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I Do Not Come to You by Chance

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Abstract

This is a film review of *I Do Not Come to You by Chance* (2023), directed by Ishaya Bako.

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Author Notes

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***I Do Not Come to You by Chance* (2023), dir. Ishaya Bako**

I Do Not Come to You by Chance is an adaptation of Adaobi Tricia Nwaubani's award-winning novel of the same name. It follows a recent Nigerian university graduate, Kingsley, who is struggling to find gainful employment despite his excellent qualifications. He has endured two fruitless years of job search, leaving his family without a breadwinner. Government corruption has cheated Kingsley's father out of his pension and money is hard to come by. Under financial pressure, life for the family stagnates. His younger siblings cannot pay their school fees and are forced to temporarily withdraw from education. Without funds for a bride price, Kingsley's romantic relationship with his long-term sweetheart cannot move forward and other suitors are now threatening the young couple's future. When Kingsley's father falls ill and requires hospitalization that the family cannot afford, they are forced to turn to their unsavory Uncle Boniface for financial assistance.

Boniface is a career criminal who has made a fortune from his many fraudulent schemes. When Boniface tries to recruit Kingsley to work for him, Kingsley's parents are wary. They warn

Kingsley that Boniface is a wicked person who has built an empire out of the exploitation of innocent people. Wowed by his uncle's fortune, Kingsley soon begins to work as an email scammer, parting naïve netizens from their money through clever and manipulative schemes. Due to his intellectual acumen, Kingsley quickly rises through the ranks of Boniface's operation and soon becomes a wealthy man. While he is finally able to provide financially for his family, it comes at a substantial moral cost. His mother still holds out hope that Kingsley will make an honest living and encourages him to continue to apply for positions at legitimate companies. Throughout the film, Kingsley grapples with the source of his dirty money and he considers resigning from Boniface's operation. In many ways, the film revisits the age-old moral dilemma: should we do what is right or what is easy?

Implicitly, the film engages classic theodicean questions: why do bad things happen to good people and why do the wicked prosper? Its premise is reminiscent of the book of Job, wherein God inflicts undeserved suffering upon his righteous servant as a kind of character test. The accuser poses a challenge to Job's loyalty: perhaps Job is only righteous because he enjoys the fruits of righteousness, and were he to be deprived of his fortune, surely, he would curse God. To test his hypothesis, the accuser inflicts a series of misfortunes upon Job; he loses his wealth, his home, his beloved children, and his health, but through it all Job remains loyal to God. While the biblical Job passes God's test, Kingsley strikes the opposite path. In some ways, Kingsley could be read as an anti-Job figure, a character who eschews his righteous life in favor of worldly gains.

At the film's opening, Kingsley is an upright citizen who has tried to live a righteous life. Despite all his efforts, he has seen little return on his investments. His prestigious education has failed to secure him employment, his beloved sweetheart is soon married off to a wealthier man, and he cannot even provide for his father in his time of need. The psychological burdens of poverty

take their toll on Kingsley's conscience, chipping away at his commitment to morality. Kingsley's experiences of poverty begin to numb him to the sufferings of others. His deep sense of the injustice of his own circumstances leads him to defraud many innocent people of their livelihoods. The accuser may have been wrong about Job, whose righteousness was unwavering, but Kingsley is a different story. His sense of righteousness is firmly transactional; having not received his promised rewards, he forges another path. What if Job had cursed God? The film presses the question: under what conditions, if any, can we take the low road?

Over time, Kingsley transforms into an extension of his uncle Boniface. The catalyst for his moral descent is the death of his father. Kingsley's father was vehemently opposed to Boniface's business and urged his son to resist the temptations of easy money. With his passing, Kingsley's last tie to a righteous life unravels and he formally joins Boniface's operation. In the beginning, he still retains hope that in time he will be able to return to his old life and pursue his past relationships. Every once in a while, he even rings his old flame in the naïve hope that one day they will rekindle their romance. With time, however, Kingsley sets his old life and relationships behind him. Any previous moral qualms he might have had about his uncle's business are now palliated by the luxuries of the fast life. Kingsley is no Job. Running variations of the classic 'Nigerian Prince' email scam, he becomes an avaricious and callous person, unmoved by extortion, exploitation, and violence. At one point, Kingsley blankly watches as one of his colleagues is brutally beaten to death by his uncle's henchmen. Increasingly, for Kingsley, it seems that the ends justify the means.

The success of the criminal enterprise emboldens Uncle Boniface to seek out greater power and influence. Out of hubris, he runs for political office, making new powerful enemies on the campaign trail. Boniface's nemesis comes suddenly, when he is assassinated at a political rally.

Given that Boniface's character embodies the biblical archetype of the wicked man, his death could be read as a vindication of God's omnibenevolence. The circumstances of his death echo Zophar's speech on the fate of the wicked: "in the midst of his plenty, distress will overtake him" (Job 20.22). In some ways, the film seems to confidently respond to the classic questions of biblical theodicy. It assures us that the wicked are ultimately slated for destruction and that Uncle Boniface has received his just desserts.

Having witnessed his uncle's assassination, Kingsley flees to his mother's home. Lying on her sofa, cradled in her arms, a traumatized Kingsley contemplates his uncertain future. The criminal enterprise is in shambles: Boniface is dead, the police have raided their headquarters, and several employees have been arrested. The risks of continuing down this road are painfully clear to Kingsley. Yet, a return to the straight and narrow would be a return to austerity, to the pressures and disappointments of poverty. For a moment, the viewer is uncertain of the path Kingsley will take. The film raises the question: is righteousness enough of a reward in and of itself?

In the final scene, we see Kingsley has established a new business. His mother beams with pride, pleased that her son is finally able to make an honest living. But all is not as it seems. Our first clue that Kingsley is up to his old tricks is his sudden change in clothing: up to this point he has only worn Western clothing, but now he dons traditional dress, bearing a striking resemblance to Boniface. His transformation into Uncle Boniface is complete; shaken, but ultimately undeterred by his uncle's violent end, Kingsley continues the family business, learning from his uncle's mistakes and refining his tactics. When God fails to deliver the rewards of the righteous life, Kingsley will seize them for himself.