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RE-READING DEUTERO-ISAIAH'S ORACLES OF SALVATION TO THE EARS OF THE POOR TODAY A PRACTICO-PASTORAL IMPERATIVE

Gerald Emem UMOREN

1. Introduction

The plight of the poor in our society today, which should be a thing of concern for any human being – in the State or in the Church – does not seem to be receiving the much attention it demands. At best, the little attention given in some quarters does not seem to be making sustained impact towards their wellbeing. This perceived indifference of the world to the plight of the poor really calls for renewed address. In Africa, fighting poverty and resettling the needy still remains a serious challenge. Almost every day in different parts of the continent, fresh situations present themselves and they do not only confirm the presence of the poor in our midst but also, definitely, intensify their vulnerability. This situation should elicit some enforced practical mission not only by the State but more especially by the Church which has a definite mission to these poor. The poor and the marginalized need to be given some sure hope that is matched with practical steps towards restoring them to wellbeing. In the face of this evident need, one readily remembers the plight of the Israelite poor in the Old Testament. This paper, therefore, proposes that a re-reading/re-application of the Scriptural passages of hope found in Deutero-Isaiah, could be a good strategy towards re-enforcing the mission of the Church and State for the poor in our midst.

2. Explication of Terms

In order to facilitate comprehension, it is necessary for us to explain our usage of some key terms in this paper as most of them are employed within context. These would include: Deutero-Isaiah; Oracles of Salvation; The Poor; and the phrase, 'A practico-Pastoral Imperative.'

2.1 *Deutero-Isaiah*¹

Deutero-Isaiah, meaning Second Isaiah, is the name given to the anonymous personality responsible for putting together the oracles which appear in chapters 40 to 55 of the book of Isaiah. Biblical scholarship has confirmed that the 8th century prophet Isaiah, the author of chapters 1-39, could not have written all the 66 chapters of Isaiah spanning many centuries.²

2.2 *Oracles of Salvation*

'Oracles of Salvation' are those prophetic pronouncements that do not only reflect hope but also guarantee it through practical involvement of those concerned. However, in this context, these oracles of salvation are limited to the prophetic utterances of deliverance addressing the poor and needy of Israel as recorded in different parts of Deutero-Isaiah. In this paper, salvation is not to be understood in the sense of eternal reward after death. It is more of physical restoration to wellbeing.

¹ Biblical quotations are taken from the New Revised Standard Version.

² John H. HAYES, *Introduction to the Bible*, Philadelphia: Westminster, 1971, p223

2.3 *The Poor*

Ordinarily, by 'poor' is meant the deprived; those who lack and those who do not have the basics that life can afford or demand. The poor are people whose basic needs for food, clothing and shelter are not being met. However, the usage of the word 'poor' in this context is in a very broad sense. It captures the above and more senses. They include the wrecks who have nothing to eat; the suffering who have no relief in sight; the marginalized, the exploited and the displaced. Anybody whose life situation forces into deprivation and hopelessness is here referred to as 'poor.'

2.4 *A Practico-Pastoral Imperative*

This phrase serves to indicate that our approach, which would definitely have to be pastoral, must be more practical than theoretical. It also serves to confirm that this strategy be appreciated as an imperative – something that must be enforced and pursued with passion³.

3. *Deutero-Isaiah's Oracles of Salvation*

The book of Isaiah generally contains some passages of hope but the section that is conventionally associated with Deutero-Isaiah (Isaiah 40–55) has a special flavor of hope and restoration to wellbeing for a distressed people. There are

³ Going by the Title of the Paper, the above explication of terms indicates that our task is to try a re-reading/application of Deutero-Isaiah's prophetic utterances of salvation as a practical strategy towards restoring hope to the poor and marginalized of our society today. In doing this, we will be more reflective of the African situation.

about 35 oracles of salvation in Deutero-Isaiah. We are not going to consider all these as they all reflect the same position. Instead we shall randomly consider just a few significant ones. For a more objective appreciation, there is need to understand the background and nature of these oracles of salvation in Deutero-Isaiah.

3.1 *Appreciating the Background of Isaiah 40–55*

Biblical scholarship appreciates Deutero-Isaiah as the anonymous poet who prophesied towards the end of the Babylonian exile. When Judah was taken into exile in 587 BC, the plight of the people was devastating and deplorable. They lost the three most important things in which their pride lay: Their King, Their Land and their Temple. In losing these most treasured possessions, Israel technically was exploited and she became poor. They were disappointed in their impoverishment and were demoralized in their subjection to foreign rule. After several years of life in poverty, hunger, displacement and depression, Deutero-Isaiah came to preach a message of hope and deliverance.⁴ A new political background marked this turn of events. This was the background of the dramatic rise of Cyrus to power who successively defeated many kings until he finally defeated Babylon and became like a political omen whose rise to prominence was described by Deutero-Isaiah as the work of God's hands.⁵ Deutero-Isaiah must have exercised his ministry around 550 to 545 BC preaching this deliverance to exiles with characteristic themes of Pardon, Restoration and

⁴ Cf. C. WESTERMANN, *Prophetic Oracles of Salvation in the Old Testament*, Translated by Keith Crim, Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox, 1987, p39.

⁵ HAYES, *Introduction to the Bible*, p223.

Grace.⁶ His oracles are concentrated solely on the event of salvation and they seek to give consolation to the people.⁷ The picture is made clearer when one considers what used to be the devastating plight of the people. The fulfillment of God's promise of salvation made sense to them because it was a break from the greatest deprivation of their life to a time of restoration. Restoration became a reality with Cyrus empowering some Israelite leaders, Ezra and Nehemiah, and facilitating their engagement to make the return to the land possible and rebuild both the city and the people (Ezra 1:1-11).

3.2 Nature of the Oracles of Salvation

For the purpose of this paper, his message can be sub-divided into four parts: The promise of salvation; the proclamation of salvation; the commission to Cyrus and the fall of Babylon; and finally, The songs of praise.

3.2.1 The Promise of Salvation

An objective analysis of the message of Deutero-Isaiah contains both the promise of salvation and the fulfillment of such promises. As a promise, salvation takes different forms in his book.⁸ In his promise of salvation, the prophet assures the people of the disposition of God to take glory in liberating

⁶ G. E. UMOREN, *The Salvation of the Remnant in Isaiah 11: 11-12: An Exegesis of a prophecy of Hope and Its Relevance Today*, Rome: Angelicum Press, 2006, p46.

⁷ In some translations, Chapters 40 to 55 of Isaiah are referred to as 'The Book of Consolation.'

⁸ Cf. Isaiah 41: 8-13, 14-16; 43: 1-7; and 44: 1-5 but there are echoes in 54: 4-6 and 51: 12-13. WESTERMANN, *Prophetic Oracles*, p42.

them. The message is proclaimed as coming from God in the form of a mandate for the prophet to carry out. The opening statement of the promise reads:

Comfort, comfort my people, says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and cry to her that her warfare is ended, that her iniquity is pardoned..." (Isa 40:1-2).

The Hebrew verb 'to comfort' (nāḥam) is in the piel imperative form and suggests intensive action. The call to action is emphatic, being given twice in the same line. It is interesting to note that this form of the verb is given to guarantee a kind of action that would bring hope to the sufferer. In the different places where they occur, the promise of salvation contains a number of other ingredients: The call of reassurance, The basis of the re-assurance and finally, the Proclamation of this salvation.⁹ Reference is made here to the 'fear not' passages in Isa 41. For instance

Fear not, for I am with you, be not dismayed, for I am your God; I will strengthen you, I will help you, I will uphold you with my victorious right hand. (Isa 41:10)

For I, the LORD your God, hold your right hand; it is I who say to you, "Fear not, I will help you." (Isa 41:13)

The admonition, 'not to fear', (from the Hebrew verb yāra') is the assurance of dominance, power and readiness to save. The basis of this reassurance is God himself ("I am your God").

⁹ WESTERMANN, *Prophetic Oracles*, p42.

Yahweh alone is God and He is the one who has assured His people of salvation (cf. Isa 41: 21-22, 25, 26, etc). The situation in Deutero-Isaiah is significant because God did not only make proclamations of salvation, He also saw them to fulfillment. He spoke and it came to pass. Israel could testify and history could confirm that the salvation God promised the poor, needy exiles of Israel came to pass (cf. Isa 43:10-13).

3.2.2 The Fulfillment of Salvation

The fulfillment of the salvation promised by God in Deutero-Isaiah is very crucial to the present topic under discussion. When did this happen; Why did it happen and How did it happen? The Bible, no doubt, is filled with accounts of God's earlier saving deeds for His people (cf. Isa 41:8-9). In the Old Testament, Israel apostatized and was visited by God with judgment (cf. Isa 50:1-3). The people lamented (Isa 40:6-8) and at a point, God heard their lament and turned again to them (Isa 51:22). He practically intervened in their plight (Isa 42:13) and made possible their return home (Isa 55:12) and consequent restoration (Isa 44:26). What He promised, He also brought to fulfillment. Deutero-Isaiah captured this fulfillment in his oracles. He would always talk of former things coming to pass (cf. Isa 42:9) even as he would announce new things. The popular proclamation of Deutero-Isaiah in Isa 48:15 refers directly to Cyrus who is chosen by God and becomes a viable instrument in God's hand for the fulfillment of God's promise to the exiles.¹⁰ The fulfillment of this promise elicited renewed trust in the people. Their confidence in God was renewed.

¹⁰ Cyrus is the Persian king who subdued Neo-Babylonian powers and eventually created an opportunity for/and gave the Israelites the needed assistance to be free and return to Jerusalem.

In Deutero-Isaiah, God fulfills the promise of comforting His people and 'making them rich again. This came after many years of suffering and lament,¹¹ but it was a welcome relief as it came to pass that the poor exiles could find their way back to regaining their city, dynasty and Temple. The fulfillment of God's promise, the consequent blessing of the people and their emancipation from poverty all became possible through the instrumentality of Cyrus, who did not only permit Israel out of bondage to go back to Jerusalem but he also gave them the resources to rebuild the Temple.

4. The Poor in Our Midst Today

We have been talking about how Israel was impoverished and the suffering they underwent in that situation. But it is important to come back home and think of the poor in our midst back here in Africa and most especially in Nigeria. It is hoped that after an objective exposure of the situation and plight of the poor among us, some evaluation would reveal possible common grounds to be addressed.

In Africa in general and in Nigeria in particular, the poor in our midst today would include those who have no food, shelter or clothing, the unemployed, those displaced by war or conflict, those rejected by their people, the migrant and racially discriminated, people - most especially youth and children - deprived of warmth of family, people denied access to education and basic social amenities, and so many others

¹¹ It is assumed that the gap between the devastation of Israel and her experience of divine comfort, reckoned in chronological time, could be about 160 years. This was a pretty long experience of suffering under successive aggressive world powers. Cf. W. BRUEGGEMANN, *Isaiah 40-66*, Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox, 1998, p8.

who suffer one deprivation or the other.¹² Most of these are very religious people, and, for no fault of theirs, have remained in abject poverty, deprivation and untold suffering for years with little or no relief in sight.

4.1 *Appreciating the Plight of the Poor Today*

One of the commonest groups of poor in our midst are those who lack food, shelter and clothing.¹³ In a country as rich as Nigeria, a brief visit to the parks and under the bridges in the major cities is enough to expose the suffering that these people go through. Many cannot afford any meals and they remain at the mercy of 'scraps from the master's table.' With no shelter, any space under the bridges becomes a home for them. They are exposed to infection, abuse, accident and death and yet there is a government and a Church professing option for the poor.

The alarming rate of unemployment is another thing that intensifies the suffering of the poor in our midst. Many qualified school-leavers have no jobs and with no source of livelihood, some have ventured into wrong and criminal tendencies that would land them, at best, in jail. The situation is such that these poor become poorer everyday. In many ways, they have cried out to God and the government of the day but the situation is yet to change for any better. In some

¹² D. DAY, "Where are the Poor." in *The Catholic Worker*, Jan 1955, 1, 6. Assessed on 12th November 2014, <https://www.catholicworker.org/dorathyday/daytext>.

¹³ C. I. OSUNWOKEH, "Overcoming Poverty as a Collective Obligation: Christian Perspective." Accessed on 12th November 2014, <https://www.ajol.info/index.php/jrhr/article/download> on 12th November 2014.

parts of Africa like Southern Sudan and Congo, and in some places in Nigeria like the crisis-torn areas in the North, many people have been displaced. Like the Israelites of old, they have lost their homes, family, farmlands, property and 'independence.' The consequent nature of suffering is better experienced than told.

4.2 *The Reality of Stagnation and the Hope of Salvation*

Like the Israelites of old, one factor that has kept the poor in our midst alive is 'Hope.' In their untold suffering, they always hope that tomorrow would be a better time. Unfortunately, this hope is sustained by the continual but only verbal assurance of relief by the Church and State. As religious people, which most of them are, they lament and cry out for help to God in prayer. They hope that God would answer their prayer through the State or Church but their hope for deliverance has not played out as anticipated. The long silence experienced by the Israelites of old has also proved to be the experience of the poor in our midst today as they hopelessly wait on God to intervene through the Church and/or State. The poor in our midst are always 'back to square one.' Even though there is hope, the reality is that of stagnation and the danger is eventual hopelessness and loss of confidence.

4.3 *The Need for Renewed 'Mission to the Poor.'*

The 'option for the poor' must be a global concern. Considering the plight of the poor today, serious need has arisen for renewed mission to these poor. Unless the Church and State see their responsibility as a divine commission and take up active role in the fight against poverty and the

emancipation of our less privileged, the situation may not change much.¹⁴ Here is a call for positive intervention that must be heeded by both Church and State. The longer the suffering of our poor remain unaddressed, the more crimes and social ills we would experience in our communities.

There is no doubt that the Church has been a pioneer advocate and a commissioned instrument in God's Hands for the salvation of the poor. For whatever reasons, since this does not seem to be bearing much fruits, there is need for renewed re-strategizing if the current unfortunate trend has to be broken. The submission below, as a proposal, constitutes a viable strategy towards the restoration of the poor in our midst to wellbeing.

5. Re-Reading Deutero-Isaiah's Oracles of Salvation to the Ears of the Poor Today

Two things are important here. There is the *re-reading* and there is the *re-application* of the message of Deutero-Isaiah to the situation of the poor. The basis for these actions is that Deutero-Isaiah's oracles of salvation were pronouncements of hope, which are addressed to people of the same circumstances like those of the poor in our midst. In proposing a re-reading, the understanding is that, given the similar setting which they share, Deutero-Isaiah's oracles of salvation would sound more reasonable to the ears of the poor

¹⁴ It is important to keep the case of Cyrus in mind here. He was commissioned by God to intervene and restore the exiles of Israel back to normalcy. This came to pass successfully because Cyrus took his commission as a responsibility. The agents of restoration for our poor today would need the same, if not better, attitude in order to change their plight.

today and its application would re-enforce their hope for deliverance and reawaken the consciousness that both Church and State have some divinely commissioned stake in favor of the poor.

5.1 *Re-Addressing the Poor with the Spirit of Deutero-Isaiah*

More than any other prophet, Deutero-Isaiah reflects the power of the Divine word which consists not just in spoken or written word but more especially in mighty deeds.¹⁵ It is also true that for faith to be meaningful, it must also speak to the specific economic situation of the individual.¹⁶ These practical situations would serve the poor of our time. Here, the basic passages of Deutero-Isaiah which touch on the promise and eventual fulfillment of the salvation of Israel could be re-read in renewed address of the poor in our midst today. Let us look at the following:

Fear not, for I am with you, be not dismayed, for I am your God; I will strengthen you, I will help you, I will uphold you with my victorious right hand.
(Isa 41:10)

For I, the LORD your God, hold your right hand; it is I who say to you, "Fear not, I will help you" (Isa 41:13).

¹⁵ C. STUHLMEYER, "Deutero-Isaiah and Trito-Isaiah" in *The New Jerome Biblical Commentary*, Edited By Raymond BROWN et al, New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 1990, p330.

¹⁶ G. O. EHUSANI, *A Prophetic Church*, Ede: Provincial Pastoral Institute Publication, 1996, p4.

Comfort, comfort my people, says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and cry to her that her warfare is ended, that her iniquity is pardoned... (Isa 40:1-2).

When the poor and needy seek water, and there is none, and their tongue is parched with thirst, I the LORD will answer them, I the God of Israel will not forsake them (Isa 41:17).

Originally, these are sample oracles from Deutero-Isaiah which show the resolve of God to save Israel from their plight in bondage. These can be re-read and actually need to be re-read to the ears of the poor today. When re-read to the ears of the poor today, Isaiah 41:10 would be sounding an assurance. It would be assuring the poor in our midst not to be afraid of facing the future. The most important thing here is the assurance that they should not fear because, the assurance is coming from God. The implication is that there is no room to doubt the resolve of God to intervene. The three verbs that communicate this divine assurance in Isa 41:10, 'to strengthen' ('āmaṣ), 'to help' ('āzar), and 'to uphold' (tāmad), speak well to the situation of the poor today and would sound meaningfully well to their ears. The second text (Isa 41:13), which includes God's promises to hold their right hand, also connotes support to help one rise above some difficulty. This would make sense to the poor because in their difficulty, they actually need a more powerful hand to support them unto wellbeing.

The meaning of Isa 40:1 follows from the above. The intensive, emphatic and urgent call which God bids the prophet to undertake implies that God is actually serious about getting this done to the extent that some other agents are also commissioned to be involved in this intervention. More

hands are needed in the struggle to emancipate the poor. The poor themselves know and would appreciate this collective effort. The actual deliverance of the poor, though promised by God, would need to be carried out through human agents and institutions.

The last text from Isa 41:17 speaks directly to the poor and needy and their situation. God promises that when they seek water, He would be available to give them and to quench their thirst. The reference to water is significant. Water refreshes and gives life. It is a very basic human need and it signifies all that the poor would lack or need. So this promise to provide water is the promise to provide the most basic needs of the human being, which brings the person out of the needy state.

Apart from the specific passages above, in general, the oracles of salvation in Deutero-Isaiah relevantly and meaningfully speak to the situation of the poor in our midst today. But what they need is not just the promise but also the actual pragmatic intervention to bring them to wellbeing.

5.2 Hermeneutical Application of the Oracles of Salvation to the Poor Today

The best application of the oracles of salvation to the situation of the poor is double-faced. First of all, it must be seen as God's definitive resolve to address their plight in His might. Secondly, it needs to be seen as God's commission of human agents to be involved and actively take responsibility towards the emancipation of the poor from their present plight. God is faithful and has always been faithful in carrying out His own side of this commitment. In the campaign to eradicate poverty today, the challenge has always been how to get the human agents who would be as committed and as 'role-driven' as

Cyrus, Ezra and Nehemiah were. The human agents here can either be individuals, groups of people or institutions – Church or State.

The place of the human agent in the fulfillment of God's promise as they apply to the poor is crucially important. Human beings must readily become a viable instrument in God's hands because God is not coming down to intervene physically in human affairs; it is the place of God to give the commission just as He has done implicitly and explicitly. But it is the place of human beings – individual, groups, Church or State – to explore the details and facilitate actual emancipation of the poor.

6. Re-Evaluating Today's Mission to the Poor in Light of Deutero-Isaiah's Oracles

In light of the provisions in Deutero-Isaiah, and against the background of the prevalent situation of the poor which needs urgent attention, there is need for some evaluation of our submissions before we conclude. Two important proposals to be included here are: The need to see this involvement of the human agent as a practico-pastoral imperative, and the need to enter into a better Church-State partnership

6.1 *The Practico-Pastoral Imperative*

There is an underlying thesis here: A human agent needs to give meaning to the promise of salvation for the poor. This inspiration is drawn from the role of the Israel leaders, Ezra and Nehemiah, who were helped and empowered by the Persian king to realize the restoration which the prophet preached. This action, which is not only practical but pastoral

is being projected, for the benefit of our poor, as an imperative. Seen as an imperative, the involvement of the human agent in God's plan of salvation is made more meaningful when that agent appreciates himself or herself as an instrument in God's hands. The opening words of Deutero-Isaiah's consolation passage: "Comfort, comfort my people..." (Is 40: 1f) clearly show that the involvement of the human agent must be an imperative. Human beings should not distance themselves from this mission.

The plight of the poor in our midst demands that this imperative be truly practical and pastoral. It is not enough to have pity on the poor nor is it enough to pronounce verbal release. It is very important that the identification with the poor be practical. Words must be matched with actions. People are differently endowed by God and such endowments should be for the benefit of the poor and the less-privileged.¹⁷ The poor need food, shelter, clothing, a sustaining employment, justice, liberation from bondage and captivity. These acts need practical steps and tangible sacrifices to realize them. The rich in our midst must play the 'Cyrus role' here. The poor need the consoling human intervention to give meaning to God's love and care for them as His children.

¹⁷ It is good to remember that the endowments and blessings of Cyrus were interpreted as God's own deeds meant to commission him to take up a practical and pastoral responsibility for the benefit of the exiles. The poor in our midst today need to enjoy this type of benefits from individuals who are so endowed because such endowments, again, represent God's commission.

6.2 *The Church-State Partnership*

God's call to human agents (the prophet, the Persian king) to comfort his people (Isa 40:1) confirms that the option for the poor needs to be a joint partnership between the Church and the State. Granted that it is more compelling for the Church as a religious organization with the debt of pastoral care, the State must also be conscious of the fact that it owes the citizenry the provision of welfare benefits. Above all, if we go by the example of Cyrus considered in this paper, we must appreciate the fact that he did what he did as a civil government official. As the king of Persia, he was also representing his kingdom and used available resources of the kingdom to help restore Israel to wellbeing.¹⁸

The State today must rise up to the mandate of providing for the poor. If better conditions of living are guaranteed and provided by the State, the number of the poor and the marginalized would be reduced. The provision of food, water, shelter; the guarantee of justice and security; the rebuilding and maintenance of public life etc, all need to be taken up practically by the government. The State must be involved in rehabilitating the poor in our midst. It is not only a social responsibility for them, it is also a religious duty that must be carried out as such.

¹⁸ Cyrus did not only pronounce and enforce the return of the exiles, he also offered them the resources with which to rebuild the ruins of Jerusalem. These were, most likely, from public funds legitimately voted for such purposes.

7. Conclusion

We have always had the poor among us but in recent times, especially in Africa, the much talked about option for the poor has reflected little or no relief to these less-privileged people. The plight of the poor today needs to be made the concern of everybody – individuals, groups, institutions especially Church and State. God's resolve to help the poor must be seen as an invitation for man to act. The increasing suffering of the poor especially here in Africa has become a thing of concern. This situation begs for an intervening explanation and consequent action.

The oracles of salvation in Deutero-Isaiah, with all its consoling words and divine assurance of deliverance, have proved to be a meaningful piece for the restoration of hope to the poor. However, results of our research have proved that there is need for practical intervention of human agents for this hope to materialize. The role of Cyrus in the return of the exiles must be replicated for the benefits of today's poor. Our thesis is confirmed that only a practico-pastoral approach by endowed and 'commissioned' human agents could give meaning to the verbal pronouncement of relief for the poor. The option for the poor especially in Africa must wear a more practical face. Just as Israel eventually regained freedom from exile at the intervention of Cyrus, it is the hope of this paper that people would come to appreciate and appropriate better the urgent need to intervene practically in the plight of these suffering poor. Apart from its value as a motivating factor for the benefit of the poor, it is hoped that the ability of this paper to provoke more researches on combating poverty greatly speaks to its worth. Together, the consciousness has to be

created and enforced that the option for the poor in our midst must be pursued as an imperative.