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Poverty in Ancient Israel

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FOR THE POOR WILL NOT CEASE from out of the land.”¹ With these words, one is reminded that poverty is a universal reality. Indeed, poverty is a tragic experience known in all times and places.

Ancient Israel was an agricultural society.² For most of its history and most of its people, agriculture *was* the economy, not just its backbone. Survival depended almost completely on the abundance of the crops and livestock. Drought and pestilence could destroy both in a short time. Various natural disasters could impoverish even the wealthy.

The Mosaic Law included numerous regulations to protect the needy. The verse quoted above and its context—Deuteronomy 15—offer God’s solution to the problem: “For the poor will not cease from out of the land; therefore I—even I—command you, saying, ‘You shall indeed open wide your hand unto your brother, to your poor and your needy in your land!’” (Deut. 15:11, author’s translation).

The poor and needy are to be recognized as “brothers” and helped accordingly. The ideal was for all Israelites to see one another as family. One should care for, and be generous to, other family members, especially in

their time of need. “This sermon is a summons to meet the poor at all times with an open hand and an open heart.”³

One means of assisting the poor commanded in Deuteronomy 15 is the Sabbath Year, also known as the Year of Release.⁴ Those fortunate enough to have an excess were to lend freely to those in need. For up to six years, the borrower was to seek to repay the debt. In the seventh year, however, all debts to fellow Israelites were to be canceled. Foreigners were not included in the mandate. This law protected people from becoming slaves to the debt. Such an act of mercy reflected

the Lord’s benevolence to His people.

An identical injunction applied to people who had been sold into slavery. They were to serve for six years as payment of their debt. Having done such, however, their debt was to be considered as paid in full. Thus, in the seventh year these servants were to be released. The memory of God’s deliverance from Egyptian slavery was the primary motivation. In addition, these “brothers” were not to be released empty handed. Rather, they were to be given a fair portion from the crops and the livestock with which to begin their lives anew. Again, this was a reflection of God’s generosity to His people: “as Yahweh your God has blessed you,

you shall give to him” (Deut. 15:14).

Closely related was the Year of Jubilee, elaborated in Leviticus 25. The Year of Jubilee was the 50th year, culminating 7 cycles of 7 years each, including a Sabbath year. The unique feature about aiding the poor was the return of any land lost to debt since the last Jubilee. The land was recognized as God’s special endowment to His people and, as such, was ultimately to be returned to the people to whom it had been given. Thus, the family land, an inheritance from God, would not be lost forever.

Another legal protection for the poor involved regulations for harvesting (Lev. 19:9-10; 23:22; Deut. 24:19-

22). Harvesting was to be deliberately less than complete. Corners were to be left untouched as were the gleanings and any fruit that may have fallen to the ground. Such left-overs were available for the poor and needy. The message was simple: the loss will not be great, but the gain for the poor could mean the difference between life and death.

One purpose of the tithe was to assist the needy (Deut 14:28-29). After every third year, a tithe was to be brought to town for collection and later distribution. The tithe was used by the Levites, who had no property as an inheritance from the Lord. It was also used by orphans, widows and aliens who were in need. Over and over, the Lord sought, through His Law, to insure that the poor received assistance in their need.

Family and national solidarity were crucial aspects of the Hebrew faith. This is seen especially in the concept of the “kinsman redeemer” (Lev. 25:25; Jer. 32:6-8). If a relative were in danger of losing property due to debt, the “kinsman redeemer” (Hebrew *goel* [go-AYL]) was to purchase the land; thus, saving it for the family. Similarly, if one were to be sold into slavery, the relative was to buy his or her freedom. The person so redeemed was to work as a hired servant to repay their relative.

While not directly addressing the issue of poverty, the law regarding Levirate marriage (Deut. 25:5-6; Ruth 3—4) also had definite positive results. When an Israelite male had a married brother or kinsman die without male children, he was to marry the widow and name the first male child after the deceased. The law’s purpose was to carry on the name of the deceased. Yet, because of this law, many women and their female children were saved

Lesson reference:

L&W: Matthew 25:34-41; Deuteronomy 15:11; Psalm 82:3-4; 1 John 3:17



Above: A ripening wheat field in Israel. Wheat was a primary element of the agricultural economy in ancient Israel. Harvesting of wheat fields was to be deliberately less than complete so the poor could glean them.

Left: A large public grain silo from the period of Jeroboam (786-746 B.C.). A spiral stairway descended to any level of the grain (right).

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from the dire existence of widows and orphans.

Perhaps the greatest causes of poverty, after crop and livestock shortages, were social injustice and overt crime. The Law and the Prophets addressed these problems.⁵ Underlying the laws and prophetic messages was one basic assumption: the poor were protected by God. The Lord's demands for fairness for all—especially the poor—can be found throughout the Old Testament. One good example is found in Psalm 82:3-4:

Vindicate the weak and orphans:



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Do justice for the afflicted and poor.

Rescue the weak and needy;
From the hand of the wicked, deliver them.

The appeal was necessary because the opposite was far too common. Injustice is no modern invention. False weights and measures were used. Exorbitant interest rates were charged. Bribery, favoritism and false witness in legal matters were widespread. These and the more blatant forms of highway robbery contributed to many people having little chance of rising above abject poverty.

By the time of the New Testament, the economy was more international in scope. Industry and trade were a larger part of the life of the nation. Still, for most, agriculture was their life. Unfortunately, crime and injustice were also a fact of life. Poverty, as always, was a threat, if not reality, for many.

John challenged early Christians to respond to people's needs around them. To know Christ, to be a Chris-

Left: Freshly slaughtered beef and lamb hanging in the open air of a meat shop in the old section of Jerusalem.

Below: Arab shepherd tending sheep in the Judean hills.



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tian, means to have experienced God's love through Christ. Having known such love, a Christian should share it with others. Love is more than sentimental feelings. Sharing one's worldly goods with those in need is imperative. John asked,

Whoever has the goods of the world and sees his brother having a need and shuts his heart away from him, how does the love of God dwell in him (1 John 3:17)?

John clearly expected a negative answer. Simply put: God's love does not dwell in that person!

John had learned from the example of the Lord Jesus. His concern for the needy was evident in both His words and deeds. Jesus fed, taught, and loved the needy. His followers will be known for doing the same. He made this abundantly clear in His parable of the sheep and the goats (Matt. 25:31-46).

Those who follow Jesus will be welcomed into His glory because they fed Him when He was hungry, gave Him a drink when He was thirsty, welcomed Him when He was a stranger, clothed Him when He was naked, and visited Him when He was sick or in prison. In dismay, they will ask, "When?" Then the King will answer saying to them: "Amen I say to you, inasmuch as you did it for the least of these my brothers, you did it for Me (Matt. 25:40)!"

¹Deut. 15:11; translations are that of the writer unless otherwise indicated.

²Martin Noth, *The Old Testament World*, trans. Victor I. Gruhn (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1966), 163; H. N. Richardson, "Agriculture," *The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*, 5 vols. (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1962-76), 1:56.

³Gerhard von Rad, *Deuteronomy: A Commentary*, trans. Doreothea Barton (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1966), 106.

⁴J. Morgenstern, "Sabbatical Year," *The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*, 5 vols. (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1962-76), 4:141-144.

⁵See Ex. 22:21-27; 23:1-9; Lev. 19:36; and Amos 2:6-8.

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