



Just Bible Extras

1: additional notes



The Bible

The English title, “The Bible”, comes from the Greek *ta Biblia*, meaning “the Books”. The Bible is a complex document, and from a literary point of view it is a library, composed of 66 volumes written by many different authors over a period from about 1,000 years before Christ to about 100 years after his birth. There are books in the Bible, such as Psalms, which are small, separate “libraries” in themselves, and several of the books are complex literary documents in which an editor has combined different sources and accounts of the same event. The Bible contains prayers and hymns, stories, poems, histories, meditations, letters and legal codes. The various authors vary in style and in the concerns they demonstrate, and each wrote within a particular historical context. Some of the books are fairly complex and others are only brief letters, epistles or stories.

God’s bias to the poor

In the Bible, at the crucial moments when God displayed his nature and will, he intervened to liberate the poor and oppressed (Exodus 3:7–8). The preamble to the Ten Commandments includes this statement: “I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage” (Deuteronomy 5:6, Exodus 20:2). In the Old Testament (the Hebrew Bible), God frequently reminds the Israelites of their former oppression in Egypt, when they were commanded to care for the poor (Exodus 22:21–24; Deuteronomy 15:13–15).

During the early period of its national formation, ethical guidelines were provided. Exodus 22–23 instructed the people to provide for strangers, widows, orphans, and the poor. Property is protected, a warning given against favouritism, and a system of “gleaning” established to help prevent starvation. Equal justice for the poor in court is constantly reiterated (Exodus 23:6; Psalm 72:14; Amos 5:10–15). Leviticus (25:8–43) describes the institution of the “Year of Jubilee”, and Deuteronomy (15) describes the requirement that all debts were to be cancelled every seven years.

In the societies of the ancient Near East, contemporary with the various writers of the Hebrew Bible, illness and poverty were understood as a sign of inferiority or a punishment from the gods. In contrast to this, the writers of the Bible view poverty and powerlessness as a scandal because it demonstrated that the wealthy were failing in their responsibilities. God, in the Hebrew Bible, revealed himself as the defender of the poor.

A frequent message of the prophets is that God punished Israel because of their exploitation of the poor. The rich “trample the head of the poor into the dust of the earth” (Amos 2:7) and the affluent lifestyle of the rich was built on oppression (Amos 6:1–7). The prophets condemn the rich who brought elaborate sacrifices but oppressed the poor (Amos 2:6–7) and exploited them in the courts (Amos 5:10–15). Through the prophets God announced the destruction of individuals and nations who oppressed the poor (Isaiah 1:21–26, 3:14–25; Jeremiah 5:26–31, 22:13–19, 34:16–17; Amos 6:4–7). Ezekiel suggests that Sodom was destroyed because they failed to assist the needy (Ezekiel 16:49–50).

The Bible states that when God’s people care for the poor, they imitate God, and that those who neglect the poor and oppressed are not God’s people, regardless of their religious rituals or the orthodoxy of their creeds and confessions (Isaiah 1:10–15). God wants justice, not mere religion (Isaiah 1:16–17, 58:3–7).

The prophetic protest shaped the content of Deuteronomy (10:14, 17ff), which goes beyond encouraging charity. A response to poverty and powerlessness is social and political action (Deuteronomy 24:19–22, 14:28–29). The later prophet Zephaniah suggested that the poor would become the chosen servants of God (Zephaniah 3:11–13) and become his instruments (Zephaniah 2:3).





Jesus and the poor

For you know how generous our Lord Jesus Christ has been: He was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that through his poverty you might become rich.

2 Corinthians 8:9

Mary was poor. Her homeland was under the occupation of Rome, she was from a poor background and as a young woman she was defined as “property” by her religious tradition. Yet it was Mary who was chosen to be the instrument of God’s liberation: the Lord had regarded her “low estate”, exalting those of “low degree”, filling the hungry with good things (Luke 1:46–53).

Jesus was literally poor. He was born in a poor home (Luke 2:6–7, 24) with few material resources (Matthew 8:19). His teaching demonstrates a concern for the “ordinary people” – the poor (Matthew 9:36–37). His parables show an awareness of the reality of poverty: stories about torn clothing; the need to borrow a loaf of bread, or women who couldn’t afford to lose a coin.

When Paul took up the collection for the poor in Jerusalem, he pointedly reminded the Corinthians that the Lord Jesus became poor so that they might become rich. The author of 1 John called on Christians to share with the needy, mentioning the example of Christ (1 John 3:16).

Luke’s account of Jesus’ first public teaching is significant. During the synagogue worship on a Sabbath morning in Nazareth, Jesus read the chapter of the book of Isaiah which announced that God’s anointed would come with the power of God’s Spirit, “to preach good news to the poor, to proclaim release to the captives, to set at liberty those who are oppressed, to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord” (Luke 4:16ff; see also Isaiah 61:10). The “acceptable year of the Lord” is almost certainly a reference to the Year of Jubilee. It is therefore probable that Jesus understood his ministry to be the initiation of a new Year of Jubilee, which implied liberation from slavery, the remission of debts and a fundamental change with respect to land-ownership.

It is clear from the gospels that Jesus responded to the plight of the poor and powerless. (In Matthew 11:28 the Greek refers to people who do heavy slave labour.) In the light of the parable of the Good Samaritan and other teachings of Jesus, it is evident that part of the meaning of Matthew 25 is that those who fail to aid the poor and oppressed (whether they are believers or not) are not the people of God.