Some comments on wealth and poverty in the Bible

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Some basic assumptions

(1) In the Bible's usual vocabulary society is not divided into the rich and the poor. The rich are a very small élite, often extremely wealthy. The poor (usually meaning the destitute) are not people who have reasonable economic security at a level of basic subsistence (i.e. many peasants and artisans), but either those who lack economic security, living dangerously on the edge of destitution, or those who are destitute, who cannot survive except by begging or crime or selling themselves into slavery. In the strictest sense the latter are the poor, but those who are economically very vulnerable are often categorized with the poor. The standard categories, very frequently mentioned, are widows, orphans, sojourners (resident aliens), and day labourers (e.g. Exod 22:21-22; Lev 19:10; Deut 24:17; Job 24:3-4; 31:16-31; Ps 84:3; Zech 7:9-10; Mal 3:5; Matt 20:1-15; Mark 12:41-44; Jas 1:27; 5:4). Especially in the Gospels, the disabled are also mentioned (Lev 19:14; Job 29:15-16; Luke 4:18; 7:22; 14:13, 21). These categories of people either could not work or did not own land or even if they did own land were very vulnerable to abuse of power by the powerful. Surprisingly, at first sight, slaves are not usually mentioned along with the poor. In fact, slaves were often better off than, say, day labourers, since employers had no interest in the welfare of those they employed on a day-to-day basis but did have an interest in at least the physical health of their slaves.

(2) Wealth and poverty are intimately connected with power and status in society. The poor are also the powerless, unable to protect their rights against those with social power. Debt and abuse of the judicial system were prominent means by which people became poor and the powerful increased their wealth. (Hence the Torah's concerns with debt and usury, and the continual attempts in OT to ensure that judges were incorruptible and not partial to the rich.) The rich have honour (an important social good), even if regarded as oppressors, while the poor tend to be despised (as we can tell from injunctions not to despise them: Prov 14:31; 17:5).

(3) One fact of far-reaching significance about the difference between such ancient societies and modern society is that the two interdependent a priori expectations of a modern economy - that individuals expect constantly to improve their standard of living and that the economy is expected to grow without limit - were completely unknown to biblical and other ancient societies. The OT's classic picture of utopian existence - 'everyone under his vine and his fig tree' (1 Kings 4:25; Mic 4:4; etc) - is simply the life of the ordinary peasant family at its best: owning their own modest smallholding, producing enough to live and with leisure enough to enjoy it, and with no threat from the rapacious rich or foreign invasion. Even when imagining the idyllic future, Israelite peasants wanted no more than this in material terms. Poverty, of course, was what noone wanted. People who did seek to make money beyond ordinary sufficiency were greedy and warned of the folly (e.g. Prov 23:4-5) or the
consequences of gaining wealth. It was often thought obvious that the rich could only be rich at the expense of the poor.
Biblical approaches to wealth and poverty

(1) Both the legislation of the Torah and the oracles of the prophets presuppose a common notion of what the society of God's covenant people should be like (and perhaps was more like earlier in Israel's history than later). Each family owns its own smallholding, which passes down in the ownership of the family inalienably. The inalienable rights of every Israelite family to its land are based in YHWH's gift of the land to all his people. No doubt there was never any thought of mathematical equality between families. But any accumulation of land is almost necessarily at the expense of others. Therefore the prophets condemn those who add field to field, and the Torah has a great deal of legislation designed to prevent accumulation of wealth by some and the impoverishment of others. Making money out of money (usury) is forbidden. Sabbatical and jubilee years ensure release from debt and slavery and the return of all land to its original owners.

(2) The assertion that in the OT wealth is often regarded as God's blessing to the righteous finds very little support in the texts. (The nomadic society of the patriarchs - to which Job also fictionally belongs - is tacitly recognized to have different cultural values from agrarian Israel.) It seems to me to arise from reading modern assumptions into texts which speak of YHWH's blessing giving prosperity. This refers to such things as the weather conditions to ensure good harvests. They simply expect that the peasant family will live quite well from their smallholding, not that they will use the surplus to accumulate wealth and land. Many of the sayings in Proverbs embody a realistic recognition of life as it is, including rich and poor, such as is fairly typical of peasant wisdom, but very few attribute riches to God's blessing (10:22; 22:4). The Torah forbids - unrealistically, of course - even the king to accumulate wealth (Deut 17:17). In general, the Torah legislates to prevent there being rich people, the prophets denounce the political and economic developments which produced a significant class of rich landowners and wealthy bureaucrats, the psalmists complain to God against their oppression by the rich, wisdom considers the pursuit of wealth foolish (Proverbs) or the fortunes of rich and poor a major instance of the meaninglessness of life (Ecclesiastes). There are thus different approaches to wealth in the OT, but not much comfort for the rich.

(3) The Torah's provision for the poor (those who have no land, cannot work, have no relatives to provide for them) is a combination of legislation (such as the law of gleaning, levirate marriage) and instilling moral obligation. One of the functions of the book of Ruth is to portray the covenant community working as it should for the benefit of those in need (two widows, one of them a resident alien) through its legal provisions put to work by people's covenant-loyalty (δσι) to each other. The famous contradiction between Deuteronomy 15:4 ('there will be noone in need among you') and 15:11 ('there will never cease to be some in need') surely means: There will always be those who would be destitute if you failed to provide for them. There will be enough for all if it is generously shared.

(4) The Bible associates different spiritual attitudes with wealth and poverty or with the status or lack of it that goes with each (of course these are intended as typical attitudes, not without exception). The rich and powerful are arrogant before God, boastful, i.e. feeling in complete control of their lives, self-sufficient, putting God out of mind, and imagining God takes no notice of their exploitation of the poor (e.g. Ezek 16:49-50; Hos 13:6; Jas 4:13-16). The poor and 'lowly' (referring to their social
status) are humble or meek (no contemporary English word seems really suitable), i.e. they trust wholly in God and set all their hopes on God. Hence they become paradigmatic of whole-hearted reliance on God. I doubt whether, as has been claimed, 'the poor' therefore becomes a term referring purely to people's piety, with no reference to their economic and social status. But it does become strongly associated with exemplary faith. When Matthew's first beatitude has 'poor in spirit' where Luke has simply 'the poor,' the effect is not to spiritualize the material aspect away, but to clarify the economic and spiritual correlation: the people who rely wholly on God because they are destitute of worldly goods.

(5) Right through the Bible (psalms, wisdom literature, prophets, Gospels, epistles) runs the theme that characteristically God exalts the lowly and brings low those who are high (e.g. 1 Sam 2:7-8; Job 5:11a, 16; Ps 113:7-8; Prov 29:23; Isa 2:11; Ezek 17:24; Matt 23:12; Luke 1:52-53; 14:12; 18:14; 1 Cor 1:27-29; Jas 1:9-10; 4:10; 1 Pet 5:6). The lowly are the poor, the powerless, the oppressed, the humble, the righteous; the exalted are the rich, the politically and economically powerful, the arrogant, the wicked. Essentially the idea is reversal of status. Therefore the same terms can be used of those who through force of circumstances are 'lowly' and those who 'humble themselves' (e.g. Luke 14:12; Jas 4:10). The latter do not necessarily become economically poor, but nor is the reference to purely spiritual attitude. They put themselves, as it were, on the same level as the poor, renouncing the privileges of status in relation to other people and the arrogance of status in relation to God. To humble oneself is to identify with the poor. The range of these sayings only becomes intelligible when we remember the nexus of status, privilege, power, wealth and arrogance.

(6) If we see Jesus' ministry as aimed at the eschatological renewal of God's people Israel in the dawning of the rule of God, then we can see Jesus as implementing the imperatives of the Torah, the prophets and the wise in relation to the poor in typically radical forms. On the one hand, he goes out of his way to bring into the sphere of God's eschatological grace the destitute and the marginalized of all kinds, including disabled beggars, lepers, demoniacs, prostitutes and (reminding us that economic status was not his only criterion of marginality) rich tax-collectors and the chronically sick in wealthy families. (A very striking feature of the Gospels, in their ancient context, is how many and various people from the lowest strata of society appear as individuals in them.) On the other hand, for his disciples who would 'enter' the kingdom, living out already the values of God's rule, he made paradigmatic the poor (to whom the kingdom belongs: Matt 5:3; Luke 6:20), children (the 'little ones' who have no status in society at all: Matt 18:1-4; Mark 10:13-16), the day labourers and the beggars (like whom the disciples must live in day by day trust in God for material provision: Matt 6:31-34; 10:9-10) and the slaves (none claiming the privileges of master but all undertaking the duties of slaves: Mark 9:34; 10:43-44; John 13:14). Jesus reconstitutes society under God's rule by making the people with no status or privilege at all the paradigm to which others must conform. This is why it is difficult, though not impossible, for the rich to enter the kingdom (Mark 10:24-25). The instruction that those who can afford to give dinner-parties should not invite their relatives, friends and neighbours, but the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind (Luke 14:13), requires something more radical than generous charity, which was a well accepted social duty. It means treating the destitute as one's social equals. On these terms, but only on these terms, Jesus did not confine the kingdom to the destitute, any more than he confined it to the children. He did very seriously
privilege the destitute and the children, in order to deprive all others of privilege. This is also the effect of his use of the theme of reversal of status: by reversing social norms to subvert all status (Matt 9:34; Matt 18:4; 23:12; Luke 14:11).

(7) Surprisingly, perhaps, Jesus' radical approach, along with its OT roots, is faithfully reflected both by Paul, in his controversy with the status-obsessed Corinthians (1 Cor 1:26-29; cf. 11:20-22), and by James (1:9-11; 2:5; 4:10), who most strikingly reverses current social values by accusing his readers of 'dishonouring' the poor (2:6). For James the eschatological reversal of status must be reflected already in the Christian community's honouring of the poor as those to whom the kingdom has been promised. It is interesting to find James denouncing the rich both in the style of wisdom literature, for their folly (4:13-16), as Jesus did in the parable of the rich fool (Luke 12:16-20), and also in the style of the prophets, invoking judgment on their oppression of the poor (Jas 5:1-6), as Jesus also did in the parable of the rich man and Lazarus (Luke 16:19-31).

(8) The community of goods in the early Jerusalem church (Acts 2:44; 4:32-5:11) was no doubt both a response to circumstances (the community must have included many people who had no means to provide for themselves) and an attempt to implement Jesus' vision of the renewed Israel. When Luke says that 'there was not a needy person among them' (4:34), the allusion is to Deut 15:4. This is Israel as the Torah always intended it should be. (We should remember the context in a period when more and more small farmers and tenant farmers were losing their livelihood as the big estate owners exploited their debt. The economic provisions of the Torah were not observed, and zealous Jews were well aware of that. The objectives of some groups in the revolutionary movement was precisely to put this right. The early Jerusalem church could be seen as a different means to this end, beginning with a group of people who realised in their life together the economic ideal of the Torah.) Luke certainly does not present the community of goods as a failed experiment, even though we know of no attempts to follow it in other early Christian communities. It is part of Luke's account of the earliest church which he sets out as an exemplary model of the life of the new people of God. Probably we should not take it as prescriptive, but certainly as exemplary. This kind of organization of shared resources was not followed elsewhere, but the spirit of it survived. The best example is what Paul says about his collection for the Jerusalem church (2 Cor 8-9), including a neglected but rather radical statement about the fair sharing of material resources (8:13-15).