

# Judaism and Poverty

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## Abstract

The article deals with social legislation of Jewish people three thousand years ago. Their legislation was advanced comparing with other dominions in those times such as Egypt or Babylon. Respect between people, human dignity of religious reasons and absence of slavery are become the foundation for social justice which was shown in agrarian law. Criminal law also was not so cruel as pagan's nation. It depends on what lead us to solve this problem of poverty: whether we use only 'light of natural reason' or we listen the God's words, too.

**Keywords :** poverty, resources, servant, slave, social laws.

## Introduction

More than two hundred years since the French revolution, has been existing the faith of solving problem just by 'light of natural reason.' It doesn't relate to science or technic section only, but humanitarian section as well – psychology, sociology and politology. However, in the real life we can use our mind partly because it does not help us to resolve all troubles. For example well-known social phenomenon of poverty and the gap between wealthy and poor people. The ideas how to eliminate poverty are not incorrect, but they are weak and insufficient.

The Jewish religion – when Judaism solves this thing it does not use only power of mind but it uses God's word authority as well, presented by prophets notably by Moses and his collection of laws the Torah (five Moses's books in Holy Bible). In the past, connection between intellectual power and religiosity brought the people different views and suggestions of solving problem of poverty.

Of course, there were poor Jews and Israelites. Such as prodigal people who spend all their money on nothings and so completely ruined their families. On the other hand, there were wars and natural disasters which fully impoverished them. Widows and orphans were there as well. Whoever is reading the Bible even though perfunctorily will see these people were protected by law that was given by God to people.

## 1 Agrarian law

The first thing which helped to prevent the Jewish society from poverty was agrarian law. People could be sure that either war or robber would steal their land because it was something what firmly stayed on one place. Two thousand years

B.C. already existed the big difference in agrarian legislation between rich empires Egypt, Babylon and the Jews.

Sovereigns tried to gather as much land as they could have and then rent it people usually in difficult times. For example well-known ancient Egypt where all soils owned pharaoh. During the seven years of famine people were coming in royal storerooms for grain (cfr. Gn 41,35-36,49). They firstly paid with money (Gn 42,2) but when those ran out of they gave pharaoh for bread their animals, cattle, horses, donkeys. Then they did not have neither animals and famine still lasted, people said: 'Why should we die in thy presence? Take us with our lands for bread.' So, pharaoh got the land back and he gave it to another people who had to bring him back twenty percent of harvest.

People in Babylon also owned the small parts of land and the king had the best and the biggest lands there. Babylon king Melisipak II. (1202-1188 B.C.) donated to his son 309 hectares of land what shows us size of lands which king owned in those times. The king Nabuchodonosor I. (1146-1123 B.C.) did in a similar way when donated 104 hectares of his land to one of his supporters. Kingdoms had so giant lands that they either noticed their donated lands. That was impossible for the Jews and the Israelites. They had the agrarian law which used nobody else. According to this law God is owner of entire holy ground (Lv. 25, 23). They were just renters. At the beginning the God gave them land and they should cultivate. They could not sell the land to the others (Lv 24, 10).

## **2 Homeostasis for its religious background**

In Jubilee year – what was every fiftieth year – had to be all lands given original owners back (Lv 24, 13) and all debts were forgiven. It means, they could just rent their land until next Jubilee year. But the owner could buy up his land before Jubilee year if he paid money for rent back to renter. The point of this was so that property remained in same family. Therefore, the kings did not own lot of estates. They had to earn money in different ways such as taking fees or spoils of war. When Samuel wanted to scare the Israelites before royal establishment he said: '(King) will take you goods of highest quality vineyards and olive trees and he will give them to his servants' (1 Sam 8, 14). This is just a warning and is mentioned as injustice and violence, which kings will commit, but not to the right of the king (cfr. Sedláková, 2005, p. 75).

Godless king of Israel Ahab could not easily expropriate vineyard of ordinary citizen Naboth, although he offered enough money for that or another vineyard. Naboth did not want to give up his father's heritage so Ahab sadly went back home. Afterwards, Ahab's wife Jezebel wanted to gain this vineyard and therefore, she let Naboth's whole family kill off and to blame him for it. After that, she took over his vineyard. (1Kr 21,1–16).

We can see the way how people wanted to prevent from poverty to somebody has more lands and the others would have nothing. They would stay without source of subsistence (Psalm 73, 12).

### **3 Punishment and Sentence**

The whole Bible try to represent defense of private possession of individuals or rather whole families. There is no causes how or why it happend. Lawgiver defends private possession of laws very strictly. On the examples which are in the Bible we can see that punishment was seriously sentenced. If man stole animal; sheep,ox, bull or cow he would have to pay five ox for an ox and four sheep for a sheep (2 Sam 12, 6; Ex 22, 1).

It should deter thieves or ensure people who were robbed in order they would not get back the same animal which was considered for less valuable. Therefore, amount of cattle expressed quality one of them. The victim had to be compensated for the loss of profit. Compensation involved sentence for punishment. Nowadays, when the court sentence thief to prison except o fit he has to pay money.

Laws in Bible are incomparably milder and more human against laws of babylon king Chamurabi around 2000 B.C. For biblical lawgiver is life more valuable than belongings. There were people killed by abduction only but not for belongings (Ex 21, 16). Not even, when the thief was unable to pay for damage. Instead of money, he had to undo what caused whereas babylon's law sentenced people to death.

According to Babylon and others ancient east legislation people were often killed for punishment or were cut their hands. Chamurabi always punished by death. Moreover, human who tried to steal something during the fire was thrown into flames (Heriban, 1992, s.480).

Holy Bible always defends human life although it is life of the thief. Because we can replace some goods but we cannot ressurect dead man. If someone killed a burglar who broke into his house at night, did not respond to the crime of murder (Ex 22, 2 - 3), because the law assumes that a thief was killed in self-defense. But who killed a thief during day when they can defend otherwise, and it was obvious that the thief came to steal his possession only he had to undergo death because had not right to kill thief.

### **4 The concept servant and his significance**

Position of servants was more bearable between believers, the Jews who lived according to ten commandments and Thorah. Legislation of Bible protected the servants and does not mention the slaves. Hebrew even does not have the word that is expressing slave. The slave who was bought in a market is named in

jewish language 'ebed' but king's minister or officer is ebed even Messiah is named ebed means Lord's servant. (Lv 25, 44 ).

Every time when Israelite bought servant he behaved toward person as he would be very close. The law consider servant for member of family though he was stranger. The law also required so that every foreigner who became permanent servant for Israelite were circumcised in order he belonged to the same religious society (Ex 12, 44).

Besides, in the law were clearly mentioned causes where servants had the same privileges like the others members of family and they took part in paschal lamb. (Ex 12, 44). Only the priest and their families could eat sacred meals at sacrificial feast. These meals could not even touch Israelites who did not belong to priest's family or day-laborer. Nevertheless, the permanent servant in priest's family could eat all of these meals where the law recognizably showed that servant belonged to family where was on duty.

## **5 Day-laborers and slaves**

For the pagan nations the slave had no position. While day-laborers had to work hard with they hands but they also had personal freedom. It was entirely different with the slaves and the servants who had no liberty and constituted just part of lord's inventory. People could buy slaves at markets together with cattle or aquired the slaves during wars as prisoners of war who had no right to living. Therefore, they used to be abused at hard work.

For Romans they did not have any rights. His owner could kill him whenever he want to without of being responsible for it. If anybody else had killed a slave he would have been in troubles because the owner had lost manpower (cfr. Rozwadowski, 1992, s. 94).

The Israelites had different legislation for servants. Although it was prisoner of war or was bought at market he was helping owner out with work. Owner had some duties to servant. Holy Bible clearly describes equality between people in God's eyes.

In Genesis God says to people after flood world: 'Whoever sheds the blood of man, by man shall his blood be shed, for God made man in his own image' (Gn 9, 6). But more clearly is explained equality between people and between lord and his servant. Then equitable Job says: 'If I have rejected the cause of my manservant or my maidservant, when they brought a complaint against me, what then shall I do when God rises up? When he makes inquiry, what shall I answer him? Did not he who made me in the womb make him? And did not one fashion us in the womb?' (Job 31, 13 – 15).

Worth of human life does not depend on whether it is lord or slave because God made us similar to himself. Only this is a measure of protection of human life.

## **6 Rights of the servants**

Lord had to provide for servants housing, food, water and clothes. The servant had a right to have a rest on Sunday as the Israelites. The lord could punish his servant similarly like the other members of family but the law ruled out him of abusing it. If servant lost one of his limbs in time the lord was punishing him though it has been tooth, the servant was released. Old testament shows us that we cannot compare behaviour of the Israelites to his servants with paganish slaves.

The servant who belonged to Israelites had much milder destiny. If Israelite became poor he also had to work for another Israelite. Either he went to serve willingly to provided for his family things needed for living or he was forced by law. It happened because he was not able to pay his debts back or according to a law he was not able to pay someone back for stolen thing. In both situations had to undo it for lord. However, the Israelite could stay on duty only six years (Gn 21, 2). After six years the Israelite had to be released at liberty no matter how much he did or whether the debt was paid back. The Israelite could be released earlier when was servant in Jubilee year (Lv 25, 10). And the law commands to lord released servant with all goods which servant could need in order he began new life (Lv 25, 13). The Israelite took his family as well. (Gn 21, 3)

It happened that manservant who worked for lord married to another maidservant of the same lord. After time they had children. When he was released at freedom he could not take his family because they still belonged to lord (Gn 21, 4). There was possibility for servant to stay to work for lord with his family. The same case for these servants who were glad and felt good with lord and they wanted to stay with him (Gn 21, 5 – 6). What actually has happened very often because they had everything what they need for living.

## **7 Salary for work**

We have lack of information about day-laborers. They worked occasionally and were paid per a day (Lv 19, 13). Price of their daily wage is not mentioned in Old Testament. Of course it changed depending on circumstances. It was necessary to pay their wage for work, otherwise it was very heavy sin. The book Deuteronomy says: 'You shall not oppress a hired servant who is poor and needy, whether he is one of your brothers or one of the sojourners who are in your land within your towns. You shall give him his wages on the same day, before the sun sets (for he is poor and counts on it), lest he cry against you to the Lord, and you be guilty of

sin' (Dt 24, 14 – 15). And prophet Jeremiah strictly adds: 'Woe to him who builds his house by unrighteousness, and his upper rooms by injustice, who makes neighbor serve him for nothing and does not give him his wages' (Jer. 22, 13). And the prophet Malachi among sinners who God will severely judge also mentioned those who retains wage of day laborers and oppress widows and orphans (Mal 3, 5).

This is the current situation as well. If anybody do not pay for services or is concluding agreement instead of employment contract it will damage hard-working people and makes them apathetic.

## **8 Jewish social legislation**

The creditor was not allowed to call for interest rate from debtor while the law required rich people to lend money to poor people. The creditor could demand any kind of deposit whatever what poor human had but he was not allowed to come into his house violently and take anything what he would want to. Neither his garment which he needed to cover yourself at night nor his stony grinder that his family needed to mill the grain on the next day (Ex 22, 26; Dt 24, 6-17). The Israelite had to let part of his harvest for poor people. They also could take grain whenever it was needed not to die of starvation (Dt 23, 25; Ruth 2, 2). The Israelite had to invite a few people of poor society. All of these rights were evidence of how the acts of God were taking care of poor people in those times.

## **9 Social inequality - the question of rich and poor people**

Social problem's are caused by social inequality. For sure, we would not live in the paradise if we had social equality as was preferred by the Marxists and the Communists. People are not machines and what they have said about the equality one day does not have to be supported on the other. Because somebody works hard and somebody is lazy to work. One person saves the money but the other spends everything what he or she has got. When people have lack of the money they want to have the same amount of the money like others. If they reach that, they will want to have more money yet. People would start fighting and the more powerful one would win (cfr. Fabian, 2001, p.67).

Neither to give whole belongings to the society and then divide it between people as wanted to do utopian socialists would not solve this problem. The man would become the slave of society soon or better said of more powerful ones. (Centessimus annus, 1991, čl. 32). It is undisputed, that the problem of coexistence could be reduced to minimum. There will have to be maintained principle of personal possession which gives freedom and independence. And it was the point of agrarian law of the Israelites. Everyone had a small part of soil or of something what was belonging to them. We can consider it for the best way

how to prevent from poverty in those times. According to the law they permanently owned it (León -Dufour, 1990, s. 1536).

## Conclusion

We cannot compare our social situation with social situation of the Israelites. It is impossible. For more than three thousand years has been done many changes. Social workers who work according to christian spirituality can be proud of the Bible and its social legislation. It tries to explain only one thing which is that we have just one Father in heaven. If He would have a respect in personal religiosity of everyone, than we can expect the progress in the social justice. Without this principle, all humanistic concepts of social activity are based "on thin ice".

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Anton Fabian is a professor at the Catholic University, Faculty of Theology in Kosice - Slovakia. In his research focuses mainly historical, ethical and spiritual issues of social work.

## Address

Mons. Prof. ThDr. JCDr. Anton Fabian, PhD  
Catholic University,  
Faculty of Theology in Kosice  
Street: Hlavná 89,  
041 21 Kosice - Slovakia  
[fabian.ant50@gmail.com](mailto:fabian.ant50@gmail.com)