that he has maximum trust on God and on his promise. But what is the basis of this conviction? This is found in Abraham perception of God. He knows God as one capable of bringing about what he says. He knows God as Almighty who has power to turn his words into reality. As Paul indicated in verse 4:17, the God Abraham believed is one who brings the dead back to life and makes what does not exist to exist. Fully convinced that God can bring back to life his dead reproductive organ and that of his wife, his hope of becoming the father of many nations remained unshaken.

In wrapping up the entire argument of Rom 4:1-25 Paul shows that all that is said about Abraham equally has relevance for Christians. While the faith of Abraham remains a model for Christians, Christians have greater basis for hope on account of the resurrection of Jesus Christ. God who not only restored the bodily functions of Abraham and his wife, Sarah but also raised Christ from the dead is capable of restoring to life whatever is dead in the life and conditions of those who hope in him.

4. Nigerian Quest for Democratic Governance

Since her Independence from the British Colonial government in October 1, 1960, Nigeria has been in quest for sustainable democratic governance. Abraham Lincoln's definition of democracy as government of the people by the people for the people has remained relevant in understanding democracy²⁵. Democratic governance is that which is characterised by principles of democracy which include fundamental recognition of popular sovereignty, representativeness, equal opportunity for all, majority rule, minority rights and popular consultation especially on fundamental issues²⁶. When governance is truly democratic, its product is good

²⁵ Contained in the Address of Abraham Lincoln at Gettysburg in November 19, 1963 cited in Ita and Ibanga, '2023 General Elections: Dashed Hopes, Lessons and Pathways for Rethinking Election-Democracy Nexus', *Global Journal of Politics and Law Research* 13:2 ((2025) 1-17.

²⁶ D.E. Arowolo and O.A. Aluko, 'Democracy, Political Participation and Good Governance in Nigeria', *International Journal of Development and Sustainability* 1:3 (2012) 797-809, 797.

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governance which is committed to the improvement of public welfare, responsive to the needs of its citizens, faithful and effective to the enforcement of the rule of law and creates enabling environment for economic growth²⁷. This is the type of governance Nigeria has been in quest for since her independence. In search of this, Nigeria has experimented different forms of governance.

The Pre-Independence Constitution of 1959 legislated federal parliamentary system of governance made up of national and regional governments. On the national are the Governor General/President as the ceremonial head of State, the Prime Minister as the head of the government, the Upper and Lower Chambers of the National Assembly and the Judiciary while the region has the Governor/Premier as the head of the government, the legislature made up of the regional House of Assembly and the House of Chiefs²⁸. The then three regions of North, West and East enjoyed greater autonomy, each with its regional constitution. The way the regions were organised encouraged economic growth, regional development and competitiveness. However, intra parties and inter parties' rivalries, quest for greater control of the national resources and the impatience of the military brought the first republic (1960-1966) to an end with the *coup d'état* of January 1966. The military government of General Ironsi abolished parliamentary rule and introduced unitary system of governance. The 13 years of military governance prior to the second republic, during which Nigeria witnessed three years of Nigeria-Biafra war, heavily retarded Nigerian democratic development.

The second republic of 1979-84 ushered in with the 1979 constitution witnessed the introduction of Presidential system of governance which though had three tiers of government of National, State and Local Governments apportioned excessive power to the President. Though both at the national and state level there are three arms of government, namely the Executive, the Legislature and the Judiciary, the power of the

²⁷ Arowolo and Aluko, 'Democracy', 798.

²⁸ Nasiru Haruna, Mohd Sabri Md Nor, Mohd Mahadee Ismail and Murai Wan Mohd Nor, 'Political Instability and the Collapse of Nigeria First Republic Government: 1960-1966', *International Journal of Research and Innovation in Social Sciences (IJRISS)* 7:7 (July 2023) 2080-2089, 2080.

Executive, especially at the national level is such that it can exercise undue influence on the other two arms. Election malpractices, corruption and embezzlement of the public fund characterised the second republic which was cut short by the military coup of 1984. Nigeria witnessed again another 15 years of military dictatorship under Generals Muhammad Buhari (1984-1985), Ibrahim Babangida (1985-1993) Sani Abacha (1993-1998) and Abdulsalami Abubakar (1998-1999). The third republic which was partially introduced when the then head of State, General Babangida allowed for governorship, state assemblies and local government elections while he ruled the nation as military dictator with the title of President. The third republic witnessed a bastardization of democracy unrivalled in the political history of Nigeria. Not only that a military dictator arrogated to himself a title due to an elected president, he also subjected the bills of the elected representatives of the people (the national assemblies) to military scrutiny and suppressed people's freedom of expression and formation of political parties by imposing two political parties on the nation. The height of it all was the annulment of June 12 presidential election adjudged to be freest in Nigerian democracy and the subsequent imposition of transitional government led by Chief Ernest Shonekan which was sacked few months later by General Sani Abacha.

In 1999 Nigeria witnessed a return to democratic governance and the introduction of the fourth republic. Though the fourth republic currently running is the longest Nigeria has ever experience (25 years and still counting), it is not free from the challenges of the past republics. Though it could be said that Nigeria has practised democratic governance for 35 years out of 65 years of its independence, the question begging for answer is how democratic was the governance of those years. When judged with the popular definition of democracy as government of the people by the people for the people, it is obvious that Nigerian democracy run short of basic principles of democracy. One of such basic principles or components is credible election.

Election when free and fair guarantees three basic components of democracy which are popular participation, competitiveness and

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legitimacy²⁹. However, when election is neither free nor faire it produces what can be described as virtual democracy, that is, that which has the semblance of democracy but lacks its basic tenets. It rather gives semblance of legitimacy to authoritarian rule. Since Independence, Nigerian election has been marred by pre- and intra election violence and various forms of electoral malpractices such as snatching and stuffing of the ballot boxes, manipulation and inflation of election results especially at the collation centres, voters' intimidation, vote buying and selling among others. Whereas one would have expected that Nigeria would have learnt from her past mistakes and that subsequent elections should be better than the previous ones, the opposite seem to be the rule. The last general election of 2023 casts serious doubt in the Nigerian hope for sustainable democratic governance.

The built-up to 2023 general election with the 2022 amendment of the electoral act which made provision for the early realise of fund to the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC), the use of electronic devise, Bimodal Voter Accreditation (BVAS) for accreditation of voters and for transmission of election results, the development of INEC Result Viewing (IReV) portal for citizens easy access to election results, coupled with INEC consistent assurance of Nigerians of free and fair election ignited rays of hope in the minds of many Nigerians. However, this optimism and hope was dashed and shattered by the actual conduct of the election. The abysmal conduct of 2023 general election especially in the areas of non-transmission of election results, especially presidential election results to the IReV portal at real time, the intimidation of voters, vote selling and vote buying, manipulation and inflation of election results especially at the collation centres and INEC fragrant disregard to its own guidelines was bewildering and disheartening. The question that bothers many Nigerians is this: if with all the laws put in place for the 2023 elections, the resources invested, the technologies employed and all the assurances of the electoral umpire, Nigeria could not conduct an election that guaranteed popular participation, competitiveness and legitimacy, the basic tenets of democracy, can Nigeria ever conduct an election that can enthrone legitimate leaders and true democracy?

²⁹ Omotola, J. Shola, 'Election and Democratic Transition in Nigeria under the Fourth Republic' *African Affairs*, 109/437 (July 2010) 536, doi 10.1093/afraf/adq040

Whereas election is not equivalent to democratic governance, free and fair election is prerequisite for democratic governance³⁰. Free and fair election gives the citizens and electorates the power to choose their leaders as well as power to dismiss them when they fail to perform through ballot paper. It keeps the elected officials on their toes knowing fully well that their return to their positions in the future depends on their performance. It gives the citizens power to hold their leaders accountable.

5. Romans 4:18-21 and Nigerian Quest for Sustainable Democratic Governance

The situation in which Abraham found himself and that in which Nigeria found herself in her quest for democratic governance have certain things in common. First, Abraham has an ardent desire to have offspring as numerous as sand on the seashore in accordance with the divine promise just as Nigeria has burning desire to attain sustainable democratic governance in accordance with the dreams of her founding fathers. Abraham has a daunting task in realising his dream because the means to that is practically dysfunctional. He is about hundred years and his body is as good as dead and his wife has long passed the age of childbearing. His hope of becoming the father of nations considering the physical factors is hopeless.

In the same vein, Nigerian quest for sustainable democratic governance faces similar daunting challenges. The factors which could have made it possible are dysfunctional. The electoral system is under the presidency that manipulates it at will to its own benefits. The power of the people to choose their leaders is suppressed. Dictators are rather imposed on them. Majority of the members of the legislature were not truly elected represented by the people and therefore they lack the mandate to truly represent the people. Many of them are primarily interested in securing their seats in future than in representing the people and for this, they reduce themselves to puppets of the ruling government or join the ruling party while the few that try to stand for their people are either intimidated or rendered irrelevant because of their minority opinion. The Judiciary that is supposed to be the last hope of the common man is manipulated by the executive through the appointment of corrupt Chief Justice of the

³⁰ Ita and Ibanga, '2023 General Elections', p. 5.

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federation and other judges who would be willing to dance to the tunes of the executives by deciding cases especially elections cases in favour of the government in power and their preferred candidates. Nigerians therefore find themselves in the state of hopelessness as regards their desire for sustainable democratic governance. But is all hope lost?

Abraham in all these challenges never gave up hope. This is because his hope is not anchored on material things: the functionality of his body and that of her wife. His hope was rather anchored on God and his promise. He strongly believes that God who made promise to him is capable of bringing it about. In the same way, Nigerian hope for sustainable democratic governance should not be based on material things – the INEC, the Presidency, the Legislature and the Judiciary. Though these institutions have crucial roles to play in Nigerian democratic process, they remain human institutions which are not reliable. Nigeria hope should be anchored on God whose intention is to see Nigeria realise her dream of sustainable democratic governance and who is capable of using even weak and imperfect human institutions to bring out something good.

Abraham's hope was not idle and passive optimism; it was rather a life of giving glory to God through faithfulness. Nigerian hope should not be one of passivity but one anchored on the fear of God and discharge of civic duties. They should maintain good relationship with God and their fellow citizens. They should participate actively in the electoral process, either through vying for elective positions or voting for people with credible character and fear of God. They should continue to push for good and democratic governance through denunciation and criticism of undemocratic principles and practices of government, insistence on amendment of relevant electoral laws through refusal to be used in electoral malpractices, be it vote buying or vote selling, electoral violence among others. They should also not succumb to the tactics of religious and ethnic bigots who exploits their religious and ethnic inclinations to advance their selfish interests.

6. Conclusion

This paper explored St Paul's presentation of the faith of Abraham in Rom 4:18-21 *vis á vis* the Nigerian quest for democratic governance. The literary background of the Epistle to the Romans shows that the Letter was

addressed to Roman Christians to help them understand that divine salvation is not a product of human work but a gracious gift of God accessible through faith. Analysis of Romans 4:18-21 further shows that Abraham's righteousness is God's gracious gift that comes to him through faith. Abraham manifested his faith in God by hoping on the promise of God of becoming the father of many nations even when there seemed to be no ground for such hope on account of the dysfunctional nature of his and his wife reproductive systems. He anchored his hope on God and on his promise rather than on his weak human nature.

On the other hand, Nigeria has for sixty-five years since her independence been in search for true democratic governance. The situation has gotten worse due to corruption both on the part of the government and of the citizens. The faith of Abraham should serve as source of inspiration for Nigeria in her quest for democratic governance. Nigerians (both Christians and Muslims should draw strength from Abraham whom they both regard as their faith in faith and should not be weighed down by the weak, corrupt and dysfunctional institutions like INEC, Legislature and Judiciary but should anchor their hope in God. Nigerian Christians have even greater basis for hope on account of God's saving actions in Christ. This Jubilee Year of Hope offers Nigerians as a nation a unique opportunity to renew their hope in God and through firm trust in God and fervent prayer to continue to push for the realization of their collective dream which is true democratic governance in Nigeria.