

WHERE IS THE OLD TESTAMENT DEACON?

Taking Care of the Poor Then and Now

Where is the deacon in the Old Testament? In spite of suggestions to the contrary, he is nowhere to be found.¹ There is no direct Old Testament precedent, or forerunner, of the office of deacon as we know it today. At the same time, we are all aware that the Lord God certainly did not forget the poor in the old dispensation. But how were the poor taken care of in the Old Testament times, and what can we learn from that for our task today? That is the real issue behind the question and topic for today, “Where is the Deacon in the Old Testament?”.

We will, therefore, not dwell so much on the “why” as on the “how” of providing for the poor.² How in a concrete way was provision made, especially in the Old Testament and also in the New Testament, and what principles can we derive from that for diaconal work today?

To answer those questions, I propose we do the following. First, let us find out who the poor in the Old Testament are. Next, we will consider their provision in the Old Testament along with the New Testament implications that resulted. Finally, we will pull the key elements together and reflect on our situation today.

WHO ARE THE POOR?

The Terms

Who are those people who are called poor and needy in the Old Testament? In answering this question, we should first note that there is a very extensive vocabulary dealing with the poor. For our purposes, we can note three major categories of Hebrew terms for the poor which all come down to us in English with the translation “poor” or something similar.

THE MATERIALLY POOR

This first and most obvious category comprises those who lack the basic necessities to exist. They are destitute and without any hope unless they receive help from others. Thus we read, for example, in Deuteronomy 15 in the context of postponing debt payment every seven years, that there should be no poor in Israel (Deut 15:4 and passim; 24:14; Ps 109:16).

THE POWERLESS

These are those who have experienced a sharp reduction or loss of their prosperity and social status. As such they are the opposite of the rich (Exod 30:15), and therefore could present less expensive sacrifices (cf. Lev 14:21 - 22). Such people can also become impaired physically and psychologically and so become needy and helpless (Job 34:28; Ps 82:3; Prov 22:22; Jer 40:7).

THE AFFLICTED AND OPPRESSED

The afflicted and oppressed are those who are intimidated and exploited by the rich (Isa 3:14; Ezek 18:16 - 18; Amos 2:7). They can also be the pious who are aggrieved by the wicked (Ps 10:2; Isa 14:32). In short, they are the victimised, those who are bowed down and lowly, with people taking advantage of their lowly circumstances.³

Thus there were the materially poor, the powerless, and the afflicted. Now we must not imagine that these were three separate categories of Israelites. No. These terms are often used as synonyms of each other and *can* (but don't necessarily need to) refer to the same people, viewed from different perspectives. The specific flavour of the different Hebrew terms for "poor" are difficult to bring out in English translation, but these different nuances exist in Scripture.⁴ Why is it important to note this? Well, it shows that the poor in Israel are not just those without money, but they include the disadvantaged, the downtrodden, and the helpless. This broad range of meanings for the term "poor" also indicates that we should not conceive of the poor in our own midst too narrowly. It can include not just the materially poor, but also the disadvantaged and the afflicted.

The Poor in Israel's Society

In order for us to appreciate as much as possible what God's Word (the Old Testament) is telling us in its extensive prescriptions for the poor, it will be advantageous to pause and attempt to picture before us the main manifestations of poverty as just noted within Israelite society, and see to whom these labels of being poor, powerless and afflicted applied.⁵ Then we notice that there are different ways in which the Israelite met the poor in his daily life. We will also see what solutions the Lord God has for the poor.

THE PEASANT FARMER AND THE LANDLESS POOR

These were not totally destitute. Although they suffered economically, they were expected to offer sacrifices, though less valuable animals could be used than the rich in their sacrifices (Lev 5:7,11; 12:8; 14:21). They had to give atonement money along with the rich (Exod 30:15). They were taxed (Amos 5:11). Especially in the days of Jeroboam II (782 - 753 BC), small landowners were often reduced to poverty by the rich so that God through Amos warned Israel of his wrath (Amos 2:6 - 7; cf. 8:4 - 6). Similarly, for example, Isaiah prophesied in his day (Isa 26:5 - 6) and promised restoration of the poor (Isa 29:19 - 20).

The landless poor (Exod 23:11; Lev 19:10; 23:22; cf., e.g., Jer 39:10) were especially vulnerable. They were day labourers who were completely dependent on others for their livelihood. They could easily be exploited and taken advantage of (Ps 37:14; Isa 32:7). God, therefore, protected these people in the short run by measures such as prompt daily payment of their wages, interest free loans, and the return of their cloaks by sundown (if they had been submitted for a pledge) so that the poor could sleep under it (Exod 22:25 - 27; Deut 24:10 - 15). They could also gather what grew of itself when the fields were left fallow every seventh year, harvest the leftover grapes, and glean from harvested fields (Exod 23:11; Lev 19:9 - 10; 23:22).⁶

In the long term, God provided for a year of no payment of loans every seventh year (Deut 15)⁷, and a year of Jubilee every fiftieth year, so that the land could be returned to the original owner (Lev 25).

THE WIDOWS AND ORPHANS

With the death of her husband, a woman, especially one who was by herself, was for all practical purposes in a very precarious position. This is evident from the fact that the Hebrew term for “widowhood” can also mean “destitution”. There were basically two options for a widow, assuming there were no sons or grown-up children.⁸

1. If she had no sons, an unmarried brother-in-law could marry her (the so-called levirate marriage) and the first son to be born would be reckoned to be heir of the deceased’s property, and he would continue the line of the deceased. However, such a brother-in-law could refuse to cooperate (Deut 25:5 - 10; cf. Gen 38:8), and the option of more distant relatives fulfilling this duty was possible (Ruth 4:5 - 6).
2. She could return to her father’s house where she might wait for a levirate marriage with a brother of her late husband who was too young at that moment (cf. Gen 38:11; Lev 22:13; Cf. Ruth 1:8,11).

Of course a widow could technically remarry, especially if she was young or wealthy (as David married the widowed Abigail, 1 Sam 25:39 - 42). The other option was that she supported her children on her own. However, being wealthy as a widow was exceptional and, as has already been noted, the word for “widowhood” also meant “destitution”.⁹

When she became widowed with young children, then her children became orphans¹⁰. Obviously, the weak position of the widow was also reflected in the plight of the orphans (cf. Lam 5:3).¹¹ Now as long as family ties were strong (as they presumably were, especially in the early days of Israel’s settlement in the Promised Land), it could be expected that widows and orphans were well taken care of (see options 1 and 2 above). However, with the establishment of a more centralised government, and the development of great economic prosperity, the widow was apparently often left out in the cold. Although a widow inherited the property of her husband (cf. Ruth 4:3; Prov 15:25), yet she was vulnerable to losing her

property through fraud and injustice.¹² The loud protests of the prophets regarding the mistreatment of the widows and orphans show that their position was vulnerable indeed (Isa 1:17,23; 10:2; Jer 7:6 - 7; 22:3 - 5; Ezek 22:7; Zec 7:8 - 14; Mal 3:5).

The Lord, however, provided for the needs of the widows and the orphans in his law. He warned Israel not to afflict them and that if they did, God's wrath would burn against them and make their wives widows, and their children fatherless (Exod 22:21 - 24 [Heb 20 - 23]). Orphans were to be treated justly, and the widow's garment was not to be taken in pledge (Deut 24:17). The widows and orphans could share in the festivities of the tithe of the produce every third year, along with the Levite and the sojourner (Deut 14:28 - 29; 26:12 - 13). They could likewise share in the celebrations of the Feast of Weeks (Deut 16:11) and the Feast of Booths (Deut 16:14). They were in all likelihood included with the poor when it came to the privilege of gleaning the edges and corners of the field (Lev 19:9; 23:22) and receiving the produce of the Sabbath year (Exod 23:10 - 11). The Lord reminded his people that he was the protector and sustainer of widows and orphans (Ps 68:5 [Heb 6]; 146:9).

THE SOJOURNERS AND ALIENS

Another important part of the mosaic of Israelite society was the sojourners, aliens and foreigners. The sojourner was a stranger who had settled and established himself in Israel but who did not really belong there, because he lived among a people with whom he had no blood ties. The examples of Abraham in Canaan (Gen 23:4), Israel in Egypt (Exod 22:20), and Elimelech with his family in Moab (Ruth 1:1) come to mind. However, because a sojourner had established himself for a period in the land among the Israelites, he was not called a foreigner and also had certain rights and privileges.¹³ One could say that the sojourner was an immigrant (to use a modern term). Or one could summarise it by noting that such a person had left his original social setting and entered into a new dependent relationship in a new social setting.¹⁴

In that light it should be noted that an Israelite who moved, or was forced to move, from his original social setting to elsewhere in

Canaan was in essence an immigrant, and he *could* also be called a sojourner in his new dwelling place. He had lost the support of his family.¹⁵ We have examples of this in Scripture. In Judges 17 we read of a young Levite, who had at one point left a Levitical city, and had been sojourning (as a stranger) with the tribe of Judah in the non-Levitical town of Bethlehem. He left this place in search of another place to sojourn. He went north to Ephraim (Judg 17:7 - 13).¹⁶ Another example is found in Judges 19:16 which speaks of an old man from Ephraim who was sojourning in Gibeah in Benjamin, far from his family. So although the people in these examples were Israelites, they were nevertheless strangers in a place outside their original social setting and context, and were thus dependent on their new social setting for help should that be needed.

Usually, but certainly not always (Lev 25:47), the stranger or sojourner was a servant of someone (Deut 24:14) and was poor and vulnerable (Deut 10:18; 14:29; 24:14,17 - 21; Ezek 22:29).¹⁷ The strangers who were economically disadvantaged could expect aid just like the widow and orphan, including the right to glean (Lev 19:10; 23:22; Deut 24:19 - 21), to receive from the tithe for the poor and the festivities connected with that every third year (Deut 14:29), and the produce growing by itself in the sabbath year (Lev 25:6). The oppression of the sojourner was strictly forbidden (Exod 22:21; 23:9; Lev 19:33 - 34; Deut 24:14 - 15,17 - 18; 27:19).¹⁸

The terms for the alien and the stranger or sojourner are often used synonymously.¹⁹ What may have distinguished them is that the alien was less integrated, or assimilated, into the social and religious life of Israel than was a sojourner. However, both seem to have identified quite strongly with Israel, including commitment to the God of Israel.

THE FOREIGNER

The foreigner was attached to his homeland and planned to return to it. He was not a permanent resident in Israel, as were the sojourner and alien. He also had no close association with God's people. This meant that there was a distance between them and Israel and that is reflected in the legislation. If he owed debts to

an Israelite, he got no relief from payments in the Sabbath year (Deut 15:3). He was charged interest on money owed to an Israelite (Deut 23:20 [Heb 21]).

THE LEVITES

Last, but not least, there were scattered throughout Israel as teachers of the law (cf. Deut 33:10; 2 Chron 17:7 - 9), members of the tribe of Levi who had been set aside in the place of the firstborn for special service to God (Num 3:40 - 51). Because the Lord was their inheritance (Deut 10:9; 18:2), they had no landed property, like the other tribes, devoted to their exclusive use,²⁰ and they were to be supported by the tithes of Israel. Such tithes involved all the produce of the field (Num 18:21 - 32).

In spite of their privileged status, Levites were, however, counted among the poor and needy that needed the special support of the community to survive. They were also clearly vulnerable to the neglect and abuse of their rights. The Lord enjoined his people not to forget the Levites, but to have them share in their festivities and offerings and chief festivals, along with the other poor in Israel (Deut 12:12,18,19; 14:28 - 29; 16:11 - 14; 26:11 - 13).²¹

HOW THE POOR WERE HELPED

Thus far we have seen, as concretely as possible in the allowable time, whom the poor were, and how the poor could actually be found in Old Testament society. Now we need to consider how, practically speaking, their needs were met. We have already seen something of how the Lord provided for the poor by various laws which were designed to alleviate their needs. Our goal now is to consider God's will for the care of the poor from the perspective of "who has responsibility for what?". What are the structures in place for the care of the needy? Approached this way, we can derive principles that we can trace through the New Testament, or apply directly to today.

THE PLACE OF THE FAMILY

No society, or living together of human beings, is imaginable without the family. For the purpose of our topic, it is important to

note that in Israel, the extended family, or clan, was an economic unit and power within society. The extended family worked as a protective association of families or households (father's house)²² to preserve the minimal conditions needed for the integrity of each of the member families by giving help as needed.²³ God designed it this way in the type of agriculturally based and labour intensive society he ordained for Israel. In this way the vast accumulation of wealth in the hands of a few was prevented²⁴, and the family could survive intact. Let us consider some scenarios illustrating how the economic viability of a family (father's house) was maintained.

If land was lost through poverty and debt, then the next of kin was to redeem what was sold to keep it within the family or clan (Lev 25:23 - 28; Jer 32). The order of responsibility went from brother to uncle to cousin and to any blood relative (Lev 25:49). The one who redeemed was the kinsman-redeemer. This redemption of land shows that each family had to keep its inheritance, so it could be economically self-sufficient. The year of Jubilee, which occurred every fiftieth year, assured that land lost would eventually revert back to the original family. God designed Israel's economy with the interests of the lowest socio-economic unit in mind - the extended families on their patrimonial land.

To this end, the kinsman-redeemer was also expected, but not forced, to marry his sister-in-law when widowed and without a male heir, so that he could raise up an heir for her (Deut 25:5 - 10).²⁵

Also, to maintain the economic viability of the family, the kinsman-redeemer had to maintain or redeem the person or dependents of a kinsman in debt (Lev 25:35 - 55). He was thus expected to provide interest free loans (Lev 25:35ff.), and, if the needy relative had lost his land (until the year of Jubilee), the kinsman-redeemer could take him on as a servant - not a slave, and feed him and his family (Lev 25:39 - 43). If the family member had been forced to sell himself outside the clan, then the kinsman-redeemer was expected to redeem him from bondage (Lev 25:47ff.).²⁶

So the household and its economic viability was protected in a number of ways. In addition, we can think of the duty to support

the poor, especially the widows and orphans. The first ones in line to give help would have been the immediate family (as with the redemption), and going out from there. Such needy people could be incorporated into the household (cf. Job 31:18; Esther 2:7,15).

We saw, however, that poverty is wider than the economics of a low bank account. Indeed, often coupled with the difficulties of material poverty were the accompanying difficulties of being afflicted and oppressed by others in society, or by circumstances beyond one's control. Here too the family would be first in line to help its oppressed members. This is a very important point for it deals with being able to function as God intended, in the place God gave such a widow or orphan or poor and afflicted. Support must be given. And the family, immediate and extended, is the first in line to provide it.

Now, as any office bearer knows, things do not always work out the way they are supposed to. Also in Israel, this was the case. It could happen that for one reason or another, the land of a family was lost, either through economics or through unresolved destructive family conflict. The result would be the dispersal or destruction of that family as a viable unit. Now it could happen that not all members of the family were able to join related households as family members. So what happened to those left out? The options left were: to become marginal members of other non-related households as debt servants or day labourers, or one could join the underclass of the poor who basically lived off the goodwill of society.²⁷

Other possible reasons for such distress (besides the destruction of the family unit) could be: if a widow and her children could not be provided for by the family for whatever reason. Then she was in dire straits. Indeed, we read of a widow who was in danger of losing her children to slavery in order to pay the debt of a dead husband (2 Kings 4:1; cf. 1 Kings 17:8 - 15). Another possible cause of distress would be if a member of a family voluntarily moved elsewhere, away from the social and economic security of his home clan and household. Such a person would become a sojourner, like the Levite in Judges 17, and be dependent on others for his economic security, especially if he came into difficulties.

All this leads us to our next point: how society outside the family took care of the poor and disadvantaged in Israel.

THE PLACE OF SOCIETY

For the eventuality that one was deprived of the support of the family, God provided laws for his people so that society would take care of them.²⁸ One must remember that this people is the church. The society we are talking about is the Old Testament communion of faith - at least that is how it was intended to be.

These laws had in view two basic needs. First, justice to the poor and their rights had to be upheld (Exod 23:3; Deut 16:19; Ps 82:3). Secondly, charity was to be exercised towards the poor. Help and assistance were to be given to them. One must not be tightfisted but openhanded to the poor (Deut 15:7 - 11). An underlying principle is that all needs in the community should be met. Not all will have the same amount, but all the needs are to be equally satisfied (cf. Exod 16:17 - 18; 2 Cor 8:15).

We noted already how the poor, the widows, orphans and Levites were protected by God's law when there was no household to care for them. Among other things they were allowed to borrow utensils or implements without leaving their garment as pledge (Deut 24:17; Job 24:3; cf. Exod 22:22 - 26; Amos 2:8), and households were enjoined to include them in their festivals that followed the harvests (Deut 16:9 - 15). They could eat grain or fruit from their neighbours' fields and vineyards before the harvest (Deut 23:24 - 25), and after the harvest, gather the leftovers (Lev 19:9 - 10; 23:22; Deut 24:19 - 21; Ruth). They could also live off the land in the Sabbath years (every seventh year) (Exod 23:11; Lev 25:6). Annually they were also to be included in the festivities and meals associated with the Feast of Weeks and the Feast of Tabernacles (Deut 16:11,14). Notice how this last stipulation not only helped fill the stomachs of the disadvantaged, but also gave them fellowship and a sense of belonging. They could share in the joy of God's people and be encouraged.

Then there was a whole body of laws that dealt with matters of financial import. For example, on a simple level, the poor were not

to be charged interest (Exod 22:25; Lev 25:36; Deut 23:20). Also, the whole setup of the financial affairs of Israel had to follow God's will. This meant, for example, that every seventh year there was no repayment of loans (Deut 15) and every fiftieth year was the year of Jubilee when property reverted back to its original owner.²⁹

To understand all this body of legislation, which in one way or another takes note of the plight of the poor, one must realise one thing very well. This legislation is based on one simple demand of God, namely, that one love his neighbour as himself (Lev 19:18).³⁰ In loving the neighbour you not only think of your immediate family, but you also move outside that circle. You include also those who are separated from their family structure and are vulnerable and on their own.

Now there are several implications of this command of love underlying all the detailed legislation. God's law is not, in the first place, a legal code with a comprehensive system of penalties for disobedience, but it is covenant law, teaching Israel the right way to go.³¹ Israel was to be motivated to obey it, not out of fear, but out of gratitude for God's deliverance (Exod 19:4 - 6; 20:2; Deut 5:6) and out of love for his choosing them as his holy nation (Deut 7:6; 6; 11; 14:2; 26:18). One can also say that this is preached law, with its warnings, motivations and goals all directed to one's relationship with God.³²

With respect to the laws concerning the care of the poor, this characterisation of the law meant that they were not followed up by detailed penalties for disobedience.³³ The directives for caring for the poor were an appeal to the heart for obedience - part of the rule of thankfulness. God was not interested in fostering legalism but love for God and the neighbour.³⁴ This meant that it could be difficult to enforce the laws regarding the poor, if the people were unwilling and wandered from God. The history of Israel and the concern of God for the poor through his prophets bear out this point.

A second related point is that since the law was not a detailed legal code of what was not, and what was allowed, the law mainly enunciated principles. It was not an exhaustive catalogue of how the

poor could be helped. It was up to God's people to make further application.³⁵

A third point is that the command of love cuts two ways. Love helps with handouts, but love also shows responsibility. It is of no small importance that the Lord expected the poor to work for their food and drink and income. We can think of the law of gleaning and taking the leftover grapes (Lev 19:10; 23:22; Deut 24:19), and the law of living off the land's sabbath year yield (Exod 23:11; Lev 25:6). Both would require hard labour to gather sufficient amounts. Think of Ruth labouring from early morning to late at night.

The corollary to this is that the lazy poor were not to be assisted, because such relief would only encourage their ungodly behaviour. In short it would not be showing love to a neighbour. That would not help them, and so one would not show love by helping the lazy poor, the sluggard, as he is called in Proverbs. After all, laziness results in poverty (Prov 6:10 - 11; 14:23; 19:15; 20:13; 21:5; 24:33 - 34). Such a lazy poor person is associated with the wicked (Prov 15:19). Indeed, laziness can even lead to death (Prov 21:25), and so one needs to learn from the diligent ant and be wise (Prov 6:6). Likewise, those who live beyond their means invite poverty on themselves (Prov 21:17), and their condition should be corrected before assistance is given.

THE PLACE OF THE KING AND STATE

We have seen how society and the individual households had obligations to help the poor. What about the civil government in Israel? Did it have obligations?

When we ask a question like that, we must of course be careful not to impose our problematics on Scripture, for the Bible does not know of the type of government-sponsored security net that we are familiar with today. It is also clear from Scripture that the responsibility for the poor was clearly given to the people as a whole, and not in the *first* place to the king or state as the mediator between rich and poor.³⁶

However, having said that, the king as God's earthly