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Extending **תָּוֶן** (Hesed) To the Poor as an Obligation in the Psalter and Matthew 25

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Extending **חסד** (*Hesed*) To the Poor as an Obligation in the Psalter and Matthew 25

Abstract

Psalter has much to contribute to the biblical theology of missions and the biblical theology of socio-economic justice. Through an examination of Psalm 109 and the Psalter, this paper will demonstrate that the theological motif of Yahweh caring for the poor, specifically showing **חסד** (*hesed*) to the poor, is found in the Psalter; furthermore, it will be argued that the Psalter also features a missiological aspect, in harmony with the prophets and the rest of the Psalter, exhorting and obligating Israel to participate in practicing **חסד** (*hesed*) towards the poor with the consequence of not practicing **חסד** (*hesed*) towards the poor resulting in not receiving **חסד** (*hesed*). Additionally, it will be suggested that this theme found in the Psalter of extending **חסד** (*hesed*) to the poor as an obligation plays a role in providing the theological basis and context for Jesus's words in Matthew 25:45 that state, "as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me (Matt. 25:45)." Jesus further states, in Mark 14:7, that the church will "always have the poor (Mk. 14:7)" and, a quick perusal of contemporary news easily provides evidence in support of His words. There is no shortage of those in need and lack right now in the world; however, in the face of immense need and lack, there is a generation that has seemingly lost a biblical understanding of extending **חסד** (*hesed*) to the poor as an obligation. Therefore, a recovery of a biblical understanding of extending **חסד** (*hesed*) to the poor as an obligation, reading and praying the Psalter rightly, is crucially necessary in order to convict and exhort the church strongly once more to action. This paper seeks to participate in that recovery.

Keywords

hesed, poor, psalter, Matthew, ministry, obligation, biblical theology of missions, biblical theology of socio-economic justice

Cover Page Footnote

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Extending חֶסֶד (*Hesed*) To the Poor as an Obligation in the Psalter and Matthew 25

Through an examination of Psalm 109 and the Psalter, this paper will demonstrate that the theological motif of Yahweh caring for the poor, specifically showing חֶסֶד (*hesed*) to the poor, is found in the Psalter; furthermore, it will be argued that the Psalter also features a missiological aspect, in harmony with the prophets and the rest of the Psalter, exhorting and obligating Israel to participate in practicing חֶסֶד towards the poor with the consequence of not practicing חֶסֶד towards the poor resulting in not receiving חֶסֶד. Additionally, it will be suggested that this theme found in the Psalter of extending חֶסֶד to the poor as an obligation plays a role in providing the theological basis and context for Jesus's words in Matthew 25:45 that state, "as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me" (Matt. 25:45, *English Standard Version*).

First, it will be established that Yahweh caring for the poor in the Psalter is a significant theme woven throughout the Psalter, and Yahweh's own extension of חֶסֶד to the poor and exhortation for Israel to extend חֶסֶד to the poor sets Israel and Yahweh apart from Israel's ancient Near Eastern neighbors and their deities. Secondly, with a focus on Psalm 109 and various other psalms, it will be demonstrated that the Psalter presents the concept that, as Daniel L. Belnap notes, because an "individual did not remember to do *hesed*, *hesed* should not be extended to him."¹ Finally, it will be argued that, perhaps, Jesus's words in Matthew 25:31–46 draws from this theme found in the Psalter and the Old Testament of "*hesed* as obligation,"² specifically the obligation of extending חֶסֶד to the poor, and that this theme plays a crucial role in identifying and providing evidence that Jesus is the exalted prophesied messianic king of the Prophets and the Psalter. Ultimately, it will be demonstrated that, as Lee Roy Martin rightly argues, "the book of Psalms challenges the Church to engage in redemptive activities that minister to the poor and to the marginalized,"³ and the Psalter has much to contribute to the biblical theology of missions and the biblical theology of socio-economic justice.

¹ Daniel L. Belnap, "'How Excellent Is Thy Lovingkindness': The Gospel Principle of Hesed," in *Approaching Holiness: Exploring the History and Teachings of the Old Testament*, ed. Krystal V. L. Pierce and David Rolph Seely (Provo, UT: BYU Religious Studies Center, 2021), 60.

² Robin Routledge, "Hesed as Obligation: A Re-Examination," *Tyndale Bulletin* 46, no. 1 (1995): 179

³ Lee Roy Martin, "The Psalms and Economic Justice," In *Die Skriflig* 56, no. 1 (2022), 2.

Yahweh Standing at The Right Hand of The Needy

Johannes Bremer rightly observes that poverty “is probably a phenomenon of all societies during all periods” and “the Psalter reflects this by the continuous references to the poor and needy in the entire book.”⁴ Eben H. Scheffler notes in a chart found in his article *The Poor in the Psalms: A Variety of Views* that the term אָנִי (*ani*) appears twenty-seven times in the Psalter, the term אָנָוּ (*anaw*) appears eleven times, the term עֲבֵיּוֹן (*ebyon*) appears twenty-three times, the term דָּל (*dal*) appears five times, the term רָשָׁה (*rash*) appears once, and the motif of the poor without a term “(e.g. helpless, stranger, widow, orphan, misery, oppressed, the hungry)” or discussions of “material care or prosperity” appear in thirty different psalms.⁵ To borrow the words of Alphonso Groenewald, “the high concentration of the term(s) for the ‘poor’ in the Psalter, in relation to the rest of the books of the Old Testament (OT), indeed indicates a profound affinity for the ‘poor’ in the Psalter.”⁶

Groenewald goes as far as to state that the Psalter could rightly be regarded “as the prayer and meditation book of the small man/person, that is the marginalised.”⁷ Psalm 113 is a particularly strong example of Groenewald’s assertion, as the psalmist praises God for seeing the poor and moving on behalf of the poor to raise them “from the dust,” lift them “from the dung heap,” and seat them “among princes, among the princes of his people” (v. 7–8). It is worthwhile to note that Psalm 113:7–8 is only one example among many of the motif of the Lord looking upon the earth and seeing His people found repeatedly throughout the Psalter. Some other examples include Psalm 53:2, Psalm 102:19, Psalm 11:4, and Psalm 33:13–14. Ultimately, in the Psalter, God is not portrayed as a distant spectator, but as a God who sees the poor and acts upon what He sees with compassion and justice. The Psalmists repeatedly extol this characteristic of God as what makes Him worthy of praise.

Bremer, going beyond the frequency of terminology, argues that “a synchronic approach to a theology of the Psalter as a book” also reveals a “theology of the poor” as one of five significant themes “that are formative for its structure” and woven “throughout the entire Psalter.”⁸ Bremer rightly observes

⁴ Johannes Bremer, “The Theology of the Poor in the Psalter,” in *The Psalter as Witness: Theology, Poetry, and Genre: Proceedings from the Baylor University-University of Bonn Symposium on the Psalter*, ed. W. Dennis Tucker and W. H. Bellinger (Baylor University-University of Bonn Symposium on the Psalter, Waco, Texas: Baylor University Press, 2017), 113.

⁵ Eben H. Scheffler, “The Poor in the Psalms: A Variety of Views,” *Verbum et Ecclesia* 36, no. 1 (2015), 3.

⁶ Alphonso Groenewald, “Psalms 69:33–34 in the Light of the Poor in the Psalter as a Whole,” *Verbum et Ecclesia* 28, no. 2 (2007), 425.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 426.

⁸ Bremer, “The Theology of the Poor in the Psalter,” 101.

that “clearly, each of the four groups in the first Davidic Psalter (Pss 3–14; 15–24; 25–34; 35–41) concludes with a psalm that includes a theology of the poor.”⁹ Furthermore, Bremer argues that a synchronic approach to the Psalter “reveals an increased quantity and quality of YHWH’s actions” towards the poor and needy “with a climax in the final Hallel Pss 146–150.”¹⁰ It is beyond the scope of this paper to consider every instance of the theme of Yahweh showing compassion towards the poor in the Psalter, and it is not the focus of this paper to follow how the theme increases in intensity from the beginning to the end of the Psalter; however, it is clear that a concern for the poor, or justice, is a theme woven throughout the Psalter.

In looking at the Torah and the Prophets, David McIlroy rightly observes that “justice is always at the top of God’s agenda.”¹¹ Justice, however, also appears at the top of God’s agenda in the Psalter. Noting that there are at least ninety-seven “references to ‘justice’” in the Psalter, Martin rightly argues that “although sometimes overlooked, the concern for justice is a significant theme in the book of Psalms.”¹² As Martin observes, the Psalter repeatedly presents justice as an essential attribute of Yahweh.¹³ In his commentary on Psalm 109:31, Robert Alter supports this identification of justice as an essential attribute of Yahweh by noting that the psalmist is “persuaded that his prayer is already accomplished, for he understands it as a fixed attribute of God that ‘He stands at the needy’s right hand.’”¹⁴ However, not only is this fixed attribute of justice and standing “at the needy’s right hand”¹⁵ merely attributed to Yahweh, it is demanded of Israel by Yahweh. It is this demand upon Israel, the theme of extending רַחֲמִים to the poor as an obligation of the people of God, that this paper will focus upon.

Before specifically turning to the theme of “*hesed* as obligation,”¹⁶ it is essential to briefly consider how the Psalter does not appear to be primarily a theological treatise but rather a compilation of prayers and songs. In other words, the Psalter had a liturgical function and was actively utilized for worship. This is important to consider because an incorporation of a theology of the poor into liturgy, specifically the concept of extended רַחֲמִים to the poor as an obligation, strongly suggests that Israel was meant to recognize their treatment of the poor as directly connected to their worship of Yahweh. Additionally, because the Psalter was meant to be regularly utilized, there is an expectation that Israel should have

⁹ Bremer, “The Theology of the Poor in the Psalter,” 102.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 112.

¹¹ David McIlroy, “The Mission of Justice,” *Transformation* 28, no. 3 (2011), 184.

¹² Martin, “The Psalms and Economic Justice,” 3.

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ Robert Alter, ed., *The Hebrew Bible*, vol. 3, 3 vols. (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2018), 264.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ Routledge, “Hesed as Obligation: A Re-Examination,” 179.

not only been able to understand that Yahweh valued the concept of extending חֶסֶד to the poor as an obligation but also that Israel should have been found practicing extending חֶסֶד to the poor as regularly as the Psalter reminds them and as regularly as they utilized the Psalter for liturgy.

They Will Know You Are God By Your Love

Worship and justice, as is explicitly highlighted in the Prophets in passages such as Amos 5:21–24 and Isaiah 58, are also intricately linked in the Psalter. Arguably, one might suggest that if the prophets stood, in a way, outside of Israel issuing a call to Israel from Yahweh for mandatory compassion for the poor, the Psalms echoed that call in Israel through the liturgy and reveal that mandatory compassion for the poor was rooted in Yahweh’s character. To understand how the Psalms echoed the prophet, it is worthwhile to turn to the Prophets briefly.

Dr. Fuhr, in his examination of the preexilic Minor Prophets, writes that “having abandoned God, Israel (the nation) also came to neglect her own, and in worshipping false gods, Israel came to neglect ‘truth [*emet*],’ ‘mercy [*hesed*],’ and the ‘knowledge [*da’at*] of God in the land’ (Hos. 4:1).”¹⁷ The connection between Israel worshipping the Canaanite deities and consequentially neglecting חֶסֶד (*hesed*) is unsurprising. John M. Bracke, in his article on justice in the book of Jeremiah, notes that the Baal myths “work against concern for those on the social margins” and that “the Baal myths focus on survival.”¹⁸ In other words, the Baal myths had a self-preservation motivation or, to put it more bluntly, a selfish, self-centered focus that worked against compassion for the poor. On the other hand, J.P.M. Walsh notes that Yahweh “mandated compassionate regard for defenseless people—‘the widow and orphan,’ the *ger* or resident non-Israelite—who would be easy prey for acquisitive and violent men.”¹⁹ This stark contrast between Yahweh as a God of justice and the Canaanite deities as uncaring for the poor also appears in Psalter, especially in Psalm 82.

In Psalm 82, as Alter points out, “God speaks out in the assembly of lesser gods and rebukes them for doing a wretched job in the administration of justice on earth.”²⁰ It is worthwhile to note that Yahweh similarly criticizes the assembly of lesser gods in Psalm 51:1; Psalm 82, however, identifies explicitly that God is

¹⁷ Richard Alan Fuhr, “True Worship Versus False Worship: Worship in the Preexilic Minor Prophets,” in *Biblical Worship: Theology for God’s Glory*, ed. Benjamin K. Forrest, Walter C. Kaiser, and Vernon M. Whaley (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Academic, 2021), 181.

¹⁸ John M. Bracke, “Justice in the Book of Jeremiah,” *Word & World* 22, no. 4 (Fall 2002), 392.

¹⁹ J.P.M. Walsh, *The Mighty From Their Thrones: Power in the Biblical Tradition* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1987), 31.

²⁰ Alter, *The Hebrew Bible*, 200.

referring to justice particularly for “the poor and the orphan” (v. 3) and “the needy” (v. 4). In verses 6–7 God, essentially, mocks the lesser gods and strips them of their divine status by saying, “As for Me, I had thought you were gods... Yet indeed like humans you shall die.”²¹ Alter rightly notes that the psalmist appears to argue that the lesser gods’ “administration of justice on earth would prove or justify their divine status,” and their failure to execute justice for the poor identifies them as non-divine, condemned to suffer the “same fate of mortality as human beings.”²² In other words, the psalmist argues that Yahweh has determined that compassion for the poor, the extending of רַחֵם to the poor, is a key identifying characteristic of a being’s divine status. Psalm 82:6-7, therefore, utilizes a theology of the poor as a polemic against the deities of Israel’s ancient Near Eastern neighbors. As Scheffler notes, “polytheism is thereby terminated, leaving God to rule alone over the nations since he is the ‘God above the gods,’ and he alone meets the criterion for being a god, namely to care for the poor.”²³ Ultimately, the “defeat of polytheism,” according to Ps. 82:6–7, comes from their failure “to care for the poor.”²⁴ This “criterion for being a god”²⁵ of caring for the poor or extending רַחֵם to the poor becomes a crucial defining factor in identifying that Jesus is not only the exalted prophesied messianic king but also divine.

Despite Psalm 82’s polemic against the deities of Israel’s ancient Near Eastern neighbors, rendering them as no better than mere mortals, Israel abandoned Yahweh and began worshipping and adopting the false deities of its Canaanite neighbors. As already noted, due to its liturgical nature, the Psalter arguably served as the ideal text for the placement of reminders of Yahweh’s mandated compassion for the poor. As Israel utilized the Psalter on a regular basis, perhaps even daily, for worship, Israel would have been repeatedly confronted with Yahweh’s command for רַחֵם to be extended to the poor. However, as Israel worshipped the false deities of its Canaanite neighbors, abandoning the Psalter, they naturally also abandoned showing רַחֵם to the poor and adopted the self-preservation focus of the Baal myths, complete with its lack of concern and compassion for the poor. To borrow Scheffler’s words, Israel was “obliged to sing about it” from the Psalter, and “such singing should hopefully motivate” them into action.²⁶ Unfortunately, with the abandonment of worship to Yahweh and, presumably, the abandonment of singing and utilizing the Psalter liturgically, Israel not only forgot Yahweh but also forgot Yahweh’s mandated compassion for the poor. Israel, in other words, ceased to extend רַחֵם to the poor.

²¹ Alter, *The Hebrew Bible.*, 201.

²² Ibid.

²³ Scheffler, “The Poor in the Psalms: A Variety of Views,” 6.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid., 8.

Israel's loss of extending חֶסֶד to the poor places Israel in a precarious situation because, as Robin Routledge notes, an important "aspect of *hesed* is its mutuality. *Hesed* is expected of those to whom *hesed*, or another act of kindness has been shown" and "though this expected reciprocation of *hesed* was not a legal obligation, its failure was taken seriously."²⁷ It is beyond the scope of this paper to argue that, perhaps, extending חֶסֶד to the poor was a legal obligation according to the Torah; however, it is sufficient to note that, as Belnap observes, Judges 8:34–35, Psalm 106, and Psalm 109 all serve as examples where it is argued that "because the individual did not remember to do *hesed*, *hesed* should not be extended to him."²⁸

Extending חֶסֶד As an Obligation

In Judges, as Routledge rightly observes, "when Israel did not demonstrate due *hesed* to Gideon and his family, the nation earned not only the disapproval of the writer of Judges, but also divine judgement (Judg. 8:35; 9:16–20, 36)."²⁹ Routledge further notes that "Jehoiada expected that God would call Joash to account for a similar omission"³⁰ in 2 Chronicles 24:22. The books of Judges and Chronicles speak of "*hesed* as obligation"³¹ in the realm of politics. The Psalter takes the same principle and applies it to the realm of spiritual and social justice concerns.

In Psalm 106, the history of the nation of Israel is recounted and the psalmist specifically notes that Israel has "done wickedness" (v. 6) in the same way as their forefathers by failing to remember "the abundance of your חֶסֶד " (v. 7), which the *English Standard Version* translates as "steadfast love." Israel's failure to remember God's חֶסֶד towards them leads them to sin and rebel against God repeatedly. In other words, Israel's failure to remember חֶסֶד results in a failure to extend חֶסֶד towards Yahweh. The psalmist then goes on to note that Israel's failure to extend חֶסֶד towards Yahweh ultimately leads to Israel's failure to extend חֶסֶד towards the vulnerable and weak.

Psalm 106 continues to record that as Israel turned to worship "their idols... they sacrificed their sons and their daughters to the demons. And they shed innocent blood, the blood of their sons and their daughters" (v. 36–38).³² In other words, as Israel forgot Yahweh's חֶסֶד towards them, Israel turned to

²⁷ Routledge, "Hesed as Obligation: A Re-Examination," 181–182.

²⁸ Belnap, "'How Excellent Is Thy Lovingkindness': The Gospel Principle of Hesed," 60.

²⁹ Routledge, "Hesed as Obligation: A Re-Examination," 182.

³⁰ *Ibid.*

³¹ *Ibid.*, 179.

³² Alter, *The Hebrew Bible*, 254.

idolatry, which in turn led Israel not only to forget to extend חַסֵד towards Yahweh but, ultimately, led to abortion, infanticide, and filicide.

Violence and Poverty in the Psalter

Psalm 109 continues upon this theme and turns the discussion of “*hesed* as obligation”³³ towards the economically poor. It explicitly discusses a situation where the psalmist argues that חַסֵד should be denied to an individual if the individual does not extend חַסֵד to the poor. In verse 12, the psalmist declares, “Let there be none to extend חַסֵד to him.” The psalmist then goes on to give his reasoning for appealing to Yahweh for the withholding of חַסֵד in verse 16. The psalmist argues that חַסֵד should be withheld from his oppressor because the oppressor “did not remember to show חַסֵד but pursued the poor and needy and the brokenhearted, to put them to death” (Ps. 109:16). The logic is simple: because the individual did not extend חַסֵד to the poor, thereby failing to fulfill Yahweh’s mandated extension of חַסֵד to the poor, the individual should not have חַסֵד extended to him. In fact, the psalmist argues that the individual and his family should be violently dealt with and cut off.

Bremer, in analyzing Psalm 10 and Psalm 74, notes that both psalms are an example of a theme found in the Psalter of a connection between violence and poverty.³⁴ Specifically, Bremer argues that both psalms contain an instance where some form of violence is inflicted upon the poor by an oppressor, and Yahweh’s justice is portrayed as an act of violence being returned upon the oppressor. Additionally, Yahweh is depicted as praiseworthy because He hears the cries of the needy and will bring them into safety.

In Psalm 10, the psalmist asks the Lord to “break the arm of the wicked” (v. 15) in response to the wicked man “hunting down” (v. 2) the weak.³⁵ In other words, in response to the violence of the wicked man, the psalmist cries out for Yahweh’s to respond with violent justice. Immediately afterward, the psalm turns from lament to a concluding refrain of praise where the psalmist declares, “The Lord is king forever and ever” (v. 16), because he has heard the cry of the poor.³⁶

In Psalm 74, the psalmist cries out for God not to hold back His right hand but to “take it from the folds of your garments and destroy” (v. 11) the enemies of Israel who are later identified as those who oppress “the poor and

³³ Routledge, “Hesed as Obligation: A Re-Examination,” 179.

³⁴ Johannes Bremer, “The Relationship between Violence and Poverty with Regard to the חַסֵד in the Book of Psalms,” in *“Wer lässt uns Gutes sehen?” (Ps 4,7): internationale Studien zu Klagen in den Psalmen: zum Gedenken an Frank-Lothar Hossfeld*, ed. Johannes Schnocks and Frank-Lothar Hossfeld, Herders biblische Studien = Herder’s biblical studies, Band 85 (Freiburg: Herder, 2016), 174.

³⁵ Alter, *The Hebrew Bible*, 44.

³⁶ *Ibid.*

needy” (v. 21). Once again, Yahweh’s justice for the poor is depicted in terms of violence. Furthermore, after declaring that “haunts of violence fill the dark places of the land” (v. 20), the psalmist specifically requests that “the poor and needy” should not “retreat in disgrace” (v. 21). In other words, the psalmist cries out for the Lord to bring the “the poor and needy” (v. 21) into a place of safety.

It is important to note that in Psalm 74 that the psalmist subtly also identifies God with “the poor and needy” (v. 21) The psalmist writes, “Rise up, O God, and defend your cause; remember how fools mock you all day long” (v. 22). Essentially, the psalmist appeals to Yahweh by arguing that abuse or mockery of “the poor and needy” (v. 21) is the same as abuse or mocker being afflicted upon Yahweh Himself. This concept of identifying Yahweh Himself with the “the poor and needy” (v. 21) appears again in Psalm 109:16 and in Matthew 25:45. Ultimately, Bremer notes that Psalm 10 and Psalm 74 present a rough formula that when Yahweh moves on behalf of the poor in justice three things occur. First, violence is afflicted or expected to be afflicted upon the oppressor. Secondly, “there is no more reason for lament,” and the psalm turns to praise.³⁷ Finally, “there is inviolacy and physical inviolability” for the poor.³⁸

Analyzing Psalm 109

Like Psalm 10 and Psalm 74, Psalm 109 exhibits this connection between violence and poverty and follows a similar trajectory in its imagery. The psalmist argues that the individual who has failed to show רָחֻם to the poor and “pursued the poor and needy and the brokenhearted, to put them to death” (v. 16) should likewise be pursued unto death and “his days be few” (v. 8). In other words, failure to show רָחֻם results in not receiving רָחֻם and that failure has dire consequences; specifically, violence is afflicted or expected to be afflicted upon the oppressor. This structure, where the psalmist cries out for the oppressor of the poor to suffer that which he inflicted upon the poor, occurs throughout the psalm.

In verse 4, the psalmist, who identifies himself as poor, laments that the oppressor accuses him; consequently, he cries out for the oppressor to have “an accuser to stand at his right hand” (v. 6). To take it one step further, one might argue that the psalmist mocks the oppressor by concluding the psalm with placing Yahweh at the “right hand of the needy” (v. 31). In another example, because the accuser has failed to show רָחֻם in not blessing others, the psalmist argues that blessings should “be far from him” (v. 17). Likewise, the psalmist contends that because the accuser failed to show רָחֻם in loving “to curse” the poor that, therefore, curses should “come upon him” (v. 17). This image is particularly

³⁷ Bremer, “The Relationship between Violence and Poverty with Regard to the רָחֻם in the Book of Psalms,” 175.

³⁸ Ibid.

important because the psalmist goes as far as to refer to the oppressor's failure to show חֶסֶד to the poor as an act of clothing "himself with cursing" (v. 18); the psalmist specifically calls for the "iniquity of his fathers" and the "sin of his mother" to be remembered continually before the Lord (v. 14). The psalmist, essentially, borrows the imagery frequently mentioned throughout the scriptures of being clothed in righteousness and utilizes it to condemn the oppressor, dressing the oppressor in curses and sin.

Ultimately, the Psalmist clearly identifies a failure to show חֶסֶד (*hesed*) to the poor as a sin that is worthy of judgment, condemnation, and withheld חֶסֶד . Like Psalm 10 and Psalm 74, Psalm 109 ultimately transitions from lament and imprecation to praise at the end of the psalm. The psalmist expects the Lord to inflict righteous violence against the oppressor and create a space of "inviolacy and physical inviolability"³⁹ for the poor by standing at the right hand of "the needy" (v. 31). He concludes by giving "great thanks to the Lord" and praising him "in the midst of the throng" (v. 30).

However, it is important also to highlight that the psalmist does not only praise Yahweh for administering violent justice and creating a space of "inviolacy and physical inviolability"⁴⁰ for the poor. The psalmist also positions Yahweh as identifying with the condition and position of the poor. In verse 31, the psalmist uses specific poetic language that appears to place Yahweh in a physical space of nearness or intimacy with the poor. In other words, the psalmist declares that Yahweh is praiseworthy because Yahweh places Himself physically alongside the least, and Yahweh's radical identification with the plight of the poor is praiseworthy. One might argue that this, in and of itself, has Messianic connotations by hinting that Yahweh will intervene and address the injustice done to the poor in a sort of incarnational way, and this intervention will be praiseworthy.

Furthermore, it is essential to note that the psalmist himself identifies himself with the poor in verse 22, writing that he is "poor and needy" to gain Yahweh's aid. In other words, the psalmist is "poor and needy" and, therefore, qualifies as one for whom Yahweh stands beside (v. 22). As W. Dennis Tucker rightly notes, "the psalmist not only draws from the vocabulary of the theology of the poor, the psalmist seeks to portray himself as one who is poor, one in need of the action of Yahweh."⁴¹

Ultimately, like Psalm 74:22, in portraying Yahweh at his right hand, the psalmist subtly suggests that his oppressor is also oppressing Yahweh. In other words, the psalmist hints at the theological reality that the one who does not

³⁹ Bremer, "The Theology of the Poor in the Psalter," 175.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ W. Dennis Tucker, "Democratization and the Language of the Poor in Psalms 2–89," *Horizons in Biblical Theology* 25 (2003), 177.

extend רָחַם to the poor does not receive רָחַם from Yahweh, because not extending רָחַם to the poor is equivalent to not extending רָחַם to Yahweh.

Considering Psalm 110 in Light of Psalm 109

As a final note, if one recognizes that the Psalter as a whole was carefully and purposefully organized, it is difficult not to see the potential link between Psalm 109:31 and Psalm 110:1. Psalm 109:31, as Derek Kidner notes, ends powerfully by replacing “the figure of the accuser, who stands at the right hand of his victim, by the figure of God who *stands at the right hand of the needy* in a very different sense.”⁴² Psalm 110 then begins with the curious phrase, “The Lord says to my Lord: ‘Sit at my right hand, until I make your enemies your footstool’” (v. 1), which appears to subtly reference Psalm 109:31 in its mention of the “right hand.”

Alter takes the opinion that Psalm 110 is “a royal psalm, and the speaker, by referring to the king as his master, would appear to be a court poet.”⁴³ Kidner, however, rightly points out that Christ himself refers to this Psalm in Mark 12:36 and “left his hearers to think out its implication, and his apostles to spell them out.”⁴⁴ Christ’s reference to Psalm 110 strongly suggests that Psalm 110 was not meant, at least by Yahweh, to be merely an enthronement oracle of a court poet for a future earthly king but an “enthronement oracle to the Messianic King” by King David.⁴⁵ This is particularly interesting because, as Philip J. Nel rightly argues, “from the New Testament midrashic interpretation it is evident that dimensions of the Royal Psalms,” such as Psalm 110, “were understood in a certain way and that the realization of the ideal Messiah had been sought in the life and rule of Christ.”⁴⁶ Much interpretation of Psalm 110 has been focused on how the Messiah will be “a priest forever after the order of Melchizedek” (Ps. 110:4). However, because the language of Psalm 110:1 appears to reference and reinforce Psalm 109:31, it could perhaps be argued that Psalm 110:1 also prophetically alludes to the idea that the ideal Messiah will be a king and priest that will join Yahweh in standing “at the needy’s right hand” (Ps. 109:31).

⁴² Derek Kidner, *Psalms 73-150: An Introduction and Commentary*, Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries, v. 16 (Nottingham, England : Downers Grove, Ill: Inter-Varsity Press ; IVP Academic, 2008), 426.

⁴³ Alter, *The Hebrew Bible*, 264.

⁴⁴ Kidner, *Psalms 73-150*, 427-428.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Philip J. Nel, “The Theology of the Royal Psalms,” *Old Testament Essays* 11, no. 1 (1998), 88.

As You Did It to One of the Least of These, My Brothers, You Did It to Me

Much has been written about how the Beatitudes of Jesus resemble the Psalms. For example, Psalm 41:1, which states, “Blessed is the one who considers the poor,” strongly resembles Matthew 5:3 and Luke 6:20, the latter of which reads, “Blessed are you who are poor.” Similarities between the Beatitudes of Jesus and the Psalms suggest that Jesus was aware of the theology of the poor found in the Psalter. However, there is perhaps no better example of the theology of the poor found in the Psalter appearing in the life of Jesus than in Matthew 25:31–46. In Matthew 25:31–26, Jesus is presented as the ideal Messiah that joins Yahweh in standing “at the needy’s right hand” (Ps. 109:31).

Chad Daniel Venters argues that “Psalm 80 was one of the scripture sources used to craft the Sheep and the Goats” narrative in Matthew 25:31–46.” However, Venters fails to consider how that Matthew 25:31–46 clearly draws from beyond Psalm 80 to take up the theme of “hesed as obligation,”⁴⁷ specifically רַחֵם extended to the poor.⁴⁸ Rick Marrs rightly argues the Psalter features a conclusion that “for ancient Israel, a graphic manifestation of the greatness of her king was his concern and advocacy for the poor and needy.”⁴⁹ Matthew 25:31–46, with potential references to the Psalter, identifies that king as Jesus.

First, it is essential to note that Jesus, in Matthew 25:31–34, identifies himself as the Son of Man coming as a king in glory. Jesus then associates His identity as the Son of Man coming in glory, as the divine Messiah, as the Messianic King, and as the royal and rightful king of Israel and the nations, with a concern for the poor. In other words, Jesus clearly identifies Himself as meeting the “criterion for being a god” and for being the prophesied Messianic King: namely, “to care for the poor,” as found in the Psalter.⁵⁰ Additionally, in Matthew 25:45–46, Jesus appears to reference the theology of extending רַחֵם to the poor as an obligation when he states, “‘Truly, I say to you, as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me.’ And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life” (Matt. 25:45–46).

Jesus’s words follow the same principle that because an individual did not extend רַחֵם to the poor, referred to in Matthew 25:45–46 as “the least of these” (Matt. 25:45), they have failed to fulfill Yahweh’s mandated extension of רַחֵם to

⁴⁷ Robin Routledge, “Hesed as Obligation: A Re-Examination,” *Tyndale Bulletin* 46, no. 1 (1995), 179.

⁴⁸ Chad Daniel Venters, “Exploring Psalm 80 as a Source for Matthew 25:31–46” (Thesis, London, Middlesex University, 2018), 2.

⁴⁹ Rick Marrs, “Worship and Social Responsibility in the Psalms,” *Leaven* 1, no. 2 (Spring 1990), 9.

⁵⁰ Scheffler, “The Poor in the Psalms: A Variety of Views,” 6.

the poor. When asked, “when did we see you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not minister to you” (Matt. 25:44) by both those who have extended רַחֲמִים to the poor and those who haven’t, Jesus’s answer suggests that Yahweh expected that His mandated extension of רַחֲמִים to the poor should have been common knowledge for all of Israel. Therefore, one might argue that in failing to extend רַחֲמִים to the poor, they also failed in truly knowing Yahweh or understanding the scriptures. Further, one might argue that Yahweh’s expectation was legitimate and fair because the theology of extending רַחֲמִים to the poor is found in the Psalter, the text meant to be utilized liturgically by Israel on a regular basis.

Additionally, Jesus goes on to state that those who have failed to extend רַחֲמִים to the poor “will go away into eternal punishment” (Matt. 25:46). Like Psalm 10, Psalm 74, and Psalm 109, Jesus declares that the individual who has failed to show רַחֲמִים to the poor will not only not receive רַחֲמִים but suffer dire consequences. The failure to show רַחֲמִים to the poor is deemed worthy of judgment, condemnation, wrath, and “eternal punishment” (Matt. 25:46), essentially cursing oneself not to receive רַחֲמִים for eternity.

Interestingly, Jesus specifically curses those who failed to show רַחֲמִים to the poor “into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels” (Matt. 25:41). This perhaps could be in reference to the idea in Psalm 82:6–7 where the lesser gods’ “administration of justice on earth would prove or justify their divine status.”⁵¹ Jesus, drawing from this idea in Psalm 82:6–7, suggests that mankind’s “administration of justice on earth would prove or justify”⁵² their right to “inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundations of the world” (Matt. 25:34). A failure to execute justice for the poor—a failure to show רַחֲמִים —identifies individuals as unqualified to inherit the kingdom and, therefore, as condemned to suffer the same fate of the lesser gods.

Furthermore, Jesus clearly identifies Himself with the poor when He unequivocally states that “as you did it to one of the least of these my brothers, you did it to me” (Matt. 25:40) and “as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me” (Matt. 25:45). Similar to how the psalmist hints that Yahweh identifies Himself with the poor in Psalm 109, Jesus identifies Himself with the poor, placing Himself “at the needy’s right hand” (Ps. 109:31). In fact, Jesus arguably takes it further by referring to the “least of these” as his “brothers” (Matt. 25:40). Ultimately, it is clear from examining Jesus’s theology of the poor in Matthew 25 that it strongly resembles and therefore likely drew from the Psalter’s theology of רַחֲמִים to the poor. As Richard D. Patterson rightly argues, “throughout the Old Testament, then, the cause of the widow, the orphan, and the poor is particularly enjoined upon Israel as befitting a redeemed people

⁵¹ Alter, *The Hebrew Bible*, 200.

⁵² *Ibid.*

who are entrusted with the character and standards of their Redeemer,” and that theme is then “utilized in pointing to the coming ministry of the forerunner of Messiah and of Messiah Himself and of the righteousness that would then be inaugurated,” a righteousness that is intimately linked with actively extending חֶסֶד (*hesed*) to the poor.⁵³

Conclusion

Compassion for the poor is not merely a New Testament or New Covenant reality but reflective of Yahweh’s heart found even in the Psalter. Missiological themes, as W. Creighton Marlowe notes, are typically “way down the list, if on the list at all” when it comes to the Psalms; however, “the Old Testament Psalms and Psalter contain motivational and emotional expressions that reveal how God feels and, consequently, how God’s people should feel about missions” and, specifically, missional ministry to the poor.⁵⁴

In his study of Psalm 113, G.T.M. Prinsloo points out that “the reversal in the fortunes of the poor is an important literary motif” found throughout the Psalter.⁵⁵ Prinsloo is specifically thinking about reversal in the context of Yahweh reversing the fortunes of the poor; however, an additional crucial literary motif found in the Psalter is the reversal of the fortunes of the poor through and by the people of God who have experienced God’s *hesed* and, therefore, are obligated to extend God’s חֶסֶד freely to the poor. Failing to extend חֶסֶד to the poor by the people of God—Israel in the Old Testament and the Church in the New Testament—results in judgment, wrath, and extreme consequences, often with violent connotations, administered by Yahweh, who intimately links his divine status to His treatment and compassion for the poor.

Furthermore, the concept of extending חֶסֶד to the poor as an obligation is not exclusive to the Psalter. As already noted, it is prevalent in the Prophets; however, it is also present in other books of the Writings. For example, it is found in Proverbs 14:31, which states that “whoever oppresses a poor man insults his Maker, but he who is generous to the needy honors him” (Prov. 14:31), and Proverbs 19:17, which states “whoever is generous to the poor lends to the Lord, and he will repay him for his deeds” (Prov. 19:17). In fact, one might argue that in extending חֶסֶד to the poor, Jesus, in a way, fulfills the Old Covenant as recorded in

⁵³ Richard Duane Patterson, “The Widow, Orphan, and the Poor in the Old Testament and the Extra-Biblical Literature,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 130, no. 519 (1973), 232.

⁵⁴ W. Creighton Marlowe, “Music of Missions: Themes of Cross-Cultural Outreach in the Psalms,” *Missiology* 26, no. 4 (October 1, 1998), 445–446.

⁵⁵ Prinsloo, G.T.M. Prinsloo, “Yahweh and the Poor in Psalm 113: Literary Motif and/or Theological Reality?,” *Old Testament Essays* 9, no. 3 (January 1, 1996): 465–85, https://doi.org/10.10520/AJA10109919_680Links to an external site., 465.

the entire Old Testament, the Torah, Prophets, and Writings. Thus, Jesus both empowers and challenges the church under the New Covenant to continue to extend רָחֻם to the poor faithfully and thereby to satisfy Yahweh's desire for compassion towards the poor as revealed in the entirety of the Scriptures.

Thomas Dubay rightly laments that “factual poverty is so unpopular that many of those who make a public profession of it have in recent years redefined it to suit their tastes.” Instead of scriptural radical material generosity coupled with living “a materially sparing life, poverty is now said to be a ‘respectful use of creation’ or a ‘sharing of one’s time, person, and talent.’”⁵⁶ Dubay goes on to rightly condemn these contemporary definitions of extending רָחֻם to the poor as “convenient, for they exact next to nothing.”⁵⁷

Especially foreign, and arguably offensive, to the contemporary church is the idea that failing to extend רָחֻם to the poor could result in actual adverse consequences for the church and for the believer. It is beyond the scope of this paper to fully consider the implications of the theology of the poor found in the Psalter and the biblical understanding of extending רָחֻם to the poor as an obligation for the contemporary church; however, one wonders if the issues of depression, anxiety, and a whole host of other mental health issues that plague the contemporary church and are faced by those in the field of biblical Christian counseling and ecclesial theology might be related to how active, or inactive, the contemporary church is in fulfilling the obligation to extend רָחֻם to the poor.

As Dubay rightly points out, Yahweh invites His people into communion, fellowship, and identification with the poor and commissions them to extend רָחֻם to the poor because “happy are the poor because they suffer no thing impediments to what they most deeply crave. They are free to rejoice in the Lord always.”⁵⁸ Perhaps Israel, in extending רָחֻם to the poor, was not merely setting themselves apart from their Canaanite neighbors. Perhaps the discipline of extending רָחֻם to the poor also helped them avoid the “thing impediments” of property and wealth: “diversions... finite crutches that [would] distract and lead... away from our genuine quenching” and towards the false deities of Israel's ancient Near Eastern neighbors.⁵⁹

For a generation that has lost a biblical understanding of extending רָחֻם to the poor as an obligation, reading and praying the Psalter rightly should strongly convict and exhort the church to action. Indeed, one might even argue, it should reshape the language utilized in contemporary worship. Ultimately, in Martin's words, the Psalter testifies that “Christian worship should point to the God who

⁵⁶ Thomas Dubay, *Happy Are You Poor: The Simple Life and Spiritual Freedom* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2003), 151–152.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 152.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 163.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 162–163.

‘raises the poor from the dust; [and] lifts up the needy from the ash heap’ (Ps 113:7).’⁶⁰ Worship should call the Church to action in partnership and participation with God in raising up and extending חֶסֶד to the poor.

⁶⁰ Martin, “The Psalms and Economic Justice,” 5.

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