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## EDITORIAL

### CHRISTIAN FAITH AND COMMITMENT TO THE POOR IN *EVANGELII GAUDIUM*

MarySylvia NWACHUKWU, DDL

"The spirit of the Lord is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me to bring good news to the poor" (Is 61:1; Luke 4:18). This text has been read by Christians as the mission statement of Jesus. To preach the good news to the poor is at the heart of the Christian gospel. The Gospel of Luke (4:18) says clearly that an essential element of the Christian message of salvation is the ministry for the poor. One of the most prevailing challenges the world faces today is how to fight poverty and address the increasingly deplorable state of the poor, the exploited and the marginalized. In spite of what the academia say at lecture halls and conference tables; in spite of what preachers communicate to their audience, and despite concrete responses to the challenge by religious and political institutions, poverty seems to be stubbornly resistant. The poor are still in our midst in great numbers.

Over the years, the Church appreciates the fact that for it to remain faithful to the gospel and relevant to the society, it must identify with the poor. Through the centuries, different Popes have drawn the attention of the Church to the fact that the Gospel cannot be preached effectively without a commitment to the poor. The reader of this edition of AJCT



will certainly benefit from the comprehensive presentation which Chibugo LEBECHI has made of the position of the Church on the 'Option for the Poor', from the Patristic era to the present. In our times, 'Option for the Poor' has again become a watchword for the pontificate of Pope Francis, who in his recent Apostolic Exhortation, *Evangelii Gaudium* (The Joy of the Gospel), has strongly re-emphasized the Church's teaching on ministry to the poor. This emphasis resounds in one of the most famous sayings attributed to him, "I want a Church which is poor and for the poor" (cf. *EG*, no.198).

With this fifth edition of AJCT, titled *The Poor in Our Midst*, the Spiritan International School of Theology joins in the current wave of conversation initiated by Pope Francis, and contributes to promoting the call for commitment to the global responsibility of the Church and State to the poor. The following paragraphs present important highlights from this important document, which above all, draws the attention of Christians to a more practical manner in which they could express their faith in God.

The joy of the Gospel fills the hearts and lives of all who encounter Jesus." With this statement, Pope Francis introduces the Apostolic Exhortation, *Evangelii Gaudium* (*EG*), issued in 2013, by describing how the people of God of different generations have expressed this joy of salvation that derives from encounter with God's love (nos. 1-13). It is clearly stated that *Evangelii Gaudium* is not a social document (*EG*, no.184). Its expressed goal is the description of practical implications for the Church's mission today and the definition of a definite style of evangelization which the Church should adopt in all of its activities (*EG*, nos. 17-18). In expressing the basis for practical implications of the Gospel, Pope Francis

repeats the words of his predecessor, Pope Benedict XVI, where he says, "Being a Christian is not the result of an ethical choice or a lofty idea, but the encounter with an event, a person, which gives life a new horizon and a decisive direction" (*EG*, no.7). The source and inspiration of any commitment to the needs of others derive from an encounter with God's love which changes the Christian's perception of self and of the world, and which leads to a delightful and comforting joy of evangelizing. Every return to this divine source brings about new expressions and new avenues of mission (*EG*, no. 11). These ideas constitute the basis for the emphasis which Pope Francis gives to a renewed understanding of evangelization and mission: "...life is attained and matures in the measure that it is offered up and in order to give life to others. This is certainly what mission means" (*EG*, no.10). These statements imply that authentic and effective evangelization demands a joy that is shared and a gift of self in generosity.

The Church's commitment to the course of the poor is the major subject of the fourth chapter of *Evangelii Gaudium* where Pope Francis discusses the social dimension of evangelization. The preceding three chapters constitute a preparation for this fourth chapter in the sense that they explain the scriptural, doctrinal and theoretical aspects of evangelization. The emphasis on the joy of proclamation and on the renewed understanding of mission trails the exposition of these first three chapters. The first chapter describes the Church as an evangelizing community whose ministry derives from fidelity to the missionary mandate of Jesus (Matt 28:19-20) and whose life and structures have mission as their goal. In this chapter, the Pope insists that the missionary perspective should of necessity affect the communication of



the Gospel in ways which bring out more clearly its abiding relevance as renewed encounter with God's mercy.

The second chapter describes in great detail the many challenges – economic, cultural and religious – which evangelization encounters in today's world. These challenges include among others (a) a financial economy which thrives on relativism and which promotes exclusion, inequality, and idolatry of money; (b) ideologies which promote widespread indifference and intolerance and which has led to denial of religious freedom and persecution of Christians; (c) proliferation of new religious movements, some of which tend towards fundamentalism; (d) growth of new secularized cultures which promote individualism and produce a growing deterioration of ethics; and more importantly, (e) a spiritual worldliness which pretends to be a commitment to the Gospel, but whose goal is human glory and personal well-being. The description of these challenges prepare the ground for the definition in Chapter Three of the task of the Church in our present age. This task is defined in relation to the entire people of God (*EG*, nos. 111-134), to the preaching of the priest within the liturgy (*EG*, nos. 135-159), and to the duty of the Church to lead the faithful to growth in faith through catechesis and education (*EG*, nos. 160-175).

In Chapter Four, the document unfolds a detailed treatment of two great issues which the Pope considers as fundamental to the contemporary world. These are: inclusion of the poor in society and peace and social dialogue (*EG*, no. 185). The Pope affirms that the poor constitutes society's most neglected and excluded members. He blames socio-economic policies and structures that encourage absolute autonomy of markets and structures of inequality which are the causes of poverty in the many

(*EG*, no. 202). This particular topic caught the interest of Dozie UDEZE, who in this edition of *AJCT*, discusses poverty as part of the worldwide growing, horrible and threatening reality of human suffering that is caused by global socio-economic factors. Since one of the major causes of poverty is inequality and exclusion, the Pope calls individual Christians and ecclesial communities to embrace an understanding of solidarity which presumes the creation of a new mindset that thinks in terms of inclusion of all in community and which shuns selfishness (*EG*, nos. 188-190). The acceptance of the poor as integral members of the community is the beginning of a true concern for their person and for their good (*EG*, no.199). All strata of society – politics, economic policies, religion – should broaden their perspective in order to be more sensitive and attentive to the cry of the poor, and in order to facilitate the full integration of the poor into the society (*EG*, nos. 186-187; 205-207). This is necessary for the achievement of a healthy world economy and of a society bereft of violence.

Moreover, *Evangelii Gaudium* avows that issues concerning the poor question the very goal of religion and the relevance of the Gospel for the society. The Pope's detailed explanation of the social dimension of evangelization is permeated with the very idea that introduced the document, namely, the inseparable bond between the acceptance of the message of salvation and genuine fraternal love. No one would experience the abundant mercy of God without sharing the joy of salvation, just as no one would genuinely accept the Gospel without reaching out to others in love. The Gospel has a clear social content. The Pope, therefore, affirms that any person who has had a personal contact with God's love and who thereby has experienced a profound, liberating joy of



salvation becomes more sensitive to the needs of others (*EG*, no. 9). The story in John 12 of Mary's anointing of Jesus' feet with costly oil is a good biblical example of how the experience of salvation leads one to concrete action for others. Ayodele AYENI makes an exegetical study of this Johannine text, arriving at the conclusion that Mary's action is charity to Jesus understood as worship of God.

For more effective response to the summons of the Gospel, Pope Francis invites us to recognize new forms of poverty and new categories of the poor in our midst (*EG*, nos. 210-215). They include a wide range of the oppressed, traumatized and excluded from different backgrounds: (a) the homeless, the addicted, refugees, indigenous peoples, isolated and abandoned elderly people, (b) various victims of human trafficking, (c) women who suffer violence, exclusion and who cannot defend their rights, (d) defenseless and innocent unborn babies who are murdered in the womb, (e) entire creation which suffers exploitation for economic interests. In his edition of AJCT, the paper that responds to the invitation to discover today's poor is written by MarySylvia NWACHUKWU and titled, "Who are the Poor in Our Midst?" From a study of the Old Testament terminologies for the poor, the author joins Pope Francis in saying that the main causes of poverty are exclusion and exploitation. Her research yields a definition of the poor which includes social, economic, political and religious categories.

A good case is made in *Evangelii Gaudium* of the special place of the poor in God's heart and in the entire history of redemption. This edition of AJCT includes essays on this idea which receives so much emphasis in biblical revelation. The essays are written by Philip IGBO, with title "Yahweh, the

Advocate of the Poor" and by Bona Ikenna UGWU, titled "Holy Spirit, the Father of the Poor." While Philip IGBO draws from the Old Testament evidences of God's providential care for the poor, Bona UGWU highlights the qualities of the person and mission of the Holy Spirit that merit him the name, "Father of the poor". According to Pope Francis, "... the option for the poor is primarily a theological category rather than a cultural, sociological, political or philosophical one" (*EG*, no.198). It is implicit in the Christian faith in "a God who became poor for us, so as to enrich us with his poverty". This option does not consist solely in practical commitment to the wellbeing of the poor. Authentic option for the poor differs from other ideologies because it is born out of love which sees beauty in the poor and esteems them as of great value. It includes, above all, a recognition of their participation in the sufferings of Christ and the saving power at work in their lives. "We need to let ourselves be evangelized by them" (*EG*, no.198). This idea is related closely to the duty which the Pope says the Church owes the poor in our midst. He says with regret that "the worst discrimination which the poor suffer is the lack of spiritual care" (*EG*, no.200). This particular idea receives emphasis in the essay by G. Emem UMOREN, who insists that God's promises and oracles of salvation, found especially in Deutero-Isaiah, must be read today to the ears of the poor. The poor have a special openness to the faith. The Church must not fail to offer them God's friendship, his blessings, his word and a journey of growth and maturity in faith.

This Editorial concludes with further reference to one of the very significant statements of *Evangelii Gaudium*: "...evangelization would not be complete if it did not take account of the unceasing interplay of the Gospel and of man's



concrete life, both personal and social" (*EG*, no. 181). Every Christian and every institution is summoned to respond to this renewed call to commitment to the poor. What is our Christian response to this call? How might God be calling us to respond to the plight of the poor? Concrete expressions of Christian response to the poor are proposed by Jake OTONKO who says that every person is a steward unto every other person as far as the resources of the universe are concerned. No one should remain indifferent to the plight of those who are agonized by oppression, poverty and disease. The Bible tells us that God is invisible but he reveals himself in various ways. Today as ever, God is inviting us again to see his face in the poor, because "just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me" (Matt 25:40). The poor are in our midst; reach out to them because they are our easiest access to the heart of God.



**WHO ARE THE POOR IN OUR MIDST?**

MarySylvia NWACHUKWU, DDL

**1. Introduction**

This essay is a study of the biblical terminologies that refer to the poor, and through them, it intends to establish the character of the people that the Bible, and by extension the modern society describe as poor. It is commonplace to think that the poor refers to those who are deprived of economic resources and material goods. The biblical terminologies reveal a broader reality that covers a wider designation. Therefore, the essay begins by exposing the use of the terminologies of poverty and the poor especially in the Old Testament (OT). Moreover, a study of the ways in which these designations are used through the scriptures offers an awareness of the social situation in which the poor lived and which the prophets addressed. This would enable the reader to understand the biblical terminology within a living context in which they are defined.

In terms of methodology, the approach from a study of use of terminology to the living context in which relationship is established enables the division of this work into four sections. After this introduction, which is the first section, the second section develops an understanding of the identity of the poor from a study of the use of related terminologies in the Bible. Helped by the terminology study, Section Three defines the different categories of poor people. The last section



concludes the research by explaining how individuals contribute to the plight of the poor and what people's responsibilities are to the poor in our midst.

## 2. The Use of Biblical Terminology for the Poor

The OT makes abundant references to the poor, which is found in narratives, legal materials, prophetic and wisdom sayings. In fact, the poor represents one of the important concerns of the biblical message. The various biblical terminologies for the poor and for poverty, and how they are used in different contexts are guide to understanding the types of people that the words describe. The terminologies presented in the following paragraphs are those which have strong socioeconomic and political flavour to them.

The Hebrew term *'ānî* is the most commonly used to denote the poor.<sup>1</sup> It is the choice term for the Prophets and Psalms of Lament. This basic term, *'ānî*, is often found juxtaposed with other sets of related vocabularies or placed in a comparative relationship with them. In most cases, this pairing of related vocabularies is used to describe different categories of poor people, the identities of which are determined by context. Below is a study of the literary structure of the terminologies which the OT often pairs with the basic term *'ānî*.

<sup>1</sup> It is found about 80 times in the Bible, occurring only in legal and priestly texts in the Torah, most prominent in Prophetic texts (25x), the preferred term for the poor in the Psalms (31x) and Wisdom texts (16x). Cf. J. D. PLEINS, "Poor, Poverty" in D. N. FREEDMAN (ed.), *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, vol. 5, New York: Doubleday, 1992, pp402-414.

### 2.1 *'ānî* and *'ebyôn*

In many places in the OT, the poor is described through a striking literary juxtaposition of two terms *'ānî* and *'ebyôn*, translated basically as 'poor and needy'.<sup>2</sup> The juxtaposition is given either as a stereotyped formula or the two terms are placed in a synonymous parallelism. Used as a stereotyped formula, the expression describes the same people, as examples in the following paragraphs show:

Deuteronomy 24:14-15: You shall not withhold the wages of poor and needy (*'ānî* and *'ebyôn*) laborers, whether other Israelites or aliens who reside in your land in one of your towns. You shall pay them their wages daily before sunset, because they are poor (*'ānî*) and their livelihood depends on them; otherwise they might cry to the LORD against you, and you would incur guilt.

Here, the reason for which no one should withhold the wages of the 'poor and needy' is given in the next sentence in v15, that is, because they are 'poor'. This implies that the formula 'poor and needy' and the single word 'poor' describe the same labourers. These labourers belong to the category of people whose poor economic condition obliges their creditors to treat them with compassion or as strictly as the law prescribes (cf. Deut 24:12-13). In another text,

<sup>2</sup> The translation used for this work is the New Revised Standard Version.



Psalm 37:14 The wicked draw the sword and bend their bows to bring down the poor and needy (*'ānî* and *'ebyôn*), to kill those who walk uprightly.

Collectively, the 'poor and needy' in this text are described with another single designation: 'those who walk uprightly'. Obviously, this category of poor people suffer persecution because of their religious background. In yet another example from Ps 40:17 as given below, the same formula describes one single individual whose need is described differently from the previous.

Psalm 40:17 As for me, I am poor and needy (*'ānî* and *'ebyôn*), but the Lord takes thought for me. You are my help and my deliverer; do not delay, O my God.

The OT has abundant references to this formula.<sup>3</sup> The use of both terms in a synonymous parallelism makes this conclusion even clearer. The literary feature of synonymous parallelism usually serves the purpose of providing other ways of making the meaning of a parallel word more understandable to the reader. In poetic texts, parallel words are found mostly in two-line verses where words and phrases in each line correspond. In the case cited above, the word *'ebyôn*, translated as 'needy' provides a basic definition of the word *'ānî*, translated as 'poor'. In other words, the poor person, according to this literary arrangement, is someone who is in need, or someone lacking some basic need. Some most obvious examples are

<sup>3</sup> The thirty-one occurrences are found in Deut 15:11; 1 Sam 2:8; Job 24:4,14; Ps 9:18; 12:5; 40:17; 70:5; 72:4,12; 74:21; 86:1; 109:16,22; 113:7; 140:12; Prov 30:14; 31:9,20; Isa 10:2; 25:4; 41:17; Jer 22:16; Ezek 16:49; 18:12; 22:29; Amos 4:1; 8:4,6; Sir 29:9; 34:25.

found in the following passages, where the corresponding words are indicated with letters in superscript:

Ps 72:12: For he delivers the needy<sup>a</sup> (*'ebyôn*) when they call, the poor<sup>a</sup> (*'ānî*) and those who have no helper.

In Ps 72:12, the bi-colon or two-line verse is held together by the verbal phrase 'he delivers' which is presupposed in the second line: "[he delivers] the poor and those who have no helper". True to the aim of synonymous parallelism, the psalmist used the words of the second poetic line to clarify the ideas in the first line. The word 'poor' corresponds to the word 'needy', while the expression 'those who have no helper' corresponds to the expression 'when they call' because it explains why the needy call on the Lord, and that is because they have no other helper (as in Ps 40:17 given above). It is interesting to see that the Psalmist used this literary device to communicate only one idea through a positioning of similar terminologies in two poetic lines.<sup>4</sup>

In some texts, the word *'ānî* (poor) is contrasted to the 'strong', from where the meaning 'weak' is derived, giving another variation of the stereotyped formula 'weak and needy', and indicating a description of the poor in another social context. For instance in Psalm 35:10:

All my bones shall say, "O LORD, who is like you?"

<sup>4</sup> PLEINS says it is a stylized rhetorical device for speaking of poverty, probably a product of either prophetic or cultic influence. See "poor, Poverty", p408.



You deliver the weak (*'ānî*) from those too strong (*hāzāq*) for them, the weak and needy (*'ānî* and *'ebyôn*) from those who despoil them.

Here, *'ānî* represents a category of poor people who are victims of powerful overlords who despoil them. The third line of this poetic verse is placed in parallel relationship with the second line in order to highlight the need of this category of the poor. God is extolled by the Psalmist as the one who delivers this persecuted poor from those too powerful for them.

It could be said in conclusion that in its many occurrences in the OT, the formula *'ānî* and *'ebyôn* represents a designation for a category of poor people who lack some basic need. This need could be material or economical, or need for divine protection or deliverance from persecution from powerful overlords.

## 2.2 *'ānî* and *dāl*

In some other OT texts, the word *'ānî* is linked with another terminology *dāl* (and *'am*) in parallel structure, where they designate other categories of the poor. The few times in which *dāl* is associated with *'ānî* is found in contexts which speak of the oppression of the orphan, widow and alien. They are the vulnerable members of the society who are susceptible to oppression and injustice (cf. Prov 23:10). The term *'ānî* also describes the oppressed righteous people, who are in need of deliverance from the Lord. The plural form *'ānāwîm*<sup>5</sup> is used

<sup>5</sup> The singular form is believed to be *'ānāw*, but it also matches with *'ānî* in its range of meaning and usage. Cf. PLEINS, "Poor, Poverty", p411.

more often in prophetic literature, in Psalms of Lament and wisdom texts to denote the poor as afflicted.

Isaiah 10:1-2 Ah, you who make iniquitous decrees, who write oppressive statutes, to turn aside the needy (*dāl*) from justice and to rob the poor (*'ānî*) of my people of their right, that widows may be your spoil, and that you may make the orphans your prey!

A text in Jeremiah exposes better the living context that creates this category of the poor:

Jeremiah 5:26-28 For scoundrels are found among my people; they take over the goods of others. Like fowlers they set a trap; they catch human beings. Like a cage full of birds, their houses are full of treachery; therefore they have become great and rich, they have grown fat and sleek. They know no limits in deeds of wickedness; they do not judge with justice the cause of the orphan, to make it prosper, and they do not defend the rights of the needy.

In some texts, this category of the poor are described as 'the poor of my people' to show that they are under special divine protection.

Isaiah 10:1-2 Ah, you who make iniquitous decrees, who write oppressive statutes, to turn aside<sup>a</sup> the needy<sup>b</sup> (*dāl*) from justice<sup>c</sup> and to rob<sup>a</sup> the poor of my people<sup>b</sup> (*'ānî* + *'am*) of their right<sup>c</sup>,



that widows may be your spoil, and that you may make the orphans your prey!<sup>6</sup>

### 2.3 *dāl* and *'ebyôn*

The *dāl* is classified among the needy, through association with the word *'ebyôn*, but here, their need is not so much material goods than divine protection from the hand of their oppressors:

Ps 72:13 He has pity on the weak (*dāl*) and the needy (*'ebyôn*), and saves the lives of the needy (*'ebyôn*).. (also Is 14:30)

Ps 82:3-4 Give justice to the weak (*dāl*) and the orphan; maintain the right of the lowly and the destitute. Rescue the weak (*dāl*) and the needy (*'ebyôn*); deliver them from the hand of the wicked.

Isaiah 25:4 For you have been a refuge to the poor (*dāl*), a refuge to the needy (*'ebyôn*) in their distress, a shelter from the rainstorm and a shade from the heat. When the blast of the ruthless was like a winter rainstorm...

Amos 8:6 ...buying the poor (*dāl*) for silver and the needy (*'ebyôn*) for a pair of sandals, and selling the sweepings of the wheat.

### 2.4 *Other terms*

Besides *'ānî*, *'ebyôn*, and *dāl*, other minor terminologies are found: *maḥsôr*,<sup>7</sup> *miskēn*<sup>8</sup> and *rāš*.<sup>9</sup> Different from other terms

<sup>6</sup> The expression "poor of [his] people" is also found in Is 14:32.

studied above, these terms do not see the problem of poverty as a result of social structures and power arrangements. It is necessary, at this point, to investigate on the type of people that the terminologies studied above describe. The study has revealed that the same terminology may designate different categories of the poor in different contexts. For instance, juxtaposed to other related terms, *'ānî* designates either the economically needy person or an oppressed person who is weak in relation to the strong who possess both legal and political powers. In different ways, the two terms *'ānî* and *dāl* are used to denote the widow, orphan and alien. The study reveals, moreover, that the major vocabulary for the poor is *'ānî*, which is associated with *'ebyôn* or *dāl* or *'am*, and which give it different shades of meaning depending on the context in question. The following paragraphs present a categorization of the poor on the basis of these associations.

<sup>7</sup> Appears 8x in Wisdom texts (Prov 6:11; 11:24; 14:23; 21:5; 22:16; 24:34 [2x]; 21:17), once in the Pentateuch (Deut 15:8), once in the Psalter (34:10) and once in Historical books (Judg 18:7). It connotes poverty that results from laziness or from lack of moderation. Cf. PLEINS, "Poor, Poverty", p407.

<sup>8</sup> It is a late term for the poor which appears only in Eccl 4:13.

<sup>9</sup> The 22x occurrence of the term is found mainly in Wisdom texts, and refers to someone who is politically and economically weak, or to poverty that results from laziness or disordered living, and best translated as beggar. Cf. PLEINS, "Poor, Poverty", p409.



### 3. The Different Categories of Poor People

#### 3.1 The Poor as the Economically poor

This designation of the poor is derived from a juxtaposition of the term *'ānî* with the term *'ebyôn*, to denote those who are in 'need' of economic resources and material goods. The etymology of *'ebyôn* is uncertain. It is thought, possibly, to derive from the root *'bh*, which means 'to lack' or 'to be in need'. Therefore, an *'ebyôn* "is a man who wants something which he does not have, and consequently, a man who is needy and poor".<sup>10</sup> In its 61 occurrences in the Old Testament,<sup>11</sup> the word *'ebyôn* appears often in the stereotyped formula 'poor and needy' (*'ānî ve'ebyôn*) or is found in synonymous parallelism with *'ānî*. The word denotes different categories of economically poor people.

- a. The *'ebyôn* is a person without land or landed property or produce who, unlike landowners, eats what grows wild on the land that is left fallow during the Sabbatical year. "For six years you shall sow your land and gather in its yield; but the seventh year you shall let it rest and lie fallow, so that the poor (*'ebyôn*) of your people may eat; and what they leave the wild animals may eat. You shall do the same with your vineyard, and with your olive orchard" (Exod 23:10-11).

<sup>10</sup> Cf. G. J. BOTTERWECK, "'ebyôn" in G. J. BOTTERWECK – H. RINGGREEN, *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*", vol. 1, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974, p28.

<sup>11</sup> Cf. BOTTERWECK, "'ebyôn", p29.

- b. The *'ebyôn* is also the debt slave, who goes to borrow money because of economic difficulties and who must be set free of all debts during the Jubilee year (Deut 15:2-11).
- c. In Deut 24:12-14, this terminology is used as a designation for hired labourers, either Israelite or alien, whose daily survival depends on their daily wage. These are the economically poor: those without land or property, debt slaves, hired labourers whose survival depends on their daily wage. What they need is a daily income which has been judged as sufficient for subsistence in a given society. Their dependence on this wage classifies them as poor and needy. A New Testament text reveals that some employers could hold back the wages of hired labourers by fraud. "The wages of the labourers who mowed your fields, which you kept back by fraud, cry out, and the cries of the harvesters have reached the ears of the Lord of hosts" (Jam 5:4).
- d. In text of Esther 9:22, *'ebyôn* refers to the beggarly poor to whom alms are given.

Therefore, the protection of the *'ebyôn* against injustice is the object of the legal system and most prophetic criticism. For these economically poor people – those without means of sustenance, the debt slave and hired labourers and other needy persons – the Law encourages payment of their daily wage (Deut 24:12-14), motivates fellow Israelites to help them by lending them money without interest (Deut 15:7-11), guarantees their release from debt after a period of time (Deut 15:2; Lev 25:39-41), and forbids perverting the justice due to them (Exod 23:6).



### 3.2 The Poor as Oppressed People

The oppressed people represent another category of the poor. On the basis of vocabulary, they are primarily indicated through the term *dāl*, which is often juxtaposed with other terms 'ānī, on the one hand, and 'ebyôn on the other. The word *dāl* (from the root *dalal*, meaning 'to be low' or 'to languish') refers to those whose lowly condition derives from their being subjected to exploitation or oppression by the wicked.<sup>12</sup> They are those made dependent through oppression and exploitation.

In many texts, the word *dāl* designates the orphan and widow, and sometimes of the resident alien, who are victims of oppression and exploitation by the rich. It designates the peasant farmer who lack grazing land (Is 14:30), and who pay excessive grain taxes to large landowners (Amos 5:11). These category of oppressed people are contrasted with the rich (Prov 10:15; 19:4), who possessed certain legal and political powers and who robbed them of their rights and denied them justice (Is 10:2; 11:4). A classic example of the situation of the *dāl* is found in the story of Naboth the Jezreelite in 1 Kings 21. This dramatic instance gives the key to understanding the living context of these people in Israelite society. In Lev 14:21, a *dāl* is someone of modest means "who cannot afford so much," and whom the rich attempt to extort their little possession. The same reality is depicted in the following texts:

<sup>12</sup> Cf. PLEINS, "Poor, Poverty", p405. There is more frequent use of the term *dāl* in Wisdom texts, especially in Proverbs and Job, in comparison with its scarcity in the Psalms and Narrative texts. Cf. PLEINS, "Poor, Poverty", p406.

Job 20:19 For they have crushed and abandoned the poor [*dāl*], they have seized a house that they did not build.

Proverbs 22:16 Oppressing the poor (*dāl*) in order to enrich oneself, and giving to the rich, will lead only to loss.

The texts reveal that the *dāl* are so specially placed under God's protection that any exploitation or violence against them and perversion of justice against their interest invite the great wrath of God (cf. Ezek 22:7; Zech 7:10; Mal 3:5). In fact, the protection of the orphan, widow and stranger add to the many attributes of God:

Deuteronomy 10:17-18 For the LORD your God is God of gods and Lord of lords, the great God, mighty and awesome, who is not partial and takes no bribe, who executes justice for the orphan and the widow, and who loves the strangers, providing them food and clothing.<sup>13</sup>

God's provision for the *dāl* is expressed in the legal system which protected them from the predatory instincts of the powerful rich and of corrupt judges (Exod 23:3; Lev 19:15). They are beneficiaries of tithes and sacred portions in the land of Israel (cf. Deut 26:12-13). During the harvest, portions of sheaves, olives and grapes must be left in the fields for them (Deut 24:17-24). The people of God must provide for their needs (Deut 14:29), and a curse is laid on anyone who deprives them of this God-given means of sustenance (Deut 27:19). The book of Proverbs exhorts on the need to show

<sup>13</sup> Cf. also Ps 10:14; 68:5.



them kindness and warns on the dangers inherent in attempting to oppress or extort them (Prov 14:31; 21:13; 22:16; 28:3,8,15).

Specific details regarding the living condition of the persecuted poor is further elucidated through a study of verbs that describe their oppression. Of these verbs, the most frequent are *dākā*' (to crush) and *gāzal* (to rob or to seize). These verbs permit a further division of the oppressed poor into different categories that are discussed below.

### 3.2.1 The Poor as Politically and Legally powerless people

In some texts, the verb *dākā*', translated as 'to crush', describes wicked actions committed against the poor. It had been shown from the vocabulary study above (cf. paragraph 3.2) that the designation '*ammî*' is usually associated with '*ānî*' to describe vulnerable members of the society, usually the widow, the orphan and the stranger. The goal of the wicked action implied by the verb *dākā*' (to crush) is more clearly described in the texts in which it occurs. In Is 3:14-15

The LORD enters into judgment with the elders and princes of his people: It is you who have devoured the vineyard;  
the spoil of the poor ('*ānî*') is in your houses.  
What do you mean by crushing my people ('*ammî*'),  
by grinding the face of the poor ('*ānî*')?...

In this text, the plunder of the poor (*g<sup>e</sup>zelaṭ he 'ānî*) is the fault of the elders and princes in Jerusalem (Is 3:14), the very leaders who should defend them against oppressors (cf. Ps 72:4). Their action is more concretely described in v.15 with a stronger verb 'to crush' (*dākā*') and explained by another

parallel verb 'to grind'.<sup>14</sup> The occurrence of the same verb in Prov 22:22 ("Do not rob the poor because they are poor, or crush [*dākā*] the afflicted at the gate"), shows that this verb describes an intense exploitation of the poor through legal manoeuvres. In two other texts, the verb *dākā*' designates the action of the wicked against the orphan (Job 22:9) and the widow, stranger and orphan (Ps 94:5-6). Ps 94:5 calls them 'God's people' because they are helpless. Here, as in Is 3:14-15, the crushing of the widow, stranger and orphan has the clear goal of murdering them in order to inherit their property.<sup>15</sup>

Psalm 94:3-6 O LORD, how long shall the wicked, how long shall the wicked exult? They pour out their arrogant words; all the evildoers boast. They crush your people, O LORD, and afflict your heritage. They kill the widow and the stranger, they murder the orphan.

<sup>14</sup> This is one of the strongest descriptions of the oppression of the poor in the OT. A similar indictment of the leaders for wicked acts against the poor is also found in Mic 3:2. Cf. John D. W. WATTS, *Isaiah 1-33*, Word Biblical Commentary, vol. 24, Waco, Texas: Word Books Publisher, 1985, p42.

<sup>15</sup> The verb is found particularly in the Psalms and Wisdom books. Other uses of the verb describe how God would treat the wicked in the same manner (Job 34:25), all his enemies (Ps 89:11). In his suffering, Job desired that the Lord could crush him and put an end to his torment (Job 6:9), and he lamented that his friends crushed him with words (Job 19:2). The only occurrence of the verb outside the Wisdom Literature is 2 Kings 23:15 where it designates Josiah's drastic action against symbols of syncretistic religion in the Israel of the time.



Another verb employed in relation to the afflicted poor is *gāzal* (to rob; to seize; to take by force). This verb is sometimes found in association with another verb *'āšaq*, with the meaning 'to oppress' or 'to extort'. Both verbs are found in Lev 6:2,4; 19:13 and Ps 62:10:

Leviticus 19:13 You shall not defraud (*'āšaq*) your neighbor; you shall not steal (*gāzal*); and you shall not keep for yourself the wages of a laborer until morning.

Psalm 62:10 Put no confidence in extortion (*'āšaq*), and set no vain hopes on robbery (*gāzal*); if riches increase, do not set your heart on them.

These texts describe how some people enrich themselves through forceful seizure or defrauding of what rightfully belongs to others.

### 3.2.2 *The Poor as the Oppressed Righteous*

In Ps 37:14, the formula 'poor and needy' is placed in a synonymous parallelism with another designation: "those who walk uprightly". According to this psalm, these righteous people are objects of attack by the wicked. In two texts in the Psalms (Ps 34:18; 143:3), the verb *dākā*' (to crush) is a wicked action against a group called "the righteous". These texts are cited here within their contexts.

Psalm 34:15-19 The eyes of the LORD are on the righteous, and his ears are open to their cry. The face of the LORD is against evildoers, to cut off the remembrance of them from the earth. When the righteous cry for help, the LORD hears, and rescues

them from all their troubles. The LORD is near to the broken-hearted, and saves the crushed in spirit [*dakk'ê rû<sup>h</sup>*]. Many are the afflictions of the righteous, but the LORD rescues them from them all.

Here in Ps 34:18, this group of righteous people are described as the "crushed in spirit".<sup>16</sup> A similar designation is found in Ps 143:3:

Psalm 143:3-7 For the enemy has pursued me, crushing my life to the ground, making me sit in darkness like those long dead. Therefore my spirit faints within me; my heart within me is appalled. I remember the days of old, I think about all your deeds, I meditate on the works of your hands. I stretch out my hands to you; my soul thirsts for you like a parched land. Answer me quickly, O LORD; my spirit fails.

Usually, in the OT, 'the upright' or the 'righteous' (*tsāddiq*) are contrasted with 'the wicked' (*rāšāh*).<sup>17</sup> The texts do not say concretely why the wicked persecute the righteous. Nevertheless, more could be known from how some OT texts speak of the righteous. They are those whose hands are clean (Ps 18:20,24), the upright of heart (Ps 32:11), those who give generously (Ps 37:21; 112:9; Prov 21:26); those who speak, seek and do justice (Ps 37:30; Prov 8:20); who speak the truth and hate falsehood (Prov 10:31-32;

<sup>16</sup> The context of Ps 34:18 does not imply a figurative use of the verb (to mean "the contrite of spirit"), as BROWN -DRIVER - BRIGGS say. Cf. *Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1951, p194.

<sup>17</sup> Cf. Ps 1:5-6; 7:9; 11:5-6; 18:20-21; 34:21; 37:17,21; Prov 3:33; 10-12.



13:5) and walk in integrity (Prov 20:7); who defend the rights of the poor and needy (Prov 29:7; 31:9); who trust and serve the Lord (Ps 64:10; Mal 3:18); give good advice (Prov 12:26); hate oppression and violence and do not accept bribe (Is33:15); and who respect the law of the Lord (Is 51:7; Ezek 18:5). The description of them in Isa 33:15 is cited fully here,

Those who walk righteously and speak uprightly, who despise the gain of oppression, who wave away a bribe instead of accepting it, who stop their ears from hearing of bloodshed and shut their eyes from looking on evil...

These righteous people are contrasted with the wicked, who are described as lovers of violence (Ps 11:5); they oppress and seek to murder the righteous (Ps 37:32), conspire against the righteous and condemn the innocent (Ps 94:21). According to Amos 2:6, "...they sell the righteous (*tsāddiq*) for silver, and the needy (*'ebyôn*) for a pair of sandals".<sup>18</sup> This comparison of the righteous and the poor needy (also in Amos 5:12) permits the conclusion that the poor referred to here are not necessarily economically disadvantaged. They are those who are persecuted for their generosity, their dedication to the law of God and their engagement in truth and justice. They are poor because of their great need for God's protection. Wisd 2:12-16 captures the reason for the persecution of the righteous:

<sup>18</sup> This is synonymous parallelism, where the words of the different lines correspond in meaning. The '*tsaddiq*' is synonymous to 'the poor' while "silver" is synonymous to "a pair of sandal". This parallelistic structure permits the understanding that a pair of sandals was costing a silver coin. There is an *elipsis* of the verb 'to sell' in the second line.

Let us lie in wait for the righteous man, because he is inconvenient to us and opposes our actions; he reproaches us for sins against the law, and accuses us of sins against our training. He professes to have knowledge of God, and calls himself a child of the Lord. He became to us a reproof of our thoughts; the very sight of him is a burden to us, because his manner of life is unlike that of others, and his ways are strange. We are considered by him as something base, and he avoids our ways as unclean; he calls the last end of the righteous happy, and boasts that God is his father.

The prophet Jeremiah (20:10-12) also interpreted his experience of persecution with words which describe the fate of the righteous:

For I hear many whispering: "Terror is all around! Denounce him! Let us denounce him!" All my close friends are watching for me to stumble. "Perhaps he can be enticed, and we can prevail against him, and take our revenge on him." But the LORD is with me like a dread warrior; therefore my persecutors will stumble, and they will not prevail. They will be greatly shamed, for they will not succeed. Their eternal dishonor will never be forgotten. O LORD of hosts, you test the righteous, you see the heart and the mind; let me see your retribution upon them, for to you I have committed my cause.

Possibly, this description of the persecuted righteous poor is reflected in Matt 5:10 which pronounces blessedness on those who are persecuted for righteousness sake.



### 3.2.3 *The Poor as the Sinful and Oppressed Israel*

There is poverty that results from bondage to sin. This poverty is defined from the reality of helplessness which the sinner experiences and from the fact that the sinner's restoration depends exclusively on God's mercy. The poverty of the people of God, in this sense, was the result of disobedience, which led to the oppression and plundering of the people by more powerful nations. In the entire book of Second Isaiah, one encounters an exclusive use of *'ānî*, where it represents the choice word of the prophet for denoting the suffering Israelite exiles in Babylon.<sup>19</sup> Although made angry by the sin of the people, God has pity for his chosen people (Jer 8:19-22; 9:1). Second Isaiah was the first prophet to judge Israel's poverty from a positive light. According to Isa 41:17, Judah came to join the ranks of the poor, oppressed people, who are beneficiaries of God's protection and compassion. This expression of God's compassionate concern for his exiled people is said in other parts of the OT in relation to the poor in general.

There is abundant references in the Bible to the fact that God is the protector of the poor. His care and protection for the poor is expressed in the legal system and through the prophets. The legal cases express immediate helps from the legal system and ensures that provision is made for their

<sup>19</sup> In the entire book of Second Isaiah, *'ānî* is associated only once with another term *'ebyôn* (Is 41:17). According to Second Isaiah, Israel had suffered political and economic oppression at the hand of the ruling power, Babylon. The prophet believed that since God is usually concerned with the plight of the oppressed poor, he would certainly not abandon Israel in exile. Cf. J. D. PLEINS, "Poor, Poverty", pp 408-409.

needs. We find this especially in the Sabbatical laws. Politically, God's assistance of the poor is extended to them through the king whose duty is to protect and provide for the poor in the society (Ps 72:12-14).

In the prophets, there are promises of what God would do in the future to relieve the suffering poor. Such promises are expressed in relational terms. For instance, the poor are called the people of God; God is the father of the poor; God is the protector and refuge of the poor, as we find in Isa 25:4 "For you have been a refuge to the poor, a refuge to the needy in their distress, a shelter from the rainstorm and a shade from the heat. When the blast of the ruthless was like a winter rainstorm" (see also Zeph 3:12). In other instances, God's assistance to the poor is the subject of many Psalms. While some Psalms invoke God's assistance and deliverance for the poor (for instance, Ps 72:4; 82:4; 86:1; 109:22), others affirm and acknowledge that He is the one who rescues the poor (for instance, Ps 35:10; 70:5; 72:12). The goodnews for the poor is that they would rejoice before God when they witness God's overthrow and humiliation of the wicked oppressors and the partial lawyers (Isa 29:19-21).

#### 4. **Conclusion: The Poor in Our Midst and my Responsibility towards Them**

The terminology study undertaken in this research yielded a cataloguing of different categories of poor people. Through stylistic placement of all related terminologies for the poor, the OT outlines different categories of poor people and presents them and their needs within the social fabric of life. We can say in conclusion that by offering a basic definition of



the poor as a needy person, the Bible enlarges the scope in which the poor are understood. This definition of the poor includes:

- They are those who need material assistance because they lack the means to provide for themselves the basic needs of life;
- they are labourers whose survival hangs on their daily income and whose wages are withheld or who are underpaid by their employees;
- they are the vulnerable and marginalized elements of the society, the widow, orphan and the resident alien, whose condition make them dependent;
- they are those who need deliverance from corrupt judges who show partiality in law suits;
- they are people of modest means who have no help and who thereby fall prey to the predatory instincts of wicked people;
- they are God fearing people who rely only on God's help and deliverance from those who persecute them because of their righteous ways.
- Finally, the poor includes those who are under the bondage of sin and who are in need of divine mercy.

The wide range of definition for the poor offers us a description of the common obligation of the human community towards the poor, of how the poor multiply within the socio-economic and political contexts and what our responsibilities are towards the poor. This responsibilities

should be understood in personal terms. An Igbo adage says that "property owned by everybody is nobody's responsibility". This is why a part of this conclusive title reads "...my responsibility towards the poor". The responsibility for minimizing the plight of the poor in our midst should be understood in personal terms. Shifting this responsibility to others, as we find in people's parlance, 'the government should' or 'the Church should' has not really solved any problem. The study has raised our awareness of the situations and circumstances in which the poor are born and bred. We should understand that the Bible, the living word of God, addresses the person who reads it.

The Word of God has addressed us through the many ways we contribute to the multiplication of the poor in our midst. It addresses employers who withhold the payment of salaries and who underpay their workers. It addresses all those who are greedy for what belongs to others. The pursuit of wealth should not involve the abuse and exploitation of others who have no power before the law. Most importantly, the word of God addresses those who witness the oppression of others. Do not watch in silence! "Rescue the oppressed from the oppressor and do not be hesitant in giving a verdict ... Do not refrain from speaking at the proper moment, and do not hide your wisdom." (Sir 4:9,23). We should know that those who enrich themselves through the modest means of others expose themselves and their families to grave dangers (Prov 14:31; 21:13; 22:16; 28:3,8,15).

Generosity to the poor is the good news for today. The Bible elevates charity or generosity towards the poor as a virtue (Prov 19:17; 22:9; 29:9). Jeremiah affirms that compassion to



the poor is an important ingredient of religion (also Is 1:17). And according to James 1:27, "Religion that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father, is this: to care for orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world." Through the prophets, God challenges us to replace an improper emphasis on religious formalism and liturgy with real social concern for the unfortunate and those in different kinds of need. Some of us would also want to substitute times of fasting with deeds of mercy towards the poor and needy, as God enjoins us in Isa 58:5-7,

Is such the fast that I choose, a day to humble oneself? Is it to bow down the head like a bulrush, and to lie in sackcloth and ashes? Will you call this a fast, a day acceptable to the LORD? Is not this the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke? Is it not to share your bread with the hungry, and bring the homeless poor into your house; when you see the naked, to cover them, and not to hide yourself from your own kin?

Charity to the poor is one of the conditions for discipleship as we read from Matt 19:21 "If you wish to be perfect, go, sell your possessions, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me." If the wearing of rags and 'going a begging' are the only criteria for determining who is poor, then we would be judged for neglecting the poor in our midst. Look around you. Gaze into the eyes of your neighbours and your colleagues; somebody could be in need of material help, of your company and friendship, of protection or of liberation from an oppressor. Yes, there are economically rich people around you who are

very poor because they are in need of God's protection from more powerful overlords. God blesses those who love the poor as Ps 41:1 says, "Happy are those who consider the poor; the LORD delivers them in the day of trouble."