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An exegetical study of Isaiah 1:10–20: Justice as a principle of religious ethics

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In the context of the religious life of the Israelites during the prophetic ministry of Isaiah, worship practices appeared ritually magnificent yet lacked moral depth and social justice. Isaiah 1:10–20 presents a sharp prophetic critique of outward forms of worship that are detached from ethical responsibility towards others. This study aims to exegetically examine the theological critique of the prophet Isaiah against religiosity that is not accompanied by the practice of justice, and to explore its implications for the understanding of religious ethics. Employing a qualitative method through literature review and biblical text analysis, this study emphasises the urgency of integrating worship and justice within the faith experience of the community. The findings reveal that authentic worship, according to Isaiah, requires active participation in the pursuit of social justice as a concrete expression of obedience to God. In today's context, this message affirms that religious practice cannot be separated from a commitment to acts of love and advocacy for the oppressed.

Intradisciplinary and/or interdisciplinary implications: This research enriches the fields of biblical theology, Christian ethics and liturgy by highlighting the importance of the integration of worship and social justice. Furthermore, from an interdisciplinary perspective, this study opens a dialogue between theology and the social sciences, such as the sociology of religion and cultural anthropology, by positioning the faith community as an agent of justice in addressing issues of poverty, injustice and the dynamics of multicultural societies.

Keywords: exegetical study; Isaiah 1:10–20; justice; religious ethics; social justice.

Introduction

In the prophetic tradition of the Old Testament, the book of Isaiah holds a highly significant position in establishing the foundation of religious ethics rooted in the relationship between God and his people. One of the most theologically and ethically powerful passages is Isaiah 1:10–20, which sharply criticises religious practices that have lost their moral substance. This text reveals a tension between religious ritual and the demands of social justice, where the worship performed by the people is rejected by God because it is not accompanied by a life that reflects justice and righteousness. In this context, Isaiah's prophetic message is not only theological, but also ethical, as it affirms that the relationship with God cannot be separated from social responsibility towards others. As emphasised in Groenewald's (2019) study, the critique of the cult in Isaiah 1:10–20 demonstrates that the primary issue is not the ritual itself, but the social injustice committed by its practitioners, causing religious practices to lose their meaning before God.

The phenomenon of the separation between religiosity and social ethics, as criticised in Isaiah 1:10–20, remains relevant in the context of contemporary religious life. Many religious practices are highly ritualistic, yet are not accompanied by a commitment to justice, social concern, and advocacy for vulnerable groups. From the perspective of biblical theology, this condition reflects a crisis of religious ethics, in which religion is reduced to mere symbols and rituals without moral transformation. Isaiah prophetically rejects such forms of religiosity and calls for the integration of worship and justice. This aligns with the view that within the prophetic tradition, justice constitutes the core of religious life rather than merely an additional aspect. Chan (2017) emphasises that ethics in the book of Isaiah cannot be understood solely within the categories of law or wisdom, but must be seen as an integral theological construct within the broader prophetic message.

The structure and content of Isaiah 1:10–20 reveal a rhetorical pattern that contrasts the rejection of hypocritical worship with a call to concrete repentance through acts of justice. This passage not only contains condemnation, but also offers a path to restoration through changes in ethical

behaviour, such as defending the oppressed, advocating for the rights of orphans and caring for widows. Thus, this text is not merely normative, but also transformative, as it directs the people towards the practice of justice as a true expression of obedience to God. Blake Couey (2016) notes that Isaiah 1 combines a critique of improper worship with the offer of divine forgiveness, thereby producing a rich theological reflection on the relationship between repentance, worship and ethics.

Nevertheless, in the development of modern biblical studies, there are various approaches to understanding the relationship between cult and ethics in prophetic texts, particularly in Isaiah 1:10–20. Some interpreters perceive a dichotomy between ritual and ethics, as if the prophet rejects cultic practices altogether. However, other approaches emphasise that what is being criticised is not the cult itself, but rather its misuse and the moral emptiness behind such practices. This debate reveals a theoretical gap in understanding the position of justice as a principle of religious ethics in this text. Groenewald (2019) highlights that interpreters often face an 'either-or' dilemma between cult and ethics, whereas the text actually points towards the integration of both.

In addition, there is also a gap in the methodological approaches used to interpret Isaiah 1:10–20. The form-critical approach, for example, often faces limitations in fully explaining the ethical dimension of this text, as it tends to classify the textual material into certain categories that are not always adequate. Chan (2017) argues that many ethical commands in Isaiah 1–39 do not fully fit within either wisdom or legal categories, and therefore require a more integrative approach, such as canonical and literary approaches. Thus, an exegetical study is needed that is able to integrate linguistic, historical and theological analyses in order to comprehensively understand the meaning of justice in this text.

Based on the above discussion, it can be seen that there is an urgent need to conduct an in-depth exegetical study of Isaiah 1:10–20, particularly in understanding justice as a principle of religious ethics. This study aims to comprehensively examine the meaning of the text through an exegetical analysis that takes into account linguistic aspects, historical context, literary structure and its theological message. In addition, this research also seeks to bridge existing theoretical gaps by offering a more integrative understanding of the relationship between worship and justice within the prophetic tradition. Thus, this study is expected to contribute to the development of a relevant ethical theology, both in academic contexts and in the praxis of faith, so that justice is understood not merely as a theoretical concept, but as a guiding principle for religious life in a concrete and practical sense.

Analysis of Isaiah 1:10–20

Isaiah 1:10–20 is an early section of the book of Isaiah that delivers a sharp critique of the spiritual and social condition of Judah at that time. This passage highlights the tension between religious ritual and the moral life of the people, affirming that God is displeased with worship that is empty of justice. Through a confrontational style of language, Isaiah issues a prophetic call for repentance and social transformation as the core of true worship.

This pericope opens with a highly provocative call: 'Hear the word of the LORD, you rulers of Sodom; give ear to the instruction of our God, you people of Gomorrah!' (Is 1:10). The use of the terms 'סְדוֹם' [Sodom] and 'עֲמֹרָה' [Gomorrah] is not without purpose. In biblical tradition, these two cities symbolise moral wickedness and divine judgement. By equating the people of Judah with Sodom and Gomorrah, the prophet Isaiah conveys that their formal religiosity does not distinguish them from the wicked nations that were destroyed. This shows that the presence of the temple, sacrificial offerings and prayers are not guarantees of the people's acceptance before God.

The critique of religious practices is explicitly presented in verses 11–15. God rhetorically asks, 'What to me is the multitude of your sacrifices?' [לָמָּה־לִּי רֹב זִבְחֵיכֶם, *lamah-li rov zivkheikhem*] (Is 1:11). Abundant sacrifices, new moon festivals, solemn assemblies and long prayers are not only considered futile but even detestable in the eyes of God. Verse 13 states, 'I have had enough of burnt offerings of rams and the fat of fed beasts; I do not delight in the blood of bulls, or of lambs, or of goats'. This shows that liturgy devoid of social justice holds no value before God. As explained by Sweeney (1999), Isaiah presents worship as meaningless when it is disconnected from ethical behaviour and social responsibility.

Isaiah's harsh words indicate that God cannot be satisfied by ritual alone. In verse 15, the Lord says, 'When you spread out your hands, I will hide my eyes' in Hebrew, כִּי תַרְבּוּ תְפִלָּה אֵינֶנִּי שֹׁמֵעַ [*ki tarbu tefillah, eineni shomea*], meaning 'Even if you offer many prayers, I will not listen'. This signifies that prayer becomes meaningless when performed by hands 'full of blood', referring to a life marked by injustice, violence, and oppression of the vulnerable.

However, this section does not end with condemnation alone. Verses 16–17 present a call to repentance using a series of imperatives: 'Wash yourselves, make yourselves clean… learn to do good; seek justice, correct the oppressor; defend the fatherless, plead for the widow!' (Is 1:16–17). Verbs such as רַחֲצוּ (*rachatzú* [wash]) and הוֹכִיחוּ (*hokhíchu* [rebuke, correct]) indicate that God demands concrete actions that demonstrate a transformed life, not merely religious expressions. As stated by McConville (2004), the prophetic call to justice is not a rejection of worship per se, but a call to restore its integrity by grounding it in righteous living.

The theological meaning of this pericope underscores the fundamental principle that true worship cannot be separated from moral integrity and social responsibility. God is not only a transcendent and holy God, but also one who cares deeply about the fate of the oppressed. Therefore, every form

of worship directed to him must reflect God's own character, namely love, justice and truth. Isaiah affirms that without social justice, worship is merely hypocrisy. As Walter Brueggemann writes, true worship must generate neighbourliness and care for the vulnerable. Otherwise, it is merely a self-serving performance (Brueggemann 2001).

At the end of the pericope, verses 18–20 convey God's invitation to dialogue and offer an opportunity for restoration: 'Come now, let us reason together … Though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow' (Is 1:18). This phrase expresses God's mercy, who continues to keep the door of forgiveness open for those willing to repent and return to the path of justice. In Hebrew, it is stated as אִם־יִהְיוּ חַטָּאֵיכֶם כַּשָּׁנִים כַּשֶּׁלֶג יַלְבִּינוּ [*im yihyu chatta'ekhem kashanim, kasheleg yalbinu*], 'Though your sins are like crimson, they shall be made white like snow'. This is a powerful expression of God's grace and renewal that surpasses human fallenness.

In the context of today's church, this text serves as a highly relevant prophetic call. Many Christian communities focus on ritual and liturgy without attending to the social implications of worship. Isaiah's critique challenges the church to integrate worship with justice and love in practical life. As expressed by Wolterstorff (2011), authentic worship equips the church to be a witness to God's justice in the world. Therefore, true worship is not only what happens at the altar, but also how the lives of God's people reflect justice and compassion in the world.

Worship and justice in the prophetic perspective

In the prophetic perspective of the Old Testament, worship is not only merely understood as a vertical relationship between humans and God, but also includes a horizontal dimension that is, an ethical and just relationship with fellow human beings. These two dimensions form an integral unity that cannot be separated in the faith life of God's people. The prophets, including Isaiah, Amos and Micah, consistently rejected forms of worship that were ceremonial but empty of justice and love towards others. This affirms that true relationship with God must result in concrete actions defending the rights of the oppressed and striving for social welfare. In Isaiah 1:10–20, for example, the Lord condemns the people's worship filled with offerings and prayers but performed by hands 'full of blood' (Is 1:15) that is, lives that perpetuate oppression. Amos expresses a similar message: 'I hate, I despise your festivals, and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies… but let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream' (Am 5:21, 24). This critique shows that in the prophetic view, worship without justice is not only ineffective, but also a form of spiritual hypocrisy.

Prophetic ethics here play a crucial role as a tool to expose religious hypocrisy, namely when religious rituals are separated from the realities of justice and love. The primary function of the prophets' proclamation is to voice God's will to the people, challenge oppressive social structures and call for repentance towards righteous living. According to Walter Brueggemann, the prophets do not merely protest cultic malpractice; they deconstruct the entire religious ideology that props up injustice (Brueggemann 2001). Thus, prophetic critique does not stop at the level of personal morality but targets social systems that enable injustice to persist. Prophetic ethics are not only normative, but also transformative, calling God's people to form an alternative community that embodies God's shalom in the world. In this context, true worship unites liturgy and ethics, spirituality and justice. Wolterstorff (2011) emphasises that worship is not merely private devotion but the liturgical formation of a people committed to justice in the world. Therefore, the church as a worshiping community is called to be a prophetic sign in society, manifesting the Kingdom of God through worship that not only glorifies God, but also advocates for a just and dignified life for all people.

Theological synthesis: Justice as a principle of religious ethics

The theological synthesis of justice as a principle of religious ethics begins with the understanding that the concept of 'justice' in the biblical tradition is not merely a juridical category or a matter of fair distribution, but a theological reality rooted in the very character of God. In Old Testament exegetical studies, terms such as *mishpat* and *tsedaqah* refer to God's actions in upholding righteousness while simultaneously restoring broken social relationships. Justice is therefore not only normative in nature, but also relational and restorative, particularly in the context of defending the weak and the oppressed. The prophetic tradition consistently affirms that social injustice constitutes a violation of God's will; thus, justice becomes a concrete expression of covenantal faithfulness (Objantoro, Seli & Julianes 2025). Thus, in a theological perspective, justice is a manifestation of the divine nature that demands an ethical response from believers in their social life.

In the New Testament, the concept of justice undergoes a Christological deepening, in which the justice of God is revealed through the saving work of Christ, who not only justifies humanity in a forensic sense but also transforms the moral and social life of believers. Justice is no longer understood merely as obedience to the law, but as participation in the new life brought forth by grace. This demonstrates that justice is integrative in nature, encompassing spiritual, ethical and social dimensions simultaneously (Bobbert 2017). Thus, the results of the exegesis demonstrate that justice is a principle that unites the vertical dimension (relationship with God) and the horizontal dimension (relationship with others), so that genuine faith always carries tangible social implications.

The relationship between worship, morality and social justice cannot be separated within the framework of biblical

theology. True worship is not merely a liturgical expression, but must be embodied in moral praxis that reflects the justice of God. The prophetic critique of empty worship affirms that ritual without justice is a distorted form of religiosity. In this perspective, worship functions as a source of moral formation, while morality becomes the concrete expression of faith, and social justice serves as the external indicator of the integrity of both. Therefore, these three aspects form an organic unity that cannot be reduced to one another. In line with this, social theological studies affirm that justice is an essential element in all religious traditions and serves as the foundation for a balanced and dignified social order.

Justice functions as an indicator of the authenticity of faith. Faith that does not produce social justice essentially loses its validity as a living faith. In the biblical tradition, the presence of justice in the life of God's people serves as a sign that their relationship with God is rightly ordered. Conversely, injustice indicates a theological dysfunction within the life of faith. Therefore, justice is not only an ethical demand, but also an evaluative criterion for assessing the quality of an individual's or a community's faith. This aligns with the view that ethics in the Bible is inherently theological, in which the character of God serves as both the foundation and the standard for the conduct of his people, so that ethical life cannot be separated from faith itself (Bọlọjẹ & Groenewald 2014).

Within the framework of religious ethics, justice also functions as a normative foundation that guides the actions of both individuals and communities. Justice is not merely one value among many, but a fundamental principle that structures the entire ethical system. In moral theology, justice is understood as a foundational concept that evaluates actions and social structures based on the standards of the common good and collective well-being. It serves as both an evaluative and regulatory principle, ensuring that religious life does not become trapped in an individualistic spirituality, but is oriented towards genuine social transformation (Bobbert 2017).

Based on this overall synthesis, a theological principle can be formulated: faith without justice is an invalid faith. This statement is not merely normative rhetoric, but a logical conclusion drawn from the testimony of Scripture, which consistently links faith with the praxis of justice. Genuine faith must produce actions that reflect the character of God, especially in striving for justice for others. Therefore, any form of faith that does not result in social justice has essentially lost its theological essence.

Moreover, worship must be integrated with ethics as a consequence of the holistic nature of faith. Authentic worship does not end at the liturgical dimension, but must give rise to moral and social transformation. This integration demonstrates that religious life cannot be dichotomised into sacred and profane realms, but must be understood as a unified whole. In this perspective, justice becomes the bridge that connects worship with social reality, so that faith is not only experienced personally, but is also embodied in concrete social responsibility. Thus, justice as a principle of religious ethics is not merely a theoretical concept, but a practical calling that demands the active involvement of believers in manifesting the signs of the Kingdom of God in the world.

Theological implications

The theological implications of the concept of justice within the framework of contemporary Christian faith indicate that justice cannot be understood merely as a secondary ethical category, but rather as a constitutive element of the life of faith itself. In the context of contemporary religious ethics, justice gains increasing relevance amid the growing complexity of social issues, such as economic inequality, the marginalisation of vulnerable groups and global humanitarian crises. Theology cannot ignore these realities, for a faith that does not engage in dialogue with its social context risks becoming abstract and losing its transformative power. Therefore, justice must be positioned as a hermeneutical principle that guides theological reflection in discerning the signs of the times. In this regard, studies in public theology affirm that religion bears a moral responsibility to contribute to the formation of a just and dignified social order, so that religious ethics does not remain confined to the private sphere, but moves towards concrete social praxis (Rosen 2017). This shows that ethics can be actualised within a broader scope, namely in the context of society.

In the life of faith, the principle of justice functions as an internal norm that shapes the moral orientation of both individuals and communities. Justice is not merely a response to external demands, but an expression of inner transformation resulting from a relationship with God. Thus, authentic faith always manifests itself in actions that reflect justice, both in interpersonal relationships and in broader social engagement. This perspective rejects the dichotomy between faith and ethics and affirms that the two exist in a mutually interdependent relationship. In theological studies that examine the relationship between faith and social justice, it is emphasised that authentic spirituality cannot be separated from a commitment to justice, as both constitute two dimensions of the same reality of faith (McMahon-Panther & Bornman 2025).

The principle of justice in the life of faith also functions as an evaluative foundation for religious practices. In this context, justice becomes the criterion for assessing whether a form of religiosity truly reflects the divine will or instead serves as a means of legitimising injustice. Theological reflection shows that the history of religion often reveals ambiguity, in which religious practices can function either as a force for liberation or as a tool of oppression. Therefore, a critical approach is needed that continually examines religious practices based on the principle of justice. Studies in theological ethics affirm that justice has a prophetic function, namely to correct and transform social structures as well as religious institutions that are not aligned with human values.

The direction of theological reflection that emerges from this understanding does not stop at normative formulation, but moves towards an interdisciplinary approach that integrates theology with the social sciences, philosophy and cultural studies. This is important to ensure that theological reflection remains relevant and capable of responding to the challenges of the times in a contextual manner. Within this framework, justice is understood as a dynamic concept that must continually be reinterpreted in dialogue with changing historical realities. Theology no longer functions merely as a static doctrinal system, but as a critical discourse open to renewal. Research in contextual theology shows that such an approach enables religion to play a constructive role in addressing global issues, such as pluralism, economic justice and environmental sustainability (Kruger 2018).

A further implication of this reflection is the need to reconstruct the paradigm of religious ethics by placing justice at the centre of its orientation. This paradigm calls for a shift in perspective from a legalistic form of ethics towards an ethic rooted in relationships and social responsibility. Within this framework, justice is understood not merely as obedience to norms, but as active participation in creating conditions of life that enable all people to experience well-being and dignity. Thus, religious ethics is no longer confined to individual moral rules, but encompasses structural dimensions related to social, economic and political systems.

Theological reflection on justice leads to the understanding that faith possesses a public dimension that cannot be ignored. Faith is not merely a personal experience, but also a social reality with broad implications for communal life. Therefore, theology is called to continually develop a framework of reflection that can bridge faith and social reality, so that justice may be realised as an integral part of the life of faith. In this context, justice is not only a theological theme, but also a horizon of praxis that directs the lives of believers towards sustainable and just social transformation.

Conclusion

The analysis of Isaiah 1:10–20 shows that the prophet Isaiah strongly rejects forms of worship that are merely ritualistic without being accompanied by values of social justice. True worship demands active involvement in defending the weak, genuine repentance and a commitment to justice as an expression of living faith. Isaiah's critique exposes the false dichotomy between liturgy and social morality, affirming that the vertical relationship with God must be realised in a just and loving horizontal relationship with others. This message is highly relevant for today's church, which often falls into symbolic spirituality without social transformation. Therefore, every form of worship that does not encourage life change and ethical concern must be re-examined in the light of God's word. Missiologically, these findings affirm that the church's mission is not merely ritual or verbal evangelism but part of the *missio Dei* that unites worship and justice. The church is called to be a prophetic voice challenging injustice and an agent of social renewal based on authentic and contextual spirituality. Thus, true worship does not stop at the altar but extends into the daily lives of God's people living according to the values of God's Kingdom.

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CRediT authorship contribution

Refamati Gulo: Conceptualisation, Data curation, Formal analysis, Funding acquisition, Investigation, Methodology, Project administration, Resources, Software, Supervision, Visualisation, Writing – original draft and Writing – review & editing. Alexander N. Rupidara: Conceptualisation, Data curation, Formal analysis, Funding acquisition, Investigation, Methodology, Project administration, Resources, Software, Supervision, Visualisation, Writing – original draft and Writing – review & editing. Both authors reviewed the article, contributed to the discussion of results, approved the final version for submission and publication, and take responsibility for the integrity of its findings.

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