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## The Bible, the Economy, and the Poor

Edited by Ronald A. Simkins and Thomas M. Kelly, Creighton University

### 4. “The Poorest of the Land”

#### Perception and Identity of the Remnant in 2 Kings and Jeremiah

Roger S. Nam, George Fox University

#### Introduction

In the broad historical spectrum of the Bible, the experience of the Babylonian exile presents a particularly unique context in which to consider poverty. The captures and destruction of Jerusalem transformed the political landscape of Judah. Accordingly, new economic crises arose and found expression throughout exilic and post-exilic biblical texts. Within the biblical narratives portraying this event, I will examine a specific phrase, “the poorest of the land” (Hebrew, *dallat ba-'aretz*), which emerges in this economic chaos of exile. It appears in only four passages in the entire Hebrew Bible:

2 Kings 24:14: “The poorest of the people of the land”

2 Kings 25:12: “The poorest of the land”

Jeremiah 40:7: “The poorest of the land”  
Jeremiah 52:15-16: “The poorest of the land”<sup>1</sup>

All four of these passages deal with the capture of Jerusalem under Jehoiachin in 597 BCE or Zedekiah in 586, and the concomitant deportation of people. This historical context situates the phrase “poorest of the land” as an expression of economic peril during the exile.

Before looking at the passages, it is important to state a few assumptions regarding the literary connections between 2 Kings and Jeremiah. This study draws largely on the work of Person’s text-critical studies on the complex relationships within these various textual traditions. Rather than posit a linear movement of the tradition, Person asserts that the four texts arise from multiple circulations and redactions. He groups the Jeremiah 52 Septuagint (hereafter, LXX) as an isolated tradition, whereas the Masoretic Text (hereafter, MT) and LXX of 2 Kings 24-25, as well as the MT of Jeremiah 52 circulated more widely among similar circles. In adopting Person’s schema, this paper hopes to move past earlier notions of simple diachronic formulations and provide a glimpse of the circuitous travels of the biblical phrase, “poorest of the land.”

Such textual complexity makes it difficult to assess the diachronic life of the phrase with much precision. Reconstructing textual histories is always challenging, particularly with theologically significant events, with none more significant than the Babylonian capture of Jerusalem. Obviously, all four passages must date past the 597 invasion and likely past the 586 destruction of Jerusalem. With the numerous variants, each of the four passages likely circulated in post-exilic settings, leading to further redactions in respective scribal orbits. But not much can be confidently assessed beyond that. Consequently, this study will avoid the term of innerbiblical exegesis, as that may warrant too much faith in understanding the diachronic development in the texts (Schniedewind: 502-509). For these reasons, innerbiblical allusion is a more fitting term for this enterprise with a nuance towards synchronic perspectives. In this sense, one can detect specific intertextual allusions between these four passages over the phrase “poorest of the land.”

Specifically, I argue that the biblical compilers use the label “poorest of the land” in two ways. 2 Kings 25:12 and Jeremiah 52:15-16 parallel each other closely, describing the effects of 586, using the term “poorest of the land” to disparage the remnant community, highlighting their abject economic condition due to the cataclysmic events of exile and deportation. 2 Kings 24:14 is a later addition to the epilogue to the 597 events, arguing that deportations proved their demonstrable failure to YHWH and the inevitable consequences of poverty to the remnant. But in contrast to the other three appearances, Jeremiah 40:7 reinterprets the label “poorest of the land” to bring hope to the remnant and to try to persuade them to a redeemed life under Babylonian rule. This direct allusion to the “poorest of the land” acknowledges the tragedy of the loss of Zion, yet also gives an underlying hint of future restoration in line with Jeremiah’s overarching message of hope.

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<sup>1</sup> All translations are the author’s from the Hebrew Masoretic Text, unless noted.

## 2 Kings 25:12: Labeling the “Poorest of the Land”

The phrase “poorest of the land” appears at the end of Zedekiah’s reign with the destruction of Jerusalem in both 2 Kings 25:11-12 and its parallel passage in Jeremiah 52:15-16. The harsh fate of Zedekiah provides a powerful epilogue to the history of Israel’s monarchy. The Deuteronomistic History, that is, the lengthy historical narrative from Joshua through 2 Kings, narrates a complex tension between the lasting promises of God and repercussions of Israel’s violation of the covenant. In the end, the Babylonians destroy two lasting institutions of Israel, the Davidic monarchy and the Jerusalem temple. 2 Kings 25 gives a lengthy exposition on the looting of the temple, as well as the capture of priestly personnel and Judah’s military officers. The reader is left with the theological conundrum of a new understanding God in light of this tragic event.

2 Kings 25:11-12 connects these cataclysmic events to the oppressive economic circumstances for the remnant. Nebuzaradan burns down the temple, the royal palace, and all of the houses in Jerusalem, then finally carries out the exile:

Nebuzaradan the captain of the guard carried into exile the rest of the people who were left in the city and the deserters who had deserted to the king of Babylon – all the rest of the population. But the captain of the guard left some of the *poorest of the land* to be vinedressers and tillers of the soil.

In describing the poverty of the remnant, verse 12 departs from the rest of 2 Kings 25, which exclusively describes the fate of Jerusalem as well as the deportees. In addition, the identification of a surviving remnant contrasts with the sweeping statement in verse 11 that Nebuzaradan exiled “The rest of the population.” For these reasons, verse 12 is likely a later addition for a time that required more focus on the remnant, namely a post-exilic time when the remnant and the returnees were forced to renegotiate their identities.

This later insertion of verse 12 uses the label “poorest in the land” as a device to denigrate the remnant community. The phrase suggests a simplification of a population from the lens of elitism and economic judgment (Lipschits: 102-107). Obviously, the deportations did not include “the rest of the population” because some people remained. But this remnant holds little hope, in contrast to the elites carried off to exile, as the Babylonian rulers leave the poor to stay as vinedressers and tillers. The vinedresser is a lowly position in its limited usage in the Hebrew Bible. In the context of post-exilic restoration, Isaiah 61:5 prophesies to the remnant that foreigners will serve as vinedressers. The two other usages of vinedresser are in contexts of warning against prosperity while in a state of disobedience (Joel 1:11; 2 Chronicles 26:10). The tillers of the soil are even more rare, appearing only in two related passages always as an illustration to poverty (Jeremiah 39:10; 52:15). These occupations are almost exclusively understood as landless, thereby marginalized from the primary means of production. Like the preceding reference, this chapter emphasizes all that is lost and the overturn of Zion theology. The exile brought about the complete destruction of the primary social institutions of Israel from the preceding four centuries: the Davidic dynasty and the temple. All that remained were unskilled laborers with little leadership, and no direction as they languished under Babylonian hegemony. Thus, 2 Kings 25 closes the lengthy narrative of the Davidic dynasty with the pejorative label of the “poorest of the land” to describe a remnant left in an impoverished land after a devastating exile.

**Jeremiah 52:15-16: Re-Labeling the “Poorest of the Land”**

Jeremiah 52:15-16 essentially follows 2 Kings 25 with minor variants. Text critically, Jeremiah 52 is a later addition, intended as an epilogue as indicated by the colophon in Jeremiah 51:64b, “Thus far are the words of Jeremiah” (Allen: 536). This borrowing from 2 Kings 25 follows a prophetic convention, similar to the narrative ending of the First Isaiah. As with much of Jeremiah, there are also major differences between the LXX and MT. LXX is chronologically earlier, missing the entirety of verse 15.

2 Kings 25:11-12 (MT = LXX)	Jeremiah 52:15-16 (MT)	Jeremiah 52:15-16 (LXX)
Nebuzaradan the captain of the guard carried into exile the rest of the people who were left in the city and the deserters who had deserted to the king of Babylon – all the rest of the population.	Nebuzaradan the captain of the guard carried into exile some of the <i>poorest people</i> and the rest of the people who were left in the city and the deserters who had deserted to the king of Babylon, together with the rest of the artisans.	
But the captain of the guard left some of the <i>poorest of the land</i> to be vinedressers and tillers of the soil.	But Nebuzaradan the captain of the guard left some of the <i>poorest of the land</i> to be vinedressers and tillers of the soil.	But Nebuzaradan the captain of the guard left some of the <i>remainder of the people</i> to be vinedressers and tillers of the soil.

The dependence on 2 Kings 25:12 is clear with the phrase “vinedressers and tillers,” only found in these two places in the entire Bible. A couple of text critical issues warrant mention. First, the Hebrew root for “poor” (Hebrew, *dalab*) appears both in Jeremiah 52:15 and 52:16, as heads of a nominal construct clause. The mention of the “poorest people” in verse 15, however, is widely acknowledged as a case of haplography with both verses 15 and 16 beginning with the words, “of the poorest” (Hebrew, *ūmiddallōt*; Person: 105). Notably, verses 15 and 16 refer to the “poorest” as feminine plural forms from *dalab* with full spellings unlike the text in 2 Kings. This is an odd spelling since *dalab* by itself is understood as a collective noun (for an opposing view, see Joüon and Muraoka: 496). Second, Jeremiah 52:15 refers to the rest of the “artisans,” not “population” as in the source tradition represented in 2 Kings 25:12. The transmission simply mistook the similar Hebrew term “artisan” (Hebrew, *ʾamōn*) for the word, “population” (Hebrew, *hamōn*).

Similar to 2 Kings 25, Jeremiah 52 provides an epilogue for the entire book. The prophet presents a series of oracles spanning a lengthy ministry, interweaving themes of divine promise, exhortation, then condemnation. This final chapter forces the book of Jeremiah to grapple with the tension of this complex dialogue of messages from Jeremiah in light of the destruction of Jerusalem and ensuing deportation. Accordingly, Jeremiah presents an elitist viewpoint against the remnant, identifying them as disenfranchised and hopeless.

## 2 Kings 24:14: Condemning the “Poorest of the Land”

2 Kings 24:14 makes another reference to the “poorest of the land.” Although 2 Kings 24 refers to events eleven years earlier than the destruction of the temple, textual clues suggest that the reference is an anachronistic addition from the post-exilic community. After Nebuchadnezzar advanced against Jerusalem and besieges the city, he captures the royal family, loots all of the treasure in the temple and the palace. And then according to 2 Kings 24:12-15:

King Jehoiachin of Judah went out to the king of Babylon, himself, his mother, his servants, his officers, and his officials. The king of Babylon took him as prisoner in the eighth year of his reign.

[He brought out all the treasures of the house of the LORD, and the treasures of the king’s house; he cut in pieces all the vessels of gold in the temple of the LORD, which Solomon, King of Israel, had made, all this as the LORD had foretold. He carried away all Jerusalem, all the officials, all the warriors, ten thousand captives, all the artisans and the smiths; no one remained, except the *poorest people of the land*.]

He carried away Jehoiachin to Babylon; the king’s mother, the king’s wives, his officials, and the elite of the land, he took into captivity from Jerusalem to Babylon.

Verses 13-14 break up the natural flow of the narrative concerning the deportation of Jehoiachin and his people, which begins in verse 12, abruptly stops, then continues in verse 15. Verse 14 also contains a numeral discrepancy referring to 10,000 captives against the 8000 captives in verse 17.<sup>2</sup> For these reasons, several scholars see these verses as secondary to the passage, inserted to provide later theological commentary on these actual events (Seitz: 178-80; Würthwein: 469-70). The condemnation begets severe economic repercussions in the destruction of the temple and looting of cultic utensils. The carrying away of gold and the explicit reference to Solomon fulfills the earlier prophetic warnings against the monarchy found in 1 Kings 9:1-9 and 2 Kings 20:12-19. The financial losses underscore the idea of the “poorest in the land” as insignificant compared to the exiled privileged classes. Both the wealthy and the possessions move to Babylon. Nothing is left.

The reference to the “poorest of the land” gets a minor but significant revision in the Hebrew MT. Instead of merely referring to the “poorest of the land,” the MT of 2 Kings 24:14 revises the phrase to “poorest *people* of the land,” a unique construction in the entire Hebrew Bible. The presumably later MT departs from the LXX traditions. Such an insertion must be intentional and deliberate and not merely a scribal error in light of the surrounding context of the end of Jehoiachin’s reign to the Babylonian king. The most obvious allusion is to the common phrase “people of the land” (Hebrew, *‘am ha-’aretz*) of the Deuteronomistic History. Throughout the Deuteronomistic History, the “people of the land” held a significant role in the continued succession of the Davidic kingship. The phrase appears 60 times in the Hebrew Bible throughout different contexts and centuries (Seitz: 42-51). Talmon argued for a more subtle appreciation for this class, in that the people are actually a broad group of rural inhabitants, but those responsible for their powerful support of the

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<sup>2</sup> Jeremiah 52:28 has 3028. Other doublets include the capture of Jehoiachin (vv. 12, 15) and deporting artisans and smiths (vv. 14, 16).

Davidic dynasty (71-76). Especially in 2 Kings, one observes that the “people of the land” rebel against Athaliah (2 Kings 11:14, 18, 20); receive Jotham as king (2 Kings 15:5), give distinct offerings (2 Kings 16:15), place the child-king Josiah in power (2 Kings 21:24), then replace him with Jehoahaz (2 Kings 23:30). Therefore, the ideologically loaded phrase “people of the land” signifies power and activity in most of the Deuteronomistic history.

The “people of the land,” have flexed their power in their control of the Davidic throne, but their association with Jehoiachin in 2 Kings 24 creates a striking break from earlier formulations of succession. Suddenly, the “people of the land” are poor, having few assets and minimal influence. The downfall begins with their taxation by Jehoiakim (2 Kings 21:24). Eventually, the Davidic line withers with Jehoiachin in fetters, bound by the Babylonians. The “poorest people of the land” have no more qualified people to rebuild a devastated Jerusalem without Davidic leadership, and they remain with no hope for revival. The “people of the land,” empowered with a crucial role throughout the Davidic dynasty, suddenly find themselves as “poor,” and without power.

Interestingly, the Deuteronomistic History does not end with such bleakness but with a semblance of hope. The two 2 Kings references to the remnant as the “poorest of the land” stand in theological tension with the later description of the remnant under Gedaliah in 2 Kings 25:22-30. In 2 Kings 25:22a, they are not labeled with the pejorative term, “poorest of the land,” but rather the neutral description, “people who remained in Judah.” The commander of the guard did not take them, but King Nebuchadnezzar himself, and they are permitted to live life under the leadership of Gedaliah. Both the prophet Jeremiah and the military support Gedaliah, who mediates between the people and Babylon.<sup>3</sup> Lipschits suggests that these people settled in Benjaminite territory, north of Jerusalem in Tell en-Nasbeh, an area with resources that would permit the remnant to survive and even thrive (104; see also Zorn). Archaeological data shows very little destruction in this area during the Babylonian period, likely due to their surrender to the imperial invaders (Sweeney: 469). With an official appointment, the remnant had some sort of status and responsibility for the Babylonian empire. This later part of 2 Kings 25:22-30 is considered an appendix to the destructive events of deportations and encourages the people to live confidently in exilic life, a very different vision for the remnant. Jeremiah casts a similar reformulation for the label “people of the land” to preserve such a contrasting paradox of exilic life of uprooting and planting.

### Jeremiah 40:7: Restoring the “Poorest of the Land”

Jeremiah takes up the phrase “poorest of the land,” but in contrast to the pessimism of the 2 Kings references, the prophet nuances the phrase to express hope and restoration. Such a reformulating of label matches the overall theme within Jeremiah of tearing, uprooting, destroying, overthrowing, then building and planting (Jeremiah 1:10).

Jeremiah 40:1 begins a new literary unit and presents a more encouraging tone to the horrific experiences of the exile. The text attributes the punishment to YHWH (40:2-3) as a result of the peoples’ sins. But Jeremiah 40:4 presents an abrupt transition beginning with two lexemes that draw attention, “today” (Hebrew, *atah*, missing in LXX) and “look” (Hebrew, *hinneh*). With these signals, Jeremiah 40 gives assurance that “I am releasing you from the binds on your hands” (40:4b), even with the promise that “The whole country is

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<sup>3</sup> Ben Zvi even sees Gedaliah as a temporary Jeremianic character, representing the will of YHWH (181).

available to you” (40:4d). These exhortations signal hope in rebuilding a renewed life in light of exile. In opposition to the bindings and deportation, the text centers on freedom and choice with the statement, “Or go wherever else you consider it suitable to go” (40:5). Furthermore, the Babylonian-appointed guard even bestows gifts upon Jeremiah as he comes to Mizpah, honoring the prophet and finishing the complete reversal from an imprisoned life of exile.

The phrase “poorest of the land” appears in Jeremiah 40:7:

When all the leaders of the forces in the open country and their troops heard that the king of Babylon had appointed Gedaliah son of Ahikam governor in the land, and had committed to him men, women, and children, those of *the poorest of the land* who had not been taken into exile to Babylon.

Again, the phrase “poorest of the land” is a later insertion, departing from the LXX tradition. In contrast to the epilogues of 2 Kings, the usage of the “poorest of the land” carries a much more optimistic tone for those remaining in Judah under the reign of Gedaliah. After exile and the assignment of Gedaliah, in verse 7, the “poorest of the land” are juxtaposed next to the neutral term of “men, women, and children.” Leuchter draws comparison of Jeremiah 40:7 to Deuteronomy 31, which legitimizes Gedaliah at Mizpah as a leader showing similar endorsement as Moses (123). Thus, Jeremiah’s charge to the exiles alludes to the levitical charge to read Torah to the people in Deuteronomy 31:

Jeremiah 40:7aB: “and had committed to him men, women, and children”	Deuteronomy 31:12: “Assemble the people – men, women, and children”
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Jeremiah 40 presents a much more diverse population than 2 Kings 25:11-12 and Jeremiah 52:15-16, including military officials and “all Judeans” (Jeremiah 40:11). Leuchter points out that the events follow the same order in both Jeremiah 40 and Deuteronomy 31. The people are summoned, then the words of a Mosaic prophet (Jeremiah) are invoked for life under divine guidance. In this sense, the end of the monarchy does not negate the promises in Deuteronomy. Indeed, Jeremiah 40:7 gives a substantively different vision of hope for the “poorest of the land.” They are no longer an insignificant group. The prophet depicts the “poorest of the land” as victims of exile, but ones who can reclaim glory by the radical notion of serving the Babylonians under the leadership of Gedaliah, while following Torah. This sudden leader is not a random person, but rather one with important ties to pre-exilic (pre-Babylonian) royalty as a descendant of Shaphan. Jeremiah 40:9-10 encourages the exiles to cooperate with the Babylonians, with the hopes that God can give a proper life of blessing within these new circumstances.

Do not be afraid to serve the Chaldeans. Stay in the land and serve the king of Babylon, and it shall go well with you. As for me, I am staying at Mizpah to represent you before the Chaldeans who come to us; but as for you, gather wine and summer fruits and oil, and store them in your vessels, and live in the towns that you have taken over.

These verses contain lexicography associated with abundance and riches such as wine, summer fruits, and oil. No longer are precious items being carted off, but rather vessels are full, and the people return to inhabit the towns.

Although not using the precise phrase “poorest of the land,” a preceding passage uses the image of poverty to present a similar hopeful picture for the remnant. Jeremiah 39:10

advocates for a renewed life in exile under Gedaliah, “Nebuzaradan, the captain of the guard, left in the land of Judah some of the poor people who owned nothing and gave them vineyards and fields at the same time.” The verse amplifies the definition of poor as those without land. But now, instead of the indentured servants of vinedressers and tillers of 2 Kings 25 and Jeremiah 52, the Babylonian official make the poor people into owners of land. This allusion to other usages of the “poorest of the land” continues the theme of allusion and reformulation. Whereas the remnant is disparagingly labeled, Jeremiah 40:7 and 39:10 empower and lift them to greater economic prosperity. These references to the poor, absent in the LXX, still acknowledge the struggles and economic hardships. But the phrase “poorest of the land” equates with a remnant that is empowered under the leadership of Gedaliah. The “poorest of the land” were uprooted, but in congruence with the greater theme of Jeremiah, they will ultimately build and plant a new life after the exile.<sup>4</sup>

### Conclusion

The inner-biblical allusion of the phrase “poorest of the land” invites the modern reader of the biblical text to reflect on and consider the economy and the poor. The phrase appears in four passages, all describing the captures of Jerusalem and the resulting economic trauma of exile. The shared historical circumstances and language indicates a literary relationship between these four passages and the framework for a theological conversation. In 2 Kings 24:14, the dethronement of Jehoiachin in 597 and the accompanying exile of the privileged and skilled classes leaves the “poorest people of the land.” The final chapter of the 2 Kings 25:12 (and Jeremiah 52:15-16) places a much more emphatic mark with the destruction of the temple and no hope for the remnant. Jeremiah, consistent with his overarching message, recognizes the tragic events for the “poorest of the land,” yet argues their potential stand before great restoration.

It is hoped that this study of the “poorest of the land” may catalyze mature thought and dialogue on how contemporary society may confront poverty. The biblical texts may allow us to fully confront the trauma and hardship of poverty, analogous to the economic turmoil following the events of 586. Honest assessment of the biblical texts need not lead to despair, but to hopes similar to the spirit of Jeremiah; it is, indeed, the “poorest of the land” who are marginalized and disenfranchised, but they will someday build and plant.

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<sup>4</sup> Typically, commentators have interpreted the “poorest of the land” as a phrase that denigrates the remnant of the exilic community. But Leucter suggests that the phrase is a deliberate reference to the Egyptian remnant community rather than the Yehud population based on the association with Jeremiah 41:17-18 when said captives in Mizpah are taken to Egypt (122).



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