



OPENING THE SCRIPTURES

Background: “Blessed Are the Poor” (2)

James’s Jewish Heritage

David Anguish

James’s warnings about wealth and emphasis on helping the poor must be understood in light of his Jewish heritage. The law had much to say about wealth and righteous treatment of the poor and oppressed, an emphasis that continued in Second Temple Judaism. The community in which James was a leader was expected to live according to the principles of the new covenant given in fulfillment of the old. Since wealth disparity and related abuses remained a problem among them (e.g., 1.9–11; 2.1–7, 14–17; 4.13–17; 5.1–11), he called on them to live up to God’s expectations regarding the rich and poor.

At the risk of distortion by oversimplification, I undertake here an overview of the Old Testament and Jewish background behind James’s teaching.

Summary of Important Themes

Peter Davids summarizes the Jewish emphasis as follows:

The background of the concepts in James is deeply rooted in Jewish thought. Naturally there are parts of the Old Testament which glorify wealth as a reward from God (e.g., the Abraham cycle), and these point to the fact that neither OT nor NT are ascetic. Yet it is clear to the biblical writers by the period of the prophets that piety often led to poverty as ruthless people took advantage of the honest and upright person (Davids 1982, 42).

Dauids refers to two passages to illustrate this prophetic emphasis. Amos wrote, “These are the words of the LORD: ‘For crime after crime of Israel I will grant them no reprieve, because they sell the innocent for silver and the destitute for a pair of shoes. They grind the heads of the poor into the earth and thrust the humble out of their way’” (Amos 2.6–7a NEB). And in an oracle denouncing Israel as God’s faithless bride, Ezekiel wrote, “Behold, this was the guilt of your sister Sodom: she and her daughters had pride, excess of food, and prosperous ease, but did not aid the poor and needy” (Ezek 16.49).

Three factors stand out in the prophetic texts. First, while they are not *per se* condemned for their wealth, for the wealthy to take advantage of the poor or simply fail to help them was a sin. Second, the word pair, “poor and needy” (אֲנִי וְעֲבָרִים; *ānî w’ ebyôn*) became a technical designation of the poor, an emphasis that became more pronounced in the exilic period (cf. Deut 24.14; Jer 22.16; Ezek 16.49; 18.12; 22.29; Pss 35.10; 37.14; 40.17; 70.5; 74.21; 86.1; 109.16, 22; Job 24.14; Prov 31.9). Third, the word *poor* was often paired with the idea of being righteous (שָׁדִיִּיק; *šaddiyq*; cf. Pss 10; 37.8–17; 72.2, 4; Isa 29.19).

The Theme in the Old Testament

The Book of the Covenant (cf. Exod 24.7) taught that YHWH’s will as Israel’s ruler was that there would be no permanent or hopeless poverty in the covenant community (Exod 23.10–11). A person falling on hard times was to be treated rightly, not ruthlessly, in harmony with God’s standard of personal holiness (Lev 25.39–43). This principle included the stipulation that loans to fellow Israelites were to be interest-free (Lev 25.36–38; cf. Exod 22.25; Deut 23.19), the credit being needed to help the borrower meet the annual necessities of agricultural life. Restrictions were also placed on collateral (Exod 22.26–27; Deut 24.6, 10).

Grounded in the principle of proper stewardship over God’s possessions (cf. Ps 24.1; 115.16; etc.), the Israelites were permitted to own property, but were expected to use it for the good of others. Every third year, the required tithe was to be used for the poor (Deut 14.28–29; 26.12–15). Farmers were expected to leave part of their harvest so the poor could help themselves as needed (Lev 19.9–10; Deut 24.19–22). As Christopher Wright summarizes, “At any time a person had the right to satisfy his immediate hunger from a neighbour’s produce without transgressing the laws of trespass or theft (Dt. 23:24f.) (Wright 1983, 86).

In short, “a demand to act like God was built into the covenant and tied in with the exodus, the fundamental act of redemption, so to ignore the demand (i.e. to fail to help the poor or to take advantage of them through interest on loans, etc.) was a fundamental breach of the covenant with God” (Dauids 1982, 42–43). As seen in Deuteronomy 10.16–19, this was an essential aspect of the circumcision of the heart and renunciation of stubbornness that was to characterize the covenant people:

Circumcise therefore the foreskin of your heart, and be no longer stubborn. For the LORD your God is God of gods and Lord of lords, the great, the mighty, and the awesome God, who is not partial and takes no bribe. He executes justice for the fatherless and the widow, and loves the

sojourner, giving him food and clothing. Love the sojourner, therefore, for you were sojourners in the land of Egypt.

In the psalms, the ideal king was to act like God and defend the rights of the poor (cf. Ps 72.1–2) who called boldly on God and assumed he would help precisely because they were poor (Pss 69.32–33; 86.1–2; cf. 12.5; 35.10; 68.5; 140.12). Amos represents the prophetic emphasis, writing to a society with widening class disparity where corruption was common and the poor were oppressed as the wealthy embraced their possessions to the point of idolatry and satisfaction of extravagant tastes in luxury (Amos 3.10, 12, 15–16; 5.10–12, 21–24; 6.1–6; 8.5–6, 14; cf. Isa 1.10–17; 5.8; Mic 2.1–2).

The Theme in Second Temple Judaism

The concern continued to be important in Jewish literature prior to the New Testament period. Statements in Sirach (late 3rd – early 2nd cent. BC), where “Ben Sira’s concern for the poor and marginalized runs throughout the collection” (DeSilva 2000, 1120), are representative.

First, Sirach stressed the traditional piety involved in caring for the poor as a fundamental religious duty:

Give a hearing to the poor, and return their greeting politely. Rescue the oppressed from the oppressor; and do not be hesitant in giving a verdict. Be a father to orphans, and be like a husband to their mother; you will then be like a son of the Most High, and he will love you more than does your mother (Sir 4.8–10 NRSV).

Second, the wealthy were increasingly viewed as unlikely to be pious and were at times cursed:

A rich person does wrong, and even adds insults; a poor person suffers wrong, and must add apologies. A rich person will exploit you if you can be of use to him, but if you are in need he will abandon you. If you own something, he will live with you; he will drain your resources without a qualm. When he needs you he will deceive you, and will smile at you and encourage you; he will speak to you kindly and say, “What do you need?” He will embarrass you with his delicacies, until he has drained you two or three times, and finally he will laugh at you. Should he see you afterwards, he will pass you by and shake his head at you. Take care not to be led astray and humiliated when you are enjoying yourself (Sir 13.3–8 NRSV).

Third, *the poor* were increasingly associated with the pious with the term becoming a popular self-designation of pious groups who saw themselves as oppressed:

What does a wolf have in common with a lamb? No more has a sinner with the devout. What peace is there between a hyena and a dog? And what peace between the rich and the poor? Wild asses in the wilderness are the prey of lions; likewise the poor are feeding grounds for the rich. Humility is an abomination to the proud; likewise the poor are an abomination to the rich (Sir 13.17–20 NRSV).

Reflections from the Biblical Teaching

Specific applications from James’s emphasis will be considered in studies of the letter’s respective passages, but based on this overview of the evidence (re-read part 1 [here](#)), I offer four broad observations.

First, to reflect the heart of God and Jesus’ example is to be concerned for the poor and marginalized.

Second, our attitude about wealth says much about the spiritual condition of our hearts.

Third, as examples like Luke’s references to the Pharisees and rich young ruler show (Luke 16.1–15; 18.18–30), being religious can mask attitudes about wealth and the poor that have adverse consequences.

Fourth, if, as we have sometimes heard in public prayers, we are among the world’s richest people, it is incumbent on us to reflect on what our prosperity implies relative to our responsibility to the poor (cf. Jas 2.5; Luke 12.48). This self-examination is better undertaken by comparing ourselves to the poorest in the world rather than to Warren Buffet, Bill Gates, et. al.

Works Cited

Peter H. Davids. 1982. *The Epistle of James: A Commentary on the Greek Text*. The New International Greek Testament Commentary. Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co.

D. A. DeSilva. 2000. “Sirach.” *Dictionary of the New Testament Background*. ed. Craig A. Evans & Stanley E. Porter. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press.

Christopher J. H. Wright. 1983. *An Eye for An Eye: The Place of Old Testament Ethics Today*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press.

Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations are from the ESV

(All emphasis in Bible quotations added by the author)

Permission is granted to reprint original materials with the credit line,

“Reprinted from David Anguish, ‘Opening the Scriptures,’ February 13, 2024”

Feedback is welcome. Direct comments to david@davidanguish.com

To receive each new issue of this newsletter in your inbox, click [here](#).