PART 3

THE BIBLE AND POVERTY TODAY

In Part Three of the thesis I try to unlock the answers the Bible can give to the moral problems associated with poverty as we understand it today.

In the first two chapters of Part Three, I analyse the ethics on poverty and riches contained in the Biblical texts themselves. In Chapter Six I analyse texts from the Old Testament that are relevant to poverty and riches. In Chapter Seven I look at texts in the New Testament that are relevant to the moral issues of poverty and riches.

In the last chapter, Chapter Eight, I combine the results from Chapters Six and Seven into a Biblical ethics of poverty and wealth. I then proceed to link this Biblical ethics of poverty and riches with the analyses done in Part Two. I look at the extent to which the Biblical texts deal with the complexities of poverty and explore the ways the Biblical texts deal with the six categories of justice concerning poverty and riches. I conclude the thesis first by creating a Christian ethics of poverty and riches. Then I finally explore the role a Christian ethics of poverty and riches can play in the public sphere of politics.
CHAPTER SIX

POVERTY, RICHES, AND THE OLD TESTAMENT

In the narrative of the rich man and Lazarus in the New Testament (Lk. 16: 19–31), the rich man asks Abraham to send Lazarus to warn his brothers to avoid ending up in Hades as he – the rich man – did. Abraham gives an intriguing answer. His brothers have access to the Old Testament (Moses and the prophets) and that is sufficient to warn them to live the right life that will avoid his fate. If they do not listen to the Old Testament, they would also ignore someone risen from death. Abraham’s answer implies that the Old Testament is God’s clear and definitive message on how to treat poor people for the people living in the time of Jesus. Nothing more is needed. What is this message of Moses and the prophets? In this chapter I want to discuss the awareness of the circumstances of poverty and the values for dealing with poverty and riches that the Old Testament expresses. I will first look at the Pentateuch, then the prophetic writings, after which the wisdom literature will be analysed. The chapter closes with a section on expressions of poverty and wealth in the Psalms and the historical writings.

1. Poverty in the Pentateuch

The foundation of the Old Testament’s values concerning poverty is in the Pentateuch. All other Old Testament writings on poverty derive from the values formulated in the books of the Pentateuch. The other books of the Old Testament are at most applying these values in new social contexts. The fundamental role of Pentateuchal values on poverty necessitates a detailed close reading of these texts.
The emphasis on God as first priority for Israel is striking. The references to God’s covenant with Israel scattered throughout the Pentateuch makes this point clearly. God’s choice of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob to be the ancestors of the nation Israel and God’s liberation of His chosen nation (people) from bondage in Egypt are fundamental for understanding the values concerning poverty in the Pentateuch. God’s election of these people to have a covenantal relationship with Him is accompanied by His loving care through which He guides their lives and saves them from oppression. In return He expects their obedience to a life-style based on His laws. These laws reflect something of His nature and are given to establish a relationship between Him and them that will enable them to acknowledge Him as their God, the one and only God. The laws also aim to lay the foundations for a communal life where every person treats the other humanely, thus leading to a peaceful and prosperous life for the nation.

1.1 God as First Priority

In the Pentateuch God claims to be the first priority of Israel and wants to command the total allegiance of this group of people. What does this mean? What does it imply for values on poverty and riches? In the Pentateuch God introduces Himself as the one who elected Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob to be his followers. Their descendants would form a nation (people) that would be God’s special people. He promised Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob that they would have many descendants for whom God would be a God and to whom He would give their own land. In return they must worship Him as the only God in the universe. He alone is God (Dt. 6: 4) and Israel must love Him with all their hearts, souls, and strengths (Dt. 6: 5). This command is fundamental. God has to be first priority who commands the ethical orientation and lifestyle of every Israelite in all parts of their lives (Miller 1990: 98, 105). How to love and worship God are not only specified in the fundamental laws of God’s covenant, i.e. the ten commandments (Dt. 5: 5b–21 and Ex. 20: 2–17). The other rules and values specified in the Pentateuch for individuals
and the community all aim to be detailed applications of the ten commandments. For this reason they too express the scope of genuine love for God as the only God.

God’s claim to be the only God and thus to legitimately demand the total allegiance of Israel rests on what He promised their ancestors and what He did to liberate Israel from Egyptian bondage. Both narratives of the origin of the ten commandments includes God’s introductory remark that He is the God of Israel who rescued them from slavery in Israel. God’s liberation of Israel from Egyptian oppression is frequently used in Deuteronomy to justify normative values. Two examples will suffice. The commandment to individuals, their households, strangers, and slaves to observe the Sabbath in Deuteronomy (5: 12–15) is justified by reminding the Israelites that they were saved by God from being slaves in Egypt. Similarly, the command not to gather all the corn, grapes, or olives, but to leave some for the foreigners, widows, and orphans is given to Israel because they once were slaves in Egypt (Dt. 24: 19–22) (Hamlin 1995: 101). Their own experience of oppression and being foreigners must sensitise them not to treat any person like they were treated (Miller 1990: 127).

This justification of God’s laws to Israel must also be used for all the laws collectively. Israel is advised to answer their children’s questions about God’s laws in the following way (cf. Dt. 6: 20–25). If children ask their parents why God commanded their parents to obey these laws, they must answer them by telling the story of how God rescued them from Egyptian slavery. They must tell the children how God brought them to the land promised to their ancestors. Having elected their ancestors, liberated the Israelite slaves from Egyptian oppression, and given them the promised land, God then demanded their total allegiance to live obediently according to His laws. Keeping the remembrance of God’s deliverance from slavery alive would ensure [1] that the Israelites stay aware that they must depend on
God and his words to sustain them, not on food and water alone (cf. 8: 3) and [2] that they have compassion with vulnerable people who are marginalised and oppressed in their society. Keeping the memory of deliverance alive, means to think of God’s reaction to the Israelites in Egyptian bondage and to develop a similar compassion towards people in need. God saw their slavery, heard their groaning, remembered His covenant with their ancestors, and became concerned enough to rescue them from Egyptian oppression (Ex. 2: 23).

Whatever else the Pentateuch has to say about poverty, this perspective may not be lost. All values dealing with poverty flow from the demand that Israel must love the only God, the One who has saved them from oppression, with their whole person and life. Part of loving God is acquiring aspects of His nature. A good example is the depiction of God as an impartial judge who does not accept bribes and as compassionate carer for widows, orphans, and foreigners. These values are consistently recommended to Israel as required by God.

1.2 God’s Promises to Israel

God often promises Israel the blessings of a good life in the promised land if they obey His commandments. These promised blessings are highly significant for an understanding of the values concerning poverty. Not only do most of the blessings concern successful food production and creation of wealth, but one promise explicitly states that no member of Israel will be poor if they are obedient to God’s commands. The conditions attached to these promises that the Israelites must fulfil are all variations of obedience. If they listen to God’s commands, obey them, live according to His laws, faithfully keep His commandments, love Him, and turn back from worshipping other gods, then the specified blessings will follow.
These blessings fall into four categories of which two are directly relevant to issues of poverty. The promise of blessings of material prosperity in an agrarian context dominates. If the Israelites are obedient they will have abundant crops from the fertile land with enough water. The detail of the kinds of crops are listed, such as corn, wine, olive-oil, etc. Their barns will be filled with food and they will have more than enough to eat. Blessings of a more personal nature refer to personal well-being, blessings on their work, being prosperous, and having many children. As a nation obedience will bring them riches, greatness, and God’s help in defeating their enemies. He will make them His own people, which refers to the religious blessings of obedience to God’s commands. Obedience will lead to God keeping His covenant, showing love and mercy, giving them obedient hearts, and bringing them back from where they are scattered among the nations because of disobedience.

These promises are made in the unique context of Israel entering the promised land as God’s chosen people (nation). These promises could be understood in two ways. One could argue that God willingly intervenes in nature to control natural forces like the weather to produce rain if the Israelites are obedient to His commandments. This argument can be supported by God’s promise to give rain at appropriate times and His threat that disobedience would lead to a curse, such as drought. If this is correct, then the promised blessings are powerful incentives for obedience to God’s laws. The curses, on the other hand, are strong threats of impending disaster that ought to instil fear in many people’s hearts.

Another understanding of these promises depends on the argument that God’s commands contain values that enables a kind of living that is best suited to a good life for human beings. The promise that obedience to God’s commandments will guarantee that no Israelite is poor, presupposes a community where no oppression or exploitation takes place, where people
do not steal one another’s property, where poor people are appropriately taken care of, where honesty in economic life means paying just wages on time, and where dealers do not cheat with their scales measuring the weight of their products. Both these interpretations seem valid, thus blessings follow both from divine intervention in natural and human affairs and from ethical human conduct.

God’s promises to Israel play an important role as incentives for Israel to obey His commands. The curses that are to follow disobedience to His commands are sanctions or threats with a similar intention of reinforcing the correct moral behaviour. Incentives and sanctions are not the only measures in the Pentateuch in support of the preferred normative values. An explicit commitment to God is perhaps the most important motivating factor. The Israelites are constantly called on to make a commitment to love and worship Yahweh only. People committed to love God would want to serve Him through obedience to His commands. These calls are made on various grounds. One is that Yahweh is the only God. Another is that He elected their ancestors as His people and promised them many descendants in a land of their own. A further ground for a strong commitment to God and a life lived according to His commandments is His role in the liberation of the Israelites from Egyptian oppression.

1.3 Provisions for the Poor: Commandments Concerning the Poor

What kind of ethical conduct towards the poor does the Pentateuch prescribe? A general theme is to help fellow-Israelites in need generously and to give to them freely and unselfishly from what one has available (Dt. 15: 7–11). The section stresses that there will always be poor and needy people and for that reason God commands the Israelites to be generous.
Another general theme is the protection of vulnerable people in the ancient Israelite society. The Israelites are told not to deprive foreigners, orphans and widows of their rights, nor to ill-treat or oppress them (Dt. 24: 17; Ex. 22: 21–24). Foreigners were vulnerable as they were alone between strangers, without the protection of members of their family, clan, or tribe. Widows in a patriarchal society were vulnerable without a husband’s income, possession of land, and protection (Childs 1974: 478; Clements 1972: 146). Orphans without parents are vulnerable in practically any society, unless given special care (Clements 1972: 146). Besides general instructions not to violate their rights or exploit them, three categories of measures are mentioned to protect the poor in ancient Israelite society. These measures include sharing resources with poor people, refusal to exploit poor people’s powerless position but to treat them with honesty, and special accommodations for poor people.

Non-poor Israelites had to share their resources with poor people in several ways. When harvesting grapes, olives, or corn, they were not gather every part of the crops yielded. After they have picked olives once, they were to leave the rest for the orphans, widows, and foreigners to collect (Dt. 24: 19–22; Lv. 19: 9–10). The Israelites were not to cut the corn at the edges of the fields and the corn left on the field were for poor people to collect. They were similarly instructed not to go back over their vines for a second time to harvest grapes. What is left, is for the poor people to collect. This provision for poor people is significant as benefits were only available to poor people capable of, and willing to, collect whatever bits of the harvest were left.

Besides sharing the abundance of agricultural crops with poor people, the Israelites also had to share their money with poor people. The Israelites were commanded to be generous to poor people and in this context it meant lending them as much as they needed (Dt. 15: 7–11). Loans played a different role in ancient Israel and were regarded as a means to help poor people
to recover from poverty (Miller 1990: 173). For this reason God forbade the Israelites to charge interest on loans (Ex. 22: 25; Lv. 25: 36, 37), as interest could only prolong the poor person's struggle against poverty (Miller 1990: 173). In any case, no non-poor person ought to benefit from the suffering of a poor person, but must rather help them in their need (Hamlin 1995: 138; Cole 1973: 125). What could be done was to take some personal possession of the poor person as a pledge or security that the money will be repaid. This practice could also be abused. The Israelites were not allowed to take anything linked to the provision of basic necessities for sustaining life. The millstone of a poor person was off limits, as it was used to grind corn for staying alive (Dt. 24: 6). Similarly, the coats of poor people could not be kept overnight, depriving them of protection against the cold (Dt. 24: 10–13; Ex. 22: 25). A widow's garment could never be taken (Dt. 24: 17). Restrictions were not only placed on what could be taken as pledge or security, but also how it should not be done. In the case of a neighbour, the lender should not collect the pledge or security. Most possibly to avoid embarrassing or humiliating poor persons, the lender had to wait outside to let the poor persons bring the pledge or security outside by themselves (Dt. 24: 10–13).

Another way of sharing resources with the poor was through tithing. Two out of three years tithing meant that the Israelites had to set aside a tenth of the produce of their fields which they had to eat at the place where God had chosen to be worshipped. Through this meal the Israelites had to honour God and enjoy themselves (Dt. 14: 22–29). Every third year the tithe of their produce had to be stored in the towns for the use of the Levites, who had no property, as well as for the use of the orphans, widows, and foreigners (Dt. 26: 12). These groups were allowed to come and get all they needed, so that they could have enough food to eat, and thus survive. Through the practice of tithing the Israelite community took responsibility for provision of food for the basic needs of poor groups in society. The goods of God's blessing in
Israel are made available and shared by all members of Israelite society (Miller 1990: 184).

Closely linked to the idea of tithing are the annual festivals, especially the Harvest Festival and the Festival of Shelters, that make explicit provision for poor people. These two festivals have important similarities (Dt. 16: 9–12, 13–17). Both are linked to the time of harvest in an agrarian society. In both cases each person ought to bring a voluntary gift in proportion to the blessings that God has given them. The aim of both festivals are to honour God and to be joyful. The festivals are to reinforce the idea that all good things come from God and to avert the danger that prosperous people will attribute their success to themselves and forget the Giver of their blessings (Miller 1990: 117). The list of participants are identical in both cases. Significantly these festivals must be enjoyed with not only family members, but also servants, Levites, orphans, widows, and foreigners. No member of the community should be left out of the festivities (Miller 1990: 132).

A second series of commands dealing with poor people exhorts the Israelites not to exploit the powerless position of poor people, but rather to treat them with honesty. In a sense, these commands concretise two of the ten commandments, i.e. not to steal and not to give false witness. The latter becomes relevant in the task description of judges. Judges – to be appointed in all towns – are implored to always give impartial judgements that are fair, honest and just (Dt. 16: 18–20; Lv. 19: 15). They are urged not to accept bribes, as gifts to judges can blind the eyes of honest and wise men, leading them to make the wrong decisions. Bribes simply ruin the cause of those who are innocent. Analogous to the acceptance of bribes are signs of favouritism to poor persons in court, denial of justice to persons because they are poor, or fear of the rich leading to biased judgements. All these practices are wrong. The truth should be heard and be decisive, regardless of the socio-economic status of the persons involved.
Another aspect of truthfulness and honesty concerns the use of appropriate weights and measures. Anyone selling products that needs to be weighed, counted, or measured in any way are commanded not to cheat their customers (Dt. 25: 13–14; Lv. 19: 35). Their instruments for the measurement of weight, length, quantity, and volume must be true and honest. If not, they are more than dishonest and false. They are also stealing from their customers. Using false weights and measures thus violates two of the ten commandments.

A further refinement of the commandment not to steal states that in several cases people will sin against God if they illegitimately acquire something belonging to a fellow-Israelite. Stealing is the obvious example, but three other refined forms of stealing are discussed. People can steal things belonging to others by cheating, by refusing to return something left as a deposit, or by lying about something that the person lost and swearing that it was not found (Lv. 6: 2–3) (Gorman 1997: 43). Whatever is stolen in this way by getting things through dishonest means, must be repaid in full, plus an added twenty percent, if the person is found guilty of using dishonest means.

A person can keep something belonging to somebody else by not paying them on time. The Israelites are commanded in general terms not to hold back even for a day the wages of someone they have hired (Lv. 19: 13). However, this general rule is specifically applied to poor and needy hired servants, whether Israelite or not (Dt. 24: 14–15). They must be paid for their work every day before sunset, because they need it and have counted on getting it. To withhold their wages would be to take away their ability to provide for the basic needs of themselves and their families. It is also a form of stealing (Hamlin 1995: 137).
Several other measures in the Pentateuch aims to safeguard the ability of poor people to provide basic necessities for themselves. So, for example, in the prescribed animal offerings for different kinds of sin, provision is made for people too poor to be able to afford a sheep or a goat. If they cannot afford that, they can offer two doves or two pigeons. If these birds are still too expensive, one kilogram of flour would do (Lv. 5: 7–11). Similar provision is made for poor women who cannot offer a lamb to offer two doves or two pigeons instead. Poverty should not stand in the way of persons’ restoration of their relationships with God through prescribed offerings (Lv. 14: 21) (Gispen 1950: 90, 91; Gorman 1997: 80).

Although women have a precarious position in the patriarchal society of ancient Israel, at least two commands are directed at protecting vulnerable women besides those aimed at widows. In one case (slave) women in polygamous marriages are protected. When the man takes an extra wife, he must still treat the other wife, or wives, as before. The other wife, or wives, must get the same amount of food and clothing as before and retain the same rights (Ex. 21: 10) (Childs 1974: 469). If a man is unable to treat his wives in this way, he must set them free without receiving any payment. This command ensures that women in polygamous marriages do not impoverish as a result of not being the current favourite of the husband.

Another command to protect women against impoverishment came about through Zelophehad’s five daughters negotiating with Moses (Nu. 27: 1–11; 36: 1–12). The five daughters challenged this command at the entrance to the tent of God’s presence, with Moses, Eleazar the priest, the leaders, and the whole community present (Sakenfeld 1995:149–150). A quite daring thing for young women to do in a patriarchal society! In this case the commands of the Pentateuch disadvantage them as they are not allowed to inherit their father’s property. Dying without a son in ancient Israel meant that the closest male relative inherited the dead man’s land. Their argument for
the right of daughters to inherit their father’s land rests on the importance of the continuation or disappearance of the male’s name. Moses takes their request to inherit their father’s land so as to preserve his name to God. God grants their request and modifies the rules of inheritance so that daughters are second in line to inherit their father’s land after their brothers (Noth 1968: 211). If there are no daughters then the land will go to the closest male relatives of the dead man. Whether the main concern of the daughters was to preserve their father’s name or to secure a means of making a living does not really matter. They inherited their father’s land and got a means to avoid desperate poverty.

In an interesting twist they lose part of their freedom, without losing any aspect of the newly won right to inherit (Noth 1968: 212). As a result of the allocation of land to the twelve tribes of Israel and the command that the land of each tribe should stay their own, the five daughters would only be allowed to marry members of their own tribe. If they were to marry outside their tribe, the tribe would lose that land to the husband’s tribe (cf. Sakenfeld 1995: 185). This was unacceptable, as it is explicitly stated that the property of each Israelite must stay attached to their tribe and that property may not pass from one tribe to another. The restriction of their freedom of choice in marriage partners makes sense in view of this conception of land holding held by the Israelites (Nu. 36: 1–12). Despite this restriction, they won the important right to have access to, and ownership of, their father’s land that could ensure their safeguard against impoverishment.

Land holding was affected by the Sabbath year as well. The Year of Restoration followed after seven cycles of Sabbath years and had important implications for land holding (Lv. 25: 23–34). The fact that land in Israel could not be sold on a permanent basis, implied that a land owner immediately acquired a right to buy back his land the moment he sold it. If a person was forced to sell his land through poverty, he could get it back through three op-
tions. The quickest option would be to have wealthy relatives who could buy it back. If there are no such close relatives, the second option is that such a person must wait until he has earned enough money to buy back the land himself. The last option would be to wait until the next Year of Restoration, when the land would be returned to the original owner or his descendants. The last option determines the price that a person would have to pay if the land is bought back. The sum paid would have to make up the income the new owner would have had from the amount of harvests left until the next Year of Restoration, when the land would have been returned to the original owner in any case.

The Sabbath principle had implications not only for land holding, but also for the cultivation of the land (Ex. 23: 10–11). Land could be cultivated for six years successively, but during the seventh year it had to rest. The Israelites were not allowed to harvest anything that grew on the land during the Sabbath year. Whatever grew on the land could be eaten by the poor, whether it was corn, olives, or grapes.

Poor people benefited from the Sabbath year in another way. At the end of every Sabbath year all debts of Israelites who owed their fellow-Israelites money were cancelled (Dt. 15: 1–11). This command did not apply to the debt of foreigners. As loans were intended to enable poor people to get rid of their poverty, the Sabbath year accelerated that process by releasing poor people from burdens and obligations that often become oppressive and enslaving (Miller 1990: 134). The danger that people in a position to grant loans would refuse to do so close to a Sabbath year was real. For this reason the Israelites were admonished not to refuse to lend poor people money because of the approaching Sabbath year. To even consider such an idea is rejected outright.
2. Poverty and Prophecy

Many of the Old Testament prophets discuss various issues concerning poverty. In their dealings with poverty, the prophets imaginatively apply the values of Pentateuchal theology to concrete situations of Israel and Judah (Smith 1989: 68). Among the prophets, Amos stands out as the champion of the cause of poor people. This reputation of Amos, justified by his strong focus on issues of poverty and wealth, merits close attention to the network of themes running through prophecies. For this reason, I will first discuss the book of Amos and then compare the other books of Old Testament prophets with his message on poverty.

2.1 The Fame of Amos as Champion of the Poor

The prophet Amos certainly deserves his reputation as champion of the poor for the scathing attacks he makes on the wealthy Israelites who exploit their fellow-Israelites (Hasel 1991: 17). Amos sharply criticises wealthy Israelites for their humiliating and oppressive treatment of poor people. To understand why Amos has this strong message of social justice, we have to reflect on the full scope of his message. The different parts of his message fit together in a network of associated meanings. The network is based on the shared understanding Amos and his readers have concerning the law of Yahweh and the defining moments of Israel’s history, such as the election of Abraham, the exodus, wilderness, and conquest experiences (Smith 1989: 71; Hasel 1991: 72). This network has the following components and relationships.

I want to claim that the central theme of the book Amos is Israel’s failed relationship with God. God wants to have a special relationship with this nation that He has chosen to be His people, but Israel fails to respond appropriately as they do not live according to God’s commands. God’s commands require a life-style that integrates worship of God as the only God with demanding
ethical guidelines on how to treat other people (Smith 1989: 172; Hasel 1991: 120). Amos criticises Israel especially for their failure to follow God’s ethical values for dealing with poor people (König 1974: 79). Although they do worship God, their worship seems insincere. Their unethical behaviour towards the poor makes their worship unacceptable to God (Freeman 1968: 185; König 1974: 35). Can this claim be substantiated from the text of the book of Amos?

In the prophecy against Judah (Am. 2: 4–5), the link between worship and ethics is clear. God accuses Judah of being led astray by other gods, of despising His teachings, and of failing to keep His commands. God’s teachings and commands include both worship and ethics. However, the prophecies against Israel stress this theme much stronger. The reason for the prophet’s stringent criticism of Israel lies in God’s history with this nation. As in Pentateuchal theology, Amos refers to the exodus from Egypt and the conquest of Canaan (Am. 2: 9–10; 3: 1–2). God delivered them from Egyptian slavery, led them through the desert, and gave them the land of the Amorites whom He destroyed as well. God’s election of Israel to be His people (Am. 3: 2) is the important reason why God judges Israel’s sins to be so awful and deserving of punishment. God chose them out of all the nations on earth and from God’s side His relationship with them was special. Israel was the only nation that he has intimately known and cared for. God’s choice of Israel for this special relationship and His interventions in history on their behalf now justifies punishment for their consistent refusal to live according to His demands (König 1974: 44). The privilege of being elected to be God’s people carries with it the responsibility to live as a holy nation (Smith 1989: 97). Failure meant punishment.

Israel got a fair chance from God to change their attitude to God’s commands and to return to Him and obey His commands. Their refusal to obey God is summarised by the expression that they have sinned again and again
(Am. 2: 6). God inflicted many of the curses, mentioned in the Pentateuch, on Israel, but despite these curses they did not return to God. They did not respond to God’s attempts to lead them to repentance and rededication (Soggin 1987: 76). The accusation that they failed to go back to God is repeated five times in the section mentioning the curses (Am. 4: 4–12). Israel’s inability to do God’s will is emphasised by their failure to admit the seriousness of their situation. They refuse to admit that God’s judgement on their sins is bringing a day of disaster and therefore they do not mourn over the pending ruin of their nation (Am. 6: 1–14). Their insight into the state of their religious life is poor. As a result they cannot respond to God’s invitation to get life from Him. The promise “you will live” is repeated three times, if only they would come back to God and do what is right (Am. 5: 1–27). Again, worship and ethics are linked.

What made it so difficult for Israel to establish the right relationship with God and to obey all His commands? The main problem seems to be that a section of the Israelites lived a wealthy, luxurious life-style that depended on the exploitation and impoverishment of their fellow-Israelites. This life-style involved the violation of several values concerning the treatment of poor people found in the Pentateuch. God’s network of moral rules designed to protect the poor and vulnerable people in society were all violated so that the guilty parties could live luxuriously. These violations are also a rejection of God and the values He commanded them to follow (Smith 1989: 86).

The luxurious life-style of the rich is described as follows. The rich Israelites have large houses, sometimes called mansions (Am. 6: 8), decorated with ivory, and built from fine stone, a material previously only available to kings (Smith 1989: 168). Some people had more than one house, as winter and summer houses are mentioned (Am. 3: 15). They have beautiful interiors in their houses, as they lie on luxurious couches (3: 12; 6: 4). They eat the best foods, such as veal and lamb (Am. 6: 4), and demand wine, that they drink
by the bowlful (Am. 6: 6). They enjoy feasts and banquets (Am. 6: 7) and like entertainment, as they compose songs and play them on harps (Am. 6: 5). They beautify themselves by using the finest perfumes (Am. 6: 6).

The life-style of the rich in ancient Israel in the time of Amos was based on a general attitude towards poor people that allowed rich people to violate God’s commands about poor people and thus to exploit and oppress them. Their general attitude towards vulnerable people in society, such as the weak, the needy, and the poor is as follows. The rich people will oppress, ill-treat, trample on, and try to destroy these categories of vulnerable people. They will do these things through cheating people out of their rights, twisting justice and turning it into poison, and turning right into wrong. Their honesty in dealing with other people is practically non-existent. The rich people criticised by Amos disregarded the network of moral values found in the Pentateuch that prescribes acceptable behaviour towards the poor and other vulnerable people in Israelite society.

Amos spells out the details of their violation of the moral values found in the Pentateuch. The rich Israelites violated the commands about loans given to poor people to help them recover from poverty. They took the clothing given by the poor as pledge or security for their loans and used it to sleep on at places of worship (Am. 2: 8). Clothing could not be kept overnight, as the poor needed it to keep them warm (Dt. 24: 10–13; Ex. 22: 25). To require clothing as a pledge was legitimate. To keep the clothing to enrich themselves was an abuse of God’s commands (Smith 1989: 86). Similarly, they drank wine taken from the poor unable to pay their debts and drank it in the temple of God. Both these deeds shows disrespect for God as well, as they violate God’s commands whilst at places where God ought to be worshipped.
The rich people who granted loans to the poor did not allow them enough
time to pay off their debt. Rather, they demanded immediate repayment and
as a result many poor people had to sell themselves as slaves (Smith 1989:
82). There is no indication that Israelites who failed to pay their debts could
for this reason be sold into slavery. Although it was possible for Israelites to
become slaves, a fellow-Israelite was not to be the initiator making the other
into a slave. At most Israelites may have been sold to, or sell themselves to,
a fellow-Israelite, but nothing more than that (Dt. 15: 12–18). In Deuteronomy
the Israelite slave must be released after six years and be given generous
help to start a new life. According to Leviticus, the Israelites should not
make Israelites who sold themselves as slaves, do the work of slaves.
Rather, they should treat them as hired servants and release them and their
families at the next year of Restoration (Lv. 25: 39–55). Even before the re-
quired time of release, an Israelite slave has the right to be bought back by
family or through his own earnings.

Amos criticises the rich people for their attitude towards slaves in the light of
the context of this cautious allowance that Israelites might become slaves
and the specification of rules to safeguard a fixed time for slavery and the
human dignity of such slaves. Amos says the rich sell honest people into
slavery who cannot repay even a minuscule debt like the price of a pair of
sandals (Am. 2: 6). The impression that the rich people were actively trying
to find fellow-Israelites as slaves is strengthened when he says the rich try to
find poor people who cannot pay their debts, although the debts again might
be very small (Am. 8: 6). Instead of helping poor people to stay out of slav-
ery, they deliberately try to get them as slaves for their own benefit. In the
context of the experience of slavery in Egypt this behaviour is insensitive
and unacceptable. God explicitly declares that Israelites may not become
permanent slaves because they are His slaves (Lv. 25: 55). To actively look
for poor people unable to pay their debts – even very small ones – with the
open the possibility that they might be sold. God’s will to change their lives
intent of enslaving them runs against the spirit of several moral values in the Pentateuch concerning the poor.

The rich Israelites not only tried to acquire human beings illegitimately, they also acquired property illegitimately. Amos accuses them of acquiring property through crime and violence, rather than legitimately buying property. This attitude of acquiring things that do not belong to them, also manifested in their business dealings. They robbed the poor of their grain (Am. 5: 11). Instead of using the appropriate weights and measures (Dt. 25: 13–14; Lv. 19: 35), they used false measures, tampered with the scales, and thus overcharged their customers. In this way they stole what belonged to their customers (Smith 1989: 254). Sometimes they defrauded their customers by selling them worthless wheat at a high price. No wonder that Amos thinks that they do not even know how to be honest! Their dishonesty also surfaced in the courts. The rich hated anybody who challenged injustice and spoke the truth in court (Am. 5: 11), they prevented the poor from getting justice in court (Am. 5: 12), they took bribes, judged unjustly, and thus turned justice into poison (Am. 6: 12). They used the judicial process to advance their own interests at the cost of the poor (Smith 1989: 167).

Their dishonesty towards God made Him say that He hated their religious festivals and their noisy songs. Despite appearances that they believed in God and were faithful in observing religious festivals, they made nazirites drink wine and ordered prophets not to speak. When they observed holy days, they did so with an attitude of not being able to wait to begin again with their dishonest and unjust business practices (Am. 8: 5–6). Instead of honouring and worshipping God, they seemingly endured the holy days to get back to their immoral behaviour as soon as possible.

Despite the harsh criticisms that the lifestyle of the rich invite, Amos keeps open the possibility that they might accept God’s offer to change their lives
and obey His law. Amos advises the rich people to go back to God and do what is right, so that they will live (Am. 5: 1–27). Instead of performing religious festivals that God hate, bringing offerings that He will not accept, and making music that He won’t listen to (Am. 5: 21–23), Israel should hate evil, love what is right (Am. 5: 15), and in beautiful metaphors, “let justice flow like a stream and righteousness like a river that never goes dry” (Am. 5: 24).

An everyday life lived in justice is part of worship and must accompany other forms of worship (Smith 1989: 187; Hasel 1991: 13). The book closes with the promise that despite Israel’s destruction as punishment for their continued refusal to live as God’s people, God will restore Israel in future (Am. 9: 11–15).

The book Amos teaches that the right relationship with God is interdependent with obedience to His commands on how to treat other people, especially the poor (König 1974: 84). To neglect either is unacceptable to God. To serve the God of Israel is a multidimensional and comprehensive matter: all aspects of religion must receive attention simultaneously – conversion from wrong ways, faith in the God of Israel, presenting offerings to God, singing songs of praise to God, respect for the Law and obedience to its commands, caring for the poor in society, and protecting the vulnerable people living with you. Nothing can be neglected, although truly worshipping God and ethical behaviour towards fellow human beings are the main priorities that depend on each other (Harrison 1969: 887).

2.2 Amos, the Poor, and the Other Prophets

The dominant concern of Amos with the interdependence of religious worship and social justice does not necessarily have the same emphasis in the other prophetic books. Nevertheless, similar issues are raised throughout many of the other prophetic books. To get a fuller picture of the prophets’ concern with poverty in ancient Israel, links between Amos and the other
prophets will be established. Not only links, but sometimes the other prophets add to the range of issues of poverty that Amos discusses.

Isaiah clearly spells out the link between worship and ethics, as Amos does. In one case Isaiah calls all religious practices meaningless if the believers do not live a life of justice as well (Is. 1: 10–20) (Freeman 1968: 193). Isaiah sketches God's disgust and aversion to all kinds of religious practices. God's irritation becomes clear when Isaiah writes in the first person singular how God feels. God had more than enough of their sacrifices, He is tired of the blood of animals, and thinks it useless for them to bring offerings. He is disgusted with the smell of incense, is tired of and cannot even stand their religious festivals and holy days any more, and will not look at them whilst praying, nor listen to them as well.

Perhaps the most important religious advice God does not notice their fasting is God's advice through Isaiah for rectifying their failed religious life consists in them being willing to settle the matter with God and to let Him cleanse them from sin. God promises them that regardless how deep red they are stained, He will cleanse them to become as white as snow again. This religious settlement is only part of the remedy for a failed religious life. The other part is an ethical life where they stop doing evil, learn to do what is right, and practice justice. What it means to see that justice is done, is specified by a variation on the familiar command from the Pentateuch. They must help the oppressed people, defend the widows, and give the orphans their rights. The Israelites must exhibit God's concern for vulnerable and marginalised people every day of their lives (Motyer 1993: 63). They must not openly or tacitly tolerate any injustice against these groups (Kaiser 1973: 49). In this section Isaiah integrates worship and ethics. He thus emphasises their interdependence.

The book of Isaiah returns to this theme much later (Is. 58: 1–12). In this section an apparently sincere group of believers question the meaningful-
ness of their fasting because of God’s lack of attention to them. They are portrayed as people who take pleasure in worshipping God every day, are eager to know God’s ways, and want God to give them just laws which they are willing to obey. Why then do they experience God as failing to react to their fasting? One reason is that they fast while doing wrong things. To be truly religious and indifferent to social justice is unacceptable to God (Motyer 1993: 478). They pursue their own interests while fasting and oppress their workers. They do not exhibit God’s compassion for oppressed people (Hanson 1995: 204). Furthermore, their fasting has negative effects on them. They become violent, quarrel, and fight with other people. They furthermore make themselves suffer by bowing their heads low and lying on sackcloth and ashes.

Perhaps the more important reason why God does not notice their fasting is that they are practising the wrong kind of fasting. The kind of fasting that is important to God is social justice and care for vulnerable people. Social justice includes eliminating gestures of contempt and evil words, putting an end to oppression, and getting rid of injustice. Care for vulnerable people means providing clothes to the naked, food to the hungry, shelter to the homeless, and in general satisfying those in need.

Fasting with this ethical content that is alive with the spirit of the values of the Pentateuch leads to God’s blessings. Blessings listed by Isaiah include God’s favour, presence, protection, response to prayer, guidance, and strength. Believers fasting correctly will indeed be like a garden with sufficient water and the original readers would have been empowered to rebuild Israel after returning from exile.

Isaiah has a third section where he discusses the intimate relation between worship and ethics (Is. 59: 13–16). When the people confess their sins, they not only confess that they refused to follow God, rebelled against Him, and
rejected Him. They also confess that they have not honoured the ethical values of justice, honesty, truth, and right. Their turning away from God is linked directly to their oppression of other people. God’s reaction to their confession is to note with displeasure and astonishment that there is no justice and that no one helps the oppressed. Again the link between relationship with God and relationship with fellow human beings are shown to be interdependent.

A similar link between worship and ethics is found in Zechariah (Zc. 7: 9–14). Zecharaiah points out that the exile occurred as a result of disobedience. Disobedience to which commands is the interesting point here. Zecharaiah lists the demands of social justice, such as the injunctions not to oppress widows, orphans, or foreigners, or any one else in need. Added to that is the command to see that justice is done and to show kindness and mercy to one another. To these commands God’s followers refused to listen and to them they closed their minds and hardened their hearts. Stubborn disobedience to these commands made God angry enough to send them into exile. This suggests that Zecharaiah judges these commands to be close to the heart of the religion of Israel (cf. Baldwin 1972: 146–147). Obedience to God means pursuing social justice. The prophet Micah echoes these sentiments and he states it simply. What God thinks is good and what He requires of His followers is to do justice, to show constant love, and to live in fellowship with God. To worship God requires to simultaneously do justice to your fellow human beings. Jeremiah echoes these sentiments by advising Israel not to boast of their wisdom, strength, or wealth, but rather to boast that they have intimate knowledge of Yahwe’s constant love, justice, and righteousness (Brueggemann 1998: 100).

Believers in God are thus supposed to have the right priorities through having right relationships with God and their fellow human beings. They might be able to resist the negative influence of wealth that could make them boast
of their achievements. Jeremiah (9: 23–24) explicitly advises wealthy people not to boast of their riches, but rather to boast that they know and understand God. Ezekiel’s prophecy against the king of Tyre has a message of destruction (Ezk. 28: 4–7). The king of Tyre collected many treasures through wisdom and skill, but became proud and judged himself to be as wise as a god. These attitudes are cause of his coming destruction. Habakkuk adds to these warnings about the negative effects of wealth (Hab. 2: 5) (Kruger 1987: 52). He says that wealth can make people greedy, so that they – like death – are never satisfied with what they have.

The Old Testament prophets reiterate many of the Pentateuchal values for dealing with poverty. The prophets also stress the general protection that Israelites should give to widows, orphans, and foreigners. These vulnerable people should be given their rights, defended when necessary, and be listened to and judged fairly in court (Is. 1: 16, 23; 11: 4). They should not be ill-treated, oppressed, or taken advantage of (Je. 7: 6; 22: 3; Ezek. 7: 10). Similar values apply concerning loans to poor people. Money-lenders should not cheat, oppress, or rob poor people by forcing them to pay up their loans or by keeping whatever the poor gave them as security (Is. 3: 12; Ezek. 18: 12; Hab. 2: 6). Ordinary Israelites are reprimanded not to cheat God by withholding their full tithes. They are encouraged to bring the full amount so that there will be plenty of food available for the Levites who have no land and the poor and vulnerable people without means (Mal. 3: 6–12).

The ethical values of honesty and truth are reaffirmed in the prophets as in the Pentateuch. Cheating customers with false scales and measures are strongly rejected, as is getting rich through any dishonest means. No easy exploitation of poor and vulnerable people were to be allowed (Clements 1996: 197). The emphasis is on the use of honest scales and measures (Ezk. 45: 10; Ho. 12: 7, 8; Mi. 6: 10–12). Similarly, in courts people must speak the truth and give fair judgements that will give justice to the poor and
vulnerable people (Zc. 8: 16–17), as doing this gives expression to the person's intimate knowledge of God (Je. 22: 16). Making unjust laws to take property away from widows and orphans and thus denying them rights that justly belong to them, is rejected outright (Is. 10: 2).

The prophets often condemn leaders and ordinary Israelites for taking other people's belongings through illegitimate means. These people ignore all moral values. Leaders are accused of enriching themselves at the expense of the poor (Is. 3: 14, 15). Not only do they take advantage of the poor, they also murder people to get rich. Leaders take other people's property, inter alia by driving some off their land (Ezk. 45:9; 46: 18). Ordinary Israelites pursue similar criminal behaviour to enrich themselves. Some rich people metaphorically build their houses with injustice, enlarge them with dishonesty, and eventually live in houses filled with loot (Je 22: 13; 5: 26–28). Their wealth comes from cheating and robbing other people. Often such people take other people's houses, seize their fields, steal the coats off their backs, and do not pay wages to their workers (Mi. 2: 1, 2, 8; Je. 22: 13).

In such circumstances of injustice that flows into criminal behaviour, God is the only guarantee of justice and care for his people. Ezekiel depicts God as the good shepherd who takes care of his vulnerable people (Ezk. 34). In a wonderful chapter on God, Ezekiel explores the metaphor of the good shepherd in such a way that all other Biblical texts on the idea of a good shepherd resonate (Ps. 23; Jn. 10). Ezekiel contrasts the shepherds of Israel, their rulers, with God as the good shepherd. The shepherds of Israel only take care of themselves and cruelly exploit the sheep for that purpose. They do not tend the sheep by taking care of the weak ones, healing the sick, bandaging those that are hurt, bringing back those that have wandered off, or looking for those that are lost. Exactly these things God now undertakes to do as He assumes the position as the good shepherd of Israel. God shows His character by explicitly siding with the vulnerable sheep of Israel.
whom He wants to care for and bless. Ezekiel echoes Isaiah’s sentiments that God is a shepherd to the poor of his people (Is. 14: 30) and the poor and helpless people flee to God in times of trouble for protection and comfort (Is. 25: 4). This vision of God as the Good Shepherd who cares deeply for His flock and wants to take special care of those who are vulnerable, underlies the moral values shared by the prophets and the Pentateuch concerning the treatment of poor people.

3. Wisdom and Poverty

The wisdom literature in the Old Testament, especially Proverbs and Ecclesiastes, provide rich contributions to the Biblical understanding and ethics of poverty. Besides normative values on poverty and wealth that are grounded in the Israelite faith in Yahweh, Proverbs and Ecclesiastes give descriptions and explanations of various aspects of poverty and wealth. Like the Pentateuchal and prophetic literature, statements containing promises (blessings and curses) are also found. Often these promises take the form of conditional statements, such as, “If you do x, then y will follow.” These three broad types of statements on poverty and wealth will be used as categories to organise and summarise what the book of Proverbs has to offer.

One should briefly note the nature of the literature contained in the book of Proverbs. Proverbs contains short, pithy teachings based on observations and experiences gleaned from everyday life – almost a kind of proto social science (Harrison 1969: 1010; Cox 1982: 84). Especially the descriptions and explanations deal with general tendencies or often recurring behaviour, without claiming to be universally applicable. This implies that no proverb needs to be universally true and applicable everywhere. They only need to be true sometimes – as most generalisations currently provided by the social sciences – to have validity.
The proverbs are offered as practical guides for successful living (cf. Harrison 1969: 1010). Their aim is to make readers think about life and stimulate them to assess their own situations so as to determine the applicability of the proverbs (Cox 1982: 86). As the proverbs are not meant to apply universally, readers must be sensitive to ascertain whether they do in fact apply in the concrete situation they are confronted with. Readers thus become active participants in learning from the collective human experience embodied in the wisdom of the proverbs (Cox 1982: 88). What I aim to provide in the following sections is extractions of the understanding of poverty and the moral values for dealing with poverty embodied in the book of Proverbs.

3.1 Descriptive–Explanatory Statements on Poverty and Wealth

The descriptive–explanatory statements about poverty and wealth in Proverbs do not present an idealised picture of poverty. The life conditions of poverty can be so serious as to destroy the people suffering them (Pr. 10: 15). The difficulty of those conditions makes the life of poor people a constant struggle (Pr. 15: 15). The misery experienced by poor people makes them susceptible to the use of alcohol to forget their misery, poverty, and unhappiness (Pr. 31: 6–7).

The already difficult life conditions of poverty are exacerbated by ruthless people in more powerful positions. Leaders who oppress poor people are compared with driving rain that destroys agricultural crops (Pr. 28: 3). Poor people are considered to be helpless against wicked rulers, who are judged to be as dangerous as a Growling lion or a prowling bear (Pr. 28: 15). Wicked people – presumably people with no moral conscience – are said to have no understanding of the rights of poor people (Pr. 29: 7). As a result some people make their living by taking cruel advantage of poor people (Pr. 30: 14).
Not only do poor people have difficult life conditions, but their human relations are often strained. They often lose their friends and find it difficult to make new ones (Pr. 19: 4, 6–7) (Meinhold 1991b: 239). People do not like the poor, even their neighbours come to dislike them and their family find no use for them (Pr. 14: 20; 19: 6). When the poor engage in conversation with the rich, they have to be submissive and beg politely (Pr. 18: 23).

Not all aspects of the lives of poor people are judged so negatively. Whereas rich people’s lives are often threatened, the lives of poor people are threatened by no one (Pr. 13: 8). Poor people often experience the love and kindness of believers who are generous to them (Pr. 31: 20). Their lives sometimes have good qualities. Being poor is judged to be better than being a liar (Pr. 19: 22). Poor people sometimes have insight into character that surpasses the views of the rich who think themselves to be wise (Pr. 28:11).

Why are people poor? The book of Proverbs identifies several reasons, of which only two are not related to any kind of mistake or shortcoming on the part of the poor person. In some cases unjust people in control of unused fields do not allow poor people to farm them, despite the fact that those unused fields could yield more than enough food for their needs (Pr. 13: 24). In other cases people who are cautious not to spend money freely become poor, although others who freely spend money become rich (Pr. 11: 24). Despite their good attempts at wise spending of money, they nevertheless impoverish. In this case it might be luck or unfavourable circumstances that determine their impoverishment.

Laziness gets the most prominent place amongst the causes of poverty directly linked to the personal shortcomings of poor people. Lazy people sleep too much. As they sleep too much, their vineyards and fields are neglected (Pr. 24: 30–32). The detrimental effect of too much sleep is described by an
appropriate comparison that says poverty will attack them like an armed robber while they are asleep (Pr. 6: 9,11; 24: 33–34). As a result of laziness, such people never have money and are thus harming themselves (Pr. 11: 16b; 21: 25–26). Instead of being able to think about other people’s needs and to give generously, lazy people only think about what they themselves would like to have (Pr. 21: 25–26).

Other personal shortcomings that cause poverty are as follows. Bad behaviour, like people who eat and drink too much (drunkards and gluttons), leads to poverty (Pr. 23: 20, 21). Negative attitudes can also lead to poverty. People unwilling to learn will become poor and disgraced (Pr. 13: 18). People who are stupid in spending their money as fast as they get it will become impoverished (Pr. 21: 20). Selfishness combined with an urgency to become rich can blind people to impending poverty striking them (Pr. 28: 22).

The book of Proverbs has a very sober view of wealth. Wealth can protect the rich and they must often use their money to save their lives (Pr. 10: 15; 13: 8). However, because these statements are true some of the time, rich people imagine that their wealth can protect them like high, strong walls round an ancient near Eastern city (Pr. 18: 10–11). The protection offered by a person’s wealth cannot be that strong, as wealth is not as permanent as rich people think (Pr. 27: 23–24), as it could be lost in a flash (Pr. 23: 4–5). In any case, wealth has limited possibilities to mean something to a person. When facing death, wealth becomes meaningless as it can do their owners no good anymore (Pr. 11: 4).

Despite the limited work that wealth can do for rich people, it can attract them friends (Meinhold 1991b: 231). Rich people have many friends, as everyone tries to gain the friendship and favour of the rich and famous (Pr. 19: 6). Perhaps the status that wealth awards its holders causes many people to pretend that they are rich, while they actually have nothing. Some rich peo-
ple, though, perhaps to avoid insincere friendships, pretend to be poor, while they actually possess fortunes (Pr. 13: 7). As a result of their influential position in society, rich people can afford to be rude towards poor people, who need to speak to them in a submissive tone (Pr. 18: 23). They can treat poor people thus, because poor people are often virtually their slaves, being in debt to the rich (Pr. 22: 7). Not only do rich people treat others with contempt, but they also judge themselves to be wise, when often they are not (Pr. 28: 11).

How important is the way in which rich people acquire their wealth? Very important, the contents of the book of Proverbs suggest. Wealth acquired through dishonesty will do their holders no good, but will soon disappear after it has lead its holders into the jaws of death (Pr. 10: 2; 21: 6). Wealth easily acquired won't do the person any good and will in any case easily be lost (Pr. 13: 11; 20: 21). The harder it is for a person to acquire wealth, the longer it will last (Pr. 13: 11). A reason why a person never will become rich is a luxurious lifestyle with wine and rich food (Pr. 21: 17). A capable wife is a reason why a man will never become poor (Pr. 31: 11). Wisdom seems another good qualification for living in wealth and luxury, as wise people are rewarded with wealth (Pr. 14: 24; 21: 20). Closely associated with this link of wisdom and wealth is the view that hard work can make a person no richer, as it is God's blessing that makes a person wealthy (Pr. 10: 22).

3.2 Promissory–Conditional Statements on Poverty and Wealth

Promissory–conditional statements on poverty and wealth can be analysed in two ways. One way is to analyse the themes in the conditions that must be fulfilled to get the promises (blessings or curses). A second kind of analysis looks at the categories of behaviour judged to be good and bad to do, as well as the categories of blessings and curses that are to follow. This analy-
sis will betray the values embodied in the book of Proverbs on poverty and wealth.

The themes in the conditions of the promissory-conditional statements are the importance of wisdom, ways of treating poor people, and the merits or not of laziness and hard work. The first theme, wisdom, is discussed as follows. To follow and acquire the teachings of wisdom will lead to a long, prosperous, and successful life that will also give honour (Pr. 3: 2, 16; 8: 18, 20). To have the foundation of wisdom, i.e. to obey and honour God, will also lead to wealth, honour and a long life (Pr. 3: 9, 10; 22: 4).

The second theme concerns the appropriate behaviour towards poor people. The wisdom of Proverbs recommends that Israelites should be kind and generous to poor people (Pr. 11: 25; 22: 9). Being kind will lead to one’s own happiness, whilst being generous will make you prosperous. They should be willing to give of their resources to poor people, share their food with them, and be prepared to help where help is needed (Pr. 11: 25; 22: 9; 19: 17). To give is like lending to the Lord who will surely pay you back, while you will be blessed for sharing your food. To give help has the promise that you too will be helped. The king of Israel must defend the rights of the poor (Pr. 29: 14). Such a king will rule for a long time.

However, to exploit poor people by taking advantage of them, charging them interest, or oppressing them, can lead to curses such as losing your own wealth or your life (Pr. 22: 16, 22–23; 28: 8). To have an attitude to poor people that makes you ignore their cry for help will be the cause that your own cry will not be heard (Pr. 21: 13). If your attitude is even worse so that you laugh at poor people and take pleasure in their misfortune – thus exacerbating their misery – you insult God and you will be punished (Pr. 17: 5) (Meinhold 1991b: 284).
The third theme deals with laziness and hard work. The message is simple. Laziness has negative consequences. Lazy people become poor (Pr. 10: 4), whether they just sit around or spend their time sleeping (Pr. 14: 23; 20: 13). Laziness may make you a slave or reduce you to such poverty that you will wear rags (Pr. 12: 24; 23: 21). Hard work will make you rich (Pr. 10: 4). Through hard work a person can earn a living, gain power, get a fortune, and have plenty to eat (Pr. 12: 24, 27; 14: 23; 20: 13).

The alternative analysis of the promissory–conditional statements yields the following results. The good things recommended by these statements are obedience to God, the acceptance of the wisdom teachings, and being righteous and honest people. Generosity and kindness to poor people is important, as is sharing your food and giving some of your resources to the poor. Hard work and keeping busy are also recommended to avoid poverty yourself. Living lives filled with these good things will have the following good consequences. Wealth and a long life are promised in different wordings. Honour, success, and happiness will follow too. Blessings from God and help in need are the additional good things promised for living the appropriate moral life.

Bad behaviour that are to be avoided include oppressing the poor to be become rich, to take advantage of the poor, to charge interest, to exploit the helpless in court, to refuse to listen to the cry of the poor and to close your eyes to their needs, to laugh at poor people, and to take pleasure in their misfortune. These deeds often come from people eager to get rich, or those who depend on their wealth when they ought to have depended on God. Being lazy, expressed by spending your time sleeping or just sitting around talking, is also rejected. Bad consequences, or curses, that will follow the bad deeds include losing your wealth and becoming impoverished, angering God and fellow human beings, and having your own pleas for help ignored.
The values underlying the promissory-conditional statements are in line with the Pentateuchal and prophetic values concerning the treatment of poor people.

3.3 Normative Statements on Poverty and Wealth

The normative statements on poverty and wealth found in the book of Proverbs express moral values that individual Israelites ought to appropriate and implement in their lives. Three themes dominate. One theme concerns the supreme value of having wisdom. A second theme deals with cases when being poor is better than having wealth. The third theme consists of instructions how to treat poor people.

The book of Proverbs judge wisdom more valuable than anything else that any person could want (Pr. 3: 15; 8: 10). Wisdom is closely linked with having knowledge, understanding, insight, and sound judgement (Pr. 2: 3–4; 3: 13; 8: 11). Having wisdom implies that you know what you are talking about (Pr. 20: 15). Another important link is between wisdom, and justice and righteousness (Pr. 1: 3; 8: 20) (Meinhold 1991a: 142). To have wisdom teaches you to know what is just (Pr. 1: 3; 2: 9). Wisdom is so important that people ought to search for it like they would search for silver or a hidden treasure (Pr. 2: 3–4). To acquire wisdom is judged to be of more value to a person than gold, silver, or jewels (Pr. 3: 14, 15; 8: 10). Wisdom’s value is even more than anything a person could want (Pr. 3: 15; 8: 10).

Wisdom’s value is seen in the beneficial effects it can have on a person’s life. Wisdom brings psychological blessings, through making people’s lives worthwhile, filling them with happiness, and making those lives pleasant (Pr. 3: 13, 17–18). Wisdom also gives blessings of a more material nature, such as wealth and a long life (Pr. 3: 16). King Solomon is a good example of a
person choosing wisdom as first priority and having many other blessings, especially wealth, added.

The value of wisdom shows itself in the second theme that expresses the view that poverty is sometimes better than being rich, despite the negative life conditions of poverty. The priority of living a moral life according to God's commands surfaces again. A series of contrasts show that being rich without a life of moral and religious integrity is not acceptable. In such a case being poor with integrity is preferable. Some examples of the contrasts are the following. Poverty and fear of the Lord are better than being rich and in trouble (Pr. 15: 16). Poverty and being humble is judged to be better than to be one of the arrogant people who rob others and share the loot (Pr. 16: 19). The value of honesty is stressed by saying that being poor, but honest is better than being rich and dishonest (Pr. 28: 6). To be poor, but to live in a peaceful household, is judged to be better than having banquets in households full of trouble (17: 1). However, the even better alternative is to be neither rich nor poor. Rather, the ideal is to have just as much food as one needs. To have more has the risk that one can feel that God is not needed, whilst being poor has the risk of resorting to theft, that will disgrace the person's God (Pr. 30: 7–9).

The third theme found in the normative statements about poverty and wealth is the appropriate treatment of poor people. In line with the spirit of the Pentateuchal theology individuals are urged to do good to people in need whenever they possibly can (Pr. 3; 27). Readers must not tell people in need to wait if they are able to help them now (Pr. 3: 28). The emphasis is on doing what is possible for poor people within the time a person has available. Part of helping poor people is to speak for them and to protect their rights if they are unable to do so themselves (Pr. 31: 8–9). To show kindness to poor people and to give of your resources to them are judged to be religious duties. To give is compared with lending to the Lord (Pr. 19: 17), whereas to
show kindness is judged to be an act of worship (Pr. 14: 31). This emphasis on religious duties ties in with the justification for help to the poor. Poor people share an important thing with their oppressors and with rich people. Poor people, their oppressors and rich people were all created by God – suggesting that they have an equal value as human beings before their Creator (Pr. 22: 2; 29: 13) (Cox 1982: 184).

There are ways of treating poor people that are explicitly forbidden. All of these are religiously motivated, showing the link between poor people and their Creator. To oppress poor people or to laugh at them are insults to God (Pr. 14: 31; 17: 5). God Himself will argue the case of poor people who are taken advantage of (Pr. 22: 22–23). To despise poor people is a sin and to take pleasure in other people’s misfortune deserves (divine) punishment (Pr. 14: 21; 17: 5). In this way God protects the dignity of every poor person He has created.

3.4 Ecclesiastes, Poverty, and Wealth

The author of the book of Ecclesiastes is generally known in theological circles as Koheleth. Although his personal identity is uncertain, he is thought to have been well-versed in the Wisdom tradition. His own contribution to the Wisdom literature is judged to be a critical questioning of the accepted beliefs and doctrines contained in the tradition (Fuerst 1975: 93). Whether Koheleth significantly modifies the views about poverty and wealth found in the book of Proverbs is questionable. Two themes emerge from Ecclesiastes, i.e., [1] the injustice, oppression, and marginalisation of poor people and [2] the uncertainty and burdens of wealth. Koheleth seems to expand on these issues, rather than modifying what the book of Proverbs has to say about it.

Koheleth provides descriptions of the injustice, oppression, and marginalisation of poor people without normative evaluations thereof. He points to the
phenomenon that oppression creates sorrow and grief in the poor suffering from it. Despite the tears of the oppressed, no one is prepared to help them, as the power of the oppressors serve as a deterrent (Ec. 4: 1) (Spangenberg 1993: 68). He becomes more specific when he discusses how government officials oppress the poor and deny them justice and their rights (Ec. 5: 8). The point Koheleth wants to make is that within an hierarchical governmental bureaucracy it is difficult to locate those responsible for the oppression and denial of injustice and rights. The reason is that government officials are protected by their superiors in the hierarchy (Spangenberg 1993: 87). No wonder that Koheleth urges his readers not to be surprised to see that government officials treat the poor unjustly, as they can easily hide behind other officials and thus escape being held responsible.

Koheleth depicts the marginalisation of poor people in a beautiful little story (Ec. 9: 13–16). In this story a small town is attacked by the army of a powerful king. Although the army already surrounded the town and was at the point of starting to break the walls, it was still possible to save the town and its inhabitants from destruction. However, the person who was clever enough to save the town was a poor man of whom no one thought as a possible hero. The lesson Koheleth draws from this story is that no person thinks of poor people as wise, nor do people pay any attention to what poor people have to say. A sad indictment of the way that poor people are marginalised and disregarded in society.

The other dominant theme concerning poverty and wealth in Koheleth deals with the uncertainty and burdens of wealth. One reason why people work to become rich is the inability to be satisfied with the wealth one has. Another reason that Koheleth has discovered is that people are envious of their neighbours and wants to be better than they are (Ec. 4: 4–6). A frantic life style in pursuit of wealth to impress others does not impress Koheleth. For him having only a little, but also having peace of mind is preferable to a life—
style where a person is always busy with activities that seem like trying to catch the wind.

The desire for wealth can be a hard master. Koheleth tells the story of a man with no male relatives (son or brother) who lives alone, works very hard, denies himself any pleasure, but yet is never satisfied with the wealth he has (Ec. 4: 7–8). Koheleth describes this man's life as miserable as there is no one with whom to share his hard work. He denies himself any pleasure from his hard work as well. His solitary quest for riches is empty (Fuerst 1975: 120). Koheleth is convinced that the desire for money can never be satisfied, as the wish for getting everything you want can never be fulfilled (Ec. 5: 10). In any case, those who become richer only gain more mouths to feed and worries that keep them awake at night. In contrast to them ordinary workers at least sleep much better each night (Ec. 5: 11–12).

Koheleth is strongly aware that wealth can be easily lost. People who wisely save money for a time of need can lose all their savings in some unlucky business deal (Ec. 5: 13–14). They might not recover from such a disaster and thus be unable to pass anything on to their children. Such events remind Koheleth of the fact that we can take nothing with us when we die. That we leave this world just as we came into it Koheleth judges as not right. All we really get from our hard work is to live our lives in darkness and grief, while we have to cope with worries, anger, and sickness (Ec. 5: 15–17). Some rich people are so unfortunate that they do not live long enough to even enjoy their own wealth. Then strangers get to enjoy the wealth that someone else worked so hard for (Ec. 6: 1–2). This, for Koheleth, is a serious injustice that is all wrong and it makes life useless.

Koheleth is not entirely negative about wealth. He has the interesting view that wealth is a gift from God that must be enjoyed (Ec. 5: 19). However, wealth and property as gifts from God for which a person must be grateful
are also described as things that the person has worked for. What exactly the relationship is between God's gift and the rich person's work, is unclear.

4. Expressing Experiences of Poverty and Wealth

Not all mention of wealth or poverty in the Old Testament have explicit normative intentions. Many texts articulate experiences that the Israelites have had in connection with wealth or poverty. Expressing these experiences gives readers an idea of the range of situations concerning wealth and poverty that the Bible takes note of.

4.1 Expressions of Poverty and Wealth in the Psalms

Although the Psalms are closely linked to the Wisdom literature, I want to discuss them under the category of expressions of poverty and wealth. The reason is that the Psalms are ways of communicating feelings and experiences to God. The Psalms tell us more about the kinds of experiences the Israelites had, as well as the religious framework they used to interpret those experiences. The variety of experiences interpreted in terms of a characteristic religious outlook makes the Psalms useful not only for prayer and worship, but for meditation and reflection as well.

Many of the themes concerning poverty and wealth that surface in the Psalms are already familiar from other parts of the Old Testament. One good example deals with wealth. The uncertainty of trusting in your wealth and the superior value of serving God rather being rich are mentioned. Wealth and riches cannot go with you when you die (Ps. 49: 16), therefore no one needs to be upset when someone else gets rich. The usefulness of riches is limited to this side of the grave. The Psalmists express the view that believers should not depend on their wealth, but on God (52: 7; 62: 10). Evil people trust in themselves or their riches and would boast about their wealth (49: 5–6; 49: 13). Wealth is not the highest priority in life for the
Psalmist of Psalm 119. Better than getting rich, having great wealth, or even all the money in the world, is the delight of having God's law, desiring to obey it and following His commands expressed in it (119: 14, 36, 72).

God's concern for poor and needy people, such as widows, orphans, and strangers has been noted before. The Psalmists express their faith in God as One who cares and protects the poor, the needy, the oppressed, the widows, orphans, and strangers – all the weak, vulnerable, and marginalised people of society (Ps. 35: 10; 68: 5; 146: 7b–9). He defends their cause and their rights, and He judges in their favour (Ps. 103: 6; 109: 31; 123: 3). Sometimes the Psalmists formulate God's relation to the poor in negative terms. The hope of the poor will not be crushed forever (Ps. 9: 18), nor does God neglect the poor, ignore their suffering, or turn away from them (Ps. 22: 24). How the poor can suffer is expressed by the psalmist who is poor and needy and hurt to the depths of his heart (Ps. 109: 22). He continues to refer to his knees that are weak from hunger and his body that consists of nothing more than skin and bones (Ps. 109: 24). The poor suffer contempt, are mocked by the rich, and scorned by their oppressors (Ps. 123: 3). For these reasons, God's followers must also exhibit this special care for the poor. Those people who show similar concern for poor people are called happy and are promised all kinds of blessings from God in return (Ps. 41: 1–3).

The Psalms know very well that there are wicked people who persecute poor people and catch them in traps (Ps. 10: 2, 9). Wicked people never think of being kind to poor people (Ps. 109: 16); on the contrary, they would not hesitate to even kill poor people (Ps. 37: 14). Nevertheless, God judges that the little that a good person owns is worth far more than the wealth of all wicked people combined (Ps. 37: 16).
4.2 Expressions of Poverty and Wealth in the Historical Writings

The history of Israel presented in the Old Testament has several significant narratives about wealth and poverty. In the selection that I am going to present, I will focus on issues such as the implementation of Pentateuchal laws, the wealth of some Old Testament believers, negative aspects of kingship as governmental system, the prevention of poverty, impoverishment through exploitation, and impoverishment through violence.

The book of Ruth presents a narrative that demonstrates how Pentateuchal laws were implemented to protect women from poverty. Many interpretations are possible of the central themes of the book of Ruth. One plausible interpretation is that the book revolves around two poor widows who take the initiative to secure their rights in terms of Pentateuchal laws (cf. Morris 1968: 248). Women were very vulnerable in patriarchal ancient Israel without the protection, support, and care of a man. Men had all the decision-making power. The book of Ruth demonstrates how the Pentateuchal laws empowered poor widows to survive in a patriarchal society.

After the deaths of their husbands, Naomi and her Moabite daughter-in-law returns to Bethlehem. Naomi is in bad shape. She wants to be called Mara, as she feels God has made her life bitter and He has sent her all kinds of difficulties. However, Naomi and Ruth are knowledgeable about their rights in terms of Pentateuchal laws. They get enough food to eat because Ruth can gather corn in the fields of Boaz. She has a right to do so, as owners of fields were instructed not to cut the corn at the edges of the field, nor to return to cut the ears of corn that were left (Lv. 19: 9). They were to be left for poor people and foreigners (Lv. 19: 10). Fortunately Ruth ends up in the fields of Boaz, who shows himself as a faithful Israelite (Goslinga 1966: 138). Boaz not only allows Ruth to gather corn in his field, but makes it eas-
ier for her and supplies her with food, water, and his protection against unwanted male attention from his workers (Ru. 2: 8–23).

The chance meeting with Boaz, a close relative of Naomi, directs her attention to two other commands found in the Pentateuch. The one states that the closest male relative must buy back the land of an Israelite who had to sell his land because of poverty (Lv. 25: 25). The other command instructed brothers to marry the widows of their brothers who died without leaving a son (Dt. 25: 5–6). Although this command only applies to brothers in the Pentateuch, in the book of Ruth it is applied, as in the case of the former command, to all male relatives (Goslinga 1966: 144). Naomi makes Ruth aware of these commands and urges her to confront Boaz with his kinship responsibilities (Prinsloo 1982: 40; 57). The initial blessing Boaz gave to Ruth after he met her was that God reward her and protect her (Ru. 2: 12). When Ruth confronts him with a marriage proposal in terms of her rights, she holds him responsible for taking care of her (Ru. 3: 9) (Prinsloo 1982: 68). God’s commands to Israel enables Ruth to get protection and care in a patriarchal society for her and Naomi. Through demanding the implementation of these laws, they save themselves from desperate poverty.

Boaz demonstrates the power of God’s commands in the life of a faithful Israelite to ensure protection for the vulnerable members of society. He takes up the case of Naomi and Ruth with their closest male relative who has the first option to execute these kinship duties towards them. When this relative is not interested, Boaz takes the responsibility for Naomi and Ruth. He legitimates his commitment in front of the court of elders at the city gate (Goslinga 1966: 158; Morris 1968: 297–298). They presided over the negotiations between Boaz and the closest relative. Through the good deeds of a faithful Israelite, who acted according to God’s commands, the two widows are safeguarded against a life of desperate poverty.
Narratives about poverty are balanced by narratives about wealthy Israelites who were also faithful believers. Abraham and Jacob are listed among the heroes of faith in the New Testament (Hebrews 11). Less well known, perhaps, is that Abraham already had wealth when God called him (Gn. 12: 5). Later on in Genesis Abraham is twice described as a rich man, who owned many livestock (sheep, goats, cattle, camels, and donkeys), slaves, silver, and gold (Gn. 13: 2; 24: 34, 35). The same is true of Jacob. Jacob had enormous business and farming skills. This is clear from his work for Laban, whose little wealth had grown enormously since Jacob had started working for him (Gn. 30: 29). Jacob too became wealthy with a similar range of possessions as those of Abraham (Gn. 30: 43).

Solomon is the best example of a wealthy person in the Old Testament. God grants Solomon’s request for wisdom to rule justly, but adds wealth and honour as well (1 Kings 3: 11). The descriptions of his wealth and the resources he employed to build a palace and the temple are overwhelming. The book of 1 Chronicles conveys impressions of the grandeur and exaltation of the temple (Japhet 1993: 400). Both Solomon’s wisdom and his wealth are interpreted as blessings from God (Japhet 1993: 639). However, part of his wealth and impressive building projects came from the use of forced labour, though not of Israelite but Canaanite origin (1 Kings 9: 15). Another part seemingly came from heavy tax burdens placed on the Israelites, if one believes the well justified complaints of his subjects after his death (1 Kings 12: 4) (Japhet 1993: 652–653; Brueggemann 1978: 33).

The possibility that a monarchical system of government can be exploitative is pointed out by Samuel (1 Samuel 8: 10–16) (Hertzberg 1964: 73). Although his warnings did not deter the Israelites from opting for a monarchy, Samuel’s warnings ring true throughout many of the Old Testament descriptions of kingship. Samuel’s rather stern warnings include that a king will need soldiers, agricultural workers, weapons manufacturers, caterers for his
palace, and makers of beauty products. For these purposes he will use young Israelites in his service. A king might confiscate the property of the Israelites to hand over to his officials, demand heavy taxes, and even eventually enslave some of his subjects. Despite these warnings, the Israelites chose to have a king and eventually did experience how kings can oppress and exploit.

Samuel’s warnings had firm grounding in the narratives about the Israelites in Egypt. Joseph’s tenure as second in charge in Egypt after the pharaoh illustrates how wise preventative measures against impoverishment can spill over into oppression and exploitation. Joseph’s interpretation of the pharaoh’s dreams leads to large-scale preventative measures against the coming drought to avoid a famine (Gn. 41: 34–35, 54). The Egyptians were the only nation in that area who had the wisdom and foresight to prevent a catastrophe and thus had the ability to sell food during the severe drought to other nations as well. However, the wisdom and value of these preventative measures are blemished by the way the story concluded (Gn. 47: 13–26). The Egyptians had to buy the food stored for use during the drought. When they had no money left, Joseph accepted their livestock as payment. Once that was gone, their fields were traded for food. When all their land belonged to the pharaoh, the Egyptians sold themselves into slavery to the pharaoh. The pharaoh exploited the desperate situation of his subjects as a result of a natural disaster to totally impoverish and enslave them. The subjects are so grateful when Joseph gives them seed to sow on their fields – now the pharaoh’s property – on condition that they pay one-fifth of their harvests to the pharaoh.

Another example of exploitative leadership is found among the returned exiles. Nehemiah stringently criticises Israelite leaders and officials who exploit the bad economic conditions suffered by poor Israelites after the Babylonian exile (Ne. 5: 1–19). The poor Israelites had many complaints. Some did not
have enough food, others had to mortgage their fields, vineyards, and houses to get money for food, while some had to borrow money to pay taxes. Some Israelites were desperate and felt helpless, as their fields and vineyards have been taken away from them. These people had to sell their children into slavery. Nehemiah’s anger lets him accuse the leaders and officials of oppressing their fellow-Israelites. Nehemiah commands them to stop forcing their fellow-Israelites to sell themselves into slavery. This practice runs counter to Nehemiah’s attempts to buy back Israelites who had to sell themselves into slavery to foreigners. The leaders and officials must obey God and do what is right. In this case Nehemiah understands that to be that they must cancel all the debts of the poor Israelites and return their property to them. These two things will enable the poor to get started again and to rid themselves of poverty. Nehemiah as governor realised that in difficult economic circumstances extraordinary measures are called for. The poor people carried heavy financial burdens, therefore Nehemiah never claimed the allowance that he as governor was entitled to. Adapting one’s behaviour in the light of an understanding of people’s desperate economic circumstances is what Nehemiah expects from the leaders and officials as well.

The narrative about Nehemiah and the returning exiles refers implicitly to the colonial conquest of Israel by Babylonia. King Nebuchadnezzar conquered Jerusalem and carried away not only the wealth from the temple and the palace, but also the elite members of society. The royal princes, leaders, and skilled workers were taken away as prisoners. Jerusalem was destroyed. The Babylonian soldiers tore down the protective city walls and burnt down the temple, the palace, and the houses of all the important people. Surprisingly, the poor people who were left behind seem to have suffered the least. Apparently their houses were not burnt down and they were to tend the vineyards and the fields.
The book of Lamentations vividly depicts the devastation and horrific consequences caused by the Babylonian conquest. The book is a direct reaction to events of great suffering and addressed to God. The author pours out his heart to God about the suffering in Jerusalem that has become so severe that it is incomprehensible (Westermann 1994: 86, 91). The severity and incomprehensibility show especially in the suffering of children (Westermann 1994: 153). The author of Lamentations does not have the words to express his feelings about the scope of suffering going on in Jerusalem (La. 2: 13). The author also does not know how to comfort Jerusalem, as the disaster brought about by the violent conquest is experienced as boundless as the ocean, stripping away all hope (La. 2: 13). Happiness has been replaced by grief and God is urgently requested to look and see their disgrace (La. 5: 1, 15). The immediate effects of the conquest are hunger and a shortage of basic necessities. The effects of hunger are especially severe on children. They cry to their mothers, fall in the streets as though they were wounded, beg for food, and die slowly in their mothers’ arms (La. 2: 11, 12, 4: 3). The effects on adults are as severe. They burn with fever from hunger until their skins are hot as an oven (La. 5: 10). People who ate the best foods die from starvation in the streets, while people who grew up in luxury paw through refuse for food (La. 4: 3). Parents are cruel to their young whom they are allowing to die from hunger and thirst, presumably because no food is available (La. 4: 3). The worst is that mothers eat the bodies of the children they once loved (La. 2: 20). Worse horrors than that is hardly imaginable.

Basic necessities like water and wood for fuel must be bought (La. 5: 4), while their properties are occupied by strangers and foreigners (La. 5: 2). They are treated with disrespect in their own country by foreign soldiers. Many men were killed, but the women were raped – even at holy places like Mount Zion (La. 5: 11). Elders are shown no respect, while the young men are forced to grind corn like slaves (La. 5: 12, 13). They are treated like animals, driven hard but allowed no rest, despite being tired (La. 5: 5). It is no
surprise that grief would have taken the place of their dances (La. 5: 15). The calamities that struck Jerusalem as part of a foreign conquest—of which I mentioned only a few related to poverty—would surely remove happiness out of anyone’s life (La. 5: 15).

Israel has also impoverished people through violence. Jacob’s family revenged the rape of family member Dinah by killing all the men and taking all the women and children captive (Gn. 34: 27–29). Their next step was to loot their village. The narrative in Genesis repeatedly emphasises that they took everything. They took everything in the city, the houses, and in the fields. This common practice in the Old Testament of warfare combined with looting must have impoverished many people.

5. Conclusion

What are the central themes found in Old Testament texts on poverty and riches? The following themes dominate.

1. God ought to be the first priority of the ancient Israelites. They had to acknowledge God as the only God and worship and obey Him only. Obedience to His commands was demanded as gratitude for His liberation from Egypt and His election and salvation of Israel as nation. They had to become like God through being holy and caring deeply for the vulnerable and marginalised people in their society. Worship of God means not only adhering to religious duties, but living according to God’s prescribed ethical values. Ethics and worship are inextricable and interdependent.

2. The Old Testament promotes the humane treatment of the poor. Strong ethical values are presented for preventing dishonesty and favouritism. The emphasis is on poor people’s status as children of God whom He has created. For this reason no one may insult, humiliate, exploit, or oppress them.
If non-poor people do these things, God as the Good Shepherd will Himself take up the cause of the poor.

3. All non-poor Israelites are implored to help poor people generously and to give to them resources unselfishly. Care for the vulnerable and marginalised people of society is an imperative embodied in different moral values. The aim of this care is to relieve urgent basic needs and to help poor people to live non-poor lives again. The ethical values of the Old Testament empowered poor widows (Naomi and Ruth) to safeguard their survival in a male-dominated society.

4. The Old Testament portrays two kinds of help to the poor. One kind of aid is emergency poverty relief where the focus is on provision for the urgent needs of poor people that, if left unfulfilled, could endanger or seriously harm their lives. Hunger, thirst, and lack of clothing are examples of such needs. This aid can be given in various ways, one being the practice to harvest certain crops only once and to leave the remainder to the poor to collect. A second kind of aid aims to liberate poor people from their poverty. Aid serves the function of enabling poor people to become interdependent insted of dependent on others and to be self-reliant instead of relying on others for the basic means of life.

5. The prophets judged deep contrasts between rich and poor as deeply unacceptable. Such contrasts were usually based on selfishness, exploitation, and deliberate ignorance of God’s commands. The ethical values of the Old Testament presuppose that special care is given to the weak, vulnerable, and marginalised people in society. Excessive wealth cannot be justified in the face of humiliating poverty.

6. Old Testament judgements on poverty and riches are always made to apply within specific contexts and not to be universally applicable to all
possible worlds. What concerns the prophets are how rich people they know of exploit and oppress the poor people the rich are sharing their lives with. Prophetic criticism and judgement deals with people in the world the prophets are part of, not all people everywhere of all times.

7. The Old Testament presents no idealised picture of poverty. The difficulties of poverty are clearly acknowledged. Being poor is hard and a constant struggle. Poor people are often exploited, oppressed, unjustly treated, and treated with contempt. Their personal relationships are often strained and even lost. Ruthless, wicked people exacerbate their situation. People are poor for various reasons, including unjust people not willing to make land available for the poor to farm on, violent conquest of colonial powers, and violent conflict that results in extensive looting.

8. The uncertainties of riches are clearly indicated in the Old Testament. Riches cannot protect the rich against all dangers and means nothing in the face of death. It is better to trust in God than in riches. Riches leads to more worries and can often not be enjoyed by those who worked for it. Nevertheless, riches are a gift from God to be enjoyed within its limited value.

9. God's promised blessings to Israel show that God intended human life on earth to be [1] rich in relationships with God, fellow humans, and creation and [2] abundant with prosperity, well-being, and meaning. This is seen in the lifestyles of the ancient heroes of faith, like Abraham and Jacob. Nowhere is poverty portrayed as an ideal lifestyle that God wishes for His people. If poverty was a state God willed for His followers, then why the strong emphasis on aid to help them escape from poverty? The strong emphasis on condemning the exploitative rich for their injustice towards the poor and the enormous significance attached to helping the poor presupposes that poverty is an unacceptable condition that is bad for human beings.