

From The Word

by Stephen Charles Mott

Biblical Healing as Empowering the Needy

Healing in the Bible has a connection to social justice that gives a social dimension to the mission to which Jesus gave to the disciples, and to us. We are sent to "heal the sick and declare that the Reign of God has come near" (Luke 10:9).

In 12:18, 20, Matthew interprets Jesus' healing (vv. 9-14) as fulfilling the prophecy that the Servant of the Lord would victoriously execute justice. Healing is closely associated with acts of justice in the Bible. Giving sight to the blind appears beside setting free from oppression in Luke 4:18 (cf. Psalm 146:7-9 et al.).

In Ezekiel 34 the political and religious leaders ("shepherds") are accused by the prophet. "You have not strengthened the weak, you have not healed the sick . . . , you have not sought the lost, but with force and harshness you have ruled over them" (v. 4 NRSV). The word sick here is the most basic Hebrew word for sickness. It means to be in a state of weakness, to suffer slackness and exhaustion. One's vital power somehow has been snipped. The sick experienced that physically, but also psychologically and socially in the aversion and social isolation they received and the subsequent exploitation.

Sickness in this way is closely associated with poverty. The basic words for the poor in Hebrew express weakness and lowness. Leviticus 25:35, the key passage on power in the Scriptures, describes a member of the community who becomes poor and, literally, his or her "hand trembles with you." Hand here and often is a metaphor for power. The poor are lacking in power to maintain themselves in community. The obligation placed on the community literally in the Hebrew is, "You shall make him strong." That is the task of justice. It is not to ameliorate or maintain a marginal existence, but to restore that person so that they can "live beside you in the land."

In Ezekiel 34:4 this obligation is placed on the rulers. It is the responsibility of political institutions and other leading public institutions. The duty denied is that of Leviticus 25:35 with the same verb. "You have not strengthened the weak." The word for the weak, however, is the word for the sick, which appears again in the next clause, "You have not healed the sick." In Isaiah 3:7 (NRSV) a person who refuses to be a ruler states, "I will not be a healer." Healing is a metaphor for a broad range of activities of empowering people to overcome the affliction that they receive from their environment.

The prophesy in Ezekiel 34 goes on to show that when institutions fail, God takes over the responsibility. It is restored in the new way of life breaking into history with God's Reign. ". . . I will bind up the injured, and I will strengthen the weak [the same phrase as in v. 4] . . . I will feed them with justice." This restoration will be carried out by the promised son of David. (v. 23). This passage is at the root of Jesus' repeated teachings about recovering the lost (sheep).

As Jesus' messianic agents, we are given the task of healing. Jesus' rule is not yet fully here. It is nevertheless the standard by which we challenge every institution to carry out its responsibilities of empowering the weak. The call for some may be simply to be instruments of physical healing. As in the Bible, it also may be much broader. Like William Booth, our healing may be with those whose "circumstances are sick, out of order, in danger of carrying [them] to utter destitution" (In Darkest England and the Way Out, 221).

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Poverty as Powerlessness

Poverty in Scripture is not merely a matter a lack of material goods; it also involves a deficiency in power. The poor person is defined as one "whose power is insufficient" (literally, "his hand does not reach" [Lev. 14:21 (hand metaphorically means "power")]). In Leviticus 25:35 a person who is poor is one whose "power slips" in relation to the rest of the community ("with you"). The poor are described as being on the verge of falling out of the community because of their economic distress.

Recently, Professor C. R. Dickson has demonstrated this understanding of poverty in Psalm 82 (Hervormde Teologiese Studies 1995, 1029-45). In this Psalm the subordinate divine beings, angelic beings similar to the fallen powers and have yielded to them in giving them unjust partiality.

Within this framework of unjust wicked power, the reference to the poor translated as "the lowly and the destitute" (v. 3, NRSV) is itself framed by two phrases to describe the poor which are very similar in the Hebrew: "the weak and the orphan, " "the weak and the lowly." Weak translates the same Hebrew word (dal). The powerlessness of the poor expressed in this term is reinforced by its being paired with orphan principalities of the New Testament, are judged by God. They have failed in their responsibility over human culture to provide justice to the poor.

Professor Dickson shows verses 1-4 to be interlaced with the conception of power. God's sovereign power is expressed by God's "standing" in the divine council and judging the gods (v. 1). The references to the poor are framed (in a chiasm) by two references to the wicked that have almost the exact pattern in Hebrew: The gods "show partiality to the wicked," and they do not deliver the poor "from the power ["hand"] of the wicked" (vv. 2, 4). The wicked are described primarily as the powerful. In fact, they are so powerful that the angelic caretakers and its own lexical connotation as "a limb dangling down." The various words for the poor in these two verses are linked closely together so as to share in the common meaning of powerlessness. The powerful wicked are used to frame the reference to the poor in order to point out the contrast between their power and the weakness of the poor.

This analysis of poverty as powerlessness requires a response that goes beyond the symptoms. When poverty is treated symptomatically, it is considered to be the lack of certain items. The response is then to give the poor those items rather than to deal with the causes.

The divine mandate in Leviticus 25:35, however, is to empower the powerless person (literally, "cause him to be strong" [the verb "to be strong" in the causative conjugation]). The community's responsibility is to restore them to participation in community. The goal is that the needy may regain their power as mutually participating members of the community: "that they may live beside you in the land." (v. 36).

In the context of Leviticus 25, the way of carrying out this responsibility is institutionalized as a proscription on exploitive power: "You must not charge [them] interest on a loan, either by deducting it in advance from the capital sum, or by adding it on repayment" (v. 36, Revised English Bible).

Empowering the poor most basically requires correcting inequalities in their capacity to provide for themselves the standard of well-being. Strikingly, these verses in Leviticus 25 follow the passage on the Jubilee, in which the land, the means of production, is restored to those who have been separated from it. Psalm 82 calls for defense of such "rights of the poor" (v. 4) in the political and social institutions.

Power to the People

Bible Study by Richard L. Righter

In a footnote on Leviticus 25:35, the New Revised Standard Version (NSRV) of the Bible states that the "meaning of Hebrew uncertain." The The New International Version (NIV) translates the verse the same way as have other English translation. They fit the charity model instead of the empowerment model. Of twelve translations, words used are support (2), maintain, uphold (3), relieve, help, sustain, and assist (3). Actually the word means "strong, stout, mighty" (Brown, Driver, Briggs, p. 305). The passage is really about the powerless and power with encouragement to be strong!

1. Read Leviticus 25:1-38. The year of jubilee hasn't been embraced by acculturated Christian scholars. Do you think it should be preached and followed?
2. Read Leviticus 23:35. How would you translate this verse? (see below) Do you believe in limiting witness to charity or do you include empowerment?
3. Faith-based community organizing recognizes the importance of people power and strength. Do you agree this verse within the jubilee principles is a key verse?

Stephen Mott translates v. 35 as follows; "If members of your community become poor in that their power slips with you, you shall make them strong ... that they may live with you. ... Literally, hand (yad) metaphorically means power (Hans Walter Wolff. ANTHROPOLOGY OF THE OLD TESTAMENT, Fortress, p. 68) Used in this way, yad expresses several aspects of power, as seen in the following examples: oppression, often regarding deliverance from it (Judg. 6:9); total domination (Dt. 3:3); control, authority (Gen. 39:6); ... Gen. 39:21-22, Deut. 8:17-18; Ps. 89:13, Num 6:21, Num 21:26, Gen 9:2)" A CHRISTIAN PERSPECTIVE ON POLITICAL THOUGHT, Oxford, p. 14, 230-1.

Confrontation and a Great Assembly

Bible Study by Richard L. Righter

Israelites survivors who had escaped the Babylonian captivity were powerless over their city of Jerusalem. The city walls were down and the gates destroyed (Nehemiah 1:3). The king's cupbearer, Nehemiah, through prayer and appeal made his peace with God and the King to return to Jerusalem to lead the people in rebuilding the walls of Jerusalem (Neh. 1:4 - 2:8). Through masterful organizing Nehemiah as "lead organizer" led the people to rebuild the wall despite enemy resistance (Neh. ch 3-4). After this great achievement, oppression developed within the Israelites and that is our study.

1. Read Nehemiah 5:1-13. What were the issues that the people faced (v. 1-5)?

2. The nobles and officials were confronted by an angry Nehemiah and then by the people. How? (v. 6-7)

2. At the great assembly what were the demands and how were they responded to and sealed? (v. 6-13) Can Christians confront officials as the Israelites did?

"From this confrontation we can learn a great deal about how to confront our friends. Nehemiah dealt with them, honestly and directly, exposing their sin. But he never attacked the profiteers personally. He separated the sin from the sinner, the people with the problem (vv. 6-13). He never accused the wealthy Jews of being exploiters of the people, like the Gentiles before them; he accused the wealthy Jews of engaging in exploitation. There is a profound difference! One can stop an action - and the wealthy Israelites did stop their usury when their sin was exposed to them." Linthicum, Robert C., CITY OF GOD - CITY OF SATAN, Zondervan, 1991, p. 217.