

Poverty eradication and the Bible in context: a serious challenge¹

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Abstract

This article endeavours to reflect seriously on poverty in its ancient (biblical) and present-day contexts, and is motivated by the notion that present-day believers (whether Jewish or Christian) want their acknowledgement of the status of the Bible to contribute to the eradication of poverty in its present-day contexts. In this article, I shall briefly discuss the various terms for poverty used in the Bible, and I shall then reflect upon present-day definitions and distinctions. After a brief review of the (ancient) historical context of Israel (and the contemporary survival measures as revealed by archaeology), I shall then focus, again, on the present-day world, including the situation in South Africa. Only serious continued reflection can lead, ultimately, to any form of action.

*Is daar 'n god? En waar is hy? Is there a god? And where is he?
Hy ontmoet jou elke dag He meets you daily
in mense wat jou nodig kry. in a needy person's plea.
(after Dietrich Bonhoeffer)*

How serious is poverty talk? We are philosophical about poverty, or religious, capitalistic or perhaps socialistically minded – but never really serious (C W du Toit).

Introduction

In this contribution I relate the ancient text of the Bible to one of the burning issues of our time: *poverty*. Since the Bible, as a sacred text for Christians and Jews, occupies such an important place in their lives, the endeavour is justified. Of course, this is not to deny the concern for poverty eradication in other religious or philosophical traditions. To the contrary: continuous dialogue with other traditions on the issue can only contribute to poverty alleviation. However, Christians should be “conscientised” as far as the Bible is concerned, amidst accusations (from, among others, neo-atheists) that the church to a large extent remains a solipsistic organisation mainly interested in the personal salvation of its members, its own interests and its role as a powerful organisation in society.

Poverty was a problem in ancient Israel as it is today, and the prophets of the Bible and key figures such as Jesus of Nazareth and Paul addressed the issue. My intention is therefore to reflect on the theme of poverty in the various writings of the Bible (as well as the situation in ancient Israel) and then to reflect on the question of how poverty in today's world can be addressed in view of what we have learnt from the Bible. It should therefore be noted that “poverty” is not merely analysed as a biblical theme like other themes (e.g. the covenant, creation, etc.). Also, because of the enormous human suffering caused by poverty, this cannot merely be an “objective” analysis. The emphasis therefore is on the *eradication* (not mere alleviation) of poverty: then and now. On the other hand, we want to be scientific in all respects. We cannot merely make propagandistic statements against poverty. An “involved” analysis is best served by a thorough study of the theme as it is reflected in the sources (these being text and archaeology). Present-day and the ancient contexts (where the biblical literature originated) both, therefore, deserve our attention. An attempt should be made to clarify what we mean by poverty (one simple definition won't suffice) and the plight of our present world (especially [South] Africa) should come into focus.

Biblical terms for poverty

It is impossible to cover the theme of poverty in the Bible extensively within the scope of one article.² My approach will therefore be to initially provide a “keyhole” perspective on poverty in the Bible by discussing the various terms used for poverty, with some examples. The interested reader can easily elaborate on this by the

¹ This article is dedicated to Prof Cornel W Du Toit.

² For a more elaborate discussion, see Scheffler & Van Heerden (eds.) 2012 and the literature mentioned in the contributions there.

use of a concordance and by consulting relevant articles on poverty in Kittel & Friedrich (1936), Jenni & Westermann (1971; 1976) and Botterweck & Ringgren (1974-). Our discussion of the various terms will later (after present-day attempts to define poverty) be complemented by a look into the different perspectives on poverty as encountered in the different literary corpuses of the Bible. I shall also examine how ancient Israel coped with poverty (an endeavour that is informed by the findings of archaeology).

The Hebrew Bible (Old Testament)

In the Hebrew Bible there are several terms that designate poverty: *ani*, *anw*, *ebjon*, *dal*, and *rasj*. It is very difficult to distinguish the meanings inherent in these terms, and the context in which they are used should be used to determine the exact meaning.

- (1) The term *ani* occurs 75 times in the Old Testament and *anw* 21 times. Scholars generally agree that these terms have the same basic root and are therefore indistinct in meaning. It can be translated as “poor” and “humble”, the latter referring to a more spiritual meaning. Material poverty is implicated in Leviticus 19:10: “*You shall not gather the fallen grapes of your vineyard; you shall leave them for the poor (ani) and the sojourner.*” Humility is implied in Numbers 12:3: “*Now the man Moses was very meek (anw) ...*” (see also the occurrences in Pr 15:15; Ecc 6:8; Am 2:7; Ps 149:4.)
- (2) The Hebrew term *ebjon* occurs 61 times in the Old Testament. Originally it referred to “beggars” and later it was used to describe the “socially weak” “miserable” or “poor” person. In Job 31:19, Job claims that he always helped the “*poor man without covering*” (see also Dt 15:7, 9, 11 and 15).
- (3) The term *dal* can be translated as “low”, “helpless”, “insignificant” or “poor” and occurs 48 times in the Hebrew Bible. In Leviticus 14:21, the offering of the “poor” is referred to: “*If he is poor (dal) and cannot afford much, then he shall take one male lamb for a guilt offering to be waived ...*” (see also Ps 41:1–2; Is 14:30; Pr 14:31.)
- (4) The term *rasj* occurs 21 times in the Hebrew Bible. It usually refers to material poverty. In the parable of Nathan to David (2 Sm 12:3), Nathan relates about the “*poor man (who) had nothing but a little ewe lamb ...*” (see also 2 Sm 13:8; Ecc 4:14; Ps 82:3.)

New Testament terms for poverty

In the New Testament there are four terms that refer to poverty: *ptochos*, *penes*, *endees* and *penichros*.

- (1) The term *ptochos* refers to poverty in its most literal sense, and actually indicates those who are extremely poor and destitute, to the point of begging, thus implying a continuous state (Louw & Nida 1988:564). In the New Testament, this is the term normally used for the poor and there are 34 occurrences of this term (10 in Luke’s gospel); this in itself is an indication on how important the issue was for the New Testament authors. When Matthew 5:3 refers to the “poor in spirit”, the term is used metaphorically, to indicate spiritual lowliness or humility, but this by no means spiritualises the term itself or implies that Matthew’s gospel is not interested in material poverty (see Mt 11:5, 19:21; 25:31–46; Lk 16:20–22; Js:2:2).
- (2) The term *penes* refers to a person who is poor and who must live sparingly and can merely survive, although this person does not suffer from the extreme poverty as a *ptochos* (see below on moderate poverty). It is used only once in the New Testament – in 2 Corinthians 9:9.
- (3) The term *endees* also occurs only once in the New Testament, when it is stated in Acts 4:34 that no one in the early Jerusalem church was *in need*. The meaning is similar to *ptochos*, but with the emphasis more on a serious lack of resources (need) rather than on a continuous state of poverty and destitution.
- (4) *Penichros* is also a *hapax legomenon* (= occurring only once) and has the same meaning as *ptochos* (see the reference to the poor widow in Lk 21:2). It tends to be used in poetic, literary contexts (see Louw & Nida 1988:564).

This overview of biblical terms by no means pretends to be complete, but servers to “transfer” present-day readers’ minds to the ancient context, a context which is different, although also marked by the common problem of poverty. We can make the preliminary conclusion that, in the Hebrew Bible, the terms for poverty usually refer to *material* poverty or destitution, but in some instances the term also has a “spiritual” or metaphorical meaning (e.g. “humility”). Any present attempt to spiritualise poverty in order to avoid its challenge should therefore be exposed as contrary to the majority of biblical witnesses. The metaphorical use of terms in some instances does not cancel the basic, literal meaning of these terms.³

Various kinds of poverty, or in search of a definition

It is already clear from the Bible that a variety of meanings can be attached to the term “poor”. In ancient Israel this was not explicitly reflected upon, with the result that “poverty” could refer to a wide range of meanings,

³ Cf Martin-Achard 1976:343: “... der Ausdruck ‘arm’ dürfte seine materielle und soziologische Bedeutung auch nach dem Exil bewahrt haben; der religiös-ethische Nebensinn bildet eine sekundäre Komponente, deren Gewicht von Fall zu Fall im Hinblick auf den Kontext zu bemessen ist.”

from the worst kind of destitution to any kind of misery or suffering, including suffering at a spiritual level. As far as this metaphorical explanation is concerned, poverty seemed (because God sides with the poor), even to be a virtue to be desired. In Psalm 86:1, for instance, the petitioner prays that God should listen to him or her because he is *ani webjon* (translated by the KJV as “poor and needy”), whereas later in the Psalm it becomes clear that the supplicant’s need is based on threats to him meted out by his enemy.⁴

As stated above, Luke’s and Matthew’s gospels also reflect this difference. Whereas Luke’s gospel has Jesus saying “Blessed are the poor”, Matthew spiritualises the concept in Matthew 5:3: “Blessed are the poor in spirit.”

It would therefore facilitate our discussion if we attempt to be more precise when we refer to poverty. Jeffery Sachs’s distinction (in his book, *The end of poverty*, 2005a) between three kinds of poverty and Maslow’s (1970) “hierarchy of human needs” can help us here if we want to explore the theme in the Hebrew Bible.

Extreme, moderate and relative poverty

According to Sachs (2005b:26–36), a distinction should be made between *extreme*, *moderate* and *relative* poverty.

- (1) *Extreme poverty* or absolute poverty refers to “the poverty that kills”, where people have less than \$1 per day to survive, are chronically hungry, deprived of basic shelter, safe drinking water, sanitation, sufficient clothing, health care and education. About one billion of the world’s population (one-sixth) falls into this category. More than 8 million people die every year (between 20 000 and 30 000 a day!) as a result of extreme poverty. This type of poverty exists mainly in the developing countries. Asia leads in numbers (approximately 650 million), but Africa has the largest proportion: nearly half its population (approximately 300 million). What makes Africa’s situation qualitatively worse is the fact that, in terms of the population percentage, the situation is worsening whereas, in Asia, the situation is improving. The situation of the extreme poor is further worsened by factors such as HIV/AIDS, drought, isolation and civil wars.
- (2) *Moderate poverty*, where people live on between \$1 and \$2 a day, and their needs are barely met. They are not in danger of dying, but they only survive physically, and do not have the means to enjoy life or live a meaningful life.
- (3) *Relative poverty* is based on a household income below a given proportion of the national average. People in relative poverty lack things that the middle class takes for granted.

A further two billion people fall into the category of moderate and relative poverty (which means that approximately half of the world’s six billion people are regarded as poor). It therefore stands to reason that extreme poverty should receive the most attention when we discuss how to ameliorate the fate of the poor.

Maslow’s categories of human needs

The psychologist Abraham Maslow (1970; see also Hjelle & Ziegler (1976:256–263) distinguished between five levels of human needs which function in a hierarchical relationship. Maslow made the point that the most basic needs should first be fulfilled before the needs at the next level become a human preoccupation.

- (1) *Physiological needs* refer to the most basic needs of physical survival, namely to have the minimum water to drink and food to eat today simply in order not to die. This level of need correlates with Sachs’s notion of absolute or extreme poverty, and was not the need of the supplicant of Psalm 86:1 (or 109) who called himself “poor” in the face of the threat of the enemy.
- (2) *Safety needs* refer to the needs for security and shelter. People who, in Sachs’s terms, experience extreme and moderate poverty experience this need particularly acutely.

The petitioner of Psalm 86 refers to the physical threat of “*a gang of cruel men that is trying to kill me*” (v 14), which means that he (or she) had this second-level need in mind. It can be remarked that almost *all* relatively wealthy South Africans, people whose even higher order needs have been met, are presently experiencing this need because of the ever-increasing levels of violent criminal activity in the country.

⁴ For such “misuse” of the terms indicating material poverty to further the own interest, see Scheffler 2011.

- (3) If needs for shelter and security are met, *belongingness and love needs* (including but not only *sexual and erotic needs*) become a priority unless a conscious decision is made to put these needs to one side. Paul's references to the "gift of abstinence" and his expression "burning with desire" actually recognise these basic human needs. Humans long for affectionate relationships. An absence of friends, relatives, spouse, children or outright social rejection (ostracism) are all accompanied by the "pangs of loneliness".
- (4) *Self-esteem needs* refer to self-respect and esteem from other people. *Self-respect* includes an individual's desire for competence, confidence, personal strength, adequacy, achievement, independence and freedom. *Esteem from others* includes prestige, recognition, acceptance, attention, status, reputation and appreciation. For business people, wealth alone may suffice; for academics, a long list of publications and recognition from colleagues may also suffice.
- (5) If all the human needs mentioned above are fulfilled, the question arises whether happiness is the result. According to Maslow, not necessarily so. Indeed, depression is rife in affluent societies. The highest order need is therefore the need for *self-actualisation*, to experience life as profoundly meaningful. This will occur when a person reaches the peak of his or her potential. Maslow (1970:46) has the following to say: "A musician must make music, an artist must paint, a poet must write, if he is to be at peace with himself. What a man can be, he must be. He must be true to his own nature." The current interest in spirituality in affluent societies is an expression of this need. Although the need for self-fulfilment or self-actualisation can be regarded as a spiritual need, one should not lose sight of the fact that the most basic need for survival is at this stage fulfilled. Distinguishing Maslow's needs helps us to explain why the eradication of extreme poverty is so important, because basic survival is a presupposition for the satisfaction of other higher order needs. The theory also explains why higher order needs are often referred to as poverty, although material destitution is not at stake.

If we speak in this article about the eradication of poverty, we are referring to Maslow's first-level and second-level needs. It should be kept in mind that Maslow is situated in a western affluent society and writes from that perspective. Really poor people would hardly grasp what is meant by self-actualisation, since they are struggling to fulfil basic needs. Since the word "poor" is also often used to designate the higher needs, Maslow's distinctions bring my discussion into sharper relief.

Deng's distinction between intellectual and conventional poverty

Deng (1997:100), a development economist from Kenya, regards poverty reduction as a leading issue in African development, both in the 1990s and afterwards. The recognition that poverty in Africa has multiple faces encouraged him to identify two main types of poverty, types which he regards as interrelated, as well as negatively reinforcing each other.

The first type, which he admits will be controversial, is what he would call "*intellectual poverty*". The second one is the *conventional type of poverty* that arises as a result of lack of and/or inability to access the means to basic human needs.

- Intellectual poverty

According to Deng (1997:100)

"[I]ntellectual poverty" has allowed inappropriate development policies and strategies that are inconsistent with African thought and culture to be applied with impunity. And when these policies and strategies do not work, African social institutions and culture(s) are seen as impediments to modernizing processes and to economic development.

.... [T]he "intellectual poverty" in Africa manifests itself mainly in the *absence of a serious African scholarship* [italics mine] that can systematically guide development policy formulation and ensure its consistency with African thought and culture.

Deng admits that this type of poverty has been widely acknowledged, but only few dare to mention it explicitly from fear of being branded as polemical, radical or politically incorrect. The approach so far has been to mask this type of poverty with coded phrases, such as "lack of analytical capacity" or "institutional weakness". Says Deng (1997:101; cf Kimenyi & Mbaku 2003:13–19):

Hence, attempts to alleviate this type of poverty have mainly (and rightly so) focused on capacity-building and institutional strengthening. While such efforts are necessary and commendable, they are insufficient to produce a viable African development school of thought, which is urgently

needed to provide alternative analysis of African problems and appropriate strategies for their solution.

Deng argues further that capacity-building and institutional-strengthening initiatives pursued in isolation from African social systems of thought will normally lead to what he likes to call “‘imitative’ development”. The latter, he believes, “has essentially landed Africa to where she is today – slow growing, if not stagnant, economies with rising poverty, indebtedness, faster population growth, civil strife and threats of natural resource degradation” (Deng 1997:102).

The implication of Deng’s argument is clear: in order to eradicate conventional poverty in Africa on a sustainable basis, intellectual poverty should be confronted head-on.

- Conventional poverty

In dealing with the conventional type of poverty (in the sense of material destitution), Deng (1997:102) admits “that there are definitional and methodological problems with respect to the measurement of this type of poverty”. In order to reach an appropriate generic definition of this type of poverty, the point of departure should be normality. What does it mean to be a normal person? According to Deng “[I]t means to have dignity and self-respect, which presupposes having the basic needs of a normal human being met. These basic needs consist of primary and secondary needs.”

Primary needs are food (including water and clothing) and shelter (extreme AND moderate poverty in Sachs’s terms). *Secondary* needs consist of economic, cultural and political services. Examples of secondary needs are health, education, security, liberty, freedom of expression and religion, individual rights to own property, and having access to productive employment and credit.

Primary and secondary basic needs could be met through one’s own resources, family, community, and/or through a combination of these sources ...

... The lack of these resources leads to a state of powerlessness, helplessness and despair, which in turn forces a person to perform undignified and disrespectful actions. In addition, the inability to protect oneself against economic, social, cultural and political discrimination, deprivation and marginalization, can also lead to this kind of poverty (Deng 1997:102).

Deng gives a list of general categories of poverty under which Africa’s poor can be classified. Although his list cannot be regarded as a blueprint for South Africa’s situation, it represents most categories of poverty in South Africa. He lists the following general categories for the African situation (Deng 1997:106):

- (1) those households or individuals below the poverty level and whose incomes are insufficient to provide for basic needs, as defined by the World Bank (extreme poverty)
- (2) households or individuals lacking access to basic services, political contacts and other forms of support; this category includes the urban squatters and “street” children
- (3) people in isolated rural areas who lack essential infrastructure such as basic services
- (4) female-headed households (especially pregnant and lactating mothers and infants) whose nutritional needs are not being met adequately
- (5) persons who have lost their jobs and those who are unable to find employment (such as school leavers and college graduates) as a result of economic reforms introduced under the adjustment programmes, that is those who are in danger of becoming the “new poor”
- (6) refugees and internally displaced populations due to civil strife
- (7) ethnic minorities who are marginalised, deprived and persecuted economically, culturally and politically.

Whereas Maslow argued from a perspective of ultimate affluence, Deng argues from below, from the vantage point of the materially deprived. However, overlaps in their categories emerge and, if we are to obtain a comprehensive overview of poverty in order to effect its eradication, it can be argued that the two stances complement one another. In order to correlate the two perspectives, both intellectual and conventional poverty should be correlated with Maslow’s distinctions.

Maslow serves as a reminder to the really poor that the eradication of poverty does not necessarily result in happiness, and Deng’s reflection serves as a reminder to the affluent that they would not experience much of their unhappiness if they were materially deprived.

Other definitions: marginalisation, income levels, possibilities of choice

In the 1950s and 1960s, the concepts of “marginalisation” and “marginality” were formed and served to describe the peripheral economic, political and social position of the urban poor and peasants in the countries of the Third World. Later, in the 1970s and 1980s, international organisations increasingly replaced “marginalisation” with the neutral term “poverty” (Berg-Schlosser & Kersting 2003:78). However, both terms are characterised by multidimensionality, which makes an empirical analysis difficult.

The World Bank and the Development Programme of the United Nations (UNDP) deal with the problem in different ways. While the World Bank prefers to use *income- and consumption-oriented* measurements (e.g. Sachs, see above), the UNDP favours a definition of poverty using *social* indicators (material and nonmaterial basic needs), which is more in line with Deng’s views. Their definitions of poverty therefore differ. While the World Bank interprets poverty as the failure to *reach a certain level of income*, which therefore prohibits the provision of basic consumer goods, the UNDP uses an extended definition. It views poverty as a *lack of chances and possibilities of choice*, both of which are crucial for human development. This lack of chances and possibilities of choice prevent people from enjoying a long and healthy life, deprive people of an acceptable standard of living and sufficient education, and prevent people from gaining access to private and public services.

Both approaches can also be interpreted as complementing one another, thus providing a more comprehensive perspective on the plight of the poor.

With these distinctions in mind, we return now to the functioning of poverty in the ancient context of the Bible.

Poverty in the texts and contexts of ancient Israel

In order to grasp what the Bible says about poverty we must study the relevant texts, but in order to understand the latter we will also have to look at the historical context of Israel itself. Archaeology can provide us with information which we do not encounter in the texts, and will also help us to better understand the texts.

There are various ways of approaching the question of poverty in the Bible, one being to analyse the Hebrew terms used for poverty (*dal, rasj, anilānu* and *ebjon*) and trace their occurrences, references, meanings and connotations within the different contexts in which they are employed (see 2 above).

In what follows, I will complement that approach by looking for a basis of comparison between the divergent views expressed in the literary corpora of the Bible (Pentateuch, Psalms, prophetic and wisdom literature, etc.) in view of the possible value these different views might or might not have for poverty eradication in the present-day world.

Diverse views on poverty in the biblical corpus of literature: a brief glance

The Hebrew Bible often refers to poverty in its most basic form (material destitution), but if one compares it with other issues, then references to poverty are fairly few. This may be because the Bible was not written by extremely poor people, for the simple reason that the poorest of the poor are so concerned with finding food to eat that a religious reflection on their situation is nothing short of impossible. In most cases, the poorest of the poor could neither read nor write. However, the fact that the Bible was written by the elite gives significance to the fact that supportive references are made to the poor. Those who have enough are called upon to respond to the plight of the poor.

In the Old Testament several *Mosaic laws*, as these find expression in the *Covenant Code* (Ex 21:1–11, 22:21–24, 22:25, 22:25–27, 23:2, 6, 23:1), *Holiness Code* (Lev 19:10, 19:13, 15, 25) and *Deuteronomic Code* (especially Dt 15:1–18) prescribe that the poor be treated kindly (Berges 2000:227–250). The Pentateuch does not present these laws as having a universal or inclusive applicability, but rather as laws that are meant to be obeyed within the context of Israel itself, which is conceptualised as a family (see the term “brother” in Dt 15:2; see Braulik 1986; Scheffler 2005, 2010).

The *Deuteronomic history* relates Israel’s history, but unlike contemporary histories in the ancient Near East, there is no attempt to glorify Israel’s history. Instead, the *Deuteronomic history* is narrated with an underlying theological message that confronts Israel with her failures and that advocates specific values, including the adoption of a positive attitude towards the poor. This can be seen in the inclusion of Hannah’s song in 1 Samuel 2:1–10 and the striking story of Naboth’s vineyard (1 Ki 21:1–9), where the exploiting king is prophetically *criticised and challenged* (see Bosman, Gous & Spangenberg 1991; Farisani 2005).

The *Chronicler* presents a more positive view about the involvement of governing powers: Nehemiah 5’s report by Nehemiah narrates the virtuous behaviour exercised by the ruler of the day, who sacrificed his own rights in order to resolve the poverty in the country (see Ps 72:1–4, 12–14; see Gunneweg 1987:90–93; Rudolph 1949:131–133; Usue 2010).

A diversity of views is also to be found in about 50 of the 150 *psalms* (Lohfink 1992–1994), of which the “piety of the poor” (*Armenfrömmigkeit* – see Rahlf 1892; Kraus 1979:188–193; Groenewald 2003:147–153; Scheffler 2011:197–198) is but one. Even the *wisdom literature* continues this tradition of diversity. Whereas the book of Proverbs (see also Jesus Sirach) generally advocates a charitable attitude towards the poor, the poor on the other hand are also reprimanded for being responsible for their own plight by being lazy, depending on the situation. Different from the conventional wisdom of the book of Proverbs, the critical wisdom of Job and Qohelet wrestle with poverty in terms of the *theodicy* problem (see Spangenberg 2010:101–120; Scheffler 2012:480–496).

In the *prophetic literature* (especially Amos and Micah) the rich, and both the political and religious leaders are *heavily criticised* for exploiting and not caring for the poor, each book having its own unique emphasis as the contexts demanded (see Van Heerden 1991).

In the *New Testament* the emphasis on poverty can be traced back to the *historical Jesus* who, according to the oldest witnesses, was poor himself (Lk 9:58), but pronounced the poor blessed (Lk 6:20–21; Mt 5:3), preached for them (Lk 7:22), cared for them through the multiplication of the bread and gave his disciples the responsibility of caring for them (Mk 6:36; Lk 12:33; Mk 10:21; Lk 16:19:31).

The earliest New Testament writings, although not as radically as Jesus, continued to reflect this attitude. *Paul* pursued (besides being an apostle) his own profession as a tent maker in order to be materially independent and have something to give to the poor. He was also involved in organising the collection of money among the Asian churches for the poor church in Jerusalem (2 Cor 8–9; see Joubert 2000).

The letter of *James* (probably written between 50–60 CE), especially, while emphasising correct ethical behaviour as a fruit of genuine faith (see Js 1:22), championed for the poor by reprimanding rich members of congregations who discriminated against poor people (see Js 1:9–10, 27; 2:3, 16).

The writing of the *synoptic gospels* in the eighties of the first century can be regarded (among other things) as an attempt to preserve Jesus’s own teaching in view of the contemporary Christian teaching *about* him. The gospels thus reflect Jesus’s caring for the poor, albeit in different ways. Although Matthew 5:3 (“*Blessed are the poor in spirit*”, contra Lk 6:20) seems to suggest that *Matthew* spiritualises the concept of “the poor”, such a conclusion cannot be drawn for the gospel as a whole (see Mt 11:5, 19:21, 25:25–46). In *Mark’s gospel*, Jesus is portrayed as having a house (together with his disciples; see 2:1, 15, contra Lk 5:29) and advocating a stance that concern for the poor should not override other expressions of love and compassion (see his version of the women’s anointment in Mk 14:3–9, contra Lk 7:36–60). In *Mark’s* two versions of the feeding of the crowd (Mk 6:30–44 and 8:1–21), where the feeding can be interpreted in Eucharistic terminology (Mk 6:41, 8:6–7), the conclusion *cannot* be drawn that *Mark* spiritualises the concept in the sense of abolishing its literal meaning. The command to the disciples to care for the poor (“*Give you them something to eat*”) is pivotal in the episode (Mk 6:37). For *Mark*, caring for the literal poor remains a continuing responsibility (14:7).

In *Luke’s gospel* the theme of caring for the poor is extensively elaborated upon (“amplifying” Jesus’s view as it were) and many more references to the poor are included in his gospel as the situation of his community (which consisted of rich and poor Christians) demanded (e.g. see Lk 4:18–19, 6:20, 7:22, 11:39, 12:33, 14:13, 21, 16:20, 22, 18:22, 21:3). His double volume (*Luke-Acts*) not only constitutes the largest (and often neglected) literary corpus in the New Testament, but is also the biblical writing that deals most extensively with the issue of poverty. Moreover, this concern for the poor is also interconnected with other aspects of human dignity and suffering. Examples are physical and mental illness, social ostracism (women, children, members of despised professions) and political enmity (see Guthrie 1970:90–92; Scheffler 1993:61–102; Scheffler 2011).

It is important to note that New Testament texts can in no way be interpreted as a glorification of poverty because of its emphasis on caring for the poor. The call to sell goods and give to the poor may indeed imply sobriety and the eradication of greed, but the aim is always to eradicate poverty, especially severe poverty.

The historical context of ancient Israel as informed by archaeology

We also need to say something about the *history of the poor* (as we are informed by archaeology) in ancient Israel. It seems that extreme poverty did not constitute a major problem in Israel’s earliest history after the settlement in the land. In fact, the archaeological record of the early Iron Age shows that survival strategies were in place that met the most basic needs for food and shelter. Of course, these strategies pertain to subsistence farming; peasant life certainly did not ensure affluence. However, these strategies seem to have countered extreme poverty. In this connection one can refer to:

- (1) the numerous *water cisterns* that were dug in the highland mountains to catch rain and preserve rainwater in great quantities
- (2) *terraces* with excellent draining that were built along the hills using the available stones and that were filled with fertile soil for the growing of crops
- (3) *basic houses* that were built of sun-dried mud bricks and mud-plastered roofs made of reeds

- (4) the growing and cultivation of *olive trees*
- (5) the breeding of *domesticated animals*, especially goats that could survive in mountainous regions and that were adapted to a semi-nomadic mode of human existence

For a more elaborate discussion of these issues, see Scheepers (2012:23-41).

The plight of today's world, especially (South) Africa

Our glance at the function of poverty and poverty eradication in the literature and history of the Bible has told us that the Bible includes different views regarding poverty eradication, all of which relate to the different and diverse contexts of ancient Israel. This point needs to be kept in mind and prevents us from appropriating biblical notions in a superficial and fundamentalist way. If the eradication of poverty was related to the contexts of ancient Israel, then the same applies today. A reflection on poverty in the present-day contexts of today's world is therefore called for.

The world situation

As was the case with the Tsunami disaster of 2006, especially the believing mind is challenged by the inexpressible suffering which human beings (especially children who did not ask to be born) have to endure in Africa. During the floods in Mozambique in 2001, when people had to climb trees to survive, rescue operators reported that actually most people lost nothing, simply because they possessed nothing.

In what can only be regarded as a very limited attempt to fathom the problem, some statistical information can be considered:

1. One billion people (one-seventh of the world population) are extremely poor.
2. A third of these (about 300 million and half of its population) live in Africa, where the situation is worsening.
3. An average of more than 20 000 people die every day because of poverty.
4. A further two billion people can also be regarded as poor, although they are not facing starvation (which means that half of the world's seven billion people can be regarded as poor).
5. According to Sunter (1992:16), most of the world's economy (about 80%) is produced in the West (North America, Western Europe, Australia and New Zealand), although only 15% of the world population live in these countries.
6. People in the West (per capita) earn about 50 times more than those in the poorest countries, most of whom are in Africa. What makes Africa's position of extreme poverty even worse is that it has deteriorated in the last two decades, whereas the rest of the world (including Asia) has grown more prosperous.

That a large gap exists between the haves and haves-not in the world is therefore obvious. Attempting to relativise this situation by underlining the industriousness of the developed nations against the "laziness" of the poor nations grossly oversimplifies the problem. It also ignores the fact that, in the process of producing wealth, poor and poor countries have often been exploited (the colonial legacy). Moreover, poverty works like a cancer that penetrates the whole of society: being born into such a society means that the innocent children who are born into this society will have little chance of escaping the poverty trap.

The South African situation

- Statistical information and comments

Compared with the rest of Africa, South Africa is in a better situation. South Africa's Gross Domestic Product (GDP) is not only the highest in Africa, but it also consists of about 25–30% of that of Africa as a whole, which is considerable if one takes into account that South Africa's surface constitutes only 4% of the continent and that it is home to only about 6–7% of its population. Furthermore, 50% of Africa's electricity is generated in South Africa, 90% of Africa's steel is produced in South Africa, 40% of all manufactured products are produced there, and it handles 69% of Africa's railway freight. South Africa has 32% of the continent's cars and 45% of all tarred roads (SA Stigting 1994:28). Globally, South Africa is referred to as a "middle" country and ranks about 40th economically.

However, as far as poverty is concerned, the situation in South Africa is critical. The gap between the rich and poor is extremely wide. Only about 10% of the population earn enough money to pay income tax.

Poor people are mostly black. Blacks constitute 75% of the population, but they earn only about 35% of the total personal income. Whites earn about nine times more than blacks, which puts them, as a group, on par with the West.

About four million people in South Africa are jobless (10% of the population and 35% of the economically active population). According to the World Bank, about 40% of the black population (about 15 million) live in extreme poverty.

One can therefore conclude that the relatively positive position of South Africa in the African context only underscores the unfavourable situation on the rest of the continent. The discrepancy between rich and poor in South Africa also prevents South Africa from becoming a major agent for alleviating the plight of the poor in the rest of Africa.

Research done in 2008 by the Bureau of Market Research at the University of South Africa on the proportion of people living in poverty in South Africa, using similar indicators as the World Bank, is a valuable source of information. According to this research:

1. From 1996-2008 poverty has increased among all racial groupings in South Africa.
2. Although the figure for poor blacks is about 6% higher than 12 years ago, poverty among this grouping has steadily declined since 2002 – from 58.6% to 56.2%, a drop of 2.4%. Poverty among coloureds has also dropped slightly from 20% to 19.5%.
3. Interestingly, the percentages of poor Indians has virtually stayed the same since 2002 (0.1% increase), whereas the percentage of poor whites has increased from 3.8 to 4%. These are the only two groups whose poverty level has increased from 1998 to 2008.
4. Since 2002, poverty among all groupings in South Africa has dropped 1.5%.

Although there are some positive trends to be found in these figures, the overall message it gives is that South Africa is not making great strides in the battle against poverty. If the total poverty level continues to decline at a rate of 1.5% in six years, it will take another 24 years simply to get back to the poverty level experienced in 1996, which then was 40.5% of the total population.

The most disturbing observation from the overview above is the disparity between the percentage of blacks living in poverty today in South Africa, 56%, and the percentage of whites, only 4%. Converted into numbers, roughly 22 million blacks compared with about 160 000 whites are living in poverty (2008).

- South Africa's "double-decker" economy

A number of publications, articles and reports have tried to explain why so many black South Africans are poor and white South Africans wealthy. In his publication, *Beyond the miracle: inside the new South Africa* (2003), Sparks uses the metaphor of a double-decker bus to illustrate the two groups of economies in South Africa:

[T]he crux of the problem with the South Africa economy is that 'it has a double-decker economy' – its First World sector and its Third World sector – and what is working for those on the upper deck of this economic bus is not working for those on the lower deck. So unemployment is increasing and the wealth gap is widening (Sparks 2003:332).

In Deng's list above, *unemployment* is one of the categories responsible for poverty in Africa. The rising unemployment in South Africa raises the level of poverty and thus contributes to the widening of the wealth gap.

Sparks (2003:333) is of the opinion that the reason for this wealth gap “is a question of skills”: the new globalised economy places a premium on skills. Those at the top of the bus have skills, while those on the lower deck do not. This means that while those on the upper deck are prospering, growing numbers of those down below are unemployed and rapidly becoming unemployable – and if nothing is done about it, South Africa faces the socially dangerous prospect of this unemployment becoming generationally repetitive. In other words, the children of the unemployed will themselves be unemployable.

Sparks (2003:333) sees a further troubling feature of this double-decker bus economy:

Those on the top deck are a multiracial group. It used to be a whites-only deck, but now it is integrated. They are getting on pretty well, working together, making money together, their kids going to the same schools and universities. It is a rainbow deck. But those down below are all black, just the odd pinched face of a white here and there. And another thing, there is no stairway from the lower deck to the upper one. If you are unskilled you cannot climb up to the top of the bus.

Sparks believes that South Africa’s neo-liberal macro-economic policy is inadequate as far as dealing with this dual economy is concerned. What’s needed is a two- pronged strategy to cater for the different needs of both. The developed sector must be encouraged and energised to build on the good start it has made, because this will attract foreign investors. But the people in the unskilled sector, on the lower deck, need a different set of strategies, not only for humanitarian reasons but also because they need to be drawn “into the economy from which they are now excluded so that they can begin to contribute their huge numbers to its growth and also to build a stairway to the top” (Sparks 2003:333).

For South Africa to really grow its economy, Sparks believes foreign investment is absolutely crucial. But investors only invest where they see growth, “because that is where they believe they can make money ... One must produce growth first to attract them” (Sparks 2003:332). This can only begin when all South Africans begin to work together. He continues:

Growth, like charity, begins at home. Foreign investors will not come if they see locals are holding back. They will come only when they hear a buzz of excitement coming from the local investors and when they see the growth figures start to rise. So an effective strategy must start with boosting local investment (Sparks 2003:332).

Encouraging local investment may sound to be a logical and effective strategy as far as boosting the South African economy is concerned. But why then are those on the upper deck, who have the skills, the financial resources, everything this economy needs, not prepared to build a staircase *down* to those on the lower deck? Why should it be the poor on the lower deck who have, to use Sparks’s words, to “build a stairway to the top”, when they have neither the money nor the skills to do so? Are those on the top deck not better equipped and resourced to rather build a staircase down? Or even better, why don’t they join skills and resources and build the staircase together? This may be – but the irony is that even if they want to, they do not know *how* to.

Over the past 350 years, numerous barriers have prevented the two groups of people from being able to work together. Today it is crucial that these barriers or dividing factors, which drove these groups apart, and which were also responsible for the double-decker bus economy, be identified and eliminated. What are these barriers or dividing factors and where do they come from? I believe that their origins are to be found in the ignorance of the ethnic diversity that exists in South Africa.

Ignorance on the part of those on both decks, and the failure of both groups to recognise these diversities, find ways of dealing with them and then moving ahead, are possibly the main reasons for poverty in South Africa. The history of South Africa is littered with a series of conflicts between ethnic groups that have led to bloodshed, pain, mistrust and eventually separation.

Surviving apart has become a way of life and a way of life that still continues. This will not work in the future.

Local investment in the economy will only thrive when South Africans realise that our ethnic diversities have kept us apart and continue to do so. Once we deal with this fact, barriers will be removed. Blacks, coloureds and whites will be able to share their skills, their creativity, their visions and their energy. Only then will we be able to work together, grow together and build the economy of this country, which will then draw the foreign investment which Sparks regards as “absolutely crucial” for the country.

Dealing with these ethnic diversities will not be an easy task. With a history of more than 300 years of ethnic divisions, how do we deal with the country’s ethnic diversity? Do we have examples from the past where different ethnic groups succeeded in changing their attitudes towards ethnicity, and were able to put aside their history of bloodshed and conflict in order to work in harmony for the wellbeing of all?

In his inauguration speech for his second term as president of the Republic of South Africa, the former South African President Thabo Mbeki (2004:19) in an almost poetic fashion, summarised the South African situation as far as poverty is concerned:

It was a place in which to be born black was to inherit a lifelong curse. It was a place into which to be born white was to carry a permanent burden of fear and hidden rage.

It was a place that decreed that some were born into poverty and would die poor, their lives, in the land of gold and diamonds, cut short by viral ravages of deprivation.

It was a place where others always knew that the accident of their birth entitled them to wealth. Accordingly, these put aside all humane values, worshipping a world whose only worth was the accumulation of wealth ...

... It was a place in which squalor, the stench of poverty, the open sewers, the decaying rot, abandoned refuge, assumed an aspect that seemed necessary to enhance the beauty of another world of tidy streets, and wooden lanes, and flow- ers' blossoms offsetting the green and singing grass, and birds and houses fit for kings and queens, and lyrical music, and love.

Conclusion

Through the study of the Bible, a conscious effort can be made to contribute to the eradication of poverty in South Africa and in the world. The message of the historical Jesus also provides us with a radical answer as far as overcoming ethnic diversities are concerned. In an important book, Hellerman (2013:326) remarks:

For not only did he destabilize and call into question genetically (and, by extension, ethnically) based social solidarity. Jesus intentionally adopted his culture's most powerful symbol of family solidarity – brotherhood – as the central metaphor for his own anti-selective approach to human relations: 'you are all brothers' (Mt 23:8). As mentioned ... earlier ... a direct correlation obtains between altruistic behavior among relatives, on the one hand, and the number of genes shared by these persons, on the other. Siblings share more of the genetic code than any persons of the same generation (50%), and they typically exhibit a closer relational bond, where altruistic behavior is concerned, than any other family relation. For Jesus to hijack the commanding symbol of brotherhood and use it to define relations among a surrogate family of followers who shared no biological connection was to 'protest against the principle of natural selection' in a most profound and fundamental way.

In particular, the large gap between rich and poor in South Africa must be closed. The fact that the division exists along racial lines (the rich mainly being white and the poor mainly being black) adds a dimension to the South African situation that is extremely dangerous. If the poverty gap in South Africa is not closed, conflict looms and South Africa will not be in a position to play its proper role in the eradication of poverty on the African continent.

The study of biblical literature looks at the eradication of poverty, regardless of whether or not ethnic issues are involved. But the eradication of poverty in practice should be considered directly in the light of the biblical message. For it is not the Bible as such that will eradicate poverty, nor our "objective" study of it, but the way we *interpret* it and are *inspired* by it to become practically involved in the struggle against poverty.

It may be asked whether there is not too much reflection on poverty and too little action. This is a legitimate question. Reflection on poverty should indeed be done in such a way that it leads to action.⁵ On the other hand, to become involved in action without proper reflection can also be counterproductive. Reflection on poverty should be a constant part of the theological discourse to prevent theology from becoming a mental exercise that is distant from the realities and suffering of this world.

Under the title of this article is a quote from Dietrich Bonhoeffer. Like Du Toit (1996:30), I would like to conclude with Keay's poem (1994:107), which is reminiscent of Matthew 25:35-45:

Indifference

I was hungry and you blamed it on the communists;
I was hungry and you circled the moon;
I was hungry and you told me to wait;

⁵ It was not my purpose to discuss practical measures for poverty eradication in this contribution, although the importance of it is fully recognised. The reader are therefore referred to Sachs (2005) and the relevant contributions in Scheffler & Van Heerden 2012.

I was hungry and you set up a commission;
I was hungry and you said, 'so where were my ancestors';
I was hungry and you said, 'we don't hire over-35s'
I was hungry and you said, 'God helps those ...'
I was hungry and you told me I shouldn't be;
I was hungry and you told me that the machines do the work now;
I was hungry and you had defence bills to pay;
I was hungry and you said, 'the poor are always with us'.

Lord, when did we see you hungry?

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