POVERTY IN THE OLD TESTAMENT
(ETHICAL CONSIDERATION)

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THE QUESTION OF ONTOLOGY

It is impossible to discuss Biblical ethics without understanding Biblical ontology or metaphysics. In this matter theology agrees with those philosophers who like N. HARTMANN assert:

> Philosophy cannot enter upon practical tasks without knowledge of being as such. For the tasks themselves grow out of a total datum of existing realities, and these must be understood and penetrated to the root before man can venture to shape them according to his goals. [1]

Of course, there are philosophers, especially of the analytic tradition, who vigorously oppose this, notably Hilary PUTNAM, who gave a series of lecture with the title *Ethics without Ontology*.[2] Another analytic philosopher, W. O. QUINE asserts "…reference and ontology recede to the status of mere auxiliaries."[3]

For Biblical ethics generally, and dealing with the problem of poverty ontology specifically, cannot recede into some unimportant auxiliary concept or idea. The problem of eternal existence (necessary being), the establishment of Biblical anthropology and the relationships of human beings with the world, the environment, cannot be indifferent to ontology. The problem of poverty is not just a "scientific problem" dealing with logical propositions. What is involved are powerful emotions - compassion, envy, indignation, greed and the like. It is impossible to understand and ethically control these emotions (related to worship and idolatry) without seeing the world through the Biblical ontology.

Just one example, before we come to the description of Biblical ontology: "Whoever mocks the poor insults his Maker (**Pro 17:5**)". This statment is ethically meaningless if we do not accept Biblical dualist Creator-creation ontology.

Understanding the problem of poverty in theological ethics presuppozes "four players" in the "field of reality". These "four players" are: (1) God, (2) man,[4] (3) the world, (4) the devil (Fig. 1).

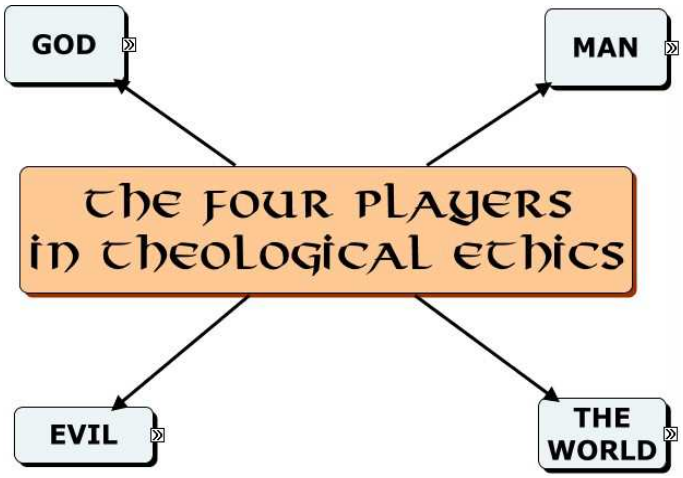

Fig. 1

[1] HARTMANN, N. *New Ways of Ontology*, s. 4.

[2] PUTNAM, H. *Ethics without Ontology*, Cambridge, Massachusetts : Harvard University Press, 2004. ("The most famous philosophers who pursued ontology in this traditional sense might be called "inflationary" ontologists. In ancient philosophy, the most famous example of an inflationary ontologist is the Plato who gave us the Theory of Forms, at least as that theory has been traditionally interpreted." p. 17)

[3] QUINE, W.O. *Pursuit of Truth*, Harvard : Harvard University Press, 1992, p. 31.

[4] I am using traditional inclusive language here meaning by "man" a "human being".

These "four players" enter into quite complicated relationships in regard to such notions as *needs, desires, property, ownership, worship, care, giving, rights, stealing, judgment* etc. These relationships are deemed ethically "right" ("just" or "righteous") or "evil' ("unjust", "unrighteous") according to whether they are given their place in our actions in agreement with their "ontological status". (Eg., the "ontological status" of the environment (the world) is defined by the fact that it has been given to man to keep and to rule over it. Therefore it is unethical to put it on the same level of importance as human beings not to say as God.)

Their place in ontology implies the important roles and positions of the "players" in ethics, in our case the ethical problems of poverty. The most important "player" is God. His ontological status of the Necessary Being and the Creator, Owner and Sustainer of all other existences makes him the main owner, lawgiver and judge of everything. It should be quite obvious how this affects the poverty-related ethical problems.

The next player(s) is (are) man (humans). Man's description as both "the image of God" and "the dust of the earth" makes the upper and lower limit of his/her place in ontology. This is further complicated by the fact of sin, which for our purposes could be defined as "confused ontology" making non-gods into God and vice-versa. (Property-related idolatry, greed etc.)

The world is given "roles to play" as the means of sustenance, the living space and the place where God's calling of man is to be realized. Again, the broken relationship of man with God complicates the ontological status of the world in the eyes of man. The world is at the same time both a good creation of God and an source of temptation that leads to enmity with God.

Today, it is not fashionable, to say the least, to believe and speak of a personal devil. (The things were different for some time after the World War II, while the memory of the horrors lasted.) But in the theological ethics based on the Bible evil is not only some mishap or stupidity of humans, but there is much more sinister side to it - an intelligent evil that tries to destroy all creation of God.

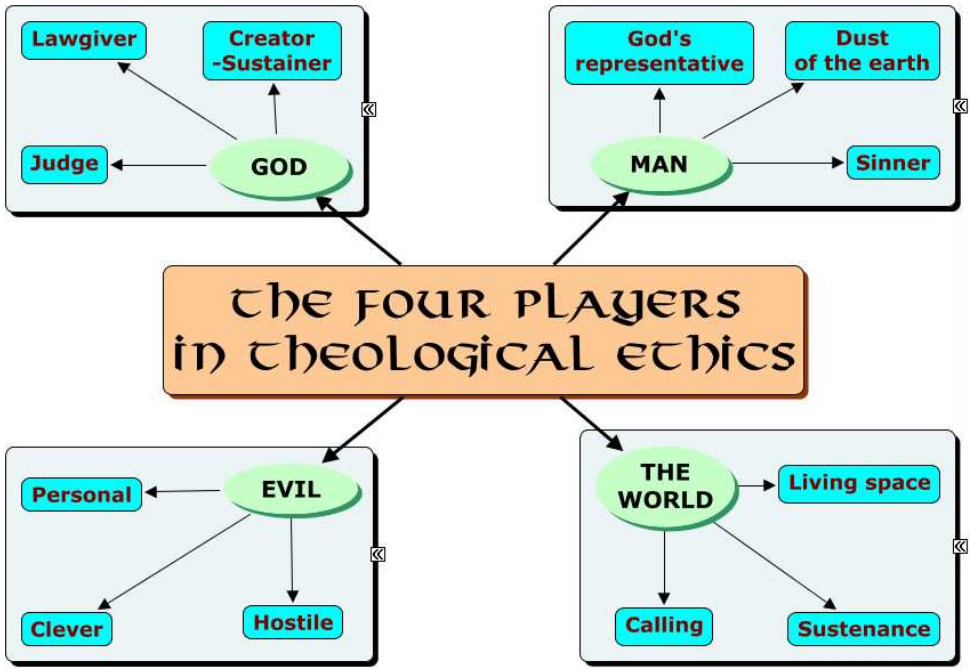

Fig. 2

THE BIBLICAL VIEW OF POVERTY AND WEALTH

POVERTY

Before we look more closely into the Biblical teaching on poverty it may be useful to discuss shortly what is meant by this word today. Merriam Webster's dictionary gives the following definition: "the state of one who lacks a usual or socially acceptable amount of money or material possessions".[5] It is obvious that this definition speaks of relative poverty in certain social environment - poverty is

[5] Merriam Webster on-line "poverty"

"what is socially unacceptable". There are also definition of so calle "absolute poverty", that define poverty not by relative wealth but by availability of the things necessary for survival - water, food, shelter, clothing, health care and education.

Poverty is first of all viewe negatively. Where Western thinking stresses the economic aspect of poverty, the ancient near eastern mind understood poverty in the context of shame and honor. Poverty means first of all dependence, vulnerability; humility and oppression. Leviticus defines the poor as those who are lowly because their "power [lit., hand] wavers" (25:35) or is insufficient (14:21). This means intrinsic weakness or outward injustice (Prov. 13:23). One aspect of such weakness is slavery - it may be caused by both the intrinsic weakness or the outward injustice (2 Kings 4:1; Amos 2:6-7; 8:4-6).

On the other hand, the Bible speaks of poverty as the consequence of moral lassitude, especially laziness (Prov 6:11 10:4; 13:18; 20:13). Poverty is not only a result of sin but also it may *lead* into sin, so the wise man prays: "Remove far from me vanity and lies: give me neither poverty nor riches; feed me with food convenient for me: Lest I be full, and deny thee, and say, Who is the LORD? or lest I be poor, and steal, and take the name of my God in vain." (Prov 30:8-9)

The paradoxical view of poverty in the Old Testament can be seen in its *positive* assessment, although not poverty in itself is deemed positive but some of the related virtues and attitudes. The most important positive attribute of poverty is that it gets "God's special attention" (Ps 12:5; 14:6; Prov 19:17)

WEALTH

In the Old Testament riches are viewed as blessing from the Lord. (Pro 10:22 It is the LORD'S blessing that makes a person rich (בִּרְכַּת יְהוָה הִיא תַעֲשִׁיר), and hard work adds nothing to it.)

On the other hand wealth gotten by greed is considered a curse: (Pro 1:19 - Such is the end of all who are greedy for gain (בֹּצֵעַ בָּצַע); it takes away the life of its possessors. Pro 28:22 - The miser (עָיִן אִישׁ רַע) is in a hurry to get rich (נִבְהָל לַהוֹן) and does not know that loss is sure to come.)

Sine very negative words about the rich can be found in the prophets: Amos 6:4,7; Isa10:1-4; Jer 5:26-29

BIBLICAL DEALINGS WITH POVERTY

The responsibility of alleviating the plight of the poor is basic to biblical faith. At the basis is the nature of God as one who hears the cries of the poor (Ps. 12:5). The deliverance from Egypt is presented as the great exemplar of God's justice to the needy (Ps. 68:5-10; Exod. 2:23-24). In the law attention is given to social structures that affect the poor. The land is to be left fallow every seventh year "that the poor . . . may eat" (Exod. 23:11). In this year the landed means of production are to be given over in their entirety to the poor and the debts of the poor are to be cancelled (Deut. 15:2).

It is part of the messianic expectation (Isa. 11:4) seen fulfilled in Jesus (Luke 1:52-53; 4:18-21). The hope for "good news proclaimed to the poor" (Luke 4:18; 7:22) was ancient (Ps. 68:10-11; Isa. 29:18-19; 35:4-6).

Biblical Economic and Social Legislation

God who is the owner of the world (Psa 24:1), the owner of the land of Israel (Lev 25:23) the Sustainer of life (Ps 104:30), the Lawgiver (Isa 33:22) is also "a God of the poor" (Prov 22:22) is compassionate towards the poor (Ps 72:13). In the OT we can see both "supernatural" and "natural" interventions of God on behalf of the needy and oppressed. The Old Testament legislation is what may be called "natural" intervention in favour of the poor. Here are some examples: Equal treatment in court (Exo 23:6); no postponed wages (Lev 19:13; Deu 24:14); no interest on loans (Exo 22:25; Lev 25:36); providing for the poor during harvests (Lev 19:9; Lev 23:22); considerate business dealings (Exo 22:26; Deu 24:10); the Jubilee year (Lev 25).

The Old Testament does not predict ideal society even if all the laws of God are followed. Deu 15:11 says expressly: "For the poor will never cease out of the land".

Biblical Admonitions against Greed and Wealth-Related Idolatry

The Old Testament knows very well the danger of wealth turned into an idol. Although wealth is one of the main channels of blessing from the Lord (Psa 112:1-3) it easily leads to heart attachment,

oppression and self-satisfaction (Ps 49:6; 62:10). Wisdom and poetic literature frequently deals with these attitudes and gives guidance how to govern one's conduct in these temptations (Ps 73).

APPLYING BIBLICAL ONTOLOGY

It is easy to sketch the six relations between the "ontological players" (Fig.3). It is more

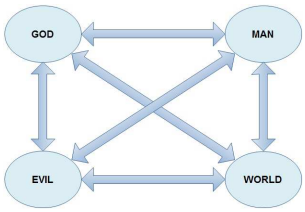

Fig. 3

complicated to show how the roles of the players and their mutual relations translate into modern scientific fields of study. (Fig. 4). The areas of study, research and action against poverty can be

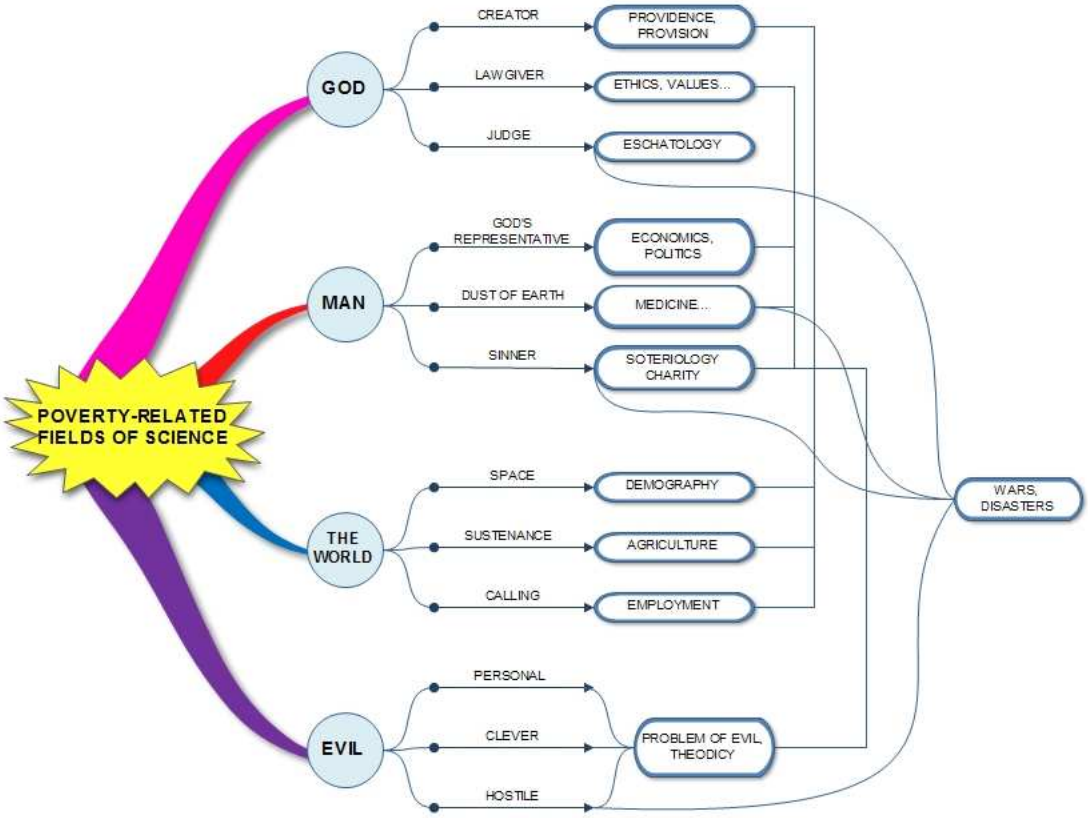

Fig. 4

obtained combining the respective roles of the four players. Some of them are given in the fig. 4. It is impractical and unnecessary to further multiply these combinations, because the logic is easily followed and the number of combinations is impossible to count precisely, some of them may be quite fuzzy and difficult to clearly distinguish from others.

One of the most interesting narratives where we can see the interplay of the above mentioned "players" is the book of Job, especially the first two chapters. Job is a righteous and wealthy man who becomes a battlefield of both visible and invisible forces. The account of his experiences raises multitude of theological, ethical, logical and other types of questions that in the end, if we consider our curiosity, are left unanswered. The important point is that to answer these questions is impossible without taking into account each of the four players because all of these take an important part in the unfolding drama.

Other Old Testament narratives that may be used for this sort of analysis are eg.: Gn 12-13, Ruth 2 or 1Ki 21. If the reader is interested in the analysis, here are some questions that are useful: (1) Who are the "players" in the narrative?, (2) What are the respective roles of the "players"?, (3) How is wealth & poverty viewed in the text?, (4) What are the attitudes of the "players" to wealth and poverty?, (5) Which principles of the Old Testament law are being applied or can be seen in the text?

CONCLUSION

I think it is obvious, that theological thinking about poverty has to begin with ontology – God and the 'big picture' of the whole drama of existence. The 'big picture' helps to see things in perspective - the relative value of wealth and the possible positive consequences of poverty. These principles can be (and we may also say should be) applied in everyday life of our present time.