

REVIEW OF POVERTY, THE BIBLE AND AFRICA: CONTEXTUAL FOUNDATIONS FOR HELPING THE POOR BY ISAAC BOAHENG

Review by Kayle M. Pelletier¹ (PhDc)

¹ Lecturer in Preaching and Biblical Studies, South African Theological Seminary

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Correspondence

Kayle M. Pelletier
Kayle@sats.ac.za

1.0 INTRODUCTION

Isaac Boaheng (PhD) holds a PhD from University of the Free State and a MTh from South African Theological Seminary (SATS). He lectures at the Christian Service University, Ghana in Theology and Christian Ethics and lectures part-time at SATS. Boaheng also serves as a Bible translator with the Bible Society of Ghana and as an Ordained Minister of the Methodist Church Ghana serving the Nsima Circuit of the Kumasi North Diocese. Boaheng has over 100 publications in Theology and other related fields.

If visiting Africa, one cannot help but be dumbfounded by the expansive, complicated, and entrenched poverty that confronts the traveller. Much aid has been given and ink has been spilled assessing the problem of poverty, its causes, and offering solutions often from a Western perspective. However, Boaheng's book, *Poverty, The Bible, and Africa*, approaches the problem from a holistic perspective by seeking a contextualized African Christian theology of poverty from which to offer practical biblical solutions within the current African context to reduce this continent-wide problem (1–3).

2.0 SUMMARY AND CRITIQUE

Boaheng paints the socio-historical backdrop from pre-colonial times which have shaped the present problem of poverty in Africa (46), such as: African traditional religion and worldview dominating belief and action (5–9); communally focused societies, by which Africans find their identity, along with precolonial tribal leadership structures (10–12); and precolonial economies interrupted by slavery's stolen human resources and by colonialism itself. Though colonialism provided many advances, particularly with infrastructure, these colonial advances were based on an individualistic worldview such that post-independent economies struggled to grow or sustain economic growth, worsening the poverty situation (12–17).

Today's specific factors in Africa's social, cultural, political, and economic society are identified as contributing to the problem of poverty, specifically large family sizes, laziness, expensive funerals celebrations, poor agricultural practices, "brain drain," high inflation, high unemployment rates, bad leadership, corruption

in relation to government funds (31–42), and more. African traditional wisdom and worldview, which views prosperity as more than just material wealth (23), sees wealth as communal, a positive element that helps relieve poverty in Africa since Africans take collective responsibility for the weak and poor in family and society (27–28). Although Boaheng focuses on the positive side of this traditional trait, this value has an overlooked negative side contributing towards poverty in Africa. Extended family members often become dependent upon the provision of the family's breadwinner, even seeing themselves as entitled to his earned money. Pressured by fear of being cursed or shamed, the breadwinner often sacrifices his earnings to the point where he stays in moderate poverty. Expanding on Boaheng's brief mention of envy toward the rich, the communal view toward one who does manage to "get ahead," even ever so slightly, is often not met with an excited congratulations, but with secret jealousy and envy, desiring to pull that person back down amongst the rest. This negative aspect of community-centred wealth cannot only stagnate a society's economic growth, but can be individually crippling, sometimes threatening harm toward those who "get ahead;" for if all cannot have, then one cannot have. Ironically, this communal value is forgotten when politicians or elites get their hands on wealth, no longer viewing wealth as communally shared, but amassing it for themselves at the expense of their own people.

Another unmentioned contributing factor to poverty in Africa is the traditional practice of lobola—the bride price a man must pay for taking a bride. Although it can be argued that lobola helps the bride's family and is not "thrown away" money, like money spent on funeral rites, lobola is often manipulated by the greed of the bride's family. Prices can become so exorbitant that men opt either not to marry, spend years waiting to marry, or couples live together without a marriage commitment, creating more social problems leading to poverty. The bedrock of marriage and family erodes, leaving women without marital stability and vulnerable children born out of wedlock.

Also overlooked are sinful life decisions that contribute to the cycle of poverty, particularly alcoholism, as men often drink away earnings needed to support the family, polygamous or promiscuous men with secretive "small houses," high instances of child sexual abuse within families contributing to teenage pregnancies, and more. On top of that, husbands often make the tough decision to leave wife and children to find paying work, breaking the family unit even further. All of these life decisions cause society's basic safety net of family to rip apart and contribute to continuous poverty.

Next, Boaheng seeks to establish a biblical foundation for a theology on wealth and poverty. Choosing a variety of passages from multiple genres, he carefully exegetes two Old Testament passages (Deut 15:1–11; Isa 10:1–4) to show God's intention for generous giving, Sabbath measures to prevent the extremes of either amassed wealth or poverty, and a condemnation of courts using their power to exploit the poor (47–69). Boaheng also exegetes two New Testament passages (Matt 6:19–34; 1 Tim 6:6–10) showing generous giving and service to others as a counter to amassing wealth and establishing a proper attitude on the place of wealth—not as a master we serve or an entity that provides a false sense of security, but contented trust in the Giver of all resources to provide daily for our needs (71–95).

With this theology of poverty in place, Boaheng then rightly moves to analysing and critiquing the most dominant Christian theology in Africa, Prosperity Theology, whose teachings are contrary to a biblical theology of poverty. Moreover, though prosperity churches contribute in small measures toward alleviating poverty, Prosperity Theology mostly contributes to the problem of poverty with its shoddy hermeneutics, the practice of "seed sowing," the "get-rich-quick" mindset that serves as a catalyst for laziness, and a focus on manipulated giving which impoverishes adherents and affects those still poor with negative psychology. With such a large focus on this dominant theology, Boaheng could have exegeted Luke 20:45–21:9 where Jesus condemns the *religious leaders* for impoverishing widows through religious manipulation and exploitative practices. This would have more advantageously aligned with the book's contextual and theological thrust. Instead, he exegetes Isaiah 10, which exposes *powerful rulers and judges* denying the poor and needy of justice. Though certainly political corruption by society's power holders bears directly upon African poverty, this book is more suited to address religious corruption as it places a huge emphasis on Prosperity Theology's role in further impoverishing the poor.

Poverty, The Bible, and Africa, written by and for Africans, is directed to both scholars as well as African Christian pastors, teachers and lay people in society grappling with everyday realities of poverty in their society, seeking ways to reduce its suffocating grasp (xv–xvi). By approaching poverty both from a solid exegetical biblical foundation, combined with contextual influences and factors at play, Boaheng's contextualized theology of poverty builds upon Asamoah-Gyadu, Bofo, and Asante's poverty studies, offering challenging yet practical biblical solutions within the current African context to reduce this continent-wide

problem. Individuals are challenged to assess their “get rich quick” attitudes and rather have a hard work ethic that strives towards excellence and not complacency. People are charged to earn money ethically and do work that serves the community above self, helping to develop others with knowledge and skills. Poverty-contributing African cultural norms are challenged along with excessive church involvement that pulls parents away from their families (141–168). However, due to the specific audience being addressed, practical solutions directed simply to believers and the church would be more prudent rather than trying to also address secular governments concerning the role they must play. Though governments play a large role in creating poverty, most localized Christian leaders have come to realize that reliance on the state to fix problems, like creating jobs, providing markets for farmers (164), or prosecuting corrupt activities (148), is wasting one’s efforts. Many other books on poverty primarily address the government’s role in this problem and offer solutions. However, since this book is approached from an African Christian theological perspective, practical solutions that stay aligned to the book’s thrust and specific audience are best.

3.0 CONCLUSION

Overall, *Poverty, The Bible, and Africa* contributes to the conversation on poverty in Africa from a refreshingly biblical point of view. This book offers a renewed look at the contributing factors which shape the poverty landscape of Africa, proposes a sound biblical theology of poverty with an appropriate critique of the dominant Prosperity Theology, and finally arrives at contextual biblical solutions that all Christians pastors, teachers, scholars and lay leaders can apply in their circumstances. For poverty is not just having to do with economics, but healthy and holistic living. Resetting our perspectives, this book reminds us that wealth is neither a sign of godliness, nor an individual possession, nor a bastion of personal security; rather, money is a gift given by our generous God, the provider of life’s resources, meant to be stewarded and shared generously with an open hand, while daily trusting in God for continued sustenance (95–103). May readers be encouraged to “seek first his kingdom and his righteousness” (Matt 6:33 NIV) knowing that God will take care of our needs as we open wide our hands to the poor.

About the Reviewer

Kayle Pelletier is an American missionary, involved in theological education in Africa since 2006. She holds an MDIV and a Masters of Theology in the OT from Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary and is currently a PhD Candidate at SATS in Practical Theology, specifically researching African Preaching. She spent 7 years teaching at the Theological College of Zimbabwe in Bulawayo, Zimbabwe, spent 8 years rearing and homeschooling their four children, then has spent the past 4 years part time lecturing at SATS. Kayle actively preaches and serves in her local church in Port Elizabeth, South Africa.