

Isaiah 10:1–4 and the welfare of the poor in Nkanuland, Enugu state, Nigeria

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Over the centuries, history has shown that peasant members of society are drenched with various forms of marginalisation. These often come from the more privileged members of society and even the government. Studies have also shown that the religious sphere that ought to be the hope of the neglected poor has turned out to be like the political milieu in the secular world. Isaiah 10:1–4 spelt out punishment meted out for the violators of the rights of the peasant poor. The text indicates that the poor have been neglected in the past millennium. There have likely been no studies that took into cognisance the neglect of the poor from Isaiah 10:1–4 in the context of Nkanuland. Isaiah 10:1–4 examines the height at which the Jewish rulers exploit the poor at their various dispensations. However, such wicked acts by such leaders would not go unpunished. The poor are highly marginalised using different means by both religious and political leaders. The insufficient welfare provision for the poor has consequently led to ill health, death, vulnerability to danger, psychological stress, social alienation, poor education, poor diet and other related problems in Nigeria in general and Nkanuland in particular. The researcher, therefore, seeks to take a critical look at Isaiah 10:1–4 and applies its exegetical result(s) in Nkanu. It is argued that if the text is practically applied by religious and political leaders in Nkanuland, there would be improved welfare provision for the poor. Rhetoric and sociological approaches common to Old Testament exegesis are employed.

Contribution: The researcher posits that Isaiah 10:1–4 would be a feasible solution to curb the incessant marginalisation of the peasant poor in Igboland in general and Nkanuland in particular. This would enhance both human and other aspects of development in Nkanuland.

Keywords: welfare; poor; Isaiah 10:1-4; Exegesis; Nkanuland; Enugu State; Nigeria.

Introduction

Exploitation and marginalisation of the peasant members of the society have been a reality for ages and are heightened in contemporary Nigeria in general and Nkanuland in particular. In the 21st century, mistreating the impoverished has progressively become more widespread. Poor people are often overlooked because they are perceived as objects of servitude. The poor people's situation in Nigeria is greatly exacerbated by the various levels of government. This is what Uzo (2016) notes:

Corruption ensures that the wealth of the nation is not evenly distributed among its teeming population generating very high level of inequality to extent that the gap between individuals in terms of material wealth is one of the widest in the world. The people that have appropriated the wealth of the nation are in the minority while the poor are in the majority. The poverty situation in Nigeria has been made worse by the fact that the poor are completely excluded from the political process ensuring that they do not make any input in decisions that pertain to their lives. (p. 1)

The extent of oppression of the poor and needy in ancient Israel is implied by the Hebrew words נִזְנֶה, which are derived from the Hebrew root meaning 'to pervert, turn, spread out', and לָקַח, which is derived from the Hebrew word meaning 'to seize, tear away, plunder', which appear in Isaiah 10:1–4. They treated the lonely destitute as if they were not human. The predation of the impoverished is a common occurrence throughout the world. As confirmed above, this technique was widespread in ancient Israel. Additionally, it targets the impoverished in various parts of Africa and abroad, particularly in Nkanuland and Nigeria in general. The covenant between God, the sovereign, and His people, Israel, is inextricably linked to the care for widows, orphans and the impoverished, according to Kline (1963). This is evident in both the Sinai Covenant and its renewal prior to Israel's entry into the land of Canaan, especially in the Pentateuch. It has been noted that in modern Nigerian society, it is hard to attest that the political and religious

administrators have better provisions for the poor. Not even the lower extension, such as Nkanuland, has a well-feasible plan for the welfare of the poor.

Nonetheless, this study shows that the rights of persons guaranteed by the national constitution are frequently infringed against at the expense of the poor, and that their welfare in Nkanuland is not adequately defined.

This study used a sociological approach to biblical exegesis and rhetorical analysis as research tools. In an attempt to define rhetoric, Obiorah (2015:93) states that it is 'the art of effective or persuasive speaking or writing'. According to the Pontifical Biblical Commission (1993), it is the art of crafting arguments that are meant to persuade. In the book of Isaiah, Isaiah 10:1–4, the Judahites are criticised rhetorically for their economic exploitation and social inequalities. The structure, tone and persuasive technique of the piece can all be understood by doing a rhetorical analysis (Armerding 2002). When examining an Old Testament passage from a socio-cultural perspective, the text's *Sitz-im-Leben*, or life circumstances, are taken into consideration. The socio-cultural environment that gave rise to a specific text is studied by *Sitz-im-Leben*. As a rhetorical analysis is an appropriate exegetical approach for biblical poetry, it is used. Without a doubt, Isaiah 10:1–4's prophetic oracle is a poem. Additionally, a sociological method is used to track the prevailing social practice that gave rise to the text's prophetic warning.

Exegesis of Isaiah 10:1–4

Socio-cultural background of Isaiah 10:1–4

Sitz-im-Leben is comparable to the social-cultural background of a biblical passage. The German expression for life's circumstances is *Sitz-im-Leben*. It is important to remember that all of the biblical texts – including Isaiah 10:1–4 – are written in response to specific social issues. Isaiah's time was not entirely divorced from the Persian era. The Israelites were experiencing a boom in their economy. Both the wealthy and the impoverished made up Israel's society throughout the prophet Isaiah's time. Isaiah 10:1–4 implies that the Persians held the reins of power in Israel at that time. The impoverished included widows, orphans, the ill and the homeless. The wealthy included merchants, the kings and the kings' cabinets. Isaiah the son of Amoz lived and preached in Jerusalem from approximately 740 BC to 700 BC. According to Isaiah 1:1, his ministry took place throughout the reigns of four kings: Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz and Hezekiah (Lassiter 1993). Counselling the kings of Judah was one aspect of Isaiah's work. When the Near East was rocked by power disputes, he counselled the kings of Judah to maintain their neutrality. Israel and Judah were positioned between Egypt and the northern power. During this period, Assyria had the power. The rulers of Judah, particularly Hezekiah, made alliances with Egypt and other nations in 597 BCE in an attempt to rescue the kingdom from Assyrian rule, but Assyria was too powerful for this to succeed. Isaiah was sent by the Lord to the rulers of Judah to cease these relationships

and put their faith in God to deliver them. Judah's faults were criticised by Isaiah, particularly the idolatry, apostasy, injustice, immorality and oppression of the poor (Lassiter 1993:8). Strict warnings were issued against mistreating widows, orphans and the impoverished, as Reggy-Mamo (2006) claims that doing so would be a flagrant insult to God. According to Ndjerareou (2006), the Israelites' widows, orphans and poor people ought to be shielded from injustice and exploitation in any way. According to Nsiku (2006) in Ottuh (2013), Isaiah's analysis of the oppressors of the poor, who included widows, orphans and the needy in general, may have been inspired by instances in which the rich exploited their position of authority to seize land from the poor and by unfair judgements rendered by those who should have provided justice to the oppressed and impoverished in Isaiah's day. Ottuh (2013) asserts that despite the fact that individuals were putting in a lot of effort in their farming, there appeared to be difficulty on the part of the impoverished in Israeli society. Mass exploitation of the barren made 'Rabid merchants cheated the poor farmers', according to Matthews (2005:523). There is an immediate and significant need to improve the situation of the peasant poor at that time.

Close reading of Isaiah 10:1–4

Cruel decrees of oppressive rulers verse 1

The Hebrew term אָה, which means 'ah', refers to how dangerous the LORD's judgement would be on the advice of the wicked who band together to impose unpleasant regulations like robbing the poor and the destitute of their meagre goods. It is similar to the interjection 'woe!', which conveys sorrow and despair, and it is used repeatedly in other Isaiahic writings like 3:9,11; 6:5; 24:16 and eight times in Jeremiah, according to Utley (2010). It also signifies anguish and pain or a summons. According to Geneva (2018), verse 1 implies that the first people to face punishment would be the nefarious magistrates who were the main source of trouble. Isaiah 10:1 opens with a lament over the oppression of the poor and needy by the leaders of Judah (Hoezee 2006). The expression 'woe to those who join house to house' alludes to the tendency of affluent people acquiring homes and land, driving the impoverished to dwell in destitution and filth. Barner (1834) suggests that the prophet in this instance is undoubtedly referring to the Judean kings and judges. 'Weary labour, trouble, oppression, injustice' is what the Hebrew word אָה appropriately means. In this instance, it is clearly used to allude to the custom of judges who imposed harsh and unfair penalties and ordered their recording. These decrees are detrimental to their subjects, particularly the impoverished peasants. The two Hebrew words אָה and אָה translated 'trouble, wicked or sorrow' and 'trouble, toil or labour', respectively, indicate that the statutes and ordinances were edicts that caused their subjects to suffer and become irritated. The word's use in the text suggests 'oppression inflicted by the stronger on the weaker, when they abuse their authority and power', according to Beddome (n.d.:para. 2). In his explanation of the passage, Bart (n.d.) identifies that Isaiah, speaking to Judah again,

foretells the day when God, the righteous Judge, would visit 'a hypocritical nation', whose nobles and magistrates make and carry out wicked laws.

The parallelism between v. 1a and b, according to Utlej (2010), connects judges – who frequently record unfair rulings – and civil leaders – those who pass terrible laws. Matthew (1991) asserts that when evil laws and decrees are made, the superior authorities who make them are not too high to be subject to divine oversight, and the lower-ranking officials who draft and record them suffer the consequences. Beddome (n.d.) asserts that some people believe that two classes are being discussed here and makes a distinction between the Hebrew roots *קקה*, which means 'those who decree', and *בנה*, which means 'those who write'. However, he goes on to argue that Isaiah targets all classes of governors and magistrates, without exception, because they oppressed the populace by capricious and unfair decisions, to the point that they were on the verge of thievery.

Marginalisation of the needy and the poor verse 2a

The Hebrew phrase *לגזל*, which is in qal infinitive meaning 'to tear away', 'to plunder' and/or 'to rob' is used in the text to intensify the deteriorating condition of the poor and needy. It describes the evil intention of the ruling class. Jameison (2018:para. 2) authenticates that 'the effect of their conduct is to pervert the cause of the needy'. According to Ottuh (2013:185), 'both our time and Isaiah's time had stratified societies'. The wealthy, the poor and the monarchs are all included in this hierarchy. The rich controlled the lives of the impoverished.

The Hebrew word *עניים* translated as 'needy' in the English version implies in its original sense 'low rank people', people who are financially and materially weak. It equally means a category of people who are politically, legally and socially powerless to defend their rights. Barner (1834) provides additional support by pointing out that the Hebrew word *עניים* translated needy are people of low status and circumstances who lack strong allies and supporters who would shield them from judgement and guarantee they receive justice. According to Strong, Kohlenberger III and Swanson (2001), the Hebrew word *עניים* does not only relate to the impoverished (poor), it also refers to the downtrodden, unfortunate class of people who are lowly in position and lack resources. In addition, Merklein (1991) posits that the word also has the religious sense of 'pious' and 'humble' (Ps 18:22).

According to Barner (1834), the Hebrew root *לגזל* is frequently used to refer to oppression and thievery. It is also applicable to the removal of war booty. This demonstrates how the impoverished and needy were compelled to give up their rights at the behest of the ruling dictators because of their inability to support themselves financially and socially. In support of this interpretation, Gill (2018) points out that denying impoverished people their rights is equivalent to robbing, plundering and forcibly taking what is rightfully theirs.

Taking advantage of widows and orphans verse 2

The Hebrew term *אלמנות* is a common feminine plural absolute noun. It means widows. Because of the loss of husbands who would look out for their well-being and general protection, these women are desolate and peasants. Being in the common feminine plural absolute suggests that it affects all women, regardless of their culture, age or generation, who are associated with this status and condition. *יתומים* is another Hebrew term that appears in the text. It is the masculine plural of a noun. This Hebrew word is translated as 'orphan'. It comes from the Hebrew root *תהי*, which means to be alone. By implication, the Hebrew word *יתומים* originally means a lonely son. Being in the common masculine plural absolute implies that it touches all male children whose fathers are deceased, irrespective of culture, age and generation. However, in modern times, the term 'orphan' has come to refer to any child, male or female, whose mother or father has passed away, particularly if the child is younger than 18 years. Both widows' and orphans' social standing suggests that they were defenceless and susceptible to mistreatment, hardship and exploitation. According to Ottuh (2013), this indicates that an orphan is a member of the group of people who make up the impoverished in Isaiah's community. The bureaucracy of the evil overlords caused these orphans and widows to suffer. The impoverished, widows and orphans received no redress as a result of the unjust judge's ruling, according to Ellicott (2016), which was not advantageous for the orphans and their equivalents. These were the classes that suffered the most from the distortion of justice, according to Orr (2010) (cf. Is 1:17, 23). God had commanded them in the law for the careful care of his people because they were precisely the classes for which he felt the greatest sympathy. 'Rulers rob them of the benefits of justice that are their rights', notes Lange (2016:para. 6). Taking possession of widows' and orphans' property is the additional goal of this negative process. According to Matthew (2018), because they lack allies to represent them, arbitrary rulers take advantage of widows' homes and estates through bureaucratic authority, depriving the orphans of what little is left for them. Pooles (2016) believes that the term 'of my people' refers to Israelites who identify as God's people and whom the LORD did make a covenant with; as a result, this is hurtful to both the LORD and the Israelites. This exaggerates that exploitation of the orphans means total negligence of the LORD who has given power and wealth to the echelon who possess them.

Impending judgement and warning against social prejudice verses 3–4

No heinous deed will go unpunished by natural law. This was highlighted by the prophet Isaiah in his prophecies. He cautioned the ruling class of ancient Israel that no votive offering could satisfy the anger of God. According to Barner (1834), the prophet then goes on to condemn the retribution or judgement that would result from the offences mentioned in the earlier passages. The foreign force's invasion of the country served as such punishment. According to Ottuh (2013), the language makes it clear that God defends the downtrodden. God may be viewed as someone who defends

the underprivileged. He stands up for those who are oppressed and affirms that God is a just and equitable God who does not wish to deny the poor their rights.

The interrogation in Hebrew וַיִּמְדֵּן יְהוָה וְלִשְׁוֹאָה רַחֲקָמָה 'what will you do on the day of punishment, in the calamity that will come from far away?' confirms the inevitable punishment that befalls the evil rulers and judges who mistreat the poor. The Hebrew words פְּקֻדָּה meaning 'punishment' and שְׁוֹאָה meaning 'ravage, ruin or devastation' indicate the irresistible anger of the LORD against them for abusing the power and wealth, which He unleashed on them. Butler (1975), in an attempt to further clarify the text, asks, 'Where will they go for help when the day of Divine retribution comes? Who is going to keep them safe when the Holy God comes to judge them? Can their idol-gods be relied upon? Will they be delivered by their international allies? Can their wealth buy them a way out of God's wrath? Despite all of these accomplishments, what will happen to Israel's glory when God's vengeance strikes? The response is that it will fail them. The unjust judges and rulers will be overthrown, Israel will be seized and all the other people will perish.

The Hebrew word כְּדָבָר translated as 'glory' in some English translations is not used to mean splendour. Its appropriate usage in the text is abundance, that is, abundant wealth. According to Bart (n.d.):

[U]nder whose protection will they leave their wealth, their dignities, their glory, which they have been heaping up for themselves? The only prospects before them are captivity or death (sick). (para. 1)

As a result, they will never be able to avoid the penalty that has been imposed on them.

They would be imprisoned and crushed alongside other dead as a result of this uncompromising punishment. According to Essex (n.d.), the day of visitation varies depending on the situation; therefore, God is said to 'visit' men when He appears to them or makes Himself known, either in a way of mercy or judgement. The day of visitation should be interpreted in the opposite way within the context of this study material; it signifies a day of judgement. There are a number of times when God visits people. The days of trouble, affliction, death and judgement are examples of occasions like these. According to Kelly (2016), Isaiah's prophecy in verses 3–4 can be read as follows: the most exalted will be the most debased, and those who least trust God with their wealth and power will suffer the most, oppressing the poor and destitute. Isaiah warns the leaders that their acts will ultimately bring about their own demise according to Hoeeze (2007). To emphasise the gravity of the repercussions, the line 'all the hills will be ploughed up' (Is 10:3) is repeated. As the chapter comes to a close, Isaiah warns the leaders that their misdeeds will be punished. It is implied that their punishment will be harsh and relentless by the statement 'therefore their deeds will be like a strong and burning wind' (Is 10:4).

According to Pooles (2016), their attempts to seek refuge and assistance from others are in vain because, in the absence of the LORD, they will bow down despite all of their supporters because they are without Him and His help, which they have lost and will not seek to regain.

Application of the Exegesis in Nkanuland

It is not incongruous to infer that the leadership of Nkanu does not have communal welfare for peasants and desolate poor in recent times. This suggests that it is difficult to locate any community-level organised welfare programme for the underprivileged in Nkanuland. It is important to note, nevertheless, that during the time of ancient Nkanuland, it was common for farmers in communities like Ugwuaji, among others, to not harvest all of the mature plants on their farms during harvest time, including potatoes, yams, cocoyam and so forth. Those mature plants are set aside for the community's peasant members. In order to find food, they were free to enter such farm or farms. Over time, these charitable deeds became commonplace (Ugwuewo 2019). This positive development is unfortunately halted by adversity, hunger and greed. Most households nowadays hardly have enough money for their everyday expenses, let alone saving for the underprivileged. Communities in Nigeria are frequently affected by this hunger crisis. People who are wealthy are sometimes too self-centred to share.

Apart from this long-standing custom, which is no longer followed, there is no other effort to find a different way to prioritise helping the impoverished in modern-day Nkanuland. According to Ugwuwo (2019), this reveals that all Nkanu villages require adaptation in order to provide children of departed parents with appropriate care.

Seeing how expropriation of family property has left some needy people in a condition of extreme poverty and exposed them to social vices such as robbery and theft, as well as other psychological issues, such attempts to alleviate the suffering of the poor are insufficient. In order to prevent divine anger, Isaiah 10:1–4 expects community leaders to seek restitution for orphans. In the context of the passage, traditional leaders, including the *Ndi Igwe* and *Ndi Onowu*, town union presidents, village chairmen and Nkanuland political representatives at the federal level, are under tremendous pressure to exercise their authority wisely in order to be spared from the LORD's impending mess. It is the responsibility of all traditional and communal leaders in Nkanuland to care for the *dällim* and *äni* (the lonely needy and suffering poor), much as it is the royal duty in Israel. The exploitation of a peasant poor person by whatever means must be punished by the royal palace, town union and village assembly's legal law, which must be rigorously adhered to in order to properly recognise the advancement of the poor's human rights and privileges as members of human society. A policy that discourages preying on the destitute and promotes the protection of a minor orphan's ancestral rights and heritage until they reach adulthood should be implemented at all costs (Ugwuewo 2019).

The human rights of parentless children and their equivalents must be taken into account by the legislators, decision-makers and secretaries at both the local and national levels of government and village assemblies. The promotion and maintenance of the welfare of orphaned children and other members of that class, as well as the defence of all facets of their human rights, must be strongly supported by such legislation. It is important to note that the community or village's law and decision-making are made by the executive members of the assembly, who include the chairman, secretary-general, treasurer, financial secretary, chairman of the land committee, secretary and so forth. Hence, as the law and decision-makers of the time of Isaiah were at the helm of affairs, the executive members of the contemporary community or village assembly of Nkanu communities had the upper hand in the affairs of the people. The leaders of ancient Israel at the time of Isaiah seized the golden opportunity to deprive the poor of their inheritance and other human rights through the enactment of obnoxious laws. However, these Nkanu executive leaders are enjoined to avoid such practices to retain a society free of chaos both from outside and within. Prophet Isaiah threatened those oppressive leaders of his time with foreign invasion of their nation and mass loss of their wealth. For a better Nkanuland, the leaders of Nkanu must put an end to such evil practices, because they are undoubtedly a symptom of a doomed country.

In order to provide adequate aid to the impoverished in their communities, the four main local governments – Enugu South, Enugu East, Nkanu East and Nkanu West – are left to manage the throngs of people in the various communities. Even if there is not much evidence, Nkanuland's local governments have made an effort to look out for the well-being of orphans. For example, the Enugu South Local Government Area of Enugu State's Department of Social Welfare established an annual mandate to visit the less fortunate in their time of need with the sole purpose of easing their poverty by providing a token amount of material and financial support based on their ability. This annual event takes place every December (Department of Welfare, Enugu South 2023).

A clause that forbids forced marriage, child trafficking, denial of Western education and physical and social abuse must be included in each local government's by-law. The goal of the leaders of each of these local governments should be to implement sound policies that support poor people's human rights. In Nkanuland, the administrative leaders are obligated by divine decree to compel compliance by imposing sanctions on individuals who may refuse to follow such directives.

For children without parents, the Nkanuland Local Government Areas have the authority to provide free basic education. Orphans may have a fantastic opportunity to learn fundamental skills that they can use to further their education later in life. With this basis, people may also combat the fear brought on by extreme illiteracy and express themselves in the official language of the modern day. For the sake of all

Nkanuland's impoverished, the leaders of the local governments ought to enact a robust policy that would encourage basic education and forbid any kind of denial of it. This will allow the text to be digested as it should, release the leaders from the LORD's devastating and irresistible retribution, and maintain a mutually beneficial and sustainable community in Nkanuland.

The text's main focus is on the ruling class's misuse of riches and power, which was allowed by God himself. It also highlights their disregard for God's authority and responsibilities. Serious retribution results from these three sins: abusing wealth and power, neglecting one's own responsibilities and disobeying God's authority. They will not be saved by their international and local connections. Similarly, their vast wealth and faith in other gods can never save them because God would always remove their protection. In Nkanuland, those in positions of authority who create and implement rules for the lower classes must show the impoverished and needy that they are human. Otherwise, they will not receive human consideration and mercy when they are held accountable for their actions. The rich will not be able to save the poor from the looming catastrophe, even while these Israeli leaders utilise their influence to keep the rich and the poor apart and favour the wealthy at the expense of the poor. Regardless of a person's rank, the prophet's teaching focussed on maintaining a society of fairness and harmony for human progress. Nkanu leaders at all levels ought to be concerned about this in order to ensure that Nkanuland maintains a thriving society where equity is the guiding principle.

Recommendations

Recommendations are listed as follows:

- Contemporary Nkanu people especially political and religious leaders should absorb Isaiah 10:1–4 as a warning for them and endeavour to adjust in their living and demonstration of power to the favour as regards the poor.
- Individuals from Nkanuland should continue to care for the needy and revisit ways to improve their support.
- The chairmen of the four main Local Governments in Nkanuland should ensure full implementation of the *Child Rights Act* to give orphans full protection.
- They should work assiduously to provide an office where a complaint can be made when the right of a peasant poor is infringed upon. The office is expected to be independent of manoeuvring and devoid of bribery and corruption.
- The poor should give a positive response to the benevolence given to them by the concerned individuals. They can do that by avoiding any form of social vice such as stealing, lying and cheating among others.
- The poor and needy should utilise the opportunity given to them by the Local Government council by being regular at schools and working hard to be outstanding in their performance. This will encourage the council to remain in the good work.

Conclusion

The welfare of the poor and needy is one of the predominant themes in the Old Testament; Isaiah 10:1–4 is one of the texts that capture it. The text shows that it is in the divine plan that the poor must be set free from any form of human subjugation or affliction. It makes clear that prophets of ancient abhor victimisation of the needy; therefore, everyone especially those blessed with power and authority of leadership is warned and given a divine imperative to improve the well-being of the less privileged members of the society.

Nkanu people, especially at the leadership level, have major roles to play in amelioration of the pathetic condition of the poor in their land. Those concerned citizens are encouraged to remain in the good work. Nkanu society will be made better and rapidly improve if the care for the poor is taken seriously.

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