

HOW CAN THE RICH LOVE THE POOR?

OLD TESTAMENT SUGGESTIONS FOR OUR PRESENT-DAY ECONOMY

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The enormous gap between the higher and lower classes is one of the main problems in the world and a constant cause for misery, migration, unemployment, wars and terrorism. How can it be overcome?

OT social laws reflect a special concern for the poor and provide useful stipulations and motivations which prove relevant even today. Here we shall present some of these insights, try to trace their social implications and also refer to examples from the prophets as well as Job.

One conclusion is that societies and economies need faith to stop their inherent dynamic towards injustice, instability and increasing differences between rich and poor. Historical experience shows that in the long term only a strong and affective relationship with a just and caring God can provide counter-weights to balance these destructive tendencies.

1 The Reality: A Divided and Unequal World

Men remove landmarks;
 they seize flocks and pasture them.
 They drive away the ass of the fatherless;
 they take the widow's ox for a pledge.
 They thrust the poor off the road;
 the poor of the earth all hide themselves.
 Behold, like wild asses in the desert
 they go forth to their toil,
 seeking prey in the wilderness
 as food for their children.
 They gather their fodder in the field
 and they glean the vineyard of the wicked man.
 They lie all night naked, without clothing,
 and have no covering in the cold.
 They are wet with the rain of the mountains,
 and cling to the rock for want of shelter.
 (Job 24:2-8)¹

This depiction of injustice and the terrible fate of the poor is more than two thousand years old. Yet, it continues even to this day. During my stay in Sri Lan-

¹ All biblical quotations are taken from the RSV.

ka, five people, on June 9 and 10, 1994, died of cold and exhaustion in the region of Nuwara Eliya due to lack of protection against the humid weather. This is just one of innumerable cases. Every hour approximately one thousand people are starving from hunger - that means one person dies every 3.5 seconds. Think of it this way: with every breath we take, two people die due to social injustice and fundamental disparities in our world.

The enormous gap between rich and poor is one of the main problems on earth. It is recognised as a cause of misery, migration, unemployment, wars and, recently, terrorism. Yet, despite such knowledge, little is being done to counter this challenge in an effective way.

Looking back into history,² we discover that this problem is an old one. We can even go beyond the initial quotation of Job, back to the old records in Mesopotamia or to texts of the Old Kingdom in Egypt. Back in the third millenium BC, for example, we find descriptions of the poor and their fate.³ This sad story continues nearly everywhere as a constant thread through human history until today. Given this state of affairs, we may say that injustice and poverty are not transitional effects showing up only rarely in history. They constitute a continuous problem, encompassing various societies, different cultures practically at all times, as far as we know. It seems to be inherent to humanity, and even an old biblical text expresses this opinion, with some touch of resignation:

For the poor will never cease out of the land (Deut 15:11).

2 Old Testament Suggestions

The situation presented above asks for all efforts to solve this problem. If our Christian faith finds its roots in scripture, it is thus reasonable and obvious that we learn from its pages. Especially the texts of the Old Testament reveal themselves as being fruitful and relevant even for today.

² These reflections here are concentrated on a biblical perspective, dealing especially with the Old Testament and its Ancient Near Eastern background. They offer one example of an old tradition, yet a very apt one, as it is well documented and as our culture is rooted in this tradition.

³ See Pritchard (1955), especially the war campaigns of Sargon: 'Their possession he brought to Agade' (p.266), or of King Pepi I, leaving the conquered territories devastated (p.227f), just as two examples of how big, powerful nations dominated others and made them poor. Examples referring more to individuals can be found in the second millenium BC.

2.1 Some major concerns

The main source for our study are OT laws from the Torah. The Decalogue and Covenant Code (Exod 20-23), the so-called Holiness-Code (Lev 17-26) and, above all, the stipulations of Deuteronomy (Deut 12-26) provide rich material.⁴ In the latter we encounter a fixed grouping of three weak classes of society:

At the end of every three years you shall bring forth all the tithe of your produce in the same year, and lay it up within your towns; and the Levite, because he has no portion or inheritance with you, and *the sojourner, the fatherless, and the widow*, who are within your towns, shall come and eat and be filled; that the LORD your God may bless you in all the work of your hands that you do. (Deut 14:28f)

*Widows, orphans and foreigners*⁵ have perennially been exposed to violations, because they cannot defend their rights as well as others. So they need protection, and the intention of this and other laws is to ensure that they are treated correctly and also receive special care, because they are the weakest in society. - Here, even a fourth group is mentioned, right at the beginning. It is the *Levite*, a lower class of religious functionaries with no property of their own.⁶ They also need extra support.

To ensure this help for those weaker groups within society, here and on other occasions, Deuteronomy adds a *motivation*: 'that the LORD your God may bless you ...'. Obviously it was necessary to give reasons for this offer of one's tithe to the poor. It runs counter to the logic of everybody piling up as much as he can. The reference to God serves as a motive for this apparently 'strange, unnatural' behaviour.

It is not enough to receive a tithe every third year. Poor people struggle every day with their living conditions. Mere survival is their daily battle. Old Testament laws realize this:

You shall not oppress a hired servant who is poor and needy, whether he is one of your brethren or one of the sojourners who are in your land within your towns; you shall give him his hire on the day he earns it, before the sun goes down, for he is

⁴ The complicated relationship between these law collections remains an open field of debate (among such renowned scholars as G. Braulik, N. Lohfink, E. Otto, just to mention some names). For our question here historical priorities or dependencies do not make a big difference, although they are interesting; therefore we leave them aside.

⁵ In Ancient Israel, there were various types of foreigners. The one mentioned here is the *ger*, an expression derived from 'sojourn'. This applies to a person living away from his home in another village or town; it may be an Israelite, but as well a foreigner from another people.

⁶ In contrast to the priests, the Levites seem to have been less influential, and dependent from the former. Cardellini (2002) offers a good presentation of the role of the Levites and the differences between those two groups at the Temple.

poor, and sets his heart upon it; lest he cry against you to the LORD, and it be sin in you. (Deut 24:14f)

There are always people dependent on others to give work to them and this, of course, can become a source of exploitation. The law here establishes a fair, regular and practical form of *payment* that guarantees a continuous supply with food. Once again we find also a motivation by referring to God. Those who have plenty often cannot imagine how needy the poor are. Sometimes the *surplus* of the former is a substantial contribution for the latter:

When you reap your harvest in your field, and have forgotten a sheaf in the field, you shall not go back to get it; it shall be for the sojourner, the fatherless, and the widow; that the LORD your God may bless you in all the work of your hands. When you beat your olive trees, you shall not go over the boughs again; it shall be for the sojourner, the fatherless, and the widow. When you gather the grapes of your vineyard, you shall not glean it afterward; it shall be for the sojourner, the fatherless, and the widow. You shall remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt; therefore I command you to do this. (Deut 24:19-22)

We can already observe repeated features: the care for the poor; the three classical weak groups of the society, and the motivation, this time with reference to the own experience of dependency in the past. In various forms, these repetitions are the sign of a *constant concern* about the poor. Even a special kind of theft, namely theft of food, is allowed:

When you go into your neighbor's standing grain, you may pluck the ears with your hand, but you shall not put a sickle to your neighbor's standing grain. (Deut 23:26; in English 23:25; compare Mark 2:23)

These and other laws want to ensure that everyone can live without begging. They wish to provide a *basis of sustenance* for all, as a legal right. This gives to each in the society a fundamental equality and dignity.

But there are other cases, where this balance is disturbed more profoundly and where radical changes have taken place. Sometimes people lose their property or even their freedom because of debts or other circumstances. Old Testament laws even provide for such difficult and grave instances:

- If your brother becomes poor, and sells part of his property, then his next of kin shall come and redeem what his brother has sold. (Lev 25:25)
- If your brother becomes poor beside you, and sells himself to you, you shall not make him serve as a slave: he shall be with you as a hired servant and as a sojourner. He shall serve with you until the year of the jubilee; then he shall go out from you, he and his children with him, and go back to his own family, and return to the possession of his fathers. (Lev 25:39-41)

This last provision, valid for every fiftieth year, is still intensified:

If your brother, a Hebrew man, or a Hebrew woman, is sold to you, he shall serve you six years, and in the seventh year you shall let him go free from you. And when you let him go free from you, you shall not let him go empty-handed; you shall furnish him liberally out of your flock, out of your threshing floor, and out of your wine press; as the LORD your God has blessed you, you shall give to him. (Deut 15:12-14)

We can see in all these laws a conscious and precise effort to *maintain basic values* such as freedom and a minimum of livelihood for all members of society. This includes the request addressed to those who are wealthier to act on behalf of the poor, even against their own interests. They are asked to invest from their wealth in the restoration of people who have come into desperate situations without a chance to free themselves. Doing so, they help to build a community where the tendency towards an ever increasing gap between poor and rich is stopped. Showing ways to handle this delicate and important issue is a lasting contribution of the Old Testament. These texts influence the discussion regarding the remission of debts on a global level, among indebted states and industrial nations even nowadays.

In order to understand deeper what is involved in these suggestions we should take a closer look at their background: How is it possible that rich persons can renounce their own interests? How can they become inclined to love the poor?

2.2 Reasons and Backgrounds

Old Israel maintained an awareness of the consequences of profit-oriented behaviour and entrepreneurship. Texts from the prophets and the writings testify to a high sensitivity towards the developments in society.

The indictments of Amos (e.g. Am 2:6-8; 4:1; 5:10-13; 8:4-6 etc.) and other prophets⁷ expose in detail the disastrous impact of an influential class. They show how the search for material gain creates division within a society. This striving to obtain always more shatters the foundations of human relations and is a main reason for the breakdown of the community.

In Persian times, the governor Nehemiah has to deal with such a case (Neh 5,1-13). He challenges the nobles and officials who take their fellows, including their families, as their slaves. This obviously leads to social tensions and disparity among the people. Nehemiah intervenes and succeeds in convincing the rich to leave off their interest and free their debtors from their debt and dependency.

⁷ One of the best books on this issue is: Sicre (1984).

At the beginning we quoted a text from Job. This book shows an amazing sensitivity with regard to this social issue. It can even be regarded as a model-case for the relationship between rich and poor: Job is extremely wealthy, at the beginning (Job 1:3) and still more at the end (Job 42:10), yet he loses everything, including his health (Job 1-2). The figure of Job thus serves as an example, as well for the fragility of riches, as well for the awareness of the view of the poor (see the quotation of Job 24 at the beginning) and the responsibility of the rich for them (Job 29:12-16 and 31:16-23 are poignant here).

As a result of these (and other) passages within the Old Testament, we can see a clear consciousness that the material gain of a certain group often signifies a bigger loss for the whole of the society. These texts therefore try to convince those in power to include other aspects in their reasoning, namely the social impact, the protection of values like freedom and equality, and the preservation of one's own identity. These texts thus enable those in power to gain a broader perspective and consequently overcome their selfish search to maximize their material gain at all costs. Some of the arguments within these texts are:

- *social gain*: What seems to be at first sight personal loss (release of servants, or remittance of debts, ...) contributes to the well-being of the whole community. A society with mutual understanding and acceptance is the basis for the welfare of all, and thus also an important aim to be pursued by the rich.

- *freedom and dignity*: The prologue to the Decalogue reads: 'I am the LORD your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage' (Exod 20:2 = Deut 5:6). This motive is repeated and expanded in Deut 5:15, showing that the preservation of freedom is a key issue of the Decalogue.⁸ Both forms of the Decalogue argue for the observation of the Sabbath by imitating God: In Exod 20 by referring to his creation, and in Deut 5 by emphasizing the act of freeing. This behaviour towards servants mirrors God's salvation. To respect them and to leave the Sabbath free from work, also for them, continues God's work of creation and salvation.

- *identity as a people*: Already the Decalogue has established firm ties between a group's social behaviour and their existence as a people. In fact, if we regard other Ancient Near Eastern texts, we can discover, besides some shared features, Israel's distinctiveness. Whereas in Mesopotamian laws theft could be punished by death, fugitives had to be extradited, strangers didn't find special protection, etc., we find another spirit behind Israel's laws. The awareness of having been oneself a stranger and slave is reflected in a special empathy and care for all groups of the weak and voiceless. To maintain this orientation marks Israel's identity as a people.⁹

⁸ For this, see Krüger (2001) 122.

⁹ This result is the special contribution of Barbiero (1996) 69.

We have still not yet answered the question of the title: How can the rich *love* the poor? To answer this, we have to go to the real source of all these convictions, the *concept of God*. There, in God, lies the principal reason for the astonishing openness and care for the poor of the Old Testament texts:

When a stranger sojourns with you in your land, you shall not do him wrong. The stranger who sojourns with you shall be to you as the native among you, and you shall *love* him as yourself; for you were strangers in the land of Egypt: I am the LORD your God. (Lev 19:33f)

He (i.e., God) executes justice for the fatherless and the widow, and *loves* the sojourner, giving him food and clothing. *Love* the sojourner therefore; for you were sojourners in the land of Egypt. (Deut 10:18f)

These two examples explicitly use the Hebrew word for love and apply it to one of classical weak groups of society, namely the foreigners. In both cases the reason for this command lies in God and in how he is and how he acts; this understanding of him influences the community believing in him to behave similarly. The rich can and shall love the poor, because God himself, being rich beyond all measure, loves all classes of poor people and cares for those in danger of oppression and exploitation.

This portrayal of God is the result of historical experience and also of the people's own past. It is neither mere fiction nor some program for the future; rather it is tested reality and the basis for the very existence of the community. At the same time this understanding of God becomes a model for identification for those who believe in him. They cannot do otherwise than follow his lead.

If we ask for the background of the Old Testament texts mentioned above, we encounter another astonishing fact. The access to writing, the authority to establish laws, the language used, the familiarity with a certain kind of reasoning (e.g. Deut 15:10,18) and other elements clearly point toward the 'upper class', those who are wealthy and influential. How can they develop such a deep concern for the poor and proceed against their own interests? In my opinion, only the deep-rooted experience of a God concerned with the poor, as examined above, can explain this coincidence of an upper-class-setting and such an empathy and understanding towards the sorrows and needs of the underprivileged. God and his generosity are the source for a likewise way of life and acting.

3 Conclusion

Summing up the main points of our exposition, we may say:

- The Old Testament, more than any other comparable text from the Ancient Near East, shows a special attention for the issue of the poor and a profound concern for them.

- It testifies to the care for several groups of weak people within society, and tries to counterbalance the inherent dynamic towards injustice and disparity by legal regulations. - This juridical binding is important as it secures a better observation of these attitudes and a better protection and status of these groups.

- These texts speak about the need for motivations, and they give reasons on two levels. On the one hand, they argue with human experiences, such as solidarity, one's own past, communal feelings, ... On the other hand, they refer to God as the ultimate source for the desired behaviour. In the long term, he can best motivate. And he alone can move the rich to love the poor.

What is the impact of these results on the present-day discussion regarding the topic of our congress? First, it is clear that faith and religion play a key role for the organisation of a society, as well as for its economy. Second, the concept of God has its effects on this process, and still more, it is crucial: how a community perceives its God will shape it and what it does. Third, we see how it is not enough simply to give some suggestions. Attitudes of care and protection for the poor have to become embodied into law, to remove them from arbitrariness or dependence from others' discretion.

These Old Testament texts also pose questions for today:

- How can the world's religions fulfill this task to protect the poor on a global level?

- Can various religions come together and collaborate on this issue?

- What are the common elements in the different concepts of God that allow for a union and combined effort to build a world-wide society, more just and human?

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