


“The Earth Mourns”: The Intersectionality of Social Justice Movement in Isaiah 24:1-6 and Environmental Issue

Author:Bamidele Olusegun Fawenu **Affiliation:**

Department of Religions, History and Heritage Studies, Faculty of Arts, Kwara State University, Malete, Nigeria.

Corresponding author:

Bamidele Olusegun Fawenu

E-mail:

bamidele.fawenu@kwasu.edu.ng

Dates:

Received: 15 Aug., 2024

Accepted: 20 Oct., 2024

Published: 18 Dec., 2024

Citation:Fawenu, B.O. (2024). “The Earth Mourns”: The Intersectionality of Social Justice Movement in Isaiah 24:1-6 and Environmental Issue. *Nsukka Journal of Religion and Cultural Studies*, 12(3), 19-26.**Disclaimer:**

All opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the position of the editors of Nsukka Journal of Religion and Cultural Studies (NJRCS).

Copyright:

© 2024. Copyright for this article is retained by the author(s), with first publication rights granted to the journal.



This is an open-access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution license

**Abstract**

In this paper, the theme of environmental desolation and social justice in Isaiah 24:1-6 is explored, motivated by the increasing relevance of ecological and social issues in contemporary theological discourse. Existing scholarship often treats environmental and social justice separately, overlooking their interconnectedness in biblical texts. Therefore, the problem addressed is the lack of a holistic understanding of justice and environmental sustainability presented in Isaiah 24:1-6. This study provides a comprehensive analysis of the prophetic message in Isaiah 24:1-6, highlighting its implications for modern discussions on environmental sustainability and social equity. The objectives are to: Analyze the themes of environmental desolation and social justice; explore the links between human behaviour and environmental impact; contextualize these themes within current debates on sustainability and equity; demonstrate the relevance of ancient prophetic wisdom in addressing contemporary global challenges, particularly in line with SDGs 10 and 15. A qualitative research method is employed, involving historical-grammatical exegesis of Isaiah 24:1-6. Findings suggest that ancient prophetic insights can inform current efforts to address environmental and social injustices. Recommendations include integrating eco-theological principles into contemporary ethical frameworks and policy-making to promote sustainability and equity. Therefore, Isaiah 24:1-6 offers valuable perspectives for addressing ecological challenges.

Keywords: Intersectionality, Environmental Ethics, Isaiah 24:1-6, Sustainable Development Goals, and Social Justice Movements

Introduction

This paper discusses the intersectionality of social justice movement in Isaiah 24:1-6 and Environmental Issue in relation to the cotemporary global climate challenges. This is situated within the broad context of the oracles of the prophet Isaiah and specifically located within the section called “Isaiah Apocalypse (Chapters 24-27).” Isaiah's messages often reflect themes of judgment and restoration, emphasizing the consequences of human actions on the environment. His predictions of cosmic devastation serve as warnings about environmental degradation, urging ethical stewardship of the earth. Furthermore, Isaiah's vision of a restored creation aligns with modern ecological ethics, advocating for a balanced relationship between humans and the natural world. Therefore, Isaiah's oracles did not only address the situation of ancient Israel, it speaks to contemporary environmental concerns by highlighting the interconnectedness of humanity and nature. Therefore, this paper keenly addresses the heightened state of global environmental peril in alignment with the Sustainable Development Goals, particularly the objectives SDG 10 (Reduced Inequalities) and SDG 15 (Life on Land), which obviously require more rigorous efforts to achieve before the expiration of the 2030 target date.

Generally, human actions or inactions have been identified as responsible for the global climate crisis. In a number of instances these climatic problems are not evenly distributed, leading to the discourse about climate injustice. The effects of anthropogenic climate change, particularly the warming caused by the consumption of fossil fuel and emissions of greenhouse gas, are unevenly distributed, with vulnerable and marginalized communities disproportionately bearing the burden. This exacerbates existing inequalities; a situation SDG 10 aims to mitigate. Similarly, deforestation and habitat degradation, key concerns of SDG 15, lead to significant biodiversity loss. These escalating environmental crises and persistent social justice struggles underscore the urgent need for interventions from all possible sources (Guterres, 2022).

Addressing the intertwined crises of environmental degradation and social injustice through interdisciplinary lens is critically needed. Despite the growing body of literature addressing these issues independently, there is a conspicuous gap in scholarly work examining their intersectionality, particularly within the context of religious and ethical teachings. This gap is significant because it misses the holistic understanding of justice and environmental sustainability presented in prophetic literature.

The prophetic literature of Isaiah, specifically Isaiah 24:1-6 with its vivid depiction of a mourning Earth and ensuing societal consequences, presents an underexplored resource offering profound insights into contemporary ethical dilemmas.

Therefore, the problem addressed in this paper is the lack of a holistic understanding of justice and environmental sustainability presented in Isaiah 24:1-6. Isaiah 24:1-6, offers a compelling oracle intertwining environmental desolation with social justice, providing rich terrain for exploration. By examining this ancient text, enduring principles that resonate with current global challenges can be uncovered, contributing to a more integrated understanding of sustainability and justice regarding the environment. Attention is given to investigating the ethical dimensions embedded in identified text, which are essential for fully grasping the ethical imperatives in it that contributes to modern discourses on environmental sustainability and equity.

Primarily, this study explores the intersectionality of environmental issues and social justice movements as portrayed in Isaiah 24:1-6. The objectives are to: Analyze the themes of environmental desolation and social justice in Isaiah 24:1-6; investigate the connections between human actions, environmental consequences, and prophetic calls for justice in the text; contextualize these themes within contemporary discussions on environmental sustainability and social equity; and highlight the relevance of ancient prophetic wisdom in addressing modern global challenges, specifically aligning with SDGs 10 and 15.

Qualitative approach is used for the paper, while the historical-grammatical method of exegesis is applied on Isaiah 24:1-6. This method of exegesis seeks to understand the author's intended meaning by examining the cultural, social, and historical circumstances of the time, as well as the literary and linguistic features of the text. By focusing on the historical and grammatical aspects, this method aims to provide a clear and accurate interpretation of the scriptures as they were understood by their original audience (Duvall, J. S., & Hays, J. D. 2012). Therefore, data were primarily collected through a detailed textual analysis of Isaiah 24:1-6, supported by secondary literature on environmental and social justice themes in prophetic literature. Also, the paper employs environmental justice theory, which focuses on the fair share of environmental profits and problems among all social groups, while also advocating for just treatment and significant participation of all individuals in environmental policy-making. Schlosberg (2007) argues that environmental inequality arises when the risks associated with environmental hazards and the profits of sound environmental rules are unevenly shared across different demographic and geographic groups. He suggests that, ideally, individuals of all backgrounds, regardless of wealth, race, or education should receive equal treatment in the allocation of environmental advantages and disadvantages.

The paper argues that Isaiah 24:1-6 offers a profound and integrated ethical background addressing both environmental degradation and social injustice, providing valuable insights highly relevant to contemporary discussions on sustainability and social equity. By exploring the intersectionality of these issues within prophetic literature, the study demonstrates the enduring significance of ancient wisdom in guiding modern efforts towards a more just and sustainable world.

Exegesis of Isaiah 24:1-6

Textual Integrity of Isaiah 24:1-6

Isaiah 24:1-6 in the Masoretic Text (MT) as presented in the Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia (BHS) does not have significant textual variants that would necessitate preferring other readings over the MT. Therefore, the MT as found in the BHS is upheld for this study.

Hebrew Text and Translation of Isaiah 24:1-6

BHS	verse	Provisional Translation
הנה יהנה בועק הארץ ובוֹלְקָה נְעִינָה פְּנִיָּהּ וְהִפִּיץ יִשְׁבִּיָּהּ:	1	Behold, the LORD will empty the earth and make it desolate, and he will twist its surface and scatter its inhabitants.
וְהָיָה כַעֲמֵם כַּהֶנּוּ כַעֲבָד כַּאֲדֹנָיו כַּשֹּׁפְחָה כַּגְּבֵרְתָהּ כַּקּוֹנֶה כַּמוֹכֵר כַּמְלִנָּה כַּלְנִיָּה כַּנְשֵׂה כַּאֲשֶׁר נָשָׂה בּוֹ:	2	And it shall be, as with the people, so with the priest; as with the slave, so with his master; as with the maid, so with her mistress; as with the buyer, so with the seller; as with the lender, so with the borrower; as with the creditor, so with the debtor.
הַבּוֹק תְּבוֹק הָאָרֶץ וְהַבוֹז תְּבוֹז כִּי יִהְיֶה דְּבַר אֲתֵּר־הַדְּבָר הַזֶּה:	3	The earth shall be utterly empty and utterly plundered; for the LORD has spoken this word.
אֲבָלָה נִבְלָה הָאָרֶץ אֲמָלְלָה נִבְלָה מְבַל אֲמָלְלוּ מְרוֹם עַם־הָאָרֶץ:	4	The earth mourns and withers; the world languishes and withers; the highest people of the earth languish.
וְהָאָרֶץ תִּנְפֶּס תַּחַת יְשִׁבִיָּהּ כִּי־עֲבָרוּ תְרוֹת תִּלְפֹּף חֹק הַפְּרוּ בְרִית עוֹלָם:	5	The earth lies defiled under its inhabitants; for they have transgressed the laws, violated the statutes, broken the everlasting covenant.
עַל־כֵּן אֵלֶּה אֲכָלָה אָרֶץ וְאֲשָׁמוּ יִשְׁבֵי בָּהּ עַל־כֵּן תָּרוּ יִשְׁבֵי אָרֶץ וְנִשְׂאָר אֲבוֹשׁ מְזַעֵר:	6	Therefore, a curse devours the earth, and its inhabitants suffer for their guilt; therefore, the inhabitants of the earth are scorched, and few men are left.

Historical Context of Isaiah 24:1-6

Isaiah 24:1-6 belongs to a section of the book of Isaiah that is distinct due to its apocalyptic and eschatological themes, often called the "Isaiah Apocalypse" (chapters 24-27).

Isaiah, who served as a prophet in Judah during the 8th century BCE under the reigns of Kings Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah (Isaiah 1:1), is traditionally credited with the authorship of the entire book (Lasor, Hubbard and Bush, 1996). However, critical scholarship rooted in the eighteenth-century Enlightenment challenged this traditional position, suggesting that the book was written by multiple authors over several centuries (Rooker, 2011). The first part (chapters 1-39) is attributed to the historical Isaiah of the 8th century BCE (Rooker, 2011), while the latter parts (chapters 40-66) are attributed to later periods, including the Babylonian exile and post-exilic times. Thus, the concepts of Proto-Isaiah and Deutero-Isaiah emerged, with Deutero-Isaiah encompassing chapters 40-55 and a later introduction of Trito-Isaiah identified as the author of chapters 56-66 (Williamson 2009, Lasor, Hubbard and Bush, 1996) and credited to the German scholar, Bernhard Duhm at the close of the nineteenth century (Collins, 2018). Meanwhile, chapters 24-27, to which the text in focus in this paper belongs, have been further subdivided and labeled as the "Isaiah Apocalypse," a section that has distinct themes and stylistic features, leading to ongoing discussions about its authorship and dating (Johnston, 2009).

Largely, the political and social conditions reflected in the book and the specific text align with era of Assyrian threat against Judah and Israel in the 8th century BCE (Kratz, 2015). This period was marked by political instability, social upheaval, and military threats to Judah and Israel. By 722 BCE, the Assyrians subdued northern Israel (Kratz, 2015), leading to the exile of its people. Judah faced the pressure of Assyrian dominance and had to navigate complex alliances and tributes. The southern kingdom managed to survive the Assyrian onslaught but lived under constant threat with implications on the religious sanctity of the people.

The "Isaiah Apocalypse" section (chapters 24-27) is challenging to date precisely. Nevertheless, some scholars suggest a late pre-exilic period or the exile for its writing, reflecting themes relevant to a time of crisis and upheaval. Sweeney (1996) suggests that the text reflects a sixth-century editorial revision of the book of Isaiah, depicting the global turmoil following Babylon's fall to Persia as a demonstration of *YHWH's* establishment of His sovereignty on earth.

Unlike earlier parts of Isaiah that focus on specific nations (Assyria, Babylon, Moab, etc.), chapters 24-27 have a universal scope, addressing the fate of the entire earth. This shift suggests an eschatological vision that transcends the immediate political context (Lasor, Hubbard and Bush 1996). While some scholars like Sweeney (Isaiah 1-39, 1996) think that this section reflects vivid characteristics of Apocalyptic literature which often arises in times of great distress to provide hope by revealing divine intervention and ultimate justice, Lasor et al (1996) argue that these chapters differ from typical apocalyptic literature like Daniel or Revelation, lacking the intense symbolism, epic struggles between good and evil, and angelic interpreters. Instead, they present elevated prophetic visions that capture the broader, future implications of the judgment and deliverance that Yahweh is currently bringing about.

It is better viewed as indicative of the early stage in Prophetic apocalyptic literature (Sweeney, Isaiah 1-39, 1996). Therefore, Isaiah 24:1-6 is apocalyptic and portrays the earth's desolation due to human sin and the subsequent divine judgment, resulting in significant loss of life. This passage fits the apocalyptic motif of cosmic upheaval leading to divine restoration.

Lexical-Grammatical Analysis of Isaiah 24:1-6

The first verse uses imagery that reflects the historical fears of invasion and total destruction that Judah faced from powerful empires like Assyria and Babylon, which could empty and lay waste to lands. The text emphasizes *YHWH's* active role in this judgment, resonating with the lofty view of God that runs through the whole book of Isaiah. Martin (2000) highlights that the LORD is portrayed as the supreme orchestrator of historical events, transcending His creation while remaining actively engaged in it. This aligns with the view of Brueggemann (1998) that Isaiah 24-27 draws heavily on the Isaiah tradition, particularly its emphasis on Yahweh's sovereignty, but advances it to new levels of rhetoric and intensity, necessitated by the challenging circumstances of faith.

The interjection *הִנֵּה* (*himeh*), which could be translated "behold" or "look," (Holladay 1988) is used to draw attention to what *הַיְהוָה* (*YHWH*), the covenant God of Israel, does. A clear sequence of intensifying destruction of the earth (*וַיִּבֹלְקֶהָ* *ha'aretz*), consistent with the poetic and prophetic style of Isaiah, is conveyed by the terms *בִּזְעָק* (*bozeq* - lays waste) and *וַיִּבֹלְקֶהָ* (*ubolqah* - devastates it). The rendering of these two verbs in the *qal* participle, emphasizes the active and continuous nature of God's judgment upon the earth. The participle highlights the ongoing nature of the desolation, suggesting that it is not a one-time event. (Walker-jones 2003). The parallel line uses the term *וַיִּשְׁבֹּשֶׁת* (*we'iwwah paneha* - distorts its surface), which suggests altering or distorting, fitting the context of describing a thorough and unsettling deformation of the earth. The use of the *piel* form for "distorts" (*שָׁבַשׁ*) highlights the deliberate and intense nature of the judgment of God. The result of the devastation is conveyed by *וַיִּשְׁבֹּרְצוּ* (*we-hefitz yosebeha* - and scatters its inhabitants), indicating that the inhabitants are being dispersed. The use of the *hiphil* stem for the verb *וַיִּשְׁבֹּרְצוּ* (*we-hefitz* - scatter) in the verse implies that *YHWH* is actively causing the inhabitants to be scattered. It emphasizes the causative nature of the action (Walker-jones 2003), indicating that it is a deliberate and intentional act of judgment. This

shows the extent of divine intervention and the comprehensive impact on the people of the earth.

Verse 2 highlights the historical existence of social stratification, revealing a society deeply divided by class with varying degrees of advantages and privileges (Goldingay 2009). However, the divine judgment and catastrophe described in the verse will not spare any social group, emphasizing universal accountability. This verse encapsulates the three main stratifications of that society: social, economic, and religious characteristics. In the face of divine judgment, these credentials will be inconsequential (Webb, 1996). The verse uses a repetitive structure to list various social roles, emphasizing that all classes, regardless of status, will face the same fate without any form of comparative advantage:

כְּעַם (*ka'am* – as with the people), *כְּכֹהֵן* (*kakohen* – so with the priest). *כְּעֹבֵד* (*ka'aved* – as with the servant), *כְּאֲדוֹנָיו* (*ka'adonav* – so with his master). *כְּשִׁפְחָהּ* (*kashifhah* – as with the maid), *כְּגִבְרָתָהּ* (*kigviratah* – so with her mistress). *כְּמֹכֵר* (*kammokher* – so with the buyer), *כְּמוֹכֵר* (*kammokher* – so with the seller). *כְּמֹלֵךְ* (*kamalveh* – as with the lender), *כְּלוֹבֵהּ* (*kalloveh* – so with the borrower). *כְּשֹׁשֶׁה* (*kanosheh* – as with the collector of usury), *בֹּשֶׁה* (*nosheh bo* – so the giver of it).

This repetitive structure serves as a deliberate rhetorical device to emphasize that all classes, regardless of status, will face the same fate. It underscores the notion that in the face of divine judgment, social, economic, and religious distinctions become irrelevant.

Verse 3 contains a prophetic declaration of divine judgment that resonates with a people familiar with the destruction of neighbouring kingdoms and their own vulnerabilities within a clear historical context. The verse reinforces the devastation described in verse 1. The gravity of the destruction is reflected in the choice of tense of the Hebrew verbs used: *הִבֵּק תִּבֹּק* (*hiboq tiboq* – utterly destroyed) and *הִבֹּז תִּבֹּז* (*hiboz tiboz* – utterly spoiled), which are in the *niphal* Infinitive Absolute form, emphasizing the intensity and certainty of the finite verb (Walker-Jones 2003). In other words, the *niphal* infinitive absolute form intensifies the action described. It underscores the certainty and completeness of the action. In this case, the actions of the earth being "completely laid waste" (*תִּבֹּק*) and "utterly plundered" (*תִּבֹּז*) are highlighted with great intensity. This construction stresses the thoroughness and inevitability of the devastation. The earth is not just affected; it is devastated to an absolute degree.

Additionally, the *niphal* stem often indicates a passive or reflexive action (Kahn 2014). In this context, it suggests that the earth is undergoing these actions (being laid waste and plundered) rather than performing them. This aligns with the theme of divine judgment, where the earth is the object of the divine intervention and judgment.

The repeated *niphal* infinitive absolute *הִבֹּק תִּבֹּק* (*hiboq tiboq* - utterly emptied) serves to reinforce the dramatic nature of the prophecy. It underscores the severity and totality of the destruction that will befall *הָאָרֶץ* (*ha'aretz* - the earth). This repetition creates a rhythmic and emphatic proclamation of judgment.

In verse 4 is the metaphor for human sin in which the mourning of the earth could symbolize the collective suffering due to widespread corruption and arrogance, themes prevalent in prophetic critiques. The structure that conveys the metaphor is significant: *אֲבֵלָה נִבְלָה* (*the earth mourns and withers*) and *אֲבֵלָה נִבְלָה* (*the world fades and withers*) is a form of poetic parallelism, a typical characteristic of Biblical Hebrew poetry (Alter 2011). Thus, the use of synonymous parallelism (Bandstra 2014) means that both lines express the same

idea of the earth/world experiencing desolation and decay. Repetitive structures often serve to emphasize the severity and completeness of the action described.

The phrase מְרוֹם עַם הָאָרֶץ (*merom am ha'aretz - the highest people of the earth*), although translated as heaven (NIV, RSV), it can be understood as referring to the people who are high or exalted, indicating that those who are considered high or important among the people of the earth are also affected by the desolation. Thus, justifying its rendering as “the haughty people” (KJV), “the exalted people” (NASB), “the exalted of the land” (CJB), and “the greatest people” (NLT). This connects the cosmic or environmental catastrophe to the human realm, particularly the social elite or those in positions of power and influence. אֶמְלֵלָה (*'umlelah - languish*) was used to describe the exhaustion (Scott 1980) that the earth suffers. The same word but now in the plural *'umlelalu* is used to express the cause-and-effect relationship within the context of the interconnectedness between humanity and the cosmic environment.

Verse 5 points out covenant violation as the cause of the divine retribution. This affirms the theological belief that human sin, particularly breaking the covenant with God, leads to natural and social consequences. חָנֵפָה (*chanefah - defiled*) is the *qal* perfect feminine singular of חָנַף (*hanaph*), which can also mean “polluted” or “corrupted,” describes the state of the earth under its inhabitants due to their actions. The verse uses three parallel statements to describe the reasons for the earth's defilement: “they have transgressed the laws,” (Isaiah 24:5b) “changed the ordinance,” (Isaiah 24:5c) and “broken the everlasting covenant” (Isaiah 24:5d). This structure is typical of parallelism in Hebrew poetry and serves to emphasize the severity of the actions leading to the earth's defilement. Thus, verse 5 utilizes synthetic parallelism. In synthetic parallelism, the second line expands upon or explains the first line rather than simply echoing or contrasting it (Bandstra 2014). Therefore, each clause builds upon the previous one to explain the reason for the earth's defilement: הָאָרֶץ חָנֵפָה תַּחַת יוֹשְׁבֶיהָ (*ha'aretz chanefah tachat yosheha*), the earth also is defiled under the inhabitants thereof (Isaiah 24:5a). כִּי עָבְרוּ תוֹרוֹת (*avru berit olam*), because they have transgressed the laws.

חָלַפּוּ חֹק (*chalafu choq*), changed the ordinance.

עָבְרוּ בְרִית עוֹלָם (*avru berit olam*), broken the everlasting covenant.

The description of the reasons for the earth's defilement is consistent with the themes of judgment and divine retribution found in Isaiah. The terms used describe specific aspects of disobedience: “laws” likely refers to general commandments, “ordinance” to specific statutes, and “everlasting covenant” to fundamental agreements between God and humanity. Therefore, the opinion of Webb (1996) that interprets this verse in terms of universal divine prescriptions and covenant of God with humanity vis-à-vis creation care as codified in Genesis creation accounts is substantiated when he reasoned that the laws and statutes mentioned in verse 5 should be understood as the fundamental principles of right behaviour established at creation, particularly emphasizing humanity's responsibility as stewards to care for the environment. The passage highlights a world so damaged by its inhabitants that it can no longer sustain life, having been defiled by its people (v. 5a). This serves as a stark warning from God about the consequences of neglecting our duty to protect His creation.

Verse 6 describes historical instances where cities and lands were laid waste due to invasions and divine retribution in a manner that reinforces the reality of divine judgment. The verse asserts the consequence of human sin is a curse that leads to widespread desolation and the reduction of the population to a small remnant. אָלָה (*alah - oath*) is a noun, feminine singular, that basically means an oath or solemn vow but could contextually be translated curse

emanating from impinging or breaking an oath (Scott 1980). Therefore, in connection with verse five that ends with הִפְרוּ בְרִית עוֹלָם (*hepheru berit olam - they have broken the everlasting covenant*), broken the everlasting covenant, אָלָה (*alah - oath*) is justifiably translated curse in this verse. אָכְלָה (*aklah - has devoured*) is *qal* perfect, 3rd feminine singular of אָכַל (*'akhal - to consume*), which could mean eat, consume, devour or burn up. One of its frequent occurrences is in the context of either deserving or unjustified punishment (Scott 1980). מִצָּר (*miz'ar - little or few*) a noun, masculine singular, describes the effect of the חָרָה (*charah - to burn*) burning on the population. Therefore, only a “few,” people are left.

Findings from the Exegetical Analysis of Isaiah 24:1-6

The above exegetical endeavour produced the following findings.

There is a clear connection between environmental devastation and human sinfulness, specifically covenant violations. In the text, the earth is described as mourning, withering, and languishing due to the actions of its inhabitants, reflecting the direct impact of human behaviour on the environment. Thus, human sin results in both environmental and societal repercussions. This underscores the theological understanding that the treaty between God and humans includes responsibilities toward creation, and violating this covenant brings about divine retribution.

Also, the passage utilizes various forms of Hebrew parallelism and intensifying structures such as “the earth mourns and withers,” (Isaiah 24:4a) “the world fades and withers” (Isaiah 24:4b) and the repetition of actions like “utterly destroyed” and “utterly spoiled” to convey the severity and inevitability of the devastation. This makes the inescapable and comprehensive nature of the consequences of divine judgement vivid.

The prophetic imagery and linguistic choices underscore the themes of universal accountability, the cosmic impact of human actions, and the ultimate sovereignty of God in executing judgment. In other words, divine judgment and the resulting desolation are universal, affecting all social strata without discrimination. This is evident in verse 2, which lists various social groups (e.g., people, priests, servants, masters) to underscore that no one is exempted from the consequences of collective sin.

Similarly, the text portrays divine judgment as both a consequence of human sin and a means of cosmic and moral reordering. This judgment serves to highlight the seriousness of the offenses and the need for repentance and restoration. Ultimately, the findings suggest that ancient prophetic oracle has enduring relevance for addressing modern challenges related to environmental degradation and social inequality, aligning closely with contemporary ethical frameworks and policy considerations.

A Synopsis of Eco-theological Texts in Isaiah

The Book of Isaiah contains numerous eco-theological texts and themes that highlight the interconnectedness of God, humanity, and the natural world (Brueggemann, 1998). It contains chapters that highlight the moral and ethical dimensions of human interactions with the environment and present a vision of ecological redemption and restoration. Isaiah 24:4-6 reflects an eco-theological perspective by portraying the Earth as a sentient being mourning and withering due to human actions that transgress divine laws and violate the covenant. It establishes a connection between human behaviour, environmental degradation, and the consequences faced by the Earth. Isaiah 11:6-9 envisions a harmonious coexistence among different species. It reflects a vision of restoration and reconciliation in the natural world, suggesting a divine intention for a balanced and peaceful creation. Similarly, Isaiah 55:12-13 personifies nature, attributing joy and peace to the mountains, hills, and trees. It signifies

a harmonious connection between humans and the natural environment, portraying a vision of creation celebrating in response to divine guidance. In Isaiah 65:25, the theme of peaceful coexistence among different species and the absence of harm or destruction are reiterated. It envisages a restored creation where predatory behaviour is transformed, in alignment with a vision of ecological harmony.

Perspectives on the Interpretation of Isaiah 24:1-6

Hitherto, it is established that Isaiah 24:1-6 is generally seen as a prophetic vision of cosmic catastrophe and divine judgment. However, it has been interpreted through various lenses by prominent scholars. Watts (2005), Blenkinsopp (2000), Childs (2001), and Seitz (1993) all emphasize the universal nature of the judgment depicted in Isaiah 24:1-6. Watts and Seitz highlight the cosmic scale of the catastrophe, while Blenkinsopp and Childs underscore the global impact of divine sovereignty and judgment. Virtually all of these scholars agree on the theme of divine sovereignty. Seitz and Childs particularly emphasize God's ultimate authority over creation, reflected in the eschatological vision of Isaiah. Blenkinsopp also notes the passage's reflection of the sovereign authority of God, especially in relation to Israel's exile.

Watts (2005), Blenkinsopp (2000), and Brueggemann (1998) view the desolation described in the text as a result of divine punishment for human transgressions. Watts sees it as part of a larger apocalyptic vision, Blenkinsopp interprets it symbolically within the Isaiah Apocalypse, while Brueggemann connects it to socio-economic injustices and covenantal disobedience. In other words, he provides a socio-political interpretation, linking environmental devastation to human sinfulness and socio-economic injustice. Childs and Seitz, on the other hand, focus more on the theological and eschatological themes therein. Childs interprets the passage within the broader theological context of Isaiah, highlighting themes of judgment and salvation, while Seitz views it as a declaration of God's ultimate authority in an eschatological context.

Meanwhile, Brueggemann stands out in his emphasis on the ecological implications of the text. He links environmental devastation directly to human sinfulness and the socio-economic injustices of the time, providing a critique that connects ancient texts to contemporary environmental ethics. The other scholars acknowledge the environmental desolation but do not delve as deeply into the ecological dimensions. It is in alignment with Brueggemann that this paper engages an eco-theological implication of this text.

Eco-Theological Interpretation and Application of Isaiah 24:1-6

Leaning on the exegetical analysis done on the text and corroborated by different scholar's acknowledgement of the environmental thrust of the text, particularly Brueggemann and Webb who delve more into the ecological implications of the text, the following eco-friendly interpretations can be safely established.

1. Divine Judgment and Environmental Desolation

The passage in Isaiah 24:1-6 serves as a powerful eco-theological critique, emphasizing that human actions have direct and severe consequences on the environment. The text portrays a world laid waste due to divine judgment, directly linked to human covenant violations and moral failings. The themes of environmental degradation and desolation reflect contemporary concerns about ecological crises, including climate change, deforestation, pollution, and the decline in biodiversity. These modern issues can be seen as parallel to the devastation described in Isaiah.

2. Universal Accountability and Social Justice

Isaiah 24:2 stresses that divine judgment impacts all social strata equally, from priests to common people, masters to servants, and buyers to sellers. This underscores the concept of universal

accountability, a principle that can be applied to modern discussions of environmental justice. The text implies that achieving environmental sustainability requires addressing social inequalities and ensuring that individuals and communities are responsible for their actions. This aligns with contemporary efforts to promote environmental justice, particularly in addressing how the most vulnerable and marginalized communities are unduly affected by environmental degradation.

3. Covenant and Stewardship

The covenantal relationship between God and humanity, as described in verse 5, includes a responsibility to care for the earth. The violation of this covenant results in significant repercussions for both the environment and society. This can be interpreted as a call for renewed commitment to stewardship and sustainable practices. Modern eco-theology often emphasizes the need for humans to act as stewards of creation, responsible for maintaining the health and integrity of the natural world.

4. Prophetic Critique and Call to Action

The passage functions as a prophetic warning, highlighting the inevitable consequences of neglecting divine laws and ethical principles. It serves as a call to action, urging individuals and communities to reflect on their behaviours and make necessary changes to prevent environmental catastrophe. Contemporary eco-theological discourse often draws on such prophetic texts to advocate for urgent and transformative action to address environmental challenges. This includes promoting sustainable lifestyles, advocating for policies that protect the environment, and working towards a just and equitable society.

The Intersection of Environmental Justice Theories and Isaiah 24:1-6

Environmental justice, environmental ethics, and social justice theories are interrelated fields that address the moral, social, and political dimensions of human interaction with the environment. Understanding their intersection provides a strong basis for addressing environmental issues in ways that are ethically responsible and socially just.

Environmental justice seeks to address and rectify the inequitable distribution of environmental hazards that disproportionately affect the poor and minority communities in society (Dobson, 1998). The core principle of environmental justice asserts that everyone is entitled to a clean and safe environment, free from the harmful impacts of industrial waste and pollution on their health and well-being (Arney, 2024). Consequently, environmental justice involves governmental efforts to ensure that all citizens enjoy an equitable degree of protection from environmental hazards. This entails preventing minority and underprivileged populations from facing disproportionate environmental burdens (Arney, 2024). This concept aligns with the principle that environmental protection and public health are fundamental rights that should be accessible to all, regardless of socio-economic status, race, or ethnicity. Environmental justice advocates for policies and practices that mitigate environmental risks and promote fair distribution of environmental benefits, ensuring that marginalized communities receive the same level of environmental quality as more affluent communities (Bullard).

Environmental ethics, a field within philosophy, explores the moral connections and responsibilities humans have toward the natural world (Desjardins, 2013). It underscores the inherent worth of nature and the moral obligations humans bear to safeguard and conserve it (Desjardins, 2013). On the other hand, theories of social justice emphasize the fair allocation of wealth, opportunities, and privileges

across all segments of society. They advocate for the protection of rights and fair treatment of all individuals, particularly the marginalized groups.

More specifically, environmental ethics and social justice theories intersect in various ways, providing the window for understanding and addressing the complex relationships between humans, non-human entities, and the environment. Therefore, the convergence of environmental ethics and social justice theories represents a vital area of study that addresses both the moral obligations humans have towards the environment and fair allocation of wealth, opportunities, and privileges. This intersection highlights how ethical principles can guide the fair treatment of people and nature, promoting sustainability and justice.

In this paper, the perspectives of Andrew Dobson (1998), Robert Bullard (2000), John Rawls (1999), and Peter Singer (2011) offer robust insights into these intersections, stressing both convergences and divergences in their perspectives.

It is noteworthy that the views of these scholars converge and diverge at several junctures. Both Singer and Dobson converge on the ethical imperative to protect non-human entities beyond anthropocentric interests. Bullard and Rawls highlight the need for policies that address social inequities and promote fair treatment. Both Carolyn Merchant's ecofeminism and Robert Bullard's environmental justice theory highlight the deep connections between social equity and environmental issues.

Differing scopes of ethical concern can be underscored between Rawls and Singer, with Rawls centered on human justice and Singer on broader bioethical considerations. On the strategies for achieving justice, Bullard focuses on policy interventions. Regarding environmental ethics, Dobson prioritizes the intrinsic value of nature, whereas Rawls focuses on human-centered justice.

The synthesis of these perspectives reveals a comprehensive guide for addressing environmental and social justice issues. The recognition of nature's inherent value alongside the necessity for fair distribution highlights the critical role of integrating environmental ethics into broader social justice frameworks. The intersectionality recognized by Bullard suggests that effective interventions must address both environmental and social inequities simultaneously. The perspectives of Dobson, Bullard, Rawls, and Singer provide a rich variety of insights into the intersections of environmental ethics and social justice. The underscored areas of convergence and divergence in their views indicate that a more holistic and integrated approach is necessary to tackle the complex challenges of environmental degradation and social inequity in a manner that is both inclusive and effective. This evaluation underscores the importance of multidisciplinary approaches and the enduring relevance of ethical principles in guiding contemporary efforts toward sustainability and justice. Consequently, the intervention through Isaiah 24:1-6 is substantially justified. After all, the Bible is generally rich in prescriptions for creation care (Fawenu, 2020; Bridger, 1990), and the book of Isaiah particularly has profound eco-theological inferences that resonates with the theories thus far explored.

The exegesis of Isaiah 24:1-6 reveals a profound connection between human sin, particularly covenant violations, and environmental and social devastation. This biblical perspective aligns closely with Andrew Dobson's (1998) theory of environmental justice, which emphasizes the ethical responsibilities humans have towards the environment and each other. Dobson's conception of distributive justice in environmental sustainability echoes the prophetic call in Isaiah for universal accountability and equitable stewardship of the earth. Similarly, Robert Bullard's (2000) exploration of

environmental justice highlights how environmental degradation disproportionately affects disadvantaged (marginalized) communities, aligning with the prophetic theme of impartial judgment across all social groups.

John Rawls' (1999) theory of justice, which focuses on fairness and equitable distribution of resources, further illuminates the social justice themes in Isaiah 24:1-6. Rawls' principles can be applied to the biblical text's portrayal of divine judgment as a means of restoring moral and social order. Lastly, Peter Singer's (2011) utilitarian ethics, which advocates for actions that promote the greatest good and minimize harm, resonate with the prophetic call for repentance and responsible stewardship to avert divine retribution and its catastrophic consequences. Together, these theories offer a robust framework for understanding the intertwined nature concerning social and environmental justice as depicted by Isaiah 24:1-6 and offer valuable insights for contemporary applications in policy and ethical conduct.

Recommendations

Based on the findings from the exegetical study of Isaiah 24:1-6, the following recommendations are proposed to address the themes of environmental desolation, social justice, and their relevance to contemporary issues:

1. Promote Environmental Stewardship

Religious communities, especially the Church and theological institutions should integrate eco-theological principles into their teachings and practices. Emphasising the covenantal responsibility toward creation can foster a deeper sense of environmental stewardship among adherents. Similarly, they should develop educational programmes that teach the significance of the covenant between God and humanity, with a focus on environmental and social responsibilities. These programmes can be incorporated into religious education curricula and community workshops.

2. Promotion of Environmental and Social Accountability

Policymakers and community leaders should promote initiatives that hold individuals and organizations accountable for their environmental impact. This includes implementing policies that address both environmental sustainability and social equity, reflecting the universal accountability highlighted in Isaiah 24:1-6.

3. Address Climate Change

Government and churches should educate the people to promote and adopt sustainable practices at individual, community, and organizational levels, such as reducing carbon footprints, conserving water, and protecting biodiversity.

4. Foster Social Equity:

Government should ensure the development projects and policies that prioritize social equity, providing fair opportunities and benefits to all members of society, particularly the disadvantaged and marginalized. Efforts of all should be directed at identifying and addressing social inequities that contribute to environmental harm, such as unequal distribution of resources, lack of access to clean water and air, and poor living conditions. Similarly, religious and civic organizations should support and collaborate with environmental justice movements that address the interconnectedness of human actions and environmental consequences. This aligns with the

prophetic call for justice and accountability seen in Isaiah 24:1-6.

5. Inclusion of Environmental Ethics in Policy Making

Governments and organizations should incorporate environmental ethics, as derived from biblical injunctions into contemporary policy-making. This can help address issues of sustainability and equity, ensuring that policies reflect a holistic approach to environmental and social well-being. Promoting interdisciplinary dialogue between theologians, environmental scientists, and social justice advocates to create comprehensive solutions to environmental and social challenges is desirable to bridge the gap between ancient wisdom and contemporary issues.

6. Encourage Ethical Leadership

Leadership training should be provided for religious, community, and political leaders on ethical and moral responsibilities related to environmental sustainability and social justice. Eco-theological interpretations and teaching from relevant Bible texts should be the priority of Pastors and teachers of the Bible.

7. Integrate SDG Principles:

Government, Church and organisations should align local, national, and organisational strategies with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly SDG 15 (Life on Land) and SDG 10 (Reduced Inequalities). They should implement systems to monitor and assess progress toward these goals, ensuring both transparency and accountability.

Conclusion

The text of Isaiah 24:1-6 vividly describes a scenario of cosmic destruction and environmental desolation due to divine judgment. The imagery and poetic parallelism emphasize the severity of the devastation. The universal scope of divine judgment, affecting all social strata equally, highlights the theme of social justice. The passage underscores that in the face of divine retribution, no social, economic, or religious distinctions hold any advantage. There is a clear connection between human covenant violations and environmental consequences. The text attributes the desolation of the earth to human sin, particularly the violation of the covenant with God. The passage serves as a prophetic call to acknowledge the effects of human behaviour on both the environment and society. It emphasizes the need for adherence to divine laws to prevent such widespread devastation. Therefore, it serves as a poignant reminder of the interconnectedness of moral conduct, covenant faithfulness, and cosmic harmony.

The eco-theological interpretation of Isaiah 24:1-6 provides a window for understanding the interconnectedness of human actions, environmental consequences, and social justice. By contextualizing these themes within contemporary discussions on environmental sustainability and social equity, the passage offers valuable insights and guidance for addressing modern global challenges. The prophetic wisdom of Isaiah underscores the urgent need for collective action, ethical responsibility, and commitment to sustainable practices to ensure a just and healthy world for all.

Conflict interest(s)

The author declares that he/she has no personal, professional or financial interest that may have inappropriately influenced the outcome of this research.

Ethical considerations

The author declares that this article was conducted in accordance with ethical standards and principles for research.

Funding

The author declares that this research received no funding from any agency/organization.

References

- Alter, R. (2011). *The Art of Biblical Poetry*. New and Revised Edition. New York: Basic Books
- Arney, J. (2024, April 22). *environmental justice*. *Encyclopedia Britannica*.
<https://www.britannica.com/topic/environmental-justice>
- Bandstra, B. L. (2014). *Reading The Old Testament: An Introduction to the Hebrew Bible*. 4th Edition. Belmont: Wadsworth.
- Blenkinsopp, J. (2000). *Isaiah 1-39: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*. New York: Doubleday.
- Bridger, F. (1990). Ecology and Eschatology: A Neglected Dimension. *Tyndale Bulletin* 41, (2), 290-301.
- Brueggemann W. (1998). *Isaiah 1-39*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press.
- Bullard, R. D. (2000). *Dumping in Dixie: Race, Class, and Environmental Quality*. Boulder, CO: Westview Press.
- Bullard, R. D. (2017). Overcoming Racism in Environmental Decision Making. In Louis P. Pojman, Paul Pojman, and Katie McShane (Eds.), *Environmental Ethics: Reading in Theory and Application*. 7th Edition (pp.315-331). Boston: Cengage Learning.
- Childs, B. S. (2001). *Isaiah: A Commentary*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press.
- Collins J. J. (2018). *Introduction to the Hebrew Bible and Deuterocanonical Books*. 3rd Edition. Minneapolis: Fortress Press.
- Desjardins, J. R. (2013). *Environmental Ethics: An Introduction to Environmental Philosophy*. 5th Edition. Boston: Wadsworth.
- Dobson, A. (1998). *Justice and the Environment: Conceptions of Environmental Sustainability and Dimensions of Social Justice*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Duvall, J. S., & Hays, J. D. (2012). *Grasping God's Word: A Hands-On Approach to Reading, Interpreting, and Applying the Bible*. Zondervan Academic.
- Fawenu, B. O. (2020). Community Development in the Light of Ecclesiastical Sensitivity to Climate Change in Ilorin, Nigeria. In Martin Shanguhya and Toyin Falola (Eds.), *Development in Modern Africa*. (pp. 110-131). New York: Routledge.
- Goldingay, J. (2009). *Old Testament Theology: Israel's Life*. Volume 3. Downers Grove: IVP Academic.
- Guterres, A. (2022). World headed for climate catastrophe without urgent action, *UN Environmental Programme*. Retrieved from <https://www.unep.org/news-and-stories/stories/world-headed-for-climate-catastrophe-without-urgent-action-un-secretary-general>.
- Holladay, W. L. (1988). *A Concise Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament*. Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans.
- IPCC (2018). Summary for Policymakers. *Global Warming of*

- 1.5°C. Retrieved from <https://www.ipcc.ch> pdf.
- Johnston, P. S. (2009). Faith in Isaiah. In David G. Firth and H.G.M. Williamson (Eds.), *Interpreting Isaiah: Issues and Approaches* (pp. 104-121). Nottingham: Apollos.
- Kahn, L. (2014). *The Routledge Introductory Course in Biblical Hebrew*. Abingdon: Routledge.
- Kratz, R. G. (2015). *Historical and biblical Israel: The history, tradition, and archives of Israel and Judah* (P. M. Kurtz, Trans.). Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Lasor, W. S., D. A. Hubbard and F. W. Bush. (1996). *Old Testament Survey: The Message, Form, and Background of the Old Testament*. 2nd Edition. Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans.
- Martin J. A. (2000). Isaiah. In John F. Wolvoord and Roy B. Zuck (Eds.), *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: Old Testament* (pp. 1029-1121). Colorado Springs: Cook Communication.
- Rawls, J. (1999). *A Theory of Justice. Revised Edition*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Rooker, M. F. (2011). The Book of Isaiah. In Eugene H. Merrill, Mark F. Rooker and Michael A. Grisanti (Eds.), *The Word and the World: An Introduction to the Old Testament*. Nashville: B & H Academic.
- Schlosberg, D. (2007). *Defining Environmental Justice: Theories, Movements, and Nature*. Oxford University Press.
- Scott, J. B. (1980). Consume. In R. L. Harris, G. L. Archer and B. K. Waltke (Eds.), *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*. Chicago: Moody Institute.
- Scott, J. B. (1980). Curse. In R. L. Harris, G. L. Archer and B. K. Waltke (Eds.), *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*. Chicago: Moody Institute.
- Scott, J. B. (1980). Languish. In R. L. Harris, G. L. Archer and B. K. Waltke (Eds.), *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*. Chicago: Moody Institute.
- Seitz, C. R. (1993). *Isaiah 1-39 Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press.
- Singer, P. (2011). *Practical Ethics*. 3rd Edition. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Sweeney, M. A. (1996). *Isaiah 1-39: with an Introduction to Prophetic Literature*. Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans.
- Sweeney, M. A. (1996). The Book of Isaiah as Prophetic Torah. In Roy F. Melugin and Marvin A. Sweeney (Eds.), *New Visions of Isaiah* (pp. 50-67). Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press.
- Walker-Jones, A. (2003). *Hebrew for Biblical Interpretation*. Atlanta: Society for Biblical Literature.
- Watts, J. D. W. (2005). *Isaiah 1-33*. Revised Edition. Nashville: Thomas Nelson.
- Webb, B. (1996). *The Message of Isaiah: On Eagle's Wings*. Leicester: Intervarsity Press.
- Williamson, H. G. M. (2009). Recent Issues in the Study of Isaiah. In David G. Firth and H.G.M. Williamson (Eds.), *Interpreting Isaiah: Issues and Approaches* (pp.21-39). Nottingham: Apollos.

Testament) from University of Ibadan. His research interest includes contextual interpretation of the Old Testament for human development in Africa, with a focus on Eco-theological studies, environmental care matters, peace, and leadership.

Author Biography

Bamidele Olusegun Fawenu is a Senior Lecturer in the Department of Religions, History, and Heritage Studies at Kwara State University, Malete, Nigeria. He earned his PhD biblical studies (Old