

## **CHAPTER 2**

### **BIBLICAL PERSPECTIVE OF MISSION FOR THE POOR**

#### **2.1 Introduction**

The purpose of this chapter is to shed light from scripture on the nature and scope of the church's urban mission. The Bible contains fourteen hundred references to the city, and there are at least twenty-five examples of what can be called urban ministry in the historical books alone. With the amount of scriptural data before us, it is not surprising that both the Old and New Testaments provide examples of outstanding urban ministries which give us important insights into God's will for cities.

A number of these passages will be examined and we will apply their insights to the contemporary world situation. At the same time the experience of working in the informal settlement of Orange Farm will be drawn in the hope that through the interplay of biblical teaching, field experience, and contemporary challenges, new insights will be found that will help us to develop the comprehensive mission strategy for the poor in today's informal settlements.

As the background for understanding Jesus' proclamation of good news to the poor, we need to turn first of all to the Old Testament, and then to the literature written in the period between the Old Testament and the New Testament.

Today there is great misconception that mission began in the New Testament or with Jesus. Mission did not begin with Jesus. That is why the study of mission theology should begin with the Old Testament. Jesus Christ is to be understood against the background of the Old Testament (Bosch 1996:16). It is He who gives the Old Testament its perspective. In order for us to understand the New Testament, we must begin with the Old Testament. Jesus himself recognized the authority of the Old Testament. The Old Testament should be taken seriously because it gives much background for the New Testament, including its concept of mission (Hedlund 1991:19). J.H Bavinck (1960:11) once remarked: 'At first sight the Old Testament appears to offer little basis for the idea of missions'

The Old Testament is important for understanding Christian mission. The Christian mission, which begins in the New Testament, has its roots in the Old Testament, where long before the incarnation of Jesus, God was at work. God has been involved with man right from the very beginning of history (Hedlund 1991:20). We find a consistent strain of thought in the Old Testament that appreciates wealth as a gift of God and regards poverty as blight upon human life, either as divine punishment or as a self-inflicted wound.

As the background for understanding Jesus' proclamation of good news to

the poor, we need to turn first of all to the Old Testament, and to the literature written in the period between the Old and New Testaments. There is a continuous tradition running throughout the Old Testament that regards possessions as a sign of God's blessings. In this view, wealth and poverty are regarded as good gifts of God and the fact of possessing wealth, even great wealth, is interpreted as a sign of God's favor (Pilgrim 1981:19).

This is true already in the patriarchal narratives of Genesis, which describe, often in great detail, the considerable wealth of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, or Joseph in Egypt (Genesis 13:2; 26:13; 30:43; 41:40). With their large flocks and families and numerous servants and slaves, the patriarchs bear the covenant promise of God without any hint of God's displeasure over their wealth. Along with this, goes an emphasis upon their generosity and hospitality to friends and foes alike. But magnanimity and wealth are comfortably compatible in these early traditions (Pilgrim 1981: 19).

A fundamental missionary motif in both the Old and the New Testament is that of God's compassion. God refuses to bypass humankind: He sends prophets, messengers, even His Son into the world (John 3:16). This divine compassion manifests itself already in the election of Israel. Israel had no claim to God's attention and yet God took compassion on Israel (Bosch

1993:180).

The Bible depicts God as the One who has compassion on the lost and marginalized (Ezekiel 16:4-7). This is why the Exodus event (*“I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery”* (Exodus 20:2) became the corner stone of Israel’s confession of faith: God took compassion on a band of slaves in Egypt and saved them (Bosch 1993:180). Psalm 68:5-6 says *“Father of orphans and protector of widows is God in his holy habitation. God gives the desolate a home to live in”*.

The term “Poverty” is an ambiguous term. According to the Oxford Dictionary its meaning refers to the external, economic, and social circumstances in which people live. The real-life situation described by this term, however, depends on the specific socioeconomic condition of society as a whole and on the social status of the person using the term (Oxford Dictionary).

The poor are mentioned 245 times in the Old Testament. The Hebrew terms ‘*ani*’ and ‘*anaw*’ appear most frequent, ‘*ani*’ about 80 times and ‘*anaw*’ about 25 times. The two terms refer back to the same root. So ‘*ani*’ refers to the oppressed poor, and ‘*anaw*’ to the humble and meek. In the Old Testament poverty is considered as an evil, as a consistently painful

fact, issuing in the establishment of relationships of dependence and oppression, which leads to the false elevation of the powerful and to the humiliation of the helpless (Nissen 1984:7).

There are some passages in the Old Testament, which imply that poverty is a punishment from God. We see this in the legal traditions, where poverty is one of the threats used against the violators of the Law (Deuteronomy 28:15-24; Leviticus 26:14-26). Likewise the prophets threatened evildoers with the loss of their treasured luxuries and a life of "sackcloth" instead of a rich robe (Isaiah 3:24). The oppressed, too, threaten their persecutors with poverty (Psalm 109:10-12). This same negative view of poverty appears in a somewhat different form in the Wisdom literature. Here we find a number of criticisms against the poor that sounds too familiar. The poor are lazy (Proverbs 6:6-11), or drunkards and gluttons (Proverbs 23:21), or carefree spenders (Proverbs 21:17). In these cases, it is observed that poverty is self-inflicted. And beggars, who shamelessly display their poverty, are much despised (Pilgrim 1981:20)

Thus we find a consistent strain of thought in the Old Testament that appreciates wealth as a gift of God and regards poverty as blight upon human life, either as divine punishment or as a self-afflicted wound. A more pervasive and fundamental theme throughout the Old Testament is the upholding of Yahweh as the protector of the poor and needy. The

needs and rights of human beings have been violated and one of the results is poverty. The language of the Old Testament is very precise; the texts speak much more frequently of the poor than of poverty

### **2.1.1 The Poor in the Old Testament?**

Some see the poor as the pious, some as a particular social group. Some see them as those who have voluntarily abandoned their possessions, and others emphasize the condition of those afflicted with literal poverty. Still others see the poor in the light of the Old Testament, as the designated heirs of salvation.

#### **2.1.1.1 The Poor are the Pious**

There are many people who think the term “poor” is virtually synonymous with the “pious”, though frequently with the qualification that such piety thrived chiefly among the literally poor. Even in the Psalms it is doubtful that the “poor”: can be treated as a synonym for ‘pious’. The poor and the pious are used in the Psalms principally to describe the socially deprived, people in great need, and the nation of Israel. (Seccombe 1983:25)

In Israel nation, God was seen as the defender of those with inferior social or economic positions. Poor or not, they were his people and enjoyed his protection. The king, as God’s vice-regent, came thus to have a special responsibility for the poor. This inevitably gave the poor a religious value

even when they were seen in a purely socially light, but their poverty was in no sense a virtue (Seccombe 1983:26)

Because God is pledged to uphold the cause of the poor and needy, who have no other defender, it is natural that a man in trouble should plead his poverty and need before God. Therefore poverty terminology in the Psalms comes to refer to a whole range of need and suffering in addition to literal poverty. Persecutions in particular lead the Psalmist to cry to God that he is poor and needy. This does not mean, however, that 'poor' has a religious meaning akin to pious. It is a description of need. The religious dimension of this language lies in God's known character as a Savior who rescues those who are in need (Seccombe 1983:27)

The third use of the terminology is to describe the nation Israel. It is clear that in Psalm 9 it is Israel, over against the nations that oppress her, who is described as "poor". In Psalm 68:10 the congregation, which God saved from Egypt is called "the poor".

Thus the dominant idea behind the poverty vocabulary of the Psalms is need, most frequently the need that arises from the attacks of enemies, be they rich oppressors, or enemies of the king, or enemies of the nation. The "poor" are saved in the Psalms not because "poor" and "pious" have any relation, but because only those in need have anything to be saved from

(Seccombe 1983:27-28).

### **2.1.1.2 The Poor as a Particular Social Grouping**

Most scholars identify the poor with the '*amme ha'aretz*', the term, which is used for abuse almost equivalent to "gentile" and noted that this group consisted of more than just the economically poor; the rich men were also numbered among them. Their poverty consisted in the fact that they did not know or practice the law in the way the Pharisees did. The converse is that the rich are the Pharisees (Seccombe 1983:29)

To see "the poor" as the '*amme ha'aretz*' is to opt for a metaphorical meaning of "poor" which is entirely conditioned by a Pharisaic viewpoint. But in a time when other parties existed, when the Pharisees, whatever their influence, were a minority, and when a large population of pious non-Pharisees practiced their traditional faith, paid their tithes, and made their pilgrimages to the Temple, to think that all but the Pharisees were regarded as despised outcasts seems unrealistic (Seccombe 1983:30).

### **2.1.1.3 The Poor as Those who have Left All**

The Qumran sect gave an impression that their new member must give up their possession to the poor in order that they should be without property. For other people possession of property did not mean poverty; for some it probably meant the end of poverty. A number of scholars focus on the

actual condition of poverty as something, which conditions people to virtue, or makes them receptive to the message of the Kingdom (Seccombe 1983:32).

## **2.2 SOME GENERAL INSIGHTS ABOUT COMPREHENSIVE MINISTRY FOR THE POOR DERIVED FROM CERTAIN OLD TESTAMENT PASSAGES**

### **2.2.1 God's creation and His purpose for humankind**

Any comprehensive treatment of mission in the Old Testament must begin with God's creation and his purpose for humanity. The notion of mission is intimately bound up with his saving plan, which moves from creation and has to do with salvation reaching the ends of the earth (Kostenberger & O'Brien 2001: 25).

The activity of God in the biblical drama always originates from without. As the Creator, God transcends the world He has made and is totally distinguishable from it. Yet his compassionate nature compels him to be involved with his creation. He is always present in the world through his involvement with humanity- persons whom he has made in his own image. God's benevolent intention with his creatures is ultimately redemptive, though humanity's need of correction also compels God to acts of judgment (DuBose 1983:60).

The first indications of God's plan for the world appear in the creation account of Genesis. From the opening verse of this chapter God's control over all creation is asserted. In the first six days eight acts of creation are presented (Genesis 1: 3-31). On the sixth day, as his crowning act, God created human kind in his own image and likeness (Genesis 1:26-28). Man as the image of God is installed as his vicegerent over all creation with mandate to control and rule it on behalf of his maker (Kostenberger & O'Brien 2001: 26).

Man was to live under the divine command (Genesis 2:16-17), but instead rebelled against his Creator. The sinner finds himself under the wrath of God, and this involves a change in relationships

### **2.2.2 The fall of humankind and spread of sin**

Genesis 3 describes the transition from innocence to guilt-the fall of Adam. Man becomes a sinner in this chapter, and the whole story of humankind is disastrously affected by the consequences of his disobedience to God. Man was to live under the divine command (Genesis 2:16-17), but instead rebels against his Creator. In chapter 3 sin begins with doubt regarding the trustworthiness of God's character, which then leads to the desire for independence from him, and this results in direct disobedience (Genesis 3:1-6). Sin, which is described as a serious moral lapse, is also the reversal of the original order of relationships, God, man, the woman and

the animals (Genesis 3:1-6; 2:18-25)- and thus a deliberate attack on the divine order is established at creation.

The sinner finds himself under the wrath of God, and this involves a change in relationships: the intimacy between the man and the woman is broken, the woman will feel the pangs of childbirth (Genesis 3:16), and the man is cursed in relation to the ground. His relation to the environment is marked by frustration and pain (Genesis 3:17-19); Romans 8:20-23), and he is unable to exercise his dominion over nature in a proper way. Both the man and the woman are banished from the Garden, and their relationship with the Maker now assumes a negative rather than a positive form (Genesis 3:22-24). A bright note, however, appears in verse 15, where the Lord promises that the seed of the woman will defeat the serpent (Kostenberger & O'Brien 2001:27).

### **2.2.3 The Book of the Covenant**

The book of Exodus recounts how the Lord began to fulfill his promise of the land to the assembled multitude of Israel. The exodus of his people from slavery to the Egyptians is presented in the song of Moses (Exodus 15:1-18) as a new creation (Kostenberger & O'Brien 2001:32).

One of the earliest collections is connected with the giving of the

Commandments, as narrated in Exodus. Yahweh speaks to Moses and provides instructions on legal ways to deal with violations of his commands. One of his basic assumptions is that all permanent or hopeless poverty will be done away with (Pilgrim 1981:22). To fulfill this, the charging of interest is forbidden, the taking of clothing as a loan pledge is negated, bribery condemned and justice required (Exodus 23:6-7).

Every seventh year slaves are to be released, the land is to lay fallow, the vineyard and live orchards intended, all for the benefit of the poor (Exodus 21:24; 23:10-11). Singled out for special mention as the objects of Yahweh's protection, are the stranger, the widow, the orphan and the poor (Exodus 22: 21-27). His motive for the poor is made clear: Yahweh's Himself rescued his people when they were strangers and slaves in Egypt; hence his redeemed people should act in like manner toward the helpless in the midst (Exodus 22:21; 23:9). As further evidence of Yahweh's compassionate care for the poor and afflicted, He promises to hear them in their afflictions and to act (Exodus 22:23,27). (Pilgrim 1981:22)

In the several periods of its history Israel understood its election either as an expression of favoritism or, especially in later Judaism, as something that it had deserved (it was something even suggested that Yahweh needed

Israel; without Israel He would have been a God without worshippers) (Bosch 1993:180).

Israel's calling in Exodus 19:5 had the whole world in view. The nation was to be holy and to serve the world by being separate. Her life was to give clear evidence of Yahweh's rule over her, and thus to be a model of his lordship over the whole world. Israel had been chosen by the Lord from among the nations of the world, which were in rebellion against him. But, in fact, Israel failed to live up to her calling (Kostenberger & O'Brien 2001: 34).

#### **2.2.4 The Deuteronomic Law Code**

It is generally agreed that in the book of Deuteronomy we have an updating of the Mosaic legislation appearing in Exodus. The Law of tithe is spelled out, coupled with the admonition to care for the Levites, who possessed no lands (Deuteronomy 14: 22-29). At the Passover and the Feast of Booths, the celebration is to include servants, Levites, strangers, the fatherless and widows. As in the covenant code, the theological underpinning of this regard for the poor is echoed in the repeated refrain, *"You shall remember you were a slave in Egypt and the Lord God redeemed you"* (Deuteronomy 24:18,22). With these words, Yahweh affirms his promise to come to the aid of the poor who cry out for relief and to punish evildoers (Pilgrim 1981:23).

In the midst of this legal material is a passionate appeal “*Not to harden your heart or shut your hand against your poor brother but you shall open your hand to him, and lend him sufficient for his need, whatever it may be*” (Deuteronomy 15:7-11). The appeal to generous and ungrudging care is linked with the promise of the Lord’s blessing to those who give freely (Deuteronomy 15:10). Although it is recognized that the poor will always be around, nevertheless, “*You shall open wide you hand to your brother, to the needy and to the poor in the land*” (Deuteronomy 15:11).

It is here that we meet the concept of the Sabbatical Year, which figured so prominently in Israel’s poor legislation. The Sabbatical Year required three things every seventh year:

- a) The land lies fallow (Exodus 23:10-11);
- b) All debts are remitted (Deuteronomy 15:1-2)
- c) Slaves are offered release (Deuteronomy 15:1-6, 12-18).

The purpose of the Sabbatical Year was to prevent gross injustice and oppression from taking root in society. It was Yahweh’s desire that “*there will be no poor among you*” (Deuteronomy 15:4). We can say with certainty that the Sabbatical Year existed as a powerful symbol to Israel of God’s concern for the poor and for justice (Pilgrim 1981:23).

### **2.2.5 The Holiness Code (Leviticus 17-26)**

This collection is considered to be later priestly material, perhaps from the time of the Exile, even though it embodies many traditions that go back for into Israel's earliest history.

It is in this legislature that we also encounter the concept of the Jubilee Year. The Jubilee year is closely connected or related to the Sabbatical Year. But it adds one further provision, which makes it theoretically the most radical social legislation in the Old Testament. According to Leviticus 25: 10ff, every 49<sup>th</sup> year the following is required:

- a) The land lies fallow;
- b) Slaves are freed;
- c) Debts are remitted; and
- d) The new Jubilee prescription, the ancestral land is returned (Pilgrim 1981:24)

This additional, provision of returning ancestral lands and possessions to their original families was obviously formulated to prevent great disparity in wealth and lands among the Israelites. Its theological premises are plainly stated: *'all lands belong to Yahweh; He has given it to his people as a gift. Each has received an inheritance, and no one can sell his portion or keep another's in perpetuity. All have a continued right to their own land'* (Leviticus 25:23-24). Obviously such legislation, unique in history, would

prevent the accumulation of gross injustice, if carried out (Pilgrim 1981:24).

The concept of Jubilee was kept alive in Israel's memory as a reminder of the kind of just social and religious community Yahweh desires. And in the later prophets, especially Second Isaiah, it becomes the symbol of the eschatological age. In all of these themes throughout Yahweh is the defender of the poor and needy. He desires justice and mercy on behalf of the poor, the stranger, the fatherless and the widow. His words are a call to remembrance:” *I am the Lord your God who brought you forth out of the land of Egypt*” (Leviticus 25:38)

### **2.2.6 The Prophetic Tradition**

Doubtless the most familiar sections of the Old Testament on the theme of the poor are the prophetic warnings and judgments addressed to the wealthy and powerful during the various periods of Israel's monarchy. It was especially during this time of the monarchy in both the northern and southern kingdoms that greater and greater social disparities developed, bringing with them increasing oppression and exploitation. Out his social and political period of crisis in Israel emerged one of the most unique religious phenomena in the world's history, the prophetic movement (Pilgrim 1981:24-25).

In the name of the God of Israel, who had called them and sometimes compelled them to be his spokesmen, the prophets directed their words against the social injustices of the people and rulers and became the staunch defenders of the poor and powerless. It is to their message that we now turn, even though with great brevity (Pilgrim 1981:25)

#### **2.2.6.1 The Early Prophets: Amos, Hosea, Micah**

The early eight-century prophets became the earliest prophets spokesmen on behalf of the poor. Their critique against the social abuse of their society was grounded theologically in God's covenant with Israel, his act of election. This covenant had called for faith obedience, as expressed in the Torah. But Israel had become indifferent and unfaithful to the covenant, and this unfaithfulness was most clearly evident to the prophets in the trampling upon the poor and neglect of the needy (Pilgrim 1981:25).

The citing evidence against the poor is long and all too familiar-unjust courts (Amos 5:12; Isaiah 10:1-2; Jeremiah 5:28) fraudulent trade (Amos 8:4-5), unfair taxation (Amos 5:11-12), theft of land (Micah 2:1-3), violence against the poor (Ezekiel 16:48), wasteful affluence amid poverty (Amos 4:1,6:4f), selling debtors into slavery (Amos 2:6; 8:6), and even suffocating tithes. These prophets all agree that social injustices are most indicative of a falling away from the covenant God. They are all certain that God is on the side of the poor.

## **2.2.6.2 The latter Prophets**

### **2.2.6.2.1 Prophet Jeremiah**

When Jeremiah is called to prophecy, the fate of the southern kingdom is all but sealed (627 –580 B.C). Jeremiah speaks to this situation, but in judgment and in grace. He knows Judah’s day of reckoning has come, yet the rulers and people live on under false hopes. And they continue their oppression of the weak in their midst. Therefore Jeremiah proclaims the true knowledge of God, which expresses itself in a just response to the cause of the needy and afflicted. In a particularly powerful passage, Jeremiah condemns King Jehoiakim, the son of good King Josiah, because of his luxurious expansion of his already luxurious palace.

*“Doomed is the man who builds his house by injustice  
and enlarges it by dishonesty; who makes his countrymen  
work for nothing and does not pay their wages...The Lord has spoken “(Jeremiah  
22:13-17)*

Jeremiah spoke of the poor in several different contexts. Firstly, he, like most of the prophets, referred to them in his oracles of judgment Jeremiah 2:34; 5:4, 28; 22:16f. In all these instances certain people (kings, officials, priest, prophets and the wicked rich) deserve to be punished, partly because they have wronged the poor.

A second context in which Jeremiah speaks of the poor is when, in one of

his confessions, he sees himself as one of them. In the passage he appeals to the people to praise the Lord, since the Lord rescues the poor from the clutches of the rich (Jeremiah 20:13).

The third context in which Jeremiah speaks of the poor is that of the fall of Jerusalem. The vineyards and fields were given to the poor to cultivate (Jeremiah 39:10; 52:16). They were entrusted to governor Gedaliah's care (Jeremiah 40:7) and some of the very poorest people were also carried off (Jeremiah 52:15).

Fourthly, the poor themselves are accused. Jeremiah says that at first he had thought that the poor acted foolishly because they were ignorant of the Lord's will (Jeremiah 5:4); but he found that they like the great (Jeremiah 5:5) were rebelling against God

The fifth and final context in which Jeremiah refers to the poor is when he judges a king (Jeremiah 22:13f). King Jehoiakim's actions were unacceptable because he was intent on enriching himself at the expense of others, in contrast to his father, king Josiah, who had fought the cause of the weak and the poor (Van Heerden 1993:221-222).

Jeremiah's instruction to the exiles in Babylon included a word about prayer. *"But seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile,*

*and to the Lord on its behalf”* (Jeremiah 29:7). Prayer for the informal settlements is a holy war against all the hostile forces that militate against the peace and well being of the city. By their prayer, God’s people distinguish themselves from those who delight in evil. Prayer for the informal settlement communities is a missionary prayer. It pleads that Christ’s Lordship be established in the informal settlement community

#### **2.2.6.2.2 Prophet Nehemiah**

Nehemiah’s prophecy recounts the returned exiles from Babylon gathered at the Water Gate of the temple in Jerusalem. They were celebrating the Feast of Trumpets, a secret festival that God had ordained as an annual celebration on the first day of the seventh month (Leviticus 23:23-25).

Nehemiah’s, the architect of Jerusalem’s urban renewal had put forward every effort to inspire the people to rebuild the ruined city. They had cleared away the rubble, erected the walls, and built new houses. It had been a tremendous undertaking, and Nehemiah was proud of the people’s accomplishments. But something more was needed. Nehemiah realized that moral and religious reforms had to be made, to give the nation a spiritual reform; they had to be made to give the nations and prevent the kind of decay that had precipitated its reformer destruction.

For social and political reforms to take hold in a way that would please

God and preserve the people, spiritual renewal had to occur. This could happen only if God's Word was known, understood, and obeyed (Greenway 1978: 45-46). The second lesson that can be learned from Nehemiah's is that the Word of God is never outdated. The Bible is always relevant, and it speaks to us in our time as powerfully as it did to people centuries ago. Thirdly, the Word of God speaks to the issues of the heart and society. When people understand what God's Word is really saying to them, when they repent on account of its judgments and take heed to its precepts.

#### **2.2.6.2.3 Prophet Isaiah**

The book of Isaiah comprises of three parts. The first 39 chapters deal mainly with the time of Isaiah (740-690 B.C) when Judah and Israel were in danger of Assyrian conquest. Isaiah prophesied in the southern kingdom where he probably had a long ministry.

Justice and righteousness are a common theme in Isaiah. If one reads the entire vineyard song (Isaiah 5:1-7), one observes that justice and righteousness are a response to what the Lord has already done for his people. In Isaiah 1:17 justice and righteousness are mentioned in the same breath as "doing good", which consists in counter-acting oppression and caring for widows and orphans. They require action. When justice and righteousness were neglected, God himself acted as judge on behalf of the poor (Isaiah 3:13-15).

Isaiah mentions a number of ways in which the poor are oppressed. The rich grabbed all the houses and land for themselves, so that the poor in the end had no place of their own (Isaiah 5:8). The laws made by the mighty caused that the poor should suffer; the poor were deprived of their rights, widows were exploited and orphans were victimized (Isaiah 10:1-2). There are even instances of robbery and murder (Isaiah 3:14-15). (Van Heerden 1993:218-219)

After destruction befalls Judah at the hands of Nebuchadnezzar, the cruel of Babylonian oppressor, the people were carried off to exile in Babylon. During this time another great prophet comes to the fore, the unknown author(s) of Isaiah 40-66. His words mark the high point of the prophetic movement. Even if he was preoccupied with bringing a word of comfort to his people and with searching out the meaning of their future, he also made a powerful appeal for justice and the cause of the poor (Pilgrim 1981:28).

It is this same Second Isaiah who envisions the coming new age as a time when God will send his anointed servant with the news of good tidings to the afflicted (Isaiah 61:1-2). This eschatological hope, as we shall see, becomes the primary vehicle by which Luke interprets the ministry of Jesus in his gospel, with the help of the text from Isaiah 58:6, which we

have just quoted (Pilgrim 1981:28).

#### **2.2.6.2.4 Prophet Zephaniah**

The book of Zephaniah contains two sections in which the poor feature In Zephaniah 3:12 the prophet speaks thus about the poor: *“For I will leave in the midst of you a people humble and lowly. They shall seek refuge in the name of the Lord”*

Hence the concept of poverty (rendered as “humble” and “lowly”) does not refer to a specific socio-economic stratum of society, but to specific attitude towards the Lord. The humble and lowly in Zephaniah 3:12, contrast sharply with the “proudly exultant” in the previous verse. In Zephaniah 2: the prophet enjoins the poor to seek to discover the Lord’s will, and to strive for righteousness and humility. If they do this they may escape the punishment of the Lord (Van Heerden 1993:222)

#### **2.2.6.2.5 Prophet Habakkuk**

Habakkuk’s depiction of injustice assumes the form of not of an oracle of judgment, but of lament (Habakkuk 1; 2f). To him the suffering ones, among whom he includes himself (Habakkuk 1:2-4) and the poor (Habakkuk 3:14), are exposed to oppression both from within and from outside. His own society is guilty of injustice, oppression, strife, contention and perversion of the law (Habakkuk 1:2-4). On top of that they live under

threat from Chaldeans. The latter are a nation of greedy and haughty people who became rich on goods that were not their own (Habakkuk 2:5-9). In this way they built themselves a “nest on high” (Habakkuk 2:2-9) to secure themselves against calamity but in this way they in fact forfeit their lives (Habakkuk 2:10).

The punishment that awaits his own nation is that the Lord will summon the Chaldeans to do to Judah as they have already done to many other peoples: to conquer what is not theirs (Habakkuk 1:5f) Ultimately God’s judgment will come on the Chaldeans as well, they will suffer the same fate as their victims (Habakkuk 2:7-10, 15-17)

This survey should suffice to remind us how central is the theme in the Old Testament prophets that because Yahweh is the defender of the poor and needy, loyalty to the covenant requires social justice. Israel’s judgment and grace are in large measure based on its fidelity to God’s demand for justice and mercy. When we turn to the critique of Jesus towards the rich and powerful in Luke’s gospel, we dare not forget this powerful prophetic tradition. A straight -line links the two together, both in Jesus’ words of blessing upon the poor and his woes against the rich (Pilgrim 1981:28).

#### **2.2.6.2.6 Prophet Jonah**

The book of Jonah begins by saying, “*The word of the Lord came to Jonah son of Amittai.*” This means that God communicated this message to his prophet. Jonah lived at the time when the Jewish nation was divided into two groups. In the north was Israel, and in the south was the kingdom of Judah. He was from the northern kingdom. He lived in the eighth century before Christ. He is mentioned in 2 Kings 14:25 as a prophet from Gath Hopher, who prophesied that Jeroboam the king of Israel would restore the boundaries of Israel.

Jonah was sent to the great city of Nineveh to preach against it, “*because its wickedness has come up before me*” (verse 2). Nineveh was a big city with many people. Nineveh was a doomed city (Nah. 3:5-7) and yet the object of God’s gracious dealings. Nineveh was a “great city” in many ways. It was a world and capital of a powerful empire. The city lasted for fifteen hundred years. Nineveh was famous for its beauty. It took ten thousand slaves twelve years to build the king’s house, and the city’s parks and public buildings were praised throughout the world. The city’s bewildering diversity, high crime rate, pollution, congestion, poverty, and squalor have created a kind of anti-urban prejudice. Cities are becoming dumping grounds for the poor people (Greenway 1978:17).

The evidence of God’s concern for Nineveh was seen in the mission, which he gave to Jonah, who became the first apostle to the city. Jonah preached

to the Ninevites in a bitter and resentful spirit, but despite this God used him. God was grieved by the city's wickedness. God made this clear when he commissioned Jonah to go and preach in Nineveh: "*Arise,*" *he said, go to Nineveh, that great city, and cry against it; for their wickedness has come up before me*" (Jonah 1:2).

The entire political and economic life of the city was based on military aggression, the exploitation of weaker nations, and slave labor. The prophet Nahum spared few superlatives in describing this betrayer of nations and city of harlotries (Nahum 3:40). Nineveh was the mistress of witchcrafts and a capital of vice. Obscenities, her culture by idols, and her beauty by violence fouled Nineveh's artistic achievements. She was called "city of blood" (Nahum 3:1) for booty and plunder had made her rich (Greenway 1978:20).

We tend to view the book of Jonah as a storybook about a missionary who was sent to proclaim God's word to a pagan nation. Jonah was not sent to preach a message of salvation but to denounce judgment on Nineveh. The thrust of the story lies elsewhere. It ridicules the narrow ethnocentrism of Jonah who allowed God to work only within Israel (Verkuyl 1978:97). And sulked about God treating those outside the covenant the same way he treats those inside.

Jonah is the only “missionary” who fervently hoped that his listeners would not heed his message! But God does not allow his compassion to be subverted. So the story of Jonah is about God’s people to be converted to compassion comparable to that of Yahweh. The story of Jonah is a story about compassion, which knows no boundaries and which, ironically, forms the basis of Jonah’s complain against God (Bosch 1993:181).

*“O Lord! Is this not what I said while I was still in my own country?*

*That is why I fled to Tarshish at the beginning;*

*For I knew that you are a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and ready to relent from punishment” (Jonah 4:2)*

God’s strategy was very simple: He commissioned Jonah to preach to Nineveh to return to him. The occasion for the mission was Nineveh’s great wickedness and impending doom. When we speak about Jonah’s mission to Nineveh, an important point to be observed is this: the initiative for the entire undertaking comes from God. It is all a commentary on the prophet’s exclamation from the stomach of the fish: *“Salvation is from the Lord!”* The book of Jonah begins with a word from God: *“Arise go to Nineveh, that great city, and cry against it; for their wickedness has come up before me”* (Jonah 4:11). God also has the last word in Jonah: *“And should not I pity Nineveh, hat great city, in which there are more than a hundred and twenty thousand person who do not know their right hand*

*from their left, and also much cattle?” (Jonah 4:11).*

Nineveh was a wicked city, infamous the world over for its bloody wars of plunder and oppression of helpless people. It was heathen city in every respect, full of idolatry and vice. Holy God was concerned about unholy people. He wanted his servant Jonah to get involved with that city. He found no pleasure in seeing the Nineveh destroyed.

The church, God’s new Israel, has similar problem. It is constantly tempted to be concerned exclusively with itself and ignore the unsaved world outside. Jonah represented all who have heard God’s call to serve him in far away places and found it very difficult to his calling as a prophet as long as he was allowed to stay within the borders of Israel.

Just as Nineveh as a capital of ancient Assyria, was the logical place for an effort aimed at influencing the entire nation, so the great cities of our days are the strategic centers that must be won if nations are to be disciplined. Failure to win these areas means failure to win the world.

## **2.2.7 The Wisdom Literature**

### **2.2.7.1 Psalms**

The poor also occupy a special place in the Psalter. Yahweh is depicted as the One who extends his hand of protection to the poor and lowly, as they

cry out to him

There are several types of Psalms, which especially contain this motif. For example, in the Royal psalm it is the king who is appointed as the representative of Yahweh to uphold justice and care for the needy (Pilgrim 1981:28)

*“He rescues the poor who call to him and those who are needy and neglected” (Psalm 72:10)*

In the Psalms of lament and other petitionary psalms, the speaker often identifies himself *God’s promise to rescue the afflicted.*

*“Listen to me, Lord, and answer me,*

*For I am helpless and weak.*

*Save me from death, because I am loyal*

*To you; save me, for I am your servant and I trust you as a poor man, who is confronted by his enemies or by severe afflictions”.*

In this situation he cries to God for help (Psalm 86:1-2)

Also in the psalms of praise, God is extolled for rescuing the needy and bringing the unrighteous to ruin. Psalm 146 seems almost like a text from Luke’s gospel:

*“Happy are those who have the God of*

*Jacob to help them*

*And who depend on the Lord their God,.....” (Psalm 146:5-9)*

In many of these psalms, a collective sense of the poor can be identified. Here the beseecher identifies himself either with a group within Israel or with Israel itself, who see them as standing in direct need of God in the face of their enemies.

*“But remember, O Lord, that your  
Enemies laugh at you,  
That they are godless and despise you.  
Don't abandon your helpless people  
To their enemies;  
Don't forget your persecuted people! “(Psalm 74:18).*

The poor and downtrodden in this Psalm are Israel itself, and the enemy are the rival nations. However, it is not always possible to distinguish between the individual or a group as the speaker frequently identifies himself with his people or a cause. (Pilgrim 1981:30).

But who are the enemies who afflict the poor and needy? And what is the concrete situation of the afflicted? The petitioners describe themselves as the afflicted (Psalm 25:16), the needy (Psalm 35:10), lowly (Psalm 147:6), downtrodden (Psalm 73:21), meek (Psalm 86:11), poor (Psalm 40:18), orphans and widows (Psalm 68:60, little ones (Psalm 116:6) even barren women (Psalm 113:9). In some instances we can be certain that the distress involves economic and political hardships, with their consequent

oppression and suffering. Yet the circle is wider than these social ills, since it also includes sickness and different kinds of moral and religious conflicts (e.g. despair, guilt, persecution). But in all of these situations, except for the penitential psalms where guilt is the person's own responsibility, the poor of the Psalms see themselves essentially as victims who cry out to God for relief and vindication (Pilgrim 1981:30)

This brings us to the most unique feature about the poor in the Psalms, namely the merging of identity between the socially poor and the religiously pious. In effect the "poor" and the "pious" become synonymous terms, and when this happens the meaning of the poor becomes synonymous terms, and when this happens the meaning of the poor becomes "those who place their total dependence upon God." "*God my truss is in you!*" (Psalm 88:1-2). This type of stance defines most profoundly the meaning of the poor in the Psalms (Pilgrim 1981:30).

Even though it is true that we find a spiritualization of the concept of the poor in the Psalter that is not all. The social and political life-settings are still there. The situations of distress are still those of literal poverty, persecution, oppression, and afflictions. The poor are truly the victims of life and their enemies the powerful and well to do. What makes them "*anawim*" is the fact that their hope is in God and their enemies cries out to Yahweh with confidence in his promised deliverance.

God is depicted as the One who has compassion for his people. He took compassion of those who were suffering: *“Father of orphans and protector of widows is God in his holy habitation. God gives the desolate a home to live in”* (Psalm 68:5-6). This is indeed one of the most powerful “mission statements in the Bible.

### **2.2.7.2 The Proverbs and Ecclesiastes**

The wisdom literature has much to say about the plight of the poor. The wisdom literature shares a tradition that regards wealth as a good gift from the hand of God and correspondingly condemns the poor as lazy and careless, with beggars held in special contempt. There is also a sharp criticism of the rich, coupled with appeals to share generously with the poor. We also find frequent admonition to the rich to help the poor, Benevolence and almsgiving are praised and stinginess reproved (Proverbs 22:9; 21:13).

Above all God is recognized as the defender of the poor. *“He who oppresses a poor man insults his Maker,”* while *“He who is kind to the poor lends to the Lord”* (Proverbs 14:31; 19:17). *“Do not rob the poor, because he is poor, or crush the afflicted at the gate, for the Lord will plead their cause and despoil of life those who despoil them”* (Proverbs 22:22f).

Finally, in addition to these familiar themes, the Wisdom writers are fond of another motif, namely, the anticipation of a reversal of fortunes between the devout and the ungodly. This reversal motif often includes a change of status between the rich and the poor. For the present moment the poor may be in want, while the ungodly enjoy good fortune. Yet the day is surely coming, when the tables will be turned. Therefore we find repeated admonitions not to be upset by the present prosperity of the sinner. *“Do not let evil people worry you; and don’t be envious of them. A wicked person has future- nothing to look forward to try to”* (Proverbs 24:19-20). Or we find reassurance that reaches lead to sin and that the reaches themselves will be taken away (Proverbs23: 4-6; Ecclesiastes 5: 12-17).

Thus the Wisdom literature, too, takes up the cause of the poor and challenges the life and practice of the rich. Yet there is an ambiguity about wealth that runs through much of this literature. The afflictions of the poor are met primarily with the assertion that God will not let the righteous suffer forever (Pilgrim 1981:32).

### **2.3 SOME GENERAL INSIGHTS ABOUT COMPREHENSIVE MINISTRY**

## **FOR THE POOR DERIVED FROM CERTAIN NEW TESTAMENT PASSAGES**

### **2.3.1 Introduction**

The Greek term most commonly used in the New Testament for “poor” is ‘*ptochos*’. The term used most often in the literature of ancient Greece (*penes*) occurs only in 2 Corinthians 9:9, in a quotation from the Old Testament. A related term, ‘*penichros*’, also occurs only once in the New Testament (Luke 21:2). The predominant use ‘*ptochos*’ in the New Testament for poverty refers to the people who are desperately poor, wretched creatures who are fighting for survival. We will now look at the way the poor are being described in the New Testament:

#### **2.3.1.1 The Poor are the sick**

The poor in the New Testament are mentioned in one breath with the sick; the maimed, the blind, the lame, and others—all are numbered with the poor (Luke 14:13, 21; 4:18-19; 7:22; Mathew 11:5; 25:35). Luke 14:12-13 contains the exhortation to invite precisely this “gallery” of the poor to the banquet, rather than his friends, relatives, and rich neighbours. And Luke 14:21-23 implies that, apart from the local poor- the crippled, the blind, and the lame- there were also the itinerate poor: “*Go out to the highways and hedges, and compel people to come in*” (Luke 14:23).

For Lazarus, this personification of a poor man, lies ill at the door of a rich

man and waits to eat from the latter's scraps (Luke 16:20). Therefore, overly subtle differentiation between those destitute who are not yet sick on the one hand, and the blind, the lame, and the cripple on the other, is hardly meaningful. Conversely, it is likely that in many New Testament passages the treat of the poor, particularly in the Gospels; precisely this social milieu of the destitute is implied. Many of Jesus' healings occur in this setting (Luke 4:31-37, 38-42; 5:12-16, 17-26; 6:6-11,18-19). The account of the blind beggar Bartimaeus is an especially vivid portrayal of this correlation (Mark 10:46-52) (Stegemann 1984:16).

#### **2.3.1.2 The Poor are the naked:**

The plight of the destitute person is aptly portrayed in Revelation 3:17 when it states that he or she is naked (*gymnos*). To be sure, the blind Bartimaeus still had his coat (*himation*) (Mark 10:50). In fact Luke 3:11 no longer exhorts the crowd: "*He who has two coats (chiton), let him share with him who has none; and he who has food, let him do likewise*", To be "naked"- undoubtedly to be clothed only in rags, left to freeze in the cold (James 2:16))- is the mark of the poor. This is also clear from James 2:15 and Mathew 25:36. Job 24:10 already assumes that the poor person literally loses the last shirt-right off his or her back- to the creditors. In Mathew 6:25 it is also assumed that the poor who are addressed have nothing to wear: "*Therefore I tell you, do not be anxious about your life, what you shall eat or what you shall drink, nor about your body, what you*

*shall put on. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing?*"  
(Stegemann 1984:17).

### **2.3.1.3 The Poor are the hungry**

Often in the New Testament an immediate connection is made between the lack of clothing and utter lack of sustenance. Poverty is synonymous with being hungry (and thirsty). This association is made in Luke 3:11, also in Mathew 6:25 and 24:35-36 and in James 2:15-16. The beatitude concerning the poor in Luke 6:20- "*Blessed are you poor, for yours is the kingdom of God*", characterizes the circumstances of the poor; they are in sorrow and want food. The poor do not know from one day to the next whether they will eat or drink; they are always on the verge of starvation (Mathew 6:25-26). This is the situation of the poor when James 2:15-16 describes them as naked and without daily sustenance, lacking the essentials for physical survival (Stegemann 1984:17-18).

### **2.3.1.4 The Poor are the destitute:**

To be poverty- stricken (ptochos), in the New Testament terms, is to be destitute. Such people depended on alms for even the basics of life. For this, too, there are vivid examples: apart from those beggars already mentioned, Bartimaeus and Lazarus, there is the lame beggar in the Temple in Jerusalem whom Peter heals in the name of Jesus. (Acts 3:1-10). Alms might be given and received in the form of food and clothes as

well as in the form of money (Mark 14:7; Mathew 25:35; Luke 16:20). The poor in the New Testament are presented as the destitute, always close to starvation, often identified with the disabled and severely ill, poorly clothed, and dependent on the help of strangers (Stegemann 1984:17-18).

### **2.3.2 John the Baptist**

A direct forerunner of Jesus who was known for this attitude was John the Baptist, whose life and thought are important in our study of the challenge of the poor and poverty to the community of faith. According to Luke 3: 3-6, John the Baptist was noted for his use of the prophetic words of Isaiah (Isaiah 40:3-5), which announced salvation “to all flesh”.

One of the demands of the baptism of repentance by John was the acceptance of humility as a preparation for receiving the Messiah who was to come. Only the meek, the poor, the rejected, who experienced the tearing pain of death, could receive the “Servant of Yahweh”. So, when John sent messengers from prison to ask Jesus if he was “He who was to come”, the Nazarene’s answer was to describe the events which confirmed that He was the Son of God: “*The blind receive their sight and the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear, the dead are raised-up, and the poor have good news preached to them,*” (Mathew 11:5) (De Santa Ana 1981:12-13).

### **2.3.3 Jesus proclaimed the Kingdom to the poor**

In Mathew 11:5, Jesus indicates the great importance of the poor in the development of his ministry. It is to them that the Kingdom of God is announced. Jesus used the words of Isaiah 61:1-2 saying that it is to the poor the good news is preached:

*“The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives, to recover sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed, to proclaim the acceptance year of the Lord.”* (Luke 4:17-19).

Jesus is the Spirit-anointed prophet who announces the new area of salvation which he brings to pass as the anointed Messiah (Isaiah 61:1-2; 58:6). The nature of his mission is marked out by four infinitival expression, three of which involve preaching: *‘to preach good news to the poor’*, *‘to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind’*, *‘to release the oppressed’* and *‘to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favour’*. The ‘poor’ to whom the good news is announced refers more generally to the ‘dispossessed, the excluded’ who were forced to depend upon God (Kostenberger & O’Brien 2001:117).

*‘He has anointed me to preach good news to the poor’*. We regard this phrase as the most significant in Luke. The idea of being anointed to carry out a divinely-commissioned task is central to the Old Testament, and in Isaiah it is linked with the proclamation of good news to a captive people.

In this passage the good news is said to be directed specifically to the poor (Pilgrim 1981:67).

*'He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives'*. The word for release seems to provide the best clue to Luke's intention. In Septuagint, "release" is used as a technical term for the Year of Jubilee ("Year of release" Leviticus 25-27) or for the Sabbath year (Deuteronomy 15:1; Exodus 23:11), so that it has the social and economic meaning of release of debts. But in Luke /Acts it has the primary meaning of "forgiveness". Therefore, in both the ministry of Jesus and in the apostolic preaching, the word "release" is used specifically for the bondage of sin and evil, which is removed through the forgiving power of Jesus. Still, its presence in the Old Testament quote from Isaiah may suggest that it retains something of its connection with the jubilee hope of social and economic release (Pilgrim 1981: 68).

*'Recovering the sight to the blind'*. Only once in his writings does Luke employ the metaphorical image of the blind (Luke 6:39/Mathew 15:14). In all other cases it has its literal meaning. The encounter between Jesus and the blind result in the joyful recovery of their sight (Luke 7:21; 18:35-43).

*'To set liberty to those who are oppressed'*. The literal meaning of word for oppressed means "broken in pieces," which would suggest social

injustices, and the context of Isaiah 58:6 supports this. The use of the word “release” by Luke points in the direction of the burden of sin, which is removed by the gospel of forgiveness (Pilgrim 1981:168-69).

Jesus identifies Himself as the messenger proclaimed by the prophet and, at the same time, explains that His mission is addressed to the unfortunate, the poor, to whom He already announces an end to their suffering. Their special place is confirmed by the beatitudes (Mathew 5:3-11 especially verse 3, and the parallel passage in Luke 6:20, where the blessed are the poor in the material, and not only in spiritual sense).

In these texts Jesus indicates that with His coming the poor will be blessed, “*for theirs is the Kingdom of heaven*”. Because they have nothing, they are particularly ready to open themselves to the saving action of Jesus. “*Only the outcast, the publicans, sinners and harlots are ready to repent. Jesus knows that it was to them He was sent*” (Mark 2:17). God takes more pleasure in one sinner who repents than in ninety- nine just persons (Luke 15:1-10). It is the hungry and those who mourn, those who know they are poor, who receive the promise of salvation (Luke 6:20ff; Mathew 5:3-60). (De Santa Ana 1981:14)

#### **2.3.4 Christ’s presence among the poor**

According to the Gospel message, although the poor are granted privileges, they are also the unfortunates who must be helped. They are the needy people whom we must assist. No other text makes this so clear and emphatic as the famous passage in Mathew 25:31-46, where the Lord describe the nature of the last judgment, with which the evangelist concludes the public ministry of Jesus. The all-powerful judge considers the unfortunate, the poor, hungry, naked, homeless, thirsty, prisoners, and others as his brothers; what has been done to them has also been done to Him meaning of Christ's presence among the poor has a clear eschatological dimension. It does not mean that poverty is sanctified as a virtue, but rather that, while therefore, be ready to accept His will, which is not only for the last day since what we do or do not do today to recognize his presence among the poor is already something the Judge will take into account in his judgment. This is also vital important to the Church which, in the light of Mathew 25:31-46, defines its faithfulness to Jesus Christ in accordance with its position in relation to the challenge of the poor and poverty (De Santa Ana 1981:19-20).

To sum up, the importance of the poor in the message of Jesus can be seen fundamentally in the life of the Nazarene himself: Jesus' whole existence is a clear demonstration of what it was to be really poor. He was the full incarnation of the "servant of the Lord", through whom is fulfilled the justice of God (Isaiah 53; Mark 14:50-16:8).

Those who are poor in this world can have confidence in this life full of fruit, the seeds of deep hope the expression of justice into account, sharing so many things with them, shows that God does not forget them. Although the life of the poor seems to be a sterile tree, they can continue to live in hope, for God has not left them to one side. Examples of such poor were Mary, the Lord's mother, and Simeon (Luke 2:25-32) despite the setbacks and pain they each had to suffer they could see the glory of God and- even more important- they could be instruments of his will.

They were not people who sought material poverty because it represented some virtue, neither did they feel spiritually superior or great. Rather, they were poor people who were ready to share with others the little they had (and thereof ready to practice brotherly charity), not making their humble condition a motive for pride, but neither were they greedy for riches. In reality, their poverty was linked with a total and absolute trust in God, shown in a limitless availability to the Lord. Instead of keeping things for themselves, the truly poor are ready to share what they have with those who in any way live humility. That is why the poor, although lacking in material possessions, try at least to share their hopes. The witness of the poor of Yahweh is seen in their active waiting for the Kingdom and its justice, and not by the cultivation of poverty as if it were an ideal for life.

### **2.3.5 Jesus' sending of the twelve (Luke 9:1-6)**

The sending of the twelve forms an integral part of Jesus' own mission. From a larger group of disciples Jesus chose and commissioned twelve 'apostles' (Greek- 'apostoloi', Luke 6:12-15). He now shares his power and authority with them, and sends (apostello) them on their mission (Luke 9:1-2), which involves them also in preaching the rule of God and healing the sick. This ministry has in view the reconstitution of Israel (Luke 6:13; 22:30). Luke's description of the twelve's mission is reminiscent of his portrayal of Jesus' mission and message which was developed in the light of the Isaiah quotation in Luke 4:18-19

The twelve are to depend on God as they journey, recognizing the urgency of their message. They are to take no extra provisions, relying instead on those who respond to supply their basic needs. Since they are an integral part of Jesus' mission to God's people, Israel, the twelve can expect the sort of opposition that he faced; some of the towns they visit will not welcome them (Luke 9:5) (Kostenberger & O'Brien 2001:119).

When Jesus sent his disciples out to preach and to heal He made them fully dependent on the hospitality of those who received them, quoting a time honored principle, "*the laborer deserve his food*" (Mathew 10:10; Luke 9:4; 10:7-8) Jesus' himself frequently accepted the hospitality of others, not only at banquets in the homes of wealthy but in the homes of his own

followers, as Peter's mother-in-law (Mark 1:31) or in sisters at Bethany (Luke 10:38-42; John 11:1).

Moreover, Luke tells us specifically that Jesus and his disciples received financial aid from a group of Galilean women, whose support continued even when he went up to Jerusalem for the last days of his life (Luke 8:1-3). We further learn that Jesus and his closest followers lived from a common purse. Without any private income of their own from the time they accepted Jesus' call to follow Him, the disciples placed the gifts of others into their common fund and from this they purchased their daily needs, paid the temple tax, helped the poor and celebrated the great feast days. Judas Iscariot's role as purse-keeper is well known (John 13:29) (Pilgrim 1981:46-47).

### **2.3.6 The Poor and Poverty in the Church of the first century**

The Acts of the Apostles is a narrative of missionary expansion which commences with a small group of Jesus' disciples in Jerusalem and extend across significant ethnic, religious and geographical boundaries to end in Rome where Paul preaches the gospel of the risen Christ to Jew and Gentile alike. The opening verses of Acts show close literary connections with Gospel of Luke (Kostenberger & O'Brien 2001:127-128).

St Luke's gospel and the book of Acts reflect the interpretation of the

communities influenced by the missionary work of the Apostle Paul, although it is important to note that their author shows an interest in social questions which is less obvious in the thinking of St. Paul, at least as it appears in the Pauline texts available today.

In those days, when Rome's domination had spread throughout the Mediterranean, constituting the most empire the region had ever known, the definition of rich and poor was based on the ownership of property, and especially buildings. Those who had them were powerful; ownership was seen as the foundation of happiness, giving the right to freedom and independence, and a sign of power. The lack of property was synonymous with dependence and with obligation to earn one's daily bread by work which was considered to be inferior.

The Lord's acceptance of the Gentiles and pagans, which constitutes one of the basic elements of St Paul's preaching, must be understood as the confirmation in history of the fulfillment of God's justice with the coming of the Kingdom of God. The attraction of the Christian communities for the poor did not encourage them to escape from the world and ignore their social condition, but to assume it fully. This attraction was not exclusive to the first century A.D.; a couple of century later, it become more marked.

Many of the names clumsily carved on the walls of the Roman catacombs

were certainly those of slaves who were freed, but never became rich for example Stephan's, Herman's and so on. Their awareness of their social condition, in the ideological and political framework of that time, strengthened their hope in the coming of the Kingdom of God and the imminent return of the Lord, whom they awaited so anxiously. This hope in turn inspired the Church's missionary work, whose rapid expansion was due to affinity between the aspirations of these sectors of society and the content of the Gospel message, which was presented to them.

### **2.3.7 The Primitive Christian community in Jerusalem**

There is no evidence that the community in Jerusalem included people with power or strong social influence. The book of Acts says they were ordinary people with varying amounts of possessions, but who were ready to share them. The atmosphere of prayer and expectation of the imminent coming of the Holy Spirit and the return of the Lord indicates that their members came from the category that we can describe as "the poor of Yahweh".

The decisive experience in the formation of this community was the pouring out of the Holy Spirit in the days of Pentecost following the resurrection of Jesus Christ (Acts 2). Many were baptized as a consequence of this:

*"And they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the*

*breaking of bread, and prayers. And fear came upon every soul; and many wonders and signs were done through the apostles. And all who believed were together and had all things in common; and sold their possessions and goods and distributed them to all, as any had need. And day by day, attending the temple together and breaking bread in their homes, they partook of food with glad and generous hearts”*  
(Acts 2: 42-46).

One of the basic characteristics of the new community, then, was the common ownership of goods. The significance of the community of goods in a group such as the primitive Christian church in Jerusalem basically reflects at the material level the kind of spiritual communion, which should prevail in the Church. In other words, it is an expression of a deep fellowship, emphasized by the summary of chapter 4:32: “*Now the company of those who believed were one heart and soul.*”

Since they share one faith, the unity of Christians is expressed above all in the union of the spirits of those who comprise the community; this is why they pray together, share the Eucharist in each other’s homes, and meet together in the temple. Inevitably, this had the effect, particularly in the early days, of eliminating the poverty of many who joined the community. This can be seen in Acts 4:34: “*There was not a needy person among them*”, which seems to confirm the promise found in Deuteronomy 15: 4 “*But there will be no poor among you.*”

Goods are shared not to make oneself poor because poverty is seen as an ideal, but to vanquish and eradicate poverty, so that there shall be no poor. The road we are shown, the ideal we are to pursue, is brotherly love, which is expressed by the act of sharing with the poor. Now this does not mean that the community of goods had the force of a law in the Jerusalem church; this would be a denial of the Gospel and the freedom, which it brings. A quick reading of the story of Ananias and Sapphires (Acts 5:1-11), who sold a possession and did not give the whole of the proceeds to the community, might indicate that sharing goods was an obligation. So the practice of community of goods did not imply the abolition of all type of private ownership, but demanded great honesty in the act of sharing. In it was a clear indication that they should not accumulate wealth, although small properties could be maintained, as the mother of John Mark did, recorded in Acts 12:12; she had not sold her house, and it was here that the brothers of Jerusalem met to pray.

The account of the ministry of deacons (Acts 6:1-6) shows how the practice of brotherly charity and service was organized following its spontaneous manifestations. Notwithstanding the importance of this, the story contains revealing signs of how democratically the Christian community in Jerusalem was organized. Faced with the need to structure the services, the apostles did not decide on their own authority that should carry out this ministry, but brought it to the community of believers for discussion.

### **2.3.8 St. Paul on Poverty and assistance to the poor**

Paul insisted on the need to preach the Gospel to the Gentiles, without imposing upon them the demands of the law, and this brought severe criticism from those whose concept of Christianity was closely linked with the existence and perspectives of the Jewish people. The controversy began to take a more structured form, and certain points of compromise were reached on the occasion of the council of Jerusalem (43-44 A.D) recorded in Chapter 15 of the book of Acts. Among other things, the compromise gave Paul the possibility of going out on mission to the Gentiles on condition that he should “*remember the poor*” (Galatians 2: 10).

A study of Pauline vocabulary produces amazing results: the typical Greek expressions for poverty, such as ‘*endees*’, ‘*penes*’ and even ‘*ptochos*’, are completely absent from the letters of St. Paul. The texts where the epistle clearly uses the term ‘*ptochos*’ are Romans 15:16 and Galatians 2:10. In both cases, he refers to the members of the Jerusalem community where there are the “poor of the saints”. We do not know exactly what were the functions of the “deacons” of Philippi (Philippians 1:1; Romans 12:7) and ‘our sister Phoebe,’ a deaconess of the church at Concrete (Romans 16:1). We know the titles given to them, and conclude that these people were responsible for ‘serving at table’.

For the apostle to the Gentile, the most important thing was the exercise of brotherly charity, and this would certainly to some extent imply an active disposition towards the practice of charity within the Church, since the same members of the same body, the same community, were to take care of each other (1Corinthians 12:26: 11:18). We can say that within the Church there should be no needy, not even any poor, for, if the unity of the church is based on brotherly love, which presumes the equality of all members of Christ's body, any thing which create tensions, divisions, or rivalry, whether for social, economic or any other reasons, should be fought and overcome.

### **2.3.9 The Epistle of James**

The direct message of this epistle brings us back to daily reality. By this, we do not mean that the thinking of the Apostle Paul led us away from it, but, just as the problem of poverty is not given priority, daily reality certainly does not occupy first place in his attention which is preoccupied with theological reflection on the cosmic and transcendental aspects of the Christian life, from which result the admonitory pages of his epistles.

But, in the extent of James, we are confronted directly with the problems of ordinary people of the time. It is not surprising that James spoke out so strongly against the rich; this indicates that the problem was not avoided, but squarely faced, in the communities in which the texts were written. In

James the poor are the '*penes*'; the wretched, the weak, and oppressed, of low social standing, who are easily exploited and persecuted, such as, widows, orphans and slaves (De Santa Ana 1981:47-48).

They are the ones who can lose nothing in this world, for they have nothing. But, they are also the ones who have everything to hope for in their poverty, hence their anxious expectations of the Kingdom of God. James' contemporaries were more familiar than we are today with theological conception of poverty which must have been well known to them through the Psalm (Psalm 22:25-27; 69:34), and the books of the prophets.

In Isaiah for an example we read that the shoot which is to come forth from the root of Jesse (that is the Messiah who is expected to come in the future) will not judge according to appearances, but will bring justice to the poor and '*decide with equity for the meek of the earth*' (Isaiah 11:3-4, 58 and Mathew 3:5)." We can add that He will act, as Mathew says (5:3) on behalf of the humble and merciful, and those who in general area not now treated with justice. "*This will be the miracle of the end time: the poor shall be rich and will inherit the Promise land; strength will grow up in the in the heart of the afflicted, the lame will leap like the hart, and grass will spring up in the desert*" (Isaiah 35) (De Santa Ana 1981: 48).

The expectation of these humble people must have been so strong, and their material needs so great, that the author of the Epistle feels compelled to take their part and challenge the Christian community. “*God destines the poor to be ‘heirs of the Kingdom’* (James 2:5). It is therefore in keeping with the will of God’ to visit orphans and widows in their affliction’ (James 1: 27). He who tries to win the favors of the rich, giving them the best places in the assembly and giving the poor to ‘*sit at his feet*’ (James 2:3), ‘*is guilty of being a friend of the world and therefore an enemy of the God*’.

As for the rich, all their effort to gain more profit and satisfy their passions will ‘fade away ‘ (James 1:11; 4:13; 4:3). Decomposition, rust, and fire will reduce their possessions to nothing (James 5:1-2). Their lives will bring them only tension, conflict and injustice (James 4:1ff; 5:4). And their hearts which have no pity for others because they are ‘fattened in a day of slaughter’ can only lead them to ruin” (de Santa Ana 1981:49).

The exploitation of the poor through the rich is particularly voiced in James 5:1-6 which contains a severe denunciation of the unjust rich. The condemnation in James 5:1-6 of the rich is probably the most severe in the whole New Testament. The author here displays a general aversion towards the rich and takes the side of the poor completely. These threats against the rich are turned directly against a whole group of society (Nissen 1984:101).

The author of the book of James states that the Christian should respect the poor and behaves justly towards them in accordance with the hope, which opens the hearts of the people of God towards the future and leads them to live in an attitude of brotherly love and mercy.

*“My brethren, show no partiality as you hold the faith of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Lord of Glory. For if a man with gold rings and in fine clothing comes into your assembly, and a poor man in shabby clothing comes in, and you pay attention to the one who wears the fine clothing and say, ‘Have a seat here, please, ‘ while you say to the poor man, ‘Stand there’, or, ‘Sit there’,.....” (James 2:1-13).*

James takes a stance on behalf of the poor because he associates himself with the tradition of the whole people of God, throughout Yahweh was always on the side of the humble. The Lord’s judgment is very different from the judgment of the rich, who are always ready to accumulate and exercise power, which prevents them from having mercy and practicing brotherly love.

The justice of the Kingdom, outlined from choosing of Israel up to the sending of the Son of God to the world, was always with the needy, the weak, the unhappy and unfortunate. God’s action in history is to repair the injustice of the rich and powerful. James text can be considered, then, as a teaching to the faithful in the form of warnings and guidelines aimed at encouraging Christians to live and carry out true piety.

His attention to the poor is like an echo of Jesus' words in Mathew 25:31-46, which we have already mentioned. For James, the ethics of service and love are closely linked with the eschatological expectation of the Kingdom of God (James 4:12; 5:7).

In contrast to the direction of the teachings offered by the author of this text, the rich man enjoys what he has, guarding his possessions, dominated by them, and subjecting all other things to the demands of the administration of his capital. James condemns him for this, especially at the beginning of chapter 5: He is condemning the rich, and declaring that the end is at hand, which not only terminates their cupidity and enjoyment of it, but ism divine punishment upon them. There is a definite eschatological note in the warning.

This condemnation indicates that the author of the Epistle assumes that it is difficult for the riches to become Christians. It is the rich as an entire social group who are judged so harshly by this passage. Jesus had said that a man could not serve two masters. For the grave error of the rich is to have a divided heart, even going so far as to deny Jesus (1Corinthians 12:30). James is concerned with the situation of the former, the '*dipsychoi*', who behave "like a wave of the sea that is driven and tossed by the wind". These people claim to be part of the community of faith. Their

double-mindedness constitutes a certain danger for the life of the people of God, since, in the end, they will act as a “counter-power” to the Lord, opposing the Spirit of God.

It is this ‘dipsychoi’ who practice unfair discrimination, and thereby threaten the equality, which should exist between all the members of Christ’s body. The social differences they represent are introduced along with them in the community of faith. They cause murmurings and jealousy among the people of God. That is why James urges: “*Be doers of the word, and not hearers only*” (James 1:22).

## **2.4 Conclusion**

Hundreds of biblical verses show that God is especially attentive to the poor and needy. God is not biased. Because of unequal needs, however, equal provision of basic rights require justice to be partial in order to be impartial. Scripture speaks of God’s special concern for the poor in at least four different ways:

1. Repeatedly, the Bible says that the Sovereign of history works to lift up the poor and oppressed. God acted to keep the promise to Abraham and to call out the chosen people of Israel. The text says God intervened because God hated the oppression of the poor Israelite (Exodus 3:7-8; 6:5-7).

2. Sometimes the Lord of history tears down rich and powerful people. Mary's song is shocking: "My soul glorifies the Lord, He has filled the hungry with good things but has sent the rich away empty" (Luke 1:46,53). James is even more blunt: "Now listen, you rich people, weep and wail because of the misery that is coming upon you"(James 5:1).
3. God identifies with the poor so strongly that caring for them is almost like helping God. "He who is kind to the poor lends to the Lord" (Proverbs 19:17). On the other hand, one "who oppresses the poor shows contempt for their Maker" (Proverbs 14:31).
4. Finally, God demands that his people share his special concern for the poor. God commanded Israel not to retreat widows, orphans, and foreigners the way the Egyptians had treated them (Exodus 22:21-24). Instead, they should love the poor just as God cared for them at the exodus (Exodus 22:21-24; Deuteronomy 15:13-15).
5. The Bible clearly demonstrates that God have a great concern for the poor. God has an equal concern for the well-being of every single person.
6. Although poverty affect individuals, they are to a large extend associated with broad social factors. The prophets' minds were primarily directed to discovering God's will in regard to certain social problems. Consequently they sometimes focused directly

on the problems of poverty.

7. According to some prophets, mainly the effects of national socio-economic policies caused poverty. Poor people had nobody to fight their cause. Price increases, the introduction of taxes, interest, mandatory tribute and the confiscation of land were all results of this policy.
8. Exploitation of impoverished, defenseless people assumed various forms. This means injustice especially towards widows, orphans and aliens by way of perversion of the law, business abuses, theft or confiscation of the property of the poor and personal or bodily harm done to the defenseless.
9. The expectations of the justice of God and the Kingdom announced by Jesus motivates men to assist the poor, weak the orphan and the widow. By this means they practice and not only proclaim the word-true faith, true piety. This means taking the side of the needy, but also confronting the oppressors who are a real danger to the people of God. The oppressors are the enemies of God because they practice the unfair discrimination; their hearts are given to what is transient. Therefore, like the things they own, which are today but tomorrow will cease to be, they too will be ruined. Hence within the community of believers there must not be any of the social divisions, which exist in the 'world': judgment must go hand in hand with mercy and unpretentious

love for one's neighbor.

10. Paul requires that every Christian should, as far as possible, meet his needs through his own work (1Thessalonoan 4:12). In other words he does not feel attracted to voluntary poverty. The believer must not allow himself to become the slave of riches, but should adopt an attitude of self-denial based on and nourished by the freedom of life in Christ in the Spirit. Thus, although he himself is in need, the apostle is able to say: "I can do all things in him who strengthens me" (Philippians 4:13).