

6.0 Righteousness, Justice and YHWH's Care for the Poor¹

6.1 Introduction

For the Hebrews, YHWH was just and the source of all justice. YHWH's justice manifested itself in two ways.

- From the viewpoint of the helpless and oppressed, his justice was liberation and salvation. Typical of this kind of justice was the Exodus event with its Covenant. Failure to live up to the demands of the Covenant led people to experience the other aspect of YHWH's justice, namely destruction. According to the Deuteronomistic Historian and the Prophets, this was the experience of YHWH's justice experienced by Judah before and during the [Exile](#) (587-538 BCE).
- In post-Exilic Judaism there was a tremendous emphasis on ritual observance of detailed laws. At the same time the teaching of wisdom held that there were moral laws of which YHWH was considered custodian and guardian. Such laws were known by prudent and blameless behaviour.

The Hebrew concept of justice is also bound up with that of *righteousness*. For the Old Testament righteousness is the fulfilment of the demands of a relationship. Every relationship has its own set of demands. When these are fulfilled, then righteousness is established. The demands set by one relationship can differ greatly from those set by another.

The Hebrew words *śedeq* (שֶׁדֶק) and *śēdāqâ* (שְׂדָאָה) denote *righteousness* with no significant difference of meaning between them. The verb *śādēq* (שָׁדַק) can mean *to be righteous, to be just and to be in the right*. Finally, *śaddîq* (שָׁדִיִּק) is the Hebrew adjective for *just / righteous*. The most frequent LXX translations are as follows:

¹ Bruce C. Birch, *Let Justice Role Down: The Old Testament, Ethics and Christian Life* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1991) 240-79; Norbert Lohfink, *Option for the Poor: The Basic Principle of Liberation Theology in the Light of the Bible*, Berkeley, CA: BIBAL, 1987; *idem*, "Poverty in the laws of the Ancient Near East and of the Bible," *TS* 52 (1991) 34-50.

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- The Greek noun ***dikaíosunē*** (δικαιοσύνη) translates ***šedeq*** (שֶׁדֶק) and ***šēdāqâ*** (שִׁדְדָאָה).
- The Greek verb ***dikaíoun*** (δικαιοῦν) translates ***šādēq*** (שִׁדְדָה).
- The Greek adjective ***dikaíos*** (δίκαιος) translates ***šaddīq*** (שִׁדְדִּיק).
- Comparison of the Hebrew root ***šdq*** (שֶׁדֶק) with similar roots in other Semitic languages, especially Arabic, suggest the range of meanings *hardness, firmness, straightness*. The consequence of this is that the only way to get at the meaning of the Hebrew terms is to examine the use of each instance. Nonetheless it is possible to understand *righteousness* as fulfilling the demands of a particular relationship.

In this context YHWH is seen as righteous in terms of the demands of the relationship with Israel.² In fact, YHWH is *never* regarded as unrighteous. For the Old Testament, YHWH's righteousness is not something consistent with YHWH's inner nature, nor is it linked to distributive justice. YHWH's righteousness is the fulfilment of the demands of the relationship between YHWH and Israel, i.e. fulfilment of the covenant relationship. Because YHWH is righteous, Israel appeals to YHWH for deliverance in times of trouble,³ from enemies,⁴ and from the wicked.⁵ YHWH's righteousness is YHWH's willingness to hear these pleas. YHWH's salvation of Israel is his righteousness.

The term ***šaddīq*** (שִׁדְדִּיק - Hebrew: *righteous*) applies not only to one who fulfils the demands of a relationship, but also to one who has had rights taken away in a relationship. As a righteous God, YHWH intervenes to restore the rights of those deprived of them and always decides in favour of the needy when they have their rights taken from them. From the time of the Exodus, Israel had been in the right over against her enemies.⁶ Israel is righteous in that she is oppressed and deprived of rights. This also applies within the community of Israel. All victims of oppression are righteous, whether the oppressors are enemies,⁷ wicked rulers⁸ or violent people.⁹ The Old Testament often equates ***šaddīq***

² 2 Chron 12:6; Neh 9:8; Pss 7:9; 103:17; 111:3; 116:5; Jer 9; 24; Dan 9:14; Zeph 35; Zech 8:8.

³ Pss 31:1; 88:12; 143:11.

⁴ Pss 5:8; 143:1.

⁵ Pss 36; 71:2.

⁶ Ps 103:6.

⁷ Pss 14:5; 69:28.

(צַדִּיק - Hebrew: *righteous*) with *'ebyôn* (אֲבִיּוֹן - Hebrew: *a materially poor person*), *'ānî* (עֲנִי - Hebrew: *an afflicted one*), *rāš* (רָשׁ - Hebrew: *one who is poor*) and *dal* (דַּל - *one who is low*)

6.2 The Prophets and the Poor

6.2.1 The Pre-Exilic Prophets¹⁰

Prophecy is not a unique phenomenon to Ancient Israel for it has many parallels with other ancient Near Eastern societies. What is unique is its criticism of the monarchy¹¹ and other institutions, especially the judicial system.¹² The prophets are scathing on landowners who concentrate land in the hands of a few, creating a great number of landless.¹³ For the prophets, poverty was created when the rich oppressed the poor.¹⁴

(a) Amos

Amos is concerned to protect the poor from exploitation, especially from that involved in the perversion of Israel's system of justice.¹⁵ For Amos the poor and the righteous are to be equated.¹⁶ The prophet's role is to declare that the oppressed are righteous, i.e. "in the right." YHWH's option for the poor is his declaration that the poor are righteous. The oppression of the poor is a crime that threatens Israel's existence. The protection of the poor and powerless lay at the centre of Israel's moral norms and traditions. Amos' most dramatic accusation is found in Amos 4:1-5. Those condemned have a life-style based on robbing the poor.

Amos attacks the social evils of eight-century BCE Israel. He attacks the rich because they seize the land of the poor, pervert the legal system set up to protect the poor,

⁸ Ps 94:21.

⁹ Ps 140:13.

¹⁰ Leslie J. Hoppe, *Being Poor: A Biblical Study* (Good News Studies 20; Wilmington: Glazier, 1987) 61-78.

¹¹ Jer 22:13-17.

¹² Isa 5:23; Amos 5:7; Mic 3:9-11.

¹³ Isa 5:8; Ezek 22:29; Mic 2:1-3; Hab 2:5-6.

¹⁴ Isa 5:8; Jer 5:27; Ezek 45:9; Mic 2:1; Hab 2:9; Amos 3:9; Mal 3:5.

¹⁵ Amos 5:12.

¹⁶ Amos 2:6; 5:12.

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and corrupt the economy for their own benefit. Amos did not call for a revolution, but since he attacked powerful self-interest groups, he was accused of being a revolutionary, a charge he denied.¹⁷ The reason Amos does not call for a revolution is that he feels Israel is beyond redemption. The most important thing about Amos' insight is that he sees poverty and oppression as a creation of the rich. While he equates the poor and the righteous, he does not idealize poverty. He does not see the poor as a "class" as in Marxist analysis. Rather he sees them as poor because they are alone and defenceless. He sees the rich as an organized group capable of marshalling the forces at their disposal.

(b) Proto-Isaiah

Proto-Isaiah preached in Judah. Like Amos, Isaiah attacked wealthy landowners and corrupt judges who were robbing the poor.¹⁸ Like Amos also, Isaiah saw poverty as something created by a corrupt judicial system and by the avarice of the wealthy. Isaiah compares Judah to a well-tended but unproductive vineyard.¹⁹ He claimed that the religious worship of the wealthy was unacceptable and offensive to YHWH.²⁰ He sees that his nation is rotten to the core and will decay from within. Yet a remnant will survive.²¹

While condemning Judah, Isaiah does not give up hope. He looked forward to a king, like David, who would rule with justice and righteousness.²² While Isaiah is totally opposed to state policies that oppress the poor, he does not call for a revolution. Yet he believes that YHWH will visit judgement on Judah because of the oppression of the poor. For Isaiah, the poor are YHWH's People.²³ This idea has behind it the notion that everyone in the community has someone to stand up for them. When there is no one to defend the poor, the judges and the king were supposed to defend them. When these fail the poor, they had only one defender, YHWH. Poverty does not make a person closer to YHWH. It results from being denied one's rights. Because of this, YHWH sides with the poor.

¹⁷ Amos 7:12-15.

¹⁸ Isa 1:23; 3:14-15; 5:8.22-23; 10:1-2; 32:7.

¹⁹ Isa 5:1-7.

²⁰ Isa 1:10-17.

²¹ Isa 10:22-23.

²² Isa 9:7; 11:5.

²³ Isa 3:15.

(c) Micah

Micah was a southerner around the time of Isaiah. His ministry is dated 722-701 BCE. He condemned Jerusalem as a centre for the dispossession of the poor and their families.²⁴ Like Amos and Isaiah, Micah condemns the judicial system that facilitated the exploitation of the poor.²⁵ He condemns religious leaders for their failure to speak out, in a craven attempt to protect their own economic status.²⁶ Micah presents YHWH as the protector, witness and judge, who will act against Jerusalem.²⁷ While Judah will fall, a David-like prince from Bethlehem will save it.²⁸

(d) Jeremiah

Jeremiah worked in Jerusalem about 100 years after Isaiah. Like his predecessors, undeniable evidence led Jeremiah to condemn the exploitation of the poor.²⁹ He spares no words in condemning those who exploit the powerless.³⁰ Jeremiah has no love for the kings of Judah. He condemns **Jehoiakim** (609-598 BCE) for expanding his palace and not paying his workmen.³¹ Rather than protect the rights of the poor, the king was stealing from them. Jeremiah made the king's (hence the state's) treatment of the poor a barometer of righteousness.³² Being a priest, Jeremiah was especially critical of the clergy who proclaimed peace to the oppressors of the poor.³³ He even preaches a sermon indicating that YHWH's demands regarding justice can become lost behind a well-conducted liturgy.³⁴

What are unique to Jeremiah are his laments.³⁵ These emotional laments give us an insight into the personal feelings of the one called to proclaim YHWH's judgement. Jeremiah never idealized the poor. In Jer 5:1-5 he is commanded to look carefully for one who does justice and seeks the truth. If he should find one, YHWH would spare Judah. He

²⁴ Mic 2:1-2.

²⁵ Mic 3:1-3,9-11.

²⁶ Mic 3:5,11.

²⁷ Mic 6:1-8.

²⁸ Mic 5:2-4.

²⁹ Jer 2:34.

³⁰ Jer 5:26-28.

³¹ Jer 22:13.

³² Jer 22:15-16.

³³ Jer 6:13-15; 8:10-12.

³⁴ Jer 7:1-15.

³⁵ Jer 11:18-23; 12:1-6; 15:10-21; 17:12-18; 18:19-23; 20:7-18.

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looks among the poor, but is unsuccessful.³⁶ Equally he finds no one among the rich. This reinforces the conclusion that YHWH takes the side of the poor, not because poverty puts people in a special state of closeness to YHWH, but because poverty is unjust and should not exist among YHWH's People.

(e) Zephaniah

Zephaniah was a southerner whose ministry took place in the period 628-622 BCE. Zephaniah criticizes Judah for the worship of foreign gods,³⁷ the assimilation of foreign customs symbolized by the popularity among the ruling classes of non-Israelite fashions,³⁸ and for an indifference to YHWH.³⁹ Zephaniah does not condemn material poverty, but speaks of poverty of spirit as something good. Since YHWH is the protector of the poor, Judah must act like the poor to enjoy that protection. For Zephaniah, the word that expresses the ideal relationship of human beings to YHWH is the word *poor*. The characteristic of the poor is absolute confidence in YHWH.

6.2.2 The Prophets in the Exilic Period⁴⁰

(a) Ezekiel

Ezekiel's ministry took place not in Judah, but in Babylon among the exiles. He interprets the Exile as YHWH's punishment on Judah's sin. One of the abominations, which Ezekiel mentions, is the oppression of the poor and needy.⁴¹ Among the works of the righteous⁴² are included: giving food to the hungry, covering the naked and refusing to lend at interest. He condemns the leadership class in Judah for failing to defend the rights of the poor.⁴³ For Ezekiel, wealth and poverty are interconnected phenomena. The ruling classes were rich because they extorted, robbed and oppressed the poor. Poverty is not brought about by chance or foolishness. It is no accident, but the consequence of the decisions of

³⁶ Jer 5:4.

³⁷ Zeph 1:5.9.

³⁸ Zeph 1:8.

³⁹ Zeph 1:12.

⁴⁰ Hoppe, *Poor*, 78-82.

⁴¹ Ezek 18:10-13.

⁴² Ezek 18:6-8.

⁴³ Ezek 22:25-30.

the rich to deprive the poor. In the New Jerusalem, righteousness and justice will replace violence and oppression.

(b) Deutero-Isaiah (Isaiah of Babylon)

A second, but unnamed prophet pronounced oracles to the exiles in Babylon. Because these oracles have been attached to the sayings of the eight-century Isaiah (Proto-Isaiah), the prophet has been known as [Deutero-Isaiah](#). The oracles of Proto-Isaiah are found in Isa 1-39, while those of Deutero-Isaiah are found in Isa 40-55. Deutero-Isaiah reiterates what the earlier prophets have said about poverty. YHWH is on the side of the poor and needy⁴⁴ Deutero-Isaiah does not launch an attack on the wealthy, but comforts his people in Exile. The [songs of the Suffering Servant](#) dominate Deutero-Isaiah.⁴⁵ The servant suffers and is ignored by the people. The songs point to a time in the future when Israel will live according to the moral, social and religious demands of the covenant. Like Zephaniah, Deutero-Isaiah speaks of the poor in a metaphorical sense. The poor are not necessarily materially poor, but those who trust in YHWH with faith and confidence. The rich are not those who oppress the poor, but who have abandoned their ancestral faith and rely on themselves to secure their future.

6.2.3 The Prophets of the Post-Exilic Period⁴⁶

(a) Trito-Isaiah

The Exile ended in 539 BCE and the Temple was built in 515 BCE. The last chapters of the Book of Isaiah (Isa 56-66) date from the period just before/after the rebuilding of the Temple. The return from exile was not a joyous thing, but one that created a gulf between those returning from Babylon, and those who had been left behind in Judah. A situation developed where a privileged few became wealthy, while the majority of the people were reduced to economic dependency. [Trito-Isaiah](#) attacks those who were only concerned about profit.⁴⁷ For Trito-Isaiah, the liturgy was not the foundation of Israel's relationship with YHWH. That relationship was based on inter-social relationships. If these were all mixed up, then there was no possibility of a positive relationship with YHWH. In the famous scene

⁴⁴ Isa 41:17.

⁴⁵ Isa 42:1-7; 49:1-7; 50:4-9; 52:13 – 53:12.

⁴⁶ Hoppe, *Poor*, 82-88.

⁴⁷ Isa 56:9-12.

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in the synagogue in Nazareth,⁴⁸ Jesus quotes a text from Trito-Isaiah.⁴⁹ It is a text that points to material poverty, which has once again established itself in Israel. It is a protest against conditions within the community that allow poverty to flourish once again. For Trito-Isaiah poverty is the result of decisions made by the wealthy that mask their theft in a cloak of religiosity.

6.3 The Poor in Prophetic Literature: Different Levels

Modern biblical scholarship shown that the manner in which the poor are presented in the Bible operates at three different levels:

- **The First Level:** this is the level of humanitarian ethics shared by all societies in the Ancient Near East including Israel.
- **The Second Level:** the level of “Exodus Theology.”
- **The Third Level:** the level of Exilic and Post-Exilic theology (Deutero-Isaiah). This theology was highly influential on Jesus. Note that the Second and Third levels are unique to Israel.

6.3.1 The First Level: Ancient Near Eastern Humanitarian Ethics

Four aspects dominated Ancient Near Eastern humanitarian ethics:

- Moral education.
- The role of the king.
- The role of the law.
- Spirituality focused on the poor.

⁴⁸ Luke 4:18-19.

⁴⁹ Isa 61:1-2.

(a) Moral Education

In the *moral education* of the Ancient Near East, the love of the poor was considered important. The following Egyptian and Mesopotamian texts on moral education are worth consulting:

Egyptian Texts

[The Teaching of Meri-ka-re](#) (2100-2017 BCE)⁵⁰

Soothe those who are weeping; do not afflict the widow; deprive no man of his father's goods.

[The Teaching of Ani](#) (2000-1000 BCE)

You may not eat a meal when another is standing by unless you stretch out your arm to give food to the other as well ... The human being is nothing. One is rich, the other is poor ... The one who last year was rich is a renegade this year ... You too, may come to a point where someone gives you crumbs.

The Teaching of Phistis (2000-1000 BCE)

The one who gives food to the poor will be welcomed by the gods in eternal favour. For when food is given, the heart of the god rejoices more than the heart of the one who receives it.

The Teaching of [Amenemhet I](#) (1960 BCE)

I gave to the beggar. I raised the orphan. I gave to the poor.

⁵⁰ For a complete list of the dynasties and pharaohs of Ancient Egypt, please click [here](#).

The History of the Eloquent Peasant (1800 BCE)

... Father of the orphan, husband of the widow ... apron to the mothers.

The Book of the Dead: Spell 125⁵¹

I gave bread to the hungry, water to the thirsty, clothing to the naked, and a passage to those who had no ship.

The Stela of the Steward Mentuwsre (1985-1795 BCE)

I was one who cared for the sick, who buried the dead and gave goods to those in need.

An Inscription on the Tomb of Rekh-mi-Re (1479-1473 BCE)

I soothed tears with consolation. I defended the widows. I placed the orphans in their fathers' inheritance. I gave bread to the hungry and water to the thirsty; meat, oil and clothing to those who had none. I supported the old man by giving him my staff. I caused the old woman to cry out: "oh how good everything is."

⁵¹ For the text of Spell 125, please click [here](#).

Mesopotamian Texts

A Typical Proverb

If a poor stranger alights at your house and asks for help, give him bread ... please prepare a nice lodging for him. Extend your hand to him. He will remember this and this place. Later on he may be wealthy and it will be to your honour.

Ancient Near Eastern documents show that these educational attitudes in favour of the poor stemmed from the higher levels in society. These ancient Near Eastern educational attitudes are reflected in the prophetic writings.

(i) Ezekiel 18:5-9

This text not only reflects the general ethical convictions of Israel, but also reflects the convictions in the form of moral education that was based on the observance of the Torah. There are references to cultic and juridical laws. The discussion in Ezek 18 is whether the punishment that the sins of Israel deserve extends to children and grandchildren. To give an answer Ezekiel constructs a case where the father is just (vv.5-9), the son unjust (vv.10-13) and the grandson is a just man (vv.14-17). Then he discusses God's reaction to each of these men. He mentions the ideas then current in Israel regarding good and bad behaviour. Sometimes he refers to the Torah (vv.5.6.9) and to general ideas existing in the society (vv.7-8) where the importance of good behaviour towards the poor and weak is stressed. In vv.10-13 we are told that the son does exactly the opposite to the father and that in vv.14-17 that the grandson imitates the just father.

(ii) Isaiah 58:6-11

This is a text of Trito-Isaiah and is post-Exilic. The discussion is not about who is punished or not. The relationship between cultic and ethical behaviour is the real issue. It is a critique of very religious liturgy-minded people who are not good to the poor. V.6

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emphasizes the freeing of the imprisoned. V.7 contains many old ancient Near Eastern motifs: sharing food, helping the homeless, clothing the naked and not turning away one's fellow. Vv.8-9a offers an indication of the blessings that come upon all who do good things. V.11 offers a benediction for all who do righteousness. When cultic and ethical behaviour is opposed everything concentrates on helping the poor and the suffering. This is the condition for receiving the blessing.

6.3.2 The King

The Hymn of Joy at the Accession of Ramses IV (1153-1147 BCE)

A happy day! Heaven and earth are in joy, for thou art the Lord of Egypt. They who were fled have come back to their towns; they who were hidden have come forth again. They who were hungry are sated and happy; they who were thirsty are drunk. They who were naked are clothed in fine linen; they who were dirty are clad in white. They who were in prison are set free; they who were fettered are in joy. The troublemakers in this land have become peaceful. High Waters have come forth from the caverns, that they may refresh the hearts of the common people. The homes of the widows are open again so that they may let the wanderers come in. The women-folk rejoice and repeat their songs of jubilation ... saying: "Male children are born again for good times, for he brings into being generation upon generation. Thou Ruler, life, prosperity, health, thou art for eternity!" The ships, they rejoice upon the deep. They have no (need of) ropes, for they come to the land with wind and oars. They are sated with joy, when it is said: "The King of Upper and Lower Egypt: Heqa-maat-Re-Setep-en-Ammon, life, prosperity, health, has taken over the office of his father!" All lands say to him: "Gracious is the Horus upon the throne of his father Ammon-Re, the god who sent him forth, the protection of the prince who carries off every land!"

(a) Jer 22:13-19

This is the most eloquent text on what is expected of the king. Jeremiah condemns [Jehoiakim](#) (609-598 BCE) by measuring his behaviour against that of his father, [Josiah](#) (641/0-609 BCE). It begins with the building of the new palace and rejects any idea of forced labour (vv.13-14). It is the classical text of judgement on an unjust king. The comparison with the father shows the father to be good and that his goodness is manifested in his attitude to the poor (v.16).

(b) Isa 11:3-5

This text is typical of how the royal liturgical language is transferred to the Messiah. The only description of royal behaviour is in terms of bringing justice to the poor. The idea of linking the poor with the expected Messianic king is proper to Israel and not found in other ancient Near Eastern texts.

6.3.3 The Law

Ancient Near Eastern societies had laws given by their kings. In Israel this was not so. YHWH gave the Torah as law to his people. We need to see this legal context out of which Amos speaks, and we need to see the reasons he gives for his actions and views. Amos speaks of justice in an ancient Near Eastern way.

(a) Amos 2:6-8

This text is part of the rhetorical unit Amos 1-2. Amos outlines the sin of the people of Israel and the judgement brought on them. He always names their sin (vv.6b-8). He speaks mainly about social injustice. In v.6 the “righteous one” is the just person who is poor. There is much debate about the meaning of “righteous” in v.6. Some scholars consider this to mean the “just one.” Other claim that it refers to those permitted to enter the Temple or Community Assembly. Slaves and the poor were not allowed into these meetings since ownership of possessions was a requirement for entry. The rich expelled the poor from the land and they were forced out of the community meetings. “To turn aside” in v.7 is to force someone into slavery. V.8 adds the sexual sin to those of the oppression of the poor. There is no indication of anything specifically Israelite here. (Perhaps the idea of

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the sexual sin as a profanation of the name of YHWH may be considered Israelite). The main focus of the prophet's condemnation is against sins of oppression against the poor. Amos does not argue with typically Israelite perspectives.

(b) Amos 3:9-10

V.9 talks of oppression. V.10 uses the term “how to do right” which is a very rare expression in the Hebrew Scriptures. It means an action that is straightforward. This is a very short text. The reference to oppression is considered as Amos' own words. In a visionary perspective he calls on foreigners to come and see what has happened to the poor in Samaria.

(c) Amos 5:10-12

Specifically ancient Near Eastern motifs are found here:

- The king does not take a bribe (v.12).
- He helps the poor in court. Amos addresses nobles and tells them to do the same.

6.3.4 A Spirituality Centred on the Poor

Ancient Near Eastern texts show that it was considered that the gods helped the poor. The more important ones are from Egypt, and Mesopotamia. The conviction of the gods' care for the poor grew in parallel with the idea of the king's love for the poor. This conviction begins in the Third Millennium BCE. For the first time a link between the action of the king and the god is established in connection with the poor.

Egypt, the Gods and the Poor (3000 - 2000 BCE)
A Coffin Text “I separated the wretched from the powerful.”

The Teaching of Meri-ka-re (2100 – 2017 BCE)

He (the god) created princes with the purpose that they support the back of the weak.

Egypt, the Gods and the Poor (1540-1070 BCE)

There are many texts from this period. They are characterized by *personal piety*. The origins of this are not quite clear. The piety was developed by the conservatives of the Amarna Period (1364-1347 BCE). For them, since their pantheon had been abolished, contact with their gods was available through prayer. This piety was also called the “religion of the poor.” Thus every Egyptian prayed to *their particular god*. Many of the texts witnessing to this piety are in the forms of prayers. Those who pray know that they live on the dark side of life. They accept what the gods give and they pray urgently for help. A new word for praying develops. “To pray” is “*to declare oneself as being poor*.”

Most of the prayers are to the one and same god, Amun-Re (who is the god of life and order). A very important text was the Amarna Hymn to the Sun: “He who lifts the afflicted one; who inclines his heart to him who cries to him; who saves the anxious one from the hour of the wild one.” It is a cultic text from the last ages before personal piety. Another text, from the *underground movement of the Amarna Period*: “My heart desires to see you ... Amun ... who fights for the poor. You are the father of the orphan, the husband of the widow...” A *variation on the theme* states: “My heart desires to see you ... when your voice brings wind from the North ... you give drunkenness without drinking ... you Amun are father of the orphan, husband of the widow...” *Another stela* from the period states: “Amun-Re ... great god who dominates Karnak ... who comes when the poor calls ... you

are Amun, Lord of the Silent One ... who comes when the poor cries ... you care to save me ... you saved me when I was in fetters ... you save even him who descends to the nether world...”

The biggest affliction for the poor was when they had to go to court. A *prayer to Amun* in this context states: “Amun, lend your ear to the poor in court ... let the poor go free ... let want surpass wealth.” Another infliction was that of being ill. A *prayer of a sick person* states: “Amun, you are the shepherd who saves the pains of him who is ill ... you are the food of him who is lame...”

The Hymn from the Leiden Collection: This hymn begins with the praise of the creator and world-governing Sun and praises the Sun who helps the poor: “Praise to you Amun-Re ... you have created the continents and islands ... you created so many good things so that living ones may live ... awe before you is in everyone ... you are beautiful in every hour ... everyone says, ‘we belong to you’ ... widows say, ‘you are our husband’ ... children say, ‘you are our father’ ... your name is a protection for the body ... you are a good idea in the midst of panic ... you save the poor from the mouth of the hot one.”

Mesopotamia and the Gods (3000-2000 BCE)

The most important god is **Utu** (the Sumerian god of the sun). He is called **Shamash**/Shamshu in **Akkadian**. He is the help of the poor. There are other gods and goddesses who help the poor. A Sumerian hymn from the end of the Third Millennium BCE to the *city-goddess of Lagash* states: “she knows the orphan, she knows the widow ... she finds justice for the oppressed ... she pays attention to the weak one.”

Mesopotamia and the Gods (2000-1000 BCE)

A hymn to [Ishtar](#) (goddess of love) tells how a woman is transposed to the place of the queen of the gods where “Ishtar gives a name to a female body among humans...” In the culture an exposed female child was the poorest of the poor. *The Hymn to Shamash*: It is 200 verses long. Lines 97-100 read: “you give the unscrupulous judge the experience of fetters ...he who helps the weak, it is pleasing to Shamshu.” Lines 130-146 read: “You have observed Shamash ... the feeble man calls from the hollow of his mouth ... you hear all...” The idea is that Shamash is addressed in the context of so much wretchedness in the world and he hears.

Marduk and Other Gods

Marduk

The texts to Marduk are in the form of “implorations” or “entreaties.” They are prayers that ask for something. They are texts used by all who are in need. They begin with a hymnic praise of Marduk. A text reads: “You are the Lord ... you illuminate the darkness ... to the deprived of rights and ill-treated you do justice ... you help the orphan and the widow...” Another text reads: “Without you they will not be free from misery and disaster ... without you widow and orphan will not be cared for ... you give a wife to the wanting widower...”

Other Gods

Although a war-god, [Ninurta](#) helps the deprived, the sick and the fatally ill people. He also helps those who are burdened by their sins. The gods thus help not only those in need, but also the sinful. Every kind of weakness in humans points to a disturbed relationship with the gods. The gods can bring back the human and correct the relationship. The *Prayer to Marduk's Wife* has the motif of the Song of Hannah⁵² and of the Magnificat.⁵³ It is the idea of the reversal of fate. “She who makes the rich poor and the poor rich; she who refuses the enemy...”

So it was that a spirituality of the poor developed.

Spirituality of the Poor: Egypt

The gods like the poor and like to help them. Every human being has a corner of his being where he is poor and miserable. Very early in the lamentations and prayers, the peoples of the ancient Near East called themselves “poor.” This represents a spiritualising of poverty. In Egypt this is clear in the personal piety. The people who formulate the prayers were poor. Yet rich people, when they spoke to the divinity, called themselves poor. There is a late Egyptian monument called “The Poor People's Stela, which was dedicated by the *prince*.”

⁵² 1 Sam 2:1-11.

⁵³ Luke 1:46-55.

The Novel of Setna

This is a late Egyptian Novel. The story is the predecessor of Jesus' story of Luke 16:19-31. It represents the apex of the development of the esteem of the poor before the gods. Setna, the royal prince has a son called Si-osire. Unknown to Setna, Si-osire is from the Nether World and has become man. One day as father and son are sitting together, they hear a funeral dirge. They look and see the funeral of a rich man. Then they see also the funeral of a poor man. He has no dirge or lamentation. He has no coffin. He is just rolled in a blanket. When Setna praises the dead rich man, Si-osire says: "May it happen to you in the Other World, as it will happen to the poor man. And may what will happen to the rich man, not happen to you!" When Setna does not understand, Si-osire brings him to the Nether World. There they see everything. They come to a large door. There is a man caught in the door, with one of the door's pivots revolving in his eye. Then they meet Osiris, the god of the Dead. Finally they see a radiant noble one. When they return home, the son says to the father: "Didn't you see the noble man? That was the poor man you saw rolled in a mat. His sins were weighed out against his good deeds. So it was ordered that to this poor man, all the wealth of the rich man's funeral was given. The rich man was brought to the Nether World too. His sins were richer than his good deeds and so he was punished. He was the one lying under the door with the pivots turning in his eye!" The novel represents the end of a developing idea in Egypt: it is better to be poor.

Spirituality of the Poor: Mesopotamia

The Egyptian stage of the development was never reached in Mesopotamia. Yet there was the concept that it was better to be poor in the eyes of the gods.

The Text of Lamentation

A priest describes the poor man who prays: “His heart is full of misery ... they all fall on him ... they silenced his laments...”

The Spirituality of the Poor

Also in Mesopotamia the kings described themselves as poor in their prayers. There was a spirituality of being poor, especially when one wanted to get something from the gods! The meaning of poor becomes equivalent with *humble* or *resigned to the will of God*. The same idea is contained in the Arabic word *Muslim*.

Is such reflected in prophetic writings?

(a) Jer 20:11-13

This is one of the texts of the “Lamentations of Jeremiah,” which were part of the personal prayers of the prophet. The text presents YHWH as helper of the poor. Vengeance is shifted to YHWH. In the final verse YHWH as helper of the poor is thanked. It is the use of metaphor. Jeremiah was a rich man, but persecuted. Yet in his prayer he considers himself poor. It is part of the oriental tradition of prayer. Since the gods were favourable to the poor, people presented themselves as poor before the gods in order to receive blessings from them.

6.3.5 Conclusions

- Much of what is termed “option for the poor” is not specifically Biblical or Christian. The ancient Near Eastern “option for the poor” is based on shared ethics. The parallels with ancient Near Eastern material show the “option for the poor” in prophetic literature as firstly an issue of simple humanitarian concern.
- The Theology of Liberation should be more careful about saying that its demand for the struggle of the poor represents the essence of Christianity. We are not sure of the fact that it is the essence of Christianity. It is God’s will that we work with the poor. It could be that the central point of the Bible in this regard has not yet been reached.
- It may be that many biblical texts, which sound like echoes of the Ancient Near East, have a wealth and context, which has yet to be revealed.

6.3.6 The Limits of Ancient Near Eastern Humanitarian Ethics

It is very important to recognize that while Ancient Near Eastern societies practiced an option for the poor based on humanitarian ethics, such an option was extremely limited. The main limitations were:

- The “option for the poor” arose out of sympathy for the poor. Yet it is important to recognize the difference between the theory and practice in the Ancient Near East. Many Ancient Near Eastern texts represent the ideal regarding the poor and not actual practice.
- Social systems were only called into question in *extreme* cases. Normally social structures were not questioned. Social structures were of the created order. In this sense a certain “option for the poor” could have a nuance of charitable condescension.

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- The Ancient Near Eastern “option for the poor” served to prevent sudden explosions in society and this maintained the system and strengthened the order that produced poverty. It created a system-stabilizing effect and obscured the problem.

The analysis of the limitations of the First Level of the “option for the poor” leads to a reflection on the Theology of Liberation. The Theology of Liberation does not choose charitable work and leave the social structures intact. The Theology of Liberation seeks to change social structures and this goes beyond the Ancient Near Eastern ethic. We should not therefore identify the Theology of Liberation with the Ancient Near Eastern “option for the poor.” The Ancient Near Eastern “option for the poor” did not touch institutions and structures. This is the key difference.

6.3.7 The Second Level: Exodus Theology

(a) The Exodus: The Prototype of YHWH’s Care for the Poor

The Exodus is the unique theme of the biblical confession of faith. YHWH’s act was seen as a divine act of liberation of the poor and oppressed. The most ancient statement of the Exodus is found in Deut 26:5-10. This is the Israelite confession of faith proclaimed when the first fruits of the harvest were presented to YHWH. The famous scholar Gerhard von Rad considered it as an ancient creed from the period of the Judges. The Hexateuch (the Pentateuch + the Book of Joshua) was seen as an expansion of this basic credo. Today we see that the Deuteronomistic redactor shaped the credo. It is a wonderful text summarizing the Pentateuch. Its pattern is found in other ancient documents such as Num 20:14-16.

The Deuteronomy text stresses poverty and the deliverance from it. The rhythm of three set up in v.5b recurs: “great, mighty and populous” (v.5b); “treated us harshly ... afflicted us ... laid upon us hard bondage” (v.6); “our affliction, our toil and our oppression” (v.7); “great terror ... signs ... wonders” (v.8). This is the basic metric structure of the text. V.5 is a description of the journey and the sojourning. V.6 describes the oppression and introduces the poverty theme. In v.7 YHWH hears the oppressed. Vv.8-9 describe YHWH’s action. In v.10 the prayer proper begins. Deut 26:5-10 is the central text of the Hebrew Scriptures. It is about the God who led the poor into freedom. It refers to poverty, affliction and liberation. It introduces the theme of poverty that is found in all the layers of the Book of Exodus. It is this theme that forms the basis of what is *specifically biblical* in the “option for the poor.” The structure of Deut 26:5-8 is as follows:

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- V.5: introduction.
- V.6: the text proper begins. The people are in distress.
- V.7: the cry of the people in distress is followed by YHWH's response. YHWH hears and sees.
- Vv.8-10: YHWH's intervention.

6.3.8 The Prophets and Exodus Theology

The prophets acted in two ways with regard to this Exodus theme:

- They denounced any loss of meaning of the Exodus event in Israelite society.
- They denounced Israelite oppression of the poor.

(a) The Prophet as “Critics of Israel”

The prophets denounced Israel-Judah for abandoning YHWH, the God of the Exodus, the only Saviour. Hosea and Ezekiel call the sin *harlotry*,⁵⁴ while other prophets called it *ingratitude*.⁵⁵ It is worth looking at the denunciations of Amos, Isaiah and Jeremiah:

- **Amos:** Israel is specifically criticized for its *sins of injustice* and the *oppression of the poor*.⁵⁶ The fat cows of Bashan are condemned because of their oppression of the poor and the needy.⁵⁷ In Amos 5:7 the prophet denounces the *injustices of those who wield power*.

⁵⁴ Hos 1:2; 2:2; Ezek 16:15; 23:1-4.

⁵⁵ Amos 2:9-12; Mic 6:3-5 and Jer 2:5.

⁵⁶ Amos 2:7.

⁵⁷ Amos 4:1-5.

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- **Isaiah:** Isaiah condemns the *injustice of the large estate owners*.⁵⁸ The *powerful are condemned* for having led YHWH's People astray.⁵⁹ The perversion of power within the Covenant community is a constant motif of prophetic condemnation.
- **Jeremiah:** Jeremiah specializes in denouncing the *kings of Judah* for their oppression.⁶⁰ In Jer 22:16 where the prophet cites Josiah's acts of justice, he exclaims, "is this not to know me, says YHWH?" Israel-Judah has known YHWH in the Exodus event. The "option for the poor" at the Second Level entails "knowing YHWH" while the practice of oppression is to fail to know YHWH who gave freedom through the Exodus event.

(b) The Prophet as "Conscientizer of the People"

The prophets not only condemned the oppressors of the poor, but "conscientized" the poor and oppressed so that they could liberate themselves. Some examples:

- **True and False Prophets:** At all times during the history of Israel-Judah there were "true" and "false" prophets. The false prophets proclaimed peace for those who did not listen to YHWH's word.⁶¹ The prophets who denounce are the true emissaries of YHWH because they are seen to be in favour of the Exodus, its option for the poor and its covenant relationship with YHWH.
- **The Cult:** Most prophets condemned the official religious cult.⁶² The cult was linked to the Exodus and to its idea of YHWH as the Liberator. But the cult became formalistic. Thus the prophets condemned the cult of YHWH that hid the oppression of the poor within its rituals.⁶³ Such unauthentic cult falsified the whole idea of the celebration of YHWH, the God of the poor and oppressed.

⁵⁸ Isa 5:8.

⁵⁹ Isa 3:12-26.

⁶⁰ Jer 22:16.

⁶¹ Jer 23:17.

⁶² Isa 1:11-17; Jer 2:2-4; 26:2-4; Amos 5:21-27; Hos 6:6; Mic 6:6-7.

⁶³ Isa 1:10-17.

6.3.9 The Third Level: (Post) Exilic Theology

(a) Introduction

This third stage arises at the time of the Exile and is found in the Book of Isaiah (Deutero- and Trito-Isaiah) in its most profound form. Prior to looking at Isaiah, the Book of Zephaniah will be taken as a starting point. Modern scholarship regards the Book of Zephaniah as *pre-Exilic*.

(b) The Poor and [Zephaniah](#)

Zephaniah prophesied during the reign of [Josiah](#) (640-609 BCE). This was the period in which Assyria was in decline and Babylonian power was developing. In this turbulent political context Zephaniah sees the fate of the nation as being in YHWH's hands. He stresses the *Day of YHWH* or *yôm yhw* (יום יהוה) - Hebrew: *day of YHWH*) when YHWH would ravage all nations, including his own people. *Yôm yhw* is the traditional phrase which refers to the eschatological destruction of all sinners; a destruction from which Israel-Judah thought she would have been spared. The first biblical occurrence of the phrase is in Amos 5:18-20. Whereas Israel thought of the day as one of deliverance for themselves, Amos inverted the idea and showed it to be a day of judgement on *Israel!* Isa 2:11-17 also portrays the day as one of universal judgement. Zephaniah follows Amos in his understanding of *yôm yhw*.

The rich of Jerusalem are contrasted with the poor of the country. Zephaniah's position is that since all Judah sinned and has fallen from holiness, the judgement of YHWH will come upon her. Yet there will be hope. YHWH will not abandon the remnant, from which a new beginning will be made. This remnant is called *The Poor*.

(i) The Contents of the Book

The Book of Zephaniah can be divided as follows:

1. The Title (1:1).
2. Oracles of Doom (1:2-18).
3. Threats Against the Nations (2:1-15).
4. Salvation of Jerusalem and Judah (3:1-20).

(ii) Oracles of Doom (Zeph 1:2-18)

Yôm yhwh will come on all creation (vv.2-3) and on Jerusalem and Judah (vv.14-18). The first to feel divine wrath will be the court officials who lead others astray (v.8) by wearing foreign clothes (i.e. the vestments used for the worship of foreign gods) and who engage in the cult of **Dagon** by leaping over the threshold (v.9). Merchants will be punished for their injustices, along with those who change money (vv.10-11). Unbelievers, those who think YHWH has nothing to offer humans, will be punished (vv.12-13). Vv.14-18 deal specifically with ***yôm yhwh***.

(iii) Threats Against the Nations (Zeph 2:1-15)

Zeph 2:1-3 form an exhortation to the Poor to stay on the paths of righteousness. Salvation is not guaranteed, but if people repent, there may be some hope. As in Amos 1-2, Zephaniah backs up the warning to his own people by citing oracles against other nations. Zeph 2:4-15 presents the storm of YHWH's anger. His wrath comes on the Gentiles first, so as to allow Judah to repent. The first group of Gentiles to be condemned is the Philistines (vv.4-7). Vv.8-11 refer to Judah's traditional enemies, Moab and Ammon. The curse here is impressive. These evil peoples will have the same fate as Sodom and Gomorrah. V.12 refers to Ethiopia. The reference is to Egypt, which was ruled by an Ethiopian dynasty. Egypt too will feel YHWH's wrath. Assyria and its capital, Nineveh, will be destroyed and the prophet gloats over this (vv.13-15). No remorse or compassion is shown.

(iv) Salvation of Jerusalem and Judah (Zeph 3:1-15)

Zeph 3:1-7: All the destruction fails to convince Judah to repent. Vv.1-5 paint the picture of the evil of Jerusalem in which there is tyranny and social injustice. Its rulers are like wild animals searching for food while its religious leaders flout the law. Only YHWH is just. According to vv.6-7 all the destruction of foreign nations has been a failure, for Jerusalem has not repented.

Zeph 3:8-15: YHWH's final act will be different. In v.8a he gathers the nations. In v.8b there is reference to a pouring out of anger. Vv.9-10 tells how YHWH converts the Gentiles and takes them to Jerusalem. In v.11a YHWH takes away Jerusalem's shame. 3:13 is the decisive statement. The New Jerusalem will be the Jerusalem of the Poor. Vv.14-15 is the closing hymn of the book. The book ends with salvation, but this does not justify the original deterioration of the society of YHWH. Salvation will return to Jerusalem,

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via the Gentiles. The New Order will be that of the Poor. It is to be noted that the Book of Zephaniah offers:

- A future perspective.
- An image of YHWH's care for the poor as a coming hope, not a past experience.
- An emphasis on the poor and exploited within Judah.

(c) Deutero-Isaiah

Modern scholarship accepts the following division of the Book of Isaiah:

- Proto-Isaiah (Isa 1-39).
- Deutero-Isaiah (Isa 40-55).
- Trito-Isaiah (Isa 56-66).

Deutero-Isaiah lived 150 years after Proto-Isaiah during the Babylonian Exile. In Deutero-Isaiah YHWH has changed his mind about the destruction of Judah because:

- It is YHWH who has made Judah poor.
- The nations have treated Judah unjustly.
- All Judah is the Poor of Israel, whom YHWH has joined to himself.

The poor appear in Isa 41:17; 51:21; 54:11.14 where they are portrayed graphically. There are basically two groups of text:

- Those texts addressed to the people who remain in Zion. The Figure of Zion dominates these texts.⁶⁴

⁶⁴ Female image: Isa 49:14-16; 50:1-3; 51:17-23; 54:1-10; 55:6-9; 60-62.

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- Those texts addressed to the people in Exile. The Servant of YHWH dominates these texts.⁶⁵ The theme of the New Exodus replaces the Old Exodus theme.⁶⁶

(i) The Songs of the Suffering Servant

These four songs are Isa 42:1-7; 49:1-7; 50:4-9; 52:13 – 53:12. When studied in the context of Isa 40-66 it can be seen that:

- The servant is the beloved one of YHWH, chosen and redeemed by him. The servant can be Judah,⁶⁷ Deutero-Isaiah,⁶⁸ Israelites and foreigners,⁶⁹ or the Persian king, Cyrus.⁷⁰
- The servant can also refer to the people of Judah, blind, deaf and despoiled⁷¹ or even to YHWH burdened by Judah's sins.⁷² Most scholars see the Suffering Servant as referring to Judah in Exile.

(iii) The Theology of Deutero-Isaiah

In summary form this theology includes the following points:

- The emphasis is on genuine poor people.⁷³
- As in the Old Exodus, so too in the New Exodus, the emphasis is on the action of YHWH alone. This is seen clearly in Deutero-Isaiah's use of the desert motif. Under the impression of the striking similarity between Israel's historical situation in the Egyptian bondage and in the Babylonian Exile,

⁶⁵ Male image: Isa 42:1-7; 49,1-7; 50,4-9; 52,13-53,12.

⁶⁶ Isa 35:5-7; 43:15-17; 48:21; 51:9-10.

⁶⁷ Isa 41:8.9; 43:10; 44:1.2.21.

⁶⁸ Isa 42:1; 49:3.6.

⁶⁹ Isa 50:10; 52:13; 53:11.

⁷⁰ Isa 44:28.

⁷¹ Isa 42:19; 49:7.

⁷² Isa 43:24.

⁷³ Isa 57:15; 61:1; 64:2.

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Deutero-Isaiah expresses the hopeful expectation of a new Exodus and a new settlement in Canaan in terms and images that are clearly patterned upon the Pentateuchal traditions. He fully retains the established notion of the desert trek. However the original concept of the trek, for the sake of purification, is completely overshadowed by the “Divine Benevolence” theme. The shift of stress is easily explained. It arises out of the fundamentally different theological position of post-Exilic Israel, compared with that of the Exodus generation. For the Exodus generation the desert became the locale of purification. The returning exiles had already passed through the stage of catharsis with the Exile. The new trek through the desert could be freed from its purgatory qualities and concomitantly be invested with new images of promise and hope and could be wedded with the theme of Davidic covenant and with the vision of the restored Jerusalem.

- YHWH creates a new order. No longer are there rich and poor. This is expressed in the image of the New Jerusalem. The new order is based on Law, Peace and Justice.⁷⁴
- The subject of the event: The People of YHWH are poor because they have failed to listen to YHWH. He uses the other nations to chastise Judah. Yet they are loved by YHWH and persecuted all the more because they are YHWH’s people.
- A new pattern: YHWH’s instrument of salvation is created within other nations. Jerusalem is recognized as the centre of the world and all nations come in pilgrimage. The new order is a model for all the nations.⁷⁵

⁷⁴ Isa 60:1-22.

⁷⁵ Isa 60:1-22.

(d) Jesus

Which approach (Ancient Near Eastern, Exodus, Post-Exilic) forms Jesus' attitude? In Luke 7:22 there is a list of poor people and it is stated that the poor have the good news preached to them. In Luke 4:18-19 Jesus quotes Isa 61:1-2. In Luke 7:22 the logic of Jesus' answer is that Isaiah's words are fulfilled. Jesus proclaims the arrival of what the prophets have said. He thus operates at the level of Post-Exilic theology. The other levels are present in Jesus' attitude, but the Post-Exilic dominates.

6.3.9 Some Concluding Remarks

Israelite belief held that since YHWH was the protector of the poor, "poverty" was considered as something entitling one to YHWH's favour. Yet the prophets of Israel do not idealize poverty as a special state of closeness to YHWH. Poverty is presented as an evil created by the wealthy, who engage in immoral practices to enrich themselves. In this they consume the innocent. For the prophets, the poor are victims whose only legitimate response is protest.

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