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WORSHIP AND SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY IN THE PSALMS

Rick Marrs

Our global world has historically been characterized by great disparities in possessions and standards of living. However, our immediate world is increasingly marked by similar disparities in wealth and socio-economic potential. For many, concern for the economically disadvantaged has been a benchmark for evaluating the church's sensitivity to its social responsibility as children claimed by God for his purposes in a fallen world. Neither surprisingly nor inappropriately, when discussions of the church's social responsibilities arise, attention most frequently turns to the gospels and the exhortations of Jesus to care for one's fellow human beings. If the Old Testament is utilized at all, most commonly cited are the stirring challenges of the prophets (e.g., Isaiah 1:10-17; Amos 5:21-24; Micah 6:6-8). Seldom are other Old Testament materials considered, resulting in rather myopic notions that the prophets were the sole advocates of social justice in ancient Israel and that social concerns and sensitivities were absent from much of Israel's religious life. This article seeks to address these misconceptions.

Concern for the poor permeates the pages of the Old Testament. Evidence of the centrality of ancient Israel's social responsibility is manifested in the Law, the Prophets, and the Writings. In striking fashion, in Deuteronomy the very keeping of the law and fulfilment of social obligations are linked to an active concern for the less fortunate.¹ More important (for our purposes) is an awareness that the famous ethical charges of the pre-exilic prophets were integrally tied to Israel's cultic (i.e., worship) system. In Amos 5:21-24 Amos decries the absence of justice and righteousness in the lives of patently "religious" people. In Isaiah 1:10-17 Isaiah rebukes a community

utilizing worship to justify itself before God, with no apparent recognition of the invalidation of worship because of current social abuses. In Micah 6:1-8, Micah forcefully responds to worshipers who seem to assume that Yahweh's unhappiness with them is assuaged through the improvement and increase of cultic activities rather than through transformed social and ethical behavior. In the prophets, worship and ethics (specifically concern for the poor) are clearly interrelated. Since the prophets not infrequently decry cultic abuses, it has often been concluded incorrectly that for them worship was either irrelevant or a hindrance to correct ethical behavior. However, in reality the prophets recognized the centrality that social responsibility (viz., concern for the poor) must play in the worship of ancient Israel.

The Psalter provides a rich resource when reflecting upon the responsibility we as contemporary Christians have toward the economically disadvantaged. It is most suggestive when we consider the role and place of our social obligations toward the poor within the context of our public worship of God. The Psalms allow us to see a community gathered before God in worship and to hear the prayers, hopes, aspirations, and challenges of that community as it considered its total life before God. This perspective serves as the specific focus for this article. Our concern will be the relation of our worship to God and our ethical responsibility toward the poor. In order to appreciate more fully the ramifications of the presence of the poor in the Psalms, we will first quickly overview various terminology employed in the Psalter for the poor and note the history of scholarly discussion concerning the poor in the Psalms. Then we will analyze selected psalms which treat the issue of the poor from a variety of perspectives. Finally we will suggest implications for the interrelation of contemporary worship and ethical responsibility.

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Terminology and History of Discussion

Just as we encounter in a modern hymnbook diverse types of hymnody reflecting various occasions, so ancient Israel's hymnbook contains a similar variety. Present are a variety of forms (e.g., laments, hymns, songs of deliverance, prayers) and a variety of subjects (e.g., the king, evildoers, sin, the law). An issue which appears in several types of psalms and in a variety of contexts is poverty. On several occasions the psalmist approaches God and appeals to Him as one who is "poor and needy" ('ny w-'bywn).

As for me, I am poor
and needy;
but the Lord takes
thought for me
Thou art my help and
my deliverer;
do not tarry, O my
God! (40:17)
But I am poor and
needy;
hasten to me, O God!
Thou art my help and my deliverer;
O Lord, do not tarry! (70:5)
Incline thy ear, O Lord, and answer me,
for I am poor and needy. (86:1)
For I am poor and needy,
and my heart is stricken within me.
(109:22)

The Psalter contains several root words relating to poverty and socio-economic disadvantage: 'ny;² 'nw;³ 'bywn;⁴ dl;⁵ hlkh.⁶ Scholarly discussion concerning these terms and their significance in Israel's corporate and cultic life is longstanding and extensive.⁷ We will simply mention briefly those issues which are most germane to our immediate concerns. Of central importance in the discussion has been the identity of and relationship between the root words 'ani and 'anaw. Are these terms simply synonymous variants, derived from the same root, or are they distinct, ultimately deriving from different roots? This issue is perhaps hopelessly complicated. For our purposes the important question is "who is identified by these terms?" Although numerous variations and nuanced modifications may be possible, it is most often suggested that the several terms intend a socio-economic designation (i.e., poor), a situation designating one's current circumstance (e.g., afflicted), or perhaps a religious designation (i.e., pious). From this discussion, two conclusions seem plausible. First, it is unlikely that these terms have one referent and one referent only throughout the Psalter. That is, the immediate and larger context must determine the nuance in a given text (rather than etymology or lexicography). Second, an

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earlier suggestion that these terms designated a group or party within Israel (viz., the faithful) should be abandoned. Rather, these designations must be seen within the larger context of the enemies mentioned within these psalms. Frequently the identity of the 'ani / 'anaw is best illuminated through the identification of the enemies depicted in the psalm. Before suggesting the possible theological significance of the 'ani / 'anaw in the Psalms, and its hermeneutical value for us as Christians living lives of faithfulness before Yahweh, some attention to the evidence within the Psalter is essential.⁸

The Poor: A Look at Selected Psalms

The poor are mentioned in several psalms; they cry for help in others. One type of psalm in which the poor are mentioned is the wisdom psalm. In these psalms a key motif concerns the blessings that come to the lives of those who attend to the needs of the poor. Such individuals are protected by the Lord.

Blessed is he who considers the poor!
The Lord delivers him in the day of trouble;
the Lord protects him and keeps him alive;
he is called blessed in the land;
thou dost not give him up to the will of his
enemies.
The Lord sustains him on his sickbed;
in his illness thou healest all his
infirmities. (41:1-3)

Conversely, the wicked abuse the poor, treating them with disdain.

The wicked draw the sword and bend their
bows,
to bring down the poor and needy,
to slay those who walk uprightly. (37:14)

Strikingly, one's treatment of the poor and afflicted provides a benchmark for one's own status before God. Perhaps most telling is the theological grounding behind this perspective. In Israel's Wisdom Literature it is clear that one's treatment of the less fortunate is a clear expression of one's theology.

He who oppresses a poor man insults his
Maker,
but he who is kind to the needy honors him.
(Prov 14:31)⁹

A similar theology is implicit in the Psalter. In Ps 111; 112 we find a significant interplay between Yahweh's treatment of his people (Ps 111) and the ethical lifestyle of the righteous (Ps 112). The covenant loyalty and grace that Yahweh manifests toward his followers in Ps 111 is evidenced not only in the blessings they receive but also in the lifestyle they exhibit.

The cries of the poor are grounded in a resolute faith in Yahweh's will to right the wrongs of oppression committed by the wicked.

He [i.e., the righteous] has distributed freely,
he has given to the poor;
his righteousness endures for ever;
his horn is exalted in honor. (112:9)

In the laments we hear the cry of the poor and needy before God. Yahweh is petitioned because he is one who hears and regards the prayers of the destitute.

...he will regard the prayer of the destitute,
and will not despise their supplication.
(102:17)¹⁰

Since ancient Israel so often connected one's state of wellbeing (and lack thereof) with God's blessing/disfavor, it is natural that the cry of the afflicted and poor would often be rooted in a sense of injustice. The cries of the poor are grounded in a resolute faith in Yahweh's will to right the wrongs of oppression committed by the wicked.

God has taken his place in the divine council;
in the midst of the gods he holds
judgment:
"How long will you judge unjustly
and show partiality to the wicked?
Give justice to the weak and the fatherless;
maintain the right of the afflicted and
the destitute.
Rescue the weak and the needy;
deliver them from the hand of the
wicked. (82:1-4)¹¹

In striking contrast to the receptiveness of the Lord to the plight of the poor is the treatment of the afflicted by the wicked. In Ps 14, a fool is characterized as one who does not take God's will and way in the world seriously. The poor, treated with abuse by the wicked, can only

rest in the refuge the Lord provides (v 6). Whereas Yahweh is one who repeatedly addresses the plight of the less fortunate with compassionate grace, the wicked repeatedly bring judgment and further misfortune upon the poor and needy.¹²

Although numerous insights could be derived from an analysis of the poor and needy in the laments, two will serve as helpful for later comments. First, the stance of the poor and needy before God is a reminder to us of our stance before God. The Psalms serve as a powerful reminder that we all stand before God in worship as poor and needy. Second, these laments of the oppressed call us to a renewed awareness of the Creator's treatment of the poor and afflicted versus their frequent treatment at the hands of fellow creatures. Perhaps Pss 9; 10 most tellingly depict the contrastive treatment of the less fortunate by other human beings and the Lord.¹³

When my enemies turned back,
they stumbled and perished before thee.
For thou hast maintained my just cause;
thou hast sat on the throne
giving righteous judgment...
But the Lord sits enthroned for ever,
he has established his throne for
judgment;
and he judges the world with righteousness,
he judges the peoples with equity.
The Lord is a stronghold for the oppressed,
a stronghold in times of trouble...
For the needy shall not always be forgotten,
and the hope of the poor shall not perish
forever...
In arrogance the wicked hotly pursue the
poor;...
He thinks in his heart, "I shall not be moved;..."
His eyes stealthily watch for the hapless,
he lurks in secret like a lion in his covert;
he lurks that he may seize the poor,
he seizes the poor when he draws him into
his net.
The hapless is crushed, sinks down,
and falls by his might.
He thinks in his heart, "God has forgotten,..."
O Lord, thou wilt hear the desire of the
meek;
thou wilt strengthen their heart,
thou wilt incline thy ear
to do justice to the fatherless and the
oppressed,
so that man who is of the earth
may strike terror no more.
(9:3-4, 7-9, 18; 10:2a, 6a, 8b-11a, 17-18)

A final psalm of some significance for our purposes is the royal Ps 72, a prayer for the wellbeing and

success of the king. Within this psalm is a dramatic interplay between the desired grandeur and majesty attendant upon a great king, and the requested justice and righteousness that such a king might demonstrate to his loyal subjects. Strikingly, the justice and righteousness desired is specified twice.

May he judge thy people with righteousness,
and thy poor with justice!
Let the mountains bear prosperity for the
people,
and the hills, in righteousness!
May he defend the cause of the
poor of the people,
give deliverance to the needy,
and crush the oppressor!...
For he delivers the needy when he calls,
the poor and him who has no helper.
He has pity on the weak and the needy,
and saves the lives of the needy.
From oppression and violence he
redeems their life;
and precious is their blood in his sight.
(Ps 72:2-4, 12-14)

The conclusion is unmistakable: for ancient Israel, a graphic manifestation of the greatness of her king was his concern and advocacy for the poor and needy. A people benefiting from such leadership would surely desire its continuance, if not permanence and expansion.

Implications for the Modern Church

In a recent work Walter Brueggemann has looked at Israel's cultic activity as a social act.¹⁴ Although one might quarrel with several of Brueggemann's assumptions and applications, his thesis of the importance of worship as a "world-forming" activity is suggestive. Brueggemann convincingly argues (in my opinion) that a central purpose of worship should be to articulate, generate, and propagate an alternate vision of reality. Following a suggestion of S. Mowinckel, Brueggemann asserts

...the praise of Israel—or more broadly, the human vocation of praise—is to maintain and transform the world, obtain a blessing that would not be obtained, maintained, or transformed except through this routinized and most serious activity authorized by God and enacted by human agents. "World-making" is done by God. That is foundational to Israel's faith. But it is done through human activity which God has authorized and in which God is known to be present.¹⁵

Clearly such activity can be threatening and polemic, since it not only makes claims for its own true God, but also against the false gods of its society. In worship, Israel was drawn again into a world that was different and in direct tension with other available worlds.¹⁶ In her worship Israel was called to celebrate a world in which Yahweh rules, a world founded on justice, righteousness, truth, and equity. Viewed from another angle, Israel's worship was intended to be self-critiquing rather than self-legitimizing. In worship, Israel was drawn again to re-examine her values, her commitments, and the essence of her life before God.

Brueggemann's work is highly suggestive for our discussion of the contemporary church's responsibility toward the poor and disenfranchised. Clearly a central tenet of ancient Israel's worship, as it must be of ours, is to critique the lives that we are presenting to the Lord in worship (see Pss 15; 24). Such a critique must necessarily involve our treatment of and active concern for the poor and needy. Further, the church, as ancient Israel, must exist as a "counter-culture" or alternate community to that presented by the world in which we live. Hence, we may not glibly assume that the church can adopt the world's perception of and response to the poor.¹⁷ If the earlier sampling of psalms evidences anything, it claims that we worship a God who hears and addresses in compassion the cries of the poor and hurting. As children of God called to do his will, we must also hear those cries and respond. Allegiance to a listening God demand a listening church. If the evidence from the Psalter is applicable, the "poor" of our society are those who feel themselves helpless and abandoned in the face of hostile powers, those who have experienced injustice and a denial of rights in their daily lives. The poor and needy are those who cry

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out with broken hearts. They are individuals whose troubles have cut to the center of their beings, and who now speak out of a deep despair and profound sense of defeat.¹⁸ In such dire circumstances, God alone stands as a final guarantor of justice and assistance. However, the awesome challenge to us is that Yahweh's promises of justice, grace, and redress are mediated through his covenant people. Such is the challenge to the church; such is the excitement, for in truly hearing the cry of the poor and disenfranchised, we as God's people are allowed to hear anew the call of the word of God to us.

Paradoxically, if Ps 72 has any claim upon us, it suggests that our glory may be manifested most clearly when we address the plight of the poor, that is, when we attend to the most humble tasks of servanthood and compassion for the less fortunate.¹⁹

As H.-J. Kraus so well states:

The self-description "poor and needy" includes more than it seems at first glance. Complex experiences of suffering accumulate. The individual comes into Yahweh's presence simply as "poor." By identifying with the... ("poor and needy") he or she is coming to God in the truth of his human condition. The declaration "I am poor and needy" is not a formula of pious phraseology and religious humility, but has reference to a wide range of concrete reality. In spite of its complexity the term does not become vague, but the original significance remains alive in it. The "poor are concerned with denial of their rights and with help in obtaining them.

Because of the privileges which Israel's God has promised to all who are helpless, deprived, and oppressed, the "poor" have a claim on Yahweh's assistance. Paradoxically, the claim to rights is not based on what one "has" but on what one does not have. The "poor" have a claim to God's assistance only because they are the have-nots, because their poverty is what is significant. This basic feature runs through all the Psalms. It is characteristic of the human situation before God, which finds theological expression in the New Testament in the doctrine of justification.²⁰

Like ancient Israel, the church finds that her call to responsibility to the poor is theologically grounded. In the Psalter, one message of which we are regularly reminded is our stance before God. In a very real sense, we all stand before God as "poor and needy."²¹

We share a way of being church that includes two simultaneous journeys — the journey inward and the journey outward. On the inward journey we become more deeply engaged with ourselves, with God, and with others. On the outward journey we join Jesus at a particular point of his ministry to the world, confronting the structures that perpetuate poverty and injustice... whatever they may be.

Elizabeth O'Connor
