

The richness of the poor in the Holy Scripture

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Introduction

How come we put side by side the rich and the poor? Does anyone of them have to do with the other? How is it possible for a poor man or for a poor woman to be rich or to be said so? That looks like a contradiction. Nevertheless, within the Bible the hagiographers play with these social positions and relations. This demands a hermeneutic of the different terms with which the prophets and the biblical wisdom display poverty in biblical times. This hermeneutic will help to read the blessing upon the poor in the New Testament period, up until the end to the book of Revelation.

It is impossible in such a brief overview to surpass the whole field of biblical texts on this subject. At least it is important to map out the main features of the poor in the Holy Land in biblical times, what sort of social standards they had to endure, with whom they had to cope. Why did they become a theological topos for the announcement of the kingdom of God? If that is so, you have to deal with the theological theme of proportional retribution in Israel, for Job and Jesus, both of them, had to face it.

In times of the so called “crisis”, like the ones we live in, we assume this challenge of speaking about the poor. But to be authentic, it has to have empathy, for it stakes at the very heart of Christian faith. Biblically speaking, poverty is not a simple sociological criteria or random. So, it is not just useful for the Christian preaching, but it belongs to the very core of Christian life. Poverty is part of the revelation, poverty is revelation, for God reveals Himself poorly. He prefers the poor, the humble. Poverty is even supported by an eschatological horizon, for it comes up like a promise to all those who believe in Jesus, in God and keep hoping the fulfillment of God’s promise, already begun on the Mountain in Mt 5 when Jesus blessed forever all those who have a pure and poor heart. The principle of incarnation demands this empathy, otherwise you betray it. You cannot talk about it from outside. Yet, this was the accusation in the years of liberation theology, presented by someone who studied and announced his entire life the message of the prophets of Israel in what concerns the denounce of social injustice inflicted on the poor of Israel:

“... pensé que estas cuestiones no pueden quedar al margen de la enseñanza oficial, perdida con frecuencia en temas bíblicos que a nadie interesan. Sobre todo, teniendo en cuenta que una presentación no comprometida de los profetas equivale a traicionarlos ... se trata de una cuestión muy grave, que casi no nos atrevemos a abordar. La mejor manera de eludir la palabra de Dios es estudiar la palabra de Dios. Porque él sigue hablando de forma directa, inmediata, a través de los acontecimientos y personas que nos rodean. Y su palabra oculta, silenciosa, podemos y debemos transformarla en palabra resonante y actual. Pero esto es duro, comprometido. Y no es científico. No ayuda a subir en el escalafón magisterial ni a conseguir prestigio. Mejor un trabajo de este tipo, que exige esfuerzo, pero no trae preocupaciones. Quienes nos dedicamos de por vida a estudiar los textos proféticos debemos confesar de vez en cuando que todo lo que hacemos es mentira. Los profetas no pretendían que los estudiásemos, sino que escuchásemos su voz y la pusieramos en práctica. Cualquier investigación sobre ellos encubre una buena dosis de cobardía”¹.

¹ JOSE LUIS SICRE, “*Con los pobres de la tierra*” *La justicia social en los profetas de Israel*, Madrid, Cristiandad 1984, 13-14.

Actually, this subject is nowadays rendered on the topic of social justice, a problem with which Israel came across after the period of monarchy. Social injustice was already a great concern for biblical authors. What have they taught us? Is Christianity an invitation to live in misery, according to the modern critique? Such reassessment must be taken into account.

The vocabulary of poverty in the Old Testament

Biblical Hebrew offers some concepts for different realities of poverty. The poor began to be a concern in the Hebrew Bible from the deuteronomist theology on. Poverty was not a topic in Pentateuch since the people recorded themselves as a whole². Only after the entrance in the Promised Land did poverty turn to increase. After the period of the monarchy social clashes and gaps began to increase³. The massoretic text uses six terms to define and distinguish all those in need in the Israelite society of the Old Testament: you have the *dal* (the poor, the weak not accounted for society, the helpless and irrelevant for the powerful and rich people)⁴, the *'ôni* (the miserable, afflicted, someone completely dependent, the beggar), the *'ébyôn* (the one materially in need, economically or legally distressed)⁵, the *'âni / 'ânâw* (the humble poor)⁶, the *râsh* (deprived from economic means and tools, the oppressed by violence and circumstances)⁷, and the *miskên* (the underprivileged, in the lower ranks of society, the despised, unconsidered). This last term is very rare in the Hebrew Bible (only three times in Qohelet), and is always translated by “penês” by the Septuaginta, for this term translates as well all the terms mentioned above. But “penês” were all those who needed to work and were forced to live without the leisure characteristic of the rich gentry. Only in one occasion the massoretic text

² See J. DAVID PLEINS, “Poor, poverty”, *ABDV* (1992) 404.

³ See, for instance, ROLAND DE VAUX, *Les institutions de l'Ancien Testament I*, Paris 1958, 14.

⁴ SIMON LÉGASSE, “Pauvreté chrétienne”, *DSp XII* (1984) 614 calls the “dalim” the “maigre”, “faible”.

⁵ See E. GENSTERBERGER, “‘bh /aebjôn” *THAT*³ I (1978) 24-25.

⁶ See ROBERT MARTIN-ACHARD, “‘nh” *THAT* II (1976) 341-350.344-345.

⁷ See SIMON LÉGASSE, “Pauvreté chrétienne”, *DSp XII* (1984) 614.

(Ps 102,18) presents *‘arâr* (the misfortunate, the stripped) instead of one of these six terms. In this case, the Septuaginta translates by *tapeinôn* in the Codes A, B and S (Ps 101,18 LXX). Only once (Est 1,20) the greek and common *ptôkôs* replaces the Hebrew *qatan* (small)⁸. The same happens with the Hebrew *hêlékah* (the hapless, unfortunate). It appears only twice: in Ps 10,8 the Septuaginta (Ps 9,29) renders it by *pênêta* and in Ps 10,14 the greek Ps 9,35 translates by *ptôkôs*. This indicates a tendency to slither the semantics of poverty to a religious and moral sense.

As for *miskên*, the wise Qohelet expresses grief because the poor (the *miskên*) is not considered when you have someone more powerful before you. So, he advises that “is better the young wise poor [*miskên / penês* LXX] than an old and foolish king that no longer takes counsel” (Qo 4,13). He continues his grief, for the city no longer remembers such a person, eventhough she is wise (cf. 9,15.16). To Qohelet the *miskên* is despised, not listened to.

The *ra’sh* is common in the book of Proverbs (Prov 13,8.23; 14,20), even if it is not the most common category to describe those in need or impoverished in the Old Testament. It is a typical wisdom term, since it is not used at all by the prophets nor by the authors of the Pentateuch⁹. *Ra’sh* is the participle of the verb *rû’sh* (to starve, to be in want, to be hungry, famished). This is the sense of the qal perfect *rashû* in Ps 34,11 (*eptôckeusan* LXX). Nevertheless, in Prov 10,4 the *ra’sh* is blameful because he is so since he works with sluggish hands. Here the *ra’sh* is not submitted to a situation he is not responsible for. On the opposite, his poverty is the consequence of his laziness and slothfulness¹⁰. Yet, when the prophet Nathan condemns David in 2 Sam 12, he presents him the image of two citizens (a rich man and a poor man). There he points to the *ra’sh*, to the one impoverished because David was like that (a *tapeinós* LXX) when Saul was still living in

⁸ See EDWIN HATCH (1835-1889) – HENRY A. REDPATH (1848-1908) – TAKAMITSU MURAOKA, *A Concordance to the Septuagint and other Greek versions of the Old Testament Including the Apocryphal Books* (Oxford 1897-1906), Grand Rapids 21998, 1239.

⁹ See J. DAVID PLEINS, “Poor, poverty”, *ABDV* (1992) 407.

¹⁰ In the same sense see DIETHELM MICHEL, “Armut II. Altes Testament”, *TREIV* (1979) 72: “Gemäss den Vorstellungen von der schicksalwirkenden Tatsphäre bzw. dem Tun-Ergehens-Zusammenhang wird in der Weisheit Armut verstanden als *Folge* fehlender sachverständiger Tüchtigkeit (= Weisheit), sie wird also negativ gewertet ... Armut ist hier nie Folge von Unterdrückung, sondern immer *selbstverschuldet*” (the italic is ours).

1 Sam 18,23. In Qo 5,7 the *ra'sh* is the exploited by unjust men, and in 4,14 the wise Qohelet acknowledges that a *ra'sh* can even become king one day, eventhough born *ra'sh*. Therefore, *resh* (poverty) is not a fate. The same way as in the book of Proverbs, *resh* or to be *ra'sh* has a moral sense, since it is better to be *ra'sh* than to be a liar, a deceitful person (Prov 19,1.22).

The *'ânâw* / *'âni* is the most common name in the Old Testament to estimate the poor in moral terms as well as the one humble, with a sincere heart. The *'âni* is predominant in the psalms and in the prophets, but in more recent texts it is written as *'ânaw*.¹¹ Only once in Num 12,3 we find it in the singular. These are the poor referred by Jesus in the Sermon of the Mountain. They are blessed because they are meek. The prophet Isaiah announces them the just reward of joy: “the poor [*'anawîm*] will increase in joy in the Lord, and the *'ebyônîm* will rejoice in the Holy One of Israel” (Is 29,19). This poverty has nothing to do with economic unevenness¹².

The *'ebyôn* classifies those in need, dependent from others favour, but not in such a worse condition like the one put up with by the *'ôni*. Still, he undertakes hunger, thirst, he is physically insecure¹³, he is mistreated by rulers and leaders (Jer 2,34; 20,13; Ez 18,12), he suffers (Ps 107,41). Nonetheless, his state may oblige him to beg for food, since what he has may not be enough. Therefore, the torah demands that every sabbatical year Israel puts the land to rest in order to redistribute it, so that the poor (the *'ebyônîm*) may have again the chance to cultivate it and eat from it (cf. Ex 23,11). The *'ebyôn* is not exactly that person that begs for money. Instead, all that he asks for is justice, he pleads for his dignity¹⁴. That's why he asks God for “*mishpat*” in Ps 140(139),13, for God alone is the One who is able to deliver him from a state out of which he is no longer capable of sorting it out. Whenever the *'ebyôn* comes to court to present his complain (his *rîb*), he is entitled to fairness by the judge, for he has the same rights everyone else does (cf. Ex 23,6). The *'ebyôn* appears sometimes

¹¹ Just for a short overview on the vicinity between “*âni*”, the root “*anah*” and “*anaw*” see J. DAVID PLEINS, “Poor, poverty”, *ABD V* (1992) 410. This topic continues to be discussed.

¹² J. DAVID PLEINS, “Poor, poverty”, *ABD V* (1992) 413 is not clear at all discussing this vicinity and rejecting the idea that the “*anawîm*” are a form of piety. The messianic traditions point in this direction.

¹³ See J. DAVID PLEINS, “Poor, poverty”, *ABD V* (1992) 403.

¹⁴ According to SIMON LÉGASSE, “Pauvreté chrétienne”, *DSp XII* (1984) 614 what characterizes the *'ebyônîm* is the “*désire*” of justice. He is neither absolutely poor nor deprived of means.

side by side the *’ôni* in the Psalms asking for deliverance¹⁵. The *ébyônîm* are the ones that prompted Amos and the other prophets to condemn the social injustice in the northern Israelite society in the eighth century B.C. when the prophet of Tequa saw that the Israelites sold or “bought the poor [*dalîm* / *ptôckous* LXX] for silver and the needy [*weébyôn* / *tapeinón* LXX] for a pair of sandals” (Am 2,6; 8,6). At that time life lost its value, the one in need or in sorrow lost his dignity. Only God, through the voice of the prophets, defended the “downtrodden of society”¹⁶.

The *’ôni* represents those who live in the poorest and worst conditions in Israel. The *dal* is very common in the Old Testament to signify those the rich don’t care for. Sometimes it is translated by *penickrós* in greek (someone in need or in pain, of whom we have pity). Sometimes in Proverbs the *dalîm* are considered guilty for being poor, instead in the prophets “the *dal* is an object of exploitation”¹⁷. It is also useful to notice that the greek of the Septuaginta translates all these massoretic terms with different concepts, not always respecting the slight semantic variations. Therefore, as mentioned, *penês* translates all the six terms, *ptôkós* and *tapeinós* (humble, modest, lowly) are never the greek equivalent for *miskên*, the abstract *’ôni* is translated sometimes either with *tapeinosis* either with *ptôckeia*, and *’ânaw* / *’âni* are too made equivalent to *praus* (meek) other than all the previous concepts in the Hebrew text. The greek versions of Aquila, Symacus and Theodocio expand the spiritualizing tendency in the vocabulary of poverty in the Septuaginta¹⁸.

The world of poverty in the New Testament

The New Testament too talks in two ways about poverty: it receives the Old Testament tradition of God’s care for the poor, and looks to poverty from the point of view of the social situations they live in bearing

¹⁵ See Dt 24,14; Job 24,14; Ps 35,10; 37,14; 40,18; 49,3; 70,6; 72,13; 74,21; 82,4; 86,1; 109,16.22. But not only in the Psalms: cf. Prov 31,9; Jer 22,16; Ez 16,49; 18,12; 22,29.

¹⁶ RICHARD D. PATTERSON, “The widow, orphan, and the poor in the Old Testament and the Extra-Biblical Literature”, *Bibliotheca Sacra* 130 (1973) 230.

¹⁷ J. DAVID PLEINS, “Poor, poverty”, *ABD V* (1992) 403.

¹⁸ See A. GEORGE, “Pauvre”, *DBS VII* (1966) 389.

harsh conditions and lack of material supply¹⁹. Moreover, Jesus has shown special interest in the poor and came close to human misery, to the poor Lazarus (Lk 16,19). Around Him we find many people, most of them ill and poor. Jesus is concerned with the poor more in Mathew and Luke than in Mark, as Q shows. In Q He appears near to the poor and He Himself as a poor, poorer than the birds of heaven (cf. Mt 8,20 // Lk 9,58; Mt 6,24 // Lk 16,13; Mt 6,25-34 // Lk 12,22-31). But this does not allow us to conclude that Jesus was poor or belonged to the lowest social classes in Palestine²⁰.

The addresses of 1 Peter are described as homeless, visiting strangers (1,1), “resident aliens” (1,7), living in the Diaspora, what allows to think in a community in need, bearing difficulties in Asia Minor. Many of its members are “household servants”. By that time the Babylon of the Apocalypse is accused of selling human lives and of producing poor enslaved people (Rev 18,13)²¹.

In the Gospels we never find neither the “endeês” (the one who needs to “déomai”, to ask for) nor the “penês” (the humble worker)²², but Jesus presents Himself as “praus” (gentle) and “tapeinós” (humble) in Mt 11,29 (cf. 2 Cor 7,6). At the beginning of the Galilean ministry, Jesus fulfills the announcement of Is 61: ¹⁶ “He came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, and went into the synagogue on the Sabbath day as he usually did. He stood up to read, ¹⁷ and they handed him the scroll of the prophet Isaiah. Unrolling the scroll he found the place where it is written: ¹⁸ The spirit of the Lord is on me, for he has anointed me to bring the good news to the poor [*ptôkois / anâwîm*]. He has sent me to proclaim liberty to captives, sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free ¹⁹ to proclaim a year of favour from the Lord” (Lk 4,16-19). A large part of the population lived poorly. His coming to the poor and the refusal He met in His homeland are the criteria for the genuineness of His message²³. The poor do not

¹⁹ See LEANDER E. KECK, “Armut III. Neues Testament”, *TRE IV* (1979) 76.

²⁰ In the same sense SIMON LÉGASSE, “Pauvreté chrétienne”, *DSp XII* (1984) 633.

²¹ On this topic see our work “Ler o Apocalipse hoje. Um cristianismo de resistência?”, *Communio* 31 (2014) 21-33.

²² See A. GEORGE, “Pauvre”, *DBS VII* (1966) 395.

²³ In this sense see the commentary of JEAN-NOEL ALETTI, *Le Jésus de Luc*, [= Jésus et Jésus Christ 98], Mame-Desclée 2011, 82-83.

rebuke Him, but the jews and the inhabitants and the nazarens will rebuke Him. That's why this announcement becomes a prophetic one and the sign it will be confirmed. This happens because Jesus is very concret. Thus He gives content to his preaching. Jesus defends the poor not with discourses. He began to look on them, to look them in the eyes, He did not turn away. This is the first sign He is very sensitive, like the prophets are²⁴.

In New Testament times, roman taxation in Palestine created a desperate situation, so oppressive that life became unbearable for the working classes of society. Many "penês" and emigrants²⁵ became poor because they were crushed with the burden of roman and herodian taxation. Many workers (*ergátas*) were hired on a daily base (cf. Mt 20,1). This was the world Jesus met and criticized by the time of Tiberius Caesar: "the provinces of Syria and Judea, exhausted by their burdens, were pressing for a diminution of the tribute"²⁶. Such a social system produced a class of aristocrats who began a process of creating large estates by the annexation of small plots²⁷. Many of those that came to Jesus were shattered with such an unjust social system. Jesus too became appalled with all that, up to the point of getting away from the program of John the Baptist. That did not satisfy Him. The poor did not need to repent, for they had done nothing to endure such a state of affairs. The poor widow in Mk 12,42 gave much more than the *plousioi* (rich), she was humble (*penikran* in Lk 21,3) enough to do so. When Jesus was anointed in Bethany, He had to remember the disciples that they will have always people in scarcity situations whom they can help or do something for them (see Mk 14,7; Jo 12,5).

²⁴ "Jesús es más humano. No se eleva a altas teologías ni habla del futuro. Mira al presente, al pobre hombre enfermo, hambriento, a la puerta del rico. El 'desastre de José' se hace persona en 'la tragedia de Lázaro'. El que no capta su problema ni se interesa por él es condenado. Aunque toda su injusticia se limite a 'vestir de púrpura y lino y banquetear todos los días esplendidamente (Lc 16,19). Según Jesús no es preciso robar, perjurar, matar para sufrir el castigo. Basta ser insensible a la desgracia ajena. Su postura es más dura que la de cualquier profeta del Antiguo Testamento": JOSE LUIS SICRE, "Con los pobres de la tierra" *La justicia social en los profetas de Israel*, Madrid, Cristiandad 1984, 457.

²⁵ See GERD THEISSEN, *Estudios de sociología del cristianismo primitivo* (Tübingen 1979), [= Biblioteca de Estudios Bíblicos 51], Salamanca 1985, 47-49.

²⁶ "et provinciae Syria atque Iudea, fessae oneribus, deminutionem tributi orabant": TACITUS, *Annales* II,42, [= Belles Lettres], edidit Henri Goelzer, Paris 1923, 89.

²⁷ See BRUCE J. MALINA, "Wealth and Poverty in the New Testament and its world", *Interpretation* 41 (1987) 354-367.

New Testament authors knew the greek of the Septuaginta and knew that the greek term “ptokos” meant those poor who survived in hard conditions, those needing help from others and mainly from God (see Ps 12,5; 14,6; 22,24; 37,14; 69,29; 70,5; 86,1). The *ptôkoi* are the oppressed. This was valid also in Qumran (see Is 10,2; 26,6; PsSal 5,2.11; 10,6; 15,1; 18,2; 1QpHab 12,3, 1QM 14,7; 1QH 5,13-14; 4QpPs 2,9-10). But those who loved riches and wealth were considered to have violated the Lord’s commandments. The corrupts were seen as traitors (cf. 1QpH 8,10-11; 9,3-5; 10,1-10).

In late Judaism, the “ôni” (“ptôkos”) got a negative meaning, because *ptôkoi* were considered those with economic and religious problems (see TestJob 10,6-7; 12,1). Therefore, the *ônyîm* were seen as someone fined, blamed. If they were poor that was understood as a sign of punishment. That meant in late Judaism that they were put aside of God’s blessings. To be poor in the jewish society meant to be prevented from participating in the temple cult. Poverty hindered the *ônyîm* to observe completely the torah, and it was viewed as their fault. In consequence, their status was condemned by late rabinism, because it kept being understood as God’s chastisement²⁸. We can thus conclude that their poverty impoverished them even more. Jesus and Job fought against it. It was the case of the poor man born blind in Jo 9. The Pharisees blamed him for being blind. This made him even more unfortunate and unconsidered. This was the tendency since deuteronomistic times in jewish theology. According to the principle of retribution, in this theology richness was the sign of God’s blessing. If you are poor, cripple, lame, ill, blind or deaf that means only that you are guilty of something, therefore you do not deserve God’s blessing. However, inside Judaism, due to its plurality, this view began to be contested since the Seleucid dynasty²⁹. There, a connection between poverty and piety began to be established (see PsSal 10,6; 1QM 14,6-7; TestJud 25,4)³⁰, which continued yet even in the jewish communities by

²⁸ See HERMANN LEBERECHEIT STRACK (1848-1922) – PAUL BILLERBECK (1853-1932), *Kommentar zum Neuen Testament aus Talmud und Midrash I*, München 1922, 191-194.

²⁹ See JOSEPHUS FLAVIUS, *Bell. Jud V*, 570.

³⁰ See FRANÇOIS BOVON, *L’Evangile selon Saint Luc (1,1-9,50)*, [= CNT IIIa], Genève, Labor et Fides 1991, 292.

the Dead Sea (see 1QH 1,3-6; 2,34; CD 6,16-21; 14,14; 19,9)³¹. In fact, in the Damascus Documents this connection reached up to the accusation of the Judean leaders³² in CD 8,3-19. In the same sense, perhaps by the time of Alexander Jannaeus at the beginning of the first century B.C., in 1 En 104,6-9 the rich and violent, who build their lives upon injustice and fraud, are accused of iniquity:

⁶ “And now fear not, ye righteous, when ye see the sinners growing strong and prospering in their ways: be not companions with them, but keep afar from their violence; for ye shall become companions of the hosts of heaven. ⁷ And, although ye sinners say: ‘All our sins shall not be searched out and be written down’, nevertheless ⁸ they shall write down all your sins every day. And now I show unto you that light and darkness, day and night, see all your sins. ⁹ Be not godless in your hearts, and lie not and alter not the words of uprightness, nor charge with lying the words of the Holy Great One, nor take account of your idols; for all your lying and all your godlessness issue not in righteousness but in great sin”.

Poverty in Israel

In spite its absence in the narratives of Israel’s sojourn in Egypt and in the Exodus movement, one cannot conclude that poverty was not included or forgotten. The verbal root *‘anah* (to be bowed down, afflicted) from the *‘anawim* expressed already the experience of Israel in Egypt because the Pharaoh oppressed the hebrews, he *ye’annû* them in Ex 1,12 forcing them to labor in very harsh conditions. Then in Ex 3,7 comes the Lord’s answer: “the Lord said to Moses, I have surely seen the affliction [*‘ôni*] of my people that is in Egypt ...” (cf. 6,5). From thereon the poor can solicit God, because He is rich in compassion (see Eph 2,4; Ne 9,7). The poor asks God to think of him because he is “ *‘ány we ‘ebyon*” (Ps 40,18). He considers himself *‘ány* and asks God for deliverance (see Ps 69,30.33-34)³³, because

³¹ See ERNST Bammel, *ptôkos*“, *TWNTVI* (1959) 888.894.901.

³² On this subject see JÉRÔME MURPHY-O’CONNOR, “The Critique of the Princes of Juda CD VIII, 3-19”, *RB* 79 (1972) 201-216.

³³ DIETHELM MICHEL, “Armut II. Altes Testament”, *TRE* IV (1979) 75 evaluates this psalm and other acrostic psalms as the religion expression of Israel after exile as a distinctive redactional

the Lord listens to the *'ebyonîm*. These are the ones God chose since they are rich in faith and in faithfulness. James in the New Testament puts the rhetorical question, to which only a positive answer is possible: “did not God chose those who are *ptôkoi* to the eyes of the world but rich in faith and heirs of the kingdom He promised to those who love Him?” (Jam 2,5). After all, this is pure Pauline theology.

The new Israel, by the end of New Testament times, continues to condemn the rich people for afflicting workers (*penês*) and the poor (*ptokoi*). Despite the word from the prophets and the message of the kingdom, social injustice proceeded:

“come now, you rich people, weep and wail for the miseries that are coming to you. ² Your riches have rotted, and your clothes are moth-eaten. ³ Your gold and silver have rusted, and their rust will be evidence against you, and it will eat your flesh like fire. You have laid up treasure for the last days. ⁴ Listen! The wages of the laborers who mowed your fields, which you kept back by fraud, cry out, and the cries of the harvesters have reached the ears of the Lord of hosts. ⁵ You have lived on the earth in luxury and in pleasure; you have fattened your hearts in a day of slaughter. ⁶ You have condemned and murdered the righteous one, who does not resist you” (Jam 5:1-6).

group, because there are some conditions and marks we don't find in them: „auffällig ist, dass in diesen Psalmen ein Geschichtsbezug völlig fehlt: Kein Faktum der Heilsgeschichte wird erwähnt, keine Variante der Erwählungsglaubens findet sich, und konsequent fehlt auch (ausser in dem nachträglich hinzugefügten 25,22) der Name Israel. Dies kann bei dieser Gruppe insgesamt kaum ein Zufall sein. Als Heilserwartung lässt sich Konstatieren: Man erwartet, das Land zu besitzen, dass Jahwe den Bösewichtern gerecht vergelten wird, dass er die nicht verlässt, die sich zu ihm halten. Nichts spricht in diesen Psalmen dafür, dass die Feinde von anderer Nationalität sind: sie werden als übermütig und mutwillig geschildert, als Verfolger der Armen und Elenden. Dies kann wiederum, wenn man auf die ganze Gruppe dieser Psalmen blickt, kaum ein Zufall sein. Wenn man dies alles bedenkt, liegt die Erklärung am nächsten, dass hier eine Gruppe in Israel greifbar wird, die sich von anderen im Volk abgesondert hat und von ihnen verfolgt und bedrückt wird ... die Annahme berechtigt scheint, diese Ergänzungen stammten aus denselben Kreisen, die diese Psalmen verfasst haben“. However interesting this thematic hypothesis might be, we have to deal here as well with a canonical reading of the psalms. Eventhough helpful, this hermeneutics must confront the historical context, what turns difficult to set out a precise editing group in Israel. To define such a group, a poor group oppressed by others, a sort of sect within the israelite society, is not, at least easy and plain. Moreover, the persian period continues to be the less known in israelite history. In the same sense see JÜRGEN EBACH, “Armen II. Altes Testament”, *RGG*⁴ I (1998) 780.

This judgment is not new, but it is based in the ruling tradition of the Old Testament where a just Jew learns to balance justice and indictment. The law demands to grant justice to the poor when he comes to court. This device intends to defend the victim. Yet, the same Torah teaches to have a special love for the poor, for those who have less, precisely because they have less resources to defend themselves: how can it be impartial? But the judge learns too in the same Torah to be unbiased when a poor victim stands before him. Poverty has to do with righteousness as well as moral righteousness. When you speak of justice you talk about interpersonal relationships, not just of the completion of a legal code. Therefore, you have to look not only for the innocent, but to the culpable as well, because he stands in an impoverished situation, even if he is not yet conscious of it. This is a matter of concern for Christian faith. This concern, this “ultimate concern”³⁴ we call it theology. In this case, if we center the regard on the poor, our soul may be relieved since they will enter the kingdom of heavens. But if we center the regard on the other part, on the accountable for evil, we weave our hope with the ultimate concern of doom, which is to say, with the eschatological question of death and retribution.

When we read Amos we note the absence of the oracles against Egypt, Babylon and Assyria. He argues against Israel, Juda in the south, the regions of Transjordan and Phoenicia. Amos condemns the atrocities against the poor and the foreigners. But the gravity comes from the fact that these crimes are completed inside Israel, by Israelites against their Israelite fellows. He begins condemning Damascus for squeezing Galaad (Am 1,3). Then, like God’s messenger (“so says the Lord”: 2,6-16), he reproves Israel and denounces social injustice. Amos sees poverty as a state, a context, a circumstance, not as the result of moral iniquity or punishment:

“die hier gemeinte Armut nicht als im Sinne der Weisheit selbstverschuldet, sondern als Ergebnis von unrechten Bedrückungen angesehen wird. Noch deutlicher wird dies aus dem Wort an die vornehmen Frauen Samarias ... die hier bei den Propheten apostrophierte Armut als Ergebnis sozialer Umsichtungen zu sehen ist ... Dementsprechend trifft nicht die ‘Armen’ die Schuld an ihrem Zustand, sondern die sie unterdrückenden

³⁴This expression belongs to PAUL TILICH, *Teologia Sistemática I* (1951), São Paulo, Paulinas 1984, 20; in the same sense see ULRICH BARTH, *Religion in der Moderne*, Tübingen 2003, 89.

Reichen. Negative ist diese Sicht der Armut nur insofern, als sie nicht gottgewollt und also zu beseitigen ist”³⁵.

Amos behaves like the spokesperson on behalf of the poor. Nevertheless, he detects another difficulty. Everything seems to go by the law. But it is not the case. Therefore comes up the cunning voice of the prophet, someone that has the grace to perceive before time. In fact, the torah predicts the case (cf. Ex 21,2) of a sold servant (cf. Dt 15,12). When that happens at the seventh year he has to be released to regain his citizenship. The same is scheduled according to the post-exilic text of the holiness code, the only place where we find just three times the very rare massoretic root “mûk” (to be low, depressed, grow poor) in the qal imperfect: “if your brother that is with you become so impoverished [*yamûk / tapeinôthê* LXX] that he sells himself to you, you shall not make him serve as slave” (Lev 25,39). In verses 25 and 35 the same verb *yamûk* is translated with *penêtai* in greek. This Levitical chapter about the jubilar year establishes that a debtor, unable to fulfill his duty, must pay with enslaved labor during a certain period of time. This rule foresees this reductin to a temporary enforced labor in order to make it reasonable the contract or the loan, because the one that takes the credit assumes the obligation to pay back. Otherwise, if there is no accountability, the one that provides lend would not allow anymore the other one to ask for borrow. This grants a minimum of security and fairness. So, the torah decrees this social consciousness. It is the law that statutes this consciousness, not the State nor the temple.

But what does the prophet Amos find? It seems that everything goes by the book in an automatic way in the northern lands of Samaria; in such a manner that forethought in the application of the law is not taken into account nor considered. Amos criticizes that the righteous man, the poor man, the anonymous citizen is sold by a very small amount of money. In fact, it was no longer in his hands to pay back because the social system became so unjust that he could no longer afford to give back everything he had borrowed before. The implementation of the law became so reckless that it was impossible to get some fairness or balance. The legal system became stripped out of wisdom. Israel had fallen again in idolatry³⁶.

³⁵ DIETHELM MICHEL, “Armut II. Altes Testament”, *TRE IV* (1979) 73.

³⁶ See JOSE LUIS SICRE, *Introducción al profetismo bíblico*, Navarra 2011, 194.

Therefore, to sell the underprivileged and the poor (*dalîm we'èbyôn*) for a pair of sandals was very easy, was done for nothing, for almost nothing, for vain things like “késeph” (silver, money: Am 8,6). Amos raises his voice to defend them, to make Israel realize that we need “epikeia” when we enforce the law. The judge must take into account the circumstances and the context. That means to implement jurisprudence. That did not happen in Samaria just before the Assyrian exile. The poor were exploited. When they came to court their life became even more devastated, because the rich people, the land owners and the judges, all they wanted was to “sô'ph” (for) the poor. This verbal root can mean either “to trample down” or “to be anxious for”. In both ways it is contemptuous. The authorities waited for them not to make them justice, but to take out what they might even have. Amos draws us a very sad picture: on one side the poor deprived of rights asking for compassion, on the other side the rich and landowners looking to reduce them to the dust of the land (Am 2,7a). They crush the *dalîm*, but they distort as well the “iter” of justice (“derek *'anawim* yatêhu” 2,7b). We can imagine a humble citizen, an unfortunate Israelite in court: he goes there because he wants to give back what he borrowed. However, it is precisely in court, the place where justice was supposed to be enforced and distributed, that he realizes he cannot find it there. He leaves court as a convict, not defended nor protected (2,6b). He was in trouble to pay back, so he demanded compassion and “epikeia”. But he left court condemned. He had hoped to find fairness and justice, a just balance. Yet, he found a blind implementation of the law. The condemned goes to court to be defended, but in Samaria he leaves court even more condemned and exploited. The court became a place of execution. Sentences brought no joy nor hope to the poor. They were deaf to the cries of the poor, so they became sentences of death. This was the reason for Amos to speak.

As we have seen, the torah demanded evenhandedness, fairness up to the point of not favoring the poor in trial. It looks like the torah demanded blindness in the performance of the law, just the opposite Amos wanted: “¹⁶ I charged your judges at that time: ‘give the members of your community a fair hearing, and judge rightly between one person and another, whether citizen or resident alien. ¹⁷ You must not be partial in judging: hear out the small and the great alike; you shall not be intimidated by anyone, for the judgment is God’s. Any case that is too hard for you, bring to

me, and I will hear it” (Dt 1,16-17). The same goes in the code of holiness in Lev 19,15-16:

“¹⁵ You shall not render an unjust judgment; you shall not be partial to the poor [*dal / ptôckou*] or defer to the great: with justice you shall judge your neighbor. ¹⁶ You shall not go around as a slanderer among your people, and you shall not profit by the blood of your neighbor: I am the Lord. ¹⁷ You shall not hate in your heart anyone of your kin; you shall reprove your neighbor, or you will incur guilt yourself. ¹⁸ You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against any of your people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself: I am the Lord”.

But Amos discovers that this blindness of the law, despite its fair-mindedness, is so harsh, its execution is so cruel that justice produces injustice. What seems to be very legal it is just a disguise, a pretext to oppress even more God’s poor people. The attainment of the law hides the intention to mash the poor. They long for the poor to mash them, to smash them³⁷. Thus, true justice is hidden behind this strictness. The appearance of legality is just a façade to hide violence against the helpless and poor people. In Israel the exercise of justice became oppressive. Those who apply it made life excruciating, since jurisdiction is just fake. The rich people and the judges take advantage from the scarceness of the poor, frail and helpless citizens.

The biblical critique of wealth

The Holy Scripture read the signs of luxury as opposite to the right to a quality life everyone is entitled to. By itself, Scripture does not consider good to be poor or to live miserably, neither convey the idea that it is good to be poor and bad to be rich. It is enough not to forget the biblical narrative of creation in the book of Genesis. There we see that one sign of the blessings is to amount properties, cattle, land, farms, houses, prosperity, offspring, family, belongings. It seems Abraham is blessed for everything that it was promised to him in Gen 12,1-3; 15,6; 17,1; 18,1. So, it seems

³⁷ See JOSE LUIS SICRE, “*Con los pobres de la tierra*” *La justicia social en los profetas de Israel*, Madrid, Cristiandad 1984, 107-108.

he was not to be poor because he was blessed. If it weren't, he would have been poor. But he was blessed, so he had to be rich. Therefore, it was supposed that the just had to have his house full and large, as a token of blessings. Solomon was rich (cf. 1 Kg 10,14-25) according to the promised made to Gabaon (3,13), the Patriarchs Abraham, Isaac and Jacob as well (Gen 26,13-14; 30,43; 32,6; 33,11). This continued in wisdom literature (Prov 10,22; 15,6; 19,23; Sir 11,21-25; 31,10-11; Ps 37,25), where some Israel continued to view poverty as God's chastisement³⁸. Against this theology Job had to stand for. He presents in his favor all the help and almsgiving he granted the poor:

12 "... because I freed the poor [*'ôny / ptôkon*] in distress and the orphan who had no helper. 13 The dying man's blessing rested on me and I gave the widow's heart cause to rejoice. 14 Uprightness I wore as a garment, fair judgement was my cloak and my turban. 15 I was eyes for the blind, and feet for the lame. 16 Who but me was father of the poor [*'ébyonîm / adunatôn*]? The stranger's case had a hearing from me. 17 I used to break the fangs of the wicked, and snatch their prey from their jaws. 18 And I used to say, 'I shall die in honour, after days as numerous as the sand. 19 My roots can reach the water, the dews of night settle on my leaves' (Job 29:12-19).

This keeps in line with wisdom literature in Prov 19,17: "Whoever is kind to the poor [*dal / ptôkon*] is lending to Yahweh, who will repay him the kindness done". Wisdom literature teaches the just to be just, so that he will be rewarded, but the just learns too to take care of the poor and the widow. Nonetheless, the pharisees' hermeneutics did not escape the temptation of the simple reading connecting justice – richness – blessing, that is to say, to make the blessings not a grace but dependent on the amount of stuff anyone can get by his own merit. At that stage, if I can work hard and bravely I leave poverty due to my own credit and value. This means I bless my self to be a rich person. If I am a rich person this means I am blessed, and I am blessed because I managed to be a rich person. Then, I need no more the graciousness of God since I bless my self. God can no longer bless, because I get the blessing to me through my own effort.

³⁸ See SIMON LÉGASSE, "Pauvreté chrétienne", *DSp* XII (1984) 617.

This sequence of thought, which is not more than a short cut in the relationship between God who blesses and the blessed, is very easy and attractive, but is totally misleading. It was deceptive to Max Weber's capitalism as well as to many sects and sectarian movements that engaged in the progress theology. The Pharisees too forgot what the promise is all about – it is a gift not depending on anything. They forgot that the God's promise was proclaimed in the first person singular – by God alone. The blessings are almost replaced in goods as the texts of Lev 26,3-13; Dt 28,1-14; Gen 13,2.6; Ps 112,3 show, but it is the Lord who grants them. It was not the amount of possessions that granted the blessings. The blessings are given, not conquered. In the history of God's promise we stay in a history of donation, not in a history of conquest.

Therefore, Scripture establishes a relationship between people and things as well as between people through things, in order to advise that belongings can depreciate people's relationships with one another. This turns the concept of "poor" and "poverty" in relational concepts ("Relationsbegriffe")³⁹. These relationships have outcomes in politic and social levels. Our world suffers from it. After the exile, the fourth servant of Iahweh (Is 52,13-53,12) makes the assistant group recognize their own faults when they stand afar and speak about themselves in the first person singular: "But he was wounded for *our* transgressions, crushed for *our* iniquities; upon him was the punishment that made *us* whole, and by his bruises *we* are healed" (Is 53,5). They realize that scarceness and powerlessness are the places where God can show His strength, thus contrasting His wisdom against the wisdom of the world (cf. 1 Cor 1,18)⁴⁰. Therefore, His servant The Son made Himself rich in weakness: "For you know the generosity [*chárin*] of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor [*eptôckeusen*], so that by his poverty [*ptôckeia*] you might become rich [*ploutêsête*]" (2 Cor 8,9). He made Himself rich in another way, in self abase (according to the "wisdom parenetical hymn" of Phil 2,5-11)⁴¹, thus fulfilling the promise of Is 61,1. There the prophet

³⁹ JÜRGEN EBACH, "Armen II. Altes Testament", *RGG*⁴ I (1998) 780.

⁴⁰ RAMON TREVIJANO ETCHEVERRÍA, "El contraste de sabidurías (1 Cor 1,17-4,20)", *Salman-ticensis* 34 (1987) 277-298.263-265.

⁴¹ RAMON TREVIJANO ETCHEVERRÍA, "Flp 2,5-11: Un *logos sofias* paulino sobre Cristo", *Hel-mántica* 46 (1995) 142; Idem, *Escritos Paulinos*, [= Plenitudo Temporis 8 Estudios sobre los orígenes y la antigüedad cristiana], Salamanca, Universidad Pontificia 2002, 288.

too felt himself summoned up to preach glad tidings to the poor (*euaggelisasthai ptôkôis*), because only these *'anawîm* are able to expect something from God (see 66,2). They live truly poverty as humbleness, since poverty is “essentiellement abandon filial au Père”⁴².

During the exile, Iahweh Himself promises to shepherd his own people. In Ez 34,2b-6 He appears committed personally with that, censuring the leaders of Israel, for they feed themselves instead of feeding the people, they serve themselves instead of serving the people, they take advantage from the weakness of the poor exploiting them even more: “you have not strengthened the weak, you have not healed the sick, you have not bound up the injured, you have not brought back the strayed, you have not sought the lost, but with force and harshness you have ruled them” (Ez 34,4). At verses 17-22 finally the Lord takes position on behalf of those in need. The verb “shaphat” appears three times to convey that the Lord prefers the oppressed sheep from the flock. The Lord favors the poor or helpless sheep, the exploited and scattered one (v.12). This predilection draws the picture for the messiah. When he comes he will take charge of the poor: “He will judge the weak [*dalîm / tapeinô*] with integrity and give fair sentence for the humblest in the land [*'anwey 'âretz / tapeinous tês gês*]. He will strike the country with the rod of his mouth and with the breath of his lips bring death to the wicked” (Is 11,4).

The whole violence the wicked cast over the poor takes place where it was not supposed to happen: in Sion. Jerusalem became a gory city, a violent place (see Ez 16,2; 22,2) where blood is shed, not only through the sacrifices but too through the poor's blood. Jerusalem exploits the poor, devours their own blood. The place supposed to make justice produces (*'asah*) injustice, instead.

But problems appeared before the exile. Indeed the prophet Micah was very said with the temple city, he did not believe neither in its past nor in its future⁴³. By the times of the deuternomistic reform, the prophet “Zephaniah son of Cushi son of Gedaliah son of Amariah son of Hezekiah, in the days of King Josiah son of Amon of Judah” (Zeph 1,1) maintained a profound sense of God's greatness. Zephaniah unveiled the dangerous

⁴² See A. GEORGE, “Pauvre”, *DBS* VII (1966) 400.

⁴³ According to JOSE LUIS SICRE, “*Con los pobres de la tierra*” *La justicia social en los profetas de Israel*, Madrid, Cristiandad 1984, 439.

sin of idolatry and pride (2,10.15; 3,11). Only the *humbles of the land* will be able to escape the Lord's anger: "seek the Lord, all you humble of the land [*'anwe' ha'aharetz*], who do his commands; seek righteousness, seek humility [*'anâwâh*]; perhaps you may be hidden on the day of the Lord's wrath" (2,3). This is the first time *'anâwâh* is used in a religious sense⁴⁴ and thus begins to be painted the rest of Israel, the rest of a pious people. God will continue to be attended by a people poor and humble: "But in you I shall leave surviving a humble and lowly [*'any wadal / praun kai tapeinón*] people" (Zeph 3,12). Just after exile, the messiah is announced coming riding poorly on a donkey, not on a horse as it was supposed to be if it was like a king entrance: "Rejoice heart and soul, daughter of Zion! Shout for joy, daughter of Jerusalem! Look, your king is approaching, he is vindicated and victorious, humble [*'any / praus*] and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey" (Zec 9,9). The moral sense given to poverty as a sign of meekness can be seen in the greek translation "praus" for *'any* in both texts. Poorness or social unevenness is no longer seen as God's penalty. The social environment worried the prophets. Amos became worried with the consequences of trade (Am 2,6; 8,4-6; the same goes to Os 12,8; Mic 6,9-11; Zeph 1,10-11; Jer 5,27)⁴⁵, Ezekiel with court administration and bribe (Ez 22,12), Isaiah felt the indignity slaves were submitte to by the powerful (cf. Is 10,1-2), Zacariah was concerned with different types of robbery (Zac 5,1-4). The prophets had to denounce taxes (Am 2,8; 5,11), luxuries (Am 3,10.15; Is 3,18-21; Jer 5,25-28; Ez 22,12), thefts (Os 4,2; Mic 2,2), murders (Jer 7,9; Ez 7,23) and whatsoever, a whole amount of attacks that took away the poor's life and dignity⁴⁶.

⁴⁴ See A. GEORGE, "Pauvre", *DBS VII* (1966) 393; SIMON LÉGASSE, "Pauvreté chrétienne", *DSp XII* (1984) 620.

⁴⁵ This is one of the main concerns to Amos according to JOSE LUIS SICRE, "*Con los pobres de la tierra*" *La justicia social en los profetas de Israel*, Madrid, Cristiandad 1984, 444.

⁴⁶ See the classification and the synthesis in JOSE LUIS SICRE, "*Con los pobres de la tierra*" *La justicia social en los profetas de Israel*, Madrid, Cristiandad 1984, 446.

The religious sense of poverty

By itself, as mentioned before, poverty was neither welcome nor desired for the biblical people. Yet, in biblical world poverty conveyed a religious openness as well, a disposition to acceptance, that is, to faith and to trust. Thus, "... when Jesus proclaimed the kingdom as a present and actual reality that belongs to the poor (cf. Lk 6,20b), he was aware of accomplishing some kind of messianic task; and when he preached the rules of the kingdom based on 'justice as mercy' – reversing in this way the common understanding and practice of social relationships (cf. Lk 6,27b-30) – he was aware of inaugurating a new era and bringing Israel's history to a turning point"⁴⁷. Jesus gathers those put aside by society, those who are not stuck to things. Jesus knows that, even if the poor have not much to live with, they still have the heart to give space to God, to trust Him. What it was seen only as a social condition in the theology of the Pharisees became a chance for grace and for blessings in the message of God's Kingdom. The *ptôkós* is a religious figure, someone devoted to God, who trusts Him. The vocabulary of poverty in the Old Testament is handed over to Jesus, as well as his spiritual assert. In this sense, we find continuity between the prophets and the message of Jesus about poverty and meekness. There remains a glide from the social sense to the religious one. Thus, "die Begriffsspanne des Begriffes 'arm' reicht im Alten Testament und auch im Altjudentum von der sozialen Armut bis zur religiösen Aussagen des Vertrauens auf Gott und der Demut vor ihm"⁴⁸.

This context allows Jesus to announce the blessing on the Mountain's speech in Mt 5. Poverty is not just a matter of material shortage⁴⁹. It presumes a disposition of mind and an openness of heart, an inner freedom: "die Armut bezieht sich nicht auf irdisches Vermögen, sondern auf den menschlichen Geist. So steht es im Gegensatz zu der hohen Selbsteinschätzung, wie sie nach matthäischer Auffassung für die Pharisäer charakteristisch

⁴⁷ PINO DI LUCCIO, *The Quelle and the Targums Righteousness in the Sermon of the Mount / Plain*, [= AnBib 175], Roma 2009, 222.

⁴⁸ WALTER GRUNDMANN, *Das Evangelium nach Lukas (1961)*, [= ThKNT Band 3], Berlin⁸ 1978, 142.

⁴⁹ Many researchers assume this discourse belongs to Q: see PINO DI LUCCIO, *The Quelle and the Targums Righteousness in the Sermon of the Mount / Plain*, [= AnBib 175], Roma 2009, 45.

ist. Gemeint sind die Menschen, die sich für niedrig halten, die demütig sind⁵⁰. When Jesus blessed the poor in Mt 5,3 (*makáριοι οἱ πτωκοὶ τῆ πνευματικῆ βασιλείας τῶν οὐρανῶν*) He did not promised them they would become rich neither a social class revolution. In His promise He is not alone. There's something comparable in the essenic community's beatitudes in 1QH 6,3; 23,14-15; 1QS 4,3; 1QM 14,7 around the Dead Sea⁵¹. There, the expression *'anwêy ruah* remembers too all those who are simple, fragile, meek⁵². They will laugh, as the *gelásete* of Lk 6,12b resumes⁵³. In Mt 5,3 we find a dative of relation (*τῆ πνευματικῆ*) which does not point to the agent but to a behaviour's framework, meaning to be poor in what concerns the spirit, our own mind. Jesus points to an inner poverty, to a freedom in heart and mind (which is another sort of surplus), not to a diminished intellectual coefficient. Jesus approves those who remain faithful, those who still expect something from reality, from God and from the others⁵⁴. For Jesus happiness comes not with self sufficiency, as our contemporary culture conveys. If one recognizes the need of God and of the others, this means that person is free, is poor, possibly with material shortage. Yet, the goal of life is not the increase objects or belongings. Jesus does not bless poverty – that's a dangerous and ambiguous discourse. This kind of discourse could give the impression that impoverishment is needed in order that people may come together and work in net, or that the economic and social disparity would be necessary to bring the eschatological coming kingdom⁵⁵. Jesus knows very well the problems the poor had to

⁵⁰ G. STRECKER, „Die Makarismen der Bergpredikt“ *NTS* 170 (1970-1971) 262.

⁵¹ Against LEANDER E. KECK, „Armut III. Neues Testament“, *TRE IV* (1979) 78 to whom the poor in Mt 5,3 is a concret person in material need. By itself, the discourse cannot overturn this hypothesis. However, it does not allow to stuck limited to it as he reads: „so hat Matthäus die Konkretheit der Q-Fassung nicht ‚spiritualisiert‘, sondern einerseits einer strikt ökonomischen Auffassung vorgebaut ...“.

⁵² In this sense see PINO DI LUCCIO, *The Quelle and the Targums Righteousness in the Sermon of the Mount / Plain*, [= AnBib 175], Roma 2009, 77.

⁵³ See PINO DI LUCCIO, *The Quelle and the Targums Righteousness in the Sermon of the Mount / Plain*, [= AnBib 175], Roma 2009, 92.

⁵⁴ See PIERRE BONNARD, *L'Évangile selon Saint Matthieu*, [= CNT 1], Génève 2002, 56.

⁵⁵ „Die ökonomischen Ungleichheiten der Gegenwart begründen nicht die Notwendigkeit der Versöhnung ... Jesus romantisiert die moralische Qualität der Armen nicht, noch idealisiert er die Armut oder verlangt selbstauferlegte Verarmung als *condition sine qua non* für das Eingehen in das Reich“: LEANDER E. KECK, „Armut III. Neues Testament“, *TRE IV* (1979) 79.

face due to their material and social conditions. Jesus blesses the poor, not poverty. God does not want poverty, material scarceness. Jesus neither wanted it nor the aramaic versions of the law in late Judaism, like the one of Pseudo-Jonathan targum on Dt 15,4: “⁴ If you will only be diligent in the precepts of the law, there will be no poor [*ebyonîm*] among you; for, blessing, the Lord will bless you in the land which the Lord your God will give you for a possession to inherit”. The same goes in the second book of Enoch, where poverty assumes the religious sense of humbleness before the Lord:

“Blessed is the man who opens his lips in praise of God of Sabaoth and praises the Lord with his heart. ² Cursed every man who opens his lips for the bringing into contempt and calumny of his neighbour, because he brings God into contempt. ³ Blessed is he who opens his lips blessing and praising God. ⁴ Cursed is he before the Lord all the days of his life, which opens his lips to curse and abuse. ⁵ Blessed is he who blesses the entire Lord’s works. ⁶ Cursed is he who brings the Lord’s creation into contempt. ⁷ Blessed is he who looks down and raises the fallen. ⁸ Cursed is he who looks to and is eager for the destruction of what is not his. ⁹ Blessed is he who keeps the foundations of his fathers made firm from the beginning. ¹⁰ Cursed is he who perverts the decrees of his forefathers. ¹¹ Blessed is he who implants peace and love. ¹² Cursed is he who disturbs those that love their neighbours. ¹³ Blessed is he who speaks with humble tongue and heart to all. ¹⁴ Cursed is he who speaks peace with his tongue, while in his heart there is no peace but a sword. ¹⁵ For all these things will be laid bare in the weighing-scales and in the books, on the day of the great judgement. [Let us not say: ‘Our father is before God, he will stand forward for us on the day of judgement,’ for there father cannot help son, nor yet son father.] (2 En 52:1-15)”⁵⁶.

The poor are blessed because they have faith in God, they trust Him⁵⁷. To the *‘anâwîm* of Iahweh, God is the exclusive richness. Thus, the first beatitude has probably what is most needed to salvation: receptiveness of

⁵⁶ See PETER FIEDLER, *Das Matthäus-evangelium*, [= ThKNT 1], Stuttgart 2006, 108; also 4Q 521; PsSal 18,6-9; aethHen 103,1-4.

⁵⁷ See PETER FIEDLER, *Das Matthäus-evangelium*, [= ThKNT 1], Stuttgart 2006, 110.

God (the Almighty Himself poor). In this sense, the first beatitude presents us the real heart of God – a humble and meek loving heart⁵⁸. He Himself is thus. God offers what He Himself is.

This message, among others, The Spirit and the Seer of Patmos convey to the Church that lives in Smyrna in Ap 2,8-9: “⁸ Write to the angel of the church in Smyrna and say, ‘Here is the message of the First and the Last, who was dead and has come to life again: ⁹ I know your hardships and your poverty [*ptôckeia*], and – though you are rich [*plousios*] – the slander of the people who falsely claim to be Jews but are really members of the synagogue of Satan”.

This community is persecuted and lives with difficulties, but that transforms her in a spiritually rich community. On the opposite side, the community of Laodiceia seems to have everything, to live a rich life free from concerns:

“¹⁵ I know about your activities: how you are neither cold nor hot. I wish you were one or the other, ¹⁶ but since you are neither hot nor cold, but only lukewarm, I will spit you out of my mouth. ¹⁷ You say to yourself: I am rich [*plousios*], I have made a fortune and have everything I want, never realising that you are wretchedly and pitiably poor [*ptôkôs*], and blind and naked too. ¹⁸ I warn you, buy from me the gold that has been tested in the fire to make you truly rich [*plousios*], and white robes to clothe you and hide your shameful nakedness, and ointment to put on your eyes to enable you to see” (Ap 3,15-18).

But, this sort of existence, this dull life turns the community into a tedious group which abhors the Gospel. The Church which lives in Laodiceia has many things, but wealth distorted the faith, blurred the identity and lessened the ability to open the heart to the Lamb. In this way the Church of Laodiceia remained spiritually poor, eventhough socially rich. It seems this Church could not resist the enthrallment of the beast in Ap 13,16-17, for every citizen got its mark⁵⁹:

⁵⁸ We take here our commentary on the beatitudes: see JOSÉ CARLOS CARVALHO, “As bem-aventuranças e a lei na mensagem de Jesus”, *Humanística e Teologia* 32/1 (2011) 237-253.

⁵⁹ See CÉSAR NERY VILLAGRA CANTERO, «Poder» y «Anti-poder» Contraposición dialéctica entre exousía salvífica y exousía del sistema terrenal en el Apocalipsis, [= TGST 183], Roma 2011,

“¹⁶ It compelled everyone – small [*mikroí*] and great alike [*megaloí*], rich [*plousioí*] and poor [*ptôkoi*], slave [*douloí*] and citizen [*eleutheroí*] – to be branded on the right hand or on the forehead,¹⁷ and made it illegal for anyone to buy or sell anything unless he had been branded with the name of the beast or with the number of its name”.

The beast is so powerful in politic terms that this parallelism tends to classify the different members in sociological levels. These poor are all those who live in material shortage, who lack material belongings enough to live with dignity.

Conclusion

The Holy Scripture speaks about the poor in sociological and religious terms. Living materialy in need does not hinder the richness of faith, the joy of faithfulness. Either enhances it. Without forgetting the social conditions, the vocabulary in Israel tended to focus on the spiritual sense and heart openness poverty could offer. As a response, in the twentieth century, the liberation theologians essayed to recover the social and political sway the Gospel never let to present. They endeavored in the translation of the Gospel departing precisely from circumstances of conflict and injustice, because the Gospel of Jesus is the good news of salvation mainly for the poor and for those in need. The Social Doctrine of the Church translated these glad tidings in Liberation theology with the preferential option for the poor and vulnerable. Thus, the Gospel uncovers the reasons for impoverishment and for injustice. This means that poverty is an important element in New Testament ethics: “Fürsorge für die ‘Armen’ (hier verstanden als diejenigen die am Rande oder unterhalb des Existenzminimums leben, z.B. die arme Witwe Mk 12,42-44; Lk 21,1-4) ist ein bedeutendes Element in der ethischen Lehre und Praxis des NT”⁶⁰. Other than a spir-

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⁶⁰ JUSTIN J. MEGGITT, “Armen V. Neues Testament”, *RGG*⁴ I (1998) 758; see, for instance, Mt 5,42; Lk 6,30.34; Lk 12,33; Jo 13,29; Act 11,29; 20,35; Heb 13,1-3; Rom 12,13; 1 Jo 3,17; Jam 2,15-16; Rom 15,25-31; 1 Cor 16,1-4; Gal 2,10; Act 24,17. In the same sense see WOLFGANG STEGEMANN, “Armut III. Neues Testament”, *RGG*⁴ I (1998) 780; THOMAS D. HANKS, “Poor, poverty New Testament”, *ABDV* (1992) 415.

itual facility, poverty is too an occasion for social commitment and for Christians' enterprise against "sinful structures" created by our society, our history and social systems, following the instructive words of John Paul II encyclical in 30-12-1987:

"It is important to note therefore that a world which is divided into blocs, sustained by rigid ideologies, and in which instead of interdependence and solidarity different forms of imperialism hold sway, can only be a world subject to *structures of sin*. The sum total of the negative factors working against a true awareness of the universal common good, and the need to further it, gives the impression of creating, in persons and institutions, an obstacle which is difficult to overcome. If the present situation can be attributed to difficulties of various kinds, it is not out of place to speak of 'structures of sin' which, as I stated in my Apostolic Exhortation *Reconciliatio et Paenitentia*, are rooted in personal sin, and thus always linked to the concrete acts of individuals who introduce these structures, consolidate them and make them difficult to remove. And thus they grow stronger, spread, and become the source of other sins, and so influence people's behavior. 'Sin' and 'structures of sin' are categories which are seldom applied to the situation of the contemporary world. However, one cannot easily gain a profound understanding of the reality that confronts us unless we give a name to the root of the evils which afflict us.

One can certainly speak of 'selfishness' and of 'shortsightedness', of 'mistaken political calculations' and 'imprudent economic decisions'. And in each of these evaluations one hears an echo of an ethical and moral nature. Man's condition is such that a more profound analysis of individuals' actions and omissions cannot be achieved without implying, in one way or another, judgments or references of an ethical nature. This evaluation is in itself positive, especially if it is completely consistent and if it is based on faith in God and on his law, which commands what is good and forbids evil. In this consists the difference between sociopolitical analysis and formal reference to 'sin' and the 'structures of sin'. According to this latter viewpoint, there enter in the will of the Triune God, his plan for humanity, his justice and his mercy. The God who is rich in mercy, the Redeemer of man, the Lord and giver of life, requires from people clear cut attitudes which express themselves also

in actions or omissions toward one's neighbor. We have here a reference to the "second tablet" of the Ten Commandments (cf. Ex 20:12-17; Dt 5:16-21). Not to observe these is to offend God and hurt one's neighbor, and to introduce into the world influences and obstacles which go far beyond the actions and brief life span of an individual. This also involves interference in the process of the development of peoples, the delay or slowness of which must be judged also in this light" (*Sollicitudo rei socialis*, 36).

This means, in spite the presence of original sin in these structures⁶¹, poverty is not a fatality. Moreover, it becomes a theological source, a *locus theologicus* where God's revelation comes to light, where God's activity is able to appear. He needs no misery, but is easier to show that everything comes of Him when He finds hearts opened to His grace, free from everything and from everybody. That's the heart of His Son Jesus. That's why the *ptokoi* are offered a sense. They are eager for salvation, they long for deliverance. With them God is able to let somebody see love. Love implies always a choice, a personal commitment, and a preference. To illustrate that He is *agape*, He has to choose, to prefer. There's no other way than that to show love, to love. To confirm His greater love, His bigger love, God chooses those who are less loved – the poor. They are blessed with this choice of God and not because they live in scarcity. This choice is their richness. Poverty makes people come closer and teaches from the very beginning that we cannot save ourselves. We need God, we need His grace. In that sense we will always be poor, indigent, since we cannot get what only He can give.

Consequently, Holy Scripture also criticized wealth as a way to salvation and the rich people who do not care for the poor. In fact, there are many things the disciples of Jesus cannot buy (morally speaking), many products cannot be purchased, many extravagances cannot be experienced, most luxuries cannot be afforded, sumptuousnesses are incompatible with the Gospel, and some spaces cannot be attended. Christians cannot have many things, they cannot adore God and the money at the same time (Mt 6,24). To follow Jesus, up to the cross, implies deliverance and liberation,

⁶¹ This is the translation Pope BENEDICT XVI, *Caritas in Veritate*, Vatican 2009, n.34 offers.

getting rid from what might hinder to receive God's blessings. Thus comes the kingdom. This is what Jesus teaches when He goes up to Jerusalem. There He teaches the disciples to leave everything behind (Mk 10,17-31). Poverty is not a social status but the price for discipleship. To follow Jesus implies being poor, to live in simplicity. This is not easy in our consumption society. God turns upside down the progress theology.