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YAHWEH, THE ADVOCATE OF THE POOR

Philip Igbo, CMF

1. Introduction

Poverty and human deprivation have been recognized as the most central challenge to the development of human society ever since the dawn of history. Poverty consists not only of a simple economic fact, but it also describes a state of deprivation.¹ All over the world, disparities between the rich and the poor continue to rise sharply. While some are getting richer, many are getting poorer. Ironically, all this is happening in a world that God has blessed with abundance, a world rich enough to allow every person a decent and comfortable life.²

The poor includes a wide range of persons: labourers who are frequently underpaid and who have difficulty organizing themselves and defending their rights; the underemployed and unemployed, who are dismissed because of the harsh exigencies of economic crisis; the marginalized and the ordinary citizens at the lower stratum of the society, whose lack of material goods is matched by the ostentatious display

¹ Yves CONGER, "Poverty in Christian Life amidst an Affluent Society - War, Poverty, Freedom: The Christian Response," *Concilium*, 15, New York: Paulist Press, 1966, p49.

² W. O. ONDARI, *Poverty and Wealth: A Christian Perspective*, ict.aillas.edu.

of wealth by the upper stratum of the society;³ the physically and mentally handicapped who are un-cared for or have been abandoned on the streets of major cities; the old people dependent on a state pension, which sometimes is withheld; the sick, who have no means to good health, etc. These are poor because of the existence of systems that exploit and exclude them.⁴ Why is there so much poverty, suffering and hunger in a bountiful world? What steps have our governments taken to address this ugly situation? What can the Church do in this situation? These are the leading questions that this article endeavours to address.

2. Biblical Meaning Poverty

Poverty is a central theme in the Scriptures. The Old Testament (OT) expresses the condition of poverty with several rich vocabularies. These include: *raš* - "the impoverished person." *Raš* is the participle of the verb *ruš* - "to be poor, needy, famished," in an exclusively social and economic sense. Poverty is often seen as a situation of lack (*raš*). This term, like the term *'ebyon*, presents a situation of dependence.⁵ The term, *'ebyon*, which often appears in the stereotyped formula *'ani ve'ebyon*, "poor and needy" (Deut 24:14; Jer 22:16; Ezek 16:49),⁶ describes the poor as one who

³ G. GUTIERREZ, *The Power of the Poor in History*, New York: Orbis Books, 1983, p134.

⁴ C. BOFF – G. V. PIXLEY, *The Bible, The Church, and The Poor*, Maryland: Orbis Books, 1989, pp7-8.

⁵ A. GEORGE, "Poverty in the Old Testament," in *Gospel Poverty, Essays in Biblical Theology*, Chicago: Franciscan Herald Press, 1977, p6.

⁶ G. J. BOTTERWECK, "'ebyon", in G. J. BOTTERWECK (ed.), *TDOT*, vol.1, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978, p29.

is lacking something and awaits it from another (Exod 23:6). The Greek equivalent term is *ptochos*. *Ptochos* is related to the verb *ptocheuo* – 'to be destitute', 'to live the life of a beggar'.⁷ It refers to the indigent, weak, wretched, destitute, "mendicant" person. *Ptochos* refers to economic deprivation. This presents the poor as one who is "dependent" (*miskēn*) and as someone who is 'socially inferior'⁸ or socially weak.⁹ Among those described as poor in the OT are the foreigners (*nokrî*) or immigrants, who live in the land of Israel, or are pilgrims in it. Their situation has become crystallized as one of poverty. The *nokrî* or *ger* has no land or familiar surroundings. In the Hebrew mind he was more wretched than the poor man, because while the latter was recognized socially, the *nokrî* or *ger* has no place in that society, which was based on blood ties and kinship.¹⁰

2.1 Causes of Poverty

The Bible presents a variety of causes for poverty. The first cause of poverty is oppression and fraud (cf., Prov. 14:31; 22:7; 28:15). The poor are poor because they are exploited by a perverse economic system and by the privileged class. The second cause of poverty is misfortune. In the book of Job we

⁷ E. Bammel, "Ptochos", in G. Friedrich (ed.), *TDNT*, vol. 6, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1968, p886.

⁸ E. Bammel, "Ptochos", p889.

⁹ E. Gerstenberger, "'bh, 'ebyon," in E. Jenni – C. Westermann (eds.), *TLOT*, vol.1, Peabody: Hendrickson, 2004, p17.

¹⁰ E. Bianchi, "The Status of those Without Dignity," in *Concilium* 130: *The Dignity of the Dispersed of the Earth*, New York: The Seabury Press, 1979, pp6-7.

learn that God allowed Satan to test Job by bringing misfortune upon him (Job 1:12-19). The third cause of poverty is laziness (*'aslâ*). Laziness (Prov 6:6-11) and pleasure-seeking are regarded by Israelite sages as the major causes of poverty: "*Whoever loves pleasure will suffer want; whoever loves wine and oil will not be rich*" (Prov 21:17; cf. Sir 18:32). The fourth cause of poverty is the culture of poverty. Proverbs 10:15 says, "*The ruin of the poor is their poverty.*" Poverty breeds poverty, and the cycle is not easily broken. Most people who grow up in an impoverished culture usually lack the nutrition and the education that would enable them to be successful in the future. Injustice is another major cause of poverty. Poverty is largely the result of the unprecedented scale of structural imbalance and social injustice, which today invades every corner of the world.¹¹ Another major cause of poverty is discussed in detail in the following paragraph.

2.2. War and Armed Conflicts as Major Causes of Poverty

Warfare is one of the chief causes of human impoverishment and degradation. War and armed violence undermine development, as the resources which would have been invested to promote human welfare are used to finance wars.¹² Today, the nations of the world spend billions of dollars annually on the upkeep of the military. Paradoxically, a greater percentage of the world population lives below poverty line. War generates far-reaching social and economic

¹¹ M. P. AQUINO, "Justice Upholds Peace: A Feminist Approach," in M. P. AQUINO – D. MIETH (eds.), *Concilium: The Return of the Just War*, 2001/2, p102.

¹²Cf. "Global Poverty and International Development," Issue 5, October 2008, www.worldsavvy.org.

costs. The awesome proportion of scarce resources dedicated to weapons and the financing of conflicts and civil wars increase the risk of poverty and starvation among warring nations.¹³ The world can be transformed and human living conditions bettered if the resources and the ingenuity used in producing weapons of war are channeled towards the development of agriculture and social infrastructure.¹⁴

Reflecting on the socio-economic situation of Africa, one is shocked by the level of underdevelopment and poverty in most parts of the continent. Although massively endowed with mineral deposits, Africa is still plagued by a scourge of poverty and underdevelopment. Yet enormous amount of money which could have been invested in infrastructural development is spent on weapons of war and to finance armed conflicts. If the enormous volume of resources used in financing wars and conflicts are utilized in funding infrastructural development in Africa, for instance, there would be a considerable reduction in poverty. And if the problem of poverty and social inequalities is tackled, many of the situations that exacerbate conflict between different groups, communities, and nationalities would be avoided.

¹³ J. SOBRINO, "Unjust and Violent Poverty in Latin America," in *Concilium 195: A Council for Peace*, 1988, p55.

¹⁴ L. S. CAHILL, "Christian Just War Tradition: Tensions and Development," in *Concilium: The Return of the Just War*, M. P. AQUINA – D. MEITH, London: SCM, 2001/2, p81.

3. God's Concern for the Poor (Exod 3)

The book of Exodus presents Yahweh as a God who takes sides with the oppressed;¹⁵ a God who is characterized by his preferential option for the poor. The liberation of the Hebrew people from their Egyptian bondage illustrates God's concern for the poor and the marginalized. The exodus of the Hebrew people from Egypt happened because God listens to the cry of the oppressed. God cannot remain neutral to the situation of the oppressed.¹⁶ This is expressed in God's statement to Moses:

I have observed the misery of my people who are in Egypt; I have heard their cry on account of their taskmasters. Indeed, I know their sufferings (Exod 3:7).

Exod 3:7 expresses Israel's condition in Egypt as one of suffering. Three verbs express three actions of God with regard to Israel's condition in Egypt: "I have seen (*ra'ohra'itî*)... I have heard (*šama'atî*)... I know (*yada'tî*)..." God is said to have seen two things with regard to Israel's condition in Egypt - the misery of his people and their cry on account of their taskmasters. God was not unaware of their misery. God 'knows', that is, he feels the pain of those who suffer; he hears their cry and intervenes to save them, not because of any legal obligation on his part, but because he is touched by their cry of distress. God is not unconcerned about the sufferings of the people; God identifies with the suffering

¹⁵ Cf. R. BURNS, "The Book of Exodus," *Concilium* vol.189/1 (1987), p13.

¹⁶ J. ALFARO, "God Protects and Liberates the Poor – O.T.," in *Concilium* vol.187/5 (1986) p29.

and the poor. Yet, while God suffers with his people, God is not powerless in the face of such suffering.¹⁷ God loves the poor with special love and comes to their defense, not necessarily because they are good, but because they are victims of oppression and exploitation.

Now God responds in power to liberate the suffering people: "*I have come down to deliver them from the Egyptians*". The biblical God is a God of liberation. Yahweh breaks into human history to liberate the oppressed. The book of Exodus reveals God's all-surpassing characteristic as the God of justice; the liberator and the advocate of the weak and oppressed.¹⁸

3.1 *Israel's legal system and Social Justice*

God's concern for the poor is expressed in the provisions made by the institution in early Israel. Israel's legal system made provisions to protect the poor. Among these legal provisions is the law of release. According to this law of "release" (*šemittâ*) from debts, each creditor is required to set his neighbour free from all debts every seven years (Deut 15:1f).¹⁹ In the seventh year of servitude the Hebrew bond-servant should go free (Exod 21:2; Deut 15:1f); in the Year of Jubilee (the fiftieth year), property that had been sold are to be returned to its owner or his family (Lev 25:8-17). The Jubilee laws, in particular, provided a comprehensive program of debt

¹⁷R. DICKINSON, "Lessons from Exodus, Yahweh: The God who is with us," 2001, www.oocities.org.

¹⁸J. P. MIRANDA, "A Liberation Challenge," in K. Lebacqz (ed.), *Six Theories of Justice*, Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1986, p106.

¹⁹BOTTERWECK, "*'ebyon*", p30.

cancellation, liberation from slavery; it enabled the poor to regain ownership of their ancestral land, thus granting them a fresh start.²⁰ In the Year of Jubilee, moreover, the people are obliged to help a neighbour faced with economic difficulties by lending him money with no interest (Exod 22:25; Lev 25:35-37; Deut 15:7f); and if he sells himself into slavery to pay his debts, he shall serve as a hired servant (*sakîr*) and not as a 'slave' (*'ebed*) until he is set free in the Year of Jubilee (Lev 25:39-43).²¹ The law required that a creditor should not keep his debtor's garments (which provided warmth and doubled as one's blanket at night) nor take the tools of a man's trade as security for a loan. No widow's raiment was to be taken in pledge (Deut 24:17), a man's garment should be returned to him before sundown (Deut 24:10-13). These legal provisions were aimed at helping the poor earn a living and also to prevent extreme hardships (Exod 22:25-27; Deut 24:12-13).²² Breach of these laws is considered a sin and their observance, righteousness (Deut 24:13, 15).

Another important legal provision aimed at helping the poor is the law of gleaning of harvests. The gleaning laws are listed in Leviticus 19:9-10 and Deuteronomy 24:19-22. As farmers reaped their crops, they would leave the corners of their fields un-harvested for the poor (*'anî*) and the resident alien to glean (*laqaš*). The gleanings of field and vineyard are enforced gifts for the poor and alien, who have little income and, during

²⁰ Cf. W. R. DOMERIS, "'ebyôn", *Dictionary of Theology and Exegesis*, CD Rom Edition.

²¹ BOTTERWECK, "'ebyon", p30.

²² R. CASSELBERRY, "Generous Giving in the Old Testament: The Poor and Needy," www.library.generousgiving.org.

hard times, little hope of earning a living.²³ It is a form of compulsory charity. Fruit and ripe grain in a field might be eaten by any hungry person, but none should be carried away (Deut 23:24-25). The poor were to have the free use of all that grew spontaneously in the field or vineyard during the Sabbatical year (Exod 23:10f; Lev 25:5, 6; Deut 15:1-11). After six years of cultivation and harvest, the land is left fallow for a year (the seventh year). Whatever the land produces on its own, that is, through no effort of cultivation, the poor of the land are free to have.²⁴

Another method used to help the poor was the tithe. Every third year (the tithe year) a tithe of the produce was presented to the local towns to provide for the needs of 'the Levite, the alien, the orphan and the widow' (Deut 14:28, 29; 26:12f; Lev 27:30).²⁵

Right to Timely Wages: The poor worker, whether a stranger or brother, was to receive his just wages. According to Deut 24:14f, one may not oppress a hired servant who is poor and needy (*lo'-ta'ašoq sakîr 'anî we'ebyôn*); instead, he is required to give him his hire on the day of his labour, all the more so if he had need of it immediately (cf. Lev 19:13).²⁶

²³ J. E. HARTLEY, *Leviticus*, WBC vol 4, Dallas: Word Books, Pub., 1992, p314; J. R. PORTER, *Leviticus*, Cambridge: Cambridge Uni. Press, 1976, p153.

²⁴ J. I. DURHAM, *Exodus*, WBC 3, Waco: Word Books, Pub., 1987, p331.

²⁵ D. L. CHRISTENSEN, *Deuteronomy 21:10-34:12*, Nashville: Thomas Nelson Pub., 2002, p641.

²⁶ BOTTERWECK, "*ebyon*", p30.

Right to Justice: The Book of the Covenant explicitly forbids miscarriage of justice due to the poor: *You shall not pervert the justice due to your poor in their lawsuits* (Exod 23:6). In view of the possibility of structural violence and oppression of the poor and the weak in the society, Exod 23:6 commands that the poor should not be denied justice in the courts. As the poor are often lacking in power and status in the society, to deny them access to true justice through the courts is to render them both powerless and effectively silenced.²⁷ The protection of the poor from the perversion of justice and from exploitation is also a major theme in the prophecy of Amos. We shall discuss Amos' discourse on justice in the course of this work.

3.2 *Yahweh as the Attorney of the Poor*

The OT presents Yahweh as attorney of the poor. The author of Ps 82:3-4 presents a mythical figure of Yahweh enthroned in divine council or the assembly of the *elohim* (gods). He issues both an indictment and a command to the 'gods' who are assembled around him, that they should cease judging unjustly. Their commission is that they "defend the poor and fatherless" and "do justice to the afflicted and needy" (v.3).²⁸ The imperative verb, 'to judge' (*šiptû*), in Ps 82:3a, means 'to judge justly'. It seems, as M. E. Tate and H. J. Fabry propose, that this verse is directed to the official ruling class of that time (elders, judges, and kings), requiring them to actively intervene in the interest of powerless people who cannot

²⁷ DOMERIS, "ebyôn", CD Rom Edition.

²⁸ H. J. FABRY, "dal", in G. J. BOTTERWECK (ed.), *TDOT*, vol.3, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978, p226.

defend their rights.²⁹ The Psalms attach great importance to right conduct toward the poor. Yahweh expects the judges and leaders to protect the marginalized people in the society: the poor, the oppressed, those without support.³⁰ Psalm 72 portrays the ideal king as the defender of the poor. Ps 72:1f is a prayer that the king be given Yahweh's righteousness in order that he might judge Yahweh's people with righteousness, and the poor with justice. As the advocate of the 'ebyon and last court of appeal, he (the king) should "defend the cause of the poor of the people ('aniyyê-'am), give deliverance to the needy (yosia'libnê 'ebyôn) and the poor ('anî), and "him who has no helper" ('en 'ozér lo, Ps 72:12), and have pity on the weak (dal - vv.13f). These activities show that Yahweh executes his divine will through the king (cf Isa 11:4; Prov 29:14).³¹

The Wisdom writers declare that God is the protector of the poor (Ps 74:21; Prov 22:22-23). The God of the Bible is a God with a passionate concern for those whom society has ostracized and whose lack of power and status has made them especially vulnerable to exploitation - widows, orphans, and the poor. These belong to the group which Isaiah classifies under the name 'oppressed' (Isa 58:6-7): "...let the oppressed go free, ... break every yoke. ...share your bread with the hungry, and bring the homeless poor into your house...." In the absence of an earthly kinsman-redeemer, God stands as their protector and guardian.³²

²⁹ M. E. TATE, *Psalms 51-100*, WBC 20, Columbia: Thomas Nelson Pub., 1990, p.336; FABRY, "dal", p227.

³⁰ TATE, *Psalms 51-100*, p336

³¹ FABRY, "dal", p227.

³² DOMERIS, "'ebyôn", CD Rom Edition.

3.3 *The Prophets and the Option for the Poor*

The land and the wealth of the land are meant for the benefit of the people as a whole; hence all have a portion in the land. This is the basis of the law concerning the poor in Israel's legal system. Its aim is to help the victims of injustice.³³ Although Israel's legal system developed laws for the protection of the poor, yet there was a tension between Israel's laws and the actual situation; there was an increasing deterioration of the social inequality and the poverty of the poor increased. This disparity between the rich and the poor developed in distinctive ways during the monarchy.³⁴ The social structure helped to perpetuate the problem of poverty. According to E. Bammel "the economic development of the monarchy created new classes and thus accentuated social distinctions." Many of the "landowners, who alone had civil rights, also functioned as judges." This development worsened the position of the poor.³⁵ Though there was so much emphasis on the concern for the poor in Israel, the wealthy and privileged class exploited, or at least ignored, the poorer elements of the population. Much of the message of the prophets was spoken to condemn the evil of the callous wealthy upper classes and to defend the rights of the poor and the marginalized in the society (Isa 5:8; Amos 3:9; 4:1-3).³⁶ Amos raised his voice against the oppression of the poor and the needy. Amos accused the privileged class of oppression and of trampling on the poor (Amos 2:7; 4:1; 5:11). He

³³ Bammel, "Ptochos", p891.

³⁴ Bammel, "Ptochos", p890.

³⁵ Bammel, "Ptochos", p890.

³⁶ J. Huckle, "Poverty, Biblical Teaching on," in *The Catholic Encyclopedia for School and Home*, New York: Grolier Inc., 1965, p607.

employs an element of hyperbole to portray the tragic social injustice that was practiced by his contemporaries: "they sell the righteous (*saddîq*) for silver, and the needy (*ebyôn*) for a pair of sandals; the oppressed poor (*dallîm/`ânawîm*) are "trampled upon" and their access to progress impeded by the covetous rich and upper class.³⁷ The selling of the *saddîq* (righteous) for silver is due to the corruption of the judges, but the selling of the *'ebyon* (needy) for a pair of sandals because of a minimal debt is due to the avarice of the creditor. Here the prophet raises his voice against the unjust and unscrupulous slavery as a payment for debts which are not serious. Amos sees the unjustified selling of the poor into slavery as a payment for debts (Amos 2:6b, v.7a) as a crime.³⁸ Of particular significance is the parallelism of *'ebyôn* and *saddîq* (2:6; 5:12). *Saddîq* and *'ebyôn* are victims of injustice and exploitation (Amos 5:12). While the prophet does equate the poor with the righteous, this does not imply any sort of idealization of the state of poverty. The poor are 'righteous' not because poverty brings people especially close to God but because the rich have oppressed them and have denied them their rights.³⁹

Amos' concern is that the judicial system, which is supposed to uphold the cause of the poor, is corrupt. Justice is perverted and the poor is pushed out of the way. People afflict the righteous (*saddîq*), take bribe, and oppress the needy (*'ebyônim*) in the judicial process "in the gate" (Amos 5:12); because of the corruption of the judges, the innocent are

³⁷ D. STUART, *Hosea-Jonah*, WBC 31, Texas: Word Books, 1987, p316.

³⁸ BOTTERWECK, "'ebyôn", p31.

³⁹ L. J. HOPPE, *Being Poor*, Wilmington: Michael Glazier, 1987, p64.

pronounced guilty and the needy are deprived of their rights.⁴⁰ Amos raised his voice against a social structure that provides abundance for the few at the expense of the many.

The prophet raised his voice against those who gain wealth dishonestly (Amos 8:4-6), and used their wealth to perpetuate further injustice.⁴¹ Amos seems to see poverty as the creation of the rich. It would appear as if Amos is describing a class conflict between two classes: the poor and rich, but this is not so. In Amos, the poor are not really a class. The poor are poor because they are alone and defenseless. They are not, as L. J. Hoppe says, “in any way organized in opposition to the rich in some sort of a struggle.” On the other hand, Amos sees the rich, not as isolated individuals, but as a group, an influential cabal that have monopolized the political and economic powers in order to use them for their own advantage, without consideration for plight of others. They are rich precisely because they are able to marshal the forces at their disposal, especially the judicial system, to undercut the poor and thereby increase their own wealth.⁴² While they exploited the poor, they frequented the temple with their offerings and tithes. This was the case of injustice cloaked in religious observances (2: 6-8).⁴³ Amos declared that the worship of such people was sin (Amos 4:4f), a thing hateful to Yahweh (Amos 5:21-24) whose first demand is justice.⁴⁴

⁴⁰ BOTTERWECK, “ebyôn”, p31.

⁴¹ C. J. H. WRIGHT, “The ‘Righteous Rich’ in the Old Testament,” August 5, 2010, www.gotquestions.org.

⁴² L. J. HOPPE, *Being Poor*, Wilmington: Michael Glazier, 1987, p64.

⁴³ G. FARR, “The Language of Amos, Popular or Cultic, *VT* 16 (1966) 320 (pp. 312-324).

⁴⁴ W. J. DOORLY, *Prophet of Justice, Understanding the book of Amos*, New York: Paulist Press, 1989, pp28-29.

Like Amos, Isaiah also railed against the wealthy landowners and corrupt judges whose scruples did not prevent them from conspiring in order to rob the poor of their rights. As was the case with Amos, the prophet Isaiah sees poverty as the creation of the wealthy. Poverty is made by the corruption of the judicial system and the avarice of the wealthy. They conspire to deprive the poor of their rights and to confiscate their land in order to increase their own immense holdings⁴⁵ (Isa 5:8). Isaiah, like Amos, denounced the wealthy class for exploiting the poor: "It is you who have devoured the vineyard; the spoil of the poor is in your houses..." (Isa 3:14-15). The prophet declares Judah's worship in the Temple unacceptable and even offensive to God because of the crimes against the poor that were committed by those whose "generosity" made worship in the Temple the lavish affair that it was (1:10-17).⁴⁶ Given these harsh words of judgment, the prophet looks forward to a Davidic king whose reign will be marked by the triumph of justice and righteousness (9:7; 11:5). Unlike those judges who have perverted the judicial system in favour of the wealthy, the ideal king whom Isaiah hoped for will judge the poor with righteousness and decide with equity for the meek of the earth" (Isa 11:3-4).⁴⁷

Like the prophets before him, Micah condemned the unconscionable exploitation of the poor by the rich and people of power and privilege. The prophet raised his voice against

⁴⁵ HOPPE, *Being Poor*, p66.

⁴⁶ HOPPE, *Being Poor*, p66.cf. also A. S. HERBERT, *The Book of the Prophet Isaiah 1-39*, Cambridge: Cambridge university Press, 1973, p90; J. D. W. WATTS, *Isaiah 1-33*, WBC 24, Texas: Word Books, 1985, p172.

⁴⁷ HOPPE, *Being Poor*, p67.

the greedy political class for their cupidity and avarice (Mic 2:1-2). He condemned the corrupt judges for perverting justice - giving "judgment for a bribe" (Mic 3:11). The prophet employs a touching imagery to describe the effect of a corrupt political and judicial set-up in the land on the poor: They "eat the flesh of my people, flay their skin off them, break their bones in pieces, and chop them up like meat in a kettle, like flesh in a caldron" (Mic 3:3). The priesthood, which should have protested this corruption, said nothing because the priests did not want to endanger their own economic status.⁴⁸ Micah condemned the religious leaders for keeping quiet in the face of corruption: the "priests teach for a price," and the "prophets give oracles for money" (Mic 3:11).

In Ezek 18:12, the oppression of the poor and needy is listed among the abominable things. Ezekiel maintains that the sins of the people of Judah were responsible for the tragedies that befell the nation. He singles out, among other sins, the oppression of "the poor and needy," and lending at interest (cf. Exod 22:25 cf. Deut 23:20-21) as crimes which led Judah to exile. When Ezekiel uses the word 'poor', he means the socially, economically and legally deprived person.⁴⁹

3.4 *Spiritual Poverty in Zephaniah: The Poor of the Lord (anawîm)*

With Zephaniah, the term "poor" acquired a spiritual meaning. While earlier prophets condemned the evil people and corrupt practices which made poverty a reality in Israel and Judah, Zephaniah borrows their vocabulary (Zeph 2:3 and 3:12) and reinterprets it. He is not talking about material

⁴⁸ HOPPE, *Being Poor*, p69.

⁴⁹ HOPPE, *Being Poor*, pp78-79.

poverty as an evil but about a poverty of spirit as a good. The prophet does not call for the practice of voluntary poverty, but he is calling the people of Judah to express a kind of faith in Yahweh which is nothing less than abandonment to the divine will and absolute confidence in divine goodness (1:14-15).⁵⁰ These are the lowly ('*anî wadal*), the '*anawim*', the 'humble of the land' (*kol-'anwê ha'ares*), who keep God's commands; "seek righteousness" and humility (Zeph 2:3; 3:12f). Understood in this way poverty is opposed to pride, to an attitude of self-sufficiency. On the other hand, it is synonymous with faith, with abandonment and trust in the Lord.⁵¹

The poverty which Zephaniah speaks about is not actual poverty, but spiritual poverty. Spiritual poverty finds its highest expression in the Beatitudes of the New Testament (NT). In the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus proclaims the poor in spirit as blessed (Matt 5:3).⁵² While it is true that Zephaniah does spiritualize poverty, he does not ignore poverty as a social and economic problem.

4. The Church and the Option for the Poor

Down the ages, the popes have raised their voices against inequality, injustice and the exploitation of the masses by the privileged class of the society. Leo XIII declares that the poor do not deserve their plight.⁵³ The Pope decries the situation

⁵⁰ HOPPE, *Being Poor*, p77.

⁵¹ G. GUTIERREZ, *A Theology of Liberation*, New York: Orbis Books, 1988, p169.

⁵² GUTIERREZ, *A Theology of Liberation*, p170.

⁵³ LEO XIII, *Rerum Novarum*, 1891, par 5, 6.

where “a very few and exceedingly rich have laid a yoke almost of slavery on the unnumbered masses, majority of who are poor. Pius XI decried the situation where the resources of the earth are not rightly distributed and equitably shared.”⁵⁴ Vatican II declares that “excessive economic and social differences militate against social justice” (*Mater et Magistra*, Par 140). C. Boff and G. V. Pixley maintain that “the poor are made poor and kept poor by structures of domination”⁵⁵; structures which favour the rich and people of power and privilege at the expense of the others in the society. In line with this view, J. P. Miranda holds that “the misery and exploitation of the poor do not just ‘happen’; they are due not to ‘neglect’ but to the very logic of the system.”⁵⁶ Injustice is not an accident; it is engendered by unjust social, political and economic structures that favour a privileged view at the expense of the vast majority. Such unjust structures demand for change. Gutierrez remarks that the beneficiaries of the corrupt and unjust social structures are often the powerful and wealthy members of the society. This privileged class often seeks to maintain the status quo and resist every move for social reform. Poverty can be engendered by a prevailing social order that creates abundance for a privilege few while leaving out the vast majority. While major countries of the world are recording strong economic growth, there is the tendency toward the pauperization and growing exclusion of the vast majority of the people.⁵⁷ John XXIII argues that there is ‘manifest injustice’ in placing a whole group of citizens “in an inferior economic and social status, with less purchasing power that required for a decent livelihood.” In *Populorum*

⁵⁴ PIUS XI, *Quadragesimo Anno*, 1931, Par II, Section 3.

⁵⁵ BOFF – PIXLEY, *The Bible, The Church, and The Poor*, p11.

⁵⁶ MIRANDA, “A Liberation Challenge,” p104.

⁵⁷ GUTIERREZ, *The Power of the Poor in History*, p132.

Progression (1967), Paul VI held that the luxury of a few is an insult to the wretched poverty of the vast masses.⁵⁸ The situation of the poor and the widening gap between the poor and the rich in many countries of the world calls into question the social order that exploits the poor.

5. Conclusion

Improving the conditions for social justice in particular is fundamental to the promotion of peace in a variety of contexts throughout the world.⁵⁹ In the *Option for the Poor*, Donal Dorr places the the main responsibility for bringing about a change in the structural imbalance in the society on the rich and the powerful in the society, since these are the ones who have position and power in the society to make policies and make "the decisions that really matter," decisions on which the future depends.⁶⁰ It is the responsibility of government to defend the poor from injustice, oppression and exploitation. Government must first establish laws that prohibit and punish injustice. These laws should have significant penalties and be rigorously enforced so that the poor are not exploited and defrauded. Second, government must provide a legal system that allows for the redress of grievances where plaintiffs can bring their case to court for settlement. If those in power would prevent this exploitation of the weak, if judges were just, and not bribe-takers, if men were honest and righteous in their transactions, the earth would bask in the sunshine of God's favour (Isa 58: 6-14).

⁵⁸ PAUL VI, *Populorum Progression*, 1967, no.3.

⁵⁹ R. R. RUETHER, "War and Peace in the Christian Tradition," *Concilium: A Council For Peace*, 195 (1988) p23.

⁶⁰ DORR, *Option for the Poor*, p282.

The Church is an advocate of the poor, the Church must raise its voice against corruption in the land and the wanton avarice of the political class that engender poverty and stagnate development. To do this the Church leaders must themselves be above board. Indeed all humans must raise the voice against a social structure that creates abundance for a few while the majority of the populace live in poverty.