

THE CAUSE OF THE POOR AND UNDERPRIVILEGED IN THE OLD TESTAMENT AND RELEVANCE TO THE 'BIG FOUR' AGENDA

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Abstract

The Old Testament Scriptures address the issue of poverty in the ancient nation of Israel. The legal provisions and prophetic teachings sought to cushion the poor and underprivileged from possible oppression and social injustices. Recently, the Government of Kenya prioritized assistance to the poor and inclusive economic growth through the 'Big Four' agenda which include; food, healthcare, housing, and employment. This paper entails a study that looks at the legal stipulations regarding the "poor" and underprivileged in the Old Testament, and relevant lessons for modern engagement with the poor in the society; realizing that the 'Big Four' agenda will largely depend on the criteria for ascertaining the identity of the poor and underprivileged, and a proper and clear funding framework. In addition, the study interrogates the effectiveness of the 'Big Four' plan as a strategy for poverty alleviation. The socio-scientific criticism to examine the cultural and social world of the Old Testament was employed.

Key Words: Poor, Underprivileged, 'Big Four,' Old Testament

INTRODUCTION

The poor and underprivileged comprise a sizeable section of any human society. The Old Testament Scriptures demonstrate that the welfare of the poor is not just a human concern but also a divine concern. It offered guidelines and legal provisions for the protection of the poor and underprivileged from oppression and social injustices. In the ancient world, just like in the modern world, the Old Testament was very much alive to the fact that the poor and other vulnerable groups like orphans, people living with disabilities, widows, and strangers needed protection from forms of social injustices. This study is divided into two parts.

The first part looks at the poor and underprivileged groups in the Old Testament. It establishes God's concern for the poor, the communal responsibility to assist the poor and legal stipulations and structures in the Old Testament that helped to reduce poverty. The second part of the paper interrogates the effectiveness of the 'Big Four' as a measure of poverty alleviation, using the insights from the Bible. The 'Big Four' agenda prioritizes four basic issues that are critical in uplifting the living standards of Kenyan citizens. These four areas include food and nutritional security; quality and affordable healthcare; affordable and decent housing, and employment creation through manufacturing (Parliamentary Budget Office, 2018). It is envisioned that these four strategies will be instrumental in the fight against poverty and in promoting inclusive economic growth.

The Problem

Any government is faced with the question of the poor and underprivileged in society. Recently, the Kenyan government identified four critical areas as mentioned above to address the issue of poverty and spur inclusive economic growth. However, this strategy faced opposition from various stakeholders even before its take-off. This paper argues that the conception of the strategy and its implementation strategy failed to take into consideration some key aspects such as the identity of the poor and the source of funding welfare programs. This study argues that the way in which the Old Testament Scriptures handled the issue of the poor and underprivileged can offer some insights into the contemporary situation. Undeniably, there is a socioeconomic gap between ancient Israel and the contemporary situation; as a result, the study seeks to discover timeless principles and intentions from this ancient setting.

Objectives

The main objective of this paper is to explore how the Old Testament addressed the cause of the poor and underprivileged, and to identify insights into the contemporary situation. In particular the study seeks to:

1. Interrogate the concern for the poor in the Mosaic law, Poetic and Wisdom Literature, and Prophetic writings of the Old Testament.

2. Identify various categories of the poor and the strategies employed to alleviate poverty and promote social justice in society.
3. Use the biblical insight to critique the effectiveness of the 'Big Four' agenda.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The Identity of the Poor and Underprivileged in Ancient Israel

This section highlights relevant material and studies that inform the direction of the study. To begin with, it is important to first establish the identity of the "poor" in ancient Israel before looking at ways in which their concerns were addressed. In the Old Testament, there are six Hebrew terms used to refer to the "poor." The terms *'Ānî* and *'ānāw* (meaning "oppressed," "poor," or "humble") are used to designate "one who suffers not from a deserved, self-inflicted poverty but from poverty caused by wrongful impoverishment or disposition" (Bromiley, 1999, p. 905). In addition, the term *'Ebyōn* meaning "in want, needy, poor" can also refer to the very poor and homeless. Further, the Hebrew word *Dal* refers to those who are powerless due to their low social status; other terms that highlight the idea of social inferiority are *Rāš* and *Miskēn* (Bromiley, 1999, p. 905).

Mainly, these terms demonstrate that first, poverty potentially resulted from oppression and social injustices in ancient society. By implication, those referred to as poor were able-bodied and economically viable individuals but rendered impoverished, homeless, and destitute by social injustices (Prov. 13:23, 22:7, 16:22). The poor and underprivileged found themselves in their present state not because they lacked ambition or a will to free themselves from poverty but because they were under oppressive powers. Thus, providing a solution to poverty emanating from social injustices needs a solution that addresses the core problem of social injustice in society.

Other Causes of Poverty in Ancient Israel

Second, apart from social injustices being a major source of poverty in ancient Israel, natural calamities also predisposed one to poverty. The land-based subsistence economy largely depended on favorable weather conditions. This means a relatively rich person could suddenly become poor in cases where famine, insects, or diseases destroyed one's crops. One could also be easily rendered poor due to other unpredictable human factors such as sickness, injury, and war (Mason, 1988, p. 301). These unpredictable eventualities affected both individuals and communities in the antiquity. It could unexpectedly affect hardworking individuals and render them dependent poor, the same category as the sick workers and disabled (Mason, 1988, p. 301). The environmental, natural or human factors occasioned a temporary situation that needed a corrective measure to stabilize the affected individuals and families. It, therefore, suffices to recognize that a solution to this kind of poverty emanating from natural crises needs a remedial approach to restore those affected to their former socio-economic state.

The third cause of poverty in the ancient world is summarized by Bromiley, "poverty results primarily from unrighteous conduct by either the poor individuals or the larger community" (1999, p. 905). Some fraction of the ancient poor had themselves to blame for their condition; perhaps because of their laziness and lack of economic ambition to change their situation (Prov. 6:6-11, 21:17, 23:21). Assisting such poor persons should involve a distinctive strategy that seeks to encourage them to change their situation.

The Cause for the Poor and Underprivileged in the Pentateuch

The Mosaic law in Deuteronomy 15:4-5 indicates God's displeasure with poverty. The text emphatically indicates that there should be no poor people among the nation of Israel if they obey God's laws. However, this promise was pegged on the condition that the people of the ancient nation of Israel wholeheartedly obeyed God and his laws. Since such obedience was going to be a struggle, the law of Moses within the same context (verse 11) anticipated that the poor will always be there. Hence, it provided stipulations concerning the cause of the poor and underprivileged.

Character of God as the Basis for Social Justice

In the Bible, the basis for addressing the plight of the poor and underprivileged stems from the character of God. The law of Moses not only revealed God's will but also demonstrated God's character and heart on matters concerning social justice. Justice is "rooted in the very nature of God, and his character is the true norm or standard" (Richards, 1985, p. 369). In the Pentateuch, God is revealed as just and righteous; He does what is right and expects human beings to do the same. Justice and righteousness in Hebrew are expressed using two words: *Mishpat* and *Tsedaqah*. The word *Tsedaqah* "reflects God's righteousness in moral character and his covenant love and faithfulness, as well as legislative, judicial, and administrative aspects of his action in the world," while *Mishpat*

refers to “God’s role as lawgiver and just judge as well as the attribute of rectitude” (Vanhoozer, Bartholomew, Treier & Wright, 2005, p. 415). These two words commonly appear as a pair and they express the concept of social justice in the Old Testament. In addition, some four important components of justice include distribution (people getting their fair share in society’s good and rewards), power (right use of power), equity (justice required fairness to all parties); rights (upholding the rights of other people) (Marshall, 2005, pp. 6–7). Thus, it can be argued that social justice is the right use of power to bring about fairness and equity to all people irrespective of their economic or social standing in society.

The prophetic section of the Old Testament also expressed the heart of God on judicial matters. For instance, Prophet Amos wrote, “But let justice roll on like a river, righteousness like a never-failing stream!” (Amos 5:24; New International Version (NIV) here and thereafter). In addition, God’s people were reminded of God who is just and does what is right; “The Lord within her is righteous; he does no wrong. Morning by morning he dispenses his justice, and every new day he does not fail, yet the unrighteous know no shame” (Zeph. 3:5). Marshall rightly notes that “Justice belongs to the very being of God. Justice is not something God aspires to; it is the heart of who God is and what God does” (2005, p. 22). Therefore, the admonition to God’s people to be just toward the poor and underprivileged was solely based on God’s character and his just dealings with his people in the past. God’s demand that justice prevails reflects His heart for the vulnerable groups like the poor, widows, fatherless and strangers.

The Theme of Social Justice in the Law of Moses

Protection of the poor and underprivileged

The Old Testament Scriptures made provisions for the protection of the poor and underprivileged from oppressors. The Mosaic Law sought to protect vulnerable groups such as the poor, slaves, widows, orphans, aliens, and wage-earners. For instance, the poor were not to be denied justice, kidnapped or sold (Deut. 24:7, Ex. 22:25, 23:6). The people were not to take advantage of widows or orphans because the Lord listens to them (Ex. 22:22; Lev. 19:9-10). A hired hand was supposed to be given their due wage by the end of each day (Deut. 24: 15). These vulnerable groups, and especially the aliens, needed protection because “not only were they the main victims of material misery, but they had no legal identity; anyone could oppress them without running the risk of legal action” (Epzstein, 1986, p. 109). An alien, for example, can be helplessly oppressed by a native without the local risking jail or any judicial consequence. Since the poor and other vulnerable groups will always be part of society, God’s people were required to treat them rightly and justly. Epzstein notes that “even if poverty is an inevitable evil, everything must be done to try, if not to overcome it, at least to reduce it as much as possible” (Epzstein, 1986, p. 112). Social justice should, therefore, be an aspiration of a nation that prioritizes the concerns of the poor and other vulnerable groups.

Again, on strangers, the Mosaic law offered them legal protection. The aliens specifically included, “‘people of the land’ and passing strangers, the *nokri*, who, for example as prisoners of war, only stayed temporarily, part of the population was made up of strangers with permanent residence, the *gerim*, singular *ger*” (Epzstein, 1986, p. 115). The ancient people of Israel were encouraged to reciprocate compassion to strangers just as the Lord had shown them compassion when they were foreigners in Egypt. The teaching of the law not only mandated the protection of strangers but also demanded that they should be loved as oneself (Lev. 19:33-34). Even the economically viable strangers were regarded as underprivileged because of their lack of citizenship and property rights which limited their economic opportunities and made them vulnerable to poverty and exploitation (Mason, 1988, p. 301). Later in history, the prophets authoritatively quoted and applied the law of Moses; for they believed the law “...provided not for survival of the fittest, but for protection of the weaker members of the community” (Schlossberg, Berthoud, Pinnock & Olasky, 1988, pp. 26–27).

Protection of the rich

The Mosaic Law not only protected the poor but also the rich. It opposed social injustices irrespective of who perpetuated it. The law safeguarded every individual whether rich or poor by putting everyone on an equal footing; “Human justice is based on God’s law (Deut. 1:17; Gen. 9:5-6) not on human reasoning (Hab. 1:7)” (Elwell, 2000, p. 440). The Torah clearly stipulated laws for acquitting the innocent and condemning the guilty. There was to be no partiality, favoritism, or perversion of justice (Lev. 19:15) because the righteous and just God (Gen. 18:25; Deut. 10:17) deals with all people justly. The rich and poor are equal before the Lord who created them all (Prov. 22:2; Job 34:19).

Explicitly, on the one hand, the law protected the poor from social injustice, “Do not deny justice to your poor people in their lawsuits” (Ex. 23:6). On the other hand, the law also clearly protected the rich from unjust treatment, “and do not show favoritism to a poor man in his lawsuit” (Ex. 23:3); that is, for instance, tilting court cases against the rich. The Bible emphasizes treating both the rich and poor fairly and justly (Grudem, 2010, p. 279). When the rich were not the cause of the injustices perpetrated against the poor, the law protected their rights to own their hard-earned wealth. It suffices to mention here that this provision can have several implications for today on how people view the rich and their wealth, but this will be discussed in the next section. The subsection below details some of the basic provisions in the Pentateuch for assisting different kinds of poor people within the ancient Israelite community.

Legal Measures for Assisting the Poor in the Pentateuch

Zero-interest loan and debt repayment

Israelites, unlike other money lenders, were commanded to lend money to the needy among them at no interest. If by the end of six years the debtor had not fully repaid the loan, the stipulation demanded that the balance be canceled in the seventh year (Ex. 22:25; Lev. 25:35-38; Deut. 15:1-11).

Just as the Mosaic law made provisions for lending, it also made specific provisions for repayment. The Israelites who sold or found themselves under the yoke of slavery and could not buy back their freedom, were to be released at the end of six years unconditionally (Ex. 21:1-11; Lev. 25:39-53; Deut. 15:12-18). The law provided ways of redemption to a debt-laden Israelite. Likewise, the same law applied to the redemption of property (land or house) to the person or family that sold it (Lev. 28:23-32). Mason rightly calls this type of a loan a “compassionate loan” (Mason, 1988, p. 301). It was a loan in which a poor but economically viable person was granted (by a member of family or clan) to regain that economic stability which was perhaps lost due to crop failure in the previous harvest. This type of loan was like an economic stimulus initiative to reposition one economically from a previous economic loss.

Law on Land Use and the Year of Jubilee

Israelites were to cultivate the land and harvest for six years, but in the seventh year, the land was to lie unplowed and unused. This was to enable the deserving poor among them and wild animals to get food from it. The same applied to their vineyard and olive groves (Ex. 23:10-11; Lev. 25:1-7).

In addition, the law provided for the year of freedom known as the year of Jubilee; as an attempt to protect both the weak and their property (Lev. 25:11-31). It also ensured that the poor had a way of getting back their personal freedom and their property restored at least during their lifetimes. This provision must have profited the poor who were able-bodied members of society but who found themselves trapped in debts.

The Law on Gleaning

During harvest, Israelites were instructed not to reap to the very edges of their fields, or gather gleanings of their harvest; rather, they were supposed to leave it for the poor, widows, orphans and sojourners (Lev. 19:9-10, 23:22; Deut. 24:19-21). Emphatically, this provision in the Mosaic law favored the dependent poor who could not secure loans; and so it was an act of charity from the landowners (Mason, 1988, p. 306).

Third-year tithe

Israelites were commanded to bring all their tithes at the end of every three years so that it can be given mainly to the Levites but also to the aliens, orphans and the widows (Deut. 14:28-29; 26:12). This facilitated welfare for the unprivileged. The dependent members of the society who could not secure loans for their economic development looked forward to receiving some charity from the temple kitty apportioned to the Levites.

In summary, these provisions in the Mosaic law demonstrate that addressing the plight of the poor today, even at the policy level, requires a clear identification of the dependent poor and economically viable persons to be able to employ both distinctive and effective measures in assisting them. The dependent poor will need to be organized into a welfare system; while the economically viable individuals or able-bodied persons can be offered zero or low-interest loans to revitalize their economic situation.

Defending the Cause of the Poor in the Prophetic Corpus

In essence, the message of the prophets relied on the law of Moses; the prophets only applied the law at different times, circumstances, and to a different audience. The law defined how relationships were supposed to be safeguarded. Apart from the law, the character of God was also the basis for engaging God's people to do what is just and right. In the prophetic material, God is presented as a just judge (Isa. 30:18) who judges the leaders that oppress His people (Isa. 3:13-15).

Specifically, the prophets denounced social injustices in the ancient nation of Israel (Isa. 1:17, 5:23, 11:4; Jer. 5:28, 22:13-17; Ez. 22:29), and advocated for the rights of the poor, needy, fatherless, and aliens (Isa.1:17, 11:4; Zech. 7:9-10). It should also be noted that the prophets related historic punishments upon the nation of Israel as a divine response to social injustices against the vulnerable in society (Richards, 1985, p. 369). In their times, the prophets pointed out that obedience to the law leads to justice (Jer. 21:12, 22:2-3; Ezk. 45:9).

The theme of social justice mattered to the prophets because it mattered to God. The book of Amos (2:7), for instance, talks of the sin of Israel that, "they trample on the heads of the poor" and also "deny justice to the oppressed." The poor in their powerlessness lost their rights to the rich and continuously became susceptible to exploitation. In prophet Amos' time, as Thorogood observes, "... the poor people got into debt which they could not repay. Then the merchants and landowners made them work like slaves and treated them very harshly" (Thorogood & Theological Education Fund, 1991, p. 23). Those who were to execute justice did it for a bribe; "the privileged classes in Amos's day did not take account of the poor as fellow children in God's kingdom. They did not take care of the underprivileged; rather they lorded it over them" (McComiskey, 1992, p. 420). Similarly, the prophet Micah (2:2-9) reprimanded those who defraud a man of his property and inheritance because they have the power to do so, and those who loot from strangers and harass women. Whenever the leaders of Israel (prophets, priests, and rulers) failed in their mandate to execute justice, they were certainly judged (Mic. 3:9-11). The leaders, including judges, were supposed to treat all people equally as opined by Marshall, "...judges were explicitly required to disregard social and economic status in hearing cases and to refrain from selling justice to the highest bidder" (2005, p. 38). And since this was happening in the land at this time, God declared judgment upon these leaders. As Marshall comments, "This is why meeting the needs of the poor is not a matter of charity in the Bible, but an act of justice, for it helps the move society in the direction God intends the world to be" (ibid., p. 41). In his character, God does not tolerate any form of injustice. Whenever there was social injustice, the prophets would often reiterate the demands of the law and its consequences; for, "social evil results from our rebellion against God and our consequent selfishness toward our neighbor" (Sider, 1999, p. 151). Therefore, the law, during the times of the prophets, remained as the sole guide on matters concerning social justice.

METHODOLOGY

The study employed a socio-scientific criticism, as an approach to biblical interpretation, to examine the social and economic world of the Old Testament. Additionally, the study employed the intertextuality approach in relating scriptural texts in the various texts in the Hebrew Bible. In the next section, insights gained from the Old Testament are applied to the contemporary situation in Kenya. In order to address the historical and socio-economic distance between ancient Israel and the contemporary world, the discussion majorly focuses on relevant principles, transferable sensitivities and intentions in ancient Israel for contemporary society.

FINDINGS AND APPLICATION

Relevance to the 'Big Four' Agenda

Recently, the Government of Kenya came up with a strategy to deal with the question of poor citizens. The plan prioritised assistance to the poor, and inclusive economic growth in its program dubbed the 'Big Four' agenda. The five-year strategy (2018-2022) focusses on issues that are critical in uplifting standards of living. As mentioned earlier, the programme places emphasis on four areas that include food and nutritional security; quality and affordable healthcare; affordable and decent housing, and employment creation through manufacturing. The Parliamentary Budget Watch report highlights the goal and expectations of the plan.

The idea behind the big four plan is to implement projects and policies that will accelerate economic growth and transform lives by creating jobs, enabling Kenyans to meet their basic needs, improve health standards, improve living conditions, lower cost of living and reduce poverty and inequality. If properly implemented the big four agenda has the capacity to enhance the country's economic performance and improve the livelihoods of Kenyans" (Parliamentary Budget Office, 2018, p. 7).

The effectiveness of this plan in eradicating poverty, solving economic inequalities, and spurring economic growth raises key questions that need to be probed in light of the biblical insights above. It is the responsibility and constitutional mandate of any government to ensure that its citizens live a decent life with improved living conditions, but the strategy to achieve this end must be well thoughtout for greater results. The next subsection looks at some flaws in the ‘Big Four’ agenda that need to be reconsidered by the relevant stakeholders. The scope of the paper will not allow looking at all the four areas; however, focus is given to the housing project that received a backlash from the public even before its take-off.

Apparent Flaws in the ‘Big Four’ Agenda and Biblical Insights

Funding of the programme

The implementation process of the ‘Big Four’ has not been without a challenge. For instance, when the government attempted to roll out the housing programme, many voices of various stakeholders rose against it. Part of the reason for the opposition of this ambitious programme was the plan by the government to impose additional charges on workers’ payslips to fund the housing project. Initially, the government did not reveal the source of the funds for the proposed projects, and ordinarily, many citizens expected the government to reorganise its priorities and apportion part of the current revenue to these key areas. However, this faced stiff opposition from various stakeholders when the government ordered employers to remit deductions from workers, and without consultation.

Noting that many Kenyans are unemployed, the government was, in a way, trying to use the few employed (privileged) to carry the overall burden of funding the housing programme. The strategy also exhibited some other deficiencies. The contributors to the scheme were not tangibly guaranteed to own a home at the end, perhaps because they are considered to be ‘rich’; also, those who already own homes and/or nearing retirement were not considered in the strategy. Likewise, those already in mortgage plans were not considered. Again, concerns of workers living in rural areas were not factored in since the houses were mainly to be constructed in major towns and cities. In this case, the policy disadvantages the employed and hardworking citizens; they are compelled to finance a government project that does not even directly benefit them. This is an injustice against the privileged members of the society and therefore they should be protected from any form of expression just like the Old Testament law protected both the poor and the rich. It is unjust for the government to distribute hard-earned workers’ pay to the unemployed for subsidised housing. Although the employed are not listed in the Old Testament as the privileged, in today’s terms they can be an easy target when the state wants to mobilize funds.

Establishing the identity of the poor

It is imperative that the government ascertains the identity of those whom it considers as poor or underprivileged. An educated and able-bodied person who lacks employment should not be categorised as poor alongside, say, a person living with a disability. Also, a person who is poor because of a natural calamity should be clearly identified for both welfare and reinstating the individual to the former economic state. It is important to distinguish these groups so as not to end up indirectly encouraging idleness.

Grudem rightly argues that the idea that those privileged (the employed here synonymously held with the rich) should be taxed more to fund poverty alleviation programmes is both an unjust and unfair move (Grudem, 2010, p. 279). It is biblically unsupported when in wanting to offer assistance to the poor that you end up committing an injustice against the rich.

Reasons for being poor

As discussed earlier, poverty can emanate from diverse causes; it is critical to ascertain the cause of a particular nature of poverty before offering solutions. A destitute situation arising from social injustice, for instance, needs to be rectified by giving people equal platforms and opportunities to work and support themselves. Solving issues of social injustices against the poor and underprivileged will enable many people to work with their hands and support their families. The government, in an effort to address such kinds of poverty, should work on improving the ease of doing business, punishing crime, abolishing oppressive taxation and laws that hinder peoples’ economic ambitions. In the case of housing, the government should offer incentives to building companies, and tax exemptions on building materials to enable people to build their own homes. The youth who lack capital should be helped with start-up capital for private businesses. It is thus imperative to identify the source of poverty prior to addressing it.

The ever-growing gap between the rich and the poor can only be reduced not by imposing taxes upon the rich but by providing equal opportunities and basic services to all people. It is true that by empowering people to work for their needs, we also affirm their dignity, “the struggle for social justice embraces the defense of human dignity, the

liberation from oppression, and the building up of a just and participatory system of government and of the economy” (Reventlow & Hoffman, 1992, p. 160).

Compulsion or Compassion Assistance

The attempt by the government of Kenya to involuntarily impose taxes on workers is a critical concern that should be interrogated. In the Old Testament, helping the poor and underprivileged was a matter of compassion rather than compulsion. Compassion to the poor is not a legally enforceable law rather it comes from a concern for fellow humans and love for one’s neighbour. Instead of imposing additional taxes on employed workers, the government should consider providing incentives for private businesses and initiatives to flourish so that they can be able to absorb more workforce. Thus, effective assistance should pay attention to the shared moral obligation by the people to help those in need.

Government and economic equality

It is noted that there are two common approaches employed by undeveloped nations to assist the poor. They include “establishing the foundations for sustained economic growth; and designing redistribution policies, to protect citizens in case of income loss—or other conditions which attack their continued economic viability”(Mason, 1988, p. 295).

While it is agreeable that the government has a constitutional obligation to improve the welfare of its people, the method in which this is carried out is equally important. “The principle of taking from the rich or from everybody else to give to the poor” (Grudem, 2010, p. 281) is flawed. Any attempt to equalize people’s economic status in society results in an injustice on a hardworking population because people have different abilities and different levels of economic goals. Redistribution of hard-earned money from the rich to the poor demeans hard work.

Equality of possessions could not be maintained apart from penalizing good habits (hard work, productivity, frugality) and rewarding bad habits (profligate spending, wastefulness, frittering time on unproductive activities). The longer such “redistribution of wealth” continued in this hypothetical city, the more the productive people would just decide to give up (for they cannot enjoy the fruits of their labor) and the society would spiral downward into poverty and despair (Grudem, 2010, p. 282).

Therefore, the government should refrain from imposing economic equality in a nation. There is no justification in Scripture that the government should distribute the wealth of the rich to the poor. The Law of Moses provided for the protection of both the rich and the poor so long as injustices were not involved in acquiring the current economic status.

CONCLUSION

In the Old Testament Scriptures, concern for the poor and underprivileged was given prominence. The Mosaic law made some provisions that protected the poor, aliens, orphans, widows and underprivileged. Likewise, the Mosaic law protected the rich who obtained their wealth in a just manner. The legal provisions in the Mosaic law paid close attention to the identity of the poor. On one hand, the able-bodied poor received loans that should be repaid but could be waived at the end of six years. In cases where the land or the freedom of the poor and underprivileged was exchanged, the year of Jubilee promised full and unconditional redemption. On the other hand, the dependent poor received charity from the temple and the right to glean in already harvested fields. At the heart of addressing the plight of the poor lies the issue of social justice; the Old Testament Scriptures condemned leaders who enrich themselves by oppressing the poor. The prophets applied the stipulations of the law in their respective times and contexts. They condemned rampant injustices perpetuated in their societies and instructed their audience to be just and compassionate to the poor in response to God’s goodness. These provisions demonstrated that the Old Testament took the issue of the poor with seriousness and sought to offer effective solutions to the issue of assisting the poor.

The biblical insight gained from this exploration can potentially inform modern socio-economic programmes and policies that seek to address the plight of the poor. In response to the ‘Big Four’ agenda by the government of Kenya, there is a need to customize poverty alleviation measures in relation to the various categories of the poor and underprivileged in society. Assistance in the form of charity and donations should be limited to the dependent poor; while the economically viable individuals should be empowered (through loans, tax exemptions, and incentives) to earn a living and support themselves. Issues of social injustice should be rectified to afford all people with equal opportunities. Instead of seeking to redistribute wealth from the rich to the poor, the government should seek to

empower citizens to use their God-given talents to earn a living, create jobs, utilise their opportunities, and economically support themselves.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Categorize and provide distinctive poverty mitigation measures to those considered to be poor. The government should be able to distinguish the economically viable poor from the dependent poor and use different strategies to address their needs- i.e. welfare/charity, loan, incentives among other strategies.
2. The government should offer incentives and tax exemptions on the areas touching on the 'Big Four' to ensure inclusivity and participation by the citizens.
3. Encourage compassionate initiatives to the poor and giving back to the community by individuals and organisations.
4. Ensure social justice is realised in society especially in the court of law. The study established that social injustices work to imprison the poor in their state. A society where justice is guaranteed offers equal opportunities to all.

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