

Poverty and the Oppression of the Poor in Niger Delta (Isaiah 10:1-4): A Theological Approach

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Abstract

Poverty with its concomitant effects of alienation, marginalization and dependency posed serious challenge to the church and society in Niger Delta. Though poverty is not peculiar to Niger Delta of Nigeria alone, the environmental and economic challenges the Niger Delta people contend with on a daily basis is left much to be desired. Both the Old and New Testaments condemned oppression and injustice especially that of the poor, orphans and needy in the society. The aim of this study therefore is to arouse the consciousness of political leaders and the Church in Nigeria of the urgent need to address the issue of poverty in the Niger Delta of Nigeria. To achieve this, the liberation theology paradigm was adopted as the methodology for this study and the passage Isaiah 10:1-4 under study was used to anchor a reconstruction of an economic liberation theology for Niger Delta. Moreover, the findings in this study showed that the problem of poverty in the Niger Delta is caused by Unemployment, Corruption, Lack of Modern Infrastructural and Economic Facilities. It was also seen from Isaiah 10:1-4 that the oppression of the poor is an offense to God. This study was concluded on the presupposition that poverty alleviation in the Niger Delta is possible if leaders will be just and fair to the poor and keep the interest of the poor and needy at heart.

1. Introduction

Poverty in the midst of wealth in Niger Delta is a very provoking factor for a struggle for economic liberation. The poverty situation in Niger Delta is occasioned by the neglect of the area by the Federal Government of Nigeria and the multinationals operating in the area despite the huge oil production in the area. Poverty has manifested virtually in the socio-economic lives of the people in the sense that they lack social amenities, employment, adequate educational facilities and adequate development.

Moreover, the activities of oil production in the area have caused environmental degradation and consequently, depletion of soil nutrients that would have enhanced agricultural activities. Environmental pollution is also enhancing poverty in the area in the sense that polluted natural waters have destroyed aquatic lives thereby making fishermen and women who depended on it for livelihood unemployed. This pollution also poses a very serious health hazard to the people of the Niger Delta especially among the immediate communities of operations. The aim of this study therefore, is to call on the government and the multinational oil companies operating in the Niger Delta area to create and sustain employment opportunities and business enabling environment.

2. Definitions of Operational Terms

2.1. Poverty

The word poverty can be defined from different angles. To Ukpong (1995:31), poverty is a condition whereby the victim is alienated from access to resources that would enable him/her live a fully human life in the society. Ukpong further explains that the resources in which the poor are being deprived of may be physical, social, material, economic (mine), spiritual or cultural and are often expressed in terms of the basic necessities of life. Moreover, Ukpong defined a poor person as a victim of alienation, one who lacks access to such resources and who thereby lives below the subsistence level. In a nut shell, while poverty can be seen as a situation, the poor can be seen as a person or people who are victims in the situation.

In the same vein, Nwigwe (2006:225) identifies the poor to be those who are indigent poor and economically deprived people, those suffering from injustice and oppression, the weak and the helpless in the society. From a biblico-theological point of view, Broomall (1960 and 2004:409), says that the chief Old Testament words expressing poverty are *ebyon*, *dal*, *ani*, and *rus* and the New Testament equivalent include: *penes*, *endees* and especially *ptochois*. Some of these biblico-theological understanding of the term poverty as will be seen later in the exegesis of this work, refer to a situation of the victim of poverty who have been oppressively deprived of resources that could help the poor.

2.2. Niger Delta

According to Sagay (2005), the Niger Delta Communities consist of Bayelsa, Rivers and Akwa Ibom. Moreover, he says that oil is also produced in the neighbouring States of Ondo, Edo, Abia, Imo and Cross River States. There seems to be a lot of controversies regarding what constitutes the Niger Delta region of Nigeria. According to Umejiesi (2006), to some, the Niger Delta region consists of the nine oil producing States under the umbrella of Niger Delta Development Commission (NDDC). These States are Abia, Akwa Ibom, Bayelsa, Cross River, Delta, Edo, Imo, Ondo and Rivers. Of all these States, Abia and Imo are in the South-East geo-political zone while Ondo is in the South-West and the remaining six States are in the South-South geopolitical zone. Perhaps this setting has led some people to devise a definition of the Niger Delta which is exclusive of some States of the NDDC and inclusive of only four of the nine oil-producing States. Umejiesi (2006) says that quite recently a new concept has come up in the definition of the Niger Delta region and this is the Coastal States and the Coastal States exclude Abia and Imo States but inclusive of the other seven States of the NDDC.

Politics apart from the Niger Delta region requires attention because of its peculiar terrain and its strategic importance to the economic life of Nigeria. The Niger Delta is the main oil and gas producing area of Nigeria. It has been described as one of the largest wetlands in the world-the largest in Africa and third largest in the world. It covers an area of about 70,000 square kilometers. It stretches geographically from Ondo in the West to Obon Massif flank in the East and the Benin flank towards the Northern part of Nigeria. The Niger Delta is the Southern or Delta portion of the River Niger. There we have the swamps of the Niger River Delta, which forms an active part of the Niger River systems, whose two mouths are Rivers Forcados and the Nun. But the Rivers Benin, Brass (Nembe), Bonny, the Cross River and a number of separate streams are linked to and flow into these two mouths by a labyrinth of Creeks and Lagoons (Dime,2003). The present extent of the Niger Delta forming an active part of the Niger River system lies between the Forcados River on the West and the Brass River to the east. The point at which the Niger water gets distributed has been identified as the Nun-Forcados bifurcation near the villages of Onya and Samabiri. The term Niger Delta is currently used to describe the areas within where crude oil is located and where the exploitation is going on in Nigeria (Akpan,2008). It is plausible to say that the Niger Delta of Nigeria include: Abia, Akwa Ibom, Bayelsa,Cross Rivers,Delta,Edo,Imo, Rivers and Ondo States.

3. The Situation of the Poor and Poverty in the Niger Delta of Nigeria

Poverty does exist in Niger Delta. It has manifested itself in malnutrition, low standard of living and inability to afford basic things of life. Some times poverty is blamed on the laziness of the poor but this is proved false in the sense that the poorest people in the Niger Delta are those that work hardest toiling day and night under very inclement weather and using poor instruments. Bribery, greed and corruption, which seemed to be the bane of all bad leadership in Nigeria, are among the worst factors that entrench poverty in the region of Niger Delta. Unemployed job seekers pay a bribe when applying for a job that they may eventually not get. Prices of government contracts are inflated, and even some contracts that have never been executed are signed as executed and the money passed into private pockets. Money is paid to decision makers to influence economic and political decisions in favour of the rich against the interest of the poor. Government funds are embezzled by public office holders with impunity. In addition, the poor state of industrialization against high population increase is another cause of massive unemployment in the Niger Delta of Nigeria. There is also high illiteracy rate leading to the exclusion of a large segment of the population from the nation's literary culture through which political and economic decisions that affects the life of the poor whom they are determined to keep poor in order to stay rich. Hence, awarding scholarship to indigenes of oil producing communities seemed far from the picture.

Though some oil companies in Niger Delta give scholarships, majority of the indigenes are marginalized with unrealistic standards knowing well that some of these people in the Niger Delta area have been in the creeks without schools for years. The ecological issue is another factor which, apart from being devastating in itself contributes to the extension of poverty. Agricultural lands are polluted in the Niger Delta oil producing communities. Forests are over-exploited resulting in unfavourable climatic changes in the environment. Oil exploration activities have destroyed the soil and water in their immediate environment of operations and these have brought about poor harvest, hunger and starvation and depletion of animal species on which human beings depend for food. In addition, pollution due to oil spillage and gas flaring are also causing environmental and psychological trauma to the people of the Niger Delta region.

In a nutshell, poverty in Niger Delta is as a result of unjust and oppressive economic relations between the rich Federal Government and Niger Delta and between the rich multi-nationals and the poor indigenes in their area of operations. The relationship is unjust because it involves taking from the poor and giving to the rich. It is oppressive because it ensures that the poor stay poorer, and the rich stay rich and even richer. All these arouse a call for a struggle or agitation for a change of the status quo. Another issue that stairs at the face of Niger Deltans is this assumption by the average Nigerian that every man in the Niger Delta region especially the indigenes work in an oil company and as such prices of commodities in the market and house rents are relatively inflated. While in other parts of Nigeria like the North and the West enjoy relatively low cost of living the reverse is the case in Niger Delta region. This is nothing but domestic captivity. The low income earners and the unemployed are invariably faced with hardship. No wonder some of them recline to robbery, vandalization of oil installations and political thurgry. The most alarming and sarcastic part of the impoverishment is the deliberate and pretentious civil service salary structure that is called a take-home pay which in the real sense cannot take care of a primary school child in a week. It must be noted with utmost sincerity that the Niger Delta region civil service needs a salary structure that can reflect the oil company pay as well so as to meet up with the necessities of life because the oil workers attends the same market with the civil servants, unemployed and the self employed.

Most of the Niger Delta people live in rural areas. Most of them manage their existence by subsistence farming, fishing, petty trading and handcraft. Largely these people lack the basic necessities of life like good drinking water, world class medical facilities, educational facilities, good food, clothing and housing. Where some of these facilities exist, the people lack the funds to avail themselves of them. Electricity is generally counted a luxury in many rural areas in Niger Delta. Industrialization has slowed down and many industries have either closed down or are operating below installed capacity. Job opportunities have therefore thinned out. The situation has brought untold hardship to urban dwellers producing different categories of the urban poor.

These include the school drop-outs who migrate to the town in search of something to do to earn a living. They turn out to be odd-job men such as the truck pushers, the load carriers, the cutters of grass and sweepers of floors, etc. They depend for their livelihood on the chance of getting some odd jobs each day. But hardly are they able to satisfy their basic needs with what they earn, neither are they able to make savings against any emergencies like medical expenses. If they get a place to squat with a friend or relative in one of the slums, they count themselves lucky. They are always unsure of the next meal. The unlucky ones sleep in uncompleted or dilapidated and abandoned buildings, or under the cities' fly-over. One meal a day is a blessing, and to go without food for days is normal. Formally, only secondary school leavers made up this group but in recent years, in Nigeria for example, university graduates have joined them. The lucky ones may get jobs after two or three years of search. The unlucky ones may have to wait for up to five years or in the alternative take to non viable self-employment. Although, some people have benefited from the oil companies like the Federal Government vast majority of the people in Niger Delta still live in abject poverty.

Another group of the poor comprise those who have lost their jobs for one reason or another. Invariably they have dependants to look after. They live in misery unsure of the next meal for themselves and their dependants. Even those who have jobs but belong to the low income group also live in misery as their salaries are not enough to meet their basic need in the face of rising inflation and high cost of living. Also, the middle class people in Niger Delta have today been highly marginalized and can hardly adequately feed themselves and their dependants with their salaries owing to high inflation. The poor in today's Niger Delta are not only materially deprived but are worse still because they are psychologically alienated and socially marginalized. In the traditional society though there were poor people, they did not experience the psychological trauma that today's poor have to contend with.

This was because of the narrowness of the gap between the haves and the have-nots, and the integrative and communal spirit of the society then which provided for the integration of the poor into the society. Today, Niger Delta is experiencing poverty in the midst of great wealth emanating from crude oil production in Nigeria due to alienation and oppression.

4. Possible Causes of Poverty in the Niger Delta of Nigeria

4.1. Unemployment

This has a tripartite facet etymology in the Niger Delta area. Unemployment in the Niger Delta is caused by environmental degradations which has polluted farm lands, rivers and even the air the people are breathing in; deprivation of the people from employment and restiveness in the area. Environmental degradation has contributed adversely to unemployment in the area in the sense that those who are self employed in farming, fishing and lumbering have been faced to be unemployed because they have no more fertile land to farm, no more fish to catch and no more woods to fetch for building and carpentry due to the depletion of farm lands, destruction of aquatic lives and forestry.

Deprivation of some indigenes from employment in the multinationals operating in the region is also another of unemployment. Although some indigenes of Niger Delta are employed by the multinationals operating in the region, it is very insignificant when compared to none indigenes. It might not be possible for the oil companies to employ all the indigene of the region but the employment of indigenes should be made a priority. Restiveness is another factor causing unemployment in the Niger Delta Region. Although youth restiveness in the area was due to frustration resulting from long neglect of the people, its negative effects cannot be over emphasized. Youth restiveness in the area has gradually metamorphosed into insecurity and community nuisance and as such, some companies and big business owners have relocated their companies and businesses to more secured communities. Their restiveness have driven away some companies and businesses that would have employed them.

4.2. Corruption

This has also contributed to poverty in the Niger Delta area. Some political and traditional leaders who supposed to have harnessed the resources of the community for sustainable development to create job opportunities are being bedeviled by corruption. Funds meant for community developments are sometimes being embezzled by some of our leaders thereby truncating progress and peace. Employment opportunities meant for indigenes are sometimes being sold by community leaders to strangers thereby living our people unemployed. The government of the day cooks up policies that will enhance the power of the multinationals, the rich, and the Federal Government in the exploitation of the impoverished people of the Niger Delta. Although, the government has proposed a Local Content and Petroleum Industry Bills, it seems to be only on papers because the poor man on the Niger Delta street is yet to feel the positive economic impact of such bills. Employment in most cases is not totally based on qualification and priority for indigenes but based on the powers that dominates and godfatherism.

4.3. Lack of Modern Infrastructural and Economic Facilities

Infrastructural and economic facilities such as electricity, good roads networks, modern markets, accessibility of business facilities and availability of strong security can encourage investors to establish businesses. For example, regular power supply can go a long way to create and sustain small business like salon, mills, etc. When an enabling environment is created, investors will be attracted from both within and outside. Poverty keeps confronting the people of the Niger Delta because the government of the day and the multinationals has refused to create the enabling environment for employment for the people.

5. Exegesis of Isaiah 10:1-4

The word exegesis can mean explanation, but as a technical term it means "to draw the meaning out of" a given text. Exegesis may be contrasted with eisegesis, which means to read one's own interpretation into a given text. In general, exegesis presumes an attempt to view the text objectively, while eisegesis implies more subjectivity.

Traditional exegesis requires the following: analysis of significant words in the text in regard to translation; examination of the general historical and cultural context, confirmation of the limits of the passage, and lastly, examination of the context within the text (Rick 2008:1). In this case, the socio-economic/political context and the analysis of Isaiah 10:1-4 shall be explored.

5.1. Socio-Economic and Political Context of Isaiah 10:1-4

Isaiah 9:8-10:4 forms the pericopy within which Isaiah 10:1-4 falls. The pericope features God's warning to Israel's unrepentant attitudes and their captors towards their cruel attitude especially that of exploitations of the poor and the weak. This warning against the exploitation of the poor and the less privileged in the society of God's people has a parallel reading in Leviticus 19:15. Isaiah wrote during the stormy period making the expansion of the Assyrian empire and the decline of Israel. Under King Tiglath-Pileser III (745-727 B.C.) the Assyrians swept westward into Aram (Syria) and Canaan. About 733 B.C the kings of Aram and Israel tried to pressure Ahaz king of Judah into joining a coalition against Assyria. Ahaz chose instead to ask Tiglath-Pileser for help, a decision condemned by Isaiah (Wolf and Stek 1995:1008). Assyria did assist Judah and conquered the northern kingdom in 722-721 B.C. This made Judah even more vulnerable, and king Sennacherib of Assyria to threaten Jerusalem itself-36:1 (Wolf and Stek 1995:1008). The godly King Hezekiah prayed earnestly, and Isaiah predicted that God would force the Assyrians to withdraw from the city (37:6-7).

This period belonged to the time of the decline of Israel's nation, the exilic and the return to their homeland. It was a time where morality was relegated to the background (Motyer, 1985:376). Due to the strategic importance of the land of Israel Politically, economically, and geographically, the land was caught up for many centuries in the superpowers! Struggles for control (Kafangi, 2001:4). Kafang noted further that the land of Israel was strategically important as a bridgehead, and its conquest was a prerequisite for any advantageous attack by one power upon another. Peoples of different nationalities infiltrated the Northern regions of Israel and the relationship between Israel and its Northern neighbours was that of constant struggles and hostilities – 1 Kings 20:22, 2 Kings 6:8 – 33; 36 (Kafang 2001: 5). As a result, the continuous campaigns of subjugation and plunder sapped Israel's vitality and natural resources.

The Babylonians captivated the Israelites, destroyed the Temple in Jerusalem and carted away valuables in 586 B. C. but when Cyprus conquered Babylon and established the Persian Empire in 539 B. C. When the Persians authority captured Babylon, the Jews were released from captivity and were given the freedom to worship their God and move on with their economic activities in their land (Bean 1991: 1097; Frye, 1970:262). By this understanding Isaiah can be seen as a pre-exilic prophet who announced the need for the people of Israel to repent or face the judgment of God. When the Israelites sinned against God by committing adulatory or apostasy, God uses a wicked nation to punish them. This is probably how God allowed the Babylonian and the Assyrians to take the Israelites into captivity (Lassiter, 1998:4).

During the Persian period, economic activities were booming among the Israelites. The society of Israel at the time Isaiah wrote was made up of the poor and the rich. The poor constituted the widows, the orphans, the sick people and the destitute. The rich constituted the kings, the kings cabinets and the merchants. Isaiah the son of Amoz lived and preached in Jerusalem from about 740 to about 700 BC and His Ministry Spanned the reigns of four Kings: Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz and Hezekiah 1:1 (Lassiter, 1993:8). Part of Isaiah's Ministry was to be a counselor to Judah's kings. He advised Judah's kings to remain neutral in the power struggles that were shaking the Near East but Israel and Judah were sandwiched between Egypt and whatever power that ruled in the north. At this time, the power was Assyria. In an effort to free Judah from Assyrian domination, the nation's kings, especially Hezekiah formed alliances with Egypt and other groups in 597 B.C. but it did not work because Assyria was too strong. The Lord told Judah's kings through Isaiah to stop making these alliances and totally trust in God to save them. Isaiah attacked Judah's sins especially idol worship, apostasy, injustice, immorality and oppression of the poor (Lassiter, 1993:8). Reggy –Mamo (2006:817) says that there were strict warnings against abusing the orphans and the widows- the poor and oppressing them amount to gross disrespect to God. Ndjerareou (2006:116) explains that widows, the orphans and the needy among the Israelites must be protected against any form of exploitations or oppression. Moreover, the needy must not be allowed to pay interest on loans.

What could have prompted Isaiah's write-up on the oppressors of the poor which constituted the widows, orphans and the needy in general was a situation in which the rich use their power to claim land from the poor and unjust judgment carried out by those who ought to have granted justice to the poor and oppressed of Isaiah's time (Nsiku, 2006:813). Numbers 7:7 -11 and 1 Kings 21:1-3 attest that parcels of land in Israel were apportioned according to family and individual rights of ownership, therefore, any attempt to acquire another person's piece of land is considered a trespass and inordinate ambition, hence the woe on such people (Anie, 1999:36). There seemed to be hardship on the part of the poor in Israel's society even though the people were working hard in farming. Matthews (2005:523) opined that rapacious Merchants cheated the poor farmers.

Broomall (2004:409) says that in the Old Testament the following facts are set forth as regarding the poor:

- i. many provisions are prescribed in the Mosaic legislation to safeguard the poor. A slave must be released in the seventh year (Ex. 21:2ff). A garment taken in pledge must be returned at sunset (Ex. 22:26f). Wages must be paid daily (Lev. 19:13). Essential implements must not be impounded (Deut. 24:6, 12f., 17). Debts must be released every seven years (Deut. 15:1f.) Provision was made for the food of the poor (Deut. 24:19-22).
- ii. the equality of the rich and poor is clearly stated (Prov. 22:2).
- iii. a man's poverty must not be allowed to pervert justice (Ex. 23:3, 6).
- iv. poverty in itself is not a virtue. Many proverbs specify the evil causes of poverty (Prov. 6:10f., 10:4; 12:24; 13:4; 18: 14:23; 20:13; 21:17; 23;21;28:19).
- v. the prophets cry vehemently against the mistreatment of the poor (Isaiah 3:13-15; 10:1f., Ezek. 18:12; 22:29; Amos 8:4).
- vi. the afflicted and the poor are often represented as the godly and pious (Ps. 35:10., 37:14; 40:17; 68:10; 86:1; Isa. 29:19; 41:17; 49:13; 51:21; 54:11).

All of these formed the background of Isaiah's socio-economic and political society. His Jewish community which may constitute Judaizers or Jewish Christians may have read their situation in resonance with their contemporary society. This background also tells us in Nigeria that the situation of the poor in both Isaiah's and his reader's time were not different from ours.

5.2. Analysis of Isaiah 10:1-4 in the Context of Poverty in Niger Delta

The analysis of Isaiah 10:1-4 shall be done here thematically. A short passage like this could be analyzed phrase by phrase but a compacted work of this nature may not give room for that. To be more focused, in regard to the subject matter, the following themes are considered from the text:

- i. אָוֶן (*aven* –verse 1a): This means trouble, wickedness, sorrow, idolatry, iniquity, unrighteous, evil, false, unjust, etc. Unmistakably, Israel's laws were instituted by God to create and sustain a just society for all of its citizens regardless of class or status. Those people who deny the poor justice and help in the society are termed as being wicked and unjust. Those who maneuver or manipulate the resources of the society in order to get rich and keep the poor to remain poorer are seen as oppressors. The prophet Isaiah pronounced woe on them. The oppressor is a cursed person. The religious leaders of today should preach against the oppression of the poor like Isaiah did in his time.
- ii. אֲמָל (*amal* v.1b): This means to toil, trouble, labour, mischief, misery, travail, sorrow, grievance, grievousness, iniquity, miserable, pain, painful, perverseness, wearisome, wickedness. This depicts the fact that the poor, needy, widow, orphans and the less privileged in general during Isaiah's time and in Niger Delta of our time go through humiliations and suffering.
- iii. נָטָה (*natah* v.2): This means to stretch out, extend, spread out, pitch, turn, pervert, incline, bend, bow, to turn aside, influence, etc. This refers to those who deny the poor and needy justice. Being that the poor and needy cannot afford the services of lawyers the rich who have access to resources and power deny the poor and the less privileged justice.
- iv. אֲנִיָּוָה (*aniy* v.2): This means poor, afflicted, humble, wretched, needy and weak, lowly, etc.

Broomall (2004:409) remarks that the chief Old Testament words expressing poverty are ‘*ebyon, dal, ani, and rus*. The approximate idea is expressed in the New Testament by *penes, penichros, endees*, and especially *ptochos*. As can be seen in Isaiah 10:2, the Hebrew word for poor is *ani*. The Hebrew word *ani* does not only refer to the poor alone, it also refers to the afflicted, oppressed, class of persons of low status and a person lacking resources (Strong, Kohlenberger III and Swanson, 2001: 1437). This is the same group Isaiah refers to as the poor in his society. They are also the same type of people that constitute the poor in the Niger Delta society. In the midst of the affliction of the poor, the rich, the highly placed people, the political as well as the traditional and religious leaders even afflict the poor the more by exploiting their resources without allowing them to have maximum benefit from the proceeds. In the New Testament, the equivalent of the Hebrew word *ani* (*poor, poverty*) is the Greek word *ptochois* and it means poor and literally means a conspicuously poor widow (Matt. 11:5; 26:9, 11; Luke 21:3. In John 12:5, 6, 8, 13:29; James 2:2, 3, 6), the poor are constantly the subjects of injunctions for assistance (Vine, Unger, and White Jr. 1996:476). Another Septuagint (LXX) adjective for poverty is *penichros* and it refers to the needy, poor and the widows as can be seen in Ex. 22:25, Prov. 28:15, 19:7. Moreover, the Greek verb *ptocheuo* is the present active indicative of *ptochois* and it means a beggar or a destitute who is begging to survive (Vine, etal). In the LXX, *ptochois* according to Ukpong (1995:32) means poor or destitute and it implies a continuous state of inadequate or insufficient value and that it also implies a beggar who have lost his properties and wonder about in great unhappiness (Ukpong, 1995).

The LXX (Septuagint), uses the Greek term *ptwcoi/j* (poor) to translate six different Hebrew words in the Old Testament (Bammel, 1968:901-908). The most common of these is אָנִי (*aniy* Ps.14:6 and the plural form is אֲנִיִּים *aniyyim*, Ps.12:6) which means afflicted, oppressed, poor, humble. Primarily it refers to a person suffering from some kind of disability or distress. Financially the *aniyyim* lives from day to day and have to satisfy the necessities of life through begging from others; socially they are dependent and subject to oppression. Generally, they are wrongfully dispossessed of their rights. Being that the poor person knows that he has only God as his defense, he puts all hope and trust in God. Hence, the word also has the religious sense of “pious”, “humble” (Ps. 18:22). In this sense it is synonymous with *anayw* and the plural form is *anaywim* (Ps.69:33) which also comes from the same root and means poor, humble, weak. It is this religious component that dominates the concept of *anaywim*- the humble pious ones in the Old Testament (Merklein, 1991: 194-104). In Israel at that time, poor people were not to be discriminated against; rather the community was to deal justly with them (Isaiah 10:2) and the king had a special charge to protect their rights (Psalm 82:3). The next word that the LXX uses *ptochois* to translate is *dal* (1 Samuel 2:8) which means weak, lowly, poor, needy, haggard and scrawny (Strong, 2001). It refers to physical weakness whereby a person cannot challenge his opponents. It refers also to those in a socially weak position who do not have the power or authority to defend themselves when attacked. Such people are poor in that they have no strength and nobody. The third Hebrew word translated with *ptochois* in the LXX is *ebiyon* which means one who seeks alms, a beggar; in a general sense, a poor person. These are people who need material help from others to be able to exist. The fourth Hebrew word translated with *ptochois* is *rush* (Proverbs 29:13) which means poor, famished and oppressed.

The fifth Hebrew word that is also translated with *ptochois* is *mahsor* (Proverbs 21:17) which means a dependant, one who is socially poor, penury, scarcity, want and lack. The sixth word that the LXX translates with *ptochois* is *helkah*. This is a Hebrew word of uncertain origin and is found only in Psalm 9:35; 10:14. It means poor, or afflicted. The above shows that the range of meanings contained in the term *ptochois* covers economic, social and religious dimensions because the term embraces the materially poor, the socially alienated, the physically weak and the psychologically afflicted who then become pious and humble placing all their hope in God (Ukpong, 1995). It is against this background that the beatitude: “blessed are the poor in spirit” (Matt. 5:3), “blessed are you poor” (Luke 6:20) is to be understood. The difference between the two is that while Matthew’s text makes explicit the spiritual dimension of the concept of the poor, Luke’s text expresses it only thematically; and because the poor are those who have been dehumanized and who thereby place their trust in God, Jesus’ mission is to restore their full humanity and make them share in the blessings of the kingdom. Their blessedness consists in the restoration of their dehumanized humanity that the proclamation of the kingdom was to bring about.

Thus to say that the poor are blessed does not mean that economic poverty is a blessing, rather it is to affirm the poor as persons, and by implication subvert poverty that makes the poor non-persons.

- v. יתום (*yathowm v.2*): This means an orphan or a fatherless person. These group of persons also constitute the poor in Isaiah's society. We also have them in our society today. The rich and the Church have a responsibility to take care of them.
- vi. הַפְּדוּתָא (*pequddah v.3*): This means custody, mustering, punishment, etc. The Lord spoke through the prophet Isaiah that the enemies of Israel will not go unpunished by God for exploiting Israel and coercing them to serve foreign gods.
- vii. נָפַל (*naphal v.4*): This means to fall, lie, be cast down, fail, violent death, fall away, go away, fail, fall out, turn out, waste away, be inferior to throw down, knock out, to overthrow, etc. All those who perverted justice for the poor were to face God's Judgment. The prophet Isaiah prophesied their boom and doom. They will fall from their lofty position and even fall into the sword of a stronger enemy. In this case, this impending doom awaits the captors of Israel the Babylonians, the Assyrians and even those Israelites who were involved in the pervasion of justice for the poor in the society of Israel.

6. Theological Implications of Isaiah 10:1-4

- i. God endorses equality of humanity not inequality. The society in our time and that of Isaiah's era was stratified. In this stratification, it comprises the kings, the rich and the poor. The poor lives at the mercy of the rich. God is not in support of this type of arrangement. God intends for all humans to see themselves as co-humans and treat one another as such. God is always supporting the poor hence He warned the people of Israel not oppress the poor (verses 1-2). This message is not far fetched in our contemporary society and church. The society and church must identify with the poor and should not discriminate against them. The rich, leaders and individuals should always fight the course of the oppressed in the Niger Delta society and Nigeria at large.
- ii. God hates oppression especially that of the poor and the less privileged in the society. People some times treat orphans, widows and the less-privileged with disdain. The poor which God warned Isaiah's society not oppress consists of the orphans, widows and less-privileged. These type of persons do exist in our time in Niger Delta. These groups of people must be cared for by the church and the society.
- iii. God fights for the oppressed. God can be seen as a one who fights for the poor. He defends the course of the oppressed and as such the church must do same.
- iv. God is the God of Justice and equity. God does not want the rights of the poor to be denied. He wants the church to protect the rights of the poor.

7. Conclusion

Can poverty be totally erased from a society of humans or even from the church? The answer is no. Those who are rich should not discriminate against nor oppress the poor in the society. The Niger Delta people are being oppressed in Nigeria in the sense that they are being denied of their rights. This study has pointed out the possible causes of poverty to include: unemployment, corruption among leaders and lack of adequate infrastructural developments in the region. This has caused various protests and the Government of the day has not done enough to adequately alleviate the poverty of the people of the Niger Delta region. Although the Government cannot make everyone in the Niger to be rich, but the enabling environment can be created for the people by ways of creation of employment for indigenes, provision of scholarships, infrastructural developments, credit facilities, etc.

The church in Niger Delta on the other hand must join the Word of God in the fight against the marginalization of the people of the region. Isaiah as a mouth piece of God just like the church leaders of our time challenges us today to warn the Nigerian society against the oppression of Niger Delta or any group. Basically, in the pericope under consideration, Isaiah taught the recipient of his message to desist from oppressing the poor. Within this context, the church in Niger Delta is saddled with the responsibility of fighting for the right of the poor.

One can constructively argue here that poverty does exist in every society but it is more painful to be poor in the midst of your own wealth just because someone more powerful is taking it away from you without caring about you the owner. It is within this context that the church must speak up for the Niger Delta of Nigeria.

8. Recommendations

- i. The Government and the church should resort to Poverty Alleviation programme that is devoid of political impinging. The poverty elevation programme of the government which is on ground now is too politically manipulated. It should be improved in such a way that the poor in the Niger Delta can benefit directly without any intermediary of godfather.
- ii. The Nigerian state should resort to true federalism in which states are allowed to manage their resources. By so doing the Niger Delta poor will benefit more from crude proceeds.
- iii. Employment opportunities should be given to people in workable age in Niger Delta in order for them to be able to take care of themselves and their families.
- iv. Free education should be provided by the church and the Government to enable the poor and less-privileged to obtain quality education like the rich. In a situation where free education cannot be totally possible, education should be subsidized for the poor in Niger Delta.

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