

Poverty and the Bible

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Given the dimensions of poverty in our world—whether we look globally or at our own inner cities and rural areas—you and I need all the motivation and sustenance we can find to fulfill our calling as Protestants for the Common Good. The poor are for the most part voiceless or at least unheard; they readily become invisible to those who have power and means. What will awaken us to their affliction, their hopelessness, their need?

Protestants have claimed that the Bible is a crucial resource for both insight into the human condition and urgent motivation to deal with the realities of life. Prominent within the human condition and human circumstances in the Bible are issues that concern the poor. Two pertinent starting points: first, there is no biblical word that can properly be translated as “poverty”; we arrive at poverty by encountering the poor. Second, the great majority of the poor we encounter in the Bible are victims, either by circumstance or by the actions of another. The only Hebrew word one might possibly translate as “poverty” is better rendered “affliction.”

In this essay I would like to explore how constant and consistent the Bible is in speaking of the poor and of the relief of their hardships. I invite you to trek with me through a range of passages, sensing their pungency and their urgency. We can draw conclusions as we go.

Let’s begin with a glimpse of a prophetic confrontation with a king—namely Jeremiah with King Jehoiakim, son of the reformer King Josiah—in Jeremiah 22:13–17, using the *New Revised Standard Version*:

Woe to him who builds his house by *unrighteousness*,
and his upper rooms by *injustice*;
who makes his neighbors work for nothing,
and who does not give them their wages;
who says, “I will build myself a spacious house
with large upper rooms,”
and who cuts out windows for it,
paneling it with cedar,
and painting it with vermilion.
Are you a king because you compete in cedar?
Did not your father [Josiah] eat and drink
and do *justice* and *righteousness*?
Then it was well with him.
He judged the cause of the poor and needy;
then it was well.
It’s not this to know me?
says the Lord.
But your eyes and heart are only on your dishonest gain,
for shedding innocent blood,
and for practicing oppression and violence.

One direct assertion here, and three questions to explore. The inescapable assertion of the passage is the relationship of the powerful terms *righteousness* and *justice* to the cause of the poor and needy. Time and again in the Bible, justice and righteousness are displayed in taking and sustaining action on behalf of a loosely defined group in society called the poor and needy, the afflicted and oppressed—sometimes named as the widow, the orphan, and the alien in the land. What is done to them is oppression and violence/violation. Such actions constitute *injustice* and *unrighteousness*.

The questions to explore? (1) Who is responsible for the poor? Out of what motivation? (2) Who are the poor and needy? (3) How does one do anything about their plight?

Now this Jeremiah passage is but one of a multitude that leaps out at us from the prophets about the plight of the poor. Amos seems never to let the matter alone:

because they [Israelites] sell the righteous for silver,
and the needy for a pair of sandals—
they who trample the head of the poor into the dust of the earth
and push the afflicted out of the way.
(Amos 2:6–7)

Or this:

Therefore because you trample on the poor
and take from them levies of grain,
you have built houses of hewn stone,
but you shall not live in them;
you have planted pleasant vineyards,
but you shall not drink their wine.
For I know how many are your transgressions,
and how great are your sins—
you who afflict the righteous
who take a bribe
and push aside the needy in the gate [where justice is seen to].
(Amos 5:11–12)

Or, we can cite the combination of Isaiah 61:1–2 with 58:6–7, the texts Luke has Jesus use to claim his vocation for his neighbors in Nazareth (4:18–19). Certainly we should bring to bear Jesus’ prophetic vision in Matthew 25, with its picture of sheep-ly behavior contrasted to goat-ly behavior in the Great Judgment scene.

Will this cluster of texts make attention to the poor and needy inescapable, at least for the people of Israel and of Judea and Galilee? I’m not confident that it will. They have become “slogan” texts, and slogan-texting, a brand of proof-texting, has perils. The passages we’ve already looked at all appear in contexts of judgment and threat of punishment. They are commands backed up by consequences. They depend on contrasts with others, the bad people, and demand a way of life that will avoid God’s displeasure. We may very well need a good dose of that from time to time, but threat doesn’t always persuade, and contrast all too easily leads to self-righteousness.

I want to explore a far wider range of passages to sense the call of compassion with the poor. For indeed the poor, the afflicted, the oppressed are in the picture in all styles of biblical literature: in law codes and prophetic diatribes, in worship acts and wise counsel, in story and editorial comment, in parable and in life narrative. *The theme pervades the Bible*. Taken together, all these literary pathways

point in the direction of a way of life, abundant life, life as a way of *shalom*. *Shalom* is the goal to be achieved by fairness to each and all (what we call equity) *combined with* action that goes beyond what is simply fair to what is generous, compassionate, and gracious.

We started with prophetic texts. But the prophets and their sense of calling are set in the context of covenant in the Bible, and covenant is a realm of commitment, of learning, of hearing and agreeing to responsibilities, and of taking on the adventure of meeting situation after situation in accord with loving kindness that leads to blessing.

We quite rightly connect covenant with “law,” but by “law” we should mean practice codified for instruction—case studies, if you will, *not* law as legislation. For example, a body of “law” brought together in Exodus 21–23 depicts a number of situations that arise in everyday human living. Consider Exodus 22:25–26.

If you lend money to my people,
to the poor among you,
you shall not deal with them as a creditor;
you shall not expect interest from them.
If you take your neighbor’s cloak in pawn,
you shall restore it before the sun goes down;
for it may be your neighbor’s only clothing to use as a cover;
in what else shall that person sleep?
And if your neighbor cries out to me, I will listen,
for I am compassionate.

Yes, there is a command and yes, there are consequences here: the compassionate one will act for the poor neighbor and thus against the lender. But the tone is less judgmental, more inviting, more beseeching than the tone of the prophetic judgment speeches. The tone is something like this: Stop and think a minute. You are taking away your neighbor’s means of keeping warm! Furthermore, remember the Ally the wronged person has, the “I” whose very character is compassion. “Motive” passages like this are frequent in the law codes; for example, don’t mistreat a slave or alien because (motive) you know what it is like to be a slave or alien. Jesus practices this approach at many points, leading hearers to think through the “why” of the law and the direction in which the law points. Along with prophetic diatribe we have, then, the law’s guidance by example and its motivating reasons.

Then there is the realm of worship, notably the Psalms. Consider Psalm 72, a coronation hymn for a ruler taking leadership:

Give the king your justice, O God,
and your righteousness to a king’s son.
May he judge your people with righteousness,
and your poor with justice
May he defend the cause of the poor of the people,
give deliverance to the needy,
and crush the oppressor.

(Psalm 72:1–2, 4)

Hollow ideology? Given the way many biblical kings acted, it may seem so. Or is this an intrinsic expectation that goes with leadership? Rulers throughout the ancient Near East faced the same expectation. And even Paul can imply such expectations of rulers, in Romans 13. Yet it stands as a criterion for righteous rule: does the ruler seek justice for the poor? And alongside every king stands a prophet with the calling to hold rulers to the standard.

Then there are the many lament psalms. The expectation is that God will provide justice for the poor, and that is the very basis for confidence underlying a cry. This is so because God as the Ruler behind all human rulers and judges is known to be, and importuned to be, the defender of the defenseless (consider Psalm 9:8–9).

In the lament psalms, too, the anguish of the one crying out is regularly tied to the fact that expected compassion from the human community has failed, placing the lamenter in the condition of being poor/afflicted. Time and again, worship acts expect and demand justice and righteousness for needful ones.

How about the wisdom literature, emanating from the educated elite? Throughout Proverbs are passages, often motivated by prudence, that call for compassion for the poor, especially from rulers and leaders. But consider two poems: the portrayal of a good woman in Proverbs 31 and Job's "credentials" in Job 29. In Proverbs 31:10–31, there is more than may meet the eye. This woman is a substantial community figure, taking financial action when it is wise, instructing others in the ways of steadfast love (loving kindness) and, in verse 20, opening her hand to the poor, reaching out her hands to the needy. In short, she is one of the righteous ones, a model for those who make up half the population! Job, in seeking his right to have a hearing before God, lays out the pattern of a life of integrity and says of himself that he was held in honor because he delivered the poor who cried, the orphan without helper. Wretched folk and widows received his care and blessing. He is the model for the other half of the population.

This catalogue of biblical genres would not be complete without reminders of stories and episodes where the care of the destitute is paramount. Two among many stir me. Paul chastises the Corinthians for their behavior when the early Christian groups would meet for eating together and reenacting the Last Supper (1 Corinthians 11:17–23). Those with means are not respecting the needs of the poor in their fellowship, by stuffing themselves beforehand and "humiliating those who have nothing." Then there is the great story in the book of Ruth. Two poor and afflicted women (true, they are not specifically called "poor," but what else can they be?) use the few means at their disposal to hold life together. Ruth gleanes according to the provision for the poor (Deuteronomy 24:19–22); she and Naomi become beneficiaries of gifts from stalwart Boaz; and yet they must force his hand by subterfuge to do what will really resolve their poverty—to combine old customs in a way that allows permanent rescue.

All these biblical styles show how pervasive is the concern for the poor—from kings and prophets, teachers and storytellers, worshippers and wise ones with leisure to ponder reality.

With that as our foundation, let's go back to the questions raised at the start in connection with the Jeremiah 22 passage.

Who is to carry out the caring responsibility for the *shalom* of the poor? Certainly kings, judges, and other leaders are. But our collection of passages also makes clear that *all* participants in the community are to bear the task. *All* are to hold others, officials included, to account on this matter. That is especially clear from the law passages, where all receive their calling from God and agree to the terms of the covenant. Close to that lies the answer to the "Out of what motivation?" question. *For what the community and each of its members are to do is to imitate the sovereign God who shows such care as part of the divine character—"I will listen, for I am compassionate."*

Now the second question. Who are the poor? For whom is the whole apparatus of compassion to be exercised? Story after story, command after command, urging after urging have required the use of words in the passive voice. The poor are afflicted, perhaps because their share of arable land simply was not sufficient to cope with drought. They are oppressed, perhaps because a rapacious "neighbor" has

squeezed them into debt slavery. They are victimized because they have no access to the place of fair dealing, the town gate. Perhaps they are widows and orphans left by sad turns of life in non-too-forthcoming circumstances. They may be aliens who have come to dwell among God's people, there to try to make their way where they lack standing. The poor may also be those who have entered poverty because they have suffered so much injustice that, even if they have enough to eat, they cry out of misery and loneliness. Interestingly enough, I find few places in the Bible (all of them in the wisdom literature) where the poor are accused of having gotten that way because of their own indolence or bad judgment. Nevertheless, even such as may have slid themselves into poverty are among those who call forth the community's compassion.

Then the third question: How? How meet the reality that indeed there will always be the poor? How meet the reality that anyone may join the poor in a moment through injustice or accident or the simple lack of enough rain? Obviously one response is relief, the kind the sheep-ly disciples give in Matthew 25 or the kind that wealthy Boaz first gives Ruth and Naomi, by sending Ruth home with a load of barley.

There is more, however. Recall that it took a push from Ruth and Naomi to prod Boaz into seeing another way to deal with poverty. Using the customs and tactics of his community in Bethlehem, he creatively brings about a lasting deliverance from need for both women. He brings together customs for caring for widows (marriage to a relative) with customs for relieving the destitute ("redeeming"), and everyone present at the city gate agrees and applauds. Something of the same sort is probably what Jesus did in the climactic act of overturning the money changers' tables in the temple court. He displayed that the way a legitimate need (to have proper coinage for temple sacrifice) was being handled was fraudulent, swindling the poor who had come to worship.

So there is biblical warrant for charity and for advocacy and action to change the system. Most certainly, with prophets from Samuel to Jesus, there is warrant to confront any governance that is failing to deliver compassion for the afflicted with direct "messages from Headquarters," where the Gracious One's heart aches for the poor.

I suppose we can try to ignore this biblical perspective in a "nonbiblical" society. It comes from long ago and far away, and poverty is relative to any society. We may feel we know much more about how people become poor and whether they should be held responsible for being poor. As Christians and Jews, and as followers of other religious systems, we cannot, however, duck the mandates held within our own fellowship. For Christians and Jews, the Bible is a governing source. It points plainly to responsible care for the poor. It points at exercising such care *with* the poor, not *to* the poor. And it confronts us with the claim that we cannot function as neighbors of the poor or advocates of their care without encountering those who have accepted office to work for a just society, and treading on their corns if they are failing to fulfill their office. We cannot remain silent when one person's well-being (*shalom*) is gained at the expense of another's affliction.

The biblical portrayal is consistent and insistent. Poverty of any kind is the lack of *shalom*. The oppressed and afflicted cannot be abandoned to solve their own problems. All of us are compelled to combat every manifestation of poverty, to do it with imagination and to do it in solidarity with the poor.