

Wealth, Poverty and Justice in Isaiah and the Other Prophets

By [Dr. John Oswalt](#)

Asbury Theological Seminary

It must be said at the outset that this essay will not be addressing what is commonly called “social justice.” I have written on the topic elsewhere, and it has been well-addressed recently by Andrew Abernethy in his 2021 volume entitled *Discovering Isaiah*.¹ Instead, the paper will limit itself to a narrower investigation of wealth and poverty in the context of justice. However, it is necessary to make a few remarks about that concept from the perspective of the Bible. In English, “justice” has largely come to refer to legal equity. Every person is treated equally before the law, receiving the same treatment as every other person in those same circumstances. But there is more to our concept than that. Justice is “fairness.” That is, it is unjust if some people in a society have some things and other persons in that same society do not. Matters of competency, training, and effort do not enter into the equation. It is unjust for some people to have much, while other people have little. The society should be so constructed that all persons, regardless of any other factors, should receive the same benefits. Thus, when many persons encounter the word “justice” in the Bible, they do so with these ideas in mind.

The problem we face is that the word normally translated “justice” – *mišpaṭ*, while it does regularly refer to legal equity, or fair treatment, has a much deeper foundation than merely those ideas.² We get a clue to this when we turn to the

¹See John N. Oswalt, “Righteousness in Isaiah: A Study of the Function of Chapters 56–66 in the Structure of the Book,” in *Writing and Reading the Scroll of Isaiah* (ed. Craig C. Broyles and Craig A. Evans; vol 1 of *Writing and Reading the Scroll of Isaiah*, ed. Craig C. Broyles, Leiden: Brill, 1997), 177–92. Andrew Abernethy, *Discovering Isaiah* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Press, 2021).

² We gain some idea of the complexity of the concept when we discover that the word is translated into English by 92 different words or phrases in the New International Version. Of the 421 occurrences, 94 are translated with “justice” and 83 with “laws,” leaving 244 occurrences to be translated with other terms. The following is a selection of these other translations. “prescribed way” Lev 5:10; “dishonest standards” Lev 19:35; “case” Num 27:5; “as specified” Num 29:6; “The share of the Priest” Deut 18:3; “the right of the firstborn” Deut 21:17; “in the manner” Josh 6:15; “the rule for the boy’s life” Josh 13:12; “the practice of the priests” 1 Sam 2:13; “what the king...will do” 1 Sam 8:9; “their quotas” 1 Kgs 4:29; “he built the temple...according to its specifications” 1 Kgs 6:38; “the cause of his servant” 1 Kgs 8:59; “slashed themselves as was their custom” 1 Kgs 18:20; “what kind of man” 2 Kgs 1:7; “the king, standing beside the pillar, as the custom was” 2 Kgs 11:14; “a proper time and procedure” Eccles 8:6; “God teaches [the farmer] the right way” Isa 28:26; “my people do not know the requirements” Jer 8:7; “the sentence of death” Jer 26:11; “conformed to the standards of the nations” Ezek 11:12. John R. Kollenberger III and

Biblical book entitled “Judges.” Generations of children and others not so young have scratched their heads wondering where the judges are in the book. Yes, a few of these “judges” pass judgments on legal cases (Deborah, Samuel), but by and large “justice” has a very small part in their careers, at least as reported in the text. What are these people doing? They are restoring *mišpaṭ*. And what is that? They are bringing God’s intended order back into Israel’s life. These men and women are governors or rulers. This is the sense in which many ancient Near Eastern kings styled themselves. They “judged” their people (presumably straightening out the disorder that had befallen the kingdom because of their incompetent predecessors).

Thus, we can see that Yahweh is the true Judge whose coming is a cause for rejoicing (cf. Ps 96:13). Why is that the case? It is because he will restore this poor disordered world to its pre-Fall condition. He will impose creation order upon his world again. Thus, we can see that the fundamental idea of *mišpaṭ* in the Bible is that which conforms to the order of life as prescribed by the Creator. Does that include legal equity? Absolutely. Is it largely confined to that concept? No. This means that when we encounter the word “justice” in the Bible, we need to pause a moment and allow Biblical ideas to penetrate our thinking.

With this foundation let us turn to the book of Isaiah, looking for its concept of justice in the context of wealth and poverty. Unlike, say, the book of Proverbs, Isaiah does not have much to say about wealth, per se. The term is almost exclusively *hayil*, which can also be translated with “strength” or “abundance.” Only in 53:9 does *‘ašir*, “rich man” appear, with a probable dismissive note. The Servant is not even permitted to be buried with the innocent poor, but instead with the wicked rich.

Otherwise, the book makes two points: hard won wealth can be easily lost to those more powerful and aggressive than you (8:4; 10:3; 10:14; 30:6); but God will bring the wealth of the nations to his faithful people (45:14; 60:5, 11; 61:6). The clear implication is that the only truly reliable wealth is that which God gives you, and that is only yours so long as he makes it available.

Jeremiah also has only a few references to wealth, but they are a bit more pointed.³ The first statement is in 5:27 where he says that wicked people have trapped people like birds, making themselves rich in the process. Next is the well-known statement occurring in chapter nine, where the prophet says that the only acquisition worth having is not strength, or wealth, or even wisdom, but rather the knowledge of God who practices *hesed*, *mišpaṭ*, and *šedeqa* (9:23-24 [Heb. 22-23]). The clear implication is that these central characteristics of Yahweh are what we should be expending our energies to lay hold of, and not riches, especially not ill-gotten riches.

James A. Swanson, *The Hebrew English Concordance to the Old Testament with the New International Version* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1998), 1041.

³Along with *hayil*, Jeremiah also uses forms of *‘ašar* three times (5:27; 9:22, 23).

Of the remaining references, three make the explicit point that all the wealth that Jerusalem and Judah have built up so laboriously will be given as spoil to the conquering nation of Babylon (15:13; 17:3; 20:5). They have labored for the wrong thing and it will merit them nothing. The implication is that gaining this wealth was a foolish enterprise at the least and is, at the worst, an ill-gotten gain. These implications are fleshed out in chapter seventeen, in verses one through eleven. Jeremiah begins by condemning the rampant idolatry of the land (vv. 1-4), and it is in that context that he says they will lose their wealth and treasures (v. 3). Why did they engage in idolatry, attempting to manipulate the forces of the cosmos in their favor? Surely it was to gain riches. Now that will all go to the enemy “because of sin throughout your country.”

What should they have done? Instead of trusting in themselves and their ability to provide for themselves (vv. 5-6) they should have trusted in Yahweh (vv. 7-8). Those who trust in themselves are a tumbleweed on the barren steppe, whereas those who trust in Yahweh are flourishing trees (in language very reminiscent of Psalm 1). But wealth will not be lost only as the result of the judgment visited on the nation because of its sin. It will also be taken away because it was not gained according to God’s divine order, his justice. This is the point of chapter seventeen, verse eleven, which says that a man who gets riches in a way not right (*mišpaṭ*) is like a partridge that hatches eggs it did not lay. This wealth was not earned, but was in effect, stolen, and the prophet says it will evaporate in the middle of life.

Many of the same patterns are also found in Ezekiel.⁴ Wealth, difficultly gained, will be easily plundered (7:11; 29:19; 30:4, 10). Ezekiel speaks at some length and in some detail about the wealth of Tyre (chaps. 27 and 28). It was because of the wealth that Tyre amassed that she was the broker for many nations who depended on her to manage their commerce (27:8, 12, 18, 33). There is no note of condemnation here; these are simply statements of fact. In 28:4 it is stated that Tyre’s wealth was the result of wisdom and understanding. Again, nothing wrong here. But the following verse, 28:5, gets at the issue. That Tyre was so successful and wealthy became a source of pride, and there was the poison. Although Isaiah does not mention Tyre’s wealth specifically, he alludes to it and reaches the same conclusion: pride. Wealth is finally a gift from God, and unless used in his service (Isa 23:18), is liable to become a deadly snare. Hosea 12:8 makes a similar point. Ephraim, northern Israel, has depended on crooked business practices to become very wealthy and now is confident that its wealth will prevent anyone from finding “any iniquity or sin.” This has, of course, often been the case in human history: wealth has protected from judgment. But Hosea makes the point that the God who has been with them since their coming out of Egypt cannot be bought off. He will not overlook their shed blood⁵ and contempt.

⁴ In addition to *hayil*, Ezekiel also uses *hon* (27:12, 18, 27, 33) and *ašar* (27:33).

⁵ It is interesting to consider whether the several prophetic references to shed blood in connection with Israel are perhaps metaphorical (Isa 1:15; 59:3, 7; Jer 2:34; 7:6; etc.; Ezek 7:23; 9:9; etc.. Perhaps the

Micah four, thirteen is reminiscent of the passages in Isaiah sixty to sixty-three that speak of Zion's receiving the wealth of the world and dedicating it to Yahweh. However, six, twelve, in the context of the famous six, eight, tells a different story. It says that the rich men are violent. This is in the context of a diatribe against dishonest weights and other sharp business practices. Clearly these are people who did not love *mišpaṭ* (6:8). Rather, (as in Jer 17:11) they have hatched someone else's eggs.

Obadiah 11 and 13 speak of Babylon's plundering of Jerusalem's wealth, and Nahum 2:9 of the plundering of the wealth of Assyria, while Zechariah 14:14, says that the wealth of the nations will come to Jerusalem.

This survey of the references to wealth in the prophets leads to several observations. First, and perhaps somewhat surprisingly, there is no blanket condemnation of wealth, nor is wealth condemned out of hand as necessarily arising from oppression. To be sure there are such condemnations, and it is important to note that they are often associated with a violation of *mišpaṭ*. However, what is it that is being violated? Is the use of false weights an injustice? Technically, using English terminology, no. But is it a violation of the order of the universe, as designed by God? Most certainly.

Second, the most frequent references are to the transitoriness of wealth. It is always, in a world of conflict and warfare, subject to sudden loss. This is undoubtedly a salutary lesson. If the significance of one's life is dependent on some degree of wealth, one had better be prepared for devastating loss. This is even more the case if the wealth is the result of mistreatment of others. Such wealth is as impermanent as the wind. From the perspective of the prophets, wealth is a divine gift, a gift to be used in the service of Yahweh and his people. While the amassing of it may indeed be the result of the exercise of wisdom and understanding, that is no cause for overweening pride. Others have also exercised wisdom and understanding and yet their efforts were not so blessed. The recognition that wealth is a gift will go far toward delivering one from the sin of trusting in oneself and one's abilities. A final observation is that nothing is said about a forcible redistribution of wealth. The wealthy are expected to be generous, but there is no sense that everyone should have equal amounts of money.

When we turn to the subject of poverty, it is considerably more widely discussed, with sixty references in the prophets. Isaiah (26 refs.) and Amos (12 refs.) have the most to say, while the others have relatively fewer comments.⁶ The primary

oppression of the poor was seen by the prophets as the equivalent of spilling their life blood. Note that loan sharks in more recent times have been called "blood-suckers." If this understanding is correct, it puts a new understanding upon economic oppression.

⁶ Jeremiah and Ezekiel, seven each; Zechariah, four; Zephaniah, three; Habakkuk, one. No refs. in Hosea, Joel, Obadiah, Jonah, Micah, Nahum, Haggai, or Malachi.

terms here are *'ani*, the noun form of a verb which speaks of being lowly, afflicted, or weak;⁷ *dal*, a noun connoting what is weak and haggard, and *'ebyon*, a noun referring to the condition of neediness. In the prophets *'ani* occurs most frequently (25), *'ebyon* is next (17) and *dal* is third (12).⁸

The terms are used primarily in four ways. The first, and the most common outside of Isaiah, is the oppression of the poor by the powerful, and in contrast, the care of the poor by the righteous. Interestingly, in view of the topic of this paper, the oppressors are never expressly said to be the wealthy. If the oppressors are identified, they are “the wicked.” The second use, and by far, the most frequent in Isaiah, is the care of the poor by Yahweh. The third use of the terms, and much less frequent than the first and second, is the idea that the humble poor are especially favored by God. Fourth, the terms are used simply to describe a condition, such as “poor Anathoth” (Isa 10:30). There are two unique usages: in Jeremiah 5:4 the prophet surmises that perhaps the reason the people are not listening to him is that they are “the foolish poor” (*dal*) who do not know Yahweh’s ways. Here the sense is clearly that the poor are weak and unintelligent, an idea that is not found elsewhere. The other unique use is Zechariah 9:9 where it is said that the Messiah will appear “lowly (*'ani*) and riding on a donkey.” Here the sense has much more to do with attitude and demeanor than it does with economic status.

It is perhaps not surprising that every one of the twelve occurrences of the terms in Amos refer to the oppression of the poor.⁹ The prophet condemns those who use the poor and needy for economic profit, buying and selling them as slaves (2:6; 8:6). He has only contempt for those who “trample” (2:7; 5:11; 8:4) and “crush” (4:1) the poor, evidently through the imposition of unjust fees and taxes (5:11). But his most dripping contempt is for the wives of wealthy men, who in their lust for luxury, prod their husbands into oppressing the poor (4:11). His description of these women as “fat cows of Bashan” could hardly be more biting. The judgment is the more gripping because it does not merely condemn the actions, but probes into the motivations behind the actions. It has been suggested that the oppression of the poor which Amos describes may have been the result of the great influx of wealth that came about during the reign of Jeroboam II, with a consequent growing divide between the rich and the poor.¹⁰ Although it is not really possible to document that suggestion, it seems very plausible.

⁷ There is a fourth term *'aniw*, which occurs six times, but two of these are pointed as *'ani* in the *qere*. *HALOT* (2:855) suggests that the term may originally have been a plural form of *'ani*. It does not seem to have a different connotation from *'ani*, although it is often translated “the meek.” It occurs most frequently in the Psalms. A fifth term, *ruš*, occurs 20 times in the Bible, 16 of which appear in Proverbs. It does not occur in the prophets.

⁸ It is common for *'ebyon* to be paralleled with either *dal* or *'ani*. It is slightly less common for the latter two terms to be paralleled.

⁹ *'ebyon*: 2:6; 4:1; 5:12; 8:4, 6; *dal*: 2:7; 4:1; 5:11; 8:6; *'ani*: 8:4; *'anaw*: 2:7

¹⁰ John Bright, *The History of Israel*, 3rd ed. (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1981), 260

It is tempting to wonder whether Judah's relative poverty in comparison with Israel may have meant that there was not so much of a division among social classes there, and that this explains why the Judean members of the so-called Minor Prophets do not, by and large, echo Amos' sentiments. Only in Zechariah (7:10) do we have a command not to oppress the widow, the orphan, the immigrant, and the poor (*'ani*). This statement appears in the context of a report by Zechariah of the commands Yahweh had given to Israel's ancestors, commands against which those ancestors had hardened their hearts. Thus, while they do constitute a judgment, it is not a judgment with the kind of immediacy that Amos evinces.¹¹

But if we make that observation concerning the Judean representatives of The Twelve, it cannot be said of Jeremiah and Ezekiel. One wonders if their condemnations reflect conditions that had come to characterize Judah during the times of Manasseh and later. Perhaps his acceptance of Assyrian vassal-ship meant an improvement in economic conditions with a growing separation between rich and poor such as that which apparently prevailed in the north under Jeroboam II.

But even with these two prophets, the number of condemnations found is relatively few. Jeremiah (2:34) uses a powerful metaphor when he speaks of people who have defiled their clothing with the blood of the innocent poor. He expands on the innocence by saying, "you did not find them breaking into your houses." Thus, there was no excuse for the harsh treatment. In verses twenty-six through twenty-eight of chapter five he describes wicked people who have grown "fat and sleek," reminiscent of Amos' "fat cows of Bashan," through their misdeeds, among which are depriving orphans of justice and failing to defend the rights of the needy. (In both 2:34 and 5:28 *'ebyon* is the term used.) In contrast to these, Jeremiah commends Josiah for "judging the case" (*dan din*) of the poor (*'ebyon*) and the needy (*'ani*). This statement occurs in the context of an address (22:11-17) concerning Jehoahaz (Shallum) whom the prophet accuses of having attempted to build his palace with forced labor, whom Jeremiah refers to as the king's neighbors. Josiah did the very opposite, says the prophet. Instead of mistreating the poor for his own ends, Josiah made sure that the powerless were treated fairly. As a result, it was well for Josiah. As for Shallum, taken captive to Egypt and never to return, his epitaph is: "But you have eyes and heart only for your dishonest gain, for shedding innocent blood, and for practicing oppression and violence" (22:17 ESV).

¹¹ There are two references in Zechariah that are somewhat uncertain. They are 11:7 and 11, which have been commonly translated "the oppressed (*'ani*) of the flock." However, LXX reads "Canaanites" (evidently taking *laken 'ani* in this way) and then this has been taken to mean "traders in sheep" (so ESV and NRSV). However, "sheep" is not present in the LXX text of v. 7, and in v. 11, "sheep" is in apposition to Canaanites. Vulgate agrees with MT, while Syriac reads "there were many sheep" in v. 7, but "the meek of the flock" in v. 11. Although 11:4 speaks of people becoming rich through buying and selling the flock, the ms. evidence of emending these verses seems to me to be very weak. For a helpful defense of the traditional reading, see Thomas E. Mcomiskey, "Zechariah," vol. 3, p. 1194 in *The Minor Prophets: An Exegetical and Expository Commentary*, 3 vols., ed. T. E. Mcomiskey (Grand Rapids; Baker Books, 1998).

When we turn to Ezekiel, we find three of the four references in the book pronouncing judgment on the oppression of the poor.¹² Samaria is said not to have helped the poor (*'ani*) and the needy (*'ebyon*) (16:49). Similarly, it is said that wicked men have oppressed the poor and needy (18:12). Finally, the “people of the land” are said not only to have oppressed the poor and needy, they have also mistreated the immigrant, denying them *mišpaṭ* (22:29). “People of the land” is a complex phrase,¹³ but it seems likely that before the exile it refers to the upper classes of the country. Like Jeremiah, Ezekiel has one positive statement. In chapter eighteen where he is discussing individual responsibility, Ezekiel contrasts a righteous man (vv. 5-9) with his wicked son (vv. 10-13), and yet again with that wicked man’s righteous son (vv. 14-17). Interestingly, in the first and third sequences, (vv. 7-8, and 16-17), he says that the righteous man holds himself back from oppressing anyone, restores the pledge, does not commit robbery, gives food to the hungry, clothes the naked, does not lend at interest or take profit, keeps himself from wrong-doing, and executes true justice. Although there is no actual reference to the poor in these two statements, it is apparent that such a man is not taking advantage of those less fortunate than he. However, if there were any doubt of that, it is removed by the middle sequence where in verse twelve, along with all the other descriptions, it is specifically said that the wicked son (and father) oppresses *the poor and needy*.¹⁴

In keeping with Jeremiah and Ezekiel, Isaiah has relatively few condemnations of oppression of the poor. These are found in 3:14-15; 10:2; and 32:7. Chapter three, verses fourteen and fifteen say, “The LORD will enter into judgment with the elders and princes of his people: ‘It is you who have devoured the vineyard, the spoil of the poor (*'ani*) is in your houses. What do you mean by crushing my people, by grinding the face of the poor (*'aniim*)?’ declares the Lord GOD of hosts” (ESV). Although “crush” (*daka*) is not normally used of grain,¹⁵ “grinding” (*ṭahan*) definitely is, and together they suggest the imagery of reducing kernels of grain to the dust of flour.¹⁶ These statements occur in the context of a passage that is dealing with the fixation of the Israelite people upon greatness and elegance, and the desolation and humiliation that will come from that fixation (2:6 – 4:1). Thus, these particular verses (3:14-15) are linking the two ideas: the powerful people who are reducing the powerless to dust will themselves be in a similar position in a very short time.

The occurrence in 10:2 appears in the final stanza of the poem found in 9:8 – 10:4. That poem is detailing the sins of Ephraim, thus designating the northern

¹² Counting the occurrence of the terms separately, there are seven references, but three of the statements use terms in parallel, so there are only four statements.

¹³ For a full discussion, see “Am Ha’arez” ABD 1:168-169.

¹⁴ Most translations, following the KJV translate the opening clause of v. 17 with some form of “From the poor (*me'ani*) he withholds his hand.” But the LXX reads “from iniquity” and ESV and NRSV choose to emend the text in that way.

¹⁵ The related root *duk* is so used; see Num 11:8.

¹⁶ Reminiscent of Amos 2:7 which speaks of trampling the poor into the dust.

kingdom, against whom Yahweh's fist is raised. The four stanzas all relate to issues of arrogance and pride. The passage here says, "What sorrow awaits the unjust judges and those who issue unfair laws. They deprive the poor (*dal*) of justice (*din*) and deny the right (*mišpaṭ*) of the needy (*'ani*) among my people" (NLT). It is apparent that it is the legal officials who are at fault here. This is reminiscent of Jeremiah 5:28 where the use of the verb and the noun from the root *din*, as here, speak in particular of the court setting. Here again it is those in power who are using that power to the disadvantage of those who do not have power.

The final reference to the oppression of the poor in Isaiah is found in chapter thirty-two, verse seven, which reads, "As for the scoundrel--his devices are evil; he plans wicked schemes to ruin the poor (*'aniim, ketibh*) with lying words, even when the plea of the needy (*'ebyon*) is right (*mišpaṭ*)" (ESV). In this case, it appears that it is not so much a person of power who is the offender, but a "scoundrel" (*kilay*). This word is unique to Isaiah thirty-two. It occurs in verse five as well as here. In verse five it is parallel to "fool" (*nabal*). The larger context is the promised coming kingdom, in which fools will not be called noble, and scoundrels will not be called honorable (?).¹⁷ This context invites us to reconsider the matter of power. It seems likely on this basis that the prophet is saying that in the present kingdom persons of power from the king on down are not noble and honorable, but fools and scoundrels, people whose motives are evil and whose actions are wicked, as seen in the ways in which they treat the powerless.

Related to these discussions of the mistreatment of the poor is one passage in Isaiah that speaks of the right treatment of them. This is in chapter fifty-eight. This chapter is discussing the practice of fasting, referred to as "afflicting one's soul," and is largely negative toward the practice. The prophet says that the fasting one only uses it as a justification for oppressing his workers. Instead, Isaiah says, the fast that Yahweh is seeking is "to share your bread with the hungry and to bring the wandering poor (*'ani*) into a house" (58:7).

This review of the ways in which the prophets address the matter of the oppression of the poor suggests that the issue is not so much a matter of economics as it is power and powerlessness. Of course, money plays directly into that, but in this case it is not so much that "money is the root of all evil," but power and the abuse of power is. The persons condemned are rarely specifically defined as the wealthy, but rather the powerful. And the range of terms used for those being oppressed speaks of those who are needy, weak, and of low estate. This observation is reinforced by those passages that speak of widows, orphans, and immigrants alongside the "poor" (Isa 10:2; Jer 5:28; Zech 7:10) Again, I hasten to say that those sorts of persons are frequently in a state of powerlessness because of a lack of money, but I am impressed that the point is

¹⁷ This term (*šoa'*) occurs only here and in Job 34:19 where it is translated "rich" and contrasted with "poor" (*dal*). The versions are undecided here. Apparently on the basis of the parallel with *nadiv*, they use a variety of terms, including "bountiful," "generous," "honorable," and "highly respected."

that persons of power take the opportunity not to assist those who have no power to protect themselves, but rather to render them even more powerless, particularly to deprive them of what is right for them, their *mišpaṭ*. I am hesitant to use the term “rights” here because of the particular political loading of that term in our society today, where it virtually means “I have a right to anything that anybody else has.” But what these passages are about is the God-given right of persons to be treated equally before the law, as those who share equally in the image of God. What is right for one person is right for all persons in God’s order of reality, and it is an egregious offense in his sight for one person to take advantage of another simply because he or she has the power to do so.

But the three passages just discussed, all of which, by the way, occur in so-called First Isaiah, contain only six of the 26 occurrences of our key terms in the book as a whole. What are the connotations of those other occurrences? One of them (66:2) speaks of the favor with which Yahweh looks upon the poor: “This is the one on whom I will look: on the lowly (*‘ani*) and broken in spirit, the one who trembles at my word.” Although the terms translated “poor” do not appear there, chapter fifty-seven, verse fifteen expresses a similar thought: “I dwell in the high and holy place, and with the crushed¹⁸ and low-spirited, and to restore the spirit of the lowly and to restore the heart of the crushed.” This highlights the opposite point that God takes no favor in the arrogant and haughty.¹⁹

Although this statement of God’s favor only occurs once, and in so-called Third Isaiah, it undergirds the other eighteen occurrences which are spread throughout the book, all of which declare that God will take up the cause of the poor and will deliver them from their oppressors. This declaration is largely unique to Isaiah among the prophets, being found elsewhere only in Jeremiah twenty-two, thirteen: “Yahweh rescues the life of the needy (*‘ebyon*),” Zephaniah two, three: “Seek the LORD, you lowly (*‘ani*) of the land who conform to his pattern (*mišpaṭ*), seek righteousness, seek lowliness (*‘anawa*); it may be that you will be hidden on the day of Yahweh’s wrath,” and Zephaniah three, eleven and twelve: “On that day you will not be disgraced by all the wantonness with which you transgressed against me, for then I will take away from among you your celebrated pride and you will not be arrogant on my holy hill any longer. But I will leave among you a humble (*‘ani*) and lowly (*dal*) people who will take refuge in the name of Yahweh.”

In Isaiah, there are basically two ways in which Yahweh’s care for the poor are expressed. The first includes direct statements either from Yahweh or about his actions on behalf of the poor. The second speaks of the care that they receive, presumably from Yahweh although his agency is not always specified. Representative of the direct statements are these: “When the poor (*‘ani*) and the needy (*‘ebyon*) seek water, I, Yahweh, will answer them” (41:17); “Therefore,

¹⁸ Recall the times when the “poor” are referred to as “crushed” (Amos 4:1; Isa 3:15). Note also 53:5 and 10 where the Servant is “crushed” by Yahweh.

¹⁹ Isa 2:11; 3:16-17; 5:15; 10:12; 13:11; Jer 13:15; 50:31-32; Ezek 16:50; Zeph 3:11. Note also the statement in Psalm 37:11 that the meek (*‘anawim*) will inherit the earth.

hear this, afflicted one (*'ani*).... I have taken the cup of staggering from your hand..." (51:21-22); "O afflicted one (*'aniya*) beset by storms and not comforted; I will set your stones in antimony, and your foundations in sapphires" (54:11). Indirect statements include both second person and third person address. A second person address is: "You have been a stronghold for the poor (*dal*), for the needy (*'ebyon*) in his distress" (25:4). Third person address is the most common, including: "with righteousness he will judge the poor (*dal*) and decide uprightly for the meek (*'anaw*) of the earth" (11:4);²⁰ "Yahweh has founded Zion, in her the afflicted (*'ani*) of his people find refuge" (14:32); "Yahweh will have compassion on his afflicted ones (*'ani*)" (49:13).

Finally, there are statements about the future state of the poor that only indirectly relate to Yahweh's action. Some of these are: "The firstborn of the poor (*dal*) will graze, and the needy (*'ebyon*) will stretch out trustingly" (14:30). [This statement is in the context of a diatribe against wealthy and arrogant Philistia.] "A foot tramples [the lofty city], the feet of the poor (*'ani*), the footsteps of the wretched (*dal*)" (26:6); "The poor (*'ebyon*) will rejoice and the meek (*'anaw*) will get fresh joy" (29:19). The statement in sixty-one, verse one ties the one speaking back to the Messiah presented in chapter eleven. There, the Messiah is said to rule in favor of the poor, and here the speaker, who is clearly the Servant, in view of the parallel language with 42:7, says that Yahweh has anointed him to bring the good news of deliverance to the poor. Here, as in both 11:4 and 29:19, the relatively infrequent *'anaw* is used.

As already stated, this emphasis upon the future deliverance and blessing of the poor is virtually unique to Isaiah among the prophets. Only once in Jeremiah and twice in Zephaniah do similar thoughts appear. Jeremiah says, "He has delivered the life of the needy (*'ebyon*) from the hands of those who do evil" (20:13). In that chapter, Jeremiah is decrying the mistreatment he is receiving at the hands of his hearers, so he may be referring to himself and this may be an expression of desperate faith that Yahweh will deliver him from all those enemies upon whom he is calling down vengeance. As mentioned above, the Zephaniah passages say that it is possible that the lowly will be protected from Yahweh's wrath (2:3) and that he will remove the arrogant boasters from the land, "but will leave the humble (*dal*) and lowly (*'ani*) who take refuge in Yahweh's name" (3:11-12). These three references are the only examples outside of Isaiah, whereas in Isaiah, we find no less than eighteen references.

How are we to explain this feature of Isaiah's work? First of all, we may dismiss the idea that this is somehow an exilic or post-exilic idea. It appears in all parts of the book. Furthermore, the concept does not appear in those prophetic books which can be confidently dated to the exilic or post-exilic periods. Three ideas come to mind. First, it must be said that the key terms, here as elsewhere, are not narrowly speaking of those suffering economic poverty. These are persons

²⁰ This statement is reminiscent of Psalm 37:11 with its statement "the meek shall inherit the earth" quoted by Jesus (Matt 5:5), especially since both the psalm and Isaiah use the relatively rare *'anaw*.

who for a variety of reasons are “afflicted,” or “needy,” or “oppressed” or “wretched.” They are in these conditions in some cases deservedly, as a result of persistent sin. This would be especially true when speaking of the nation as a whole. They are afflicted by enemy troops more powerful than they because they have taken themselves out from under Yahweh’s protective hand. But most of the time, that is not so. They are in these conditions through no doing of their own because they are oppressed by people more powerful than they. So, is their condition hopeless? Oh no, because the most powerful Person in the universe who is marked by self-giving, self-denying love is going to show on their behalf how power is meant to be used – not for self-aggrandizement, but for the enhancement of the lives of others, most especially those who are in no position to repay the gift. In this context we should remind ourselves that again and again throughout the Old Testament narrative, covenant faithfulness is summarized in two points, no worship of false gods, and care for the powerless.

A second thought relates to the theological completeness of the book of Isaiah. In many ways Isaiah contains a more complete summary of Biblical theology than any other book in the Bible, including the New Testament books. Its coverage extends from creation to the new heaven and new earth. It is unparalleled in its combining of the transcendent Yahweh and the immanent Savior, in the glory of the Creator and the lowliness of the Servant. In that light, it makes good sense that this book which has so much to say about the folly of human creatures attempting to exalt themselves to the heavens and in the process stepping on everyone beneath them, would have much to say about the exaltation of those who whether willingly or unwillingly are put in the lowest places. The theology of glory and humility would be incomplete without it.

Finally, Isaiah is a book teeming with polar opposites. There is judgment and hope, and the truth that for these people hope can only be found through judgment. There is exaltation and humility and the fact that the only way to exaltation is through humility. There is power and weakness and the frightening realization that the only road to real power is through weakness. There is the security of one’s accomplishments and the risk of faith and the recognition that the only real security is to be found in waiting in faith on the One God. In the light of all this, it becomes almost necessary for the book to display in a variety of ways that those who are utterly powerless should be the beneficiaries of the One in whom all the power of the Universe resides.

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