
In his thematic study on poverty—focused on writings from the Hebrew Bible, Apocrypha of the Old Testament, selected pseudepigraphic writings (e.g. 1 Enoch), selected Dead Sea Scrolls, the New Testament and rabbinic literature—Leslie Hoppe seeks to make a wide array of references to poverty instructive for communities of faith today. While this work has much to commend it, such as its lucid style and relatively comprehensive approach to biblical literature, one issue that stands out as needing further engagement is that of methodology.

From the outset, Hoppe assures the reader that the study to follow is not objective, indeed, he states, “No method is ‘objective’” (16). Although there is a truism in the statement, this simple platitude is only the beginning of laying a methodological groundwork. As one continues to read, it becomes evident that history and theology merge and it is the very lack of rigour in seeking to be historically objective that makes later “theological” insights less than convincing. One should note that objectivity is relative and one method found to be substantially more viable than another. Instead of measuring objectivity, Hoppe poses several questions which provide his objective standard, such as: “Has my understanding of this text given new direction to my conversion?” A methodology which is applicable only when reading scriptural texts, rather than ancient literature more broadly as we find in this study, actually seeks to be subjective in nature. Therefore, when this measure is applied to, say, 1 Enoch (135-36) or the Damascus Document (137-40), one finds it difficult to see how contemporary devotional reflection makes sense of these documents.

In reading passages from the Hebrew Bible, such as Moses and the Exodus (21-22), one is left to wonder whether the passage is being read as a witness to a historical event or if lessons are being drawn simply from the narrative. Hoppe understands the story of Israelite bondage in Egypt as reflecting a social reality, which then allows him to conclude that oppressed societies today may view the wealthy in society as oppressors of the poor. An observation that is made several times in the book is that poverty and oppression are human inventions, in particular, those with power seek to keep others subjugated to them. For Hoppe, reflection on the plight of the Israelites in Egypt allows him to conclude: “The people of the United States and the European Union can maintain their lifestyles only because of the economic and political power they wield over the still developing nations in the southern hemisphere” (22). That the story of Egyptian bondage and contemporary suffering in Africa and South America may be so summarized is, indeed, dubious.

Although this is not the place to engage with Hoppe’s view of oppressive Western society as an economist or political scientist, and one really should, more
plausible historical readings of Exodus are available, such as reading this not just as story of oppression but of special deliverance from Egypt. The Israelites, a minor power in the Levant, appear to be telling an embarrassing tale which portrays a regional superpower as being humbled by the power of their God. The suffering of the Israelites in Egypt, regardless of whether a historical kernel is present, serves as a backdrop to the Exodus and an account of the mighty Egyptian gods falling before the God of the politically inferior Israel.

To further confuse the reader whether one is to reflect on a non-objective view of history or derive a moral of a story as a point of contemplation, Hoppe on occasion draws our attention to archaeology. The distinction between reading literature and reconstructing a Sitz im Leben is indeed pertinent when suggesting what one may learn about poverty. In contrast to the presentation and consideration of bondage in Egypt, in the introduction to Joshua historical-critical issues are raised, such as the value of the composition for reconstructing a historical context. Moreover, Hoppe finds value in interpreting Joshua “through the lens of the social sciences” because archaeological excavations have revealed that Israelite tribes emerged in the midst of social and economic conflict (43).

After addressing the motif of poverty in the Hebrew Bible (Torah, Former Prophets, Latter Prophets), Hoppe offers an overview of Wisdom literature. This section is admirable for its engagement with a number of writings, including the pseudepigraphic Testament of the Twelve Patriarchs along with biblical and apocryphal writings.

Given Hoppe’s view of the oppressive upper class, derived from reading portions of the Hebrew Bible, how is one to consider the attitude of Sirach who, in Hoppe’s words, “is one example of Judah’s elite” and part of a “relatively small but wealthy upper class” (113)? Adding to the overall view of Sirach, this sapiential writing cautions the well-off audience to avoid actions which will lead to poverty (18:22-33). Sirach despises begging, going so far as to say that it is better to die than to beg (40:28-29). Although Sirach is sure to express respect and concern for the poor (4:8-10), he clearly holds wealth in high esteem (e.g. 10:27). When speaking of poverty and wealth, Sirach seeks to emphasize not that the upper class are responsible for the suffering of others, but rather that one should not abandon Jewish traditions in order to become wealthy. To return to Hoppe’s method and questions related to objectivity, what lesson is the community of faith to draw from Sirach’s views, especially if one has already learned that western elitists have caused the suffering of those in the third world?

A document included in Hoppe’s overview of poverty in Wisdom literature is 4QInstruction (4Q415-418, 4Q423; 1Q26). In terms of categorization, 4QInstruction’s location here rather than with the Dead Sea Scrolls (137-40) is somewhat perplexing. It is apparent that for Hoppe the category of Dead Sea Scrolls is an appellation for monastic Essene documents. While the opinio communis is that 4QInstruction is non-Essene or pre-Essene, one would hope that the time when