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JESUS' DISTURBING TEACHING ON GOD AND DEBT
The Teaching of the Torah



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First some thoughts on the teaching on Debt in the Hebrew scriptures, the bible of Jesus.

After the 10 commandments in the Book of Exodus comes a code of Laws (the Covenant Code Ex. 20:22-23:33), which includes provisions for the care of the poor. This is unique of all the Ancient Near Eastern law codes, although it certainly shows borrowings from other types of ancient custom and literature. Among some of its oldest strands of law are those which prohibit the taking of interest from a poor person (22:24), the command to give back every evening the cloak left as a pledge on a loan (22:25), rights for poor to harvest the fields, vineyards and olive orchards every seventh year (23:11). Particular concern is shown for the Stranger. The laws start and conclude with the stranger (22:20; 23:12), and then the widow and the orphan (22:21 and later 23:11). Why the stranger comes to be mentioned with the widow and the orphan is not clear perhaps there was large-scale migration from north to south with the destruction of Samaria, no one knows.

What is interesting is that the word used when commanding not to oppress the stranger is the same word used of the oppression of the Israelites when they were in Egypt (Ex. 3:9/Deuteronomy 26:7). In other words the God giving these rules is the God of Exodus, reminding the Israelites they were once strangers in the land of Egypt. It reminds Israel that it came into being by God's action, liberating a suppressed and poor part of an inhuman, oppressive society; and that part of God's plan is that they should create an alternative society, just and blessed, in opposition to the corrupt societies of the world. God had taken Egypt's poor, transplanted them in another country to start something really new. It's clear that that society was to exclude oppression and poverty, and yet these laws clearly presuppose the continuing existence of poverty within Israel itself.

In the book of Deuteronomy, there is a further set of Laws (12-26). Here the stranger the orphan and the widow are joined by slaves and Levites. It seems as though the legislator is trying to create new structures to help all those who cannot live off their own land. There will always be strangers, orphans and widows but Deuteronomy is trying to create a world where they don't have to be poor. And so in this vision of things a widow and a slave have the same right to secure life as a Levite, an honoured person in Israel.

The Sabbath and Debt

In the midst of all of this lie a series of laws about debt (Dt. 15 & 24). There was obviously a growing experience of debt among the small farmers of Palestine. Bad harvests led to financial difficulties people borrowed. Dt. 15: 7-11 urges the neighbours to lend what is necessary

(there is no expectation of interest yet). To pay back they may have to give their services as day labourers but Dt. 24:14-15 assures they'll be given daily pay. If the creditor demands a pledge, Dt. 24:10-13 insists on an honourable way of it being handled. If the debt is so great that he or she should have to enter debt slavery then on a Sabbath or fallow year, then Dt. 15:1-6 instructs the lender to free them from their debt. If they became a debt slave in another year, Dt. 15:12-18 says that in the Sabbath year the master must free them and give them enough to set themselves up independently. The language unlike other legal codes is sexually inclusive. Help for those in debt is required from their immediate neighbours and it is linked to the holy rhythm of seven years. The word brother is used for the first time of a fellow Israelite, implying a family solidarity with one's neighbour (15:2). Help is demanded even at the risk of one's own considerable financial loss (15:9).

The sanction is dire. In 15:9 & 24:15 anyone who forces the poor to cry out to God will be in a state of sin, a sin (*het*) which can only be expiated by the death of the sinner. The vision is that poverty when it arises should stimulate all to eradicate it. Sadly no-one seems to have believed, or understood this, so that by the time we get to the book of Leviticus and a new set of Laws which are called the Holiness Code there has been a retrogression.

Leviticus omits the provisions for those without landed property. The facility of those without land to live freely off the land in the Sabbath year is subtly changed. Dt. spoke of the stranger the orphan and the widow. Lev. speaks of the stranger and the poor. Not only does it presuppose the existence of poor in Israel, it demotes orphans and widows to the class of the poor. Also the strangers no longer have a place in the joyful celebration of Israel's great feasts of Pentecost and Tabernacles, the pilgrimage feasts, whereas in the time of Dt. the stranger the widow and the orphan and landless Levite were taken in by Israelite families to participate in Israel's joy. Now it is only every citizen of Israel (Lev. 23:42) who enjoys the joyful days in the booths, strangers are excluded.

Jubilee (7x7+1) instead of Sabbath

Dt.'s attempt to provide for all groups of the population is abolished. Now the liberation of slaves will take place every 50th year instead of every 7th. Given the short life expectancy most Israelite victims of poverty would not see a Jubilee year, would not see the end of their debt slavery, or be able to start again. There is still some concern for the poor. In the Jubilee year not only persons but also lands must be returned to their original clan, and debt slaves have clearer rights than ordinary slaves (Lev. 25:40). But for all the encouragement to help an impoverished brother (Lev. 25:35-8) the assumption seems to be that the poor will always be there. Lev. is more realistic perhaps but is it more truly God's will?

The vision of Dt. was not completely forgotten. The prophets kept something of it alive. Isaiah proclaimed a messianic gospel for the poor. And Jesus proclaimed Isaiah's Gospel to the poor. The meals he shared with whoever would sit down with him are the fulfillment of the festive meals of Israel in Dt. when there was a place for the stranger the widow and the orphan. The Acts of the Apostles sees the early church in Jerusalem as fulfilling Dt. "there were no poor among them" (Acts 4:34) and "the widows received a daily distribution" (Acts 6)

Let's look at the situation at the time of Jesus.

Jesus and the Torah

Jesus is involved in an ongoing debate over the true nature of the Torah and he stands with the prophets in their interpretation of it (Math 5:17). As he puts it, "The weightier matters of the Torah are judgement, mercy and faithfulness." (Math 23:23).

Something of this tension can be seen in the encounter between Jesus and a scribe who asks Jesus how to inherit eternal life. Jesus asks two revealing questions: What is written in the Torah? How do you read? In other words they make sure they are dealing with the same text but then the text has to be interpreted. In Galilee the Torah was in dispute. Jesus' teaching and action reveal how he read/interpreted the Torah. So let's look at some of his readings.

Purity and Debt

In the Torah there are purity as well as debt codes. The debt codes belong primarily to the Yahwist and Elohist strands of the tradition and the purity codes to the Priestly strands. Deuteronomy reinstates both. The codes apply to the table, the household and the sanctuary.

The origin of the purity code is in the creation story and the command "You shall be holy as I am holy". Just as God separates light from darkness the purity code separates incompatibles, cf. Dt. 22:9-11 on planting different seeds, using different cloth for clothes, ploughing with different animals. But the process continues - clean and unclean animals, women at different times of their cycles, Israelites and Gentiles, those who follow the Torah and the *amme ha-arets* (the dirt poor who have no time for the finer points of religion as they strive to survive on a daily basis). The list can extend *ad infinitum* at its heart is the idea that every individual should be complete and there should be no mixing of kinds. Mixing involves pollution, confusion, a curse, and death. Impurity is the beginning of the dissolution of creation back into chaos. The purity codes avoid this.

The debt codes are linked to the exodus and the gift of the Land. The land is Yahweh's, the people are tenants. So the land can never be sold in perpetuity (Lev. 25:23). The Debt codes extend the graciousness of the first gift to the sharing of the fruits of the land, e.g. Deut. 26:12 has tithing every three years to "the Levites, the aliens, the orphans, and the widows, so that they eat their fill within your towns." Similarly with the Sabbatical Year (Dt. 15:12-18) and the Jubilee year (Lev. 25:23-55) with its cancelling of debts, freeing of slaves, and return of land to the original families.

The debt codes aimed to avoid the violence of the exploitation of the poor by the rich. But it is clear from Jesus' teaching that as the land produced abundantly it was not simply seen as a gift but as a source of wealth, and so, instead of the surplus being distributed, it was hoarded for status and private excessive consumption.

Notice what happens when one code is read over another;

When the debt codes are read as subsidiary to the purity codes, poverty, from the point of view of the purity codes, is the result of uncleanness. If one were pure one would be blessed i.e. not poor. Hence the way in which the Temple authorities, who based themselves on the purity codes, blamed those they exploited by portraying them as unclean *amme ha-arets*. Their poverty was their own fault.

But, read from the point of view of the debt codes, poverty is the result of covetous greed, what Jesus calls *Mammon*, the unrestricted accumulation of wealth. And how do the rich in this society accumulate wealth? At the expense of peasant producers, through fraudulent collection of taxes and tithes, through lending to those who would have difficulty paying back and then foreclosing on their loans. All this is a violation of the will of Yahweh expressed in the non-exploitative social relations of the covenant. In Jesus' view it compromises the justice of the divine rule (the Kingdom). So in the story of the rich fool (Lk. 12:16-20) Jesus explodes the way in which the debt codes have been sabotaged. The fool, in hoarding, the excess out of greed undermines the Torah's teaching that the land is Yahweh's alone. Life is giving, whereas here having is holding and implicitly is the cause of the poverty and death of others.

In the time of Jesus the period, between becoming a day-labourer as a result of debt and so being totally dependent on one's own strength and health and no longer being supported within the mutuality of village structures till dying of malnutrition, was a matter of a few years. Hence the power of the parable of the workers in the vineyard that attacks head-on the isolation and marginalisation of the day workers in a society founded of the shared graciousness of Yahweh's gift.

Again something of this can be seen in the encounter with the wealthy man in Mark 10:17-22. He flatters Jesus, expecting suitable polite flattery back but gets none. Already the tone of the encounter is sharp. "What must I do to inherit eternal life?" He is wealthy with inherited wealth. It is

his expectation as an observant Israelite to inherit eternal life. He comes in confidence. He has followed the Torah since youth; according to the perspective of the purity codes he is pure. As wealthy he is already blessed by Yahweh.

Jesus' challenge is a challenge to his religious assumptions. The rich man who can only remain wealthy by keeping others poor has worshipped a God who condones oppression. This is then not the liberating God of Exodus. The God of the covenant has become a God of convenience. Note how Jesus slips in the phrase "you shall not defraud" among the commandments. There is no such commandment in the Decalogue but, for Jesus, to defraud implies the infringement of the whole covenant and the taking of God's name in vain.

The confidence of the wealthy man is total, so Jesus has to restate the radical message of the Decalogue in a powerful way. Instead of reading the Decalogue through the purity code he reads it through the debt code. "Just one thing you lack: go, sell, give - distribute to the destitute, follow me." This is a reading of the Torah as an appeal to the justice of the rule of Yahweh. Jesus interprets the Torah in terms of the distributive justice of God, who gave the land to be received and shared, not hoarded at the expense of others. He is appealing to the Jubilee code. The man leaves because he has great wealth, many possessions, and great estates. He can meet the requirement of the purity codes but not of the radical call to distributive justice.

Is the teaching of the kingdom of God new? Or is it merely a fresh statement of the essential dynamic of the covenant?

Into this reality Jesus comes bringing a message about a God who is not primarily interested in rituals of home or temple, nor of purity laws, nor of racial identity. Rather this God is reminding the Jews of where they come from. When Jesus says in Mark 12:28 "Love God with your whole self and your neighbour as yourself" he is evoking ancient memories. They would have heard the echo of the prayer written on the heart of every Jew and taught to all children in Deut 6: 5: "Hear O Israel! The Lord is our God the Lord alone! Therefore you shall love the lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength". And the second half echoes Lev 19:18 "Take no revenge and cherish no grudge against your fellow countryman. You shall love your neighbor as yourself." The people of Israel were a liberated people made up of migrant workers under the Egyptians; 12 tribes is a glamorous title for 12 separate gangs with little in common except their slavery. God calls them out of nothingness to be something, his people Israel, a people characterised by a unique freedom and as such they were to be a sign for others that such freedom was possible. They must create a land where there would always be a place for the widow the orphan and the stranger – the migrant worker! The people whose power was a gift of God should not threaten the powerless.

Jesus breaks open again the covenant message. He does it by re-naming God. The Jewish title for God – its holiest word that still today no orthodox Jew will use – is Yahweh. It is given to Moses at the burning bush. *I will be who I will be, I am who I am, and I will be where I will be* – in other words God beyond our concepts and feeble imaginings, Lord of history, master of creation. You can see the danger of this name. Too holy to be named God must be too holy to be near. This is the classic danger and option of religion, utter transcendence! But when the disciples say "how should we pray?" Jesus says *Our Father – Abba*, a close familial, everyday name The God of domestic mess, the God who is where we all are. In using this name Jesus had already subverted the power of temple and cult and potentially of those who controlled access to the God of Temple and cult. Now forgiveness is a direct transaction between God and us but implying just as direct a transaction between us and those who trespass against us.

If the Kingdom of God is the Kingdom of Abba then all sorts of relationships change, all sorts of limits disappear. "Many will come from East and West and sit at the table with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob in the Kingdom of Heaven, while the sons of the Reign will be thrown into outer darkness" Mth 8:14 The so often forgotten and latent universalism of Jewish faith flames forth again.

The way Jesus extends this transformation of people's expectations and perspectives is by his use of parables. In relation to our theme there is one particular parable we cannot not but reflect on. In many ways it is the most radical of all and the most truly revelatory of Jesus' own perspective. A lawyer asks Jesus what he must do to be saved, to inherit eternal life. After a conversation the lawyer sums up the law "Love God and Love neighbour". Jesus applauds him. But the lawyer in a typical rabbinic fashion says "but who is my neighbour?" The Rabbis typically emphasised the periphery of the circle within which love of neighbour could be practised. Jesus subverts this by breaking open the circle. The love we are to express is the love God has already offered us.

In the society of the time, with its rigid social hierarchy and its politics of holiness, to be poor and to be a sinner were often seen as the same, and so in some way to be poor was to be guilty. Jesus proposed a different view of God and of the poor and a different view of the exercise of power. In Luke. 22:25 God is Father primarily of the little ones. "I am among you as one who serves." The rule of God is the opposite of the existing order, service as opposed to dominion.

A Kingdom of the Living Dead

This is all part of the horizon of that kingdom or rule of God that Jesus invited the people of his time to look towards. At the heart of his teaching are a series of sayings that we now call the Beatitudes. The familiar received translation of the first of these (Luke 6:20 NRSV) goes something like: "Blessed are you who are poor for yours is the kingdom of heaven." But the Greek word *ptochoi* translated as poor is not simply poor. Poor and rich define our status within the same world but at different ends of a sliding scale. *Ptochos* is someone outside the scale, a destitute person, without family or social ties, a wanderer. Indeed it is derived from the classical Greek word for a corpse. Jesus' kingdom is not a kingdom of the poor but of the destitute, the derelict, of the living dead. The kingdom is not centred on the worthy hardworking peasant or artisan but on the unclean, the degraded, the expendable, the powerless, and all too often, then as now, the children.

Note the **basis** of his critique of power and authority – it lacked justice and truth. "What is truth?" Pilate asks and under pressure saves himself. The question expresses the void undermining Pilate's own authority. His wealth and that of the Jerusalem elite is at others' expense, that of their neighbours. Not to love one's neighbour is for Jesus not to know the God who is the father of the neighbour and the source of truth.

Jesus saw the misuse of power as arising inevitably out of the profit motive – mammon. (Luke. 12:21-23; Mth. 6:19-20) The rich lost their chance of knowing God, their minds clouded by desire to enrich themselves, leading inevitably to an insensitivity towards the brother in need. Cf. the parable of Lazarus and Dives in Luke 16: 19-31. But for Jesus to be deaf to the cry of the poor is to be deaf to God. Such solidarity with the poor made him a threat to the Jerusalem power elite, it provoked his brutal death and it inspires us to explore again the religious, political and economic, structures of our own time and their repercussions – repercussions for our sense of ourselves, others and the very image of God that we take for granted.

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Dr David McLoughlin

Worship Suggestions by Rev Elaine Russell

Collect

Loving God,

You created a world of light, beauty and colour.
In our wastefulness we have squandered your planet's resources,
Leaving many of our brothers and sisters, in an arid, monotone darkness.
Let us so learn to value your world, in all its finite splendour,
That we may share its bounty in justice and equity,

In Jesus' name.

Amen

Confession

Forgiving God,

In this season of Lent, we bring to you our prayers of confession.

In humility we confess that we have failed you, and failed our brothers and sisters.
In not sharing your planet's bounty we have selfishly wasted earth's resources,
Building landfills of plastics, metals and synthetics,
Creating mountains of food and dry goods,
Abandoning and neglecting as unloved and unwanted clothes, toys, and materials,
When across your world, children hunt for saleable goods to sell for a meal.

God have mercy

Christ have mercy

In shame we confess that we have failed you and failed our brothers and sisters.
In ignoring the plight of those whose burden of debt has led to their being
homeless, workless, without health services, education, or support.
We confess our unwillingness to sacrifice our comforts to provide even the most basic sustainability for the
lives of those of our neighbours forgotten, abandoned and ignored so far from our own borders, whilst they
die hungry, the debts mounting, as interest rates rise, and governments mortgage their futures to international
banks.

God have mercy

Christ have mercy

We confess in penitence that we have failed you and our brothers and sisters.
In seeking to keep all that we have, and ignoring the needs of those who have nothing we have selfishly
closed our minds and hearts to the plight of children, the elderly, the foreigner, the weak, the vulnerable –
your people. You have always challenged your people to protect the orphan, the alien and the weak, yet
today we hide behind Christ's words 'the poor are always with you', to sit by and wait for someone –
anyone- else to make right, what we have left so very wrong.

God have mercy

Christ have mercy

In truth we confess our failures, our mistakes, our omissions, in the sure and certain knowledge of your love and forgiveness, by our willingness to submit to your will and to work towards a new day, a new hope and new beginnings, building your kingdom of love, hope and justice for all People.

Amen

‘For you always have the poor with you, but you will not always have me’. Matt 26. 11 (Matt 23 v 6 – 13)

Jesus is anointed with oil, by Mary Magdalene, in the tradition of anointing that was a Jewish acknowledgement of Kingship.

Mary is rebuked for wasting the oil, its value to the poor for sale given as a justification for the rejecting her actions, but Jesus tells them that the poor are always there, and that this one jar of oil would not change the poor’s plight, but that her actions have supported, enabled and sustained him, at this most critical juncture in his ministry and journey.

He is shortly to find himself arrested, whipped and crucified; Mary’s actions presage his suffering and death, his ultimate sacrifice.

The Church has used this reading as a critique of Mary’s behaviour largely endorsing the ‘waste’ motif, whilst occasionally reprising the significance of oil in the gifts of the magi, in the birth narratives, and in pre-empting the visit to the empty tomb to anoint the body on Easter morning.

The significant points are: -

The role and relevance of the oil, in life, (birth) and death

The support that Jesus gives to her actions and why

The fact that Jesus was not saying that the existence of the poor was acceptable, and as ‘normative’ was thereby justified - the church has taken this as an opt out clause for inactivity, a reason and rationale for standing by – merely criticising Mary (another opportunity to decry the woman who stood closest to Jesus in life, and who was first and foremost in death and resurrection!), and not accepting responsibility for the changes that are necessary to build God’s kingdom of love joy hope and justice –based on equality - equity for all – the fundamental principles of his ministry, why he was there in the first place and the point that he was prepared to go to the cross to make!....

Intercessions

Loving God

At your heart there is always Justice, Truth and Mercy. We bring to you our prayers for those whose needs are immense, whose hopes have been cruelly denied, whose rights to Justice have been ignored, betrayed and dismissed.

As we bring to you our prayers for this world’s rebirth and renewal we must always remember that birth comes through blood, pain and with a mother’s screams and cries, to make life possible through tears of joy, hope and love.

That renewal comes in the dying and rising and that the promise of new life and resurrection is the fulfilment of suffering and dying.

Let us always be willing to bring to birth in pain, joy and sorrow, to renew in dying and rising, the hopes, expectations and possibilities of all people.

We pray for all those in power and authority, remembering especially.....

Loving God, by your truth
May we enable your justice

We pray for those dying in debt,.....

Loving God, by your truth
May we enable your justice

We pray for those without homes, and livelihoods, which have been lost to war, terrorism, and conflict.....

Loving God, by your truth
May we enable your justice

We pray for those who are dependent on the generosity of others' giving for their next meal, the medicines without which they will die, on the aid without which they have no hope, no future, for themselves, their children, their families.....

Loving God, by your truth
May we enable your justice

Loving God, we know that without justice there can be no peace. Without hope there can be no joy. Without freedom, there can be no future. We pray for the time when all people will know your justice, your peace and your freedom, built not upon the power of human authority, but by the prayers, hearts and willing spirits of your people in every time and place.

Amen

Rev Elaine Russell

Resources suggested by Revd Ray Gaston

Now the whole group of those who believed were of one heart and soul, and no one claimed private ownership of any possessions, but everything they owned was held in common. With great power the apostles gave their testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and great grace was upon them all. There was not a needy person among them, for as many as owned lands or houses sold them and brought the proceeds of what was sold. They laid it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to each as any had need.

Acts of the Apostles 4:32-35 New Testament

"Be ashamed, you who hold back what belongs to another, take as an example the justice of God, and no one will be poor. While others suffer poverty, let us not labour to hoard and pile up money. . Let us imitate the first and most important law of God who sends his rain on the just and on sinners and makes the sun shine on all men equally. God opens up the earth, the springs, the streams and the woods to all who live in the world. He gives the air to the birds, the water to the fish, and the basic needs of life abundantly to all, without restriction or limitation or preference. These basic goods are common to all, provided by God generously and with nothing lacking. He has done this so that creatures of the same nature may receive equal gifts and that he may show us how rich is his kindness."

St. Gregory Nazianzen

"Nothing is baser, nothing is more cruel than the interest that comes from lending. For such a lender trades on other persons' calamities, draws profit from the distress of others, and demands wages for kindness, as though he were afraid to seem merciful. Under the mask of kindness he

digs deeper their grave of poverty; when he stretches forth his hand to help, he pushes them down.
.."

St Chrysostom

"The Queen's Jubilee is good; but the People's Jubilee is better . . . 'Liberty throughout the land unto all the inhabitants thereof': That is the ideal of a true Year of Jubilee. Liberty to the wage-slaves; liberty to the landless... labourer; liberty to the landlord-ridden ...people; restoration to the disinherited of their share in the land which the Lord their God giveth them, and of which the injustice of their brother man has despoiled them."

Stewart Headlam 1886, Anglican Priest and Social Activist

"A society that lacks people of vision is a society certain of its end. Perhaps the crisis in our country, our church, our world today is a result of a lack of dreamers."

Leonardo Boff Liberation Theologian

"Where will the poor sleep in the twenty-first century?"

Gustavo Gutierrez Liberation Theologian

"To not take sides is to side with those in power."

Gustavo Gutierrez Liberation Theologian

When..... the five thousand people gathered around Jesus became hungry the disciples wanted to go to the market and buy food (Mark 6:30-44). Jesus asked instead: what have the people got with them? And when this was passed around to everyone it was enough. This story has a symbolic meaning. When the people in a community use their opportunities and work together in terms of basic needs there are alternatives – in the midst of a system shaped by property, money and the market, not to speak of political oppression. And at the same time the people are no longer victims but protagonists. The gospels are full of such stories in which Jesus empowers people to take their lives in their own hands. 'Your faith has made you whole', he says to them.

Ulrich Duchrow and Franz J Hinkelammert *Property for People, not Profit Alternatives to the Global Tyranny of Capital*

Gandhi, King, Chavez, Mother Teresa, the nameless saints--they are all irritants, challenging the careful, comfortable ways we have organized our lives. Yet we love them. Why do we love them? It is only partly because of who they are. They give flesh to what they believe and thereby awaken a spirit deep within us. By their words and deeds they call forth that part of us that yearns to give life, to love mercy and to do justice. By living their lives the way they do they reach for what is deepest and best in each of us--pulling, organizing, putting our love for justice to work in practical ways that serve the poor. We respect and love ourselves more as we put into practice what we believe in our hearts; and we love, with a universal love, those persons who led us on that better way...

Chris Hartmire Minister and Farm Workers Organiser