

“From the Bottom Up: Poverty and Inequality in Ancient Israel and Today”  
2015 Runcie Convocation Lecture  
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I would like to thank President Kendra Clayton and the Graduate Theological Foundation for inviting me to give this year’s Bishop Runcie’s Convocation Lecture, and I especially want to thank the Stendahl Medal Selection Committee for awarding me the 2015 Krister Stendahl Medal in Biblical Studies. I am deeply appreciative and grateful for both of these honors.

It is a real pleasure for me especially to address you graduating students this evening. Your commencement ceremony is the culmination of years of hard work, of faculty hounding you to get your papers and theses written and submitted, and of the emotional, psychological, spiritual, and financial support of your families and friends that have carried you and borne with you during this formative time. Your graduation tomorrow will be a time to remember the past that has brought you to this point, and a time to look forward to your future ministry with great expectations.

I must admit that come before you with a little trepidation. In my thirty plus years of higher education, I have heard my share graduation and convocation speeches. Most were very inspirational, but there was this one year... It was blazingly hot in the outdoor stadium of my university. And the speaker was not the most exciting of orators. And after about twenty minutes a beach ball appeared that was plunked about among the three hundred graduating seniors. While we mortified faculty tried to seize the offending orb, the speaker valiantly persevered on. She paused suddenly to consult her notes, and thinking that the talk was ended, all the graduands stood up and began clapping, making

her return to her chair, while we faculty slunk down in our seats and groaned with despair. If a beach ball suddenly appears among you, I will know when to call it quits.

My address today will be on one of my passions. For many years now and helped by a Lilly grant, I have been investigating poverty and inequality in ancient Israel.<sup>1</sup> Particularly with the rise of the Occupy Wall Street protest movement in 2011, social and economic inequality has been receiving global attention nowadays. President Obama had made fighting inequality an early focus of his second term, although he seems to have moved away from this issue to the politically more expedient theme of “ladders of opportunity.” A scholarly tome on income inequality, Thomas Piketty’s *Capitalism in the Twenty First Century*, became a *New York Times* Best Seller last year. I actually have plowed through its 700 plus pages during my current sabbatical to obtain a better understanding of the systemic structures of global inequality. You will find your own ways of confronting these issues in your own ministries.

Poverty and inequality are not the same thing. While poverty focuses on the condition of the poor, such as inadequate housing or medical care, contaminated drinking water, or food shortages, inequality focuses on both the rich and the poor. It asks us to confront an important question that is often sidestepped nowadays: How can the ways in which the rich obtain their wealth generate poverty? The architectural structures of poverty and inequality are age-old. Ancient Israel had its 1%*s* too. Frankly, the biblical

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. Gale A. Yee, "The Creation of Poverty in Ancient Israel," *Journal of Religion & Society* 10 (2014), 4-19; Gale A. Yee, "Recovering Marginalized Groups in Ancient Israel: Methodological Considerations," in *To Break Every Yoke: Essays in Honor of Marvin L. Chaney*, eds. Robert B. Coote and Norman K. Gottwald (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2007), 10-27; Gale A. Yee, "'Take this Child and Suckle it for Me': Wet Nurses and Resistance in Ancient Israel," *Biblical Theology Bulletin* 39, no. 4 (2009), 180-189.

text is mostly about Israel's 1%, narrating the histories of its kings and their wars and their politics, its priests and their rituals, and scribal elites and their laws. It also recounts the sagas of their well-to-do heroes and just a few of its exceptional, male-worthy heroines. But the voices of its marginals, such as ordinary women, the subsistence farmers, the poor and destitute, the indentured servants, the *corvée* laborers, the debt slaves, the chattel slaves, the landless day laborers, the child laborers, the conscripted soldiers, the prisoners of war, the prostitutes, the beggars, the orphaned, the diseased and disabled, refugees and displaced, these voices are primarily silent. If we hear about their oppression and exploitation at all, it is chiefly through their advocates, the prophets.

One of the most difficult aspects of teaching the biblical text for me is disabusing my students that the world of ancient Israel is the same as our own today. My students at the very progressive Episcopal Divinity School are certainly not fundamentalists. However, because the bible is such a foundational text for their faith, it is sometimes difficult for them to distinguish the ancient historical world that produced the biblical text and the one they now inhabit. They often forget that they are not the real audience of the biblical writers, being so culturally, geographically, and socially removed from them by thousands of years. They often forget that the ancient author's depictions of their world is not their own. Just this past year one of my students refused to believe that the Old Testament was canonical, because the violent God that commanded genocide in the book of Joshua was not the Christian God of love that she believed in.

To help you understand the structures that created poverty and inequality in ancient Israel, I invite you to use your historical imagination this evening. I want you to imagine the daily lives of these ancient Israelites *from the bottom up*. Can we hear their

submerged neglected voices in the biblical text? What did it mean to be on the receiving end of the history of kings, priests, and scribal elites, to be the 99 per centers of ancient Israel? My hope this evening is that you will better understand the social and systemic ways in which poverty and inequality were generated in ancient Israel and that you will find some fruitful ways to help rectify these in their own configurations today.

So forget that you live in a world of labor-saving devices, computers, fossil-fueled transit, flush toilets, and so forth. Forget that you live in a world that accepts as true notions like personal freedom, liberty, equality, human rights, and democracy. Imagine you are living in the highlands of ancient Israel during its tribal period ca. 1200-900 BCE.<sup>2</sup> You are entering into a strange and frightening realm. If you are male, you probably will not live past forty. If a female, you will be very fortunate if you actually make it to thirty. The survival rate of your babies will only be around 50 per cent.<sup>3</sup>

Ancient Israel was primarily an agrarian society. Along with 90 per cent of the population, you are a subsistence farmer and that means that the plot of land that you work produces only enough food to keep your family alive. You have dreams and aspirations, I am sure, but your basic focus is on survival, getting through the day alive.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> To help reconstruct the lives of the ancient Israelites, see William G. Dever, *The Lives of Ordinary People in Ancient Israel: Where Archaeology and the Bible Intersect* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publ. Co., 2012); Oded Borowski, *Daily Life in Biblical Times* (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2003); Philip J. King and Lawrence E. Stager, *Life in Biblical Israel* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001).

<sup>3</sup> Carol Meyers, *Rediscovering Eve: Ancient Israelite Women in Context* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 98-100.

<sup>4</sup> Regarding the mechanisms of subsistence survival, see Roland Boer, *The Sacred Economy of Ancient Israel* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2015), 73-81; Aharon Sasson, "A Comparative Perspective: The Survival Subsistence Strategy - Animal Husbandry and Economic Strategies in the Bronze and Iron Age," in *Animal Husbandry in Ancient Israel: A Zooarchaeological Perspective on Livestock*

You have no time to read or become educated. (Actually, you are illiterate.) You have no time to make fine beautiful art, or contemplate the meaning of life. Nor will growing houseplants or backyard gardening prepare you for ordeals of subsistence farming. Growing the food that you and your family will eat involves a day-to-day struggle in a very hostile environment. Genesis 3 reminds us of this when God tells Adam, “Cursed is the ground because of you. In toil you shall eat of it all the days of your life; thorns and thistles it shall bring forth for you... By the sweat of your brow you shall eat bread... Dust you are and unto dust you shall return” (3:17-19).

Living in the rocky highlands makes it very difficult to farm. Before you can perform the usual tasks of plowing, sowing, weeding, harvesting, threshing, and winnowing,<sup>5</sup> you have to clear the land of its large heavy stones.<sup>6</sup> All these tasks are accomplished without our usual farm equipment like tractors or combines. Rainfall is concentrated in a few months and of high intensity. To prevent run-off and conserve water, you men will have the arduous jobs of digging deep cisterns and terracing the hillsides. You women work just as hard. Besides having and raising children, you will spend a big part of your time processing the harvest into food. Just to make some bread for your family, you will have to soak, mill and grind the grain, kneed it and then bake the bread in an outdoor oven that you shared with other women. To convert the foodstuffs

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*Exploitation, Herd Management and Economic Strategies* (London and Oakville: Equinox, 2010), 6-61.

<sup>5</sup> David C. Hopkins, "All Sorts of Field Work': Agricultural Labor in Ancient Palestine," in *To Break Every Yoke: Essays in Honor of Marvin L. Chaney*, eds. Robert B. Coote and Norman K. Gottwald (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2007), 149-172.

<sup>6</sup> David C. Hopkins, "Life on the Land: The Subsistence Struggles of Early Israel," *BA* 50, no. 3 (1987), 178-191; Oded Borowski, *Agriculture in Iron Age Israel* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1987); Victor H. Matthews and Don C. Benjamin, *Social World of Ancient Israel: 1250-587 BCE* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1993), 36-51.

to store them, you will be threshing, drying, pounding, pitting and pressing olives for oil, grapes for wine, and canning them. And for storage, you just broke your last jug and your last basket fell apart. To replace that jug, you must scoop the clay, throw the pot on a wheel, shape it and bake it in a kiln. For a new basket, you must find some reeds or grasses and skillfully weave them together.<sup>7</sup> Your husband Eli needs a new tunic. You must find a sheep or goat, clean it, shear it, process the hair, spin the yarn, weave the cloth from a loom you have built, and then assemble and sew the garment. And you are responsible for caring for those animals, feeding, grooming, healing, and, in the case of goats, milking them.<sup>8</sup> The word “housewife” takes on a new meaning from the bottom up in ancient Israel. You perform these multiple tasks so that your family survives.

Because the work of farming is so labor-intensive, you must have a large family. Your family is not like our typical nuclear one. Your household is often extended and multigenerational, averaging about twelve to fifteen persons. Because men exercise much of the formal power, your household will be described in the 21<sup>st</sup> century as a “patriarchal household,” the “house of the father,” which practices patrilineal kinship. Kinship is an ideology that determines how human beings relate to each other in society. Why do we call certain people “mothers” and others “fathers,” or “sisters” or “brothers,” or “aunts” or “uncles”? It is because societies and cultures name or construct these relationships into an overall social system. Notions of kinship, who is my mother, who are my brothers, depend on the kinship ideologies a particular society holds.

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<sup>7</sup> Meyers, *Rediscovering Eve: Ancient Israelite Women in Context*, 134-35.

<sup>8</sup> Carol L. Meyers, "Everyday Life: Women in the Period of the Hebrew Bible," in *Women's Bible Commentary*, eds. Carol A. Newsom and Sharon H. Ringe, Expanded ed. (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1998), 251-259.

The kinship ideology of ancient Israel privileges the male. Your household therefore practices patrilineal descent, in which descent lines are traced only through the male. Just imagine if the people you would consider “family” will only be on your father’s side. In your household, the father’s inheritance will pass on to your brothers, particularly your oldest brother. Marriages are primarily endogamous, meaning that you married within your father’s family line to keep property in the lineage. If you are male, your preferred marriage partner will be your father’s brother’s daughter or your female cousin on your father’s side. If you are female, you will probably look for a mate among your male cousins on your father’s side. This is why even relatives on your mother’s side will actually be from your father’s descent line. Just think about it. If the preferred marriage partner is your cousin on your father’s side, whom will you have ended up with, if you lived in ancient Israel? And if you are female, you will have to come to live in your husband’s household, the custom known as patrilocal marriage residence. Neo-local marital residence where the couple lives apart from their in-laws did not occur in ancient Israel. Romance is also not a factor in marriage. Your father may use your marriage to forge or strengthen relations with other family households or lineages.<sup>9</sup>

From the bottom up, this focus on family and the particular lineage to which you belong is essential to understand. It is the very source of your identity and a significant factor in your survival. Because of the harsh environment of the highlands and the stress on survival, your family household joins other kin groups for solidarity. Doing the hard work of digging cisterns, creating terraces, building houses and farming create strong ties

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<sup>9</sup> Gale A. Yee, *Poor Banished Children of Eve: Woman as Evil in the Hebrew Bible* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2003), 34-40; Sandra L. Gravett and others, *An Introduction to the Hebrew Bible: A Thematic Approach* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2008), 95-130.

of cooperation and closeness among you that are strengthened by the bonds of kinship. Any surplus crops are not sent out for market, but are stored for times of famine, which occurred often in ancient Israel.<sup>10</sup> If your crops are destroyed by blight or by insect invasion, you depended on the surplus of your kin groups to get you and your family through the crisis. If during one year your relatives come to your door begging for relief, you of course will assist them out of what you have on hand. The bonds of blood among you are that strong. If bandits or thieves attack your household, you can depend on your kin groups to defend you.<sup>11</sup> You and your neighboring family households cluster into bigger protective associations called clans, which themselves form larger groups called tribes. Israel, as you know, traditionally had twelve tribes, all interconnected in some way according to family kinship lines, unified religiously under the worship of their god YHWH.<sup>12</sup>

Now we come to the point where we can talk about poverty and inequality in ancient Israel from the bottom up. (You probably didn't think I would get there, did you?) The economic system of ancient Israel during its tribal period was primarily allocative. If your household needs food during a time of want, food is allocated or distributed from the surplus of other kin groups. If your terraces need rebuilding, kin groups will allocate or assign which men to help out. Military engagements tend to be

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<sup>10</sup> Nathan MacDonald, *What did the Ancient Israelites Eat? Diet in Biblical Times* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publ. Co., 2008), 57-60; William H. Shea, "Famine," *Anchor Bible Dictionary* 2 (1992), 769-773.

<sup>11</sup> Gale A. Yee, "By the Hand of a Woman': The Biblical Metaphor of the Woman Warrior," *Semeia* 61 (1993), 110-12.

<sup>12</sup> Norman K. Gottwald, *Tribes of Yahweh: A Sociology of the Religion of Liberated Israel* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1999); Norman K. Gottwald, "Recent Studies in the Social World of Premonarchic Israel," *Currents in Research: Biblical Studies* 1 (1993b), 163-189.

defensive, protecting the interests of the tribe and the smaller units within it. There is no standing army. A tribe who needed reinforcements depended upon the quota of warriors that were supplied by the clans or family households. A widow who lost her husband and sons in battle would be supported by her kin group. The important point is that in an allocative economy any surpluses of material or human resources did not leave your tribe, but remained within the tribe and allocated among its members to support any concerns or infrastructural problems that arise.

Things will change when Israel enters its monarchic period and is ruled by a king and his elites (900-586 BCE).<sup>13</sup> With the advent of the monarchy came an increased social stratification between the “Haves” and the “Have Nots.” At the top of the socio-economic pyramid were the king, the ruling classes, and the merchants that supported them. They composed only a small minority of the population, about 10% at most. The rural peasantry, the “Have Nots,” represented 90% of that pyramid. So we arrive at the question posed at the beginning of this presentation: In obtaining their wealth, in what ways did the Israelite ruling elites generate poverty in a major portion of its population?<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Reasons for rise of the monarchy in Israel are complex. See Paula M. McNutt, *Reconstructing the Society of Ancient Israel* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1999), 104-142; For socio-economic characteristics of the monarchy, see John S. Holladay Jr., "The Kingdoms of Israel and Judah: Political and Economic Centralization in the Iron II A-B (Ca. 1000-750 BCE)" In *The Archaeology of Society in the Holy Land*, ed. Thomas E. Levy (New York: Facts on File, 1995), 368-398. They include urbanization, centralization, stratification, standing army, king and elites, monumental architecture, tribute/taxes and tolls, redistribution to army, government officials, etc. and writing.

<sup>14</sup> For a detailed discussion of the process, see Norman K. Gottwald, "A Hypothesis about Social Class in Monarchic Israel in the Light of Contemporary Studies of Social Class and Social Stratification," in *The Hebrew Bible in its Social World and in Ours* (Atlanta, GA: Scholars Press, 1993a), 139-164.

A big factor was the development of an extractive economy that will clash with the allocative economy of the tribes.<sup>15</sup> It was a top-down economy that exploited the labor and extracted the resources of those from the bottom-up, which was 90% of the population. Let me give you a good example of an extractive economy found in 1 Samuel 8:

“So Samuel reported all the words of the Lord to the people who were asking him for a king. He said, ‘These will be the ways of the king who will reign over you: he will take your sons and appoint them to his chariots and to be his horsemen, and to run before his chariots; and he will appoint for himself commanders of thousands and commanders of fifties, and some to plow his ground and to reap his harvest, and to make his implements of war and the equipment of his chariots’” (8:1-12).

You have to remember that ancient Israel was an agrarian society, primarily composed of subsistence farmers whose main purpose was to grow enough for them and their families to survive. So we are not talking about wealthy people here, but those at or a little above the level of survival. There was no middle class in Israel. So here arises this king and his elite, who do none of the hard physical labor to contribute to this agrarian economy. Instead, they parasitically live off the 90% by extracting what little surplus these farmers have and converting it for luxury items and ostentatious displays of conspicuous consumption.<sup>16</sup> I already said that you need much

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<sup>15</sup> For the most thorough discussion of the economy of ancient Israel, see Boer, *The Sacred Economy of Ancient Israel*; For a shorter version, Roland Boer, "The Sacred Economy of Ancient 'Israel'," *SJOT* 21, no. 1 (2007), 29-48.

<sup>16</sup> Boer, *The Sacred Economy of Ancient Israel*, 146; Holladay, "The Kingdoms of Israel and Judah," 382.

labor in order to work your land to survive, and adult, infant, and maternal mortality rate was already very high. But 1 Samuel 8 describes the king conscripting your sons from working in your fields to become soldiers, charioteers, and horsemen in the king's standing army (8:11-12a). Furthermore, the king has his own estates, on which he makes your sons to farm food for his own table, not yours. Instead of the life-giving work of farming, he also forces your sons make the death-dealing implements of war, the swords and chariots (8:12b).

Males were not the only human resources taken from the tribes. 1 Samuel 8 continues: "(The king) will take your daughters to be perfumers and cooks and bakers" (8:13). Instead of the arduous tasks of processing and cooking for your own family households, you women might be drafted into cooking, serving, and cleanup for the elaborate feasts of the royal court. Queen Jezebel is said to have had four hundred fifty prophets of the foreign god Baal and four hundred prophets of the goddess Asherah eating at her table (Cf. 1 Kgs 18:19).<sup>17</sup> If you were attractive, you might be selected for the king's harem, perhaps not as a wife, who usually was chosen for political marriages with other powerful kings, but as a concubine, who primary serves as a sexual plaything. King Solomon is said to have had seven hundred wives and three hundred concubines (11:3).

Besides exploiting your human resources from working your land, the king will extract a considerable portion of your material resources for himself and distribute them to his henchmen. 1 Samuel continues:

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<sup>17</sup> Regarding the politics of feasting, see Peter Altmann and Janling Fu, eds., *Feasting in the Archaeology and Texts of the Bible and the Ancient Near East* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2014).

“(The king) will take the best of your fields and vineyards and olive orchards and give it to his officers and his courtiers. He will take your male and female slaves, and the best of your cattle and donkeys, and put them to his work. He will take one-tenth of your flocks, and you shall be his slaves. And in that day you will cry out because of your king, whom you have chosen for yourselves; but the Lord will not answer you in that day” (1 Sam 8:15-18).

When Israel chose a king, the king had to break up the allocative tribal structure that you had for centuries, so that your allegiance will be to him and not your tribe. Solomon accomplished this by dividing up his kingdom into twelve administrative districts that cut across tribal lines. He assigned twelve officials who taxed your district to provide food and other provisions for the king and his household for one month in the year (1 Kgs 4:7). We have a similar dynamic of the economic oppression of twelve districts by a centralized government in the recent movie, *The Hunger Games*. To give you an idea of Solomon’s extraction from you subsistence farmers, let me read selections from 1 Kings 4.

“Solomon’s provision for one day was thirty cors of choice flour, and sixty cors of meal, ten fat oxen, and twenty pasture-fed cattle, one hundred sheep, besides deer, gazelles, roebucks, and fatted fowl” (1 Kgs 4:22-23)

Now as subsistence farmers, you eat very simply. The central part of your diet is the Mediterranean triad bread, wine, and olive oil. Fruit, vegetables,

legumes, and milk products make a much smaller contribution to your table.<sup>18</sup>

You rarely eat meat. Now, compare your table with Solomon's daily provision of thirty *cors* of, not just ordinary flour, but *choice* flour. We don't exactly know how much a *cor* measures, but it was somewhere between 6.5 – 14 bushels. So thirty *cors* of fine flour would range from 390-840 bushels daily, along with sixty *cors* of meal from your farms.<sup>19</sup> Just like meat is primarily a First World food in our own day, meat was chiefly eaten by the wealthy in ancient Israel.<sup>20</sup> Moreover, Solomon's table not only included pasture-fed beef and sheep, but also exotic meats like deer, gazelles, roebucks and fatted fowls.

The text goes on to say that Solomon had forty thousand stalls of horses for his chariots and horsemen. So besides the enormous daily provisions for Solomon's table, your households had to provide barley and straw for these horses (1 Kgs 4:26-28). As an equestrienne, I know how much horses eat and to provide barley and straw for forty thousand of them is an additional burden to your already heavy taxation.

Even though ownership of land is an indicator of wealth in ancient Israel, without labor to make the land productive that land would be useless. It is in the removal of males from working the lands of the family households that the tensions between the allocative and extractive economies in Israel become most

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<sup>18</sup> MacDonald, *What did the Ancient Israelites Eat?*, 91-93.

<sup>19</sup> Marvin A. Sweeney, *I & II Kings: A Commentary* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2007), 99.

<sup>20</sup> Jodi Magness, "Conspicuous Consumption: Dining on Meat in the Ancient Mediterranean World and Near East," in *Feasting in the Archaeology and Texts of the Bible and the Ancient Near East*, eds. Peter Altmann and Janling Fu (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2014), 33-59; MacDonald, *What did the Ancient Israelites Eat?*, 61-72.

acute. Not only are you rural men drafted into the king's armies and forced to abandon your own farms to work on the king's agricultural estates (1 Sam 8:1-12), but you also become corvée laborers, unpaid labor, for the king's extensive building projects. Solomon not only constructed the great temple in Jerusalem, but a palace for himself and for his Egyptian wife, Pharaoh's daughter, along with a treasury and an armory. He also used forced labor for constructions in the cities of Hazor, Megiddo, and Gezer (1 Kgs 8:15).

Since large timber trees are not indigenous to Israel, Solomon has to import at a steep price the cedars of Lebanon from his Phoenician neighbor, Hiram of Tyre. Solomon pays Hiram twenty thousand cors of wheat and twenty cors of fine oil, again extracted from your hard labor. How did he obtain the great cedars of Lebanon? Here's what the text says:

“King Solomon conscripted forced labor out of all Israel; the levy numbered thirty thousand men. He sent them to the Lebanon, ten thousand a month in shifts; they would be a month in the Lebanon and two months at home” (1 Kgs 5:13-14).

So, thousands of you are taken from your families and farms several months out of the year to work in a foreign land.

Besides the forced labor to obtain the cedars of Lebanon, the text continues:

“Solomon also had seventy thousand laborers and eighty thousand stonecutters in the hill country, besides Solomon's three thousand three hundred supervisors who were over the work, having charge of the people

who did the work. At the king's command they quarried out great costly stones in order to lay the foundation of the house with dressed stones" (1 Kgs 5:15-17).

So instead of being shipped off to a foreign country to cut down trees, some of you could stay in Israel but as stone cutters. Your own houses are of simple mud brick, but the king's building projects are made of the expensive ashlar stone that had to be quarried, cut, and dressed.

For a sizeable part of the population to be taken away from the agricultural base of the economy is very troubling. You still had to meet your monthly quota of crops and flocks, in spite of the fact that your labor pool to work the land is considerably reduced. Even during times of famine, insect invasion or blight, you still had to meet that quota. Furthermore, the ruling classes interfered with your traditional growing practices that spread risks. You had long-established strategies to prevent crop failures, such as crop rotation, staggered sowing, fallowing, and herd grazing. However, the elites demand an increase of cash crops like grain, wine and oil, which conflicts with your conservative methods of farming (cf. Ezek 27:17; 1 Kgs 5:11; 2 Chr 2:10). By forcing their own agenda upon the use of your land, they put you at risk for crop failure and famine.<sup>21</sup>

When you are unable to meet your quota due to crop failure or drought, you will have to take out a loan from the elites at a high interest rates, because the kin groups you would have depended on during the tribal period are now broken

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<sup>21</sup> Yee, *Poor Banished Children of Eve*, 84-84; Marvin L. Chaney, "The Political Economy of Peasant Poverty: What the Eight-Century Prophets Presumed by did Not State," *Journal of Religion & Society* 10 (2014), 39-42.

down. When you could not pay back the loan, sometimes you would have to sell your land. And if you still could not pay back the loan, you may have to sell your children into debt slavery or become a debt slave yourself.

Therefore, you farmers face two cycles of extraction, the first when you must handle over the little surplus you have above your subsistence needs to meet heavy taxation quotas. These are your crops and flocks for the royal court, along with your sisters, nieces, and aunts for the royal kitchen and harem, and your sons, brothers, nephews and uncles who work as soldiers or *corvée* laborers in the king's service. The second cycle of extraction comes when you cannot meet your quotas and must take out high interest loans, initiating ruinous cycles of tax and debt. A double-whammy, a one-two punch, creating a state of poverty, which you never seem to transcend.

In order to work harmoniously, your ruling classes should ideally only tax you just enough to fulfill their needs without threatening their tax base, while you farmers should be able to maintain your level of subsistence and pay the demanded taxes. But in reality the ruling classes demand higher taxes than you can pay, threatening the viability of the system upon which their own well-being relies. This is especially the case when the Assyrian empire demands hefty tributes from Israelite and Judean elites, who naturally pass the added burden upon you. Let me give you a sample of the tribute King Hezekiah of Judah ostensibly sent to the Assyrian king Sennacherib according to the Rassam Cylinder:

“He, Hezekiah...sent me...30 talents of gold, 800 talents of silver, choice antimony, large blocks of carnelian, beds (inlaid) with ivory, armchairs (inlaid) with ivory, elephant hides, ivory, ebony-wood, boxwood, multicolored garments, garments of linen, wool (dyed) red-purple and blue-purple, vessels of copper, iron, bronze and tin, chariots, siege shields, lances, armor, daggers for the belt, bows and arrows, countless trappings and implements of war, together with his daughters, his palace women, his male and female singers.”

Most of the items were exotic luxury goods, not native to either Judah or Israel.

The king and his elites secured these preciosities through taxing you subsistence farmers and collecting tolls from the caravans that traverse the land.<sup>22</sup> The disintegration of their agrarian base will be an important factor in the fall of the elites to the empires of Assyria and Babylonia.

Those of you who are reduced to poverty because of the burdens of taxation will have your advocates in the prophets. Recall the stories of your people. The prophet Elijah came to the aid of a widow and her son malnourished by the famine. Her kin group supposedly would have supported her, but its structures were weakened during the rule of Israel’s king Ahab (1 Kings 17).

Elijah also condemned Ahab’s illegal seizure of Naboth’s vineyard, when Naboth refused to sell his ancestral inheritance in keeping with the law (1 Kings 21). The

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<sup>22</sup> John S. Holladay Jr., "Hezekiah's Tribute, Long-Distance Trade, and the Wealth of Nations Ca. 1000-600 BC: A New Perspective ("Poor Little [Agrarian] Judah" at the End of the 8th Century BC: Dropping the First Shoe)," in *Confronting the Past: Archaeological and Historical Essays on Ancient Israel in Honor of William G. Dever*, eds. Seymour Gitin, J. Edward Wright and J. P. Dessel (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2006), 312.

prophet Elisha helped another widow who was forced to sell her children into slavery to settle her husband's debt (2 Kgs 4:1-7). Elisha also helped a day laborer from selling his body into grinding servitude by recovering the ax head that he had borrowed from a rich lender and had lost (2 Kgs 6:1-7).

Recall the denunciation of the prophet Amos who calls down God's punishment against those who "sell the righteous for silver, and the needy for a pair of sandals—they who tramples the head of the poor into the dust and push the afflicted out of the way" (Amos 2:6-7). "Because you trample on the poor and take from them levies of grain, you have built houses of hewn stone, but you shall not live in them. You have planted pleasant vineyards, but you shall not drink their wine. For I know how many are your transgressions, and how great are your sins—you who afflict the righteous, who take a bribe, and push aside the needy in the gate" (Amos 5:11-12). Amos will be especially scathing of the indolence and conspicuous consumption of the elites: "Alas for those who lie on beds of ivory, and lounge on their couches, and eat lambs from the flock, and calves from the stall; who sing idle songs to the sound of the harp, and like David improvise on instruments of music; who drink wine from bowls, and anoint themselves with the finest oils, but are not grieved over the ruin of Joseph! Therefore they shall now be the first to go into exile, and the revelry of the loungers shall pass away" (Amos 6:4-7). Unfortunately, the prophets could not change the oppressive system of tax and debt that afflicted 90% of the people and reduced them to poverty. Ultimately, this system was unsustainable, leading to the collapse of both Israel and Judah to the more powerful empires of Assyria and Babylonia.

So from the perspective from the bottom up, in what ways did the Israelite upper classes generate poverty in a major portion of its population in their pursuit of wealth and pretentious display?<sup>23</sup> First of all, there was a move to break up the tribal structures of mutual kin-group support and protection that had developed for subsistence survival. The tribes were tax-free and their economy was allocative. Surplus wealth did not leave the tribe, but was saved and allocated to those injured by crop failure, famine, illness and so forth. Man/woman power also did not leave the tribe, but worked to build and sustain the infrastructure of the tribe through collaborative farming, building terraces and cisterns, and defending against intruders. These allocative bonds of mutuality and support were weakened by the monarchy.

Second, the powerful and wealthy minority devised an extractive economy to exploit the labor of the masses and redirect their products toward the well-being of the few. This extractive economy did not contribute to agrarian prosperity but freeloaded off of it. It was in continual tension with the allocative economy of the tribal households and was ultimately unsustainable, leading to the collapse of Israel and Judah to the powerful empires of the ancient Near East. Ironically, from the bottom up, from the perspective of the subsistence farmers, indentured servants, and debt-slaves, this collapse meant a reprieve from the oppressive forms of extraction and the re-emergence of the stable reality of subsistence survival, which had been the norm of the agrarian population for centuries.<sup>24</sup>

We now come to the problem of global poverty and inequality in our own day and

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<sup>23</sup> For a detailed discussion of the process, see Gottwald, "A Hypothesis about Social Class in Monarchic Israel," 139-164.

<sup>24</sup> Boer, *The Sacred Economy of Ancient Israel*, 195-196.

whether can we learn anything from the biblical text to address it. First of all, it goes without saying that there are qualitative differences between the allocative and extractive economies of ancient Israel and global capitalism. We cannot simply move uncritically from monarchic period of ancient Israel to our own time. Second, it is always simpler to kvetch about the 1% in ancient Israel and in our own time, than propose constructive ways to eliminate poverty and inequality in our day. You now know a little bit about Israel from the bottom up and how the extractive economy of the monarchy impoverished the majority of its population. I now encourage you to learn how the present economic structures here in the US favor the wealthy at the top and generate poverty at the bottom. You do not have to brave 700 pages of Thomas Piketty's *Capitalism in the Twenty-first Century*. You can visit websites like Inequality.org, which can help you through the complexities and give you many resources.

Becoming educated about “Who benefits economically and how?” will help you greatly in being prophetic in your own ministries. Prophets like Elijah, Elisha, and Amos were not fortunetellers who predicted the future. Rather they were persons, who saw and analyzed their present context, who read the signs of their times and declared the terrible results if things do not change. They had to be knowledgeable of contemporary affairs and skilled in social analysis to critique injustice and exploitation. Bishop Robert Runcie, after whom this convocation lecture is named, was also like the prophets of old, highly critical of Margaret Thatcher's economic policies that favored the rich. He also had no problem vocally weighing in on public policy.<sup>25</sup> So must *you* be knowledgeable in your

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<sup>25</sup> Daniel Gover, *Turbulent Priests: The Archbishop of Canterbury in Contemporary English Politics* (London: Theos, 2011), 28-33.

own prophetic ministries to eradicate poverty and inequality today.

My last word is for you graduates. Along with everyone else here and with those closest to you who are not, I rejoice with you in this new beginning. My prayer for you today is that you never lose the excitement, the hope, and the gratitude of today. Many persons made this day possible for you. During those times in your new ministries when you think you might quit and throw in the towel, remember today. Remember your fruitful educational journey here at the Graduate Theological Foundation and look forward to your new future ministry, the reason you came here in the first place: to be faithful ministers of God's justice, compassion and reconciliation.

Thank you.

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