

## TRANSFORMATION: THE EQUALITY MODEL

### STUDY 4: HELPING THE POOR PARTICIPATE

#### The Biblical Setting

As with the other laws about the Hebrew peoples' relationship to God and to the community, there are some specific laws relating to the land into which God was leading them, and the type of society He wanted them to create there. This society would be a stark contrast to the stratification and oppression of Egypt and to the superstition and fragmentation of Canaan. These laws were designed to enable them to create and sustain a just and equitable society. Disparity between rich and poor was to be resisted because everything belonged to the community, all bore the image of God, and all were valued by Him. The concentration of wealth in the hands of one person or group posed the dual dangers of that person or group thinking they were of more value than others and misusing the power money gave them. So wealth in Israel was to be a sign of the interdependence, sharing, and mutual support of the tribes for each other.

From your knowledge of Egyptian and Canaanite society at that time (1300-1250 B.C.) choose adjectives which you think might apply to each from the following list: discriminatory, decentralized, disorganized, wealthy, oppressive, warlike, urbanized, feudal, rural, dictatorial.

#### The Pattern

The equality of society was foreshadowed in two events – the provision of manna and quail in the wilderness and the distribution of the land.

1) Provision of Manna and Quail. God's provision in the wilderness was the greatest feeding programme ever conducted. In length it far surpassed the seven year drought supply managed by Joseph; it lasted for 40 years, a whole generation. In consistency; there were no failures of supply, manipulation of ration cards, bribery, or sale on the black market. In balance: every morning there was carbohydrates and vitamin C and every evening protein was supplied. In justice: "He who gathered much did not have too much; he who gathered little did not have too little. Everyone gathered as much as he needed" (Exodus 16:17-18).

God taught the people not to be greedy by making the extra manna go rotten, and He taught them to exercise faith rather than demand security – every night they went to bed with no guarantee that God would meet their needs on the morrow but he always did.

2) Distribution of Land. God instructed, "To the larger group give a larger inheritance, and to a smaller one give a smaller one. Each one is to receive its inheritance according to the number of those listed" (Num. 26:54). This was exactly the pattern of the gathering of the manna. The generation spent in the wilderness was not just a punishment, it was a retraining after the exploitation of Egypt. The Hebrews learnt and applied the lesson, for when the two and a half tribes who settled on the west bank of the Jordan were given the choice of remaining with their families and flocks or helping their brothers claim their possession they replied, "We will not return to our homes until every Israelite has received his inheritance" (Num. 32:18).

Research and report the land owning patterns in your area, state, or country.

3) The Aim. The aim of these laws is more graphically expressed in Deuteronomy 15:4; "There ought not to be any poor among you in the land the Lord your God is giving you if you fully obey the Lord your God." The same passage later notes, "There will always be poor people in the land" (15:10), an observation echoed by Jesus more than half a millennium later. Poverty, however, was not meant to be a permanent condition in Israel. When it did occur specific steps were taken to redistribute the wealth of the society and because they once suffered as outsiders in Egypt their generosity was also to extend to the sojourners and aliens in their land.

In India, steps to uplift the poor include:

- reserved places in educational institutions
- development programs among the rural and urban poor.
- loan melas.
- reserved jobs in government.
- food for work programs.

Rate these according to your view of their effectiveness. Why are they effective or ineffective? Is poverty worse in cities or in rural areas? Where is wealth more evenly distributed?

#### Five Laws for a Just and Equal society

This section looks at five specific laws given to the Hebrew people to achieve and maintain justice and equality in their society.

Law 1: One-third Tithe to the Poor. Deuteronomy 26:12-15 gives the command that the tithe, usually the possession of the Levites in lieu of land and in recognition of their religious service, was to be distributed to a wider group every third year. What were the four defined target groups?

The common feature of these groups was that they were usually the poorest people in the society. This was the major provision to alleviate their poverty and the hunger that always accompanies poverty. The reason given for sharing the tithe is "so that they may eat in your towns and be satisfied." Other provisions included levirate marriage (the responsibility of the nearest male relative to take care of his brother's widow and even to raise children for his brother with her and commands to always treat the aliens in the land as equal members of the community.

The command about the distribution of the tithe among the poor follows immediately after the section on the offering of first fruits to God in recognition of His goodness to them. The principle of putting God first was built into many of the ceremonial laws. This guaranteed that God was not forgotten.

There is no question in this least radical of the commands highlighted in this study, about selling assets and giving to the poor as Jesus instructed the rich young ruler to do (Mt. 19:31) and as many of the richer Christians in the early church did (Acts 2:45, 4:32). This provision relates to the distribution of the supplies – the use of the "Lord's tithe". The malady of many

churches is that members do not give their tithes. There is no surplus to distribute! In such a situation, the minister, like the Levites who depended on the offerings of the people for their livelihood, might himself set an example of radical sharing with the needy.

Some might question how widely these laws can be applied today. The options are:

- a) They apply only to Israel in the Old Testament period
- b) They apply also to the church.
- c) They could work in local communities, i.e. some Mennonite and Hutterite communities in Canada and the USA.
- d) They could be applied on a national scale today.

Which option do you support and why?

### Law 2: Leave Some Crops for the Poor to Glean.

When you reap the harvest of your land do not reap to the very edges of your field or gather the gleanings of your harvest. Do not go over your vineyard a second time or pick up the grapes that have fallen. Leave them for the poor and the alien. I am the Lord your God. (Lev. 19:9-10)

The refrain at the end of the verse, "I am the Lord your God," which recurs through this book seems to suggest two things: first, it is like a seal establishing the authority of the command – it comes from God Himself. Secondly, it reflects the character of God – if He were living in the context of this society these were the things He would do. The speech begins "The Lord said to Moses, 'Speak to the entire assembly of Israel and say to them, Be holy because I, the Lord your God, am holy'" (Lev. 19:12). Which do you think is the dominant meaning?

Genesis declares that humanity bears God's image. However people only reflect that image when they act as God would act, when they do what God would do. This passage is a forceful reminder that God would care for the poor.

A Contemporary Parallel: The Rice Harvest in Bangladesh. Bangladesh, a Muslim country, observes this practice of Israel as the command is repeated in the Koran. At harvest time the orphans and widows in their scant clothing and tattered saris follow the reapers, gathering what is left. They know that at this one time of the year they will not go to bed haunted by the pain of hunger.

A Biblical Example: Ruth 2. Read this chapter and mark the following statements true or false. Note the verses which support your choice.

Ruth was rich. T or F

Ruth was a widow. T or F

Ruth collected rice. T or F

Ruth was an Israelite. T or F

The reapers never left anything. T or F

Poor female gleaners were sometimes molested. T or F

The landowner objected to Ruth's gleaning. T or F

Ruth gleaned throughout the harvest season. T or F

Farmers regularly allowed the poor to glean. T or F

Commands about gleaning also come in Deuteronomy 24:19-22. There are three types of

crops mentioned and three beneficiary groups. What are they? In verse 22 an additional reason is given for keeping this command. What is that reason?

Law 3: Charge No Interest to the Poor. First note the biblical references Exodus 22:25, Deuteronomy 23:20, and Leviticus 25:35-37. The command applies to a) members of your own community with whom you share traditions and faith, b) the poor and needy. According to Deuteronomy 23:20 the command does not apply to foreigners. Would it apply to commercial transactions? Discuss this in the group.

The Koran repeats this injunction also, so that a key element in the new Islamic economic order is interest-free credit. Research to see who this applies to and under what conditions.

The reality in rural Bangladesh is that the money-lender has great power and wealth. He is offer the worst exploiter of the poor and the marginal farmer. The usual interest rate is 10 percent per month, that is 120 percent per annum. IN many cases the real interest rate is much higher as part of the crop may be claimed, interest is deducted in advance and inflated figures may be record on the documents. Where the borrower is an illiterate farmer exploitation is easy and common. The result is that many marginal farmers lose their land. To such people, rural bank loans at 15% are "good news."

A New Testament equivalent to the ancient Israelite and modern Bangladeshi moneylenders is the tax collector. Parallels include:

- a) They often collected three or four times the necessary amount (Lk. 19:8).
- b) They sometimes imprisoned their debtors (Mt. 18:28-30).
- c) They were socially despised (Lk. 18:13, 19:7).
- d) They were usually very rich (Lk. 19:2).
- e) They oppressed their own people (Mt. 9:9)

Yet Jesus was a friend to tax collectors! He chose a tax collector to be one of the disciples. Another, little Zacchaeus, found salvation. His response was to sell his many possessions and give half the proceeds to the poor and to repay four times the amount he had robbed.

Look up Matthew 9:10-13, Luke 18:8-14 and 19:1-10 to confirm the conclusion and add any other characteristics you are aware of.

Write a short profile of the money lender in your society.

Banks offering low interest rates or special loans for the poor can be an instrument of justice and equality in society. To what extent do you think they are?

Law 4: Cancel Debts Every Seven Years. Read Deuteronomy 15:1-11.

Analyze the passage under the following headings:

The command.....	v. 1
The beneficiaries.....	v. 2-7
The attitude.....	v. 8-10
The context.....	v. 11
The exemptions.....	v. 13
The results.....	v. 4-6

The caution..... v. 9  
The aim..... v. 4

This theme is taken up in the New Testament when Jesus quotes verse 11 in Luke 6:34 and 6:38. "And if you lend to those from whom you expect repayment, what credit is that to you. Even sinners lend to sinners expecting to be repaid in full." "A good measure, pressed down, shaken together and running over will be poured into your lap. For with the measure you use, it will be measured to you."

The command to cancel monetary debts is linked to freeing human servants from obligations and dependency (see Deut. 15:12-18 and Ex. 21:2-6). It is also set in the context of worship and celebration of God's goodness: "At the end of every seven years, in the year for canceling debts, during the feast of Tabernacles...assemble all the people and read this law" (Deut. 31:10). It was a sacred tradition of the people of God to be passed on from generation to generation.

The parallel is with God's action in creation where six days of work were followed by a day of rest (Lev. 25:1-7). The contrast is with Pharaoh who refused to release the Hebrew slaves even after several generations of hard labor (Ex. 1-15). In any description of the poverty cycle indebtedness is always a feature. In your society for what things do the poor incur most debts? Compare your lists and note what amounts of money might be involved.

What about beggars? We often meet the poor and needy in the form of beggars who come to our door, accost us on the streets and wait outside our worship places. Does this command relate to giving to them? Note that the canceling of debts is a structural solution to a societal problem whereas giving to beggars is a charity or welfare response. In the range of approaches to the needs of society – welfare, development, liberation – one is at the beginning point the other at the end. Canceling debts every seven years is much more likely to lead to transformation than giving to beggars. One action endorses dependency, the other ends it.

Law 5: Give back Land Every 50 Years. The Feast of Tabernacles was the time for learning, remembering, and acting on the command to cancel debts every seven years. The Day of Atonement, the holiest day of the most sacred and special of Jewish celebrations, the Passover Festival, was the occasion for giving back land to its original and rightful owners every 50 years. Thus in the Bible the sacred and the social, worship and justice are inseparable.

Read Leviticus 25:8-55 and note which verses contain the following statements about the jubilee.

- a) God owned the land.
- b) The 50<sup>th</sup> year was a time of celebration.
- c) The land was to be allowed to produce naturally.
- d) Everyone was to celebrate with his own family and clan.
- e) All were to return to their own land
- f) The crop bearing capacity determined the land price.
- g) This was a constant anti-inflationary measure.
- h) The people would not starve.
- i) Relatives should help their kin reoccupy their land.

- j) Rural land and village homes could not be sold permanently.
- k) Urban property could be exchanged permanently.
- l) The property of the priests could not be sold.
- m) Fellow Hebrews could not be owned as property.
- n) All Hebrew slaves were to be released at the Jubilee.

### Comments on Equality

Ron Sider in Rich Christians in an Age of Hunger comments:

The Jubilee principle: Leviticus 25, is one of the most radical texts in all of Scripture. At least it seems that way for people born in countries committed to laissez-faire economics. Every fifty years, God said, all land was to return to the original owners – without compensation. Physical handicaps, death of a breadwinner, or lack of natural ability may lead some people to become poorer than others. But God does not want such disadvantages to lead to greater and greater divergence of wealth and poverty. God therefore gave His people a law which would equalize land ownership every fifty years (Lev. 25:10-24). The year of Jubilee envisages an institutionalized structure that affects everyone automatically. It is to be the poor person's right to receive back his inheritance at the time of Jubilee. Returning land is not a charitable courtesy that the wealthy may extend if they please.

The Jubilee Principle also provides for self-help and self-development. With his land returned the poor person could again earn his own living. The biblical concept of Jubilee underlines the importance of institutionalized mechanisms and structures that promote justice.

Because he disapproves of extremes of wealth among His people, God ordains equalizing mechanisms like the Year of Jubilee.  
(1978, p. 78-81)

The accompanying concern that the land should not be inherited out of the tribe meant that even within the community equality must be preserved. The test case was Zelophehad's daughters', recorded in Numbers 27:1-11 and 27:36. For this to work the women could inherit but they must marry within the tribe so that at the time of Jubilee the land remained in that tribe. So while maintenance of equality and eradication of poverty were the major purposes of the Jubilee, it also had a wide ranging stabilizing effect on Israelite society.

### Review

- a) Note the five laws specifically designed to create and maintain equality within Israelite society.
  - b) Discuss how widely these can be applied today.
  - c) Suggest 20<sup>th</sup> century equivalents to these laws.
- Example 1: One-third of church budgets to relief and development activities.  
 Example 2: Purchase extra groceries and share them with the poor.  
 Example 3: Land according to need.  
 Example 4: Loans on the basis that if they repay regularly you cancel the last installment.  
 Example 5: Create a loan fund to enable landless farmers to buy property.

## Vinoba Bhave and the Bhoodan Movement

Vinoba Bhave, like Mahatma Gandhi, was one of the leading advocates of Indian independence. When it came however, he also realized that the British Raj had merely been replaced by the Indian Raj and no real transformation of the values and structures of society had taken place. In meditation on God's will for independent India he conceived the idea of redistribution of land to the landless. He envisioned himself going to landowning families, and claiming as an extra son, part of the property on behalf of the poor. His target was 50 million acres. One-sixth of India's cultivable land.

When he first suggested the idea he was opposed from all sides but claimed the issue was not one of charity but of justice and the future of India was at stake. In hundreds of villages people met and formed *gramsabhas* to redistribute the land until no person lacked land to cultivate.

The first stage was *prapti*, the promise of land. The title deeds of land would be handed over to the *gramsabha* for redistribution to the landless. The second stage was *pusti*, implementation of the redistribution of land, during which the *gramsabha* made sure of the genuineness of the gift and the eligibility of those who would receive it. The third stage was to be *nirman*, the completion of the redistribution of land and the beginning of *gram kosh*, the integrated development of the village.

The movement was initiated in Hyderabad in 1951. It met with startling initial success. Lest the movement be understood only as being effective in favorable conditions, Vinoba advocated it should be put to the test in a state where conditions were considered least favorable. So Vinoba called his workers to concentrate on Bihar where things were very difficult. By 1967 more than 250,000 people had participated in the movement, four million acres of cultivable land had been transferred and 50,000 villages – 17,000 in Bihar – had been declared *gramdan*.

There were many failings. Not enough land was offered; the transfer process was often too slow; some land was useless; some was repossessed and the *bhoodan* workers failed to sustain the vision. Yet it still produced the greatest voluntary transfer of land in history and demonstrated an alternative to the status quo and a viable strategy for non-violent change.

Discuss the strengths and weaknesses of this experiment in justice and equality. How important do you think the religious dimension of the vision and its implementation was and is for social change?

Case Study: Land Redistribution in Lothar. Land tenure is a serious problem in Lothar as half of the farmers do not have their own land. The average holding is about two acres with large farmers owning up to 30 acres. The government has placed a restriction on the amount of land any one individual may own at 30 acres but some large operators evade this restriction by placing 30 acres in the name of each of several members in the family.

Many of the peasants rent land under an arrangement where the tenant keeps 50 percent of the crop and the landlord receives the remaining half for supplying the inputs including seed and fertilizers. The tenant never gets more than a one year contract on the land. The

landlords fear losing their land because the tenants may lay claim to the land if they farm it for too many years in succession.

Among the more serious problems created by the land tenure system are the reduced fertilizer applications because of the uncertainty of continued tenancy, poor farming practices, and indebtedness. Devise an on-revolutionary way of improving this tenure system.

1. Where would you get the land from?
  - a) How would you obtain it? By confiscation? If so, how would you take the land? Through compensation? If so, would it be partial? Complete?
  - b) Would you consolidate the holdings for an individual peasant?
2. What acreage restrictions would you place, if any?
  - a) How would you enforce them?
  - b) How would you treat plantations where large-scale operations are, or seem to be, most efficient?
- 3). How would peasants obtain title to their land under your scheme?
  - a) Purchase? Under what terms?
  - b) Subsidized purchase?
  - c) How could you finance this redistribution?
4. What criteria would you utilize in determining who gets the land?
  - a) Would you allow a peasant who has half an acre of land to buy additional land before giving someone without any land an opportunity to purchase land?
  - b) Would you sell to someone who had gainful employment in industry but who wanted to farm?

(Source: EFICOR, India)

### Counterpoint

Equality in society is the agreed ideal of Marxism, socialism, the welfare state, and revolutionary movements, but is it a realistic dream? All people are not equal intellectually or socially in any society. What is being suggested here, in the example of the Hebrew nation and God's laws for them, is not absolute sameness but a sharing of resources and the structuring of new beginnings, so that everyone may equally enjoy the heritage God has prepared for them. Following these laws would have dramatic beneficial results for them individually and collectively so that Israelite society would be a model for the world of human dignity and societal justice. God has said. "I broke the bars of your yoke and enabled you to walk with heads held high" (Lev. 26:13), and , "Follow justice and justice alone, so that you may live and possess the land the Lord your God is giving you" (Deut. 16:20).

### Conclusion

The equality model seeks to place, not just the results of production but the means of production into the hands of every family in society. In Israel the method to achieve this was not violence or force but the command of God and appeal to justice. History suggests this ideal was never fully practiced but neither was it completely forgotten. IT meant that Hebrew families maintained a close relationship with their land and in the rural areas at least, extremes of wealth and poverty did not emerge.

A similar event took place in Africa a few years ago Joseph Donders in Non-Bourgeois



Theology records the following event:

The Gabbra are a nomadic people in the northeast of Kenya. They live in one of the driest areas of East Africa. In 1981 they celebrated their year of jubilee, ending another cycle of fifty years in their existence. In the year of the jubilee crooked affairs are straightened out, injustice is righted, debts are settled, cattle (the only property) are reallocated, and sins are forgiven. This is not a myth: it is not a story: it is not an ideal that they believe should be fulfilled. It really happened in 1981 after a year of preparations. Considering the rapid encroachment of western life-patterns the Gabbra year of the Jubilee may have occurred for the last time but in 1981 the Gabbra managed to keep to their old tradition. (1985, p. 75)

#### Postscript

On the Liberty Bell in America there are inscribed words from Leviticus 25: "Proclaim liberty throughout the land." The complete verse says, "Consecrate the fiftieth year and proclaim liberty throughout the land to all its inhabitants. It shall be a jubilee for you; each one of you is to return to his family property and each one to this own clan" (Lev. 25:10).