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***The Deuteronomic School in Ancient Israel, Inequality and the Church Today.***

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**By Ven. Matthew Ogheneochuko Iyede, Ph.D**

**Emmanuel Ogheneochuko Arodovwe**

Ven. Dr. Matthew OgheneochukoIyede has expanded the frontiers of biblical scholarship with his book. It has seven chapters covering 200 pages of good prose. The book discusses various reformist policies in ancient Israel aimed at checking inequality gaps; and compares the Hebraic experience with traditional Urhobo society. The more widely-held conception about the church is that it is a celestial institution whose focus, as St. Augustine describes it, is on the bliss and perfection of the heavenly city, rather than on the sin and decadence of the earthly one. To that extent, it is thought that the church ought to be indifferent to ‘mundane’ matters of social inclusiveness, justice, equality, human rights, freedom and economic and social emancipation of peoples.

Ven. Iyede’s book challenges this position, arguing, convincingly, that ancient Israel had provisions in its laws which were intended to ensure economic and social inclusiveness. The Hebrew experience is sourced from Deutoronomic texts of the Bible. He concedes, however, that before the Deutoronomic era when these positive social reforms were introduced, Israel’s social policies were largely discriminatory in certain respects. For instance, the patriarchal nature of the society regarded women as unequal to their male counterparts; and high nationalist sentiments also meant that strangers were discriminated against. (p.5). But as he states emphatically: “Contrary to this patriarchate system which kept women in an inferior legal and social position, Deuteronomy takes a radically different view”.

The turning point, according to the author, was the discovery of the law book in the temple during the reign of Josiah. In this book were contained laws which were meant to address “anomalies of social inequality and which are leading features in the Deutoronomic legislation”. These reforms are contained in six texts in Deuteronomy which the author identifies as (Deut14<sup>22-29</sup>, 16<sup>9-12,13-15</sup>, 24<sup>17-18,19-22</sup>, 26<sup>5-15</sup>) . Those implicated among these disadvantaged social groups include the widows, orphans, and strangers (sojourners) (p.6). The repeated concerns for this group in the referenced texts above, according to the author, reveals “Deuteronomist’s philanthropic appeal with the aim of addressing the social condition of the marginal groups”.

The focus of these laws concerns the use of tithes, being a tenth of a person’s gross income or produce, rated at regular convenient intervals. In earlier laws governing the administration

of the tithes in Israel as made referenced to by the author in (Lev27<sup>21-24</sup>Num18<sup>19-21</sup>), the tithes were the exclusive possession of the Levites (i.e. priests) as reward for their services as cult officials (functionaries). But after the deuteronomic reform, the social classes to benefit from the tithes were extended to include the widows, strangers and orphans. The essence of this policy, according to Iyede, was to minimize the social inequality gap by meeting the needs of the implicated social classes through the tithes.

The most significant point of the book is the comparison Dr. Iyede makes between ancient Israel and Urhobo, holding that the phenomenon of social inequalities exists in both societies. And just as obtained in ancient Israel, the Urhobo people had traditional cultural practices and policies which were meant to insulate the most vulnerable classes from harsh social and economic pressures.

Iyede throws light on the nature and indices of the phenomenon in Chapter Four of the book. He holds that the nature of social inequality in Urhobo is revealed in “the pattern of recognised social status in the society, privileges, variation in wealth status, restrictions (such as discriminations against the female gender) and cultural practices that define relationships in the society” (p.123). These are given expressions in (a) the hierarchical structures of the society ordered in the form of kings, chiefs, *otota* (spokesman), and age grades in descending order of power and status; (b) cultural practices such as those which restrict women from breaking kola nuts in social gatherings; (c) indigenous names which reveal an underlying desperation to conquer, achieve and be recognised. Such names include *Achoja* (rise to the challenge), *Efetobore* (wealth is achieved), *Ighomuedafe* (wealth intoxicates the wealthy); and (d) in songs and proverbs such as in the *Udje* genre which celebrate wealth and high achievement, while denigrating the poor and destitute in society. (p. 123-126).

But how did the Urhobo people protect vulnerable groups like widows, orphans and strangers from economic shocks and social unfriendly conditions? Dr. Iyede enumerates a handful of such practices. First, it was part of the traditional custom in Urhobo society, though now on the decline, for widows (*ayuku*) to be inherited by capable members of the husband’s family (p.128). This had both economic and social relevance. The economic relevance is that it protects the widow from harsh economic conditions to which she might be exposed in solely catering for herself and her children. There were also traditional customs and practices that protected orphans in society. As the author puts it, “the orphan among the Urhobo people is considered for special care because the Urhobo social system is communal... For the Urhobo people, a man’s continued existence is believed to be perpetuated through the gift of children hence a high premium is placed on the child” (p.129). For this reason, when a child loses a parent or both, the extended family members automatically take responsibility of the children.

Strangers or sojourners are also well protected in Urhobo society. According to Iyede, “The culture of the Urhobo people does not encourage alienation of the sojourner or strangers, thus showing the close relationship between the Urhobo people and ancient Israel”. The author laments the gradual decline of these revered traditional practices due to the worsening stings of modernism on the indigenous culture. As he states, “the lack of social security, communal harmony, disruption in the vital unifying force, loose family traditions all threaten the peaceful coexistence, which once pervaded the earlier ages of development. (p.133). The marginal groups have been the hardest hit in this attitudinal shift. In this sense, the author hopes that the Deuteronomic response in Ancient Israel would help inspire revivalist turn to the waning culture of social balance and inclusiveness in traditional Urhobo society.

Dr. Iyede deserves commendation for his original contribution to scholarship with his profound exegesis of the Deuteronomic response to the issue of social inequality in ancient Israel and its point of resonance with traditional practices in Urhobo society which had similar goal. By way of recommendation, it is my opinion that Dr. Iyede’s good book would have been an even better one if he had included as part of his analysis the difference the contemporary church can make in bridging the inequality gap in society. The church represents one of the most influential symbols of modernism, whose combined influence with other such institutions contributed to the erosion of the highly revered traditional values Iyede eulogizes so well. It places on the church therefore a moral responsibility to take up the role these institutions and cultural practices once served society in the past.

The early missionary churches in Nigeria were known for laudable charity interventions such as building quality schools and hospitals which were near free-of-charge; and supporting the elderly and destitute in society. The reverse appears to be the case at present where living in flamboyance is now the craze among some church leaders. A significant way the church can help bridge the social inequality gap in contemporary Urhobo society is to set up labour employing institutions in form of factories and industries, using the Public Private Partnership (PPP) model, with members as shareholders. In this way, the church would have contributed meaningfully to the social and economic advancement of society. A policy which stipulates that all churches in the land set aside a percentage of their earnings to such industrialisation project would be a good way to begin.

Dr. Iyede has made significant contribution to scholarship by re-awakening the old but relevant issue of social and economic inequality in society. In his “Foreword” to the book, Professor G.G. Darah describes Iyede’s work as “a scholarly inquiry that explores the humanistic ideals and ideology that have made Christianity a universal institution through the ages”. This book has the potential of making the all-important difference in our quest for an equitable and egalitarian society in Urhobo and the Nigerian State at large.

One technical weakness in Iyede's book is that it was not produced by a registered publisher. It is hoped that in the next edition, the author will correct this shortcoming so that the original contribution to Urhobo scholarship contained in the work will be given the appreciation it deserves.