

TRANSFORMATION: THE JUSTICE QUESTION
STUDY 6: BIBLICAL PERSPECTIVES AND CURRENT ISSUES

The Prophetic Perspective

The prophets of ancient Israel and their contemporary counterparts rank among the most interesting if not the most popular people in society. The Old Testament tells of the towering Moses, challenging the might of Egypt; of the lone Elijah, confronting 400 prophets of Baal; of Elisha, nicknamed "old baldy" by a group of youths, yet able, in the name of Yahweh, to incite a popular rebellion that overthrew the Omri dynasty.

From the 8th Century B.C. There rings out the thundering voice of Amos: "For three transgressions and for four I will not revoke the punishment." There was the courtly Isaiah, whose concern for the poor led him to challenge the king. Then there was dramatic Jeremiah, whose enacted predictions about Jerusalem proved true.

For some prophets it was a lifetime vocation, for others a brief campaign. The common threads in their life stories were first that they were called by God and second they called for justice in society as an expression of God's will.

In fact, while this course appears under the title of "Social Transformation" the most common biblical word used to describe the Christian vision for society is that of "justice." It appears more than 300 times in the Old Testament. The biblical perspective is that while there are disasters that require a response, equality to be sought, and the desire for development, the real need, in the long term, is to establish justice in society. This was the perspective of the prophets.

Using a Bible dictionary, identify three key verses on the topic of justice. Explain your choice to the group.

The Problem of Oppression

In Bible of the Oppressed Else Tamez explains the meaning of the nine Hebrew words used for oppression (1982, p. 8-9). What follows is a brief summary of an analysis of certain Hebrew words in their contexts.

1. The experience of oppression is closely connected with the antagonism that exists between rich and poor, whether these be whole nations or sectors within nations.
2. The experience of oppression involves:
 - a) '*anah*': the degradation of the human person; oppression affects the inmost being of the person (see also *daka'*); the tyranny of the powerful; the sexual violation of women.
 - b) '*asoq*': the violent despoliation and consequently the impoverishment of the oppressed; ruthless violence; injustice.
 - c) '*lahats*': the smashing blow of the oppressor and the immediate outcry of the oppressed.

d) *nagash*: violent exploitation, chiefly by means of forced labor; compulsion to produce; pressure from the oppressor.

e) *yanah*: deadly violence used for the despoliation of the poor; exploitation in the form of enslavement; fraud.

f) *ratsats*: the crushing and despoiling of the poor.

g) *daka*: the grinding effect of oppression that penetrates the whole person, oppressing internally as well as externally; a knocking down; (the oppressor will experience the same in turn).

h) *dak*: the vexation of the poor, and the persistent hope of the poor for the establishment of a new and just order.

i) *tok*: the tyranny of the oppressor, exercised in deceit.

3. The underlying cause of oppression is the desire to pile up riches; this explains the repeated appearance of despoliation and theft. Some references are:

a) *anah*: Gen. 15:13, Ex. 1:11, Ex. 3:7, 2 Sam. 13:12 & 14, Ps. 119:75 & 107, Is. 24:4-5, Is. 53:3 & 7, Is. 58:10.

b) *ashag*: Lev. 19:13, Jer. 22:13, Ezek. 22:7 & 12, Hos. 12:7, Mic. 2:1-2.

c) *lahats*: Ex. 3:9, 1 Kgs. 22:27, Jer. 30:19-21, Is. 19:17 & 20, Is. 19:23-34, Amos 6:14

d) *nagash*: Ex. 1:14, Ex. 5:6 & 10, Ex. 5:13-14, 2 Kgs. 23:35, Job 39:7, Is. 3:5, Is. 58:30

e) *yanah*: Lev. 25:14, Ezek. 22:25 & 28-29, Ezek. 45:8, Ezek. 46:18, Zeph. 3:1

f) *ratsats*: Job 20:15 & 19-20, Is. 58:6, Jer. 22:17.

g) *daka*: Deut. 23:1, Ps. 89:11, Ps. 90:3, Ps. 94:5, Is. 56:11, Is. 57:1 & 15.

h) *dak*: Ps. 10:12 & 17-18, Ps. 74:21.

i) *tok*: Ps. 10:7, Ps. 55:11, Ps. 72:14, Prov 29:13.

Divide into groups and research together some of these biblical passages.

The Prophetic Role

The last study on the role of kings noted that there were four power groups in Israel. The kings and the nobles, the priests, the prophets, and the people who were mostly poor (Figure

6.1). These formed alliances once the monarchy became established. Over a period of time kings and priests combined to monopolize benefits and oppress the people reducing them to poverty. God raised up the prophets to plead their cause and remind those in power of the standards of God's justice.

The role of the Old Testament prophets has been described by many Old Testament Scholars and Christian social analysts. They say:

Poverty was never sentimentalized by the prophets of Israel; in keeping with the rest of the Old Testament, it was regarded as an undesirable thing. The poor man was not just because he was poor, but the existential fact could not be ignored that poverty and injustice were frequent companions. It was the evil of other men that had created this situation and the whole prophetic effort was directed against this evil. (The Jerome Biblical Commentary, p. 233)

The Prophet's task was to recall the real purpose God had for His people. When Israel sells its firstborn, when it practices injustice instead of serving righteousness, when it deals unfairly instead of being merciful, when it treats people inhumanely, then God sends His prophets with a measuring rod to take the measure of the individual and collective life, the personal relations and the social structures of Israel. The measuring rod is the Law of Yahweh. (Verkuyyl & Nordholt, 1974, p. 13)

Prophets sat in judgment on the institutions of Israel and became the conscience of the nation. This passing of judgment on the nation constituted a new role in the religions of the near East, and has become part of the tradition of Western culture since that time. (The Jerome Bible Commentary, p. 227, 229)

In Amos's Israel there would seem to be no hope for the hungry, short of a fundamental change in their economic and political position. Such a change would necessarily involve a redistribution of wealth and the wealth-producing resources. Unless the poor could rid themselves of debt and regain control of productive resources, principally land, they would be locked into a state of permanent exploitation. It is interesting that the biblical writers established clear provisions which, if enforced, could have prevented gross inequalities. Every seventh year was to be a sabbatical year in which all debts were forgiven, all Hebrew slaves freed, and the land allowed to lie fallow to restore its fertility (Deut. 15:1-6, 15:12-18 and Lev. 25:2-7)

Furthermore, every fiftieth year was to be a jubilee in which land automatically returned to its original owner; poor people in Israel were exploited at both ends of the food chain. Farmers because of indebtedness and injustice in the court were reduced to landless serfs, had their production taken from them, or were cut out of production completely. At the same time, poor consumers (including the displaced farmers who migrated from the countryside) could not contend with the monopoly power of the merchants. What's more, as land ownership was concentrated in the hands of a small group, the criterion dictating what was produced was profitability. Therefore, while the laborers who worked the

vineyards were hungry, the rich drank wine (a commodity priced well out of reach of the poor) in bowls (Amos 6:6).

Hunger in Amos's Israel was a consequence of economic structures that resulted in great gaps between the wealth and power of the rich compared to the condition of the poor. Once set in motion, these structures of inequality tended to be self-perpetuating. Merchants formed alliances with bankers, members of the court took bribes, and the unjust prosperity of the urban classes spilled over into the coffers of the rich (Nelson, 1980, p.5).

There are now four billion people in our world. From the point of view of Christianity – founded from an artisans' religion – priority belongs to the poor. So attractive is Christianity, however that the rich are constantly reinterpreting it in order to make it speak for their interests. Whenever this happens in the course of history, the practice of Christianity loses its prophetic quality – that is, its capacity to call to account those who are exploiting the poor in their own interests – and becomes merely a rationalization of the status quo. (Neal, 1977, p. 2)

Who Were the Poor

In the Old Testament there were five Hebrew words for the poor. Each describes a dimension of poverty.

- 1) Chaser – lack or inadequacy. *Chaser* refers especially to hunger, for example, Job 30:3: "Through poverty and hard hunger, they gnaw the dry and desolate ground, picking mallow and the leaves of bushes." "Even the most refined woman of noble birth will secretly eat her own afterbirth, and begrudge it to her husband and children, for want of all things" (Deut. 28:57; 2 Samuel 34:29; Amos 4:6). People may also lack shelter (Prov. 6:32) and wisdom or diligence (Prov. 21:5; Jdg. 19:19-20)
- 2) Yarash – dispossession. In 2 Samuel 12:1-4 a rich man robs a poor man and is rebuked. People can be dispossessed of land, possessions, and dignity. The cause is most frequently the injustice of the rich (Prov. 13:3, 18:23, 22:7).
- 3) Dal – frailty and weakness. *Dal* is used to describe the thin cows of Egypt (Gen. 41:9), Saul's house, and Gideon's clan. The frailty was physical, political, military, or social. The poor are looked down on, deserted, easily crushed, and unable to recover from calamity.
- 4) Ebyon – need and dependence. Amos 4:1, Job 5:5 & 15-16, Is. 14:30 and Is. 25:4 all describe those who have no resources of their own and so rely upon the charity and justice of others.
- 5) Ani – oppression. This is the most frequent biblical perspective. For example, *ani* describes the slavery from which God liberated the Hebrews in Egypt. God is the refuge for the poor (Ps. 14:6, Is. 14:32). He opposes all who exploit the poor (Is. 26:6, Amos 2:7)
The frequency of usage of these words is:
 - a) *Chaser* – lack, 36
 - b) *Yarash* – dispossession, 31

- c) *Dal* – frailty, 57
- d) *Ebyon* – need, 61
- e) *Ani* – oppression, 80

Why do you think oppression is the most common cause of poverty in the Old Testament?
What would be the most common cause today?

Orlando Costas comments:

The 'poor' continues to be an important category in the New Testament theology. The Greek term *ptochos* which means the 'wretched ones' appears 34 times. This evidence shows that the Bible takes seriously those who are materially poor. Those who are socially, economically, and politically marginalized; who are powerless because they are deprived of the basic essentials of life, are said to have God on their side. Their condition is a scandal an insult to the God who created humankind in his image, to live in community and to look after one another. (1979, p. 70-71)

Views of Riches and Poverty

In the book Need is our Neighbor Byron Johnson describes four views of economics held by Christians (1966, p. 107-119).

- 1) The Pessimistic View says that in banishing Adam and Eve from the Garden of Eden, God condemned people to a life of hard labor and scarcity of material goods (Gen. 3:17-19). There will never be enough for all until the second coming of Christ.
- 2) The Deterministic View believes God has determined who will be rich and poor. This is reinforced by belief in the "will of Allah", karma, "luck," and "God's will." Thomas Malthus in 1790 predicted the rich-poor gap would widen and population would grow faster than food supply and that this trend is inevitable (Mt. 25:29)
- 3) The Ascetic View sees poverty as good and affluence as evil. Jesus commended the poor (Lk. 6:20) and warned of the dangers of wealth (Mt. 6:19-21, 19:21). Gurus, monks, priests, and nuns are all honored for their unselfish, non-acquisitive attitudes (see also Deut. 7 & 8 and 1 Tim. 6:9-10).
- 4) The Optimistic View. In the Old Testament, wealth has dangers, but it is still a sign of God's will and blessing. The rich should help the poor by sharing their wealth (Deut. 15:7-8; Mt. 25:31-46). God desires abundant life for all (John 10:10).

Opinion Poll

Use the following chart to find out what people in your project or neighborhood believe most:

Insert Chart – pg 187

Describing Poverty Today

Descriptions of poverty are myriad. In India and Bangladesh everyday the newspapers, radio, and television tell the plight of some section of the population. The concern in this study is to focus on the causes of poverty for millions of the world's people. Patrick Kenans summarizes the problem in these words:

It is the exclusion of low-income people (from the broader social and economic participation which is open to others) when this exclusion is not voluntary on their part which we define as the essence of poverty in the "Report to Canadian Government" 1971.

The poor are disadvantaged:

- a) in the labor market,
- b) in the consumer market,
- c) in access to credit,
- d) in benefits from schools,
- e) in quality of housing,
- f) in treatment in law courts.

(1974, p. 88-90)

Jacob Vines in Development and Society gives five common definitions of underdevelopment (Novak & Lechaman, 1964, p. 117-130):

1. Low ratio of population to area.
2. Lacking capital.
3. Low industrial output to total output and industrial population to total population.
4. Low per capita income
5. A country with good potential to use more capital resources and labor and raise its per capita income.

David Milward comes to six conclusions about the causes of and solutions to poverty.

1. The way our world operates is basically unjust; it discriminates against the poor and underprivileged and denies them an equitable share of resources.
2. This system is deeply entrenched and is not seriously challenged. It depends for survival on its acceptance by the majority; and most people even its victims, do accept it, if only passively.
3. An interlocking set of confidence-mechanisms holds the system together, distributes its benefits to the rich and privileged, and locks the poor into their own poverty.

4. The major hope for fundamental change lies in transforming the way people – in particular the poor and excluded – feel about the system by eroding their confidence in its mechanisms. This is inevitably a long-term task.
5. Good and services, however, can be redistributed more equitably in favor of the poor without overturning the system, through action directed at its pressure points.
6. The only way to ensure that poverty planning reduces poverty is for the poor themselves to participate in the planning. (1977, p. 56)

Apply these perceptions to your social context.

Measuring Poverty: How Poor are the Poor?

In the Indian papers in January 1984 an announcement was made on the news page and in the cartoon column. India, according to the latest World Development Report, had the dubious distinction of being the sixth poorest country in the world and, except for Laos, the other four countries at the bottom of the economic ladder were all her neighbors. Measured in per capita GNP the rankings were:

Bhutan & Laos	USD	\$80
Bangladesh		\$140
Nepal		\$150
Burma		\$190
India		\$260

On the same scale most western countries averaged more than US \$10,000 per capita. The miracle is that the poor somehow manage to keep living. If the average annual income in the Indian subcontinent is the equivalent of just one week's wages in the west, the logical conclusion is that people must starve for months each year. However, that is not borne out in reality. It is important to know how the per capita figures are calculated.

In calculating the gross national product few countries can collect all the data necessary to produce accurate figures. One limitation in India is that only ten percent of the people pay any tax and it is widely conceded that up to 50% of the money circulating in the country is "black money," this is, undeclared income. Furthermore, produce grown for a family's own consumption and products exchanged as gifts can't be calculated. Where the data ends, guesstimates are made.

The second major disadvantage of this type of comparison is that all currencies are converted into USD equivalents at the current rate of exchange. The fluctuations of the US dollar and local currencies can therefore alter the ratings considerably. On the latest GNP figures the ratios are 50 to 1 for India and 75 to 1 for Bangladesh and the USA.

A better scale for making comparisons is called the Purchasing Power Parity formula. This compares what money can buy in India, with what it costs to live elsewhere. On 1975 figures this reduces the discrepancy between India and the USA from 40 to 1 to 14 to 1. The international poverty line, then, was calculated at US \$75 per annum. On the GNP figures, 359 million people were below the standard line where adequate life could not be sustained. Estimated according to Purchasing Power Parity, this figure dropped to 180 million.

A third method of measurement of how people are surviving is the "Physical Quality of Life Indicator." This measures the performance of countries in meeting basic needs: literacy, infant mortality rate, and life expectancy are all calculated, and together scored as a percentage. On that scale, Afghanistan is the most desperate country in the world with a score of 18 percent. Zambia and Saudi Arabia, because very few women there can read or write, comes next. Bangladesh, India, Pakistan, and Iraq all scored below 50 percent. All western countries score over 90 percent.

Calculations of GNP and PPP tend to measure income, so interest and dividends from stocks and shares, etc., are included. They do not calculate wealth, therefore the values of houses, cars, videos and other luxuries are excluded. So what do the figures really say? Do they convey any truth at all? Indeed, they are useful for pointing out general trends and conditions.

On all scales, countries in the Indian subcontinent fare badly. The worst interpretation of the figures makes Indians 40 times worse off than Americans. By the best calculations they are twice as poor in socio-economic terms. It is not surprising then, that the poor are everywhere: on the streets of the cities and in the mud and thatch huts of villages. South American nations do not appear at the bottom of international scales because, while the disparity between the rich and the poor may be greater than in Asia, the basic income is higher. The rural peasants and urban squatters suffer from relative poverty – they don't get a fair share of the national cake. In India many suffer from absolute poverty – they get so little they are in the process of dying, not living.

This surely must be a situation of concern to the God who rescued a nation from slavery and whose spokesmen denounced oppression. Should it not be the concern of Christians today too? (Source: M. Hardman, lecture at RUHSA, Tamil Nadu, 1984)

The Prophets: Spokesmen for the Poor

It is important to be aware of what the biblical prophets said about injustice in their societies. Look up and summarize the following references. Amos 2:7, 4:1, 5:11, 5:12, 8:4-6; Joel 3:2, Isaiah 1:23, 10:1-2, 41:17, 58:6-10; Jeremiah 5:28, Ezekiel 22:29; Micah 2:2, 3:11, 6:10-11, 7:3; Zephaniah 3:1, 3:4.

God and the Poor

Is God biased in favor of the poor?: Ronald Sider in Rich Christians in an Age of Hunger (1977, p. 54-77) comes to the following conclusions.

- a) God is not partial. He loves each person He has created, weak and disadvantaged or strong and fortunate. Because He is impartial, His actions contrast with those of human societies which are often sinful and unconcerned for the suffering. Therefore from a human perspective He may appear biased.
- b) God is not neutral. He is on the side of the poor because He opposes oppression and neglect of the needy. He also opposes extremes of wealth and poverty.
- c) God opposes the rich when they oppress or fail to share with the poor. Salvation for the rich includes repentance of economic selfishness so that they are no longer worshipers of things. For this community this releases resources for the upliftment of the poor.
- d) In Jesus, God identified with the poor. Jesus was the friend of the poor because He lived

among them, loved them, ministered to them, shared their lifestyle, never accumulated possessions, died for them.

e) The poor are the focus of God's mission at key points in history. Examples include: the slaves in Egypt freed at the Exodus, the refugees in Babylon restored to their land, and the rural poor in Galilee whom Jesus taught and healed.

State at least 3 specific actions the church can take to demonstrate and share God's perspective and concern for the poor.

Conclusion

A church notice board recently carried this statement:

How can we live in God's world and claim to be God's people and let half of His children starve...
AND NOT ANGER GOD

How can we live in God's world and claim to be God's people and let hundreds of millions remain illiterate...
AND NOT ANGER GOD?

How can we live in God's world and claim to be God's people and observe hundreds of millions treated as inferiors...
AND NOT ANGER GOD

How can we live in God's world and claim to be God's people and not tell three billion lost people about God's Son, our Savior...
AND NOT ANGER GOD

The early church father St. Ambrose would agree. In the 2nd Century A.D. He admonished the rich:

You are not making a gift of your possessions to the poor person. You are handing over to him what is his. For what has been given in common for the use of all, you have abrogated to yourself. The world is given to all and not only to the rich. (Kenans, 1974, p. 6)

What then should be done for the liberation of the poor from want, and the rich from selfishness and greed, and for the reconciliation of both into one brotherhood?

Indian church leader and theologian Geevarghese Mar Osthathios suggests a strategy for action. Make a prayer response to this plan.

- a) We must live simply that the poor may simply live (1 Tim 6:6-8, 1 Pet. 3:13)
- b) Enact regulations for capital formation for jobs for all. Let the right to work have precedence over the right to accumulate wealth.
- c) Stop the production of luxury goods till the basic necessities are produced

for all the people of the world

d) Boycott the goods produced by the exploiting transnational corporations and produce substitutes locally for self-reliance.

e) Study the Bible afresh to discern the theology of a classless society in it.

f) Limit the land and wealth of each person and redistribute the extra for the landless and the penniless of each country.

g) Make economic sharing a prerequisite for Eucharistic sharing (1 Cor. 11:20-22)

h) Make a 'clear option in favor of the oppressed and the poor' and change their weakness to power til the powerful are ready to be reconciled.

i) Let the church promote 'holy living' associated with simplicity, piety, and devotion and give eschatological hope to her members.

j) Do everything possible to be Good Samaritans, but also try to convert the robbers on the Jericho Road.

k) Condition the theological seminaries and mission training centers to produce leaders of the caliber of Monsignor Oscar Arnulfo Romero.

l) Organize prayer cells and fasting groups praying for liberation and reconciliation (1983, p. 87)