

Some Notes on Biblical Teachings on Justice

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ABSTRACT

H. H. Schrey writes: "The Bible, taken as a whole, has one theme: *The history of the revelation of God's justice.*" This modest study tries to unfold some of the meanings of the rich and complex biblical message on justice. The study considers biblical justice from the perspective of theological ethics, particularly from the viewpoint of Christian Social Ethics. The author reflects, firstly, on the social teachings of the Old Testament by focusing on five major points: The Exodus (God, liberator of the oppressed); the Alliance (people's fidelity to God and interpersonal justice); the Law (love of God and love of neighbor, particularly of the downtrodden); the coming of the Messiah (the kingdom of justice and justice towards the oppressed), and the Prophets' voice (announcing justice and denouncing injustice). He develops, secondly, the theme justice in the New Testament and centers on four significant points, namely: Jesus Christ, the Liberator; Jesus Christ, the Prophet; the new commandment of love of God and love of neighbor, and the theology of the New Testament on justice: Paul, James and John. The writer closes his article with a question: *Are the social teachings of the Sacred Scriptures teachings on justice alone, or on love alone, or on justice/love?* He concludes by re-affirming the answer previously reached: the social teachings of the Holy Bible are neither on justice nor on love alone, but on both – on justice/love. The justice of Jesus Christ is charitable justice or fraternal justice, a justice

that is completed in love, which is – as charity – the form of all virtues, including justice. Hence, the biblical teachings on justice may be summed up thus: “You shall love your neighbor as you love yourself” (Mt 22:10).

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The biblical notion of justice integrates, and goes beyond, various ideas of human justice clearly present in ancient philosophy and ethics. These described justice as the right order in inter-human relationships. Within the framework of the doctrine on virtues, justice is pre-eminently considered as a general virtue: “All the virtues are summed up in justice” (Teognis); the just man is, generally, the good man. Aristotle, in particular, developed masterfully a study on justice-injustice in Book Five of his *The Nicomachean Ethics*.

The concept of justice in the Sacred Scriptures integrates some of those philosophical and ethical descriptions; particularly, the notion of general justice. Albert Nolan writes: “The justice on the Bible is a much broader and more comprehensive concept; it covers the whole of morality – personal and social. As H.H. Schrey put it: ‘It can be said without exaggeration that the Bible, taken as a whole, has one theme: *The history of the revelation of God’s justice*’.”¹

A Christian reflection on justice necessarily includes the Bible’s theory of justice: “The study of Sacred Scriptures must be like the soul of theology”; furthermore, the scientific exposition of moral theology “should be more thoroughly nourished by scriptural teaching.”² The Bible contains a deeply rich and widely complex message of justice. Of justice and love: while in the Old Testament

¹ A. NOLAN, O.P., *Justice in the Bible*, in *Justice and Truth shall meet* (Sinsinawa, Wisconsin: Parable, 1984), pp. 74-75; cf. H.H. SCHREY, *The Biblical Doctrine of Justice and Law* (SCM), p. 50. Nolan writes: “Justice in the Bible is the state of affairs in which things are right or true, that is to say, that they are what they are supposed to be, what God wants them to be. And the activity of doing justice is the activity of putting right whatever is wrong in the world” (*Justice and Truth shall meet*, l.c., p. 76). Cf. Carlo María Martini, *Sobre la justicia* (Madrid: PPC, 2002), pp. 12-17.

² VATICAN II, *Dei Verbum*, no. 24, and *Optatam Totius*, no. 16; cf. II Tim 3: 15-16.

the term justice is preferred, in the New Testament the term love is given priority; nevertheless, the Old Testament's justice includes love, and the New Testament's love, justice: all throughout the Sacred Scriptures, justice and love are inextricably linked.³

In the following pages we shall study the complex biblical message on justice within the perspective of Christian Social Ethics. The author is not a biblical scholar or exegete, but a teacher of the virtue of justice and of the Social Doctrine of the Church.* We develop first the biblical message of the Old Testament; second, of the New Testament. We conclude with the question: the biblical message is on justice, on love, or on justice/love?

1. Justice in the Old Testament

In the Old Testament, two key Hebrew words give us the meaning of justice. They are: "*mishpat*" (righteousness) and "*sedaqah*" (justice); singly or jointly, they both manifest, according to biblical scholars, the substantial biblical message on justice – on justice/love. The theologians speak of the complexity of meaning

³ Cf. J.A. DIAZ, 'Las buenas obras' (o la 'justicia') dentro de la estructura de los principales temas de teología bíblica," *Estudios Eclesiásticos*, No. 52 (1977), pp. 445-486; ID., "Términos bíblicos de 'justicia social' y traducción de 'equivalencia dinámica'," *Fascículos Bíblicos*, No. 19 (1978), pp. 1-31; ID., "El don del Espíritu y la Justicia escatológica," *Fascículos Bíblicos*, No. 1 (1978), pp. 1-36; H. HENDRICKX, *Bible on Justice* (Quezon City: JMC Press, 1978), pp. 1-68; J. DONAHUE, "Biblical Perspectives on Justice," in J.C. HAUGHEY (Ed.), *The Faith that does Justice* (New York: The Paulist Press, 1977), pp. 68-112; JOSE L. SICRE, "*Con los pobres de la tierra*" – *La justicia social en los profetas de Israel* (Madrid: Ediciones Cristianidad, 1984), pp. 1-506; J. ALFARO, *Cristianismo y justicia* (Madrid: PPC, 1973), pp. 1-13; K.H. SCHELKLE, *Teología del Nuevo Testamento: III Moral* (Barcelona: Hender, 1975), pp. 261-279; R. SIVATTE, "La práctica de la justicia, criterio de discernimiento de la verdadera experiencia de fe, según el Antiguo Testamento," en *La justicia que brota de la fe* (Santander: Sal Terrae, 1982), pp. 13-34; J.P. MIRANDA, *Marx and the Bible* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1974), pp. 35-108; FAUSTO B. GOMEZ, O.P., "The Jubilee 2000: A Call to Justice/Love," *Philippiniana Sacra*, Vol. XXXV, No. 104 (May-August, 2000), pp. 205-226.

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of justice and its evolution in the different traditions. One note, however, runs through these traditions, that is, the special concern for the poor and the weak; in fact, the most frequent meaning of “*mishpat sedaqah*” is “the effort to carry forward the trodden rights of the people, particularly of the poor and invalid, that is, the rights of those who by themselves cannot carry them forward; the powerful carry forward their rights, without help from anybody: the ‘weak’ of the Bible, however, will never be able to have their rights without the help from others.”⁴

We could say that justice in the Old Testament is a general virtue or general justice (relationships of citizens to society and among themselves). This is similar to Greek philosophy’s general justice. But, with a radical difference: the Old Testament’s general justice is inseparably linked to the virtue of religion. Justice, thus, becomes a major attribute of God, with mercy, truth, fidelity, law, etc. Hence, it is primarily *divine justice*: “I am Yahweh, I rule with kindness, justice and integrity on earth” (Jr 9:24). It is also *human justice*: man is just if he is faithful to God’s Alliance with Israel. Thus, justice may be truly defined as “fidelity to the demands of a relationship.”⁵

As others have done before us, one may concretize the message on justice of the Old Testament in five key categories. These categories are the following:

- (1) The *Exodus*: God, Liberator of the oppressed,
- (2) The *Alliance*: People’s fidelity to God and interpersonal justice,
- (3) The *Law*: Love of God and love of neighbor, particularly of the downtrodden,

⁴ J.A. DIAZ, “Las ‘buenas obras’...,” a.c., 445-446. See JUAN ANTONIO MAYORAL, “La virtud en la tradición bíblica: La justicia virtud suprema,” *Vida Nueva*, No. 2.251 (Octubre 7, 2000), pp. 23-29.

⁵ J. DONAHUE, a.c., 69. Victor Salanga, S. J., “Biblical Justice and Righteousness Includes Mercy and Kindness,” in *Restorative Justice. A Source Book*, ed., Catholic Bishops’ Conference of the Philippines – Episcopal Commission on Prison Pastoral Care (Manila: CBCP-ECPPC, 2004), pp. 28-32. Mosh Weinfeld, *Social Justice in Ancient Israel and in the Ancient New East* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995).

- (4) *The Coming of the Messiah*: The Kingdom of justice and justice towards the oppressed, and
- (5) *The Prophets' Voice*: Announcing justice and denouncing injustice.

1.1 The Exodus: God as Liberator of the Oppressed

Yahweh, the God of the Old Testament is the Creator and the God of justice; his creative power, according to some biblical scholars, is directed to the defense of justice. God chooses Abraham ultimately to form a new humanity. He begins the process by taking Abraham away from the corrupted world (Gen chap. 12) towards the formation of Yahweh's People. From the moment of the election of Abraham, justice is part of the process: "I have singled him out to command his sons and his household after him to maintain the way of Yahweh by just and upright living" (Gen 18:19). Jose Alonso Diaz comments that "Amos did not invent a Yahweh of justice, but he re-took it."⁶

However, as A. Nolan underlines, it was with Moses when the Israelites begin to understand fully that the God of Abraham is the God of justice for the oppressed: "I am Yahweh. I will free you of the burdens that the Egyptians lay on you. I will release you from slavery to them" (Ex 6:6).⁷

The *Exodus*, the liberation of Israel from socio-political oppression, represents for some theologians the main event in the liberating process of God's people; for most theologians, however, Yahweh's Alliance or Covenant with his Chosen People, their religious liberation or communication with God, constitutes the principal happening. Certainly, both aspects – the political and the religious – have to be considered together.

Although some theologians of liberation have been accused of highlighting *Exodus* as the paradigm of liberation, the majority of them – particularly the outstanding ones –, have most often stressed, with the socio-political aspect, the religious dimension of

⁶ J.A. DIAZ, "Las 'buenas obras'..." 463.; cf. J.P. MIRANDA, o.c., pp. 78-88.

⁷ A. NOLAN, a.c., 77.

Israel's liberation. Writes Gustavo Gutierrez: "The Covenant gives full meaning to the liberation from Egypt; one makes no sense without the other... The Covenant and the liberation from Egypt were different aspects of the same movement, a movement which led to encounter with God."⁸

In its two instructions on liberation, Vatican's Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith deals also with the significance of Exodus. The first *Instruction on Certain Aspects of the "Theology of Liberation"* judges rather negatively the "hermeneutic" allegedly used by some theologies of liberation that leads 'to an essentially political re-reading of the Scriptures.' In this context, the Vatican Congregation avers that too great an importance is given to the Exodus event as political liberation.

The second *Instruction on Christian Freedom and Liberation* appears more conciliatory and innovative, and accepts explicitly that the Exodus event has both a political and a religious meaning, adding that the latter is more important than the former. Truly, the political aspect of liberation has to be viewed in the light of the religious aspect.⁹

Certainly the whole Old Testament highlights the singular significance of Israel's liberation from Egyptian oppression. This liberation is principally God's work (his gratuitous love). He is the liberator, first, of the people of Israel from the Egyptians, and, second, of the Israelites who suffer injustice and oppression at the hands of other Israelites – the powerful and the wealthy. In *Justice in the World*, the Synod of Bishops noted:

In the Old Testament God reveals himself to us as the liberator of the oppressed and the defender of the poor, demanding from man faith in him and justice towards man's neighbor.

⁸ G. GUTIERREZ, *A Theology of Liberation* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1973), 157. It seems to us that Carlos Abesamis overstates the importance of the Exodus event in his Catechetical Primer *Exploring the Core of Biblical Faith* (Quezon City: Claretian Publications, 1986), pp. 25-26.

⁹ CONGREGATION FOR THE DOCTRINE OF THE FAITH, *Libertatis Nuntius* (Vatican City, 1984), X, 5; ID., *Libertatis Conscientia* (Vatican City, 1986), no. 44.

It is only in the observance of the duties of justice that God is truly recognized as the liberator of the oppressed.¹⁰

As it is well-known, the liberation of the poor and oppressed is a favorite proclamation of Israel's prophets: God is on the side of the poor, the Israelite – to be just – must also be on their side, and become poor of Yahweh. God cares in a particular way for the poor, the weak, and the needy: "God stands at the right hand of the needy" (Ps 109:31); "He raises up the poor from the dust" (I Sam 2:8); He "will give justice to the poor" (Is 11:4).

Therefore, not only in the New Testament are the poor considered blessed, but also in the Old Testament. *How about the rich?* They are not considered blessed in the New Testament – as we will see later on –, but they are considered so in the Old Testament. Hence, *blessed are the rich?* The answer is *yes* and *no*. Affirmatively, wealth can be a blessing from God (Gen 24:35; 13:2; Dt. 6:11; 16:14; 28:4-5; Ps 111:3; 143:13). Negatively, wealth can be an enslaving instrument in man's hands. The Old Testament condemns consistently those who exploit, ill-treat or neglect the poor (see, Ps 10:2): Indeed, "prayer with fasting and alms with right conduct are better than riches with indignity" (Tb 12:8-10).

Listen to this, you who trample on the needy and try to suppress the poor people of the country, you who say, 'When will new moon be over so that we can sell our corn, and Sabbath, so that we can market our wheat'? Then by lowering the bushel, raising the shekel, by swindling and tampering with the scales, we can buy up the poor for money, and the needy for a pair of sandals, and get a prize even for the sweeping of the wheat. Yahweh swears it by the pride of Jacob, 'Never will I forget a single thing you have done' (Am 8:4-7; cf Ex 22:20-25; Ho 4:1-2; Is 10:1-2; 61:1; Jb 29:11-17; Pr 22:22).

¹⁰ SYNOD OF BISHOPS '71, *Justice in the World*, II, no 30. According to Sobrino, God takes the side of the poor not because they are needy but because they are victims of injustice. (Jon Sobrino, S. J., and Juan Hernández Pico, *The Theology of Christian Solidarity*. New York: Orbis Books, 1985, p. 48). See Henry T.C. Sun and Keith L. Eades, *Problems in Biblical Theology* (Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1997), p. 236.

Wealth in the Old Testament can be a gift of God – a blessing. It can be a value, but a relative one compared to justice, wisdom, peace, a good name; these are considered as higher values (cf. Pr 15:16; 16:8). It is a blessing when it was honestly acquired (cf. Jr 5:27) and it is shared with the poor: the wealthy upright man is “merciful, tender-hearted, virtuous,” “quick to be generous, he gives to the poor” (Ps 112:3-4, 8). Writes William Barclay:

The poor man is under the care of God. The Old Testament does not despise wealth; it does not deny that there are things that wealth can do. But it will never make wealth the principal good, and it will always insist that to gain wealth wrongly and to use wealth selfishly are both to sin against God.¹¹

Blessed, then, are the poor. Blessed are, at times, the rich. And blessed are always the good – the just –, the loving and the humble.

1.2 The Alliance: People's Fidelity to God and Interpersonal Justice.

The Alliance or Covenant is the mutual, friendly commitment between Yahweh and his people of Israel. It demands fidelity from God and obedience from the people: God will be the God of Israel, and Israel, the People of God (cf. Ex 19:3-8). Some theologians draw from this significant Covenant the conclusion that it is the radical principle of ethics. Nevertheless, the New Testament paradigm of “filiation” (and fraternity) is more radical, for it perfects God's relationships with his people, that is, his children.¹²

Yahweh, the liberator of the oppressed is also, then, the God of the Alliance, who is faithful to it and demands also fidelity from his Chosen People. This fidelity of the people demands from them also justice towards the neighbor, particularly the oppressed

¹¹ W. BARCLAY, *Ethics in a Permissive Society* (Glasgow: William Collins Sons & Co. Ltd, 1971), 152; cf. J.M. CABODEVILLA, *Las formas de felicidad son ocho* (Madrid: BAC, 1984), 18-23.

¹² G.G. DORADO, *La Biblia, hoy* (Madrid: PS Editorial, 1980), 104-106.

neighbor. Thus, no one can be faithful to God without practicing justice towards the poor, the needy and the weak (Jg 2:16-19; 10:2-3; I Sam 8:7-22). The leaders, in particular (Is 1:23; 3:14-15; 10:1-2; Jr 21:12), and the whole people, in general (Ex 22:20; Dt. 10:18; 24:14), are asked to do justice towards the downtrodden.

Fidelity to God, therefore, is two-dimensional: it is religious and ethical; it includes worship and justice. Without the practice of justice, there cannot be true, authentic worship: "What I want is mercy" (that is, justice and love), "not sacrifice" (Ho 6:6).

We read in Isaiah (1:11, 15-17):

What are your endless sacrifices to me?
Says Yahweh. I am sick of holocausts of rams
and the fat of calves.
The blood of bulls and of goats revolts me.
When you stretch out your hands
I turn my eyes away. You may multiply your prayers,
I shall not listen. Your hands are covered with blood,
Wash, make yourselves clean.
Take your wrongdoing out of my sight.
Cease to do evil.
Learn to do good; search for justice,
Help the oppressed; be just to the orphan;
Plead for the widow. (Cf. Is 58:6-11; Jr 7:1-11; Ez 33:14-19).

Moreover, one who does not practice justice (and love) towards the poor does not know God:

Yahweh says this: Practice honesty and integrity; rescue the man who has been wronged from the hands of his oppressor; do not exploit the stranger, the orphan, and the widow; do no violence; shed no innocent blood in this place... Your father ate and drank, like you, but he practiced honesty and integrity, so all went well with him. He used to examine the cases of the poor and needy, and then all went well. Is not that what it means to know me? It is Yahweh who speaks (Jr 22:3, 15-16; cf. Ho 4:1-2; Am 5:7-17; Is 11:1-5).

The Alliance condemns religion without ethics as well as ethics without religion: "The Old Testament presents undividedly united the two fundamental demands of the Covenant: fidelity to

Yahweh – concretized in monotheistic worship and confession –, and the duties of love and justice towards men.”¹³

1.3 The Law: Love of God and Love of Neighbor

The Law is understood within the framework of the Alliance. The end of the Law, is in fact, mainly holiness. *The Law*, as W. Eichrodt comments, *meant the response to the God of the Alliance*.¹⁴

The central content of the Law (the Torah) of the Old Testament is intimately connected with love (and justice). Its quintessence, the Decalogue, centers on love of God and neighbor, because Yahweh is the God who does justice and liberates the oppressed. As a matter of fact, Yahweh is the true God because he does justice, while the other gods are not true gods because they do not do and demand justice (cf. Ps 82).

The commandments are given by the “just” God to establish justice and equality among the people. The Law speaks also of “just” judgments (Ps 7:9; 17:1-5; 18:22-24; 26:1-6), and unjust judges (Zp 3:5 ff). In reality, only God is truly just (Ps 143:2), with a justice that punishes the unjust, but which is also, and mainly, a merciful justice (see Gen 18:20-32) In God, penal justice coexists with merciful justice (Ex 20:5 ff). Truly, God is love (Ho 2-3; Is 54:8; Ps 103:13).

The various Law Codes, the Code of the Covenant, the Deuteronomic Code, the Code of Holiness give prominence to justice and the protection of the poor, the orphans and widows. The slave is also protected (Ex 21:10); and his rights defended (Dt 5:14-15) including his right to worship God (Ex 23:12; Dt 5:14). We read in Exodus (22:20-25):

You must not molest the stranger or oppress him, for you lived as strangers in the land of Egypt. You must not be harsh with the widow, or with the orphan; if you are harsh with them, they will surely cry out to me, and be sure I shall

¹³ J. ALFARO, o.c., 17; cf. J.P. MIRANDA, o.c., pp. 67-72.

¹⁴ W. Eichrodt, *Theology of the Old Testament*, Vol. I, Translated by J.A. Baker (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press), 1981, pp. 70-194.

hear their cry; my anger will flare and I shall kill you with the sword, your own wives will be widows, your own children orphans. If you lend money to any of my people, to any poor man among you, you must not play the usurer with him; you must not demand interest from him. (Cf. Dt 24:17-18).

After wandering through the desert, the Israelites reached the Promised Land, and settled at Canaan as a nation. This was organized into twelve tribes. Israel was then, in general, an egalitarian society, where there were neither poor nor rich people: the land was divided in such a way that each family had an equal part (see Nb 33:54; Jos 13:21). Nolan notes: "For nearly two hundred years Israel was indeed the most extraordinary nation in the history of humankind."¹⁵ Unfortunately, inequalities and injustices soon appeared. To re-establish justice and equality, the Sabbatical Year and the Jubilee Year were instituted.

The institution of the Jubilee and Sabbatical Years, and their celebration by the Israelites, have particular significance on the issue of justice, the establishment of just interpersonal relationships and the reduction of the gap between the rich and the poor. Among the prescriptions of the Sabbatical Year, celebrated every seven years (see Dt 15:1-11), we find the following: "Let there be no poor among you, then... Is there a poor man among you, one of your brothers, in any town of yours in the land that Yahweh your God is giving you? Do not harden your heart or close your hand against that poor brother of yours, but be open handed with him and lend him enough for his needs."

The Jubilee Year was celebrated every fifty years. The most important and revolutionary prescriptions are the following: every fifty years slaves must be freed, debts must be canceled and lands must be given back to their original owners (cf Lv 25:8-55). In *Tertio Millenio Adveniente*, John Paul II speaks of the Jubilee Year 2000 as an occasion to reflect on the possibility of reducing if not canceling the international debt of Third World Countries. Herman Hendrickx comments:

¹⁵ A. Nolan, l.c.

We may consider the institution of the jubilee year as a *social blueprint*, founded on the deeply religious concepts of justice and equality, which intended to apply the simple sabbatical principle (cf. Lv 25:2-7) to a society which had become more economically complex. Although never realized in the letter, its spirit of respect for personal rights and human dignity sums up much of Old Testament teaching and serves as a forerunner of the true equality of the Christian era as expressed, e.g., in Gal 3:26-29.¹⁶

1.4 The Coming of the Messiah: The Kingdom of Justice

The promise of Yahweh and Israel's hope was progressively concretized in the future establishment of the Kingdom of God through a descendant from David's line. The descendant would be the Messiah of God.

God's Kingdom constitutes the main object of the hope of the Israelites (Is 24:23). It is described as "a kingdom of justice and of the liberation of the oppressed." The Messiah, the Christ will have the mission of carrying out "mishpat" (righteousness) and "sedakah" (justice).

The principal figures used by the prophets to describe the Anointed of God are Ideal King, Servant of Yahweh and Son of Man.¹⁷

Justice is an attribute of the *Ideal King* (and the Messiah). This is clearly shown in the following texts: Is 11:19 (in the messianic Kingdom violence and injustice will be abolished); Is 9:5-6 (the Ideal King will be called "Yahweh-our-integrity"); Is 9:5-6 (the same will be said of the figure Emmanuel).

¹⁶ H. HENDRICKX, *o.c.*, 11. John Paul II writes: "In the Spirit of the Book of Leviticus (25:8-12), Christians will have to raise their voice on behalf of all the poor of the world, proposing the Jubilee as an appropriate time to give thought, among other things, to reducing substantially, if not canceling outright the international debt which seriously threatens the future of many nations (TMA, 1994, no. 51). See our study "The Jubilee: A Call to Justice," *l.c.*, pp. 205-209.

¹⁷ J.A. DIAZ, "Las 'buenas obras'..." 465-468.

The *Servant of Yahweh* will possess the Spirit of Yahweh and, therefore, will bring justice to the nations (Is 11) and suppress inequities: "By his sufferings shall my servant justify many, taking their faults on himself" (Is 53:11).

The *Son of Man*, symbol of the messianic King, will possess justice, defend the just and destroy the unjust (cf. Dn, chap. 7, and 9:24).

The Messiah, then, will bring justice, establish the kingdom of justice and integrity, and defend the poor:

He has sent me to bring good news to the poor;
to bind hearts that are broken;
to proclaim liberty to captives,
freedom to those in prison (Is 61:1)

God, give your own justice to the king,
your own righteousness to the royal son,
so that he may rule your people rightly
and your poor with justice...
Uprightly he will defend the poorest,
he will save the children of those in need,
and crush their oppressors (Ps 72:1-2,4).

Commenting on the figures of the Messiah, in particular on the figure of the Ideal King, or the messianic king, René Coste writes sharply: "If we translate the image of messianic kingdom to modern language (dynamic equivalence), we have a regime that favors social justice through the promotion of the poorest; in this regime, corruption and favoritism will have no place in the tribunals and the administration."¹⁸

1.5 The Prophets' Voice: Announcing Justice and Denouncing Injustice

Commenting on Mt 11:7-11, William Barclay writes: "The prophet is two things – he is the man with a message from God, and he is the man with the courage to deliver that message. The

¹⁸ R. COSTE, "Les fondements biblico-theologiques de la justice et de la paix," *Nouvelle Revue Theologique*, Vol. 105, No. 2 (1983), 198.

prophet is the man with God's wisdom in his mind, God's truth on his lips, and God's courage in his heart."

The prophets are messengers of God, God's spokesmen and religious guides of his people. They announce the ways of God and the future, and denounce the evil ways of injustice. Their main goals are: to strengthen the people's fidelity to God, and conversion to Him. They present an image of God that has to be imitated by the Israelites. This image is mediated by four basic attitudes expressed by the words *mercy* (*hesed*), *justice* (*sedaqah*), *right* (*mishpat*), and, particularly since Hosea and Isaiah, *love*. The practical signs of true fidelity and conversion to God are: "Social justice, moral rectitude, compassion and mercy towards the poor and the wretched."¹⁹

The prophets proclaim the justice of God, and demand justice from the People of God. Before the Exile, this justice is mainly collective, that is, justice of the People; but not exclusively communitarian: the sins of David are his (see II Sam 24, and 11:16). During the Exile and afterwards, justice became also markedly personal or individual, that is, the justice of the pious Israelite. As in other ethical themes, the prophet Ezekiel is the great prophet of individual justice (more accurately, of personal responsibility); this is already present in Jr 31:29-30.

More than announce justice, the majority of the prophets denounce injustice and injustices. However, we are cautioned by biblical scholars not to take their strong denunciations literally, nor absolutize them. Moreover, as Sicre has written:

The prophets are seriously concerned with social justice, but each prophet does it from his own viewpoint, stressing at times a problem that others leave out, with peculiar arguments, traditions and goals. To speak of the social message of the prophets is almost as equivocal as to speak of the symphonic music of the XIX century.²⁰

¹⁹ G.G. DORADO, *o.c.*, 116-117; cf also pp. 127-131.

²⁰ J.L. SICRE, *o.c.*, 439.

Although the existing differences among the prophets must always be taken into account, still one is obliged to find their convergences. And these are also clear. In various degrees, all the prophets (even all the books of the Old Testament) speak in favor of justice and against injustice; in general, they talk more against injustices. The outstanding prophets of justice are Amos and Hosea, Isaiah and Micah, Second Isaiah, Jeremiah and Ezekiel, and Third Isaiah. Amos is usually presented as the prophet of social justice.

The prophets preached fidelity to God and conversion to Him. They strongly denounced injustices as obstacles to conversion and signs of infidelity. *Prophetic denunciation*, then, is part of the mission of the prophets. It is principally a religious and social denunciation. As *religious denunciation*, it is a harsh statement against worship without justice to the people, especially the poor: "What I want is love, not sacrifice; knowledge of God, not holocausts" (Ho 6:6).

As *social denunciation*, it is a denunciation of social sins. These are many and different, according to the distinct historical and political contexts of the prophets, who speak against the unfair administration of justice in the courts (Am 5:10-12; Is 1:10-17), injustices in commercial exchanges (Ho 12:8, Mi 6:9-11; Ezk chap. 27), unjust salaries (Jr 22:13-19), stealing (Ho 4:2; Is 5:8; Mi 2:1-2; Jr 7:9), murder (Ho 4:2; Jr 7:9); luxury, wealth (Am 3:10, 15; 4:1; 6:4-7; Is 5:11-16; 3:16-24; Jr 5:25-28; Ezk 22:12).²¹

In our times, politicians, social activists, educators and theologians speak forcefully of social denunciation. In biblical perspective, rooted in the prophets – and re-taken by Jesus –, the prophetic denunciation must have according to biblical scholar and theologian Sicre, the following characteristics:

- (1) Prophetic denunciation flows from love and commitment to the oppressed and exploited particularly the weakest. Thus, it must be concrete, unselfish, and principally directed to the poorest (for instance, the orphans, the widows and the foreigners, for the prophets of the Old Testament).

²¹ Cf. J.L. SICRE, *o.c.*, 444-447.

- (2) It links the demands of justice with the will of God: God listens to the cries of the oppressed, as clearly shown in the experience of Exodus.
- (3) It is not limited to demand a change of structures; it also asks for the conversion of heart, which is the only valid pre-requisite that will keep the structures from becoming oppressive again.
- (4) It does not turn the social question into the only absolute. The prophets spoke also of other themes beside oppression, which, moreover, comprises the political, social, economic and religious aspects. Religious liberation is very important: experience shows that the struggle for religious liberation can bring as many – or more – complications as commitment in revolutionary movements.
- (5) It must be accompanied by love of enemies. It is not a question of merely accepting and tolerating the behavior of the oppressors, but of giving them a chance as Christ gave it to Zacchaeus.
- (6) It never loses hope; in fact, it maintains hope in God.²²

The prophets, the Torah and also the Psalms and Wisdom literature speak repeatedly of God as the God of justice and of the just Israelite as the good one. This is shown in a clearer manner, with the exilic and post-exilic prophets, in the Psalms and in Wisdom literature: the ideal Israelite, the good one is “the just one.” The just individual “conducts his affairs with justice,” trusting in the Lord, and “gives freely to the poor” (Ps 112). Through the Old Testament, we find some persons presented as models of justice; for instance Noah (Gen 6:9), Abraham (Gen 15:6), Daniel and Job (Ezk 14:14, 20).

The just Israelite is the one who does not maltreat the poor and acts in their favor. As Cardinal Carlo Martini puts it: “In the Old Testament, to say ‘just’ is equivalent to say ‘good’, ‘holy,

²² Ibid., pp. 455-456; cf. B. PEÑA, O.P. “Reflections from the Street Corner,” *Philippiniana Sacra*, Vol. XXI, No. 62 (May-August, 1986), pp. 212-244.

'perfect'. Job expresses this beautifully in a text that is considered 'the strongest statement on social justice in the wisdom literature.'²³ In this significant text, the ideal person is described thus:

My praises echoed in every ear,
and never an eye but smiled on me;
because he freed the poor man when he called,
and the orphan who had no one to help him.
When men were dying, I it was who had their blessing;
if widows' hearts rejoiced, that was my doing.
I had dressed myself in righteousness like a garment;
justice, for me, was cloak and turban.
I was eyes for the blind,
And feet for the lame.
Who but I was father of the poor?
The stranger's case had a hearing from me.
I used to break the fangs of wicked men,
and snatch their prey from between their jaws"
(Jb 29:11-17; see Ps 112).

In the whole Old Testament, there is, according to Hendrickx, "cumulative evidence" that clearly shows that God is the God of justice and the defender of rights, particularly of the poor and weak and needy; God, thus, is "almost biased in favor of the poor." God is just when He defends the widow, the orphan and the poor. After a careful and scholarly study on the practice of justice in the Old Testament as criterion of discernment of the true experience of faith, Sacred Scriptures scholar Rafael Sivatte concludes:

Summing up I can say that, in the whole Old Testament experience of God, the following apparent binomials form an inseparable unity: faith-life, religion-ethics, worship-commitment to justice, divine wisdom-happy human life, knowledge of God-respect for man.²⁴

²³ B.V. MALCHOW, "Social Justice in the Wisdom Literature," *Biblical Theology Bulletin*, Vol. XII, No. 4 (1982), 123; Carlo Maria Martini, *Sobre la justicia*, l.c., p. 14.

²⁴ R. SIVATTE, o.c., 34; Cf. H. HENDRICKX, o.c., 44; cf. J. DONAHUE, a.c., 78. See also H. HENDRICKX, *Social Justice in the Bible* (Quezon City: Claretian Publications, 1985); Kevin O'Reilly, *Towards a Christian View* (New Zealand: Prison Chaplains' Association, 1982).

What does God ask from his creatures and children on justice? "This is what Yahweh ask of you, only this: To act justly, to love tenderly and to walk humbly with your God" (Mi 6:8).

2. Justice in the New Testament

While the term justice ("mishpat" and/or "sedaqah") appears frequently in the Old Testament, in the New Testament love is the overriding word. Love, however, is also justice. Writes Nolan:

Some Christians, think that there is very little in the New Testament about justice and that love replaces justice as the fundamental and all-embracing virtue. But it is only possible to think like that if justice is thought of as one virtue among many. The New Testament is all about justice and the word occurs very frequently if you remember that righteousness means making someone or something just, putting right what was wrong.²⁵

The justice of the Old Testament is the justice of the New Testament understood as holiness (Mt 5:6) and particularly as love of the neighbor in need, a love that designates often "good deeds" or good works of justice as in the parable of the last judgment (Mt 25:34-43). Justice in the New Testament is also "just relationships," translated in English as "justification," "righteousness," or "justice": While the first two underline the religious, spiritual message of the Gospel, the third stresses its social message.²⁶

As in Old Testament, then, the concept of justice in the New Testament is quite complex and rich. We will approach it by reflecting on:

- (1) Jesus Christ the Liberator;
- (2) Christ the Prophet:

²⁵ A. Nolan, *a.c.*, p. 82. See Pierre Debergé, "La justicia en el Nuevo Testamento," *Cuadernos Bíblicos 115* (Estella, Navarra: Editorial Verbo Divino, 2003), pp. 1-64; Carlos Eduardo Román H., "Implicaciones morales de la justicia en el Nuevo Testamento desde el Evangelio de San Juan," *Theologica Xaveriana*, No. 144 (Octubre-Diciembre, 2002), pp. 615-640.

²⁶ Cf. J. Alonso, "Las 'buenas obras'...", *l.c.*, p. 446. Cf. D.J. Bosch, "The Scope of Mission," *International Review of Mission*, Vol LXXIII, No. 289 (1984), p. 28.

- (3) The New Commandment of love of God and neighbor
- (4) New Testament Theology of Justice: Paul, James and John

2.1 *Jesus Christ the Liberator*

Justice in the New Testament continues to be radically *theocentric*: God is just and demands fidelity to “*mishpat sedaqah*” (righteousness, justice). The God of Jesus is “God as the loving ‘Motherly Father’ whose power is mercy (Jurgen Moltmann). God is love: “*agape*.” God is solidarity (I Jn 4:20-21; cf. Is 49:15). Justice in the New Testament is also *Christocentric*: Christ is the Messiah and therefore the liberator of all (justice is universal), especially of the poor, sick and marginalized of society (it is principally justice towards the “little ones”).

Unlike in the Old Testament, where liberation, salvation is generally temporal (it will take place in this world), except in the apocalyptic writings, and the books of Wisdom and Maccabees and Psalms, in the New Testament it will be realized fully at the end of time. Its *eschatological* dimension, however, comprises and gives impulse to *temporal* liberation: “the future resurrection has a primordial relevance in the doctrine of Jesus, in the primitive Church and in the whole New Testament theology.”²⁷

Jesus Christ, the Servant of Yahweh (Mt 12:15-21), the Son of Man (Mt 12:32), the Just One (Ac 3:14; 7:52), liberates through “good deeds,” through his life, death and resurrection. He is condemned by religious and political leaders to die on the cross by reason of his proclamation of “good deeds” and denunciation of “bad deeds” (cf. Mk 3:1-6; Jn 7:6-9). Jesus denounces the “bad deeds” of the Jews, particularly of the Pharisees and scribes and the rich: he condemns self-sufficiency and selfishness. Alonso writes:

The “world” hates Jesus because He testifies that the activity of the world has nothing to do with the appropriate works of “*mishpat*,” that is, to be truly concerned with the marginalized. “Good or bad deeds” is a question of loving or not effectively the needy ones. The mission of Christ was

²⁷ J. Alfaro, *o.c.*, p. 20.

centered upon the unlimited love of the needy neighbor. But the world, blocked by its selfishness, does not want to know anything about it.²⁸

Jesus' death on the Cross seemed like the victory of those who performed "bad deeds." Nevertheless, this was a provisional victory only. God, who is faithful to his promise of liberation, raised Christ from the dead. His resurrection means the definitive victory of Justice: Risen Justice returns to the world, and now it cannot be suppressed any more.

Jesus, thus, is the liberator of all, particularly of the poor: He became poor for us (II Cor 8:9). He was under the law (Gal 4:4), burdened with our sins (II Cor 5:21), and died for us (Phil 2:6-11). He proclaimed the Good News of justice and compassion and love. He was close to those without dignity in society: lepers, prostitutes, tax collectors...

The proclamation of the Good News by Jesus is centered, as clearly shown in the Synoptics, on the Kingdom of God – an intra-personal, interpersonal and eschatological Kingdom (Mt 3:2; 4:23; 5:3; Lk 10:9; 17:21). The Kingdom, in fact, is already here in the life and message of Jesus, who fulfills God's intervention in human history (cf. Mk 1:9-12; Mt 3:13-14; Lk 3:21-23). It is experienced in filiation and fraternity.

The Beatitudes, the heart of the Sermon on the Mount (Bossuet), present to us the values of the Kingdom of God, the new style of life of the followers of Jesus. More than Matthew's, Luke's version of the Beatitudes emphasizes their social implications. In Luke's gospel we read:

How happy are you who are poor: Yours is the Kingdom of God. Happy you who are hungry now: You shall be satisfied. Happy you who weep now: You shall laugh. Happy are you

²⁸ Cf. J. Alonso, *a.c.*, 476-477. He adds: "The 'good deeds' are the miracles of Jesus: Jesus heals miraculously, it is true; but, his miraculous healings are 'signs', not because they are portents, but because they are 'mishpat'" (*Ibid.*, p. 474). Cf. J. Linskens, *Christ, Liberator of the Poor* (Manila: ASI Communication Center, 1976).

when people hate you, drive you out, abuse you, denounce your name as criminal, on account of the Son of Man. Rejoice when that day comes and dance for joy, for then your reward will be great in heaven. This was the way your ancestors treated the prophets (Lk 6:21-32).

Jesus lived and taught the Beatitudes. In truth, He is the Beatitude. The poor are proclaimed blessed of the Kingdom of God, and Jesus is the messenger of the Good News of the Kingdom, that brings the liberation to the poor and wretched of the earth. Hence, "in the Sermon on the Mount Jesus makes his the perception of the Old Testament of God as the defender of the poor and oppressed; He presents the Kingdom of God, which is arriving in his Person, as the fulfillment of the justice of God for the weak; He is the Messiah through whom God will liberate the oppressed."²⁹

The rich, however, are not "blessed." The rich are often condemned (Lk 12:16; 16:25; 6:24-25): not so much because they are rich, but because they are possessed by riches (cf. Mk 4:7; Mt 13:22; Lk 8:14; I Tim 6:7-10). Wealth is not presented as a blessing, but often, as a stumbling block to accepting Christ's invitation to the Kingdom (Mt 6:24; Lk 10:25; 16:13) and a source of insensitivity (Lk 16:19-31) towards the needs of the poor, and of their exploitation as shown in Jesus' cleansing of the Temple (Mk 11:15-16; Mt 21:12-13; Lk 19:45-46; Jn 2:13-17). It is difficult for the rich to love the neighbor poor because this love has to be expressed in fraternity and equality (cf. Lk 19). "No man has the right to live like the rich man while Lazarus is at the gate" (W. Barclay). "No one can be poor in spirit while living like the rich man" (J.L. Martín Descalzo). Charity includes *to love the rich* but not their unjust wealth. Hence, to love the rich implies to help them overcome their injustice: evil must be condemned.

²⁹ J. Alfaro, o.c., 21-22. Paul Hollenbach writes: "The cause of Jesus' death is essentially his action on behalf of the peasant poor of his society. He dies for the poor of his society. He gives his life as a 'ransom for many' – for the many oppressed peasants of Palestine" ("Liberating Jesus for Social Involvement," *Biblical Theology Bulletin*, Vol. XV, No. 4, 1985, p. 156). It seems to us that this interpretation of Jesus' death is overly restrictive: Christ really died for all; for all sinners of all times!

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus deepens the meaning of Old Testament justice, which He came to fulfill: ‘Do not imagine that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets. I have come not to abolish but to complete them’ (Mt 5:17).

To complete the Law and the Prophets means to improve them. How does Christ improve them? By interiorizing justice (cf. Mt 6:1; 23:28); by giving it, as goal, God the Father’s perfection (Mt 5:48) and, as food, doing the will of the Father (Jn 4:34); by preaching in a deeper and wider manner that justice is not only to give what is due to others but to give of what is ours (cf. Lk 3: 10-14). His liberation, moreover, is principally a *religious liberation* from sin against God and neighbor (Lk 16: 19-31; 17:9-14; Jn 8:34), but also *social liberation*: to liberate oneself and others from injustice. Conversion is grace of God and justice/love towards the neighbor (Lk 19:1-10).

2.2 *Jesus Christ the Prophet*

Prophet, or nabi, means the mouthpiece of God. Jesus is the prophet: He not only speaks the words of God, but is God’s Word.

Jesus is the eschatological Prophet announced by the prophets of the Old Testament: He fulfills their prophecies, by announcing justice, above all towards the poor. He applied to himself the words of the prophet Isaiah (61:1-2):

The spirit of the Lord has been given to me, for he has anointed me. He has sent me to bring the good news to the poor, to proclaim liberty to captives and to the blind new sight, to set the downtrodden free, to proclaim the Lord’s year of favor (Lk 4:18-19).

Jesus, then, follows the line of the prophets – and perfects it (cf Hb 1:1-2). He sides with the poor and makes himself their friend and brother. He was considered a subversive, or a rebel by the religious and political powers that crucified Him; but, in reality, he was not a revolutionary as some theologians and social activists want to portray him. He was a peaceful person – and a peacemaker. Only once his prophetic zeal was expressed in mild violent action when he threw from the temple courts the money-

changers and the sellers or pigeons – exploiters of the poor and simple people.³⁰

As the Prophet of God, Christ denounces the irresponsible and unconcerned rich and the proud, vain Pharisees and scribes, and false prophets (Mt 7:15-16). He announces likewise a justice which must go beyond the one of the Pharisees: “For I tell you, if your virtue (holiness, justice) goes no deeper than that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never get into the Kingdom of heaven” (Mt 5:20). He performs justice/love.

Christ is the Son of God and a Man-for-others: the two radical attitudes of His life are filial obedience and fraternal service. He does denounce injustice, but principally, He announces radical conversion to God and neighbor, and practices a justice which is also merciful love: “The new thing in the new justice of Jesus is that he brings divine compassion into the historical project of building a just world” (A. Nolan). “Solidarity with the poor is a way of saying God today” (J. Pfammater).³¹

Like the prophets, Jesus made prophetic denunciations. Unlike the prophets, however, he exhorted more than denounced. *What are the convergences and differences between the prophets’ denunciation and Jesus’?*

Like the prophets, Jesus sides with the poor and weak, but his solidarity with them is clearer, so much so that he himself was poor and identified himself with the poor (Mt 25:31-46).

Like the prophets, Jesus denounced the fake religiosity of the Pharisees, the extravagant living of the rich; but his prophetic denunciation is harsher than that of the prophets, particularly regarding pharasaic religion, wealth (Mt. 6:24; 13:22) and lack of solidarity of the rich with the poor (Lk 16:19): according to Jesus,

³⁰ Cf. O. Cullmann, *Jesus et les revolutionnaires de son temps* (Neuchatel, 1970); W. Barclay, *Ethics in a Permissive Society, l.c.*, 158-159; J. Alfaro, *o.c.*, 24-26; J. Alonso, “Las ‘buenas obras’...,” 475-478; Robert McAfee Brown *Unexpected News: Reading the Bible with Third World Eyes* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1984), 89-104.

³¹ A. Nolan, *a.c.*, 84. J. Pfammater; quoted by B. Bennassar, *Moral Evangélica, moral social* (Salamanca: Ed. Sígueme, 1990), p. 56.

not only robbers and murderers will be punished, but also those who are insensitive to the needs of others (Lk 16:19-31).

Unlike the prophets, however, Jesus gives more importance to exhortation than to denunciation. He exhorts, in particular, to a *radical renunciation*, which he demands from his disciples (Lk 14:33), who are to practice it (Mt 19:27; Lk 18:28); and to an *attitude of service*, as exemplified by the women who accompanied Jesus (Lk 8:3). More than the prophets, Jesus is *the prophet of love*, who even gives his life for the love of all (Jn 15:13).

Therefore, Sicre concludes:

Jesus does not eliminate the message of the prophets; he is not unconcerned about the problems of this world. Perhaps, he is more realistic. In this sense, He does not pretend to change the whole society of his time, but prefers to plant a seed that will grow into a future tree.³²

2.3 The New Commandment of Love of God and Neighbor

God is the God of merciful justice. In the New Testament, God is Father (Lk 11:2; Rom 8:15; I Pet 1:17). He is love (and *justice*).

The Old Testament Law centered on the two commandments (Dt 6:5; Lv 19:18), and likewise, the New Testament Law (Mk 12:28-31; Mt 22:37-39). Jesus said: "On these two commandments hang the whole law and the Prophets also" (Mt 22:40).

Christ's commandment of love, however, deepens and widens the Old Testament's love. It is called a new commandment. New in three ways, according to biblical scholar Karl Hermann Schelkle³³: first, in the deep intensity that underscores the presentation of the commandments of love of God and neighbor, and their mutual unity (Mk 12:29-31); second, in the unconditional application of the commandment of love to all men and women without distinction –

³² Cf. J.L. Sicre, o.c., 456-460.

³³ K. H. Schelkle, *Teología del Nuevo Testamento* (Barcelona: Editorial Herder, 1975), 184-188.

including the enemies (Mt 5:43-47); and third, in the foundation of the commandment of love of neighbor, namely, God as a generous and forgiving Father (Mt 5:44; Jn 13:35). Radical meaning: "As I have loved you" (cf. Jn 13:35).

Love of God or love of neighbor? Practically, their separation is not possible – neither would it be authentic. Jesus emphasized love of neighbor in the parable of the Samaritan (Lk 10:25-37). The two commandments, writes Jose Miranda, center on having compassion on the neighbor in need: "Go and do the same yourself" (Lk 10:37).³⁴

The love of neighbor, inseparably linked to the love of God, is universal and unconditional. It demands limitless commitment to all persons; particularly, in the first place, to the needy persons – the poor, the oppressed and marginalized. Thus, the followers of Jesus must practice justice with compassion, or merciful love: "Be compassionate as your Father is compassionate" (Lk 6:36).

Justice towards the needy is so important that without it no one can be saved: at the end of time, persons will be elected or rejected – saved or condemned – depending upon their compassionate justice towards the poor and weak whom Jesus makes his brothers and sisters.

Then the King will say to those on his right hand, "Come, you who my Father has blessed, take for your heritage the kingdom prepared for you since the foundation of the world. For I was hungry and you gave me food; I was thirsty and you gave me drink; I was a stranger and you made me welcome; naked and you clothed me, sick and you visited me, in prison and you came to see me..."

Next he will say to those on his left hand, "Go away from me, with your curse upon you, to the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels. For I was hungry and you never gave me food; I was thirsty and you never gave me anything to drink. I was a stranger and you never made me welcome, naked and you never clothed me, sick and in prison and you never visited me" (Mt 25: 34-37, 41-43; cf. Cor 1:28, and 9:22; 1 Jn 4:20; Jm 2:14-17, and 5:1-4).

³⁴ J.P. Miranda, *o.c.*, 70.

As I was reading this text I remember the comment of theologian Vincent Cosmao: "The unique criterion given to us by Jesus, to measure whether or not we are following him, is that we recognize him in the one who is in need. Unless we see him in the poor we do not see him at all. We may say, then, that all the rest is words and pious words, with the depth and human consistency of meaningless clichés."³⁵

Echoing the prophets of the Old Testament, Christ tells us that what He wants is "mercy, not sacrifice" (Mt 9:13; 12:7-9; 21:12-13; cf. Ho 6:6); poverty in spirit, not pharisaic self-righteousness (Mt 5:20; 6:6-1; Lk 18:9-14); works of justice and not uncommitted prayers (Mt 7:21). Truly Jesus said, "the weightier things of the Law are justice, mercy, good faith" (Mt 23:23).

Belonging to Christ's Kingdom requires poverty of spirit from all – the rich and the poor alike. All have to seek first the Kingdom of God and his justice, and all the other things will be given to them (Mt 6:33) – also to the poor and in this world. However, to seek the Kingdom of God and his justice means, for the rich, to share – like Zacchaeus (Lk 19: 1-10) – to become poor in spirit (cf Mt 5:3-11; Lk 6:20-22; 1:45-55). Jesus said "How hard it is for those who have riches to enter the Kingdom of God... It is easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the Kingdom of God" (Mk 10:23, 25; cf Lk 12:13-21).

Usually when many of us Christians read that text we apply it right away to the rich, when perhaps we also are rich – ambitious (Mk 7:12; Lk 12:15), or arrogant (1 Tim 6:17), or unconcerned with the poor (Lk 16:19-31). Alonso Diaz comments: "Cover-ups and attenuations for those very harsh words (Mk 10:23, 25) have been sought to harmonize wealth and Christianity, but the whole thing is useless."³⁶

³⁵ Vincent Cosmao, *Trasformar el mundo. Una tarea para la Iglesia* (Santander: Sal Terrae, 1981).

³⁶ J. Alonso, *a.c.*, 470; cf. H. Hendrickx, *o.c.*, 67-68. J. Donahue writes: "In biblical thought, generally, wealth is evil on two grounds: (a) when it becomes a source of dominating power over others, and (b) when it dominates the one who possesses it" (*a.c.*, 106-107).

On the other hand, it seems to us, that, today, at times, Jesus' special concern for the poor is absolutized to the point of making it exclusive. This would also be incorrect; moreover, the understanding of "poor" appears in some theological writings overly restricted, to mean primarily the materially poor; for Jesus "poor" were also the weak, the defenseless, the sinners. Thus, Christ also healed rich people (Lk 7:2-10; Mt 18:5-13), was accompanied by rich women (Lk 8:1-3), was a close friend of Lazarus and his sisters (Lk 10:38-42). The model of love of neighbor in need is a rich Samaritan traveller who takes care of the wounded man (Lk 10-29-37).

1.4 New Testament Theology of Justice: Paul, James and John

After his resurrection from the dead, Jesus, the liberator of the oppressed, sent his Spirit to continue in the Christian community the spreading of his Kingdom of love and justice, the call to conversion (see Ac 2:38-41; 3:19-26).

The first Christian communities were generally faithful to the just and justifying God of Jesus: to Jesus, Son of God and Man-for-others. Luke, the evangelist of the poor, narrated vividly this fidelity to justice and love of the communities, particularly manifested through the sharing of the goods (Ac 2:42-47; 4:32-37), and following the praxis of Jesus (Mt 19:21; Lk 12:33). Luke's report on the salient characteristics of these Christian communities is outstanding:

They remained faithful to the teaching of the apostles, to the brotherhood, to the breaking of bread and to the prayers. The faithful all lived together and owned everything in common, they sold their goods and possessions and shared out the proceeds among themselves according to what each one needed (Ac 2:42, 44-45).

Writing from and for their different Christian communities the New Testament writers – practical theologians – explained and interpreted the message and life of Jesus for those communities. Their nuanced ideas on justice and love are worth mentioning, in particular those from St. Paul, St. James and St. John.

2.4.1 *St. Paul: Justification by faith – and justice*

Paul is “a servant of justice” (Rom 6:18). Through justification, a person becomes just. Justification is theocentric and Christocentric. It is God’s action through Christ: God’s justice justifies persons through the cross of Christ; He is just (Rom 3: 5-8), and justifies everyone who believes in Jesus (Rom 3:6; cf. Phil 3:9).

A man or woman, then, is made just by faith (Rom 3:28), and not by the Law (Rom 3:20). He is freed from sin (Rom 6:1-23; 8:2), from death (1Cor 5:54-58; Rom 8:2), and from the law (Gal 2:4; 4:21-25); and for love (Gal 5:14). The justified person becomes a new creature, dead to sin and alive in love (Col 3:5-16).

Paul emphasizes the religious aspect of justification (or liberation, or salvation, or redemption): liberation from sin and death, and for God’s love. Nevertheless, his justification implies also liberation from the sin of injustice and for justice/love towards the neighbor. The conversion to which St. Paul calls includes change from the sin of injustice also (Rom 1:28-32), the renewal of grace (Col 3:5-16), and commitment to love of neighbor: “Serve one another in works of love, since the whole of the law is summarized in a single command: love your neighbor as yourself” (Gal 5:13-14; cf. II Cor 5:14-15; I Thes 1:3; Eph 4:15; Lk 19:18; Mt 7:12).

Love of neighbor – always inseparable from love of God – is the commandment, the Christian value (I Cor 13:1-13; Col 3:14). It is universal, because Christ died for all (II Cor 5:14-15): “I made myself all things to all men in order to save some at any cost” (I Cor 9:22). Does Paul’s message on love of neighbor entail principally love of the needy – or poor – neighbor?

In his meeting with the apostles in Jerusalem, Paul was reminded of one thing: “The only thing they insisted on was that we should remember to help the poor, as indeed I was anxious to do” (Gal 2:10). In fact, Paul felt nearer the poor, weak and ignorant, because these were the ones chosen by God (I Cor 1:28); likewise, he asked Jesus’ followers to share what they had with those in need in God’s household (Rom 12:13), to be generous (II Cor 9: 10-11), to have a simple life style. “We brought nothing into the

world, and we take nothing out of it; but as long as we have food and clothing, let us be contented with that" (I Tim 6:7-8).

It is often repeated that Paul did not reject slavery in society, nor did he fight structural injustices. Even if these were true, these cannot be taken against Paul, a son of his time. In particular regarding slavery in relation to faith: after his conversion, Onesimus, a slave of Philemon before his conversion, is, after his conversion to Christ, "not a slave anymore, but something much better than a slave, a dear brother" (Phm verse 16); Onesimus and Philemon have now the same Master!

Concerning structural justice and injustice, Paul did stress in social relation legal justice (Rom 13:7-8). He underlined spiritual liberation, but including the practice of justice. He continues asking all to become slaves of righteousness (Rom 6:18), slave of Christ (I Cor 7:22), slaves to all (1Cor 9:19), and instruments of justice (Rom 6:13).³⁷ To be an instrument of justice means, for all but particularly for the rich (cf 1 Tim 6:17), to share – to level the gap between rich and poor:

To give relief to others does not mean you ought to make things difficult for yourselves: it is a question of balancing what happens to be your surplus now against their present need, and one day they may have something to spare that will supply your own need. That is how we strike a balance (II Cor 8:13-14).

2.4.2 *St. James: Faith and Justice – to the Poor*

In some scriptural and theological quarters, Paul and James continue to be opposed to each other regarding faith and works of justice. It is said, rather simplistically, that Paul teaches justification by faith alone, while James defends justification by works of justice alone. Certainly, Paul emphasizes faith, and James, works; but one does not need to be a biblical scholar to realize that, although Paul's justification is by faith alone, this faith is

³⁷ J. DONAHUE, *a.c.*, 88-103; K.H. SCHELKLE, *o.c.*, 269-275; J. ALFARO, *o.c.*, 26-30; J. ALONSO, *a.c.*, 480-486; SYNOD OF BISHOPS '71, *Justice in the World*, II, No. 33.

never alone; that is, it is actuated by love (Gal 5:6). Similarly, in James' case deeds are highlighted, but they are never alone; faith and deeds work together, like in the case of Abraham, who was justified by his deed: "faith and deeds were working together; his faith became perfect by what he did" (Jm 2:22). Therefore, "for James there is neither faith alone nor works only."³⁸

The works of justice are the works of love. The supreme demand of the supreme law: "The right thing to do is to keep the supreme law of Scripture: *You must love your neighbor as yourself*" (Jm 2:8). For James, faith without justice is not really faith; we may even say that for him faith is equivalent to justice (2:18), and justice is justice/love towards the poor or sharing with those who are in need: "If one of the brothers or one of the sisters is in need of clothes and has not enough food to live on, and one of you says to them 'I wish you well; keep yourself warm and eat plenty', without giving them these bare necessities of life, then what good is that? Faith is like that: if good works do not go with it, it is quite dead" (2:14-17).

Following the line of the prophets, and particularly of Christ, James links justice to religion or worship. James adds that the authentic, the one that is pure and undefiled before God our Father is this: "coming to the help of orphans and widows when they need it, and keeping oneself uncontaminated by the world" (1:27). "Widows and orphans are to be understood," Hendrickx explains, as "the defenseless," irrespective as to whether they are widows and orphans or not. Any religiosity without taking up the cause of the poor and the defenseless is worthless.

All persons, therefore, are bound by their faith to help and share with the poor, the needy – the defenseless. All, especially the rich; these are in a position to share more. Wealth is not a lasting value, and, in the hierarchy of the Kingdom of Christ, a low

³⁸ K.H. SCHELKLE, o.c., 276. The commentator of James, in the Jerusalem Bible says: "However closely he relates the two things (faith and deed), he (Jm 2:22) makes a clear distinction between having faith and doing something as a result of that faith." For Jeremias, that difference between Paul and James is formal, not substantial: Paul speaks of faith in contraposition to Jewish legalism; and James opposes genuine faith to dead orthodoxy (cf. J. Jeremias, "Paul and James," *Expiratory Times*, 66) 1954-55, pp. 368-371.

value and, very often, a dangerous one; it gives further a false sense of security (cf. 1:9-11).

James denounces strongly the unjust rich. He also condemns those who give preferential treatment to the rich in the churches of Christ: "As long as you make distinctions between classes of people you are committing sin" (2:9). The harshest indictment is reserved for the rich who live in luxury while their workers remain poorly paid or unpaid:

Now an answer for the rich: Start crying, weep for the miseries that are coming to you. Your wealth is all rotting; moths eat up all your clothes. All your gold and your silver are corroding away, and the same corruption will be your own sentence, and eat into your body. It was a burning fire that you stored up as your treasure for the last days. Laborers mowed your fields, and you cheated them – listen to the wages that you kept back, calling out; realize that the cries of the reapers have reached the ears of the Lord of hosts. On earth you have a life of comfort and luxury; in the time of slaughter you went on eating to your heart's content. It was you who condemned the innocent and killed them; they offered you no resistance (5:1-6).

2.4.3 *St. John: Filiation and Love of Neighbor*

In his Gospel and Epistles, St. John the Evangelist speaks powerfully of love of neighbor. Fraternal love is modeled after the love and union of Christ with the Father (Jn 17:21-23).

John presents Jesus as "the Word," whose content is "related to justice and love of neighbor, in other words, with 'good deeds' or 'mishpat'; "the word is an *imperative*, which is really love of neighbor"⁴⁰: "If you make my word your home you will indeed be my disciples" (Jn 8:31).

Love of neighbor is the "new" commandment; its main "newness" consists in loving persons, as Christ has loved them. "I give you a new commandment: love one another; just as I have loved you, you also must love one another" (Jn 13:34). It is the trademark of the true disciples of Christ (Jn 13:35).

⁴⁰ J. ALONSO, *a.c.*, 471.

For John, this love of neighbor is universal and limitless (see Mt 5:48). It is, above all – again –, love of the needy neighbor, so much so that “to love the neighbor is to love the person in need”.⁴¹

If a man who was rich enough in this world's goods saw that one of his brothers was in need but closed his heart to him, how could the love of God be living in him? My children, our love is not to be just words or mere talk, but something real and active (1 Jn 3:17-18).

With the synoptics and the other New Testament writings, love of God and love of neighbor are inseparable and indivisible: they both are truly one commandment. St. John stresses and explains: without love of neighbor there cannot be love of God: “If you refuse to love, you must remain dead; to hate your brother is to be a murder, and murderers, as you know, do not have eternal life in them” (1 Jn 3:15; see 2:9-11).

To love God, to know God, to be a child of God requires, is expressed by the love (justice) to the neighbor: “In this way we distinguish the children of God from the children of the devil: anybody not living a holy life and not loving his brother is no child of God's” (1 Jn 3:10; see, *ibid.*, 4:7-8). To be a child of God means to perform “good deeds,” to do what is just: “you know that God is righteous – then you must recognize that everyone whose life is righteous has been begotten by him” (1 Jn 2:29).

3. Love or Justice?

After having reflected on the Bible's theory of justice one is tempted to ask again. Does the Bible speak of justice or of love? As we have answered throughout this study, it talks of justice and love, or, better, of *justice/love*: in the Sacred Scriptures, “justice and mercy (compassion) meet; they are co-terminus; there is no dichotomy between justice and love in the Bible.”⁴²

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 472; cf. J. ALFARO, *o.c.*, 30-32.

⁴² A. NOLAN, *a.c.*, 84-85.

Certainly biblical justice implies love (mercy). And “when justice and love are not married, then Christians are misled.”⁴³ The Bible really teaches the Christians that ‘in their quest for justice, they are recovering the roots of the biblical tradition and are seeking to create a dwelling place for the word of God in human history.’⁴⁴

Is it justice or love? It is neither justice or love, but justice and love; or loving justice; or just love. In biblical perspective, justice and love are inseparable aspects in God’s interventions in human history, particularly through Christ and in the interpersonal and social relationships of those who call God the Father of Jesus Christ. The Synod of Bishops of 1971 stated:

Christian love of neighbor and justice cannot be separated. For love implies an absolute demand for justice, namely recognition of the dignity and rights of one’s neighbor. Justice attains its inner fullness only in love. Because every man is truly a visible image of the invisible God and a brother of Christ, the Christian finds in every man God himself and God’s absolute demand for justice and love.⁴⁵

Justice and love (justice/love), then, are the main social values of the Bible. They are particularly underlined in the paradigm of social ethics in the Gospel.

⁴³ J.G. DAVIES, *Christians, Politics and Violent Revolution* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1983), 80-81.

⁴⁴ DONAHUE, *a.c.*, 109. The scripturist Father of the Church, St. Jerome – when his religious houses in Bethlehem were attacked by sectaries – told his community: “Now we have to translate the words of Scriptures into deeds, instead of talking of holy things we must enact them” (Donald Attwater, 1983).

⁴⁵ SYNOD OF BISHOPS ’71, *Justice in the World*, II, No. 34. In their pace-setting pastoral on the economy, the US bishops write: “Biblical justice is more comprehensive than subsequent philosophical definitions. It is not concerned with a strict definition of rights and duties, but with the rightness of the human conditions before God and within society. Nor is justice opposed to love; rather, it is both a manifestation of love and a condition for love to grow” (NCCB, *Economic Justice for All*. Washington D.C., 1986, No. 39).

The social message of Jesus, the prophet, continued creatively the teachings of the prophets and of the whole Old Testament. It may be summed up in these phrases: "You shall love your neighbor as yourself" (Mt 22:10), "Love your enemies, pray for your persecutors" (Mt 5:44).⁴⁶ □

⁴⁶ Cf. BARTOLOMEU BENNASSAR, *Moral evangélica, moral social* (Salamanca: Ediciones Sígueme, 1990).