



Justice and compassion toward the oppressed in the Judeo-Christian Scriptures

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Burned into the psyche of the ancient people of Israel was their sense of identity as a people who were once foreigners residing in Egypt. Their God looked on them with compassion and led them out from slavery to freedom and to their own land. Among their core moral principles, therefore, was that they should not oppress a foreigner residing among them, nor neglect the poor. As part of the Covenant Code, at the heart of the Constitution of ancient Israel, we read: *'You shall not wrong or oppress a resident alien, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt. You shall not abuse any widow or orphan. If you do abuse them, when they cry out to me, I will surely heed their cry'* (Exodus 22:21-23).

Obviously, not everyone was faithful to this imperative, especially among those who wielded political and economic power. Again and again the prophets spoke out against this failure, especially when it was supported by legislation and administration that made it hard, if not impossible, for the poor to find redress. Amos proclaimed: *'Thus says the Lord: I will not revoke my punishment on Israel, because they sell the righteous for silver, and the needy for a pair of sandals. They trample the head of the poor into the dust of the earth, and push the afflicted out of the way'* (Amos 2:6-7). Religious cult, too, is phony when it disregards justice and has no regard for the poor: *'I hate, I despise your festivals, and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies ... Take away from me the noise of your songs; I will not listen to the melody of your harps. But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever flowing stream'* (Amos 5:21-24).

Isaiah is just as vehement in denouncing the lack of compassion and the failure of justice: *'Ah, you who join house to house, who add field to field, until there is room for no one but you, and you are left to live alone in the midst of the land!'* (Isaiah 5:8). *'Ah, you who make iniquitous decrees, who write oppressive statutes, to turn aside the needy from justice and to rob the poor of my people of their right, that widows may be your spoil, and that you may make the orphans your prey!'* (Isaiah 10:1-2). What God wants of his people is *'to break unjust fetters, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, to break every yoke'* (Isaiah 58:6).

Propaganda with no concern for truth was then, as it still is, an instrument used by those with the power to further their own agenda and hide the lack of justice in their governing of the people. Isaiah denounced leaders who *'conceive lying words, and utter them in a sincere way. Justice is pushed aside and honesty is made to stand at a distance; for truth stumbles in the public square and honesty cannot find a place'* (Isaiah 59:13-14).

In the period just before the Babylonian destruction of Judah, Jeremiah criticized king Jehoiakim for not following the example of his father, Josiah: *'Woe to him who builds his house by injustice; who makes his neighbours work for nothing, and does not give them their wages; who says, "I will build myself a spacious house with large upper rooms," and who cuts out windows for it, panelling it with cedar, and painting it with vermilion. Are you a king because you compete in cedar? Did not your father eat and drink and act with justice and righteousness? Then it was well with him. He judged the cause of the poor and needy; then it was well. Is not this to know me? says the Lord. But your eyes and heart are only on your dishonest gain, for shedding innocent blood, and for practising oppression and violence'* (Jeremiah 22:13-17).

The New Testament makes it abundantly clear that justice was at the heart of Jesus' message, especially in relation to those who were least able to insist on it. Luke sets up Jesus' key agenda in the opening scene of Jesus' public ministry, when he has Jesus identify with the following text from Isaiah: *'The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free'* (Luke 4:18; Isaiah 61:1-2).

Ultimately our lives are judged by how open we have been to God's justice and compassion. Jesus' parable on the Last Judgment (Matthew 25:31-46) echoes Isaiah 58:6. James is faithful to his Jewish heritage and to Jesus when he includes in his definition of religion *'to care for orphans and widows in their distress'* (James 1:27). He insists on action, not words: *'If a brother or sister is naked and lacks daily food, and one of you says: "Go in peace, keep warm, and eat your fill," without supplying their bodily needs, what is the good of that?'* (James 2:15-16). He categorises neglecting the poor and *'spending what you get on your pleasures'* as equivalent to adultery, for it is to break our part in our covenant with God (see James 4:3-4). *'The wages of the labourers who mowed your fields, wages that you have kept back by fraud, cry out to God'* (James 5:4).

The early Christian writers had no doubt about the centrality of the demands of justice in living as disciples of Jesus. Examples abound. The *Letter of Barnabas* (from the early second century) states: *'relax all your iniquitous restrictions, loosen the shackles of your oppressive covenants, let your ruined debtors go free, and tear up all your unjust agreements. Break up your bread into portions for the starving; and if you see a man who is in want of clothing, fit him out yourself. Bring in the homeless under your own roof.'*

The following, from the Pastoral Rule of Gregory the Great (end of the sixth century) is typical: *'When we attend to the needs of those in want, we give them what is theirs, not ours. More than performing works of mercy, we are paying a debt of justice'* (Pastoral Rule 3.21).

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