

**Critical Perspectives: The Anawim and the Tsunamis**  
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**Abstract**

*The Hebrew word ‘ānāwîm is traditionally translated in English as “humble, meek, pious,” etc. A closer look at this word reveals a different story. Although the etymological study of this word sheds light on its meaning, it is context that plays the most important role. Most of the biblical references to ‘ānāwîm occur in either exilic or post-exilic contexts. In these instances, the term is used as a technical term referring to the “true Israelites” who, despite their suffering, rely on God for deliverance and expect God to intervene and reverse their fortune. This way of thinking is exhibited today among Christian survivors of the tsunami. Both groups are committed to maintaining God’s sovereignty in the face of the circumstances surrounding them.*

**Introduction**

Mr. K. Parameshwaran and his three young children once lived close to the harbor of Nagapattinam. The entire family is committed to both God and the Church. When the tidal wave erupted, his three children were playing on the beach after a Christmas celebration. In a fraction of a moment, the children were carried away. The status of the family lies between upper- and middle-class by Indian standards. He, like Job, has asked several questions about life but is determined to be dependent on God, for he believes that God alone can change the fortune of his life. He is angry with God at times, but he finds comfort in the Word of God. His thoughts are paradoxical on account of his confusion, but he is determined to stay close to God because he believes that God will never let him down.

This is not the only family in which we find this type of character. Several of those affected by the tsunami exhibit similar behavioral patterns irrespective of whether or not they are Christians. Whether they have lost boats and nets, houses and cattle, loved ones or important documents, none of them question the wisdom of God.

The aim of this study is to identify in the Bible people of a similar disposition (viz., “the poor” of the Hebrew Bible) and to compare them with the victims of the tsunami in order to determine the nature of the similarities they have in common. This comparative study is limited only to certain groups of people in the areas affected by the tsunami with whom we interacted.

**‘Ānî / ‘Ānîyim and Ānāw / ‘Ānāwîm**

Although a number of terms are used throughout the Hebrew Bible to refer to those who are poor, needy, afflicted, etc., we will focus on ‘ānî and ānāw because these seem the closest parallels to the victims of the tsunami. A peculiar situation arises when we read about the “poor” in terms of ‘ānî (pl. ‘ānîyim) and ānāw (pl. ‘ānāwîm). In its various forms, it appears nearly 80 times in the biblical corpus. In the prophetic literature, ‘ānî is

the most prominent term for “poor” in the economic sense. The word also occurs throughout the Pentateuch, in 2 Samuel 22, and in the Wisdom literature (Pleins, 408). The *w*- form (*ānāw*) occurs 24 times in the Hebrew Bible (ibid., 411). The plural form *‘ānāwīm* alone occurs 13 times in the Psalms (Gerstenberger, 241-245), mainly in Psalms of lament. English translations of the Bible render it as “weak,” “humble,” and “pious.”

Is there a difference in meaning between the two root forms *‘ānī* and *ānāw*? Scholars have a difficult time distinguishing between the two. *‘Ānī* appears frequently in parallel with other words for “poor.” On the other hand, *ānāw* is not paired in parallel with any Hebrew word for “poor.” However, it is found in the same context or chapters with other terms for “poor” (e.g., Psalms 9, 10). Gerstenberger notes that *ānāw* (singular) appears only in Numbers 12:3 where it is translated in most English versions as “humble,” referring to Moses as the most humble person in the world. *Ānāw* is replaced by *‘ānī* in the Samaritan version. The problem, therefore, lies almost exclusively with the plurals. Is *‘ānāwīm* the original plural of *‘ānī*? If so, *‘ānīyim* is a scribal error or an artificial formation used secondarily to convey a semantic difference (ibid., 241-245). Gerstenberger finds that most scholars believe the plural forms *‘ānīyim* and *‘ānāwīm* always existed side by side, even though they were often confused (ibid., 242). The Masoretes occasionally prefer a *y*-form to a *w*-form (Isaiah 3:7; Amos 8:4; Psalm 9:19; Job 24:4) or a *w*-form to a *y*-form (Psalms 9:13; 10:12; Proverbs 3:34; 14:21; 16:19). It is possible that they discern a difference in which *‘ānīyim* is “poor” and *‘ānāwīm* is “humble, devout” (Kirkpatrick, 47), but the distinction should not be overstressed (Gerstenberger, 242). Bruce believes that both *‘ānīyim* and *‘ānāwīm* are synonymous with the economically and socially deprived and vulnerable (Bruce, 48). As we will see below, *‘ānāwīm* has religious overtones in certain passages and a concrete socio-economic dimension in others (e.g., Amos 2:7; 8:4). The rare feminine forms of the adjective *‘ānīah* are significant in this regard, because they refer to personified cities (Isaiah 10:30; 51:21; 54:11) which are destroyed, desecrated, and in depleted condition (Pleins, 411).

As noted above, our interest lies with how these two words relate to the victims of the tsunami. The uncertainty surrounding these words calls for a detailed exegesis of references where *‘ānāwīm* and *‘ānīyim* appear either together or disjointedly in order to determine whether they are synonymous or else connote different meanings altogether. At that point, we will determine whether, and to what extent, they are relevant for the survivors of the tsunami. It is to this task that we now turn.

### **The meaning of *‘ānāwīm***

Psalm 22 has been described as a Psalm of lament with a difference: unlike other lament Psalms, Psalm 22 shifts to a Psalm of praise verses 22-31. Hence, Westermann calls it a “lament that is turned around” (Westermann, 82). In verse 27, *‘ānāwīm* seems to be an obvious choice for the psalmist, but the appearance of *‘ānī* in verse 26 complicates our understanding. In verses 1, 11, and 19, the psalmist wonders why God is standing far off when he suffers. The undefined “enemy” is the cause of his affliction (22:12,13, 16-18) and not the “rich.” Since the enemies are defined as strong bulls of Bashan, hungry lions, and packs of dogs, *‘ānāwīm* cannot be understood solely in economic terms. In verses 22-31, the psalmist acknowledges that God’s act brings him deliverance (ibid., 83). Since the *‘ānāwīm* depend on God for their deliverance, they must be viewed from a religious point

of view. In verse 22, the *'ānāwīm* invite people to praise God. Initially, the invitation is limited to a small circle. It then extends to the children of Jacob and Israel. Finally, the circle expands to include “all the ends of earth, and all the families of the nations” (ibid., 90). Since God establishes a special relationship with his people (22:4, 10) and the *'ānāwīm* live in hope of his deliverance, the psalmist invites the whole of humanity to come and praise him, thus acknowledging God’s kingly rule over the universe (ibid., 90).

Psalm 25 has two references to the *'ānāwīm* (25:9). Verse 16 uses *ānî* in reference to the poor, which leads Pleins to argue that the two words are synonymous (Pleins, 411). What makes this Psalm so important is that it describes the character of the *'ānāwīm*: they acknowledge that they are sinners and ask God to be gracious and to show his steadfast love (25:7, 11, 18); they are hated by their undefined enemy (25:19) and ask God to deliver them (25:1, 20); they maintain integrity and uprightness; and they do not lack any material thing but seek Yahweh’s favor. They also acknowledge Yahweh’s character: he is their salvation (25:5), deliverer (25:20), and redeemer (25:22). Moreover, he is kind (25:7), upright (25:8), and faithful to his covenant (25:10). By means of this description, the psalmist tries to impress upon the audience that the *'ānāwīm* are the true people of God, Israel (25:22), because they have a special covenantal relationship with Yahweh (25:14). The phrases “to possess land” and “to redeem Israel” (25:13, 23) help us fix the context to be during the time of Israel’s captivity.

Psalms 9 and 10 (a single Psalm in the LXX) illustrate primarily the character of Yahweh. Brueggemann calls these Psalms an extraordinary act of counter-speech. The oppressed quotes the words of the oppressors as the latter go on mocking and prevailing over the former (Brueggemann, 11). The context cannot be defined precisely, but the proposal that they emerged in exile cannot be ruled out (Bellinger, 28). In these Psalms, the *'ānīyim* (9:13; 10:12) and the *'ānāwīm* (9:19; 10:17) appear together. The psalmist says that Yahweh does not forget the cry of the *'ānīyim* (9:13), and that he will hear the desire of the *'ānāwīm* (10:17). The psalmist is convinced that God is concerned about the weak and can give them real justice. The physical affliction of *'ānīyim* is expressed in no uncertain terms in 9:13. The enemy seems to have crushed them. They are understood to be the foreign nations before which Israel has been exposed (9:12; Dumbrell, 459). But the *'ānīyim* rejoice in God’s deliverance because he has done wonderful deeds (9:14). In Psalm 10:12, the *'ānīyim* are the economically destitute, but in 10:17 the word takes on a religious tone. Thus, the term can be rendered in both economic and religious senses (Plummer, 140). The pivotal point in these Psalms is that Yahweh will deliver the *'ānāwīm* and the *'ānīyim*, and he will punish the oppressors who have afflicted the disadvantaged people (9:13; Dumbrell, 459), because he remembers them. While in Psalm 10:2 the pursuit of the afflicted by the wicked is keen, there is the expectation that Yahweh will intervene. Psalm 10:17 concludes with the expression of confidence that Yahweh will not forget the desires of the *'ānāwīm*. Though it is difficult to distinguish who the *'ānīyim* and *'ānāwīm* are, the designations probably refer to the same group which shares a common enemy and cries to the Lord for deliverance. This may be due to the group having two characteristics, i.e., being economically poor on one hand, and depending on God for help, on the other. These Psalms are likely speaking about the exiles who have lost everything to the enemy and thus are both economically poor and victims of suffering. Their designation as the *'ānāwīm* reflects their dependence on God.

The central theme of Psalm 37 is similar to the question often asked by the wisdom teacher: “What does faith in God mean in a world where wickedness sometimes seems to pay handsome dividends?” (Davidson, 124). The peculiar meaning of *’ānāwîm* is relatively discernable in this Psalm. Synonyms include the “righteous” (37:12, 16, 17, 21, 25, 29, 30, 32, 39), “those who hope in the Lord” (37:9), “those whose ways are upright” (37:14), the “blameless” (37:18, 37), “those the Lord blesses” (37:22), the “pious” (37:28), and the “man of peace” (37:37). Notably, the *’ānāwîm* are contrasted with the wicked (37:1, 9,10, 12-14, 16,17, 20, etc.) and the envious (37:1) but *not* with the rich. The *’ānāwîm* are instructed not to be envious (37:1) but to trust Yahweh and do good (37:3, 5); to delight in Yahweh (37:4); to commit themselves to Yahweh (37:5); and to be patient despite difficulties (37:7). Soon the wicked will fade away like grass and wither like the green herbs (37:2). The *’ānāwîm* do not need to fret (37:1, 7,8) but should joyfully trust in God despite their affliction (ibid., 125). It is the contrast between the *’ānāwîm* and their opponents, the wicked, that makes the meaning of *’ānāwîm* distinct. Having seen the qualities of the *’ānāwîm*, Dumbrell comments:

The quiet patient acceptance of their lot, without resistance, anger, or complaint, cherishing the hopes of Israel within them, marks them as the true Israel. Yahweh will reverse adversity into blessing (37:11; 147:6; Isa 26:6). Yahweh, the ultimate judge (Ps 49:4; 76:9), encourages the lowly to wait in hope for they will receive their reward (37:9) (Dumbrell, 457f.).

In Psalms 69, 76, 147, and 149 the meaning and context of the *’ānāwîm* is even easier to determine because the psalmists have provided clues as to their identity. In Psalm 69, the enemy (69:4, 26) is not defined but the people who suffer at the hands of the enemy are considered to be captives (69:33). If verses 35,36 are part of the original composition, it is likely that the Psalm was composed during the time of the Babylonian exile. Psalm 76 is a hymn celebrating God’s power and his victory over his enemies. Like Psalms 46 and 48, it praises Jerusalem as the place where God reigns as victorious king. The context of Psalm 147 is clear: Yahweh rebuilds Jerusalem and he gathers the scattered Israelites. Psalm 149 also refers to a war against Israel’s enemies (149:6-9). In the psalmists’ vision, God actively relates to the *’ānāwîm* by rescuing and guiding them, though precisely what this entails is difficult to determine from the texts (69:33; 76:10; 147:6; 149:4; cf. 25:9; 34:3). The poets observe that the *’ānāwîm*, who are portrayed as landless (37:11) and in pain (69:30, 33), call on God and God does not forget them. Hence, the *’ānāwîm* depend upon God despite their suffering.

The use of *’ānāwîm* in Isaiah 61:1 means nearly the same things as it did in the aforementioned Psalms. Pleins explains that the *’ānāwîm* in Isaiah 61:1 are the victims of social injustice. Several texts in Isaiah emphasize hope for “the poor” (i.e., the *’ānāwîm*): they will find a just judge in a future king (32:7); they will rejoice before God when God topples the tyrants (29:19); and they are the exiles to whom the announcement of release is presented (61:1). This reflects a concrete socioeconomic or political aspect (Pleins, 411). In the larger context of Isaiah, the reference to “poor” might have taken on the economic meaning. Reconstructing a different context helps us see a different picture of *’ānāwîm* in Isaiah 61:1. Along with most scholars, Bratcher places the text in the immediate post-exilic context and notes that the Servant in Isaiah 61:1 announces his messianic deed as the one anointed by the Spirit of God to bring good news to the

*ʾānāwîm*, the faithful Israelites, the returnees (Bratcher, 177-187). The content of the text reflects the end-time Jubilee when the restitution of God's righteousness for his people will be marshaled in, i.e., basically a reconstitution of creation. The *ʾānāwîm* (i.e., those who are faithful to God in the midst of their trial; Watts, 302) prepare themselves for the coming of that day by mourning for Zion (61:3) and by awaiting the salvation (61:10) that has not yet arrived. (The proclamation of good news is also found in second Isaiah [40:9; 52:7], referring to an accomplished task. The prophet uses it here the future tense, announcing an event not yet accomplished [Westermann, 366]). God is with such people (i.e., those who, by definition, are contrite in spirit; Isaiah 66:2; Dumbrell, 457f.). Koole is of the opinion that the afflicted knows that they are powerless against both their oppressors and unjust structures on one hand, and God's majesty and holiness on the other. Thus, they tremble at God's holy word (Isaiah 66:2), but also, in a strange paradox of faith, place their trust in Yahweh, who one day will deliver (Isaiah 14:32); they are God's chosen ones (Isaiah 26:6; 29:19; 32:7; 41:17; 49:13; Koole, 271). Essentially they wait for God's deliverance. Like the Psalms, Isaiah 61:3, 10, and 11 identify the *ʾānāwîm* with the righteous. The *ʾānāwîm* are those who trust in God for their salvation and wait for their deliverance. Their opponents will face the day of vengeance (61:2), but God will reverse the fortune of the *ʾānāwîm* so that their opponents will be made slaves of the true people of God (61:5, 9).

### **The meaning of *ʾānîyim***

In Job 34:28, *ʾānîyim* probably refers to economic destitution. It appears in the words of Elihu, the young man who defends God while answering Job. The Septuagint omits this verse due to the difficulty of interpreting it. In 34:24, the adjective plural *kobar* literally means great or mighty and most likely refers to the rulers (cf. 34:17, 20). These mighty ones cause the *ʾānîyim* to cry for help, and God hears their cry. The rulers are said to be fearless and to have turned aside from following God (34:27). Such godless people must not be allowed to rule over the people (34:30).

Psalm 12:6 seems to address itself entirely to moral issues (Taylor, 69). The evils of which the psalmist speaks come to fullest expression among men in places of authority or power (12:3,4). Their power goes to the extent of proclaiming "we will say what we wish, and no one can stop us" (12:4). Naturally the *ʾānîyim* in verse 6 are the victims of those who exercise power. Notably, unlike the *ʾānāwîm*, the *ʾānîyim* are contrasted with the powerful. The *ʾānîyim* seek help of the Lord (12:1) and are assured the God will give them the security they want (12:5).

In Isaiah 3:15, the rich are condemned for striking at the fabric of covenant society (cf. 10:2). The author shows that God himself is rising up as the accuser of the upper class. Yahweh has set the elders and the princes, those who hold political and military power, to work in the vineyard of his people. But they regard the vineyard to be their own and shamelessly plunder it. They were called to protect and care for the poor, but carried out every form of economic oppression upon them and deprived them of human dignity (Kaiser, 45).

The word *ʾānîyim* clearly points to poverty in economic terms. Unlike the *ʾānāwîm*, the enemies of the *ʾānîyim* are rulers and people in power and authority who physically oppress them.

### **The Context of the *ʿānāwîm***

Pleins argues that etymological information alone is insufficient to determine the meaning of these terms; context is also essential (Pleins, 413). It is not possible to determine the precise context for the Psalms studied above. If we read these Psalms and Isaiah in the exilic and post-exilic context, then the *ʿānāwîm* are God's own people, the true Israelites. *ʿĀnāwîm* is a technical term referring to a particular group of people having experiences similar to those of the *ʿebyônîm* of Qumran. (One of the numerous expressions used by the Qumran community to describe itself collectively was *ʿebyônîm* and individually *ʿebyôn* "the poor one" (see particularly 1QpHab, xii 3, 6, 10). See Mansoor, 50.) In Psalms 9, 10, 22 and 25 and Isaiah 61, the *ʿānāwîm* easily fit the post-exilic period, and references to the "wicked" or the "enemy" naturally suit their principal opponents who took possession of them and their land during and after the exile. If the opponents are the "other nations," then the *ʿānāwîm* is Israel, God's chosen people, who depend on him for their deliverance. In other instances, the content of the cry of the *ʿānāwîm* is to "get back their land which they have lost" and to "drive out those who possess it now" (e.g., Psalms 37:9, 11, 22, 28,29, 34; Isaiah 61:7; cf. Nehemiah 1:3; 5). What makes the *ʿānāwîm* distinct is the promise of a change of fortune (Psalms 37:11; 147:6; Isaiah 26:6; 61:7); Yahweh will turn their affliction into deliverance and they will experience salvation. The economic aspect of *ʿānāwîm* is difficult to determine. It may be present, but it is not be the primary focus of the authors.

Therefore, it is likely that the usage of 'y' and the 'w' forms of *ʿānāyîm* and *ʿānāwîm* did not creep in accidentally or emerge due to scribal omission or correction. The use of *ʿānāyîm* clearly reflects a pecuniary situation, but *ʿānāwîm* may need to be viewed differently because of its special meaning. The *ʿānāwîm* category in Old Testament, irrespective of whether or to what extent it has an economic association, is different from other categories of words used to refer to the "poor" in economic terms. Indeed, the *ʿānāwîm* are "true Israelites," those who are totally dependent on God despite their sufferings. To merely call them "humble" or "pious" or "weak" as reflected in English versions of the Bible is delimiting and inappropriate.

### **Conclusion:**

The *ʿānāwîm* of the Hebrew Bible seem to resemble very closely the character of Christians in Nagapattinam who survived the tsunami. These two groups of people, one of the past and the other of the present, are not identical, but both groups exhibit similar characteristics. The context of the *ʿānāwîm* is not the same as that of the tsunami victims, but their suffering, endurance, and dependence upon God are very similar. For both groups, affirming and maintaining their faith in God's sovereignty is as important as their survival. Both groups experienced the loss of something they loved dearly. Whereas the enemy of the *ʿānāwîm* appears in human form, the destroyer of the victims of tsunami is the fury of nature for which we are all accountable. Both of them cry out to God "how long must this suffering be?" However, both the *ʿānāwîm* and the Christian survivors of the tsunamis put their trust in God for deliverance. Will not God, with whom the victims of the tsunamis have a special relationship not unlike that of the *ʿānāwîm*, reverse their fortune? He certainly will.

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