

THE KINGDOM AND THE POOR*

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Much theological thought has gone into the question of poverty and the poor of late, no doubt because of the experience of Christians in the Third World church who have been trying to relate the Christian faith to the circumstances in which they found themselves. In their reflection upon the Scriptures many have come to the conclusion that God has a special concern for, indeed, a 'bias' towards, the poor, which if true ought radically to affect our Christian life and church practice.

The Old Testament

God and the Poor There are four main Hebrew words used in the Old Testament to denote the 'poor', each with its own particular nuances of background meaning, and it may be an enlightening place to start by looking into these meanings.¹ The word *'eḇ iôn*, used 25 times, usually refers to the very poor, 'those with no roof over their heads'. As a result of this extreme poverty they are at the foot of the social scale, the subject of oppression and abuse, and therefore in desperate need of help or deliverance from their predicament.

The second word *dal*,¹ used some 43 times in the Old Testament, refers usually to 'one who is wrongfully impoverished or dispossessed'. It is used more with the idea of expressing a relationship rather than the state of social distress; *i.e.*, that one is poor in relation to someone else, because of their greed or oppression.

The adjective *'āni*, used over 60 times, has the meaning 'poor, afflicted, humble, needy'. This word has religious connotations in that it is used of the pious people in Israel who are afflicted by the wicked in Israel itself, or by the wicked nations around them. God has compassion on such people (Is. 49:13), and saves them (Ps. 34:9).

The final Hebrew word of the four is *rûš*, meaning 'poor, impoverished'. It is related to the verb *yâraš*, which basically means to 'take possession of, inherit, dispossess'. The word *rûš*, is used in one form to mean 'to be dispossessed, impoverished, brought into a state of poverty' and is used in the Wisdom literature in antithesis to the 'rich'.

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1. Background information extracted from the *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*, the *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* and R. L. Harris *et al.*, *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*, Chicago, 1980.

Study of the words used in the Old Testament and their range of meaning shows that the writers were aware of the close relationship between being poor and needy, and being afflicted, oppressed and dispossessed. It is worthwhile keeping this in mind as we look at what Sider calls 'pivotal points of revelation history'.²

The Exodus 'Then the Lord said, "I have seen the affliction of my people who are in Egypt, and have heard their cry because of their taskmasters; I know their sufferings, and I have come down to deliver them out of the hand of the Egyptians . . . and to bring them up out of that land to a good and broad land . . ." (Ex. 3:7, 8a).

'Say therefore to the people of Israel, "I am the Lord, and I will bring you out from under the burdens of the Egyptians, and I will deliver you from their bondage, and I will redeem you with an outstretched arm and great acts of judgement and I will take you for my people, and I will be your God; and you shall know what I am the Lord your God who has brought you out from under the burdens of the Egyptians,"' (Ex. 6:6, 7).

Both Sider³ and Kirk⁴ point to the two-pronged aspect of the revelation of God in this major incident in the history of Israel. First there is the emphasis on liberation – that God was revealing himself as the liberator of a people from oppression and cruelty under the Egyptians. God was in this act showing himself to be against oppression and very much concerned about justice. Secondly, nevertheless, God did not enter history at this point to free all people of this period who were under the yoke of slavery, but rather he chose the Israelites to be a special people – a people who were to have a special relationship with him and who were to reflect in their life as a nation the attributes and characteristics of God. This aspect of the revelation is often missed by those concerned with portraying God simply as the great freedom-fighter on behalf of the oppressed. Certainly in the Exodus we see God acting in that way, as the liberator of an oppressed people, but they were liberated for a purpose – to reflect the justice, love and purity of the God who had called them up out of Egypt.

A further danger among some exegetes is that they see this incident purely in human terms as an oppressed people rebelling against their masters. Rather, the text consistently proclaims that Israel's liberation is due to the initiative, direction and overwhelming power of God.

The Law Having established themselves in the promised land we see clearly in the law the reflection of their experience prior to the Exodus. Written into the law were various aspects that were anti-oppression and positive expressions of liberation and justice. So, for example, in Ex. 22:25f, Lev. 19:13, and Deut. 24:7, there were specific laws to prevent

2. R. J. Sider, *Rich Christians in an Age of Hunger*, London, 1977, p 54.

3. *Ibid.*, p 54f.

4. J. A. Kirk, *Theology Encounters Revolution*, Leicester, 1980, p 169.

exploitation in money lending, the taking of a pledge, the paying of wages and stealing of sheep. In other laws, *e.g.* Ex. 22:21f; Deut. 10:17f, 24:17f, new standards were set for the living of life in the community with special reference to the vulnerable, *e.g.* widows, sojourners and strangers, often relating the need to look after these people to the experience of the Israelites in Egypt. The laws concerning tithing and gleaning allowed the poor to be able to obtain food and thus provided a simple welfare system appropriate to the agrarian community that existed at that time.

Two laws in particular ought to have special mention. In the sabbatical law the land was to lie fallow every seventh year (Ex. 23:10f; Lev. 25:2ff), not only to help the land renew itself, but also so that the poor may be able to eat, because they were allowed to gather whatever grew on the land that year. However, not only was the land freed, but people who, because of poverty, had sold themselves as slaves, were also released (Deut. 15:12f), as were any who had debts (Deut. 15:1f). Thus the sabbatical year spelt liberation for the soil, the slaves and debtors.

The second law worthy of particular mention is in Leviticus, chapter 25. It is referred to by Sider as 'one of the most radical texts in all Scripture'.⁵ Every fifty years, in the year of jubilee, all land was to be returned to its original owners – without compensation!

The absolute importance of land in an agrarian economy is the basis for this law, in that should anyone lose their land through ill-health, mismanagement, or for any other reason, then it could lead to all sorts of dangers of inequality. Thus both these laws – the sabbatical and jubilee laws – prevented the permanent creation of great differences of wealth within the community and would have helped maintain an equal and just society which reflected the impartial justice of Yahweh.

The Exile There is, however, little to suggest that these laws were in fact ever seriously put into practice, and it becomes very evident by the 8th century B.C. that there was gross inequality and oppression throughout the land. Onto the scene comes a series of prophets whose preaching, based on the knowledge of God in the law, ruthlessly attacked the rich oppressors who claimed to know and worship God. Knowing God was to do justice, they said, for justice is integral to the being of God (Jer. 22 especially v. 14). It is impossible to worship God if the commitment to justice is missing. Therefore, referring to the rich women of his day, Amos could prophesy, 'Hear this word you cows of Bashan . . . who oppress the poor, who crush the needy . . . The Lord God has sworn by his holiness that behold the days are coming upon you when they shall take you away, even the last of you, with fish-hooks' (Amos 4:1f). Similar passages throughout the minor prophets, and in Isaiah (especially chapters 10 and 65) and Jeremiah (*e.g.* chapters 5, 11 and 34) warn Israel

5. Sider, *op. cit.*, p 79.

that doom is about to fall on them due largely to their lack of practice of the worship of Yahweh, especially in relation to their dealings with the poor and needy – that on account of their oppression of the afflicted, God has had no alternative but to inflict upon them destruction and captivity. Here again we see the consistency in the revelation of the character of Yahweh, namely, that the God of the Exodus is still at work correcting the oppression of the poor in the national catastrophe of the exile from Israel.

However, the God of liberation is not finished yet. Later in the exile when the Israelites again found themselves under an oppressive regime, Ezekiel raises once more the theme of the Exodus, to the effect that, upon repentance for past injustices, God will release them just as he had done in Egypt. Israel would be set free so long as they returned to God's way of justice and righteousness. Thus we see the close relationship between the economic exploitation of the poor and the action of God in the liberating of the people from their affliction. God's justice is consistently manifested in his action with his people Israel, both for and against them.

New Testament

The Poor The principal word for the poor in the New Testament is *ptōchos*¹ from the verb *ptōssō* meaning 'to crouch' or 'to cower', the inference being one of begging. Thus there is still this undercurrent of relations with those who have wealth – the relationship being one where the poor person, having to beg, is very much at the mercy of the rich.

The Incarnation However, of far greater importance in the New Testament is the appearance of the divine in human form in the incarnation. How did the God of the Old Testament, with his concern for those who were oppressed, and for justice in society, enter the world? Were those particular concerns followed through consistently into his incarnation? The answer is a resounding Yes! We see his humble birth to a carpenter and his wife caught up in a census registration by being members of a subject race. We see him having to flee as a refugee from a tyrannical ruler who is set to destroy him. We see him brought up in Nazareth, a village held in low regard by the people of that day. 'Can anything good come out of Nazareth?', asked Nathanael in John 1:46.

In his first recorded preaching opportunity, Jesus lets his hearers know exactly what his purpose is. 'The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives, and recovery of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed, to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord' (Luke 4:18f). When John the Baptist sent to Jesus to ask whether he was the one who was to come (Matt. 11), Jesus validated his messianic

ministry by pointing to, amongst other things, the preaching of the good news to the poor.

The Kingdom of God Thus the Messiah came to establish the kingdom of God. The kingdom of God was (and still is) God's programme for the total redemption of every aspect of creation – *i.e.*, there was to be a liberation of relationships. The relationships between people and God, between people and people, and between people and the physical world were all to be transformed, and Jesus made it plain by his lifestyle and his preaching that the poor had a crucial role to play in the work of transformation involved in the coming of the kingdom. In the Beatitudes Jesus gave new hope to those who were poor, hungry, thirsty and oppressed. The news that God loved and wanted them gave them a dignity and self-worth society had denied, and was still denying them.

Indeed such was the identification between Jesus and the poor that implicit in his teaching is the fact that Jesus *was* the poor, for that which was done to the 'least of the brethren' – the hungry, the prisoner, the thirsty, the naked – was actually done to Christ himself (Matt. 25). However, it was not just help or aid that Jesus brought to the poor. It was liberation and justice which he sought. It was this that brought him into so much conflict with the religious and social powers of his day. His verbal attacks were specific, telling the rich that it would be harder for them to enter the kingdom than for a camel to get through the eye of a needle, cursing them for their greed and selfishness (Luke 6:23f), and lambasting the hypocrisy of the religious leaders who had turned the law of freedom and love into an oppressive and destructive bondage.

However, the passion for justice did not stop at the verbal level. Indeed it could not, for in Christ we see a man whose speech, deeds, and very being were so uniquely integrated, that he entered the Temple in Jerusalem, which was not only the religious centre of the nation, but also the financial and economic one, and made a 'highly significant display'⁶ by clearing out the money-changers. Thus we see his total antagonism to all agents of oppression throughout his ministry, whether they be demonic, religious, social, political or economic, and at the same time an identification with the concerns, hopes and desires of the poor and oppressed.

Crucifixion There can be little doubt that it was this identification which led to his death. For while we can rightly say that Jesus Christ died as the sacrifice for sin, for the atonement of guilt, for reconciliation between God and man, and man and man, it must also be made quite clear that, at the human level, Jesus Christ died a political death. He was put to death to maintain the *status quo*. The political and religious authorities saw him as a threat to their social power, a threat that had to be removed. They

6. C. Sugden, *Radical Discipleship*, London, 1981, p 31.

saw him as a revolutionary who had too much popular support for their comfort. He had to die, and so he did – between two robbers, the death of a social and religious outcast. Thus we see in his crucifixion his continuing commitment to the oppressed and powerless, his continuing identification with the poor and the outcast.

Resurrection Were that to have been the end of Jesus, it would have been an heroic gesture of self-sacrifice, but ultimately a futile act of a revolutionary visionary. However, the subsequent resurrection of Jesus gave ultimate victory and power to those who would continue the work of the kingdom. ‘The revolutionary presence of Jesus in the new community he founded was not simply a memory, nor a repetition of revolutionary language and symbols, but an objective reality through the gift of the Holy Spirit. The resurrection of “this same Jesus” meant that the disciples were already living in the reality of the new age. The eschatological forces of God’s Kingdom were already operating in the middle of time.’⁷

The Church It was in the body of believers established by the resurrection and Pentecost experiences that we see the next stage of the establishment of God’s kingdom. If there was any description worthy of the Christian community of the early church it was quite simply that it was ‘new’. It was the *avant garde* of God’s new creation in which former relationships and attitudes were transformed, and through which the social and religious assumptions of the day were severely challenged, none more so than in the economic realm of the community. We see clearly from Acts, chapter 2, that, following the practice of Jesus (John 12:6), the early church practised the common purse, where individuals’ monies and property were put together for the common use – at the individual’s own choice (Acts 5:4). Jesus had inaugurated a new kingdom of faithful followers who were to be completely available to each other, not just within the local community, but also in the relationships between and among the Christian communities as they were being founded. So when Paul hears of the famine and poverty in the Jerusalem church, he sets about organising an appeal in the churches of Macedonia and Achaia (2 Cor. 8 and 9). The result was that within the worldwide Christian community there was ‘unconditional economic liability for and total financial availability to the other brothers and sisters in Christ’,⁸ both at the level of individual relationships within the community, and between the communities of fellow-believers. The aim of this sharing was not just to use up excess, but was, in fact, equality (2 Cor. 8:14). Once again we see the importance of the post-Exodus emphasis on community-living, living together in such a way that they would avoid extremes of wealth and poverty.

7. Kirk, *op. cit.*, p 175.

8. Sider, *op. cit.*, p 90.

A further radical break was in the make-up of the new community. Paul (in 1 Cor. 1:26f) describes the church thus: 'Not many of you were wise according to worldly standards, not many of you were powerful, not many were of noble birth; but God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise, God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong, God chose what is low and despised in the world, even things that are not to bring to nothing things that are, so that no human being might boast in the presence of God.' Likewise James (2:5): 'Has not God chosen those who are poor in the world to be rich in faith and heirs to the kingdom?' This teaching, together with the incarnation itself, suggests that the frequent use of the poor as his special instruments is not insignificant. It points to something in the very nature of God.

This emphasis on the early church consisting mainly of the poor and despised does not mean that there were no rich in the church. Indeed one of the very problems that James is trying to wrestle with in his letter is how to deal with relationships between the rich and the poor within the congregation. It was in this area of reconciliation, of unity, not just between rich and poor, but across all the social and ethnic divides of the period, that radical inroads were again made in the life of the church. 'There is neither Jew nor Greek, circumcised nor uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave, freeman, but Christ is all, and in all' (Col. 3:11). This catholicity of the church is crucial in its mirroring of the kingdom of new relationships. All are one in Christ Jesus, and while, numerically, certain groups may dominate, this was in no way taken to mean control. For example, in Acts, chapter 6, when the Hellenists, who must have been a minority in the church at Jerusalem, were worried about the apparent raw deal that the Hellenist widows were getting in the sharing of resources, they seem to have been given complete control, judging by the names of the seven deacons chosen.

The biggest problem of the early church over their catholicity, however, seemed to have come in the Jewish-Gentile relations. The Jews would seem to have had every right in maintaining the pre-eminence of their culture and religious ethos, seeing that the links between the Jewish faith and Christianity were fundamental. However, they soon realised, at least Paul did (Eph. 3:4f), that the Christian faith was much bigger than the Jewish background from which it arose, and indeed that the gospel of Jesus Christ was a universal gospel. There can be little doubt that this would have hit the Jews hard, because of the nationalistic fervour with which they worshipped their God, and the importance of authority and control within the Jewish faith (especially of the law), all of which would be lost were they to allow the unconditional entry of the Gentiles into the church. However, it is to their eternal credit that they did just that. Kirk emphasises the importance of this when he says, 'The entry of the Gentiles into the new community on a completely equal footing with the

Jews was, in itself, a revolution of incalculable consequences.⁹

Thus the Christian gospel spread, due in the main to Paul, who had become aware of the power of the new gospel, and its adaptability and suitability to each new culture and social group which he encountered. Roy Joslin¹⁰ has looked at the terms in which Paul couched his preaching of the gospel to the two totally different centres of Lystra and Athens, and notes how differences were appropriate to the situations in which Paul had found himself. Thus the church grew in numerical size, but more significantly it grew in the number of ethnic groups from which followers of Jesus Christ joined together in the new community, continually extending its catholicity.

One final radical departure from society's prevailing attitudes was the response of the new community to service and suffering. The willingness to be part of the spreading of the gospel, and the willingness to serve the kingdom, led often to suffering and even martyrdom, due usually to those who were worried that their position of power (economic, social or religious) was likely to be challenged, for example, the owners of the soothsayer at Philippi (Acts 16:16f). The Christian community was essential at these times when Christian involvement in mission meant persecution and personal suffering. Paul's letters, especially those from prison, rejoice in the knowledge of the prayer and also the practical support he was receiving, aware as he was that Christians are 'not contending against flesh and blood, but against the principalities, against the powers, against the world rulers of this present darkness, against the spiritual hosts of wickedness in the heavenly places' (Eph. 6:12). The war now waged with spiritual weapons is a war in which the whole community of the people of God is engaged. This people fights in close ranks. The letter to the Ephesians does not envisage the saints as lonely heroes who fight the battle and win the victory independent of the support of the community.

Recent commentators have attempted to point out that this particular passage does not just refer to spiritual realms, but that social structures or institutions may also have been in Paul's mind. 'The "principalities and powers" are at the same time intangible spiritual entities *and* concrete historical, social or psychic structures or institutions of all created things and all created life.'¹¹ Such an interpretation has important consequences for the task of mission, and for advancing the kingdom, especially in the way in which social and political involvement is related to Christian discipleship and church life, which has been a major topic of much recent theological study and debate.

9. Kirk, *op. cit.*, p 175.

10. R. Joslin, *Urban Harvest*, Welwyn, 1982, especially ch. 6.

11. *Ephesians*, Anchor Bible Commentaries.

Pointers from some recent Theology

Two major strands of theological enquiry have arisen of late which have great significance for the gospel to the poor. They arise out of different historical contexts, but the contexts both have a significant role in the formation. One is the Liberation Theology movements, coming principally from Third World churches, all of which originate in contexts of oppression and domination. I would include in this category the South American, Marxist-related, theology of revolution, the more conservative (relatively speaking) theology of liberation, feminist theology, and the Black Theology movement especially in the United States.

The other strand is a much more Western-European phenomenon, sometimes referred to as Political Theology. The main exponents of this are Moltmann, Gollwitzer, and the Roman Catholic, Metz. I suspect that the experience of the Second World War, especially the rise of Nazism in Germany, has had much to do with this particular movement, although Moltmann and Metz in particular have significant Third World experience. Both these strands, however, have made and are still making significant contributions to the socio-political involvement of the church, especially in relation to the poor.

There are four important pointers which these recent theological movements have for the church today. All of them are interrelated, and indeed may prove useful in summarizing the previous biblical themes we have been looking at.

Salvation has social and political consequences. 'Soteria must also be understood as *shalom* in the Old Testament sense. This does not merely mean salvation of the soul, individual rescue, or comfort for the troubled conscience, but also the realisation of the eschatological *hope of justice*, the *humanizing* of man, the *socializing* of humanity, peace for all creation.'¹² Therefore, 'the acknowledgement of the sole Lordship of Christ plunges the church into political conflict. A logical and consistent Christian discipleship always has logical political consequences.'¹³ The aim of this involvement is liberation. 'The rule of Christ who was crucified for political reasons can only be extended through liberation from forms of rule which make men servile and apathetic.'¹⁴ In particular Moltmann lists five 'vicious circles' from which men must seek liberation. These are poverty, force, racial and cultural alienation, pollution and feelings of senselessness and godforsakenness.¹⁵ Any advancement in these areas of liberation can be seen as 'materialisations of the presence of God.'¹⁶ On this theme Chris Sugden writes, 'When Kingdom-shaped things happen,

12. J. Moltmann, *Theology of Hope*, London, 1967, p 329.

13. J. Moltmann, *The Church in the Power of the Spirit*, London, 1977, p 15.

14. J. Moltmann, *The Crucified God*, London, 1975, p 324.

15. *Ibid.*, pp 329ff.

16. *Ibid.*, p 337.

whoever does them and however insignificant they are, God's Kingdom is at work.' ¹⁷

Theology and Church structures are culturally conditioned. 'When (Christian churches) regard themselves as being either unpolitical or apolitical, this is only because of the blindness which their social position inflicts upon them.' ¹⁸ Gollwitzer points out that the idea of order, and the need to preserve the order of social institutions assumed to be immutable, has often been the guiding principle behind the churches' social involvement. However, 'Christianity does not bind the hearts of the citizen to the state, but lures them away from it. The path of a theology of the cross that is critical of society goes between irrelevant Christian identity and social relevance without Christian identity.' ¹⁹ Theologians must therefore become aware of the possible effects of ideological presuppositions upon their theologizing.

The gospel is biased to the poor. Is it possible to have a 'pure' gospel, free from ideological biases? No, say the theologians of liberation, and therefore Christians must do their theology from the perspective of the poor, the emphasis being on *doing* theology, *i.e.* active participation with the poor. Liberation theology 'is a theology which deliberately starts from an identification with persons, with races and with social classes which suffer misery and exploitation, identifying itself with their concerns and struggles. There is no option; theology must be done from out of a commitment to a living God who defends the cause of "the hungry" and who "sends the rich empty away" (Luke 1:53).' ²⁰ Nevertheless, while siding with the oppressed and humiliated, 'efforts are directed equally to the free and human future of the oppressor.' ²¹ The rich, however, will only be helped when they recognise their own poverty and enter into fellowship with the poor, especially those whom they have caused to *be* poor. Thus Moltmann says, 'It is precisely as the partisan gospel for the poor that the Kingdom of God brings freedom to all men, for it brings both rich and poor, healthy and sick, the powerful and the helpless for the first time into that fellowship of poverty to which it is possible to talk without distinction about "all men". In a divided, unjust and violent world, the partisan gospel reveals the true universality of the coming rule of God.' ²²

Community is important. 'The more communal life in society approximates to a real togetherness and the more through solidarity – so far as laws can compel it and educate men towards it – they show *chesed*,

17. Sugden, *op. cit.*, p 69.

18. J. Moltmann, *The Crucified God*, p 324.

19. *Ibid.*, p 324.

20. J. A. Kirk, *Liberation Theology*, London, 1979, p 205.

21. J. Moltmann, *The Church in the Power of the Spirit*, p 74.

22. *Ibid.*, pp 79f.

solidarity to each other, by that much more there comes into being an earthly horizon of grace for the earthly life of men . . . and by that much more such a communal life will become a “parable” of the Kingdom of God.’²³ This search for community involves political participation ‘with the aim of supporting those efforts to increase togetherness so far as is possible under the conditions of the old world; and this aim is at the same time the *criterion* by which tendencies, theories, attitudes and alliances of the disciples are measured.’²⁴ It also means identification with the poor. ‘To opt for the poor man, to be identified with his lot, to share his destiny, means a desire to turn history into genuine brotherhood for all men.’²⁵

I finish with the same quote from Gutierrez with which Kirk finishes his book. ‘We need be conscious of the always critical and creative character of the liberating message of the gospel – a message that does not identify itself with any social form, no matter how just it may seem to us in any given moment, but which always speaks from the stance of the poor and which asks of us a very concrete solidarity in the present of our situation and our capacity to analyse it, even at the risk of being mistaken. The Word of the Lord interprets every situation and places it in the wider perspective of the radical liberation of Christ, the Lord of History.’²⁶

23. H. Gollwitzer, *An Introduction to Protestant Theology*, Philadelphia, 1982, p 204.

24. *Ibid.*, p 192.

25. H. Assman, *Practical Theology of Liberation*, 1975, p 13.

26. G. Gutierrez, in J. A. Kirk, *Liberation Theology*, p 209.