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## Justice For the Poor and Oppressed (Part 2)

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# JUSTICE FOR THE POOR

## AND OPPRESSED

(Continued)

A. M. Leske

### *The Poor Man and the Law*

The Covenant Code, contains laws dealing with oppression (Exod. 22:21-26) which are entirely dependent upon each man keeping them according to his conscience. They carry curses upon the evildoer but these are a reminder to the hearer that Yahweh himself is the judge who can condemn and punish. As former strangers and oppressed in Egypt, the covenant people were commanded not to take advantage of the weak and powerless such as the stranger, the widow and the orphan. They were not to charge interest of one oppressed, thereby taking advantage of a brother in his misfortune.

The Covenant Code also warns (Exod. 23:1-11) against perverting justice and oppressing the weak and innocent poor, particularly by accepting bribes. Since *all* land belongs to Yahweh as the covenant Lord, the people were required to leave their land fallow in the seventh year so that the poor among them may gather food from the land.

The Deuteronomic Code (Deuteronomy 12-26) is even more concerned about the widow, the fatherless, the poor and oppressed. It represents the teaching of the Covenant Code applied to the period of the monarchy and seeks to deal with injustices brought about through these changed conditions. It seeks restraint of the power and wealth of the king (Deut. 17:18-20). It calls for integrity in court procedures (Deut. 16:18-20; 19:15-20) and assistance for the poor.

The Code elevates the positive values of familial solidarity. The integrity of the poor man is to be upheld. He is to be shown mercy and kindness (Deut. 24:10-13), even to the extent of giving him what he needs without hope for return because of the closeness of the year of release (15:8-10). In times of family rejoicing and religious festivals, the dispossessed, the widow and the fatherless, the Levite and the stranger are to be invited to take part and share in the good things in conformity to the old custom of clan gatherings (14:22-27). Other legislation seeks to alleviate the situation of the dispossessed, by allowing them to eat the grapes and the grain from their neighbour's land, provided they did not carry the produce off with them, (23:24-25) and to glean what was left over after the harvest (24:19-22). The dispossessed were also to have the exclusive use of the tithe of produce consecrated to Yahweh every three years (14:28, 29). Thus, the disinherited were to be brought back into the picture of the familial or clan environment where justice would not be a matter of legal expediency but of

brotherly love and concern, reflecting Yahweh's concern for them when he brought them out of Egypt.

The legislation in the Deuteronomic Code recognizes the problems caused by the change in the social and economic structure during the period of the monarchy. Not only was there a growth in the power and influence of the ruling and merchant classes, but the burden of state taxes was unequal and unjust and a real threat to the economic freedom of the rural peasant. Thus, to the Levites and sojourners, who had no inheritance, there were added the widow and orphan who, because they had difficulty in working their ancestral plots to pay the taxes, were an easy prey for the greedy and the oppressor. Included also were others who through misfortune, affliction or oppression were dispossessed. All these became known as the poor and needy (*'ani we'ebyon*, 15:11; 24:14). In having their property taken from them, the dispossessed had been treated unjustly.

The implication of Deut. 15:4: "But there shall be no dispossessed (*ebyon*) among you", is that every member of the covenant people has the right to share in and enjoy the fruits of the promised land given them as an inheritance. Thus, when his "brothers" open their hands to help the dispossessed in his need (15:7-11), they partially correct the injustice done to him by their society. On the other hand, to take advantage of such a person's depressed situation and oppress him in any way would cause him to cry to Yahweh against his oppressor (24:12-15). Yahweh will certainly come to his defense for he takes special care of the disinherited.

An attempt to get around the problem of ancestral property being sold to pay debts was made again in the Holiness Code (Leviticus 17 to 26). Regulations were set down whereby every fifty years - the Jubilee Year - all fields and houses which had been alienated would return to their original owners, except the town houses which had to be redeemed within a year after their sale (Leviticus 25). A man might thereby give up his familial land temporarily to reduce a debt, but eventually it would return to him. The only problem was that this Jubilee Year remained a pious dream. It was never put into practice.<sup>5</sup> The Holiness Code also repeats the prescriptions for leaving the gleaning of the harvest for the afflicted and for the sojourner (Lev. 19:10; 23:22) and also for being just in judgment towards the weak (Lev. 19:25).

In summary, it is to be expected that the focus would not be on poverty *per se*. The plea of the Law is a social one: alleviate and correct the unjust and unhealthy state of the poor and dispossessed. Poverty and lack are regarded as unhealthy and contrary to God's plan. There is a religious aspect here too, particularly in the concept of justice - Yahweh's and the brother's - which is to be motivated by love. Involved in the concept is the covenant relationship between God and man in which God is ultimately the owner of everything and man is dependent upon him. Obedience in this relationship means continued blessing in that land which

5. A. Causse, *Les Pauvres d'Israël [Prophetes, Psalmistes, Messianistes]* (Strasbourg: Librairie Istra, J. Gabaldo et Cie, 1922), 78-80. Also Roland de Vaux, *Ancient Israel* (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, c. 1961), 175-177.

Yahweh has given. Therefore Yahweh is always ready to come to the aid of the oppressed when they cry out to him.

## The Poor Man in the Psalms

The cause of the poor and oppressed and his cry for deliverance is a dominant theme in the Psalms. The poor man always has an enemy, who is sometimes described symbolically as wild animals (22:13-17; 74:19), as malicious witnesses (35:11), as “those who seek to snatch away my life” (40:15), as a band of ruthless and violent men, and generally as the wicked, the evildoer, the oppressor or the arrogant. The poor man’s enemy is sometimes seen as a group of evil men who surround him, plotting against him, seeking his death; they band together and bear false witness against him. Sometimes they hunt him like a wild beast and set all kinds of traps to catch and destroy him. They ridicule the simple faith of the believer who accepts the *credo* that the righteous will be blessed and the wicked destroyed by Yahweh. Falsehood and deceit come so easily to the evildoer, and the poor, righteous man can do nothing but call for vindication upon Yahweh who is the refuge of the afflicted.

The fact that the righteous suffer and the wicked appear to prosper was an impenetrable mystery to the poor man. But his faith held steadfastly to the conviction that Yahweh would rise up and destroy the evildoer with his fearful arm and give to the afflicted and oppressed the final victory, blessing them with prosperity and the possession of the land. Yahweh is always the righteous judge, the vindicator of the oppressed - the emphasis being on the justice and righteousness of God and not on the merit or faith of the afflicted. The poor call on Yahweh because he is just and merciful, and the protector of the weak and helpless, not because of their piety.

As with the prophets, so the psalmists look for the fulfilment of their hopes for justice, righteousness, and peaceful prosperity in Yahweh’s Anointed, the king. The king, who was to represent Yahweh on earth, had the grave responsibility to be a righteous and wise ruler, and thus carry out the justice which Yahweh offers. He was to reflect the righteousness of Yahweh to the afflicted and oppressed and transmit Yahweh’s promises, blessings and power to them. In a very full sense, therefore, he was to represent Yahweh to the people.

But the king also had the important task of representing the people to Yahweh. As such, he was to intercede with Yahweh on their behalf (132:10; 89:4, 51). He was even to bear the suffering and humiliation of the nation in himself before Yahweh. In this representative way he became the “afflicted one” himself, pleading deliverance from his afflictions. This is brought out in Psalm 89 where the king is depicted in this double role. As the representative of Yahweh, he is Yahweh’s first-born son (89:28), and so he can address God as “my Father” (89:27). As the representative of his people before Yahweh, he is the suffering Servant pleading to be delivered from scorn and humiliation (89:39-52).

In the development and use of these psalms this hope became the messianic ideal: the messianic king would be Yahweh’s representative to the afflicted in showing Yahweh’s justice and mercy, giving protection to the weak and

oppressed, and setting the perfect example or righteousness. But the Messiah would also suffer on their behalf and intercede for them, and eventually lead them in the fulfilment of Yahweh's promises to possess the land and rejoice in abundant prosperity (Ps. 37:11).

## Summary

Thus, we see some basic themes developing in the Old Testament which had their origins in God's concern for the poor and oppressed.

First of all, material poverty is never really the issue. It is always failure to live up to the covenant laws (i.e. failure to provide help for the weak and oppression of the powerless) which causes poverty. It is invariably a matter of justice and righteousness.

Secondly, the king as Yahweh's representative and upholder of the covenant was supposed to defend and protect the poor and oppressed. Yet too often the king was either inaccessible and surrounded by corrupt officials. Or he was himself the oppressor, either by explicit acts or indirectly through corrupt officials and through unequal taxation.

Thirdly, out of the failure of the king to show justice and mercy emerged the messianic hope. Messianism finds its basic core in the poor man's cry for justice. It is a blend of his hoping for an ideal king in his own situation in life and his realization that Yahweh is finally the only one who can fulfil that ideal and bring about justice.

Finally, the Day of Yahweh was seen as the day of vindication when Yahweh himself will rule and will destroy the wicked oppressor, manifesting his mercy and righteousness in favour of the poor and oppressed. Then the poor man will be the true Israel, living in peace and prosperity in the kingdom of God. But from his own experience the poor man knows that it is always the righteous who are persecuted and oppressed, so the righteous Messiah would have to suffer too. He would be a Suffering Servant for his people, willingly giving himself for them, but always remaining righteous in his obedience to Yahweh.

## THE NEW TESTAMENT

### *The Poor Man's Deliverer*

Jesus began his public ministry with the proclamation that the messianic era was beginning. As in ancient times when the "good news" of a golden era was announced at the enthronement of a king, so Jesus announced God's Good News in terms of the "lists" of messianic works set down particularly in Isaiah (Is. 29:18-19; 35:5-6; Is. 61:1-3). This is what the Beatitudes are (Matt. 5:1-12; Luke 6:20-23). With his proclamation: "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of Heaven", Jesus was announcing the first messianic work of Is. 61:1: "The Lord has anointed me to bring good news to the afflicted." The term "poor in spirit" has the same meaning as "afflicted", that is, the poor and oppressed. This messianic announcement suggested an end to suffering and oppression and the

beginning of a time of joy and peace. The poor were blessed because the kingdom of heaven belonged to them. They would now be able to enjoy it and share in it by anticipation although they would not fully receive this kingdom prepared for them until the day of judgment (Matt. 25:34). They were now entering into eschatological tension, a state of preparedness in waiting for the bridegroom (Matt. 25:1-13).

The poor and oppressed at the time of Jesus may well have been the simple country folk of Galilee and Judea - the lower priesthood, farmers, shepherds, artisans and the like, or even outcasts, demoniacs, lepers, Gentiles, women and children, and "bad people." Yet there was a sense of religious oppression in all of this as is indicated by the reference to the poor "in spirit" (Matt. 5:3). Jesus included in these poor all kinds of people who were rejected by the religious leaders of the day as being unworthy to enter the kingdom of God. The Pharisees expected the kingdom of God to come about because of their "righteousness". But Jesus announced it as coming to the poor - the very ones the Pharisees rejected and despised. It was announced as coming to the publicans and sinners - people not in a position to fulfil the prescribed requirements of "righteousness" because their calling brought them into contact with heathen and thus ensnared them in a permanent uncleanness; the people of the land whom the Pharisees said were accursed because they "do not know the law" (John 7:49) and who lacked the means for regular temple visits and offerings. Although their depressed social position was often aggravated through want and poverty, they were occasionally wealthy people. In other words, these "poor" suffered from religious oppression. And, as in the Old Testament, these were often the people who in their affliction hoped steadfastly in God.

The other beatitudes are variations of the first. "Those who mourn" in the second beatitude (in Matthew) are those who cry out in their affliction to God, and the comfort they receive is the consolation of God's reign of justice, mercy and peace (cf. Is. 61:1-3; 57:18-21). The third beatitude announces the fulfilment of the messianic promise of Ps. 37:11 to the poor and oppressed. The fourth beatitude speaks of the poor man's desire for his rights, for relief from oppression and for vindication by God - a desire which is now to be satisfied. The "merciful", the "pure in heart", the "peacemakers" in the next beatitudes are all familiar Old Testament descriptions of the poor and oppressed. The eighth beatitude introduces the theme of persecution and repeats the proclamation of the first, "for theirs is the kingdom of Heaven", thereby showing the unity of the ideas incorporated in these beatitudes - oppression and persecution, a predominant theme in the poor man motif.

Thus, the beatitudes constitute a single proclamation based on the promise of Isaiah 61: "Good News for the poor and oppressed! The kingdom of God is for them!" And Jesus identifies himself as the messenger sent by God, as one "anointed" to bring the Good News to the poor. The rule he has announced is the reign of God, which becomes manifest only through him. He is the herald and the pledge. With his preaching parables, his miracles and deeds, his conduct toward the poor, the oppressed, the sick and the sinners the reign of God becomes a reality. Isaiah 61 is also seen as the basis for the preaching of Jesus in the synagogue at Nazareth in Luke 4:16-30; Is. 61:1-2. And, it is on the basis of the

words of Is. 61:1-3 and 35:5-6 that Jesus answers the disciples of John who ask whether he is the Messiah (Matt. 11:2-6, Luke 7:18-23).

Jesus' messianic mission to the poor and oppressed is further reflected in his invitation to those who labour and are heavy-laden (Matt. 11:28-30). He invites them to take his yoke upon them - the yoke of obedient discipleship. In contrast to all other yokes of instruction, his yoke leads to freedom from oppression, the freedom of the reign of God. Picking up Zeph. 3:12, Jesus referred to himself as "the afflicted and lowly one", a description of the faithful messianic remnant who would "seek refuge in the name of the Lord", who "shall do no wrong and utter no lies."<sup>6</sup> Jesus was saying thereby to the afflicted and oppressed: "I have come as your representative before God. I am the afflicted and oppressed one, the poor man *par excellence*, and it is by following me that you will be vindicated and enter the kingdom." Jesus' basic role as Messiah was that of the suffering Servant, who vindicates the righteous and delivers the oppressed.

At his anointing at Bethany (Mark 14:3-9; Matt. 26:6-13; John 12:1-8), Jesus answers the objection about the expense of the ointment used on him with: "You always have the poor with you, but you will not always have me." This is an apparent reference to Deut. 15:11 which emphasizes the spontaneous action of the individual to help the poor man in his need. Jesus interprets the woman's action of love as the supreme charity - a spontaneous act to help the poor man in his affliction. The verses prior to this pericope clearly show that the poor man was Jesus himself, about to suffer at the hands of the wicked, and the chief priests and scribes, seeking to arrest Jesus by stealth and kill him, are the wicked portrayed so often in the Psalms.

In Matthew's Gospel this pericope follows the parable of the last judgment (Matt. 25:31-46), where those who inherit the kingdom have done charity to Jesus by helping the afflicted and the needy: "As you did it to one of the least of these my brethren, you did it to me." The close relationship between the poor man and Jesus is clearly evident.

Jesus' entry into Jerusalem (Matt. 21:1-9; Mark 11:1-10; Luke 19:28-40; John 12:12-19) was a public proclamation of the fact and meaning of his messiahship. He entered on a colt, the traditional mount of the ancient tribal leaders and early kings. He came as the messianic king to lead his people in justice and righteousness, yet as one "afflicted" in fulfilment of the prophecy in Zech. 9:9.<sup>7</sup> Before he could enter into glory and exaltation as their Messiah, he had to be their suffering king, to bring about their vindication and exaltation. Again the Suffering Servant motif is clearly seen.

Thus, Jesus' task in establishing the kingdom involved bringing justice, deliverance from affliction and oppression, retribution and recompense, vindication and exaltation of the poor man. And, it involved the judgment of the

6. When the Alexandrian Jews translated the Old Testament into Greek they used Greek words which emphasize poverty, meekness and humility and which failed to convey the concept of oppression so essential to the Hebrew terminology. These Greek words were then used in the Greek New Testament. Therefore, to discover the real content of these words, we have to go back to the original Hebrew terminology.

7. Once again, as in Matt. 11:29, the Greek word *praus* must not be given the classical Greek rendering of "meek" but rather should be translated in accordance with the original Hebrew term 'ani as "afflicted", "suffering".

wicked. But this could not be accomplished through force and violence the approach taken by the wicked. The poor man's way was to turn the other cheek, to demonstrate that he had been set free to live once again in that covenant relationship with God and man - the relationship of loving concern. Possessing the kingdom meant just that. It was the way Jesus himself chose.

The way of the poor man meant undergoing the same affliction, oppression, and persecution the poor man had always known. It meant humility and lowliness, suffering and death. But Jesus, as the poor man's representative, would show that the way led through humiliation and death to exaltation and life. Those who followed him would participate in his exaltation and glory. Therefore, Jesus called all who felt the burden of suffering and oppression to take his yoke upon them for he was the poor man *par excellence*. He would set them free.

## The Poor Man's Deliverance

As the deliverer of the poor and the oppressed, Jesus concern was never for poverty *per se*. His concern was to inaugurate the kingdom. This meant answering the cries of the afflicted and fulfilling their needs by giving them assurance that, no matter how much the world had rejected them, God had not. His kingdom belongs to them. They are his, and as such they will finally be vindicated before those who had rejected them. But as kingdom members they would show the same loving concern for their fellowmen in need as God had shown to them. To fail to show these kingdom signs is to be rejected as unworthy of the kingdom (Matt. 25:31-46).

This is illustrated in the story of the rich young man (Mark 10:17-22; Matt. 19:16-22; Luke 18:18-23). When asked what was required from him to inherit eternal life, Jesus told him to sell his possessions and give the money to the poor. The poor play no significant role. They are only the recipients of charity. The point is that those who enter the kingdom of God, and so inherit eternal life, do so because they have become "poor in spirit", i.e.: they recognize that it is not by their own goodness but by God's grace and mercy that they inherit eternal life.

Applying this test to the rich young man, Jesus found him wanting. He was not poor in spirit. He was still self-dependent and would expect everyone else to be so too. This is where the danger of riches lay. It is as hard for a rich man to give up his self-dependence because of his wealth and to place his reliance completely in God's love and mercy as it would be for a camel to go through the eye of a needle. Not recognizing God's love and mercy toward him, it is impossible for him to act in love and mercy towards others. Consequently, he was unfit to enter the kingdom.

The need to live in the covenant relationship and be righteous and merciful towards one's fellowman and the need to view one's possessions as God's wealth to be properly managed for the good of all, is the message of a number of parables. Among them is the parable of the unjust steward (Luke 16:1-15). In this parable the rich man is God, the owner of all things. The steward represents those who have leadership and power. They have the responsibility to use their God-given resources in a purposeful and fruitful way, but they are selfish and

misuse them. In the process they oppress the poor, the “debtors”, who have no option but to cry to God for deliverance and vindication. Because God delivers the oppressed when he calls (e.g. Ps. 72:12-14), those oppressing the poor are given notice that their responsibilities are about to be taken from them. In the face of impending judgment, the steward of the parable makes amends by cutting out his vast profit and compensating those he has been defrauding, knowing that they will now receive him and no longer bring judgment against him. In changing his ways he has acted wisely and is therefore commended by his master. Similarly God commends those who repent in these last times and makes amends to those whom they have oppressed. The real thrust of this parable comes in two-fold manner in 16:10-13: “If you have not been a good steward of earthly riches then how can you be entrusted with heavenly riches?” “If you cannot be faithful with someone else’s inheritance, how can you expect to receive the eternal inheritance promised to you?” (Cf. Luke 19:12-17).

The early Christians in Jerusalem, desiring to fulfil these responsibilities of the kingdom in a very concrete way, set up a community in which they shared all things, selling their possessions and putting the money into a common treasury for distribution according to need. They sought thereby to fulfil the covenant ideal of a brotherly relationship with one another where no one would be needy. (Acts 4:32-37).

In summary, the poor man’s deliverance meant that he would be received by God into a new covenant relationship. In this relationship he would realize his complete dependence on God’s love and mercy, and would respond in love and mercy toward his fellowman - not in terms of almsgiving, but in terms of accepting him as one who shares equally in the love and mercy of God.

## CONCLUSION

The church is still living in tension. Its members have been claimed by Christ as members of the kingdom. Yet they need continually to respond to the love and mercy of God by demonstrating that love to all men. The church thereby calls the poor and oppressed to follow the afflicted and lowly one - Jesus Christ. In Him there is freedom and salvation. He alone will vindicate them before their oppressor and give them resurrection and eternal life, even as the Father has given it to His Son.

In carrying out its task and in looking to its final vindication the church must be conscious of the nature of sin and be concerned to be a catalyst for change rather than becoming involved in systems of society that oppress. The church’s primary task is the proclamation of the Good News - the Good News that the Deliverer, Jesus Christ, is here to vindicate the oppressed. But its proclamation of the gospel must make the church sensitive to every form of oppression so that it not only proclaims Good News in every situation but is part of the saving process as the body of Christ. In making this proclamation the Church must also be careful that it does not itself become the oppressor by implying that it is better than others - that its hold on the truth makes it more worthy of God’s fellowship than others. The church at the time of Jesus under the leadership of the scribes and Pharisees had become guilty of that and was declared unfit for the Kingdom.