

# The Psalms and Human Poverty

By Don E. Saliers | Volume 4.1 Winter 2018

Poverty is endemic in a world that hordes wealth and exults in it. Many of us have come to understand that poverty and the problems associated with it are astoundingly persistent. We so easily make peace with the sharp co-existence of utter wealth with utter poverty. In the United States, this contrast has become a cliché of everyday news and political analysis. Some who are well-trained in economics and social history say that such human disparity is *simply the way it is*. At the same time, those who stand in the religious tradition of the Hebrew prophets are continually struggling with this humanly destructive reality in our social/political world. The enormous gap between the rich and the poor is not what “ought to be.” This conviction is deeply written in both the prophetic and the wisdom literatures of the Bible. When the church and Christian theology turn our attention to the enormity of the problem, we need look no further than the Psalms for sources of insight. There is, of course, much more than economic disparity at stake.

In his seminal 1971 work, *A Theology of Liberation*, the Peruvian theologian Gustavo Gutierrez used the expression “preferential option for the poor” to describe the radical idea that God, as described in the scriptures, chooses to take the side of the marginalized and the oppressed. Since that time, this idea of a “preferential option” has become central to liberation theology and has found its way into the moral and ethical teachings of the Christian churches—in the United States most notably through the writings of the U. S. Conference of Catholic Bishops.<sup>[1]</sup> My question is: What can be discerned of God’s preferential option for the poor in the Psalms, which play such a central role in Christian liturgy and prayer?

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Much of the Psalter, I contend, is born of the gap between what ought to be and what actually results from our habitual arrangements of power and possession. This essay explores some of the deep questions about human poverty that emerge in the poetic prayers of the Psalms, and in certain texts from the book of Proverbs.

There are several distinct ways in which poverty appears in the Psalms:

- 1) the voice of the suffering poor in laments
- 2) judgment on those who oppress the poor
- 3) the righteous who consider and aid the poor
- 4) the divine *hesed* (the foundational loving-kindness and justice of God toward all creation) and the way poverty in all its forms is to be addressed.

These are linked together through the rhythms of the entire Psalter. Each mode is intertwined with the others.

The plight of the poor is right on the surface of many Psalms. Take, for example, the first lines of Psalm 41 that concludes Book I of the Psalter: “Happy are those who consider the poor; the Lord delivers them in the day of trouble. The Lord protects them and keeps them alive; they are called happy in the land.” Those who care for the weak and poverty-stricken are blessed. By contrast the wicked are those who oppress the poor: “The wicked draw the sword and bend their bows to bring down the poor and needy. . . .” (Psalm 37:14). It is notable that the great motif announced in Psalm 1—the contrast between the ways of the wicked and the ways of the righteous—so often refers to the treatment of the poor and oppressed. How those who are impoverished, materially or spiritually, are treated becomes a key index of the difference between those who delight in Torah and those who stand in God’s judgment.

When the Psalmist laments the arrogance of the wicked who persecute the poor (as in Psalm 10), God is called upon to “arise” to do justice. God is expected to answer. The divine response to this plea is made clear in Psalm 12. “Because the poor are despoiled, because the needy groan, I will now rise up,” says the Lord. . . (v.5). God consistently promises to come to the defense of the poor and needy. The primal contrast between the wicked and the righteous continues throughout the entire collection of psalms. In the lengthy Psalm 37, God provides both rescue and refuge against the plots and violence of the wicked. Again the voice of the poor is given a prominent place: “The wicked draw the sword and bend their bows to bring down the poor and needy, to kill those who walk uprightly. . . .” (v.14). Yet there is social realism here; this is not a sentimental prayer simply for material riches to be given to the poor. “Better is a little that the righteous person has than the abundance of many wicked” (v.16). The spiritual gift of divine safe-keeping is itself a release from captivity and from the devices and desires of those who would oppress the poor.

Some Psalms celebrate the ways in which the righteous (who may indeed possess some wealth) come to the aid of the poor. Psalm 112 contrasts them with the wicked who are angry at such generosity given to those whom the wicked think unworthy. The righteous are described as “gracious and merciful” and as those “who deal generously and lend, who conduct their affairs with justice” (vv.6-7); “They have distributed freely, they have given to the poor” (v.9).

At the same time, it is clear that it is God’s compassion that works in and through such generosity. Psalm 113 claims that God “raises the poor from the dust, and lifts the needy from the ash heap. . . .”

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Some forms of poverty are discovered only by paying attention to cries of desolation and despair. Some of these are etched in the laments that are most difficult to hear, as in Psalm 88. We hear the voice of a deeply troubled soul, “I am like those who have no help, like those forsaken among the dead” (vv.4-5). Unlike most of the lament Psalms, this one does not turn to praise at the end. “You have caused friend and neighbor to shun me; my companions are in darkness” (v.18). This, too, must be understood as a severe form of poverty—the experience of the absence of divine and human assistance. While this Psalm

has traditionally been interpreted as the expression of deep sickness, it is also a cry of loss, of diminishment. We do well to read and pray this Psalm on behalf of those in exile, in desperate conditions. This form of human impoverishment demands the compassion of God as well. The church must learn to cry out for those who have no social or political voice.

At the same time God's pronouncements characteristically contain a reply to poverty in all its forms. Psalm 132, for example, speaks of God inhabiting Zion: "I will abundantly bless its provisions; I will satisfy its poor with bread" (v.15). This is contrasted with those who have no bread and who are subject to social conditions that have taken their bread! The Psalms are not shy in speaking of human poverty and of the plight of the poor under the image of bread. Material poverty is clearly in the mind of the Psalmist, but so is the plight of those who are broken in spirit and under the oppressive hand of the wicked. The appearance of phrases about those who "eat my people as they eat bread" (cf. Ps. 14:4, 53:4 and elsewhere) reveal overtones of consumption on the part of those who practice exploitation of the poor. Such exploitation is a violation of the divine covenant. In this sense, the Psalms present us with a set of permanent tensions placing the *hesed* of God in relation to the demand for human justice for the poor and marginalized.

Psalm 109 is one of the most challenging and disturbing psalms relevant to our theme. It has been treated as an angry, cursing prayer. But Walter Bruggemann has given it a startling fresh interpretation. It contains a passionate plea for actual justice under the sovereignty of God's reign of justice. The figure who accuses the righteous is the one who "did not remember to show kindness, but pursued the poor and needy and the brokenhearted to their death" (v. 16). While we may not find the strict retributive justice fully satisfying, the Psalmist dares speak the angry hope that many in our world have. This is the voice of the poor that we must hear. Not vengeance, but justice in and through social processes—both judicial and political. "The truth is that the God of the Bible is committed to a public justice that is not sentimental. . . . The voice of this psalm is the voice of the poor who insist that human solidarity (*hesed*) matters to the quality of our common life." His conclusion strikes at the heart of our theme. "When that voice is absent from our conversations, we likely will end with a protected religion and with a God who is not pressed enough about abiding commitments to the poor."<sup>[2]</sup>

## **A Concluding reflection**

The Psalms contain both the prophetic critique of the conditions of human degradation and elements of wisdom found in the explicitly moral instruction of Proverbs and the wisdom literature more generally. The human heart cries out to God to come to the rescue of the poor. To pray the Psalms is thus to participate in the cry against injustice and to the continuing supplication for the orphan and the widow who represent *all* who are relegated to poverty and neglect. The fact that the Psalms also speak of abundance and material blessing as gifts (as in Psalms 66, 67, and 147) throws into bold relief the social reality of those deprived of the good things of creation. Poverty, both spiritual and material, is not what God wills for the children of earth.

Lament, complaint, and supplication all lead both to and from doxology. That is the profound rhythm of the Psalms. Thus, it is no accident that even in the midst of great doxological praise, the poor are not forgotten. In the Hallel Psalms we hear that the Lord God "raises the poor from the dust, and lifts the needy from the ash heap, to make them sit with princes. . ." (113:7-8). The whole of the Psalter concludes with breathless praise (Psalms 146-150). In the midst of doxology we hear Psalm 146 sing of the God "who executes justice for the oppressed; who gives food to the hungry (v.7). "The Lord lifts up those who are bowed down. . . watches over the strangers; upholds the orphan and the widow, but the

way of the wicked is brought to ruin” (vv.8-9). Thus, when we sing and pray Psalm 146 (and the great Hallel) in the liturgy the Christian assembly echoes Isaiah 61, and recognizes the theme of justice for the poor proclaimed by Jesus in his inaugural sermon (Luke 4).

The Psalms sing of a justice which is the heart of God’s covenant with God’s people, the compassionate commitment (*hesed*) of God to the poor. God responds to the cry of the oppressed. The lyrical mode of the Psalter is firmly rooted in the Book of the Covenant (Exodus 22). There God speaks: “You shall not wrong or oppress a resident alien, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt. You shall not abuse any widow or orphan, if you do abuse them, when they cry out to me, I will surely heed their cry. . . . If you lend money to my people, to the poor among you, you shall not deal with them as a creditor. . . . If your neighbor cries out to me I will listen, for I am compassionate.” This is the great theme of God’s preferential option for the poor. From our brief sampling, here we can conclude that the Psalms continue to sing and pray these things in our time and place. This is why, for the Christian communities, these Psalms are essential to our prayer, “Your kingdom come.”



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[1] “The obligation to provide justice for all means that the poor have the single most urgent economic claim on the conscience of the nation.” *Economic Justice for All*, paragraph 86 (The U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, 1986).

[2] Walter Bruggemann, *The Psalms and the Life of Faith*, ed. Patrick D. Miller. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995), 281.

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