

ECONOMIC JUSTICE IN THE OLD TESTAMENT: PERSPECTIVES FROM THE HEBREW SCRIPTURES

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Abstract

Any discussion of economics and social justice must begin with the biblical background. The biblical background, in turn, must come first from the Hebrew Scriptures. As a Jew, Jesus would have been raised with these sacred writings, and his insistence on justice for the poor and the marginalized is firmly rooted in the soil of the Mosaic Covenant. As the Catholic bishops, in their pastoral letter, Economic Justice for All, clearly state: “The focal points of Israel’s faith—creation, covenant, and community—provide a foundation for reflection on issues of economic and social justice” (NCCB, 1997, p. 32). The Old Testament as a way of illuminating the path to economic justice with the light of the Hebrew Scriptures is explored.

Work for economic and social justice must be an integral part of any biblically-based religion. The three religions “of the book,” Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, are all marked by a strong concern for the right of every person to live a fully human life, a concern that leads naturally to a special care for the poor, the homeless, and the oppressed.

One of the Five Pillars of Islam, the five principles revealed by Allah to Mohammed to help regulate the life of the Muslim, is almsgiving. Each year, Muslims are required to give two-and-one-half percent, or one-fortieth, of everything they own to the poor. According to Muslim tradition, all Muslims, even the poor themselves, share food, resources.

In the Beginning

Any attempt to explore the biblical roots of the call to economic justice must begin with a consideration of the place and purpose of men and women in God’s plan for creation (Sider, 1985). Turning to Genesis, we find much that is helpful in coming to a realization of the role God intended for us humans. The creation accounts are a statement of our correct relationship with God, with one another, and with the universe.

There are, actually, in Genesis, two accounts of creation, each with its own emphasis. The Priestly author of Genesis 1:1-2:4a, in the beautifully balanced seven-fold crescendo, pictures the first humans as

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a couple whose end in life is fruitfulness. Humanity was made in the image of God, “created as a living representative of God’s kingly rule on earth, just as the image of a King, set up in the various provinces of an empire, was a visible token of the King’s dominion.”* Thus, men and women are given the special role/ task of representing God among all creatures.

The Yahwist author of Genesis 2 stresses humanity’s social nature. Each of us is a person who cannot be fulfilled alone. “The world and creation are the divinely designed systems for the nurturing of enduring relationships, helping one another to do what we cannot do on our own: motivating, encouraging, bringing out the best that is in us” (Anderson, 1875, p. 429). The Yahwist story shows early humans as tillers of the soil; it is, in fact, primarily concerned with our earthly environment (Anderson, p. 212).

It is important, however, particularly in a study of economic justice, to explore the deeper meaning of the dominion humans are called to exercise over their world. It is not a dominion which is meant to entitle us “to have autonomous power and to rape nature in [our] own selfish interests;” (Anderson, p. 429) rather, it is a “responsibility of stewardship over the earth and its creatures. A ruler does not devastate the land but nurtures it, seeks its welfare, and enhances its beauty—even while eating from it and using its resources” (McCurley, 1979, p. 14). Men and women are meant to tend the earth, to care for it, to enrich it, to touch it lovingly.

John Pawlikowski, building on the work of Claus Westermann, in an article entitled, “Participation in Economic Life” (Pawlikowski, 1986, p. 363), adds an interesting consideration to the Genesis commission, one that is of particular import for a technologically advanced society such as ours. Pawlikowski builds on the compound verb of Genesis 2:15; “The Lord God then took the man and settled him in the garden of Eden, *to cultivate and to care for* it.” The twofold directive, to cultivate and to care for, enjoins on humanity the coequal duties of preservation and enhancement. The challenge is to find a way to balance protection of the environment with economic development.

Further, since God is a loving and just God, then this God must have placed in us creatures the ability to fulfill the tasks placed before us. The Genesis narratives do not give us a blueprint for economic decision-making; rather, they assure us that, just as humans are responsible for events in the world, so we have the ability to deal with the issues of life, to cope with natural historic crises (Harrelson, 1976, p. 85). The Yahwist author makes it clear that, just as God gave us dominion and responsibility for the world, just as God gave us the freedom to act on our own, so God also gave us the ability to achieve happiness (Boadt, 1984, p. 112).

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The human community has not merely been “given” life; it has been mandated by divine blessing to “perpetuate” life to its fullest. This of necessity will involve its active participation in the process of adapting and improving those basic human institutions, including economic ones, which are critical for the preservation of this creational dynamism (Pawlikowski, p. 365).

We cannot return to the garden. As social and economic conditions change and develop, however, we must continually reapply the creational commission of the Genesis narratives. We must never allow our choices to be governed by selfish interests, as do those who exploit and abuse, but they must be guided by loving care and trusting stewardship, as do those who tend and nurture.

A Call out of Paganism

The phenomenon that we call Yahwism had its roots in the desert experience of a small band of mixed rabble, leaving Egypt for Palestine nearly 4000 years ago. The exact itinerary they followed and the adventures they experienced can never be precisely recaptured or recounted. The resulting pattern of religious reform and conversion, however, can be traced, and its impact is in no way diminished by the passing of centuries.

What was it that set these Israelites apart from their Canaanite neighbors? What was it that was so radically different that it made Yahwism a revolutionary development in the religious history of the world?

Let’s just take a moment here to review what religion among the nations of the Ancient Near East was all about. The earliest religious practices were tied, naturally enough, to the cycles of nature. The dominant spirit for centuries was the earth goddess, “Mother Nature,” if you will, because the earth was seen as the source of vitality for all the living.

Eventually, as civilization progressed and religion became more formalized, the joining of Mother Earth and Father Sky was seen as the celestial source of earthly fertility. More and more, temple worship became centered on rituals whose aim was increased fertility, fertility not only in crops, animals, and human offspring, but in the extended forms of money and power. Ritual prostitution became the way of imaging on earth the sexual union of fertility gods and goddesses. Each city-state has its own pantheon, an array of gods worshipped meticulously in order to insure that city-state’s prosperity, as well as to achieve a position of dominance among neighboring territories. This is the backdrop against which Yahwism developed.

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The *El Shaddai*, Lord Almighty, of Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Rebecca, and Jacob and Leah, gradually gave way to the *Yahweh* of Moses, the Source of all being and the God of the Decalogue (Ten Commandments), a God who stood for ethics, for social equality, and not for money and power. This Yahweh loved all, without exception or condition, and expected people to do the same.

The worship of Yahweh reached far beyond temple reforms. It touched every aspect of Israelite life. Alone among its neighbors, Israel had no human king, no private ownership of land. Yahweh was the king of an egalitarian society where the hallmark of obedience to Yahweh was concern for the neighbor.

Yahwism, then, in its most pristine form, was a call out of paganism to a religion marked by ethical concerns and with securing the good of the neighbor. The Decalogue, seen in this light, is an instrument of social and ethical reform. People must be more important than money and power; ethical behavior must be a mark of true religion.

Covenant and Conquest

This insistence on ethics is the keynote for the whole bible; even Jesus is not unique, but a reform movement within this framework.

The material in Genesis tells of the vast period from the dawn of creation until roughly 1500 BCE. It is generally believed that the historical record of Israel actually begins with Moses and the Exodus, while Genesis provides the pre-history, a recounting of the highlights of Israelite tradition (Boadt, p. 109). Abraham becomes an ancestor common to all, and the stage is set for the migration of Jacob and his sons into Egypt.

It is not necessary here to explore the sequence of events that led to the Israelites' declining fortunes in Egypt. By the time of Moses, however, they had been reduced to the status of slaves, forming part of the enormous body of forced labor needed to carry out the building projects of the Pharaoh, Rameses II, along the delta. It was at this point that Moses and his "crowd of mixed ancestry" (Ex. 12:38) left Egypt and started across the desert of Sinai.

What is important, indeed crucial, for our study of economic justice, is the covenant entered into at Sinai between Yahweh and this people, that covenant which provides a framework for the whole history of Israel, that covenant which was the standard by which the righteousness of Israel was measured. The Decalogue is part of that covenant.

A covenant may be understood as a pact or treaty between two parties. It was a common occurrence in the Ancient Near East, but it is difficult today to capture the meaning it had for those people. A covenant was meant to last forever, and its binding force was a quality

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referred to as *hesed*, covenant loyalty, a love so deep that the covenant continued even if one party should prove unfaithful. This is the kind of bond established between Yahweh and the Israelites: “I shall be your God and you shall be my people.” (Lev. 26:12) The Ten Commandments became “the social expression of the covenant bond” (Anderson, p. 88), setting down general guidelines for life within such a context. The Decalogue, with its emphasis on the proper relationship between people and God, as well as between people and their neighbors, was a document of social reform intricately connected to the religious and social revolution described in the preceding pages.

From the very beginning, however, abuses crept in, so that, as early as the Book of Joshua, there is evidence that the Israelites had forsaken Yahweh and reverted to the worship of pagan gods. In Chapter 24 of that book we read that, after leading the people in the conquest of Canaan, their Promised Land, Joshua gathered all the tribes together at Shechem and called them to task for their lack of fidelity. He challenged them to choose between the Lord and the other gods, declaring firmly, “As for me and my household, we will serve the Lord.” (Josh. 24:15)

Inspired by Joshua, the Israelites chose Yahweh, but the conquest of Canaan meant a change from the nomadic life of the desert to a more settled, agricultural way of life. The very event that marked the end of the long years of wandering also marked the beginning of changes in Israel, changes which eventually led to abuses of the ethical demands of the covenant, abuses so blatant that they called forth the wrath of those mighty voices of later centuries, the Classical Prophets.

An Indifferent Affluence

“Before the settlement of Canaan, there seem to have been no clear distinctions between poor and rich” (Boerma, 1978, p. 12). There must have been poor and rich, but there were apparently no economic conflicts. That began to change after the conquest of Canaan, around 1200 BCE. There were many reasons for the religious deterioration in pre-Exilic Israel. Several of these reasons are economic and are tied directly to our study of the biblical perspective on economic justice.

1. According to the covenant, serving the Lord and possession of the land went together. Yahweh owned the land, and all families shared it equally. Thus, “the covenant not only [bound] Israel to God, but it also [bound] individuals together into one family: the Israelite community” (Hoppe, 1986, p. 375).

As Israel began to grow and prosper, however, wealthy landowners emerged, and to be poor began to mean to be without land. “The development of an economy involving dealings in trade and land disrupted the equality of families.

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Some families became very rich and others slowly became poor” (Boerma, p. 15).

2. Religion among many Israelites began to be marked by an indifferent attitude. It was worship that permitted business as usual. Indeed, abuses in business, bribery, the use of false measures, and so on, became commonplace and the developing aristocracy, while pursuing their own luxuries, became complacent and grew apathetic at the plight of the poor.
3. Israel now sat on the trade routes between Egypt and Mesopotamia, and the resulting prosperity gave rise to elements previously unknown among the members of the Tribal League: merchants, landlords, tax collectors, and money-lenders.
4. Solomon, successor to Saul and David and king of Israel from 961-922 BCE, had a social vision directly opposed to the Mosaic revolution. Its aim was to secure the king and the dynasty by means of heavy taxation and conscripted labor. It was a politics of order and security, not justice and compassion. New administrative divisions eradicated the old tribal perspectives. Now, instead of 12 tribes in charge of 12 shrines, there were 12 governors in 12 areas to be taxed. In a clever move to make Yahweh part of the royal panoply, Solomon built Yahweh a very proper pagan temple; thus, Yahweh was permanently “on call,” as it were, housed in Jerusalem, a God who had lost the power to do anything but support the status quo.

It was against this backdrop of division, hostility, and unrest that the prophetic movement arose.

A Kingdom Divided

Following Solomon’s death, the kingdom split into two sections. The state of Saul, David, and Solomon, which had been united for about 70 years, divided roughly along the tribal lines that had existed since the time of Joshua.

Judah, the southern kingdom, had the smaller population and was made up of rugged, desert land, but its rulers were David’s successors, and they had both Jerusalem and the Temple with the Ark of the Covenant. Israel, the northern kingdom, was richer. It was located in the more fertile areas of Palestine and had a much larger population, but it never achieved any kind of dynastic succession.

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Prophetic Voices

Prophets arose at times of crisis, usually when the people were being unfaithful to the covenant. The word itself means messenger, not fortune-teller. In Greek, *prophetes* means one who speaks on behalf of

another. The Hebrew *nabi'* was applied to one who communicated the divine will (Anderson, p. 226).

Prophets, then, can be described as charismatic spokespersons for God. Their mission in the bible may be seen as fourfold:

1. to confront wrongdoers and challenge them to convert to the Lord;
2. to shed God's light on contemporary events;
3. to preach courageously an unpopular message;
4. to denounce the persistent evils of empty worship and social injustice.

The point of prophecy was not a foretelling of future events. Rather, "the prophet's announcement of what God was about to do accented the urgency of the present" (Anderson, p. 227).

Amos

Amos was from Tekoa, near Bethlehem, in the south, but he prophesized in the north. He was active in a period of relative prosperity, the mid-8th century BCE, when Israel was free to control and expand her trade. Consequently common people were more and more becoming the victims of wealth and greed. As the merchants grew rich, the poor easily descended from poverty to indebtedness to slavery.

Religion flourished, but it was a religion of complacency and self-satisfaction. The people were sure God was pleased with them. Amos, however, called the people to an especially strict accounting and came down hard on social injustices, in light of Israel's covenantal relationship with Yahweh. The prophet connected the injustice he saw around him to a society bent on wealth and prosperity, yet forgetful of the true worship of God.

Amos attacked moral failure in every level of society: law, leadership, economic life, and worship. He used the strong, vivid language of battles and curses and held out little hope.

Thus says the Lord: for three crimes of Israel, and for four, I will not revoke my word; because they sell the just one for silver, and the poor one for a pair of sandals. They trample the heads of the weak into the dust of the earth, and force the lowly out of the way. (Amos 2:6-7)

Beware, I will crush you into the ground as a wagon crushes when laden with sheaves. Flight shall perish from the swift, and the strong one shall not retain strength; the warrior shall not save his life, nor the bowman stand his ground; the swift of foot shall not escape, nor the horseman save his life (Amos 2:13-15).

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It infuriated Amos that much of the prosperity enjoyed by the emerging aristocracy was reaped from the exploitation of the poor. The rich and powerful manipulated the law so that poor landowners lost even the little that they had (Sider, p. 31).

Hear this, you who trample upon the needy and destroy the poor of the land! "When will the new moon be over," you ask," that we may sell our grain, and the Sabbath, that we may display the wheat? We will diminish the ephah, and fix our scales for cheating! We will buy the lowly one for silver, and the poor one for a pair of sandals; even the refuse of the wheat we will sell."

The Lord has sworn by the pride of Jacob: Never will I forget a thing they have done! Shall not the land tremble because of this, and all who dwell in it mourn, while it rises up and tosses like the Nile, and settles back like the river of Egypt?

On that day, says the Lord God, I will make the sun set at midday and cover the earth with darkness in broad daylight. I will turn your feasts into mourning and all your songs into lamentations (Amos 8:4-10a).

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There would be no averting disaster because values had been abandoned; even liturgy had been turned into arrogance. Amos diagnosed the present scene and offered, not an agenda, but a challenge.

Amos used many of the themes of Wisdom literature, particularly the idea that Yahweh's covenant was meant to be a way of life. The ethics were to be learned first in the home, then made effective in the wider world of the Temple and society.

Another thing Amos did was to extend the message. Previously, prophets addressed themselves to the king alone. Amos addressed not just the king, but the entire nation. Just as the covenant had been made with the whole of Israel, so too did the responsibilities of the covenant rest with the entire nation.

Isaiah and Micah

While Amos is undoubtedly the prophet of social justice, and the one who has the most to say to our society today, Isaiah was possibly the greatest of the prophets. He was intellectually superior and covered a wide range of ideas with vigor and daring. He expressed great wrath and deep feelings of tenderness with equal power.

One of Isaiah's major themes was anger against oppression and injustice. His list of indictments against Israel includes the exploitation of the poor, the oppression of widows and orphans, and Israel's pride and haughtiness. In a famous passage, Isaiah likens Israel to a

vineyard: instead of sweet wine it yielded sour grapes and would have to be destroyed. Yahweh expected justice from Israel and got harlotry instead.

Let me now sing of my friend, my friend's song concerning his vineyard.

My friend had a vineyard on a fertile hillside; he spaded it, cleared it of stones, and planted the choicest vines; within it he built a watchtower and hewed out a wine press. Then he looked for the crop of grapes, but what it yielded was wild grapes.

Now, inhabitants of Jerusalem and men of Judah, judge between me and my vineyard: what more was there to do for my vineyard that I had not done? Why, when I looked for the crop of grapes, did it bring forth wild grapes?

Now, I will let you know what I mean to do to my vineyard: take away its hedge, give it to grazing, break through its wall, let it be trampled! Yes, I will make it a ruin: it shall not be pruned or hoed, but overgrown with thorns and briars; I will command the clouds not to send rain upon it.

The vineyard of the Lord of hosts is the house of Israel, and the people of Judah are the Lord's cherished plant; the Lord looked for judgment, but see, the bloodshed! For justice, but hark, the outcry! (Is. 5:1-7)

Later, in Isaiah 3:5, "What do you mean by crushing my people and grinding down the poor when they look to you?" The word the prophet uses for "grinding" the poor is the verb used to describe corn being ground between millstones (Sider, p. 52).

Isaiah "not only provides a rich background for the role of the poor in God's messianic plans, but he also links the poor with the manifestation of God's justice" (Boadt, p. 334). Listen to this passage from chapter 35, part of the Book of Consolation.

The desert and the parched land will exult; the steppe will rejoice and bloom. They will bloom with abundant flowers, and rejoice with joyful song. The glory of Lebanon will be given to them, the splendor of Carmel and Sharon. They will see the glory of the Lord, the splendor of our God.

Strengthen the hands that are feeble, make firm the knees that are weak, say to those whose hearts are frightened: be strong, fear not! Here is your God, who comes with vindication; with divine recompense God comes to save you.

Then will the eyes of the blind be opened, the ears of the deaf be cleared; then will the lame leap like a stag, then the tongue of the dumb will sing (Is. 35: 1-6).

Isaiah was a man of the city, whose main focal point was Jerusalem. Micah was active around the same time as Isaiah, but his are images of small towns and country life. He apparently grew up among people concerned with agricultural pursuits, and there is hardly any mention of Jerusalem or the Temple in his work (StuhlmueLLer, 1986, p. 389). The basic message, nevertheless, is the same.

Woe to those who plan iniquity, and work out evil on their couches; in the morning light they accomplish it when it lies within their power.

They covet fields and seize them; houses and they take them; they cheat an owner of his house, a man of his inheritance.

Therefore thus says the Lord: Behold, I am planning against this race an evil from which you shall not withdraw your necks; nor shall you walk with head high, for it will be a time of evil (Mi. 2:1-3).

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Micah attacked the greed of landlords and other officials, who drove the poor from their homes and confiscated family farms. Using the format called the “covenant lawsuit,” Micah shows God, in chapters 6 and 7, taking the Israelites to court. The Lord recounts all that had been done for them over the years, and addresses the cries of the victims of injustice. Micah 6:8 summarizes powerfully and superbly the true marks of covenant fidelity: “only to do right and to love goodness, and to walk humbly with your God”. “Here we find, expressed in a single sentence, Amos’ demand for justice, Hosea’s appeal for the steadfast love that binds people in covenant with God and with one another, and Isaiah’s plea for the quiet faith of the ‘humble walk’ with God” (Anderson, p. 318).

Jeremiah

To conclude our look at the more well-known prophets of social and economic justice, let us consider briefly the message of Jeremiah.

In true prophetic fashion, Jeremiah’s major themes were idolatry and injustice (Boadt, p. 366). He was schooled in the great traditions of Israel, came from a priestly family, and lived near Jerusalem. He lived and worked at a time of great international unrest and uncertainty; within his lifetime he witnessed the first conquest of Jerusalem by the Babylonians in 598 BCE, and the city’s final destruction in 586 BCE.

Like Amos, Hosea, and Isaiah before him, Jeremiah used harsh words and stern rebukes in his call for conversion.

Put not your trust in the deceitful words: “This is the temple of the Lord! The temple of the Lord! The temple of the Lord! Only if you thoroughly reform your ways and your deeds; if each of you deals justly with your neighbor; if you no longer oppress the resident alien, the orphan, and the widow; if you no longer shed innocent blood in this place, or follow strange gods to your own harm, will I remain with you in this place, in the land I gave your ancestors long ago and forever (Jer. 7:4-7).

The prophet called the king and the people alike to task for their abandonment of personal responsibility. He lashed out at the wealthy who knew how to exploit the poor, while staying within the boundaries of the law.

Woe to him who builds his house on wrong, his terraces on injustice; who works his neighbor without pay, and gives him no wages. Who says, “I will build myself a spacious house, with airy rooms,” who cuts out windows for it, panels it with cedar, and paints it with vermillion.

Must you prove your rank among kings by competing with them in cedar? Did not your father eat and drink? He did what was right and just, and it went well with him. Is this not true knowledge of me? says the Lord.

But your eyes and heart are set on nothing except on your own gain, on shedding innocent blood, on practicing oppression and extortion (Jer. 22:13-17).

In vivid images, Jeremiah warned the people of impending doom, the invasion from the north, and he described Israel as refuse ore that has to be melted down to be purified. One of his most famous passages likens Yahweh to a potter and Israel to the clay.

This word came to Jeremiah from the Lord: Rise up, be off to the potter’s house; there I will give you my message. I went down to the potter’s house and there he was, working at the wheel. Whenever the object of clay which he was making turned out badly in his hand, he tried again, making of the clay another object of whatever sort he pleased.

Then the word of the Lord came to me: Can I not do to you, house of Israel, as this potter has done? says the Lord. Indeed like clay in the hand of the potter, so are you in my hand,

house of Israel. Sometimes I threaten to uproot and tear down and destroy a nation or a kingdom.

But if that nation which I have threatened turns from its evil, I also repent of the evil which I threatened to do. Sometimes, again, I promise to build up and plant a nation or a kingdom. But if that nation does what is evil in my eyes, refusing to obey my voice, I repent of the good which I promised to bless it (Jer. 18:1-10).

In his later years, when destruction and exile had become realities of life for the Israelites, Jeremiah began to offer words of hope for restoration. Perhaps the most moving of these, and the passage that offers encouragement to us today who struggle against seemingly insurmountable obstacles in our modern-day quest for economic justice, is the promise of a new covenant, a covenant written, not on tablets of stone, but on the hearts of all people.

The days are coming, says the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah. It will not be like the covenant I made with their ancestors the day I took them by the hand to lead them forth from the land of Egypt; for they broke my covenant and I had to show myself their master, says the Lord.

But this is the covenant which I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the Lord. I will place my law within them, and write it upon their hearts; I will be their God, and they shall be my people. No longer will they have need to teach their friends and kinsmen how to know the Lord. All, from least to greatest, shall know me, says the Lord, for I will forgive their evildoing and remember their sin no more (Jer. 31:31-34).

Conclusion

Vatican Council II, and our own United States bishops, have underscored the necessity of exercising an “option for the poor.” Such a call grows directly out of the traditions of the Hebrew Scriptures, the “Old Testament,” some of which we have just explored. It is important, however, that we understand the real meaning of the phrase, “option for the poor.”

The justice that was the sign of God’ covenant with Israel was measured by how the poor and unprotected—the widow, the orphan, and the stranger---were treated....we are challenged to make a fundamental “option for the poor”—to speak for the voiceless, to defend the defenseless, to assess

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life styles, policies, and social institutions in terms of their impact on the poor (NCCB, 1997, pp. 16-17).

The Messiah will not only save the poor and the humble, but will actually share their condition.

This is to say that God's kingdom will not be complete as long as the poor are left unaided. It is not to say that poverty, in and of itself, is a blessing. If that were the case, there would be no need to fight it, and poverty is always challenged in the Bible (StuhlmueLLer, p. 385). Throughout the scriptures, oppression and injustice are seen as the two main sources of poverty, and reading the biblical writings prompts us to action. "Reading the Bible is more dangerous than we often would like it to be. It puts us under an obligation" (Boerma, p. 29).

The central message of much of the bible is that the solution to economic injustice lies not with the poor who are its victims, but with the wealthy who are its authors. Boerma notes that the poor are not poor because they are idle; on the contrary, they are idle because they are poor. So, poverty and the structures of society are, and have been since biblical times, directly connected.

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