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Meditating on poverty: Seeking guidance from the Psalms

ABSTRACT

A correction to current ways of talking about the poor is sought and found in the Psalms. Although the Psalms use language about the poor in different ways, they never talk about poverty and the poor in absolute terms, in terms that define people's lives and situations. Rather, in the presence of God, who is praised or begged for help, specific situations of need, distress, and injustice are put into words. The specificity of these situations does not lie in the details of the circumstances, but in the certainty that these circumstances will pass or have already changed.

The invitation to join this project has given me the chance to consider my late unease about public references to poverty in the so-called post 9/11 world. I have tried to take my unease to the Psalms and into God's presence. I shall make use of my chance in the following way: I shall explain the above mentioned unease. Then I shall turn to a few psalms, focusing on their adherence to the theme of poverty and their potential to reveal more about the understanding of poverty in God's presence. I shall conclude with a summary and application of what I find in the Psalms.

THE POOR: VICTIMS OR TERRORISTS?

In the years since September 11, 2001, it has become quite common to hear references to "poverty" as an explanation of terror. As the argument goes, one should address poverty and thereby defuse terrorism. The assumption is that "the poor" are responsible for terror in our world. Poor people are so dissatisfied, that they revert to violence to change their situation. In some cases, coming from the mouths of presidents, one can fairly easily deconstruct this reference to "the poor" as the rich's fear of the other, their acquired suspicion that all who suffer under their voracious policies and practices are capable of extreme violence, fuelled by burning envy. The violence of the rich, who buy and sell, develop and produce arms and weapons of mass destruction, who can orchestrate the demolition of societies and livelihoods, is simply denied. As part of the deconstruction, one can state the truth that it is more often rich and powerful people who act violently and nations of note that sponsor and produce terror.

However, it is not only the representatives of the world's most powerful who speak of "the poor" in this way. One hears calls to eradicate poverty also from altruistic motives, from people who care, who see the needs of others and are moved by it.¹ Once again, though, laying violence at the door of the poor, denies the violence committed by the rich and dismisses the millions of

¹ Dirk Sager (2003:62) points out that this altruism is not really disinterested, for the own advantage is served, either in gaining prestige, being known as caring, or in avoiding God's judgement. The Psalms, for him, accept only acknowledgment of God as reason for caring about poverty.

fleeing, hungry, and persecuted people who do not choose violence as a response to their situation.² This altruistic concern for the poor also treats “the poor” as the other, speaks about them from the outside. “The poor” are, therefore, still under suspicion, capable of violence, laziness, and anger, infectious, uneducated and unwise – all things that the altruists do not identify with themselves.

When one then considers, how the faith community should respond, the choices are severely limited. These references to “the poor” and “poverty” leaves one with the options of victimhood or patronage. Either the poor are victims of injustice and must be saved by those willing to do something, casting the church in the role of rich patron. Or the state is so severe and crippling, that one can only suffer it and remain the victim. The church then has the choice to suffer along in solidarity with the poor.

The question to the Bible, specifically Psalms, is whether it can point our thinking and talking into a different direction.³ So we turn to some of the many psalms that talk of being poor, needy, and insignificant.⁴ The choice here, Psalms 34, 37, 69, 70, and 147, reflects the varied occurrence of these references. Although, as seems logical, the songs of complaint and lament make most use of these terms, they also occur in praise songs. Pursuing my theme, I shall look at the references to being poor, needy, or insignificant. These references place the poor and needy, alongside the righteous and others, as well as in opposition to the godless.⁵ In tracing these groupings, the ways in which God responds to these groups will also be noted.

POVERTY IN THE PSALMS

Two general observations apply to my reading of Psalms: The selected Psalms form part of the movement from stability through instability to restabilisation – from lament or complaint to praise – which is a well-known feature of Psalms. This movement, that recurs many times throughout the Psalter, often sweeps through neighbouring psalms, creating tides within the flow of the Psalter. The psalms preceding and following Psalms 34 and 37,⁶ for instance, provide certain topics or take them further. This is also true about Psalms 69 and 70.⁷ In the final set of praise songs, starting in Psalm 145, the case for praising God is made with reference to different objects of God’s grace, those who stumble and are bowed down (145:14), the captives, the blind, those who are bent over, stranger, widow, and orphan (146:8–9), the oppressed poor (149:4), and the faithful (149:5).

It is, further, striking that many of these psalms are attributed to David or tied to events in David’s life.⁷ This means that the distressed and miserable and poor speaking in these psalms

2 I am using violence here as related to “terrorism,” since I don’t think that all instances of violence, the misuse of power in inter- and intrapersonal relationships, are at issue here. These forms of violence, being a widespread part of human behaviour, will certainly apply to all participants in the conversation.

3 This question grows out of a basic reluctance to accept either/or choices. The fact of the matter is, that between every “either” and “or” lies a vast spectrum of alternatives.

4 In the Old Testament the Hebrew words meaning “poor,” “needy,” insignificant” (‘*ânî*, ‘*anawîm*, *dal*, and ‘*ebyôn*) are used most frequently in the book of Psalms. The selected five Psalms offer a fairly representative view of the Psalms use of these words.

5 See also Hans-Joachim Kraus: 189. Kraus says, further, that “the poor” are those who have no justice, no influence or status, who are – without any means – at the mercy of their opponents. They are the socially under-privileged, including those without bread to eat (ibid: 190).

6 Beat Weber (2001:313) considers Psalms 69–72 to form, by sharing themes of water, enemies, the poor, being bound, and inheritance, an interconnected conclusion to either the Davidic Psalter, Psalms 51–72, or/and the second book of Psalms, Psalms 42–72.

7 Although the psalm subtitles are most likely later additions, they represent clues to the faith community’s interpretation of these songs. They now have great suggestive power that can help us read and interact

might have been David. However, one knows about David that he did not only suffer in his life, and as king certainly did not remain without means for long. I conclude, therefore, that the reference to being poor does not indicate a state, a final category, as one might argue, for instance, gender represents. The poverty voiced in these prayers, flowing out of both tears and joy, reflects specific situations, that match known situations in the lives of individuals.

PSALM 34

Psalm 34 is a song of praise. The acrostic, using the Hebrew alphabet to structure the song, suggests the completeness of the song and its praise. It also suggests, on another level, that this Psalm belongs, even more than others, to the wisdom tradition.⁸ The basic claim of the praise song is that the speaker's experience of being heard by God is a reason for others who need hearing and help to rejoice and depend on a similar outcome. The speaker praises God and calls the other needy ones to listen and join in (34:3). Past experience substantiates this summons: "This needy one called, and YHWH heard" (34:7). Although the need situation is not really explained, it is hinted at by its alignment with other difficulties: frights (34:5), a lion's hunger (34:11), a broken heart and a crushed spirit (34:19), the many evils faced by the righteous (34:20), and loss of life (34:23). Need and distress fit somewhere on an axis between exaltation and the deepest pit (sheol). They stand at the lower end of the scale. "Needy" is often also translated as "lowly," but should thus not be mistaken for humility. It refers rather to being brought down towards ruin and destruction.

The speaking voice in this song is no longer in the same position of need, as is echoed by the reference to David in the subtitle. Although the person speaking has known great need, need or poverty is not a lone defining attribute of his or her life. The same, the song claims, goes for all needy ones, all the righteous who experience evil. Finally, God is the one who hears (34:7), who is near to those without resources or outlook (34:19), who helps and saves (34:5, 19, 20, 23). God, who is praiseworthy and exalted, reverses the downward direction. This song, which celebrates God's ears that heard, now changes the tune for those same ears, but also for the ears of others who, likewise, need help and hearing.

PSALM 37

Like Psalm 34, Psalm 37 is an acrostic. It is an admonition against becoming heated or angry (37:1, 7b), and in its teaching tone even more clearly to be understood as guide to life, as practical wisdom. The potential cause of anger – against which the warning is given – is the behaviour of the wicked, who seem to go their wicked way without any hindrance. The admonition maintains that it is better to trust in and wait on God, for God safeguards a good and whole outcome. Psalm 37 ranges the oppressed (37:11 and 14b) and needy (37:14b) with the righteous (34:6, 12, 16, 17, 21, 25, 29, 30, 32, 39), just (37:6, 28, 30), loyal (37:28), true (37:14b, 37), and upright (37:18, 37) together.

with psalms. "The elusive and open language of the prayers gains a specificity in reference to the life of David, and David's life is given a universality of reference a various prayers are associated with particular distresses that he underwent" (Miller:83).

8 The obvious structuring of the psalm by means of the alphabetic is considered a trademark of wisdom traditions. The wisdom tradition is also known for its concern with the practical arrangements of life and application of faith. Here it is interesting to note that although the wisdom tradition often interprets poverty and need as the result of laziness, extravagance, or foolishness (see, for example, Pleins:407), this Psalm does not do so. It's use of "needy" is quite in keeping with the Psalms in general.

The promised outcome of trusting and dependent patience will be inheritance or taking possession (37:9, 11, 22, 29, 34), peace (37:11, 37), and a place to stay (37:3, 27, 29). The repeated expression, “take possession of the land,” links “those who wait on YHWH” (37:9), with “the oppressed” (37:11), “those blessed by God” (37:22), “righteous ones” (37:29), and those who “hope in YHWH and keep YHWH’s way” (37:34). The lines between physical and spiritual well-being and distress are blurred, since almost every reference, such as “land” that seems to be ultimately concrete, also takes on metaphorical value. In the case of “land,” its more-than-literal reference is to power and security. The presence of “land” prohibits an exclusively spiritualised reading of “oppressed.” Nor can the meaning of “oppressed” be limited to either financial distress or political insignificance. It covers the whole spectrum. The oppressed poor of Psalm 37 are contrasted with the seemingly prosperous and unhindered godless, who exert violence. The student to whom this admonition is addressed is not clearly identified with any one group. However, if the oppressed, righteous, and those who trust in God are on par, against the godless, the one who is warned not to get too angry about the latter, probably belongs to the first group.

God’s role in the psalm is to be the one who puts everything to right, who sees (37:13) and knows what is happening (37:18), who laughs at the godless (37:13) and doesn’t abandon the helpless (37:40), but saves and lifts them up (37:34). The one taught must learn to trust God, just as the helpless and oppressed have to trust God. The help of the helpless is not the outrage of those who see it, but God’s actions. The admonition, therefore, tells the student not to usurp God’s role, not to try and put to right what God alone can do. However, that does not mean – as our media so often suggest – that one chooses only between justifying the wrongs with violence and doing nothing. If the student is called to trust God, that implies all kinds of possible action, the same array of actions that the righteous, the oppressed, and those waiting are performing.

PSALM 69

The image of sinking down into waters that will be too deep dominates this psalm. This description of distress is both very material, of one thrown into a water-filled pit, and heavily laden symbolically, since the deep, the waters, are a common metaphor for death. The change brought about or hoped for by the one crying out is to be taken out of the situation of distress, to be raised out of the pit and deep waters, and for the dispossessed to be brought to an inheritance. In this psalm’s imagery, the underlying grid, that ranges from the highest elevation, where God is, to the lowest of depths, where death is, is quite clear. One can relate the sense of help and rescue and the resultant praise of God to a movement away from the depths.

The one crying out is contrasted with enemies and adversaries who create and participate in the distress. The experience of oppressed poverty lines up with the distress the speaker experiences, the physical distress of almost drowning, and the social distress of abuse, persecution, derision, and dismissal. The ones who hate restate the threat from the deeps, the waters, and the mud (69:15). So, also, the adversaries align with taunts, shame, and disgrace (69:20).

This psalm also refers to the sufferer’s own guilt or foolishness (69:6). It is not, however, interpreted by the transgressor as explanation for the suffering. For, rather than understanding the threat to come from God, God is the one on whom survival depends (69:14, 15–19, also 30). The urgency of the situation becomes clear also from the urgent appeal to God, “answer me, answer me quickly” (69:14b, 17, 18). The speaker is oppressed, poor, and in pain (69:30), yet expects some safety, due to God’s help. The demand for God’s present help will distinguish the petitioner from the adversaries, who moves towards a different fate. This call for help is supported with a promise of praise (69:31). Not only will God find pleasure in it, but also all others who are in need. The expectation of God’s continued help to those in ruin, such as Zion, does not elicit praise only

from the present speaker, but is a cause for rejoicing for all who suffer oppression and poverty (69:33). Actually, even the heavens and the waters – the latter until now only a threat – will join in the praise (69:35).

God's role in this song is fourfold. God is guarantor of life and justice, the reason for it all ("for your sake," 69:8), the one who gives answer and help, and the one who records, who knows (69:20). God must be urged to act and seems to be willing to delay. God's knowing is not only important because it is essential that God should know, before God will act. In experiences of distress and injustice it is always very important that the injustice not remain hidden and unknown. One of the very difficult demands injustice places on people, is for them to know or notice it. It is easier, as stories all over the world seem to suggest, not to know, see, and record injustice, but to look away from it.

PSALM 70

This psalm voices an urgent call for help.⁹ "Hurry up, God. Help." It picks up on the urgency of Psalm 69. Here it is even more concentrated. The call itself (70:2 and 6) frames two desired consequences, that the adversaries will be turned back and that others in similar circumstances will be encouraged and be glad. This, too, repeats in short form, the prayer of Psalm 69. Once again, the "oppressed and needy" one (70:6) calling out is aligned with others: those who seek God, and "those who love your saving acts" (70:5). On the other side, facing these, are those who seek – instead of God – "my life", "those who enjoy my bad luck" (70:3) instead of loving God's saving acts. Psalm 70's cry, with its urgent call, "hurry, hurry" creates the impression that God is taking His time. The caller cannot quite depend on God having seen, being on the way already. Therefore, the added advantages of helping "me" are listed: the disgrace of the adversaries and the praise of others, who will be glad about God's moves. Although God is a bit slow, God nevertheless counts as the only help and saviour (70:5). In this psalm, brief as it is, one does not see anything of the petitioner outside the present severe distress.

PSALM 147

In this song of praise, Jerusalem and Jacob (God's people) are lined up with the poor, for they are exiles to be gathered, ruins in need of building up (147:2). In the context of the surrounding psalms, Psalms 145–150, the oppressed poor are in the company of others who have suffered severe setbacks, who have been brought low, who are without influence in society, or who are vulnerable to the powerful. Although they are in this needy situation, they are also the privileged receivers of God's powerful rules and commands (147:19–20). God's words direct the elements and have the power to burn (147:18) or freeze (147:17). God's actions include a number of striking contrasts. God builds up (147:2) and lets melt with a word (147:18), gathers the scattered (147:2) and scatters frost (147:16), helps up the downtrodden and casts the wicked to the ground (147:6). These contrasts serve to emphasise God's power (147:5). The poor are further aligned with the beasts who need to be fed, the ravens who cry out (147:9), as well as with those who deeply respect God and depend on God's help (147:10). The cry of the poor and their needs are even echoed in nature. God is the constant provider, who takes care of all. Those who respect God are, of course, the faithful community, God's Israel (symbolised by Jerusalem, called Jacob). The dependence of

⁹ Note that Psalm 70 is an almost exact repetition of Psalm 40:14–18.

the insignificant on God is therefore not substantially different from the pious' dependence on God. In terms of our thematic pursuit, this song of praise lets the believing community talk in solidarity with the poor, as part of the insignificant. Being poor is not a description of "the other" but of one's own reality.¹⁰

CONCLUSION

The psalms are unified in stating that God sees distress, hears cries for help, and can be moved to action. This induces worship and praise. All who are in miserable circumstances can call out and cry in the full expectation of being heard, of finding help, and of being lifted out of their misery. These circumstances are, therefore, not considered as lasting forever. Even when a psalm doesn't talk about any deliverance, the prayer establishes that the one calling out is poor but also part of the community of the faithful. In fact, the other applicable conditions, such as reverence for God, loyalty, and justness, might be more lasting descriptions of the petitioners and singers of praise whom one meets in Psalms. Although, as Psalm 37 shows, trust in God is something to learn and a choice one has to make. The psalms considered above reaffirm that before the God who sees, hears, and speaks to the needy and oppressed, these objects of God's seeing, hearing, and speaking, are not fully defined by their distress. They speak from a knowledge of other possibilities and other truths that are guaranteed by the presence of God. Their distress, oppression, lack, and need pertain to some aspects of their life and identity, but never describe their lives or identities fully.

Talk about being poor and experiencing poverty, as seen in the Psalms, is quite varied. Broadly speaking, the oppressed and resourceless can be believers, those who know their dependence on God, the Israel who needs God's help and cannot help itself. In this instance, certainly, the poor are victims of specific circumstances and actions, calling out to God. The oppressed and needy are also those who are unprotected in a society where powerful oppressors can abuse them. Thus they need the patronage of others with power, most of all of God. What we don't see in the Psalms is any sense that people suffer what they deserve, that they are needy because they are lazy or stupid or wicked. The poverty of those praying in the psalms, thus range from spiritual to material and structural poverty, a range also true for current uses of the terms for poverty. Therefore, in spite of the distance between modern readers and the psalms, the patterns of human life are recognisable, so that a current reader might also be able to pray these psalms.

The psalmists' language suggests that one should be wary of using terms like "the poor" or "poverty" in absolute ways. Doing that not only narrows one's options for dealing with one's own situations of need, but leads to denial of the complexity of people's lives and circumstances.¹¹ It also denies people's options to be responsible, as if one can do nothing about "poverty" or "the poor". On the other hand, when one considers people and specific situations of need, one can come up with or hear of creative responses to these situations. When circumstances no longer define

10 This does not mean that one denies power one has, and calls "rich" "poor" in another twist of Orwellian newspeak. It is not merely a matter of picking up a new label, but of recognising the true state of affairs, one's own limits and lack. That means that the believers know and face their own neediness and lack in the presence of the God who feeds, provides, and commands. In the history of the Christian church, the monastic orders succeeded, at least for certain periods of time, in claiming and acting out of this solidarity with their choice of poverty. One need, however, to remember, that material lack and need do not exhaust the concept of "poor" and "needy" in the Psalms.

11 The psalms do not promise that the miserable condition will change tomorrow but express the certainty that people in miserable conditions are not only in miserable conditions. They are still, wholly, people in God's presence.

people, all kinds of possibilities emerge, the strangest of which seems to be that people in material lack don't need answers from others, but can provide very good answers for themselves, since they are not only their lack or need.¹² The suggestion from the psalms is thus not, that poverty is not real or will pass, but that "poverty" can say only so much about a person. Relegating millions of people to one category, "the poor," therefore, as though that in itself is absolutely defining for those millions, is not psalm language.

Furthermore, talk of "the poor" and "poverty" in vague and absolute terms implicitly reduces God and God's eyes, ears, and hands to intervention and action that denies the reality of God's presence. God's presence creates a space where people can be more than their circumstances, more than what their societies judge them to be. To call God either powerful, like the powerful of the world, or poor and helpless, like the oppressed poor in the world, is only true if one also remembers that God's power and poverty are very unlike what one knows and sees. In a world, where the powerful can broadcast their voices to the earth's furthest reaches, it remains a radical thought that God actually hears the voice from the pit, the panting breath of the fleeing, or the faint cry of the hungry.

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12 Statistics from many sources indicate that all over the world women, more than men, suffer poverty and its effects. However, citing these statistics, without telling the astonishing stories of women who live creatively and caringly in their poor and oppressed conditions, is a lie. For it limits the women to the one – albeit significant and far-reaching – aspect of their lives, when, in fact, they have a myriad answers to their situation, coming from the richness of their persons, their traditions, and their communities.