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## The Bible, the Economy, and the Poor

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### 1. The Creation of Poverty in Ancient Israel

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#### Introduction

In view of recent demonstrations by Occupy Wall Street, the toxic influence of corporate money on the three branches of our government, and the scandalous income inequality across the world, this volume, “The Bible, the Economy, and the Poor” is timely and addresses the age-old concern for the most vulnerable in our societies. The biblical text has been used throughout history to legitimate dominant structures that have enriched the haves and impoverished the have-nots. Jesus’ statement that “The poor you will always have with you,” has been wrongly interpreted to justify poverty rather than to challenge us to do something about it. I am very happy to contribute to this volume and am emboldened by its wisdom and expertise in tackling the economic disparity in this country and around the globe.

The impetus for my own work on poverty arises from two different sources.<sup>1</sup> In the 1980s, Gerda Lerner argued that patriarchy, male dominance over women, was not a

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<sup>1</sup> I thank the Lilly Foundation for a 2011 Faculty Fellowship that has helped fund my research.

“natural” or “biological” phenomenon, but rather one that was created historically. If she is correct, patriarchy can be ended historically. Therefore, my first impetus is that it is *not* true that the poor will always be with us. Poverty, like patriarchy, is created historically and can, therefore, be ended historically. My second impetus mirrors one of the 2000 United Nations Millennium Development Goals (MDG) to eradicate poverty. The complex layers of today’s global poverty are thickly entangled. Extreme poverty leads to chronic hunger, which creates the rapid spread of infectious disease, infant and maternal mortality, obstacles to education, gender inequality, environmental degradation, and ultimately national and international conflict and war. The MDG acknowledge that ending poverty involves a comprehensive program of gender empowerment, improving education, physical health, environmental sustainability, global partnerships for trade, debt relief, and accountability. In this paper I examine the historical creation of poverty in Israel, its complex links among gender, ethnicity, class, colonial status, and environment, and how they inform our current situation.

### **Braudel’s Conception of Time**

Fernand Braudel’s three levels of history (or different conceptions of time), the *longue durée*, *histoire conjoncturelle*, *histoire événementielle*, offer me a springboard to examine how poverty was created in Israel (1980: 24-54, 74-76; 1973: 1238). In his work, *On History*, Braudel describes the *longue durée* as the long-term history shaped by humans and their relationship with their environment or geography:

For centuries, man has been a prisoner of climate, of vegetation, of the animal population, of a particular agriculture, of a whole slowly established balance from which he cannot escape without the rise of everything being upset. Look at the position held by the movement of flocks in the lives of mountain people, the permanence of certain sectors of maritime life, rooted in the favorable conditions wrought by particular coastal configurations, look at the way the sites of cities endure, the persistence of routes and trade, and all the amazing fixity of the geographical setting of civilizations (1980: 32).

The *longue durée* operates at the interface between the natural physical environment and human social activity (Diamond presents an excellent popular example of such long-term history). An essential part of the character of civilizations “depends on the constraints or advantages of their geographical situation” (Braudel 1993: 9). Indeed, the physical environment plays an integral role in the various ways humans interact socially over the long haul. Conversely, human social interaction has a direct impact on the physical environment. At the level of Israel’s *longue durée*, then, one investigates its geographical and ecological sectors and their direct or indirect relationships to the creation of wealth and poverty in the land. The land itself becomes an important determinant, not simply a backdrop, in who becomes wealthy or impoverished in Israel.

### **The Creation of Poverty over the *Longue Durée***

Ancient Israel was primarily an advanced agrarian society with some animal husbandry, and land was the most important social and economic resource. The land of Israel consisted of five geographic zones: coastal plain, Shephelah (lowlands next to the coastal plain), highlands, Jordan Valley, and Transjordan plateau, which varied in soil quality and rainfall

and dictated the types of crops grown and harvested (MacDonald: xiv, 50-56; Herr: 101-15; Miller: 289-93). Around 1200-1000 BCE (Iron I), Israel's highlands witnessed a dramatic settlement and the rise of rural village life, particularly in the north, but less so in Judah. The settlers were most likely descendants of indigenous Bronze Age peasants, responding to the power vacuum that resulted from the collapse of Egyptian rule over Canaan (Domeris: 27-41; Coote and Whitelam: 16-25). They were the social survivors of the famine, disease, and military conflicts that ended the Bronze Age. Their development of the highlands was assisted by technological adaptations to the terrain, such as terracing, pillared houses, and plastered limestone cisterns. The emergence of Israel is usually correlated with the settlement of this "frontier" area of the hill-country (Gottwald 2008: 132-38; Finkelstein and Mazar: 69-98; Lenski 2005: 147-68).

In contrast to the walled city-states of Bronze Age Canaan (Dever 1987; Bunimovitz), archaeology reveals that these agrarian villages were composed of nearly identical "four-roomed" houses, with no evidence of elite structures or monumental architecture, such as temples or palaces, or defensive walls. These villages were socially unstratified, kinship-based entities, in which the extended family household (*bēt 'āb*) was the basic socioeconomic unit (Dever 1997: 27-30; Bloch-Smith and Nakhai: 75-77). Such villages also characterized rural areas during Iron II, the time of the monarchy (Faust 2000). The households, whose main goal was the survival of the family, devoted themselves to subsistence farming. The varied nature of village life during Iron I was most likely a reaction to socio-economic disparities experienced during the Bronze Age. Farmers in the isolated areas of the highlands would have been able to elude urban elites who demanded their surplus (Faust 2005: 120; Nakhai: 130). Because the landscape was not ideally suited for farming, villagers had to plan ahead, work hard, and cooperate in order to survive. The land's seasonal cultivation, along with the labor-intensive construction and repair of houses and terraces, engendered a communitarian ethos of collaboration that was strengthened by bonds of kinship. These households joined other groups to form clans (*mišpāhā*) and ultimately tribes (*šēbēt*), becoming self-sufficient, mutually supporting and protecting entities. Unlike Bronze Age Canaan, there were no state mechanisms that appropriated their agriculture or human surpluses as taxes or tribute (Gottwald 1992: 83). Surpluses were kept in both household and communal storage facilities as a check against famine (Faust 2000: 25-26). Should any village members or households become impoverished, they relied on kinship connections to come to their aid and see them through the crisis.

According to 1 Samuel 4–8, the Philistine threat compelled the Israelite tribes to subject themselves to a king. The reality however was more complicated. The growth in population meant that more land was needed to support and feed it, and land in Canaan was a limited valuable resource. In a rain-fed agrarian society such as Israel's, *where* one grows crops is an important factor in the agricultural surplus that the plot does or does not produce. Over the *longue durée* the variegated terrains, rainfall, and soils made some land holdings more productive than others. The geography and climate of the land created economic zones of prosperity and disadvantage. These environmental factors influenced not only the wealth or poverty of individual farmers, but extended further up the social ladder to villages, to urban areas, and ultimately to nations. For example, the northern kingdom of Israel was historically

wealthier and more powerful than the southern kingdom of Judah, because of its rich agricultural breadbaskets and water sources.

Nevertheless, Israel and Judah were second and even third tier nations economically, when compared to the empires of Mesopotamia and Egypt, which had great river systems to sustain them. These empires had a considerable head start in the agricultural development of their land. Agriculture began in Mesopotamia around 8500 BCE. Harnessing the Tigris and Euphrates rivers, its population developed the more dependable irrigation agriculture after 7000 BCE, and hierarchical social forms began to emerge during the early 6<sup>th</sup> millennium. Writing developed in Mesopotamia and Egypt around 3000 BCE. When Israel and Judah began to emerge by the end of the 2<sup>nd</sup> millennium, Mesopotamia and Egypt were already highly advanced agrarian societies, with complex political, legal, military, and religious systems (van de Mierop). Another significant aspect of geography that considerably impinged upon Israel's history was the fact that Israel occupied an important land bridge between these two civilizations. Many nations fought to control this strategic piece of real estate. Israel was often caught in the middle of their conflicts, and its history was often a reaction to their actions, policies, and demands.

If we date Israel's emergence in the highlands in the twelfth and eleventh centuries BCE, those villagers profiting from their land's fertility were then able to accumulate agricultural surplus beyond subsistence level, enlarge their possessions, and procure status and power. Settlements closer to existing trade routes and urban centers were able to sell their produce or labor and benefit more economically, than those in isolated areas. The minor judges (Judges 10:1-5; 12:8-15) with their property and numerous offspring and the shepherd Nabal the Calebite (1 Samuel 25:2-3) would be included in this emerging group of power brokers. Saul, the first "king" of Israel, evidently came from a wealthy family (1 Samuel 9:1), and David's father, Jesse, was a prominent landowner and pastoralist, and perhaps an elder of Bethlehem (1 Samuel 16:4-5; see Routledge: 53-59; Reviv: 129). In contrast to this ascending class, those landowners cultivating inferior parcels of farm or pastureland or those whose holdings were ruined by drought, insect infestations, or military conflicts lagged behind. The books of Joshua, Judges, and 1 Samuel provide textual confirmation that armed struggles were regular occurrences in this land.

### **The Creation of Poverty over the *Histoire Conjoncturelle***

The formation of socio-economic groups and movements benefiting from the land and the environment takes us to Braudel's second layer of history, *histoire conjoncturelle*, the history of economic and social climates. Conjunctions are the slow but perceptible rhythms of economies and societies over decades (1980: 29-30; 1973: 20-21). These can include the rise and/or fall of economic cycles, states, and empires, and the emergence and decline of particular social groups or movements. The prosperity of the wealthier families helped them survive times of famine, disease, and social conflicts, while the less fortunate ones were deprived even further. During these times, the more successful households assisted the less successful, often through opportunistic means, creating relations of dependency and subordination. These included: 1) controlling the labor or products of slaves or unfree dependents, through client relationships with impoverished individuals, 2) obtaining contributions, taxes, or labor of free citizens, or 3) securing rents and/or other incomes

from large landholdings (Holladay 1995: 378; Nakanose: 37-41). The need for more land also produced conflicts with bandits and other parasocial elements, forming a class of warriors under powerful chieftains who exploited farmers and pastoralists in various ways (Doak: 1-29). Abimelech and Jephthah in Judges 9 and 11 were described as leaders of a band of outlaws. David himself was running an extortion racket before becoming “king” according to 1 Samuel 22:1-2 and 25:2-8.

These conjunctures among others encouraged a movement toward political centralization, economic specialization, and social power structures that progressed steadily toward statehood (Coote and Whitelam: 107-47; Holladay 1995: 368-79; McNutt: 104-42). Although regarded as the first kings of Israel, Saul, David, and Solomon were most likely powerful chieftains, rather than genuine monarchs of an established state (Flanagan; Finkelstein and Silberman; Finkelstein and Mazar: 117-39). Archaeology confirms that Jerusalem, ostensibly the large glittering capital city of David and Solomon, was a much smaller settlement in the tenth-century; its magnificent temple (1 Kings 6-8), a much humbler structure (Vaughn and Killebrew). Although most scholars agree that Omri and Ahab ruled over some sort of state in the north, a ninth century dating for the statehood of Judah is debated from an archaeological perspective. For some, full statehood for Judah only occurred in the eighth century, when the archaeology of Jerusalem reveals a capital city of a genuine state. I concur with Gottwald, however, that in view of the biblical and extra-biblical data, there were two states in Israel during the ninth century. The northern Israel was “the larger, more multicultural and cosmopolitan state,” while Judah was “the smaller, more monocultural and insular southern state” (Gottwald 2000: 199-200; Finkelstein and Mazar: 160-66; Steiner: 201-202).

Although inequality was apparent even in the pre-state period in the diversity of wealth among cultivators, the stratification of Israelite society appeared particularly with the establishment of the state, which took place in the ninth century for Israel and, to a lesser extent, Judah. Social stratification happens when inequality becomes institutionalized, developing a system of unequal social relations that determines who gets what and why (Kerbo: 10; Lenski 1984: 1-23). The state came into being in the conflict between the inhabitants of the village and those of the city (Boer: 34-37). It was the creation of this urban culture that led to social stratification and economic divisions of labor and, with these, the formation of a governing class and lower classes (Gottwald 1993: 3-22; Sneed). The governing class included not only the king and his court, but also the powerful local landowners, mentioned already, who became dominant even before the emergence of the state (Mettinger; Gottwald 2000: 48-51).

The archaeological finds at Hazor and other cities support the contention that the stratification of ancient Israel arose with the institution of the monarchy and urbanization (Faust 1999; Faust and Bunimovitz: 27-28). Several of the cities that housed the upper classes were built on the remains of Bronze Age Canaanite cities, eventually reproducing their hierarchical system of social relations (Dever 1987). According to Herzog, cities were “containers of power” (1-16). With their monumental art and architecture, cities displayed the power and will of the new monarchy (Whitelam). Their fortifications defended the state against foreign adversaries. Within them the land was administered, accommodating the

various governing officials assigned for this purpose (Fritz: 13-14). Their temples and shrines proclaimed the worship of the religious establishment and the political objectives of the king (Holladay 1987: 249-99). Even the tombs and burials that appeared during Iron II reflected the status and wealth of this emergent population in Jerusalem and in the Shephelah in their elaborate architectural details (Bloch-Smith: 128-29).

Lester Grabbe argues against dichotomies that demonize city/urban as bad and country/rural as good: “The concept of significant rural/urban alienation does not fit either what is known from other areas of the ancient Near East or the primary data” (2001: 104). Relations between village and city covered an interdependent continuum between the positive and negative poles. Cities offered markets for the village’s agricultural and animal surpluses. Villagers brought their sacrifices and gifts to the urban temple, which supported its priesthood. Cities protected villagers during times of war and dispensed food during times of famine (cf. Genesis 41:53-57).

Cities also provided rural families opportunities for upward mobility. For example, younger sons, who could not become heads of household because of customs of primogeniture, could enter occupations in government, military, or cult in the cities (Stager: 26-28; Holladay 1995: 381). McKenzie suggests that this was the case for the younger son David (McKenzie: 35). Very likely, beautiful female “commoners” were able to enter the harems of kings. We know that some Assyrian families sent daughters to live at the palace in hopes of advancement (Melville: 40). In the biblical text, one can include the orphaned Esther before she was taken into Ahasuerus’ harem (Esther 2:7), Abishag the Shunammite (1 Kings 1:3-4, 15), and perhaps some among Solomon’s three hundred concubines, since the seven hundred princesses were listed separately (1 Kings 11:3). While these examples might not be historically accurate, they might reflect the historical circumstances, as the authors understood them.<sup>2</sup> According to 1 Samuel 8:13, women also became perfumers, cooks, and bakers for the royal court. They would have provided some limited cultic services, such as weaving textiles for sanctuaries (cf. Exodus 35:25-26), serving at their entrances (Exodus 38:8; 1 Samuel 2:22), and performing as musicians and dancers (Ackerman; Bird: 405-408; Meyers: 16-27). Cities were also places where one could learn a variety of trades, such as signet making, metal work, and pottery (cf. Sirach 38:27-34; Mendelsohn 1940). Hiram of Tyre, son of a widow from the tribe of Naphtali, became a bronze worker for Solomon’s temple (1 Kings 7:13).

However, elites residing in the cities also demanded taxes and tithes from the villages, which exposed villages to much expropriation, exploitation, and oppression (Premnath; Coomber). Besides seizing their material surpluses, they took a great part of their labor pool away from farming to supply the ranks of the military for their wars and corvée groups for their building projects (Dreher; Soggin; Mendelsohn 1962). Their demands became particularly heavy when foreign powers and policies imposed steep tribute quotas upon Israel and Judah, which were then passed on to the villages. Stratification concretized the class differentials between city and village. In an agrarian society, the productive members were those who actually worked the land or pastured herds, laboring to transform the raw

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<sup>2</sup> My thanks to Susan Ackerman for pointing me into this direction.

materials of the land or herd into food, clothing, shelter, and whatever else was needed for living. These made up the vast majority of the population. The non-productive members were the upper-class minority, who came to own the means of production (the land) and lived off the agricultural and pastoral efforts of the productive group by extracting its surpluses as tribute, taxes, or rents (Gottwald 1993: 6). While appropriating peasant surpluses to fund its bureaucracy, building projects, wars, and expensive lifestyles, the dominant consuming class usually allowed the producing class just enough surplus to keep it at subsistence level.

### The Creation of Poverty over the *Histoire Événementielle*

Braudel's third level, *histoire événementielle*, has been the traditional preoccupation of history, focusing on historical individuals and events (1980: 27). To foreground the environmental and social dynamics involved in the creation of poverty, I will analyze in the remaining pages the narratives of the ninth-century individuals – Omri, Ahab, Elijah and Elisha – through the lenses of *longue durée* and *histoire conjoncturelle*.

Some scholars argue that Israel's first king, Omri, established the first early state in ninth century Palestine, followed by his son, Ahab (Finkelstein and Mazar: 149-51; Albertz: 355-59; Finkelstein). 1 Kings credits Omri for building Israel's capital city Samaria (16:23-28), attributing to Ahab the construction of other fortified cities, water systems, and expensive palaces in the north (1 Kings 16:32-34 and 22:39; Ussishkin). These extensive construction projects required substantial amounts of building supplies, centralized administration and planning, and many skilled artisans and workers, placing a heavy economic load on the population in material and human resources. Adding even more to this burden, both the biblical text and Ancient Near Eastern sources describe Israel's costly wars and heavy tribute paid to their foreign vanquishers, the Arameans (1 Kings 20, 22; 2 Kings 6:24–7:20; on the war with Moab, see 2 Kings 3; for analysis, see Grabbe 2007: 142-49).

In contrast to the accounts regarding his father (1 Kings 16:15-28), the narratives of Ahab are occupied by his confrontations with the prophets Elijah and Elisha (1 Kings 16–2 Kings 17). According to Albertz, prophetic opposition against a sitting monarch was a new phenomenon, one tied to the economic development of the ninth century (347-67). The prosperity that occurred under the Omrides made it possible for prophetic groups to emerge that, unlike Nathan (2 Samuel 7; 1 Kings 1) and the king's prophets (1 Kings 22), had no kinship or professional ties to the court. On the one hand, a wealthier population would be able to pay for prophetic services, such as healing, exorcism, and divination (cf. 2 Kings 4:8-37). On the other hand, the social stratification and exploitation that occurred in the midst of this prosperity created resistance groups drawn from different social classes. Although Elisha was a well-to-do farmer (1 Kings 19:19), the "sons of prophets" who accompanied him were often very poor (2 Kings 4:1-7, 38-44; 6:1-7). The economic independence of these prophetic groups and their personal involvement with the victims of Omride economic development enabled them to castigate the system.

The miraculous legendary features of the Elijah and Elisha stories (Rofé) and their reworking into larger redacted narratives (Campbell; Sweeney: 26-30) make them difficult to substantiate historically. However, they do provide important narrative clues to the

exploitation, distress, and impoverishment experienced under ninth-century monarchic rule in the northern kingdom (Rentería: 75-126).

In the first place, the Naboth incident (1 Kings 21) illustrates the abuses of power over land ownership that occurred under the ruling elite. Ahab desired a vineyard in Jezreel belonging to a man named Naboth. Jezreel was a strategically important location, because it contained rich farmland and its low-lying plains linked the Transjordan area to the coastal plain (MacDonald: 52; Sweeney: 247). One can infer that possessing such a vineyard in an economically productive and vital locale, Naboth represented a class of prosperous landowners in Israel. More importantly, he regarded the land as an inheritance that could not be bought or sold outside of the family to which it belonged. Ahab's foreign wife Jezebel, however, regarded land as a commodity to which the royal court had a privileged claim (Brueggemann: 257). When Naboth refused to sell, she instigated an illegitimate seizure of his land and engineered his death (1 Kings 21:5-16). Royal confiscations of land owned by farmers, even well-to-do land-owners like Naboth, continued through the eighth century and were strenuously condemned by the prophets (cf. Isaiah 5:8-10; Micah 2:1-4; for analysis, see Premnath). The loss of family land in an economy based on the land exacerbated a farmer's descent into poverty.

Second, the aristocracy's indifference to the people's hardships is quite evident in these narratives. While the nation suffered an acute famine, Ahab seemed more concerned about water for his horses and mules (1 Kings 18:5). According to the Kurkh Monolith, Ahab possessed enough horses to pull two thousand chariots in a campaign against the Assyrian king Shalmaneser III (Grabbe 2007: 131, 142-43). What little arable land and water to be had during this drought was thus diverted from food production for the populace to pasture for Ahab's vast number of animals. Similarly, his wife Jezebel persecuted the native prophets (1 Kings 18:4, 13), while holding banquets for her 450 foreign prophets of Baal and 400 prophets of Asherah (1 Kings 18:19). If 1 Kings 4:22-23 describing the daily provisions from the tribes for Solomon's table is any indication, those eating at Jezebel's table consumed the choicest grains and exotic meats, while the rest of the people starved (MacDonald: 78-79).

Famine particularly affected the most vulnerable in Israelite society: widows. A malnourished widow and her dying son were the first recipients of Elijah's miraculous powers at the beginning of his ministry (1 Kings 17). Debt slavery became prevalent during the monarchic period (Kessler: 306-308; Chirichigno). A widow of one of the "sons of the prophets" was forced to sell her children into slavery to settle her dead husband's debt (2 Kings 4:1-7; cf. Amos 2:6). Another one of the "sons of the prophets" was threatened with possible debt slavery when he lost the ax head that fell into the Jordan (2 Kings 6:1-7). The ax head was borrowed, probably from one of the elite who would have been able to possess and lend the expensive commodities necessary for farming, such as iron plowshares, mattocks, axes, and sickles (cf. 1 Samuel 13:19-20). It would have been almost impossible for the average subsistence farmer or day laborer to compensate for the lost ax head. He would have to pay by selling his body into grinding servitude.

Third, the narratives regarding Ahab are replete with accounts of wars with his neighbors Aram (1 Kings 20, 22; 2 Kings 6:24-7:20) and Moab (2 Kings 3), some of which can be confirmed archaeologically (Finkelstein and Mazar: 169-74). 2 Kings 3:18-25



describes the destruction of the fragile eco-system of Moab's subsistence agriculture by war (Hasel: 197-206). The Israelites threw stones covering every good area of farmland, stopped up springs of water, and chopped down valuable fruit trees (v. 25), disobeying Deuteronomy 20:19, which banned the destruction of such trees (Wright: 423-58; Cole). Undoubtedly, the enemies of Israel returned the favor by decimating Israel's countryside in similar ways. The accounts describe vast armies of soldiers, horses, and chariots used on both sides, implying the destruction of crop fields as they stormed over the plains (cf. 1 Kings 20:23-25). During the siege of Samaria, Ben-hadad and his armies lived in booths on the fields surrounding Samaria (1 Kings 20:12, 16). Inferred is the feeding and housing of these enemy hosts, their cavalry and chariot horses that were confiscated from peasant surpluses, while those in Samaria starved (cf. 2 Kings 6:24-30; Saggs; Eph'al: 101-102). Also inferred from these war stories is the conscription of thousands of able-bodied men to serve in these vast armies, removing them from the cultivation of the land, the backbone of the nation's economy (Eph'al: 104-106). Many of these men were ultimately killed.

Women and children suffered horribly as well. 2 Kings 8:12 alludes to the practice of the victors dashing infants and ripping up pregnant women in their destruction of a fortified city (cf. Amos 1:13; Hosea 13:16; Cogan 1983: 755-57). 2 Kings 5:2 makes a passing reference to an Israelite female war captive taken into the household of the king of Aram, belying the fact that thousands were taken in slavery and systematically raped (cf. Deuteronomy 21:10-14; Judges 5:30; 1 Maccabees 3:41; 2 Maccabees 8:10-11). Women and children were especially vulnerable as war captives to sex trafficking to other lands (cf. Joel 3:2-3; Ezekiel 27:13; see Jacobs). Commenting on Amos 1:6, Paul states, "the sale of human booty on the slave market was a well-known practice that became a profitable by-product for the victors in war" (56). Though not presented in a context of war, one can interpret the Joseph story as the sex trafficking of a handsome youth to a foreign land (Fontaine).

The biblical stories of individuals and events of ninth-century Israel demonstrate the creation of poverty over the *histoire événementielle*. The stratification of society that emerged during the time of the monarchy at the level of the *histoire conjuncturelle* (the broader history of economic and social groups and settings) was a significant factor in the impoverishment of the majority of Israel's population. Although there were undoubtedly opportunities for upward mobility and advancement for the wider populace, the biblical texts record their suffering and oppression through times of famine, economic exploitation, and military confrontations.

## Conclusion

From the perspective of Braudel's *longue durée*, the geographical and ecological variations in the highlands produced a communitarian ethos during Israel's pre-state period, which valued kin-group relations and collaboration to work the difficult terrain and withstand periods of agricultural failure. Some agricultural areas were more lucrative than others, creating relations of dependency and hierarchical groupings at the level of Braudel's *histoire conjuncturelle*. Growth in population, economic specialization, and political complexity occasioned the growth of cities and urban culture. Growing tensions between villages and cities resulted in the emergence of the state and the stratification of social classes. Biblical accounts of Ahab, Jezebel, Elijah, and Elisha during ninth-century Israel in 1 and 2 Kings

disclose some of the pernicious effects of the clash between the interests of the governing classes and the rest of the people during early statehood and intensified during the eighth century and beyond: the royal abuse of power and seizure of land even from prosperous landowners; the acute disparity between the royal rich and their impoverished subjects, particularly during times of famine and religious persecution; the distress of widows and children, the most marginalized in the state; the selling of bodies, young and old, into debt slavery; the ecological devastation of the land by war; the human costs of war in the maiming and death of soldiers and the rape of women; and the trafficking of prisoners of war as slaves, especially the sexual slavery of women and children. All of these contributed to the creation of poverty in ancient Israel.

We saw in the discussion above how the prophets, Elijah and Elisha, challenged the abuses of power by the ruling classes and advocated on behalf of the poor and marginalized. The prophets offer us models for our own efforts to assist in the eradication of poverty in our day. It would be a mistake to regard the prophets, like many do, as fortunetellers who, gazing into their crystal balls, predict the future. A better understanding of a prophet is one who reads the present social situation, analyzes it, and courageously proclaims the dire future consequences of injustice, corruption, and exploitation, if this situation is not rectified. A prophet sees a terrible wrong, considers its cause, and endeavors to help right it. The “miracle” that the prophets perform in these stories is converting the helplessness and despair of the people into one of agency that confronts a terrible situation head-on. And just like these prophets, we too must have an informed, balanced understanding of what creates local and global poverty, in order to be a prophetic voice against it. A good place to start is reading about what is being done and still needs to be done about poverty on the Millennium Development Goals website (United Nations). We have to read the present social situation of poverty, analyze it, and courageously proclaim the disastrous future results of the inequalities, fraud, and injustice that afflict our present world. We must empower the poor and exploited become agents in resisting the institutions that contribute to their marginalization. This is the challenge is before us today.

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