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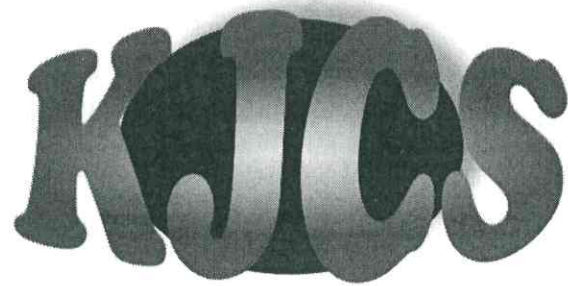
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FORWARD FOR THE MAIDEN EDITION

Kashere Journal of Christian Studies (KJCS) is a peer-reviewed Journal of (Christian Studies) the Department of Religious Studies, Faculty of Humanities, Management & Social Sciences, Federal University of Kashere, Gombe State, Nigeria. Its visionary mandate is to stand out innovatively in the dissemination of excellent research findings among the academia nationally and internationally.

KJCS is devoted to serious intellectual discourse on religious issues as they affect Nigeria and Africa at large. As such, it is not a confessional journal but its commitment is to facilitate objectives religious debates for national development.

In this maiden edition, contributions are drawn from universities far and near and topical issues relating to daily experience were touched.

The Editorial board ceases this opportunity to thank our esteemed assessors, editorial consultants and dear contributors for making the first edition of this Journal a reality.

Thank you and God bless you while anticipating looking forward to seeing your articles for the next edition.

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EDITORIAL KEYNOTE

KJCS is a peer-reviewed journal of the Department of Religious Studies, Federal University of Kashere, Gombe, Gombe State. The essence of the Journal is to stand-out innovatively in the dissemination of excellent research findings both locally and internationally.

To this extent, the Journal welcomes and encourages well-researched articles that cut-across all spheres of life, more especially in the areas of the different religions.

In this maiden edition, contributions are drawn from various universities across Nigeria, including those addressing contemporary issues like gender imbalance, corruption, poverty alleviation, rape and its psychological effects, politics and a host of other contemporary issues. Therefore, we highly appreciate the interest shown by academics.

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The Editorial Board of Kashere Journal of Christian Studies, Department of Religious Studies, Faculty of Humanities and Social Science, Federal University of Kashere, Gombe State will only consider:

1. Articles that are of relevance on Religion
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4. Articles must have a cover page containing (a) Title, (b) Author(s), (c) Affiliation, (d) Phone Number, (e) email address.
5. Articles must also have abstract of not more than 250 words with keywords where necessary.
6. Such articles must not have been submitted for consideration in any other publication.
7. KJCS adopts the endnotes format of referencing after the Turabian style of documentation.
8. Articles submitted for consideration should not exceed 15 pages in length, must be type-written, double-line spaced and 12 font size of Time New Roman.

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A THEOLOGICAL STUDY OF THE OPPRESSED IN THE PSALTER AND THE NIGERIAN CONTEXT

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Abstract

The oppressed individuals are given different names in the Old Testament. In the Psalms, some are called the poor, weak, exploited and the afflicted among others, (e.g. Pss. 35:10; 69:34). They are equally understood differently by categories of people in the Old Testament. In the Mosaic legislation, they are the helpless people whom God made special provision for (Deut 15:1-4, 7, 9, 11). Among the prophets, the oppressed are the needy ones who are tormented by the wicked people (Amos 4: 1). The thrust of this article is a theological study of the oppressed in the Psalter and the Nigerian context. The intriguing questions include who are the enemies behind the plight of the oppressed in the Psalter? What is the attitude of God towards the oppressed in the Psalter? What is the relationship between oppression of the Psalmists in the Ancient Israel and the oppressed in the contemporary Nigerian Society? A historico-exegetical method is adopted. The paper postulates that while the oppressors in both the Psalter and the contemporary Nigerian society make every effort to afflict the poor and needy, God's goodness remains the sigh of the oppressed.

Introduction

The issue of oppression is a serious challenge confronting humankind down through the ages. It is the process whereby powerful individuals or a group of people treat other weak people in an unfair or cruel way. Oppression manifests itself in different ways which include physical, material, financial, political or even spiritual. The oppressed are given different names like the poor, weak, exploited, and afflicted in the Old Testament.

The focus of this article is a theological study of the oppressed in the Psalter and in the Nigerian context. The pertinent questions that require urgent attention include: Who are the enemies and the perpetrators of oppression in the Psalms? Is there a relationship between the oppressed in the Psalter and the oppressed in the contemporary Nigerian society? This article attempts to provide answers to these questions through a historico-exegetical method. Specifically, the article examines the Hebrew words for poor or poverty, modern definition for poor and poverty, the oppressed in the Psalter, the activities of the enemies, God's attitude towards the oppressed, and finally the oppressed in the Nigerian society.

Hebrew Terms for Poor or Poverty

There are few words used for poor and poverty in the Hebrew Bible but our focus in this article is to examine three of them, namely, *ʿani*, *ʿebyon* and *dal*. The common word for poor or poverty in the Hebrew Bible is *ʿani*. It is a masculine noun which means ‘affliction’ or ‘oppression’. It can also be used as an adjective to mean ‘poor’, ‘weak’ or ‘afflicted’. The word *ʿani* occurs about 80 times in the Hebrew Bible as follows: 7 times in the *Torah* with reference to Exodus 24, Deut 15 and 24 in the context of lending to the poor; 25 times in the *Nebi'im* to mean economic oppression (Isa 3:15; Ezek 18:22; 22:29; Amos 8:4); unjust treatment in legal decisions (Isa 10:2) and victimization through deception (Isa 37:2). The word *ʿani* appears 47 times in the *Kethubim* mostly in the Psalms where it occurs 31 times mainly in the Psalms of Lament. In this context, the term describes the poor who is being seized by the wicked and strong individuals (Ps. 10:2, 9; 14:6; 35:10; 37:14; and 106:16) or being plundered (Ps 2:4). Socially, *ʿani* speaks of an individual who is helpless, defenseless and he is subject to oppression. Materially, the oppressed is deprived of many basic needs of life and thus he earns his bread by serving others.

The second word for poor or poverty is *ʿebyon* which is an adjective and it means “needy, poor or miserable”. The word occurs 61 times in the Hebrew Bible. It is used 9 times in the *Torah* to speak of an individual who is poor in material sense. The person may have lost his ancestral land (Exo. 23:11) and perhaps he has reverted to borrowing (Deut 15:7, 9, 11). The word is also used in the *Torah* in the context of subverting the legal judgement made on behalf of the poor (Exo 23:6). The word occurs 17 times in the *Nebi'im* to denote general physical insecurity and homelessness (Isa 14:30; 25:4; Amos 8:4); hunger and thirst (Isa 32:6-7; 41:7; Ezek 16:49); mistreatment by the rulers of the society and evil doers (Isa 29:19; Jer 2:34; 20:13; Ezek 18:12; 22:29; Amos 4:1); unfair handling of legal cases (Isa 32:7; Jer 5:28; 22:16; Amos 15:12); and economic exploitation of an individual (Amos 2:6; 8:6). The *ʿebyon* is used 33 times in the *Kethubim* of which the Book of Psalms has 23 times. The word is used in connection with the poor and oppressed ones who are the victims of the wicked (Ps 37:14).

The third word used for poor or poverty is *dal*. It is an adjective which means “someone who is poor, low, helpless and weak”. *Dal* speaks of physical or material deprivation. The word occurs about 48 times in the Hebrew Bible: 5 times in the *Torah* in the context of not showing favoritism toward persons, whether rich or poor, when making legal decisions (Exo. 23:3; Lev 19:15). The word occurs 12 times in the *Nebi'im* in the contexts of unfair treatment in legal cases (Isa 10:2; 11:4); unfair grain taxes paid to the large landowners (Amos 5:11); abuses in the debt-slavery system (Amos 8:6); and lack of grazing land (Isa 14:30). The word occurs 26 times in the *Kethubim* mainly in Proverbs where it appears 15 times. It is particularly used in Proverbs 10-29 where poverty is contrasted with wealth. This poverty shatters the poor (Prov 10:15); it is a friendless circumstance (Prov 19:4); and it may produce insight that the rich can

one hand, the political class use religion to control the masses who are not in power as they make them feel better about themselves and about the distress they experience. They use religion to brainwash masses into not questioning them. On the other hand, religion is believed to convince people to accept and endure the suffering and injustices of this life because heaven awaits them. This understanding of religion makes the oppressed masses to think less of how they could set themselves free from the hands of the oppressors believing that everything in the world is temporary and efforts must be made to make it to the kingdom of heaven.

A Re-examination of the Oppressed in the Psalter

The concept of oppression in the Psalter is situated within the context of Psalms of Lamentation which form the major part of the Psalter. These are the Psalms in which the Psalmists expressed their lament as a result of affliction or oppression that has come upon them from the activities of the enemies. One of the earliest scholars who had done a form-critical analysis of the Psalter is Hermann Gunkel. Writing on the community lament Psalms, he says:

One does not always sing praises and give thanks; there is also a time to grieve and lament...when crop failure, pestilence, and danger from the enemy afflicted the people, such a day of lamentation was observed. On such occasions all the people would assemble at the sanctuary, tear their clothes, fast, weep, lament and sound the trumpet. In this manner a passionate people would implore their God to have mercy upon them.

Similarly, commenting on the laments of individuals, he observes that in this group of Psalms, the peculiar and recurring situation is the individual who found himself in the midst of some illness which is a matter of life and death, and at the same time complaining about many enemies who are oppressing, persecuting and slandering him. Claus Westernmann, on his part, sees lamentation as a phenomenon that is characterized by different determinant elements: namely, the one who laments, God and the enemy who is involved in oppressing or afflicting the Psalmists. He also identifies two types of lament in the Bible. These are the lament of the dead and the lament of affliction. The lament of the dead, according to him is secular; it looks backward as one who mourns and bewails the dead. An example is David's lament over Saul and Jonathan (2 Sam 1:17-27). Lament of the affliction on the other hand looks forward; the oppressed laments what has happened to himself; and he reaches out for life as he begs that his suffering be taken away.

Pius Drijvers identifies three types of enemy who were oppressing the Israelites community. These include: one, those who were members of the Israelite community as exemplified in the book of Job; two, those who scorned and failed to take seriously either God or religion. They laughed and mocked at everything that is religious (Ps 69:10-12). The third category of enemies consisted of those who had always been the Psalmist adversaries, those who had

persecuted him; those who had robbed him or slandered him and who now took the opportunity of his illness to crush him.

The oppressed individuals are particularly found in the Psalter. They are godly individuals who even though are seeking for the good and welfare of their neighbours they are mocked by the so-called friends. Thus, the oppressors of the Psalmists are identified as the enemies who are the self-righteous neighbours (Ps 35, 69, 109).

Generally, the Psalmists were not comfortable with oppression as observed in the spirit resistance and irritation which pervade the whole scene. This is particularly felt in the tone of violent language used especially in the imprecatory psalms. Commenting on the reaction of the Psalmist to suffering, Erich Zenger notes that "hatred, enmity, violence, retaliation and even revenge are not sub-motifs in the Psalter; they are a substantive part of it."

Perhaps, the most important reaction of the Psalmists against oppression is complaints as particularly noted in the Psalms of Lament. Looking unto God for assistance, the question of "why?" is repeatedly asked by the Psalmists. For example, "why have you rejected us...why does your anger smoulder...? (Ps 74:1); why do you hide your face...? (Ps 44:24). In addition to the question of why, the question of "how long" is further asked by them. These questions show the level of their groaning and distress. The Psalmists asked how long O LORD? Will you be angry forever? How long will your jealousy burn like fire? (Ps 79:5; 80:4; 85:5; 89:46). The Psalmists also complain seriously about the enemies as they slander and abuse God and His people (Ps 44:13-16; 74:10; 79:10; 89:41, 50-51; 94:3; 123:4).

The Enemies and their Activities in the Psalter

An enemy is called by different names in the Old Testament. The first term is *'oyeb* which means 'enemy'. The word is used about 282 times in the Old Testament. It is used of an individual enemy or the enemy of the nation. Another term used for enemy is *sar* which means adversary, enemy or foe. It occurs about 70 times in the Old Testament and mostly in the Psalter. Also, the said enemy may be a nation (2Sam 24:13) or opponent of an individual (Gen 14:20; Ps 3:1). Furthermore, the Hebrew word *asha* which is an adjective and it means 'wicked' or 'criminal' is used in connection with the enemy in the Old Testament. Usually, the wicked is the opposite of the righteous and the individual is guilty of hostility to God or his people (Ps 17:13). He is guilty of sin against God and man (Ps 11:5; 32:10).

The indisputable fact about the enemies in the Psalter is their high prevalence and their wicked activities in oppressing the godly innocent Psalmists. These enemies are described as the Psalmists accusers and they are involved in uttering falsehood and slander and the likes against the Psalmists (Ps 3:1-2; 5:9). They are described as warriors, fighting and oppressing the Psalmists all day (Ps 56:1-2). Also, they are described as hunters wanting to

catch the Psalmists (Ps 31:4-5). Furthermore, they are like wild animals who seek the Psalmists as their prey (Ps 22:12-13). In addition, the Psalmists are oppressed not only by physical assault but also through spiritual assault and emotional attacks which result in serious illness and even death.

Commenting on the enemies in the Psalter, Erich Zenger notes that the life of individuals and the people of Israel appear overwhelmingly to be a daily struggle, an on-going battle against the enemies. He notes further that the Psalmists and the people who pray the Psalms feel themselves surrounded, threatened and shot at by a gigantic army; or they are like an animal pursued by hunters and trappers, or they see themselves surrounded and attacked by rapacious wild beasts, trampling bulls or poisonous snakes.

The enemies are responsible for the oppression of the Psalmist in different ways: they set traps or nets (Ps 140:4-5); they conspire together, take counsel and utter threats against the Psalmists (Ps 56:6); they surround and encircle the Psalmists with the aim of devouring them (Ps 22:12, 3, 16); they mock the oppressed Psalmists (Ps 35:16; 39:8; 42:10; 35:16; 39:8; 69:9; 89:51; 102:8; 119:42; 51); they revel in the misfortune of the oppressed (Ps 22:17; 35:21); their mouth is filled with cursing, deceit and oppression (Ps 5:9; 55:21; 59:13; 35:16, 20; 36:3; 41:5; 52:3-4; 59:7, 12; 64:2-6; 73:8-9; 109:2, 20; 119:69; 120:2; 140:3, 9; 144:11). These enemies in their speech seek to destroy the oppressed and their actual intention is hidden behind lies and false friendliness (Ps 28:3; 41:6; 52:2-4; 55:21; 62:4; 119:69; 144:11). The enemies are perverse (Ps 14:1, 3-4; 28:4; 36:4; 52:1; 53:1, 3-4; 55:10, 11, 15; 73:6; 109:17). They are sacrilegious and godless (Ps 5:10; 10:3; 14:1, 4; 28:5; 36:1; 52:7; 54:3; 55:19; 73:27; 86:14; 119:85, 139).

God's Attitude towards the Oppressed

The Psalmists' understanding of the goodness of God towards the oppressed is best understood within their deep knowledge of God. Also, their understanding is made clear with the Hebrew word *'ani* which denotes the attitude of God to the poor or oppressed in rescuing and providing for them. Specifically, God in demonstrating His goodness to the oppressed rescues them from the hands of the enemies and oppressors (Ps 35:10; 40:17; 69:33; 70:5; 72:12-13; 109:31; 113:7 and 140:12). He saves them. An inductive study of the Psalter shows that the Psalmists recognize God as their saviour and deliverer (Pss 18:46; 24:5; 25:5; 27:9; 38:22; 45:5, 11; 43:5; 65:5; 68:19; 79:9; 85:4; 89:26) as He has saved different individuals. He saved the humble and brought low those whose eyes are haughty (Ps 18:2). He saved His people (Ps 28:9) and His servant (Ps 31:16). He saved the Psalmist from trouble and danger (Pss 71:2; 91:3). He saved the weak and the needy (Pss 72:13; 109:31). He saved the poor (Ps 34:6) and the simple hearted (Ps 116:6).

God is deeply interested in the poor, needy and the afflicted as demonstrated in His several acts of kindness. God defends the afflicted and saves the children of the needy (Ps 72:4). He rescues the weak and the needy and

delivers them from the hands of the wicked (Ps 82:4). He blesses and satisfies the poor with food (Ps 132:15). He does not forget the needy (Pss 9:18, 74:19). He takes pity on the weak and the needy and saves them from death (Ps 72:13). He defends the cause of the weak and fatherless and maintains the rights of the poor and oppressed (Ps 82:3). He raises the poor from dust and lifts the needy from ash heap (Ps 113:7).

Oppression in the Nigerian context

Nigeria, which is generally regarded as “the giant of Africa and the black world”, has a population of over 140 million, according to the 2006 census. However, the recently published figure by the National Bureau of Statistics estimated the population of Nigeria as 163 million. But then as the population is on the increase yearly; the level of oppression coupled with poverty is also on the rapid increase. The statistical figures showing the percentage of the oppressed masses in Nigeria is alarming. The 2009 United Nations Human Development Report states that 68% of Nigerians are living on less than \$1.25 per day while 84.5% are living on less than \$2.00 per day. Surprisingly also, the National Bureau of Statistics on 14th February, 2012 said that 112.519 million Nigerians, out of the estimated 163 million population, live in relative poverty conditions.

Nigeria since her independence in 1960 has had so many years of military leadership which in a way has made life difficult for the masses. Alamu observes that “the military junta contributed more to the present level of poverty by siphoning the riches of the nation into their personal coffers without considering the welfare of the masses they purportedly govern.” Unfortunately, the uninterrupted democracy since 1999 has not brought a desirable relief to the masses. There are powerful individuals, particularly among the political class who “acquire, exploit, embezzle and misappropriate” the wealth of the nation at the expense of the poor masses. Describing the situation of things in Nigeria between 1999 and 2009, J. Shola Omotola says:

Rather than yield sustainable dividends of democracy by providing an enabling environment for the promotion of the political, economic and socio-cultural rights of the people, Nigeria’s first democratic decade (1999-2009), yielded a vicious cycle of violent conflicts and the repression of the basic rights of the people in many respects.

Politically, few highly placed politicians behave and act with little or no consideration for the common and oppressed masses. The level of poverty in the Nigerian society since 1999 is on the increase and this is an indication that the political class is simply oppressing the majority of Nigerian populace. The level of oppression in the nation is grievous and unbearable as it has brought untold hardship on the oppressed masses. Alamu notes:

As a result (of poverty), people die every day from the combined effects of malnutrition and infection. This plague makes people to become scavengers who

go about combing out things from dustbins. This malaise called poverty is a scandalous condition of life that is suggestive of subhuman situation. The scandalous situation of poverty is preposterous to economic detachment and material acquisition.

The pathetic situation of homelessness of the oppressed masses has been described as "the growing scourge" in the Nigerian society. Bob Majirioghene notes:

Nigerians who sleeps outdoors daily have found themselves in that condition for a variety of factors, but mostly because the government seemingly has no place in its plans for their welfare.

An x-ray of the write-up indicates that several of the people living under the bridges, uncompleted houses and other untidy places across the major cities in Nigeria are not lunatics; they found themselves in that hopeless condition due to retrenchment from their place of work or lack of employment in the first place. These poor and oppressed people make public buildings around the cities their place of habitation especially at night. Bob Majirioghene observes:

At a popular eatery in the heart of Lagos Mainland, women and children swoop on the premises every evening. The women, young and mostly in their 30s carry huge bundles of all their worldly possessions. From there, they bring out sheets and cartons which they spread on the floor to sleep on. Every one of the women, children sleep in the open, while those closer to the walls of the eatery are homeless married couples.

The recent partial removal of fuel subsidy on petroleum products is another way by which the political class has oppressed the poor masses. The pertinent question is what happens to several billions of Naira on turn around maintenance of which only the high placed politicians can account for? Speaking on the fuel subsidy issue, Gbenga Kaka observes:

It is the poor masses that are being made to subsidize the inefficiency of the government. There is also the inefficiency of the system, whereby we devote billions to turn around maintenance, only for them to develop wings and nothing done. All these in a situation whereby the refineries are operating below 25% capacity install.

The effect of the political oppression is felt in every facet of the Nigerian society. There are several unemployed graduates, many of whom are involved in various unwholesome acts and crimes, like cultism, prostitution just to mention few. There are cases of individuals who take advantage of poverty in the nation and use their position to exploit, oppress and carry out various forms of wickedness against the helpless masses. An example is the recent Pension Probe which exposed how few individuals stole billions of Naira meant for retired people. Onyedun Ojabor and Dele Anofi write:

A probe into the administration of pension funds in the office of the Head of Service shows that corrupt officials are feeding on the sweat of retired senior citizens.

Another act of wickedness in oppressing helpless and innocent lives took place on Saturday 31st March 2012 at Oke-Odo, along Ore-Sagamu expressway when a 12 man robbery gang descended on 42 young girls and raped them. The young girls involved were said to be students of Holy Cross Rosary College, Enugu who were going to spend Easter holiday with their parents in Lagos in the hired bus belonging to Ekene DiliChukwu Group of Companies. Commenting on the wicked act, Ogcockukwu Ikeje notes:

A sexual assault of that nature and on girls so young traumatizes the victims as much as it wrecks their parents. While the bus conveying the minors was still in transit and night was wearing on, parents waiting on the Lagos end must have been anywhere between life and death, not knowing what may have befallen their young girls. For the girls, rape even by relatives is said to be nasty and unforgettable. Now, consider the agony when the crime is committed by beastly beings and in the middle of nowhere in the dead of the night.

As noted earlier, the Psalmists in the Psalter reacted to oppression by resisting the enemies, crying and complaining their plight to God. In a similar vein, the oppressed masses in Nigeria are reacting to oppression in three different ways: complaining, protesting and invocation of imprecatory prayers against the oppressors. While the popular language of the political class is 'transformation agenda for the nation', the common language of the oppressed is centred on complaint of various things that are making life unbearable for them. In fact, it is not an exaggeration that when two or three Nigerians are gathered together today, the next thing you see them doing is complaining and agonising over the state of the nation. The complaint is centred on insecurity of lives and properties, lack of money to buy food and some essential items that would make life more comfortable.

The instance of protest of the oppressed was witnessed in January 2012 when the Federal Government of Nigeria removed fuel subsidy. For about two weeks, there was a mass protest which literally paralysed every aspect of the nation. The President of the nation and his team got the message of the protest hence the government eventually made it a partial removal.

Another important way of reacting to the oppressors in Nigeria is through the invocation of imprecatory prayers. Karl Marx's definition of religion as the opium of the people as noted earlier perfectly describes the attitude of Nigerians towards religion as majority of the population is very religious. In fact, the political class is taking advantage of this by promoting religious activities like Nigeria Inter-Religious Council (NIREC). The Government is even involved in sponsoring individuals to Mecca and Jerusalem for pilgrimages even though several of them are not qualified. While there is nothing bad in praying

in the 'holy lands' it should be stated that the procedure for choosing individuals to spend Government money on is very political.

The point is that the oppressed masses in the contemporary Nigerian society spend time to invoke all manners of prayers on their oppressors. Imprecatory prayers which are weapons of the helpless and oppressed abound in many congregations in Nigeria today. They are expressions of one's inner heart to God. In other words, instead of the masses taking law into their hands and begin to cause trouble and violence in the society, they simply report the matter to God who knows everything and He is able to help them.

Conclusion

The article has demonstrated the reality of oppression in both the Psalter and in the contemporary Nigerian society. This is a confirmation of Karl Marx's analysis of religion as mentioned earlier in the article. Also, it has shown some similarities and differences between the Psalter and the Nigerian society. The oppressed Psalmists and the masses in Nigeria found themselves in an unpleasant and uncomfortable situation. Both groups react to the situation by complaining and crying to God for solution. The slight difference one observed in their reaction is that while the Psalmists at the end of their crying and complaints affirmed their faith in God and vowed to worship Him (Pss 35:18; 69:30); the oppressed masses in the Nigerian society, apart from complaining and protesting, offer imprecatory prayers to God, asking Him to punish their oppressors. It is also observed that the enemies of the Psalmists were individual accusers who uttered falsehood against them. They were individuals whom the Psalmists had been good to but then repaid them with evil (Ps 35:12). The enemies of the oppressed in the Nigerian society are members of the political class who sometimes hide under religion to carry out their wickedness and exploitation.

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