

# The Psalms and economic justice



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Economic justice is a global issue; and in many areas of the world, it is a life-or-death issue. It is well known that the biblical prophets address economic inequities, poverty, and oppression; but the book of Psalms has not been viewed as a resource for promoting economic justice. The purpose of this article is to examine relevant texts in the Psalter that speak to a theology of economic justice. The objective is to construct an initial framework for talking about the Psalms and economics in the context of today's church. Texts from the Psalms that mention the poor, the weak, the orphan, the widow, the alien are identified and examined exegetically and theologically. These texts are classified and outlined logically according to the following topics that emerged from the texts themselves: the poor and the covenant community, the nature of poverty in the psalter, God's vindication of the poor, worship and justice, and the psalter's encouragement of the poor. Results of the research showed that God created Israel to be a community of justice and equity; therefore, God acts on behalf of the poor, and God makes the worshipping community accountable to care for the poor. The study concluded further that privileged leaders who wield power in the community are responsible to care for the disadvantaged members of the community who lack the resources to fend for themselves. The Psalms also encourage the poor to cry out to God whenever they experience oppression and injustice. Potential implications of this article were offered that challenge modern individualism and the theology of private spirituality that is detached from concrete communal ethics.

**Contribution:** This article contributed to a biblical theology of economic justice. It demonstrated that the book of Psalms challenges God's people to engage in redemptive activities that minister to the poor and to the marginalised.

**Keywords:** poverty; justice; marginalised; immigrants; oppression.

## Introduction

The book of Psalms is a song book that should inform the church's theology and its practice of worship. However, churches that claim to love God sometimes show little evidence of loving their neighbours, particularly if those neighbours are poor. The Church loses its moral authority and its influence in the community when it fails to minister to the poor. In addition to sinful bigotry, the individualistic and dualistic nature of evangelicalism is partly to blame for this disconnect. The emphasis on saving the 'soul' has caused the church to downplay the suffering of the body, and the belief in personal responsibility requires people to fend for themselves. The Psalter, however, is holistic and communal rather than individualistic and dualistic. It declares that love for one's neighbour (the poor) is a criterion for acceptable worship.

Theology, social ethics, and worship are deeply and inextricably integrated in the Psalter. The following texts suggest a direct link between worship and ethics, addressing, for the most part, either the ethical condition of the worshipper, the ethical requirements of the covenant, or the ethical character of Yahweh: Ps 1:2; 5:4-6; 7:4-6, 15-17; 9:19; 10:2-11, 14, 17-18; 12:2-9; 14:4-6; 15:1-5; 18:26-28; 24:3-4; 25:8-10; 26:2-3; 31:17-18; 32:6; 33:5; 34:14-15; 37:1-3, 8, 21, 28-29; 39:12; 40:9; 41:2; 49:1-20; 50:5, 16-20; 52:3-7; 53:5; 62:11; 68:6-7; 72:1-14; 73:1-19; 74:21; 82:2-4; 84:11; 92:9, 13; 94:2, 6, 12; 96:9, 13; 97:10; 99:4, 5; 101:5, 7; 107:40-41; 112:5-10; 118:18; 119:9, 19, 29; 125:3; 130:3-8; 141:3-4; 143:2, 10; 146:9; and 147:6. Despite the many texts that link theology, worship, and ethics, modern study has too often divided these three areas into discrete, exclusive categories. Guroian (1985:332) observes the troubling 'separation, if not an outright divorce, of worship, belief, and ethics in much of American religious discourse'. For example, there is no entry for either 'liturgy' or 'worship' in the *Dictionary of Christian Ethics* (Macquarrie 1967). Saliers (1979) also laments this separation:

Communal praise, thanksgiving, remembrance, confession and intercession are part of the matrix which forms intention and action ... But there has to date been a paucity of dialogue between liturgical studies and ethics, even though it seems obvious that there are significant links between liturgical life, the

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confession of faith, and the concrete works which flow from these. *How* we pray and worship is linked to *how* we live – to our desires, emotions, attitudes, beliefs and actions. (p. 174; cf. Wainwright 1988:123–38)

This article argues that the book of Psalms challenges the Church to engage in redemptive activities that minister to the poor and to the marginalised. Discussions of social justice, poverty, economic inequalities, and oppression normally centre around biblical texts taken from the Old Testament prophets, or from the teachings of Jesus. However, the book of Psalms is also a rich source of theology regarding economic concerns. According to the Psalms, economic justice is a problem that concerns God, the poor, and the broader worshipping community. The Psalter declares that God created Israel to be a community of justice and equity; therefore, God acts on behalf of the poor, and God makes the worshipping community accountable to care for the poor. Furthermore, privileged leaders who wield power in the community are responsible to care for the disadvantaged members of the community who lack the resources to fend for themselves. The Psalms also encourage the poor to cry out to God whenever they experience oppression and injustice.

## The poor and covenant community

Both the love of God and the love of neighbours are covenantal responses and responsibilities. Therefore, the Psalter represents worship as a thoroughly ethical practice (Koernke 1992:27). Inasmuch as it flows out of the covenantal relationship between Yahweh and Israel, worship both celebrates and promulgates the covenantal ethical commitments of Israel to Yahweh and to the community. Guroian (1985:335) insists that ‘ethics is possible because a new people have come into existence’ by God’s saving acts and is continually ‘nourished’ by their liturgical life together before God. This vital connection between worship and covenant is recognised by Eugene LaVerdiere (1964:240), who observes that ‘the covenant penetrated and gave significance’ to Israel’s worship and that ‘the covenant is cast in a liturgical context from its very inception’. In its function as covenant renewal and remembering of Yahweh’s acts, worship would ‘strengthen their moral life’ (LaVerdiere 1964:242).

Also, the above-mentioned function of worship in spiritual formation suggests that the moral life is shaped partially through the lifelong participation in the prescribed liturgy. Saliers (1979) describes the role of worship in forming the affections as follows:

*[T]he relations between liturgy and ethics are most adequately formulated by specifying how certain affections and virtues are formed and expressed in the modalities of communal prayer and ritual action. These modalities of prayer enter into the formation of the self in community. (p. 175, emphasis original)*

Daniel Castelo (2004:37) agrees in writing, ‘the inculcation and formation of the affections arise from a context of worship’ (cf. Rossi 1979:244). Wenham (2009:121) adds that it

is the act of *participation* in prayer, praise, and confession that makes worship so effective in forming the moral life. He argues, for example that ‘if you pray ethically, you commit yourself to a path of action’.

Furthermore, the book of Psalms aims at the ‘moral and ethical transformation of persons and society’ (Saliers 1979:183). From the very beginning, the Psalter describes the ethical lives and destinies of the righteous and the wicked, because, ‘the Lord knows the way of the righteous, but the way of the wicked will perish’ (Ps 1:6).<sup>1</sup>

The Psalter’s definition of ‘righteousness’ suggests that it is more than an abstract quality – it includes ethical actions. Positively, the righteous are generous, lending to their neighbours, and they give ‘freely’ to ‘the poor’ (Ps 112:5–9). Negatively, the righteous ‘turn away from evil’ (Ps 37:27). The wicked person, however, ‘plots destruction’ and loves ‘evil more than good’ (Ps 52:1–5). Therefore, because ‘Yahweh loves justice, He will not forsake his saints ... but the children of the wicked shall be cut off’ (Ps 37:26–28).

Within this ethical world view, Yahweh takes up the cause of the oppressed. The psalmist therefore warns the wicked: ‘You would confound the plans of the poor, but the Lord is his refuge’ (Ps 14:6). Moreover, Yahweh ‘raises up the needy out of affliction and makes their families like flocks’ (Ps 107:41). Bremer (2013:57) insists that Yahweh’s activity goes beyond compassion and concern; Yahweh’s rule changes social hierarchies, toppling the powerful (Ps 107:40) and exalting the poor to positions of power and authority. Moreover, Bremer (2013:77) argues that these transformations of society are not fleeting and ineffectual; rather they are permanent.

## The poor in the book of Psalms

Who are the poor in the book of Psalms? The poor are most commonly designated by four Hebrew words: *ani* (אֲנִי), found 41 times in the Psalms, can be defined as ‘poor, wretched, in a needy condition’ (Köhler 2000:856; ed. Clines 2011:VI, 504); *evyon*, (אֲבִיּוֹן), found 23 times in the Psalter, means ‘needy, poor’ (Köhler 2000:5; ed. Clines 2011:I, 104); *dāl*, (דָּל), found six times in the Psalter, refers to the ‘low, poor ... powerless’ (Köhler 2000:222–23; ed. Clines 2011:II, 437); and *rush*, (רֹשֶׁת), appearing twice in the Psalms, is defined as ‘be in want, poor’ (Brown, Driver & Briggs 1977:930; ed. Clines 2011:VII, 455). These terms overlap in meaning; combined they describe poverty from four perspectives:

- Poverty is an economic state in which basic human needs are not being met.
- Poverty produces a sense of lack – the poor are aware of their insufficient resources.
- Poverty creates a social location – the poor are metaphorically ‘low’.
- The deficiency of resources causes genuine suffering and misery.

1. Biblical quotations are translations of the author unless stated otherwise.

The average citizen of ancient Israel would have lived very close to subsistence level, and would often have been unable to provide for their basic needs if they were among the orphans (יתום, appearing eight times), the widows (אלמנה, appearing five times), or the aliens (גר, appearing four times). Altogether, these seven terms that refer to the poor occur 89 times in the 150 Psalms.

The poor are those who live in the lowest economic strata of society. Their poverty makes them powerless, and therefore vulnerable to abuse (Brown et al. 1977:2) and oppression by wealthy property holders who control the bulk of the community's resources (Bremer 2013:57). The poor are those who are alienated and marginalised because of their economic circumstances. Poverty (עני) is a state of 'misery', a 'plight demanding Yahweh's intervention' (Gerstenberger 2001:239–240). Thus, the psalmist may plead with God: 'Turn to me and be gracious to me, For I am alone and poor' (Ps 25:16). Poverty makes one subject to oppression, as illustrated in Psalm 37: 'The wicked draw their swords and bend their bows to bring down the poor and the needy, to slaughter those whose way is right' (v. 14); and in Psalm 10: 'In arrogance the wicked hotly pursue the poor; let them be caught in the schemes which they have devised' (v. 2).

Those who wield power sometimes continue to oppress the poor, believing all the while that they can do so with impunity because God does not intervene. Consider the example of the wicked in Psalm 94:

How long will the wicked – oh, Lord!  
how long will the wicked win?  
They crush your own people, Lord!  
They abuse your very own possession.  
They kill widows and immigrants;  
they murder orphans,  
saying all the while, The Lord can't see it;  
Jacob's God doesn't know what's going on! (vv. 3–7 CEB)

From the psalmist's viewpoint, the wicked often 'win' (v. 3), even though they are abusing God's people and even though they are taking advantage of the weakest members of society. Because the oppressors are not prevented from doing evil and because they do not experience immediate consequences of their evil, they mistakenly believe that God will not vindicate the oppressed.

## God's vindication of the poor

The oppressors, however, will learn eventually that God *does* know what is going on. God cares for the poor, and God will arise to stand on the side of justice. Poverty, as indicated by the noun עני, refers to 'a burden of suffering that affects Yahweh' (Gerstenberger 2001:240):

Because the poor are oppressed, because the needy groan, I will now arise, says the Lord; I will place him in the safety for which he longs. (Ps 12:5)

The psalmist insists that Yahweh 'delivers the poor from him who is too strong for him, and the poor and the needy from him who robs him' (Ps 35:10).

Although sometimes overlooked, the concern for justice is a significant theme in the book of Psalms. We find in the book of Psalms 97 references to 'justice' and 130 references to 'righteousness' (the words 'righteous' and 'righteousness' come from the צדק root, and the words 'justice', 'just', and 'judgement' come from the שפט root). Righteousness and justice are attributes of Yahweh, – 'He loves righteousness and justice' (Ps 33:4–5) – and those attributes are also demanded in society. Israel is commanded:

Give justice to the weak and the fatherless; maintain the right of the afflicted and the destitute. Rescue the weak and the needy; deliver them from the hand of the wicked. (Ps 82:1–4)

Therefore, Bullock (1985:269) argues that worship 'plays a special part in telling the story of what we "should be" if we could only see ourselves "truthfully" in its light'. Gray (1965:30) adds that in worship the believer 'makes a commitment to service of others'.

In this just society envisioned by the Psalms, the weakest and most vulnerable members are afforded special consideration, and worship becomes a shaper of public policy. Therefore Saliers (1979) states:

We may investigate worship as motivator of moral behavior, or liturgy as political act. Liturgy can be viewed as the promulgator of an ideology, or at least of specific moral and ethical policies. (p. 187)

In some parts of the world, the gap between the rich and the poor is growing ever wider, and economic policies threaten to create a neo-feudalism in which the 'landowners' (market speculators, real estate moguls, CEOs, and the like) live in luxury while the remainder of the population struggles to survive.

Just as in other biblical texts and as mentioned above, the weaker members of society are named as the alien, the fatherless, the widow, and the poor: 'Yahweh watches over the alien; He upholds the widow and the fatherless' (Ps 14:9; cf. Ps 39:12; 94:6; 119:19). 'Father of orphans and defender of widows is God in his holy habitation' (Ps 68:5). Regarding Yahweh's concern for the poor, the psalmist writes, 'Oh, Yahweh, who is like you, delivering the poor from him who is too strong for him, the poor and needy from him who robs him?' (Ps 35:10).

God's care for the poor is generated by his holy attributes. The psalmist explains, 'In your goodness, God, you provided for the poor' (Ps 68:10). As 'father to the fatherless and protector of widows' (Ps 68:6), Yahweh not only cares about weak, he requires that the community care as well. Israel is instructed: 'Give justice to the weak and the fatherless; maintain the right of the afflicted and the destitute' (Ps 82:3). 'Blessed is the one who considers the poor!' (Ps 41:1; cf. Ps 102, 9; 37:14; 72:4).

As a point of clarification, it would be incorrect to assume that the Psalms locate the 'poor' as a subcategory of the 'righteous' and that God cares for the poor *because* they are righteous. Firstly, the poor are never equated with the righteous. Secondly, God's care for the poor is based on God's commitment to justice and love for the neighbour. As members of the covenant community, the poor deserve equitable treatment even if they are not 'righteous'. Regardless of their moral standing, the weak should not be abused and their rights should not be violated.

## Worship and justice

LaVerdiere (1964:244) observes that worship leads to the human 'imitation' of Yahweh's righteousness, justice, goodness, and faithfulness. De Souza (2015:4) observes:

In theological terms, *tsedeq* ('justice') defines how God treats his people within the framework of the covenantal relationship and reveals how God expects humans to treat one another. (p. 4)

'God stands right next to the poor, to save them from any who would condemn them' (Ps 109:31). In this imitation, the covenant faithfulness of Yahweh is brought together in the requirement for a just society. Yahweh's faithfulness is signified by the Hebrew term *hesed* (*hesed*), which can be translated with 'steadfast love'. The *hesed* of Yahweh, therefore, inspires and shapes human *hesed* (cf. Ps 18:25–27; 32:5–6; 50:4–5). Saliers (1979) argues:

Of God, the Psalmist continually sings: 'for his love endures forever'. From this, intense affectivity may flow; and, upon occasion, from a proleptic experience the dispositions for more enduring love may be laid down in a life. That is, from an overwhelming experience of being mercifully loved and accepted, a person may find new capacities for steadfast love suddenly in place. (p. 182)

Paul Ramsey sees a similar implication of Yahweh's *hesed* and he writes:

The notion of steadfast 'covenant' love, or agape, in Christian ethics must obviously be constantly nourished by liturgy. (p. 150)

It should be noted that Saliers and Ramsey are not without their critics, Everett (1979:203–14) and Farley (1979:191–202).

The maintenance of a just society is the responsibility of every member of the community, but a greater burden is placed upon those who are in positions of leadership and authority. The Psalms include prayers that the king may judge righteously and that he may ensure justice for the poor, that he may 'defend the cause of the poor of the people, give deliverance to the children of the needy, and crush the oppressor' (Ps 72:1–4; cf. also Ps 72:11–14; 99:3–4).

Let the king bring justice to people who are poor;  
let him save the children of those who are needy,  
but let him crush oppressors! ...  
Because he delivers the needy who cry out,  
the poor, and those who have no helper.

Let him have compassion on the poor and the needy;  
And let him save the lives of those who are in need.  
He will redeem their lives from oppression and violence;  
their blood is precious in his sight. (Ps 72:4–14)

As stated earlier, the 'poor' (עני) are considered people who are 'bowed down, oppressed' (Martin-Achard 1997:931). Both the poor and the 'weak' (אביון) 'lay a particular claim to justice: the duties of the powerful ... include pity for the suffering' (Gerstenberger 1997:18). As God's representative, the king has the responsibility to authorise and enforce God's care for the poor, the weak, and the marginalised.

Today's increasingly polarised political climate begs for a renewed emphasis on the Psalms' demand for compassionate rulers who maintain justice and who prevent abuse and oppression. The privilege of leadership includes the weighty responsibility to care for those who are the weakest in society. Rulers must not take advantage of their positions of power to enrich themselves and their cronies. The Bible views the role of government as a safeguard against evildoers, but government does not work if the rulers themselves are the evildoers.

As a relational act, worship cannot be separated from the justice of Yahweh and the covenantal demand for justice within the community. Therefore, the genuineness or validity of worship is judged by ethical criteria that lies outside of the worship act itself. Yahweh accepts only worship that is offered in the context of a just and righteous community. Psalm 15 sets forth the ethical requirements for acceptable worship:

O Yahweh, who shall sojourn in your tent?  
Who shall dwell on your holy hill?  
He who walks blamelessly and does what is right  
And speaks truth in his heart; ...  
Who swears to his own hurt and does not change;  
Who does not put out his money at interest  
And does not take a bribe against the innocent.  
He who does these things shall never be moved. (Ps 15:1–5; cf. 5:3–7; 24:2–4; 50:15–20; 101:3–7)

De Souza (2015:1) argues that 'Psalm 15 establishes the inextricable relation between worship and conduct and thus highlights important characteristics of the true worshiper'. He adds: 'Such a theology, without denying the value of formal adoration, brings ethics to the foreground of worship and makes appropriate relationships with the neighbour a prerequisite to communion with Yahweh' (De Souza 2015:4).

Walter Brueggemann (2014:27) insists that the ethical perspective of the Psalter is alien to the dominant culture of today. He states that the truth that we find in the Psalms, but which is absent from today's society, is that Yahweh 'is a real agent, a lively character, and an agent of firm resolve who brings transformative energy and emancipatory capacity to all our social transactions'. Brueggemann compares the

ethical concerns of the Psalms to that of the Old Testament prophets, making clear that Brueggemann's (1978) characterisation of the theology of the Psalms is in fact quite like his description of the fundamental message of the prophets, as we find it described in his book, *The prophetic imagination*.

Brueggemann's insights help us to see that in many places, Christian's imitate the dominant culture in which they are imbedded when, instead, worship should imagine an alternative community and an alternative way of life for God's people. Brueggemann's vision is echoed by Achtemeier (2001):

I suppose only if a preacher has something of such a worldview – a view of human life and of a world from which God is never absent; a view of a world in which nothing is secular; of a life that is God-haunted and God-accompanied, do the psalms of praise and lament make much sense. For that is the context in which these songs occur. (p. 104)

In the book of Psalms, the enactment of worship is a form of proclamation; and as Patrick Miller observes, we should recognise our worship as a similar witness to the world. Miller (2001) writes:

Praise and thanksgiving, therefore, turn prayer into proclamation. The very heart of the act of giving thanks and praise is a declaration of what I, or we, believe and have come to know about the Lord of life. It is a declaration that thus calls others to a response to that reality, to see, fear, and trust in the Lord who has taken away my fears and helped me. (p. 62)

We find in the Psalms 'the testimony by which those who sing, pray, and speak point beyond themselves, the "kerygmatic intention" of their praise and confession, their prayers and teachings' (Kraus 1986:13; Kraus borrows the term 'kerygmatic intention' from Von Rad 1962:I, 106). Some Christian traditions throughout history have conceived of their preaching as prophetic speech, but I am suggesting that the church should go even further and recognise the entire liturgy as a prophetic witness to the transformative presence and power of God in this world. Christian worship should point to the God who 'raises the poor from the dust; [and] lifts up the needy from the ash heap' (Ps 113:7).

## Encouragement for the poor

Poverty robs one of hope, but the Psalms insist that the plight of the poor will someday be remedied: 'Not forever will the needy be forgotten, and the hope of the poor shall not be lost forever' (Ps 9:18; cf. Ps 10:8–9). Despite their challenging status and circumstances, the poor are encouraged to worship God, trust God, and remain hopeful. The psalmist declares, 'The young lions suffer want and hunger; But they who seek the Lord shall not lack any good thing' (Ps 34:10).

Of course, the question of theodicy comes into play. The Psalter acknowledges the complexities of life and the evils of systemic abuse that continue while God apparently does not

act. The paradox between God's care for the poor and the delay in God's action is embodied in the presence of both the Psalms of orientation and the Psalms of disorientation (the terminology of 'orientation' and 'disorientation' originates with Brueggemann 1984:9–23). The Psalms of orientation suggest that the righteous can expect to flourish and prosper. The righteous 'shall be like a tree planted by the canals of water, that brings forth its fruit in its season, whose leaf also shall not wither; and whatever he does shall prosper' (Ps 1:3). This prosperity is possible because 'Yahweh knows the way of the righteous' (Ps 1:6). Righteousness, as barrier against poverty, is expressed further in another Psalms of orientation: 'I have been young, and now am old, yet I have not seen the righteous forsaken or his children begging for bread' (Ps 37:25). The Psalmist bears witness to Yahweh's faithfulness toward those who have put their 'trust in Yahweh' and who 'do good' (Ps 37:3). In the Psalms of disorientation, however, the Psalmist questions the reliability of the theology expressed in Psalm 1. Psalm 73, for example, states that the wicked are prospering while the righteous are suffering. Moreover, because the abuse of the poor is occurring within the covenant community, the blame for suffering is not entirely God's to bear. As mentioned above, the community, in God's name, must take responsibility for addressing injustice.

As a way of encouraging the poor to trust God, the book of Psalms includes many prayers of the poor, as they plead for God's assistance. Many of these prayers are in the form of a lament: 'As for me, I am poor and needy, but the Lord takes thought for me. You are my help and my deliverer; do not delay, O my God!' (Ps 40:17). 'But I am poor and needy; hurry to me, O God! You are my help and my deliverer; O Lord, do not delay!' (Ps 70:5); 'Incline your ear, O Lord, and answer me, for I am poor and needy' (Ps 86:1; cf. 109:22). Other prayers of the poor come in the form of testimonies: 'This poor man cried, and the Lord heard him and saved him out of all his troubles' (Ps 34:6).

## Conclusion

This brief study of the Psalms challenges modern individualism, and it also challenges the theology of private spirituality that is detached from concrete communal ethics, in which believers could worship God on Sunday and oppress the poor on Monday, all with a good conscience, because they are justified *Sola Fide*. Furthermore, it challenges current trends that make participation in 'worship' alone the highest expression of the Christian faith. While I would agree that genuine worship of God is the Christian's goal, genuine worship is communal, which means that worship without ethics is not acceptable to God.

According to the psalmist, the obligation of a righteous community is to:

Give justice to the lowly and the orphan; maintain the right of the poor and the destitute! Rescue the lowly and the needy. Deliver them from the power of the wicked! (Ps 82:3–4)

The duty to maintain justice, rests most heavily upon leaders, who should exemplify the qualities of a 'good king' (Bremer 2013:75), but everyone in the community also shares in that responsibility.

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