

## Responding to poverty<sup>1</sup> Christopher J H Wright

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This is an abbreviated extract from the book by the same author, *Old Testament Ethics for the People of God*, revised and updated edition, IVP, 2004. Not to be reproduced or copied without permission

So far, then, we have seen the creational foundation of Old Testament economics, the distortions arising from human sin and disobedience, and the efforts made within Israel's economic system to make creation principles come to life within the arena of Israel's redeemed, covenant community. How was all of this brought to bear on the issue of poverty?

We shall first note some of the causes of poverty that are recognized and commented upon in the Old Testament. Then we shall survey the responses to poverty that are found in the major sections of the canon.<sup>2</sup>

### 1. Causes of poverty

Poverty can come upon a person, family or community for a wide variety of reasons, and the Old Testament recognizes the complexity of the matter.

First, there are what we would call '*natural causes*', the result of living in a fallen world in which things go wrong for no reason apparent to us. Such things as blight on crops and invasions of locusts can devastate a local economy. Sometimes such events may be attributed to divine judgement (e.g. Joel), but other times they are simply recorded without any explanation. Stuff happens. We might think of the famine that drove Jacob's family to Egypt in Genesis, or that drove Elimelech to emigrate from Bethlehem (ironically meaning 'House of Bread'), to Moab in Ruth. Illness and disaster can reduce a man to the rubbish tip (Job); death and widowhood can reduce a woman to bitter emptiness (Naomi). Attributing it to the hand of Yahweh (rightly or wrongly) does not mitigate the pain of such reversals.

Then second, the Old Testament recognizes that some poverty may be the direct result of *laziness*. This is particularly the observation of the world of the Wise in the book of Proverbs. For that reason, some scholars portray the authors of that book as rather cynical representatives of the well-to-do, urban elite, who saw the poor not so much as a moral challenge as a political eyesore, and felt it necessary to blame them for their own poverty.<sup>3</sup> This seems to me an exaggerated ideological interpretation of Proverbs. The point Proverbs makes seems to be valid, and complementary to the more dominant note of the law and the prophets (as we shall see). The fact is that laziness and squandering can lead to impoverishment, and hard work is often conducive to economic prosperity (e.g. Pr. 12:11; 14:23; 20:13; 21:17, etc.). Proverbs itself is well aware that these are generalizations, not rules without exception (e.g. Pr. 13:23).

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<sup>2</sup> There are some very detailed scholarly studies of poverty in the Old Testament, some of which are listed in the reading list at the end of the chapter. For studies of the rich vocabulary of poverty that is characteristic of the Old Testament, see David J. Pleins, 'Poor, Poverty', and Mignon R. Jacobs, 'Concern for the Underprivileged'. A full survey of the poor in every part of the Bible is provided by Leslie J. Hoppe O.F.M., *Being Poor*. An account that claims to find a wide variety of ideological and social perspectives within the different sections of the Hebrew canon is argued in considerable critical detail in J. David Pleins, *Social Visions*.

<sup>3</sup> This is the case argued in several works by David Pleins. See, David J. Pleins, 'Poverty in the Social World of the Wise', and Pleins, *Social Visions*, ch. 11, pp. 452-483. Less negative accounts of how the Wisdom tradition viewed poverty and wealth and be found in Norman Habel, 'Wisdom, Wealth and Poverty', and R. N. Whybray, *Wealth and Poverty*.

Thirdly, however, *oppression* is by far the major recognized cause of poverty. The Old Testament asserts, as all modern analyses demonstrate, that only a tiny fraction of poverty is 'accidental'. Mostly, people are made poor by the actions of others – directly or indirectly. Poverty is caused. And the primary cause is the exploitation of others by those whose selfish interests are served by keeping others poor.<sup>4</sup> Such oppressive exploitation takes various forms, and the Old Testament offers a remarkably nuanced understanding of this variety.

- i) *Exploitation of the socially weak.* There are those whose lack of status in the community makes them vulnerable. This is classically the case with those who have lost either family or land or both: widows, orphans, aliens. Naomi and Ruth illustrate the potential struggle, and 2 Kings 4:1-7 presents a typical case. Loss of family leaves a person defenceless, unless strong defenders take up their cause (as Boaz did, and as Job claimed to have done before his own calamity – Job 29:12-17).
- ii) *Exploitation of the economically weak.* Debt, leading to loss of land, accumulates and drives people into deepening poverty. The charging of interest exacerbates the problem (Ex. 22:25). So does royal taxation, confiscation and conscription (1 Sam. 8:10-18). Economic and social powerlessness go together in the situation graphically described in Nehemiah 5. Debt (even apparently trifling debts) could lead to slavery (Am. 2:6). On the other hand, the mechanisms to relieve debt could be abused, or people refused loans because of their imminence (Dt. 15:7-9). Lenders could abuse their power by unscrupulous demands (Dt. 24:17-18). Employers could exploit the most vulnerable section of the workforce – the casual day labourers – by delayed payment of wages (Dt. 24:14-15).
- iii) *Exploitation of the ethnically weak.* The Israelites themselves, of course, began their national history as an ethnic minority in Egypt, suffering all the horrors of political, economic and social oppression, culminating in state sponsored genocide (Ex. 1). For that reason they were told to pay particular attention to the vulnerability of ethnic minorities in their own midst (Ex. 22:21; Lv. 19:33). Again, the story of Ruth illustrates the potential danger that immigrant foreigners could be exposed to. And one might point out that two of the Old Testament's major figures, Abraham and David, stooped to their lowest in episodes of appalling treatment of ethnic foreigners (Hagar and Uriah).
- iv) *Royal excess, corruption and abuse of power.* The Old Testament includes some vividly trenchant critique of the violent corruption of power and the gaining of wealth at the expense of the poverty of others. Solomon, of course, is the prime example as his later reign degenerated into naked exploitation of the northern tribes in a way which doubtless contributed to his legendary wealth and splendour, but equally clearly sparked the revolt which tore nine tenths of the kingdom away from his son Rehoboam (1 Ki. 11-12). Later kings followed suit to one degree or another. Ahab's greed smashes a Naboth (1 Ki. 21). Jehoiakim's greed builds his own conspicuous affluence on the backs of unpaid workers (Jer. 22:13). Ezekiel summarizes the whole abusive history of the monarchy in Jerusalem thus: 'See how each of the princes of Israel who are in you uses his power to shed blood... There is a conspiracy of her princes within her like a roaring lion tearing its prey; they devour people, take treasures and precious things and make many widows within her.' Not surprisingly, ordinary people follow the examples of their political masters: 'The people of the land practice extortion and commit robbery; they oppress the poor and needy and mistreat the alien, denying them justice.' (Ezek. 22:6, 25, 29).
- v) *Judicial corruption and false accusation.* The case of Naboth was not just one of royal greed; the means used to get rid of him was a blatant manipulation of Israel's own legal system by Jezebel (with Ahab acquiescent). Amos 5:7, 11-12 spotlights the terrible corruption of the courts that turned justice to poison for the poor. The powerful could then legislate poverty by decree (Isa. 10:1-2)! This is a common cause for complaint in the Psalms, when the poor who are 'righteous' (i.e. legally in the right as against wicked

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The prophets ...did not regard poverty as the result of chance, destiny or laziness. Poverty was simply the creation of the rich who have broken the covenant because of their greed. The wealthy used their abilities and resources not to enhance the community but to support their own purpose. In this way they violated the covenant, they destroyed the unity of Israel and called forth divine judgment.

Hoppe O.F.M, *Being Poor*, p. 61.

opponents) find no human redress in the assembly and can appeal only to God. The failure of the judges to do their job will arouse fury of God and their eventual destruction (Ps. 82).

## 2. Responses to poverty

'From the oldest of the Old Testament documents to the most recent, the cause of the underprivileged is upheld.'<sup>5</sup> Let us, then, survey a selection of the documents as we find them in the different sections of the canon.

### *In the Law*

- i) The law insists that **poverty must be addressed**, and redressed, whatever its causes may be. The series of clauses in Leviticus 25 beginning 'If one of your countrymen becomes poor...' (vs. 25, 35, 39, 47), give no hint as to possible causes. It is not a matter of assigning blame. The question is, What is now to be done if a brother is in danger of sinking into poverty? If there were injustices or oppressive practices causing the impoverishment process, that is a matter for another day, or for prophetic rhetoric. Those who are required to take action are not necessarily those responsible for the problem (in the sense of being guilty of causing it). But they are responsible under God for those in danger of falling through the cracks of society. They must be restored one way or another.
- ii) The law emphasises **the kinship/family structure of society** as the key factor in preventing poverty and restoring people from it. As we have already seen, Israel's economic system included such family-supportive principles as: the equitable distribution of land through the broad network of clans and families (Nu. 26:52-56); the inalienability of family land (Lv. 25:23); redemption and jubilee practices, to restore families to participation in the community (Lv. 25); the ban on interest between Israelites (Dt. 23:19); the levirate marriage arrangement (Dt. 25:5-10).
- iii) Israel's law included a range of measures which, taken together, formed an impressive and systemic **welfare programme** for those who were truly destitute – i.e. mainly the landless and family-less.<sup>6</sup> Thus, there was the right of annual gleaning in the various harvests (Ex. 23:10-11; Dt. 24:18-22); the triennial tithe, during which 10% of all produce was stored to create a social fund for the support of the needy (Dt. 14:28-29)<sup>7</sup>; and the sabbatical year arrangements, which included the availability of what grew of itself on the fallow land (Ex. 23:10-11), the cancellation (or suspension) of debts (Dt. 15:1-11), and the freeing of Hebrew slaves (Dt. 15:12-18). The combination of all of these would have meant that something was available every year for the benefit of those who truly had no means for their own economic support.
- iv) The law insisted that the poor be treated with **judicial equality** in the whole legal process. This meant neither being treated with an unjust favouritism, nor (the more likely reality), being denied justice altogether because of the social and economic power of the wealthy (Ex. 23:3, 6-9; Lv. 19:5).
- v) The law typically addresses, not the poor themselves, but **those who wield economic or social power**. Whereas it is common to see 'the poor' as 'a problem', and to blame them or lecture them on what *they* must do to redeem their situation, Israel's law puts the focus instead on those who actually have the power to do something, or whose power must be constrained in some way for the benefit of the poor. Thus the law addresses the creditor, not the debtor (Dt. 24:6, 10-13); employers, not day-labourers (Dt. 24:14); slave-owners, not slaves (Ex. 21:20-21, 26-27; Dt. 15:12-18).<sup>8</sup>

<sup>5</sup> David H. Englehard, 'The Lord's Motivated Concern', p. 5.

<sup>6</sup> Stephen A. Kaufman, 'Social Welfare Systems', offers a less than satisfactory account which is confused in its handling of the provisions in Leviticus and Deuteronomy. For greater detail, compare Wright, *God's Land*, and Hoppe O.F.M., *Being Poor*, chapters 1 and 2.

<sup>7</sup> 'From being an obligatory gift to the gods the tithe has become an obligatory gift to the poor.' Hoppe O.F.M., *Being Poor*, p. 27.

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Deuteronomy makes the alleviation of the suffering of the poor a matter of obedience to the divine will. If Israel would abide by the law, there would be no poverty. Because people have

- vi) The law builds around its whole system of legislation on poverty a broad **moral and emotional ethos**. This includes the familiar Old Testament emphases on gratitude to, and imitation of, God as a motivation (see Chapter 1), and compassion and generosity as key virtues (see above)<sup>9</sup>.
- vii) The law makes care for the poor **the litmus test of covenant obedience** to the whole of the rest of the law. This is the remarkable thrust of Deuteronomy 26:12-15. The Israelite worshipper, bringing his offering in gratitude for the gift of the land and the harvest, is to declare that he has given the sacred portion to Yahweh, and also to the poor and needy, as required by the triennial tithe law (Dt. 14:28-29). Only on that basis could he claim to have 'not forgotten' any of God's commands.
- Thus, giving to the needy is not only a sacred duty to God, but it also is the defining point for any claim to have kept the law. *The law is kept only if the poor are cared for.* Only when Israel responds to the needy by enabling *everyone* in the community to **eat and be satisfied** can they affirm **I have done everything that you commanded me**. This shows ...how the enacted love for the poor and needy is the practical proof of genuine, God-honoring love for the neighbor. The Torah itself thus agrees with the way the prophets later pinpoint and prioritise care for the poor as somehow definitive or paradigmatic of Israel's response to God as a whole.<sup>10</sup>

#### *In the narratives*

- i) The constitutive narrative of Israel's redemptive history brings them from slavery in Egypt to freedom in the land of promise. It is true, as Rodd points out, (p. 183), that the words for poverty are not used of the Hebrews in Egypt, and the situation is described in terms of oppression, not poverty. Nevertheless, Deuteronomy makes much of the anticipated goal of the whole experience, which was the abundance of the land of promise in stark contrast to the minimal subsistence of life in Egypt and the wilderness that preceded it (Dt. 8 and 11). Certainly, the Egyptian oppression included economic exploitation, inasmuch as all the forced labour of the Hebrews was going towards the wealth and grandeur of the Pharaoh, not for their own benefit.
- ii) This liberating narrative forms the basis of celebration around the theme of this characteristic action of Yahweh as God. Hannah sings of God's power of economic reversal (1 Sa. 2:5-8). The Psalmists do likewise (Ps. 146).
- iii) The narratives also provide examples of both negative and positive behaviour in relation to poverty. As we have seen, our Old Testament narrator paints the glaring contrast between the sumptuous wealth of Solomon and the growing oppression of parts of his kingdom, and notes with depressing regularity the succession of kings who followed his example. But we are also given more encouraging stories of what was probably regarded as the true Israelite ideal of justice, compassion and generosity towards the vulnerable and needy – Boaz being the prime hero in this regard.

#### *In the prophets*

- i) It would be difficult to exaggerate the extent of the prophets' engagement with the struggles of the poor in Israel. Rodd is right to say that the major issue was not purely the fact of material poverty alone, but **primarily one of injustice and oppression**. It was the imbalance in a society that was supposed to be based on covenantal equality and mutual support that most angered the prophets. But the material aspect cannot be overlooked. That the victims of exploitation were also becoming materially destitute is clear from the way Amos, for example, contrasts their plight with the affluent lifestyle of those he refers

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failed to be obedient, poverty is a reality that needs to be handled. Deuteronomy speaks to the prosperous, to judges, to owners of bond slaves, to creditors, to all who are in a position to either mitigate or worsen the situation of the poor... [asking] that people of means relinquish some of their "rights", act against their economic self-interest and treat the poor as members of their own families which, in reality, they are.

Hoppe O.F.M, *Being Poor*, p. 32.

<sup>9</sup> On the distinctiveness of Old Testament motivational material on this issue, see, Englehard, 'The Lord's Motivated Concern'

<sup>10</sup> Wright, *Deuteronomy*, pp. 271-272 (italics original).

to as the wicked (e.g. Am. 4:1; 6:4-6); or Isaiah contrasts the accumulating estates and mansions of the wealthy with those who have no place left to live (Isa. 5:8). Jeremiah contrasts the exploitative greed of Jehoiakim with the justice and generosity of Josiah towards the poor (Jer. 22:13-17). Micah surely has material suffering in mind when he luridly paints the ruthless rich as those 'who tear the skin from my people and the flesh from their bones; who eat my people's flesh, strip off their skin and break their bones in pieces; who chop them up like meat for the pan, like flesh for the pot' (Mi. 3:3).

- ii) Perhaps the major contribution of the prophets, and the major lesson we can learn from them in terms of the prophetic responsibility of the church today, lies simply in the fact that **they saw what was going on**. They were the mouthpiece of the God who sees – as Israel should have known ever since Exodus records that God had seen their suffering in Egypt, heard their cries of pain, and intervened on their behalf (Ex. 2:23-25, 3:7). A major part of the problem is that poverty becomes invisible and the poor inaudible. But not to the God of Israel. 'I have been watching!' declares the LORD' (Jer. 7:12). So, the prophets first notice, then expose the grievances, then challenge those in power (kings and judges especially), who would prefer to look the other way. No wonder then that Ahab called Elijah, 'you troubler of Israel', even though Ahab himself was the source of the trouble (1 Ki. 18:17-18). A government capable of doing what Jezebel and Ahab did to the family of a peasant farmer, Naboth, needed to be severely troubled, and Elijah did not shirk the task.<sup>11</sup>

#### *In the Psalms*

- i) Like the prophets, the Psalmists affirm unambiguously that **Yahweh is the God who hears the cry of the poor**. They are utterly dependent on God when human help fails, and their plight matters to God profoundly (Pss. 145, 146, 147, etc.). There is thus often an oscillation between a material and a spiritual meaning of 'the poor' in the Psalms. It seems misguided to insist on one or the other exclusively. The materially poor are thrown in spiritual dependence on God. 'Poverty' thus serves both as a literal description for the destitute, and as a metaphor for spiritual humility.<sup>12</sup>
- ii) Israel's worship also, like the law and the prophets, is very clear about where **the prime responsibility** lies in the matter of addressing the needs and the just cause of the poor – namely with political and social authorities – kings (Ps. 72) and judges (Ps. 82).
- iii) The Psalter also builds a strong connection between the **claims and criteria of worship that is acceptable to God**, on the one hand, and practical social concern and economic justice on the other. Among the marks of the righteous worshipper who may dwell in God's holy mountain is the willingness to lend without demanding interest – a major plank in Israel's economic ethic (Ps. 15:5). And if it is true that you become like the object of your worship, then not surprisingly the one who worships and fears Yahweh will reflect him in justice, compassion and generosity (Pss. 111:4-5 and 112:4-5).

#### *In the Wisdom Literature*

- i) There is a strongly **creational base for the social ethics** of the Wisdom writers, which contrasts (though in a complementary way), with the way the Torah and the prophets

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Naboth was not poor in purely economic terms: he was a small landowner. A man who had a vineyard of such high quality that a king coveted it could hardly be considered destitute! ...The point is that although he was not poor, yet he was powerless to resist the wicked scheming of Jezebel, who, with the tacit approval of the king, contrived to deprive him not only of his property but also of his life.

J. Emmette Weir, 'The Poor Are Powerless', p. 14.

<sup>12</sup> Sue Gillingham urges that the mission of the church needs to preserve this holistic double focus.

We cannot feed and clothe the poor without recognizing the spiritual poverty in the world around us – perhaps particularly the poverty of the affluent West; nor can we preach a Gospel which fulfils our deepest spiritual needs without allowing this to challenge our attitude to every aspect of material well-being. This, to my mind, offers a theology of poverty which is both biblical and contemporary.

Sue Gillingham, 'Poor in the Psalms', p. 19.

grounded their ethical motivation in the great historical-redemptive tradition. Thus, for Proverbs, the poor should be treated with the dignity that reflects the fact that they too are created by the same God. Indeed, what we do to or for them, we do to or for God (in a remarkable anticipation of the teaching of Jesus).

He who oppresses the poor shows contempt for their Maker,  
but whoever is kind to the needy honours God (Pr. 14:31; cf. also 17:5; 19:17; 22:2, 22-23; 29:13).

The created equality of slave and master also governed Job's insistence on his own fair handling of his workers' grievances (Job 31:13-15).

- ii) As with so many other matters, the Wisdom writers were gifted with **observation and insight on the realities of poverty** – not only in its economic debilitation, but also in its disabling social embarrassment. (Pr. 10:15; 19:4, 7). Job is eloquent in his description of destitution (Jb. 24:1-12). Ecclesiastes observes the impoverishing effect of bureaucracy (Ecc. 5:8-9), and also the speed with which wealth and poverty can change places (Ecc. 5:13- 6:6).
- iii) Based on this careful observation, the Wisdom writers all advocate the same ethos of **compassion, generosity and justice** that we find elsewhere (Jb. 31:16-23; Ecc. 4:1). Such an attitude is in fact characteristic of true righteousness, as its lack is of the wicked. For 'the righteous care about justice for the poor, but the wicked have no such concern' (Pr. 29:7). However, just caring is not enough. Job, who complained that God seemed to do nothing about the plight of the poor and oppressed, overlooked the fact that he himself had been an instrument of God's justice in action in his own daily work as an elder in the gate, defending the weak and confronting the oppressor (Jb. 29:7-17; 'confronting' is actually a weak word in comparison to Job's own metaphor – 'I broke the fangs of the wicked and snatched the victims from their teeth'). Addressing poverty caused by the abuse of power inevitably brings conflict with those who are the abusers.
- iv) Like the law, prophets and Psalms, the Wisdom tradition put its finger on the spot in pointing to **the key role of political authorities** in taking responsibility for the needs of the poor. Thus the final chapter of Proverbs, before its portrait of the ideal wife, has some advice for an ideal king. Adding some colour to the Deuteronomic law that limited the perks of royalty, King Lemuel's mother urges him to avoid profligacy with women, wine or beer. This advice, however, was not for the good of his own health, but so that he would have a clear head to obtain justice for the oppressed. The prime job of the king, according to the wise queen mother, was to,

Speak up for those who cannot speak for themselves, for the rights of all who are destitute.

Speak up and judge fairly; defend the rights of the poor and needy (Pr. 31:1-9).

In conclusion, we may note that the same eschatological hope that concluded the last chapter, (the ecological hope for our earth and the whole environment), also strongly flavours Old Testament economic ethics. In the here and now of our fallen world, the Old Testament presents to us a sensible balance of, on the one hand, ideals and goals (there need be no poverty if people would live according to the principles and systems that God has provided for our flourishing), and on the other hand, realistic awareness of the endemic nature of human greed and violence and the perpetuation of poverty that results. Deuteronomy provides the classic expression of both in chapter 15. On the one hand, 'There should be no poor among you, for ... the LORD your God will richly bless you, if only you fully obey the LORD your God and are careful to follow all these commands (vs. 4-5). But on the other, 'There will always be poor people in the land. Therefore I command you to be openhanded toward your brothers and toward the poor and needy in your land' (v. 11).

But the time will come when poverty will be no more. Micah's glorious vision of the messianic era adds to its parallel in Isaiah the proverbial picture that 'every man will sit under his own vine and under his own fig tree' (Mic. 4:4; cf. Isa. 2:1-5). Both see an end to war and armaments as a major contributor to such economic revival. As we saw at the end of Chapter 4, the vision of the new creation in Isaiah 65:17-25 is not one of effort-free wealth, but it is one of a society without poverty and oppression, in which work will be satisfying, rewarding and safe, freed from the frustrations of disease and dispossession. As with our ecological ethic, then, our economic ethic is built around the principles of creation, the realism of the fall, the paradigmatic detail of Israel's systemic response to economic problems – especially poverty caused by oppression, and the eschatological hope of a new world that is as certain as God's own character and promise.

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