



Quaker Universalist Voice

Luke 4–5: The Poor and the Desert in Luke

by J.M. Spears

We have chosen two Biblical words, or themes, for further reflection: the “poor” and the “desert”. To understand how these words are used by the author Luke, we need to look back at their usage in the Hebrew Bible from which Jesus and Luke drew their messages.

The Poor:

Many different words are used in the Hebrew Bible, which are translated into English as “the poor.” One Hebrew word, *anawim*, is used to mean the “afflicted”, “the bowed down,” and “those who are oppressed by the rich and powerful.” (See examples in Isaiah 3:24 and Amos 2:7) Another Hebrew word is *dal*, which means the “weak” and “needy.” (See examples in Leviticus 19:15 and Jeremiah 5:4.) Other Hebrew words include *ebyuown-* or “want” or “destitute” (See Exodus 23:6, Job 29:16 and Psalms 49:2), *muwk* or “to make thin” or “impoverished” (See Leviticus 25:25) and *ruwsh* or “to be destitute” (See Proverbs 10:4).

The poor were the people who were pushed to the edge of society and left in social lowliness and economic distress. They were forced to seek the help of others by begging. Beggars were considered outside of society and were treated as having lesser value than those inside society.

The poor were viewed differently in different periods of Israel’s history. When the tribes of Israel were nomads, there was no sharp or rigid distinction between rich people and poor people. The range of wealth was narrow. The networks of relationship and mutual obligation were complex and near universal. Yahweh’s will was understood to mean that there should be no permanent or hopeless poverty in the community. Unlike the Greek gods, Yahweh was the protector of the poor. This idea of God’s special protection for the poor is a common theme throughout the Bible.

The basic idea of Israel’s poor laws was to help the victims of human injustice. The Law of Moses and the prophetic exhortations sought social justice for the poor. Justice was understood to mean that society values and treats the poor in the same way it values and treats the privileged people. The perennial problem was to conform actual practice to this clear standard of compassionate concern.

Later, the prophets spoke against the desire of the rich to increase their riches by taking land away from the poor. In the tradition, the land had been given to all the people by

Yahweh. (See, for example, Psalms 94:5.) Isaiah 5:8 and Amos 2:6 say that this improper taking of the land by the wealthy would result in the inevitable judgment of God on Israel. That judgment was not to be a judgment on individuals who acted with injustice, but a judgment on the whole people.

In Amos 2:6-16, Israel was called to provide the same level of caring that God had given them when they were the outcasts in Egypt. The God who led them out of Egypt, when they were slaves of Pharaoh, now called the people of Israel, to treat all people with the same motherly love and fatherly care as God had shown to them.

Jeremiah 33:14-16 urged people to remove poverty and treat all people as having equal value, because that is what was required for the salvation of Israel as a whole.

After most of the inhabitants of Judah and Jerusalem were forced to migrate in the Babylonian Exile, beginning in 598 BCE (Before the Common Era), a new and negative attitude toward the poor developed in Israel. Progressively, the poor were regarded as non-existent, being clarified with the dead, the lepers, the blind, and the childless in social status.

From the last two centuries before Jesus, the Maccabean Age, Judaism was plagued by great social tensions. During the reign of the Herod family, beginning in 37 BCE, the interest and care of the leaders for the people declined. The leaders rejected the standard of solidarity with the people and disregarded the prophets' calls to justice. The leaders thought of the whole nation as "poor Israel."

Therefore, the concern of the leaders was not for the individual poor people as persons. Their concern related only to the idea of the nation of Israel. They believed that it was the nation that was to continue receiving God's mercy and salvation from their national enemies, in the same way God had shown mercy to Israel in saving it from the pharaoh. They were able to disregard the poor people in their midst by believing that the individuals were poor because they were receiving the judgment of God for their past individual sins.

The leaders said that, for the people, the way to a right relation to God was through the keeping of all the laws and rules that had been established through the centuries of the tradition. However, it was impossible for the illiterate and uneducated to read or understand those laws. Women were not allowed to study the law. The laws and customs were so complicated that the uneducated were unable to understand what was expected of them. Because the uneducated did not keep all of the laws, they were considered "sinners" and, as such, were outcasts.

During this same period, the religious leaders interpreted the religious laws to mean that all people who were poor and disabled were sinners. This helped push the poor into a permanent poverty status that resulted in their separation from society. The religious leaders also interpreted the laws of the temple to mean that all people, including the poor, were required to pay temple taxes, further oppressing the poor.

Although philanthropy was still firmly rooted in the tradition at the time of Jesus, giving alms to the poor was done primarily for social and religious visibility. These customs showed little concern for meeting the real social and economic needs of poor people. It was the practice to give a portion of the charitable tithe to the poor in Jerusalem. Gifts to the poor were distributed on the night of the Passover. Therefore, large numbers of beggars were attracted to the holy city, particularly at Passover.

Luke introduced the theme of the poor in the Jesus infancy stories. For Luke, the shepherds represented the poor. The poor were among the first to learn the good news of God's acceptance (Luke 2:8-20). At that time, shepherds were stigmatized. They were generally suspected of illegally leading their herds onto other people's land. It was generally assumed that all shepherds stole lambs. Like the tax collectors all shepherds carried a social stigma and were excluded from society.

Luke writes that, when the community is a community of God, there is a topsy-turvy world where everything seems to be reversed from the expected. Two of the images of God in Luke are those of a homeless baby among the animals in an outhouse and a crucified carpenter, neither of which was the expected image of an exalted God.

In the community of God, beggars are honored guests at the feasts of kings (Luke 14:15-24). When the world is turned upside down, the *anawim* enter into God's community before the conventionally righteous enter the community. The blind see (Luke 4:18). The dumb speak (Luke 11:14). The dead are restored to the world of the living (Luke 7:22).

In Luke, bringing the good news to the poor is a specific task that Jesus accepted (Lue 4:18). The good news, which Jesus talked about and demonstrated, was that God loves and cares for everyone. Jesus told the people that national survival (salvation) for Israel would not happen by overthrowing Rome, but by doing justice, treating the poor as being of equal value to the rich and powerful.

This message put Jesus in direct conflict with both the Roman and Jewish authorities. The Roman authorities saw him as a nationalist, who had the power to stir up the poor. The Jewish leaders saw Jesus as misleading the masses by teaching the poor that they had the same value as the righteous who followed all the rules and that they, the poor were accepted by God.

The major suffering of the poor was social shame and disgrace (Luke 16:3). To beg was to lose human dignity. These are the ones Jesus sought, helped, and served by telling them that they were accepted by God. They could live whole lives starting at the moment they accepted their acceptance and trusted God.

Jesus said that, for Israel to escape destruction by their enemies, that is for Israel to be saved, the Israelites must care for the poor. For example, see Luke 11:42-52. Salvation could come through caring, not killing. In God's community, no one was to be excluded.

No one was to be cast out of society. The good news that Jesus brought to the poor was that they were accepted and loved, as they were. Jesus was telling the rich that the *anawim* were accepted and loved by God. Jesus called on the rich to walk in the way of God, to live their life accepting, loving, and treating the *anawim* in the same way they treated themselves.

The Desert:

In the Bible, the Hebrew word, *midbar* and the Greek word *eremos* are alternately translated “desert” and “wilderness.” The desert or wilderness was a deserted, uninhabited place. It was a place of preparation for departure.

After leaving Egypt, Moses and the Israelites stayed in the desert to prepare themselves to go into the Promised Land.

The desert was the place that John the Baptist became spiritually mature and received the Word of God (Luke 1:80 and 3:2). John the Baptist was called to “prepare the way”, to prepare the people to see and to accept the new life the Messiah would bring. John went to the desert to prepare the way (Luke 3:3).

It was in the desert that Jesus was baptized and understood God’s message of grace, “You are my child. I love you very much. You please me greatly.” (Luke 3:22). After the baptism, Jesus was driven into the desert by the Holy Spirit. Jesus was then tempted in the desert, but decided that God’s new order should not come through force of arms or through the use of political and economic might. During that time in the desert, Jesus set the direction, and prepared, for his life’s journey. (Luke 4:1-12)

Luke tells us that, when the crowds looked for Jesus they found him in the desert. Jesus told them about the decisions he had made about the next step in his journey. He said, “I must proclaim the good news of God’s community to other cities also, for I was sent for this purpose.”

In chapter 5, Luke tell us that Jesus went to the desert to pray- to prepare. In the desert, Jesus gained courage to speak truth to the powerful. There, Jesus was enabled to confront the leaders of his community. Jesus told them the good news that it is in accepting God’s love that people are saved, not by following all the rules. Jesus said that all people who had been pushed to the edge of society, the lowly, were to be first in God’s community (Luke 5:20-26)

In Chapter 9, Luke tells us that Jesus was in the desert when he showed the followers that there was enough food for everyone in the world. Jesus demonstrated that none of the 5,000 people needed to go hungry. In that time, 5,000 was a figure so large that it could have stood for all people. Here in the desert, Jesus demonstrated justice by using food.

For Jesus, justice was a matter of the haves sharing with the have-nots. Those who had material goods, sight, hearing, health, and power were called by God to share with the poor, the blind, the deaf, the lame, and the weak.

Questions:

- Are these translations more appropriate for children in your observation or is their usefulness primarily for parents, teachers, and other adults in helping children on their spiritual journeys?
- In what ways are these translations helpful for children?
- How can these translations be improved for helping children?

Resources:

- G. Kittle, et. *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* (Erdmans, 1965)
- G. Buttrick ed., *Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible* (Abington, 1962)
- A. Nolan, *Jesus Before Christianity* (Orbis, 1976)