

The Poor and the Needy in the Book of Isaiah

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When we read Jesus's pronouncement in 3 Nephi that "great are the words of Isaiah" (3 Nephi 23:1), prophecies about the Messiah and the scattering and gathering of Israel are what may quickly come to mind. However, the book of Isaiah *also* contains important passages addressing the treatment of the poor and needy. These passages, which particularly focus on one of the many social ills in ancient Israelite society, range from condemning the unrighteous treatment of the poor to promising how the Lord will (eventually) deliver them.¹

Stating the obvious, the Hebrew Bible (the Christian Old Testament) depicts the Lord's call to the ancient Israelites to live in a covenant relationship with him.² That covenant included not only devotion to Jehovah, but also the injunction to "love thy neighbour as thyself" (Leviticus 19:18).³

This paper reviews and analyzes the passages in the book of Isaiah dealing with “the poor” in order to present how the Israelites’ Jehovah, the God who became our resurrected Lord, expected, and still expects, his covenant people to treat the poor and oppressed in their midst. Therefore, this is not a study of all biblical passages relating to “the poor.”⁴ Even with this limited focus on passages in the book of Isaiah, there are many important statements to assess that deal with Jehovah’s view of peoples’ covenant obligations to assist those in need. Following a brief summary of the context in which Isaiah lived, the Hebrew words which are translated “poor” in the book of Isaiah will be overviewed, and then passages that mention the poor will be assessed.⁵

Isaiah in Context

For purposes of this discussion, it is important to have a basic sense of the social environment in which Isaiah lived, since many of his statements about the poor are related to his setting (and are still applicable today). Isaiah was prophetically active in Jerusalem, the capital of the kingdom of Judah, from about the 730s to 690s BC.

Archaeological evidence and biblical texts combine to indicate that the first two-thirds of the eighth century were relatively stable politically and that there was real economic prosperity in both the northern kingdom of Israel and the southern kingdom of Judah.⁶ Even so, rural living and subsistence farming and herding were still the norm for most Israelites.⁷ During this time period, it appears that at least some of the newly rich estate owners and individuals in various leadership positions exploited many in the large subsistence class of people, causing economic hardships for them.⁸ Plus, when a working family member became ill, injured, or died, or when rainfall was insufficient and crops were less productive, hunger and debt would have been real occurrences for many Israelites. Then, in the latter quarter of the eighth century, Assyrian invasions, warfare, death, deportations, destruction of crops and agricultural lands, and

pressing tribute to Assyria brought additional challenges to vulnerable Israelites who lived in the land of Israel. Isaiah thus witnessed or was at least aware of all these developments.

Although it is difficult to determine the full extent of social abuses at that time, comments on social ills that impacted the poor appear in the first chapter of the book of Isaiah, giving an instructive indicator of the general corruption in Judahite society. (“Judahites” designates those who lived in the southern Israelite kingdom, known as Judah. So, Judahites were Israelites who lived in the kingdom of Judah.) In Isaiah 1, which serves in many ways as a thematic introduction to the book, Jehovah pleads with his covenant people to turn in repentance from their collective sinfulness towards him: “And when ye spread forth your hands [in prayer], . . . your hands are full of blood. Wash you, make you clean; put away the evil of your doings from before mine eyes; cease to do evil; learn to do well; seek judgment [*mišpāt*, pronounced “mishpaht”], relieve the oppressed, judge the fatherless, plead for the widow. Come now, and let us reason together, saith the LORD” (Isaiah 1:15–18, see also v. 4). This condemnation of those who preyed on the weakest members of their society and the string of action verbs in this passage convey a sense of urgency and impending divine judgment, which is clearly announced throughout verses 2–20.

Note that the Hebrew word *mišpāt*, which is regularly translated “judgment” in the KJV and which does mean “judgment,” was often used with the sense of *just* judgment or “justice,” the type of judgment Jehovah dispenses and desires among his people. The word *mišpāt* is translated as “justice” in modern English translations of Isaiah 1:17, and in most of the other passages cited below, and is often better understood in that way. Thus, in the context of passages such as Isaiah 1:17, seeking *mišpāt* “does not [solely] refer to aspects of the judicial process but rather to the concept of the administration of social justice: improving the condition of the impoverished, rescuing the oppressed from the oppressor, upholding the rights of the weak and needy.”⁹ Such expected *mišpāt*, which included the proper administration of justice for the poor and others in need, appears

to have been seriously lacking among some, and probably many, of Jehovah's covenant people at the time of Isaiah. This general background provides a context to better understand the passages in the book of Isaiah that mention the poor.

Hebrew Words Meaning "Poor" in the Book of Isaiah

Several Hebrew words, occurring in singular and plural forms, are translated "poor" and "needy" in the KJV and in most other English Bibles. Some of these are more common in one biblical genre than in others. They share a related semantic field, and various nuances are connoted by each of these terms, too many to fully explore here.¹⁰

However, in brief, the three Hebrew words in the book of Isaiah that are commonly translated "poor" or "needy" are *'ebyôn* (plural *'ebyônîm*), which has been defined as meaning "economically or legally distressed; destitute; beggar"; *dal* (plural *dallîm*), which has been defined as meaning "poor; weak, inferior; lacking," often designating a "beleaguered peasant farmer"; and *'ānî* (plural, *'ānîyîm*), which has been defined as meaning "economically poor; oppressed, exploited; suffering."¹¹ These meanings are based on the etymology of each word combined with their actual biblical usage.

Because the meanings and usage of these words sometimes overlap, some passages contain more than one of these terms, potentially providing nuance, emphasis, or poetic variety. Each of these three Hebrew words used in poetic passages in Isaiah, for example, occurs in parallel with one of the others. In such cases, Bible translators often render these words "poor" and "needy," to avoid rendering "poor" and "poor" in the same verse in English. Thus, in Isaiah 25:4, "thou hast been a strength to the poor [*dal*], a strength to the needy [*'ebyôn*]" (see similarly, with plural forms, in Isaiah 14:30). Isaiah 26:6 reads, "even the feet of the poor [*'ānî*], and the steps of the needy [*dallîm*]" (see those terms in reverse order in Isaiah 10:2). And in Isaiah 41:17, "the poor [*'ānîyîm*] and needy [*'ebyônîm*] seek water." So, depending on the

passage, there may be intended subtleties in the use of these different words, detectable or not by us; there may be examples of hendiadys (two nouns joined with a conjunction rather than one noun and a modifier; e.g., “the poor and needy” versus “the needy poor”); or there may just be examples of literary variety.¹² More specific discussion is beyond the scope of this paper, but this overview of Hebrew words used to designate the poor in the book of Isaiah helps in assessing what this major prophetic book teaches about the poor and about the Lord’s expectations for their care. For those who are interested, the passages quoted below include in brackets the transliterated Hebrew words just reviewed.

Passages Specifically Mentioning the “Poor” in Isaiah

Condemnation of abuse

Passages in the book of Isaiah that specifically refer to the poor and needy (as well as in other prophetic literature in the Bible), generally fall into two broad categories. The first of these is condemnation of Israelites who mistreated and took advantage of other Israelites, thus generating or perpetuating poverty and want.

For example, in Isaiah 3 Jehovah pointedly says through Isaiah, “The LORD will enter into judgment [*mišpāt*] with the ancients [= leading elders] of his people, and the princes thereof: for ye have eaten up the vineyard; the spoil of the poor [*‘ānî*] is in your houses. What mean ye that ye beat my people to pieces, and grind the faces of the poor [*‘ānîyîm*]? saith the Lord GOD of hosts” (Isaiah 3:14–15; cf. Amos 2:6–7; 4:1).¹³

The opening verses of chapter 3 (1–7) announce judgment against Judahite leaders, while verses 8–15 provide the explanation for this punishment, including the fact that corrupt leaders have inflicted abusive practices on the poor. Verse 14 collectively mentions the “spoil of the poor,” with *‘ānî* connoting those people who were not just

economically poor, but were oppressed and exploited by more powerful and influential leaders. It was obvious who the guilty oppressors were, since “the spoil of the poor [*‘ānî*]” they had acquired was in their own houses. The Hebrew noun translated “spoil” in the KJV is from the lexical root *g-z-l*, which means “to seize, rob,” signifying what was plundered or looted from the poor.¹⁴

Also, the recurrence of the noun *‘ānî* (*‘ānîyîm*) in verse 15 reinforces the notion of intentional abuse against the oppressed poor. The Lord rhetorically asks the oppressing ones, “What mean ye that ye beat [or crush] my people to pieces, and grind the faces of the poor [*‘ānîyîm*]?” Grinding their faces figuratively suggests the poor were walked on, with their faces pushed into the dust. This indictment of (some of) Judah’s leaders condemns the arrogance and corruption of the rich and powerful who took unjust advantage of the powerless, hardly what Jehovah expected among this covenant people.

Similarly, Isaiah 5:7b–8 announces, “he [Jehovah] looked for judgment [*mišpāt*, “justice”], but behold oppression; for righteousness, but behold a cry. Woe unto them that join house to house, that lay field to field, till there be no place, that they may be placed alone in the midst of the earth!” (Isaiah 5:8).

Isaiah 5:1–7 presents a reproving parable that communicates the lack of just judgment and the oppression of some Judahites, culminating in the poignant sentiment that Jehovah looked for justice and righteousness, but found “oppression” and cries of distress instead. Even though words meaning “poor” are not included in Isaiah 5:8, the phrases in this verse—“that join house to house, that lay field to field”—are regularly interpreted as an indictment of rich estate owners who acquired property at the expense of the poor.¹⁵

These actions had theological as well as practical implications. Practically speaking, subsistence farming families needed their property to support themselves. Moreover, the Israelites believed the land of Canaan/Israel belonged to Jehovah. He was the divine land-Lord. As such, he had directed which tribes were to inherit which portions of the land (Numbers 36:2; Joshua 13:6; 18:6, 10). These allotments

were subsequently divided up among the clans and extended families in each tribe. And by divine decree, a family's property was supposed to stay in that family.¹⁶ The corrupt acquisition of other families' property, condemned in Isaiah 5:8, was against Jehovah's will, and it deprived poorer Israelites of a place to live, farm, provide for themselves, and, ultimately, a sense of self-worth.

Sadly, exploitive and oppressive practices were not limited to estate owners and other wealthy Judahites. Despite Mosaic law to the contrary (e.g., Exodus 23:6–8; Deuteronomy 1:16–18), several passages in the book of Isaiah indicate the poor were also taken advantage of in legal proceedings involving conspiracy, bribery, false witnesses, and other forms of corruption. General critiques of these practices are found in the following two passages:

Thy princes are rebellious, and companions of thieves: every one loveth gifts [i.e., bribes], and followeth after rewards: they judge not the fatherless, neither doth the cause of the widow come unto them. (Isaiah 1:23)

Ah, you who are heroes in drinking wine and valiant at mixing drink, who acquit the guilty for a bribe, and deprive the innocent of their rights! (Isaiah 5:22–23 NRSV)

Again, some "princes" and other officials are here condemned for abusing the powerless and less fortunate in Judahite society, preferring bribes and drinking to excess over displaying compassion for widows, orphans, and other Israelites who were not part of their privileged circles. Elsewhere in Isaiah, corrupt Israelite leaders are metaphorically derided as "greedy dogs which can never have enough . . . : they all look to their own way, every one for his gain" (Isaiah 56:11).

While it may be assumed that at least some of the poor were the recipients of the unrighteous actions mentioned in the passages just quoted, the following passage makes this connection explicit: "Woe unto them that decree unrighteous decrees, and that write grievousness which they have prescribed; to turn aside the needy [*dallim*] from

judgment, and to take away the right [*mišpāt*] from the poor [*‘āniyyēy*] of my people, that widows may be their prey, and that they may rob the fatherless!” (Isaiah 10:1–2).

The Hebrew word *dal* (here plural, *dallim*) in Isaiah 10:2, translated as “needy” in the KJV, connotes the poor in general, especially those in the subsistence class. The accusation here is that the poor were turned aside or kept from just and fair consideration in legal matters, that there was respect of persons. The next phrase essentially reiterates this concept: the rights of “the poor [*‘āniyyēy*] of my people” were being taken away (KJV) or robbed from them by corrupt leaders (the Hebrew verb is *g-z-l*; see above at Isaiah 3:14; 5:23). As previously noted in relation to Isaiah 3:14–15, the plural form of *‘ānî* in 10:2 connotes people who were economically poor because of the exploitation they experienced at the hands of more powerful and less caring individuals. The accompanying accusations in 10:2 make this evident.¹⁷ Finally, this verse suggests that “widows” and “the fatherless” were often among “the poor.” People who had little were thus robbed by people who already had much. Therefore, some of Judah’s officials and elders were pointedly condemned in the book of Isaiah, since payments and partiality appear to have often replaced the just dealings expected by Jehovah among his covenant people.¹⁸

Another important passage in this category of texts condemning the victimization of the poor is Jehovah’s well-known rebuke of Judahites who were “going through the motions” of fasting but abusing the intent of the fast:

Wherefore have we [Israelites] fasted, say they, and thou [Jehovah] seest not? wherefore have we afflicted our soul, and thou takest no knowledge? Behold [says Jehovah], in the day of your fast ye [Israelites] find pleasure, and exact all your labours. Behold, ye fast for strife and debate, and to smite with the fist of wickedness. . . . Is it such a fast that I have chosen? . . . Is not this the fast that I have chosen? to loose the bands of wickedness, to undo the heavy burdens, and to let

the oppressed go free, and that ye break every yoke? Is it not to deal thy bread to the hungry, and that thou bring the poor [*‘ānīyim*] that are cast out [in]to thy house? when thou seest the naked, that thou cover him; and that thou hide not thyself from thine own flesh? (Isaiah 58:3–7)

Rather than smiting fellow Israelites “with the fist of wickedness,” Jehovah expected ancient Israelites, as part of their fasting and covenant keeping, to reach out with compassion and generosity to the poor and needy among them. After condemning those who engaged in the religious act of fasting for their personal gain (“we have afflicted our soul”), Jehovah instructed what constituted an acceptable fast: one that was enjoined to compassionately assist “the poor [*‘ānīyim*]”—those who had been exploited and oppressed—and others with related needs. There is no evidence that ancient Israelites gave a regular, formal “fast offering,” as Latter-day Saints are encouraged to do in this dispensation. However, this passage emphasizes that “real” religion was more than just ritual action. Rather, it involved looking outward and included providing assistance to the poor and needy.

The conditions and the concerns expressed in Isaiah 58:3–7 and the other passages reviewed above demonstrate some Judahites’ lack of covenant commitment to Jehovah. Social apathy, greed, exploitation of the powerless, and otherwise unjust social actions produced hardships and grief in the lives of many poor and needy Judahites. The poor thus experienced a serious lack of covenant compassion.

Some Israelites, no doubt, brought impoverished conditions upon themselves through regrettable choices, such as idleness or an excessive lifestyle.¹⁹ However, this situation is *not* the focus in the book of Isaiah, which blames and denounces the unrighteous rich and powerful for the socioeconomic problems in Judah, including poverty. Thus, “like Amos, Isaiah viewed poverty as the creation of the wealthy.”²⁰

A final passage to review in this category of condemning the abuse of the poor is Isaiah 32:6–7: “For the vile person will speak

villany, and his heart will work iniquity, to practise hypocrisy, and to utter error against the LORD, to make empty the soul of the hungry, and he will cause the drink of the thirsty to fail. The instruments also of the churl [= villain, scoundrel] are evil: he deviseth wicked devices to destroy the poor [*ʿāniwwim*] with lying words, even when the needy [*ʿebyôn*] speaketh right” (Isaiah 32:6–7).

The Hebrew word *ʿāniwwim*, semantically related to *ʿāni*, is often connected with the lexical root *ʿ-ṇ-ṇ*, with the sense of “bowed down,” thus meaning in this passage those who are oppressed by others.²¹ It occurs in parallel with the Hebrew word *ʿebyôn*, here translated “needy,” which, as mentioned above, generally connotes “economically or legally distressed; destitute.” Isaiah 32:6–7 does not specifically mention Judah’s leaders and thus may be directed more broadly at more members of Judahite society. However, the references to “vile” people who “speak villany, and . . . lying words” against the poor, even when they are in the “right,” are reminiscent of the accusations against some Judahite officials in Isaiah 1:23; 5:22–23; and 10:1–2, all cited above.

Isaiah 32:6–7 actually occurs in a larger passage (32:1–8) that describes how a future ideal ruler will govern with justice, and thus reverse and banish the contemptable behavior of individuals that is the focus of verses 6–7. These verses are included in this first category of passages that condemn the abuse of the poor in the book of Isaiah because these two verses focus on what were exploitive conditions in Judah contemporary with Isaiah. However, this larger passage provides a fitting segue to the second category of passages involving the poor in the book of Isaiah.

Jehovah will provide (future) help for the poor

The second major category of passages that mention the poor and needy in the book of Isaiah emphasize how Jehovah would help deliver them from oppression and want, by means of his own power *and* by sending just and compassionate rulers. These passages emphasize that “God is on the side of the powerless who trust in him.”²²

Depending on the context and content of each passage cited in this category, this divine aid can be understood to refer to Jehovah's support of the poor in antiquity, or his still future deliverance when all poverty and oppression are eliminated, or his aid across an undefined span of time.

This principle of Jehovah caring for the poor is specifically stated in Isaiah 14:30, 32: "The firstborn of the poor [*dallim*] shall feed, and the needy [*'ebyônim*] shall lie down in safety. . . . The LORD hath founded Zion, and the poor [*'āniyāy*] of his people shall trust in it."

These two verses are couched in a "burden" or judgment oracle against the Philistines (14:28–32; KJV reads "Palestina"), which contrasts the ominous consequences prophesied against them (14:29, 30b, 31) with the positive conditions to be experienced by Jehovah's people who trust in him (14:30a, 32). All three of the prominent words designating the "poor" in the book of Isaiah occur in this passage (all in the plural). Isaiah 14:30 announces that "the poor [*dallim*]" and "the needy [*'ebyônim*]" will be safely provided for, while there will be famine and destruction in Philistia. As indicated above, *dal* connotes those who were weak and poor, including subsistence farmers, and *'ebyôn* connotes those who were economically distressed and destitute. Although verse 30 does not explicitly indicate who will provide care for these needy ones, verse 32 presents the answer: "The LORD [Jehovah] hath founded Zion"; therefore, "the poor [*'āniyāy*]" of his people shall trust [or, take refuge] in it." The word *'āni* connotes those who are economically poor and oppressed. This latter term seems to function here as a general designation for all the poor, oppressed, and beleaguered among the Lord's people, including those mentioned in verse 30.

The designation "Zion" often occurs in the Old Testament as an alternative name for Jerusalem, the "city of David" and David's dynasty. And, because of Jehovah's temple there, Zion also refers to the dwelling place of Israel's God. Thus, in Isaiah 14:32, "Zion" most likely conjured images in the mind of Isaiah's audience of a Zion ideal—a city of righteousness, justice, safety, and peace—Jehovah's

ideal Jerusalem. As expressed in Isaiah 1:27, real characteristics of Zion include “judgment” (*mišpāt*, “justice”) and “righteousness.”²³

Isaiah 25:1–5 is a future-looking passage emphasizing Jehovah’s triumph over worldly powers. This chapter does not specify *when* Jehovah would or will destroy the proud and powerful of the world, other than saying he would do so “in that day” (most Latter-day Saints and many other Christians see the ultimate fulfillment in Jesus’s Second Coming and the Millennium); however, this passage does indicate the righteous will praise Jehovah for his saving power, including this exclamation in verse 4: “For thou hast been a strength to the poor [*dāl*], a strength to the needy [*’ebyôn*] in his distress, a refuge from the storm, a shadow from the heat, when the blast of the terrible ones is as a storm against the wall” (Isaiah 25:4).

The verb *to be* at the beginning of verse 4—rendered in the past tense in the KJV—depicts the perspective of someone in the ideal future looking back at the “wonderful things” Jehovah has done (verse 1), including that his sustaining influence has been with the afflicted, including the poor. Since *dāl* and *’ebyôn* appear in poetic parallel, it is hard to know if they are used in a general, synonymous way, or if some nuance about the types of poor is intended. Either way, collectively, the poor are promised a future reversal of their ill fortunes if they trust in Jehovah.

In the book of Isaiah the theme of Jehovah’s judgment against the proud and wicked is not limited to Israel’s enemies. Based on his binding covenant relationship with them, Jehovah also promised to overthrow sinful Israelites themselves but then to mercifully provide restoration and redemption for the faithful among them or their descendants (see, for example, Isaiah 1:24–27). Although such judgment can certainly be interpreted as having come upon the kingdom Judah in Isaiah’s lifetime, in 701 BC when the Assyrians caused great destruction throughout the kingdom (e.g., Isaiah 1:4–9), the language in most of these Isaiah passages alludes, for *complete* fulfillment, to a future time when *ideal* conditions would follow destruction.

With this understanding, some of the passages that mention the poor look to a righteous future ruler descended from David. Although commentators differ on when such passages have been or will be fulfilled, and by whom, as noted above such passages are often interpreted by some Christians, including many Latter-day Saints, as prophecies of the Second Coming of Jesus Christ and his millennial reign on earth. So, for example, “And there shall come forth a rod out of the stem of Jesse, and a Branch shall grow out of his roots: and the spirit of the LORD shall rest upon him, the spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and might; . . . with righteousness shall he judge the poor [*dallim*], and reprove with equity for the meek of the earth: . . . and righteousness shall be the girdle of his loins, and faithfulness the girdle of his reins” (Isaiah 11:1–2, 4–5; cf. 2 Nephi 30:9; Doctrine and Covenants 113:1–2; Jeremiah 23:5–6).

This messianic prophecy emphasizes that this “Branch” will, using the Lord’s spirit (Isaiah 11:2) and in the fear of the Lord (verse 3), judge the poor with “righteousness” (verse 4). These attributes stand in contrast to the bribery, false witnesses, and other forms of corruption and exploitation at the expense of the poor evident among at least some of Judah’s officials in the days of Isaiah. Even though it is presented as future assistance to future poor, it is likely that the word *dallim* was originally intended here, as elsewhere, to indicate poor, weak, and distressed Israelites, often the impoverished subsistence farmers.²⁴ At least *in this passage* there is no indication that poverty will be fully eliminated by this righteous ruler (ultimately Jesus Christ, according to Latter-day Saints), at least initially, but the poor will be treated fairly and justly.

Other passages in this category that suggest future help for the poor, such as Isaiah 26:4–6, envision that deliverance will produce a reversal of fortunes for the poor *and* for the proud, with the result that the poor will have great cause to rejoice. “Trust ye in the LORD for ever: . . . for he bringeth down them that dwell on high; the lofty city, he layeth it low; . . . the foot shall tread it down, even the feet of the **poor** [*‘āni*], and the steps of the **needy** [*dallim*]” (Isaiah 26:4–6).

These verses are part of a larger “song” of praise and thanksgiving (26:1–6). They specifically indicate that not only will the proud be brought low by Jehovah, but that “the feet of the poor [*‘āni*], and the steps of the needy [*dallīm*]” will “tread [or, trample] upon it”; that is, on the “lofty city” and all it represents (verse 5). This in contrast to the “strong city” of the righteous, presumably Jerusalem, mentioned in verse 1. The word *‘āni* usually connotes the oppressed and exploited who became economically poor. So the future reversal proclaimed in this passage seems to represent, conceptually, a contrast with the content of Isaiah 3:15, reviewed above, in which powerful Judahites were condemned because they “beat my people to pieces, and grind the faces of the poor [*‘āniyīm*].”

A last passage in this category of deliverance of the poor is perhaps more familiar to Latter-day Saints because of the expanded commentary on Isaiah 29 found in 2 Nephi 27:²⁵ “And in that day shall the deaf hear the words of the book, and the eyes of the blind shall see out of obscurity, and out of darkness. The meek [*‘āniwwīm*] also shall increase their joy in the LORD, and the poor [*‘ebyônēy*] among men shall rejoice in the Holy One of Israel. For the terrible one [ruthless, tyrannical person] is brought to nought, . . . and all that watch for iniquity are cut off” (Isaiah 29:18–20; cf. 14:30–32; 2 Nephi 27:29–31).

This passage is part of a larger text in chapter 29 that alternates pronouncements of woe and redemption (see “woe” in verses 1 and 15). Following judgments against Judahites who attempt to hide their doings from the Lord and others (verses 15–16; differently interpreted by different commentators), verses 17–21 prophesy an overturning of the proud and corrupt by Jehovah, who will (finally) reverse the exploitation of the oppressed and downtrodden, providing comfort and care and an opportunity for them to flourish. The meek and the poor, or the lowly and the destitute, will have good reason to rejoice in Jehovah, “the Holy One of Israel.”²⁶

Finally, one interesting subset of prophecies about the poor in the future, at least from the vantage point of Isaiah’s more immediate

future, is found in Isaiah 40–55 (these prophecies are “future” if one accepts that these chapters derive from Isaiah around 700 BC; but not if one accepts these chapters are products of a “second” Isaiah in the 500s). As commonly interpreted, these chapters appear to be directed to Judahites deported to and eventually returning from Babylonia, and Jehovah’s encouraging promises to restore them or their posterity to their own land (e.g., Isaiah 40:1–2; 48:20).²⁷

Thus the “poor” in the following two passages were originally envisioned as upper-class Judahites themselves who went into Babylonian exile in 597, 586, and 582 BC (it was primarily upper-class individuals who were deported when the Babylonians conquered smaller kingdoms, not a broad cross-section of a society). They then figuratively became the poor and needy in their own deported circumstances. Jehovah promised to comfort and provide for them as they returned to Jerusalem and Judah.

When the poor [*‘āniyîm*] and needy [*‘ebyônîm*] seek water, and there is none, and their tongue faileth for thirst, I the LORD will hear them, I the God of Israel will not forsake them. (Isaiah 41:17)

Sing, O heavens; and be joyful, O earth; and break forth into singing, O mountains: for the LORD hath comforted his people, and will have mercy upon his afflicted [*‘āniyāw*]. (Isaiah 49:13)

Both of these verses contain a form of *‘ānî*, conceptually linking them to the passages about economically oppressed Israelites living in the kingdom of Judah, reviewed above, despite the fact that it is possible that most of these deported, upper-class Judahites were not as destitute in exile as their poor fellow Israelites had been back home in the days of Isaiah (see above for comments on the combination “the poor and needy”).²⁸

Summary and Conclusion

Based on the analysis of the passages reviewed above, one may indeed conclude “great are the words of Isaiah” (3 Nephi 23:1).

By way of summary, the book of Isaiah squarely places the blame for poverty and suffering among Jehovah’s covenant people in ancient Judah on those who had riches, power, and privilege, not on the poor themselves. Social injustices, including the mistreatment of the poor, were a form of covenant violation and brought the just judgments of Jehovah upon Israel in the north (via the Assyrians in the 730s–720s BC) and then later upon Judah in the south (via the Assyrians, 701; the Babylonians, 590s–580s). The covenantal dimension of these violations is evident in part in Jehovah’s use of the designation “my people,” which many times in the Old Testament refers to faithful Israelites. The phrase “my people” occurs in relation to the poor in Isaiah 3:15 and 10:2, and “his people” occurs in 3:14; 14:32; 49:13, all discussed above.

Additionally, in all these passages in the book of Isaiah, the words meaning “poor” designate a physical status and socioeconomic plight. The poor were economically impoverished and were seemingly powerless to alter their own circumstances.²⁹ Isaiah did “not portray the poor as people who are especially close to God because of their exploitation. The poor are victims.”³⁰ In this light, the oppression and exploitation of the poor was decried by Jehovah, and by his prophet Isaiah, as violations of the covenant between Jehovah and his people Israel (of course, even the poor were expected to honor their covenant with Jehovah).

Finally, the book of Isaiah teaches that Jehovah strengthens the *faithful* poor during their afflictions (Isaiah 30:18; cf. Psalm 22:24) and provides hope that in a future age, following divine judgment and the establishment of an ideal righteous ruler, all the wrongs that the poor have endured will be righted (Isaiah 11:1–5; 14:30, 29:18–20; 32; 32:6–7).

The cumulative effect of the Isaiah passages that mention the poor is that while awaiting the ideal ruler to arrive, upon whom “the spirit of the LORD shall rest . . . [and] with righteousness shall he judge the poor [*dallim*]” (Isaiah 11:2, 4), Latter-day Saints, as latter-day covenant Israelites, share in the responsibility to do what is possible in a “covenant of compassion” to assist the poor and vulnerable in this time period. Jehovah still cares about the poor³¹ and still condemns those who propagate poverty and exploit the needy.

What can Latter-day Saints do to help diminish the crushing reality of poverty for so many people around the world today? Although individuals may take somewhat different approaches to achieving the goal of aiding the poor, the passages from the book of Isaiah cited above provide a good starting point. Those who have entered into a covenant with Jehovah can

- ensure that “the spoil of the poor [*āni*]” is not found in their houses (Isaiah 3:14),
- work to ensure that there is not a situation where “there be no place” for the poor to live (Isaiah 5:8),
- oppose those who devise “wicked devices to destroy the poor [*āniwīwim*] with lying words (Isaiah 32:7),
- pray and fast to “undo the heavy burdens” of the poor (Isaiah 58:6),
- “deal thy bread to the hungry, and [see] that thou bring the poor [*āniyim*] that are cast out [in]to thy house” (Isaiah 58:7), and
- work in harmony with the Lord and others to establish Zion, because “the Lord hath founded Zion, and the poor [*āniyāy*] of his people shall trust in it” (Isaiah 14:32).

Thus, the concept expressed in the physicians’ promise, “first do no harm,” represents only part of the Lord’s expectations regarding the poor. Positive actions are required to compassionately fulfill one’s covenant with God and to help found Zion.

This last point about the poor trusting in Zion is, after all, the goal of every divinely initiated covenant community. Jehovah's people are called to (attempt to) live Zion-like ideals: to be of "one heart and one mind," to dwell in righteousness, to have "no poor among them," and to live according to "peace, justice, and truth" (Moses 7:18, 31; see also Alma 1:27; 4 Nephi 1:2–3). Most of these attributes are mentioned in the Isaiah passages discussed above. Thus, it is no surprise that Jehovah has instructed his covenant followers in this dispensation "to bring forth and establish the cause of Zion" (D&C 6:6; 11:6).

By pursuing Zion in their lives now, Latter-day Saints can compassionately fulfill an important dimension of their covenant with the Lord by caring for the poor and needy and those who are otherwise oppressed. Thus, for Latter-day Saints who are "trying to be like Jesus," the attributes of Jehovah, who is Jesus Christ, are worthy of emulation: "For you [Jehovah] have been a refuge to the poor [*dāl*], a refuge to the needy [*ebyôn*] in their distress, a shelter from the rain-storm and a shade from the heat." (Isaiah 25:4 NRSV)

Notes

1. I thank my wife, Jane Allis-Pike, and the anonymous reviewers who read and responded to previous drafts of this paper.
2. I am not aware of another review of passages focusing on the poor in the book of Isaiah by a Latter-day Saint author. Some Latter-day Saints have published books on the book of Isaiah as a whole, which are worth consulting, including Victor L. Ludlow, *Isaiah: Prophet, Seer, and Poet* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1982); and Donald W. Parry, Jay A. Parry, and Tina M. Peterson, *Understanding Isaiah* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1998).
3. See, for example, Genesis 15; 17; Exodus 19. See also the comments of John Goldingay, "Covenant, OT and NT," in *The New Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*, vol. 1, ed. Katharine Doob Sakenfeld et al. (2006; Accordance edition 1.2), especially subparts D and E.

4. Unless otherwise noted, quotations from the Bible in this paper are taken from the King James Version of the Bible (KJV).
5. Since the issues highlighted in Isaiah often have parallels in other Old Testament prophetic passages, as well as in biblical legal, psalmic, and wisdom texts, occasional citations to some of them are also provided below. For additional information on poverty, as well as on other social challenges, in the Old Testament, see, for example, the other papers in this volume and these representative titles, some of which were expressly written to encourage Bible readers to do more to actively assist those in need: Daniel C. Juster, *Social Justice: The Bible and Applications for Our Times* (Clarksville, MD: Messianic Jewish Publishers, 2019); Cynthia Long Westfall and Bryan R. Dryer, eds., *The Bible and Social Justice, Old Testament and New Testament Foundations for the Church's Urgent Call* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2015); Richard A. Horsley, *Covenant Economics: A Biblical Vision of Justice for All* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 2009); Walter J. Houston, *Contending for Justice, Ideologies and Theologies of Social Justice in the Old Testament* (New York: T & T Clark, 2006); Leslie J. Hoppe, *There Shall Be No Poor among You: Poverty in the Bible* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2004); Christopher J. H. Wright, *Old Testament Ethics for the People of God* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Academic, 2004); Craig L. Blomberg, *Neither Poverty nor Riches: A Biblical Theology of Material Possessions* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1999); Bruce V. Malchow, *Social Justice in the Hebrew Bible, What Is New and What Is Old* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1996); Moshe Weinfeld, *Social Justice in Ancient Israel and in the Ancient Near East* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1995).
6. There is a long-running debate concerning when various portions of the book of Isaiah were initially written. The historical figure Isaiah prophesied primarily during the reigns of Ahaz and Hezekiah, kings of Judah (ca. 735–687 BC), and traditionally all 66 chapters of the book of Isaiah have been attributed to him. However, given that chapters 40–55 appear to presuppose the Judahite exile to and return from Babylonia in the 500s BC, and for other reasons, most scholars now posit that an anonymous “Second Isaiah” wrote chapters 40–66, and some posit that a different anonymous “Third Isaiah” wrote chapters 56–66. It is thus possible, depending on

one's views, that some of the teachings of "Isaiah" about the "poor" are from more than one person and from more than one century. Since space does not permit further discussion here of the possible multiple authorship of the book of Isaiah, this paper deals with Isaianic passages as they occur in the canonical book of Isaiah. Furthermore, see the following for how some Latter-day Saints have recently dealt with this topic: Jeffrey R. Chadwick, "The Insight of Third Isaiah: Observations of a Traditionalist," in *The Unperceived Continuity of Isaiah*, ed. James H. Charlesworth (New York: T&T Clark, 2019), 76–93; and Kent P. Jackson, "Isaiah in the Book of Mormon," in *A Reason for Faith: Navigating LDS Doctrine and Church History*, ed. Laura Harris Hales (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University; Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2016), 69–78.

7. For a summary of this time period, see, for example, Richard Neitzel Holzapfel, Dana M. Pike, and David Rolph Seely, *Jehovah and the World of the Old Testament* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2009), 276–83.
8. See, for example, William G. Dever, *The Lives of Ordinary People in Ancient Israel: Where Archaeology and the Bible Intersect* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2012), 206, who states, "The bulk of the population of Israel and Judah in the 8th century B.C.E. lived in rural villages and towns."
9. The output of the robust Israelite economies in the first major portion of the eighth century was primarily enjoyed by wealthy estate owners and leaders comprising the small upper class. Merchants and artisans benefited, too, but there was never much of a middle-class in ancient Israel. And Israelites who lived in cities could also fall victim to debt and poverty. For more on life in the two Israelite kingdoms in the eighth century BC, see, for example, Dever, *The Lives of Ordinary People in Ancient Israel*, 142–205. See also, Hoppe, *No Poor among You*, 8–12; and Philip J. King and Lawrence E. Stager, *Life in Biblical Israel* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2001), 192–94. The book of Ruth, depicting life in an earlier century, provides a representative account of one family's troubles (cf. Exodus 23:11; Psalms 25:16; 70:5).
10. Barry L. Eichler, review of *Social Justice in Ancient Israel and in the Ancient Near East*, by Moshe Weinfeld, *Jewish Quarterly Review* 89, nos. 1–2 (July–October 1998): 187. See similar comments in Malchow, *Social Justice in the*

Hebrew Bible, 16–17. See also Ludwig Koehler and Walter Baumgartner, *The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament*, trans. and ed. M. E. J. Richardson (Leiden: Brill, 2000); hereafter abbreviated *HALOT*, s.v. *mišpāt*; and this statement from Anders Runesson, “Judgment,” in *The New Interpreter’s Dictionary of the Bible*, vol. 3, ed. Katharine Doob Sakenfeld et al. (2008; Accordance edition 1.2), subpart A: “The overwhelming majority of texts [in the Old Testament mentioning judgment], however, depict the God of Israel as representing the highest form of righteous rule and impartial judgment. God’s judgment protects, in particular, the poor, the innocent, orphans, widows, day laborers, and immigrants. . . . Judgment means vindication and liberation for the oppressed and destitute.”

11. For greater detail on all such words for “poor” in the Hebrew Bible, see the extensive discussion by J. David Pleins, “Poor, Poverty, Old Testament,” in *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, ed. David Noel Freedman (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 402–14.
12. For these meanings, see Pleins, “Poor, Poverty, Old Testament,” 403, 405, 408; and Malchow, *Social Justice in the Hebrew Bible*, 12–13, who references Pleins for the meanings he uses. See also the pertinent entries in *HALOT*. Regarding *’ānī*, the related Hebrew noun *’ōnī* designates the condition of being oppressed and is variably translated as affliction, trouble, distress, misery. See, for example, Exodus 4:31; Isaiah 48:10.
13. Although not the focus of this paper, the combination the Hebrew words *’ānī* (“poor” in the KJV) and *’ebyōn* (“needy”) in parallel phrases occurs multiple times in Psalms (e.g., 35:10; 72:4), as do occurrences in which they are juxtaposed in the same phrase as “the poor [*’ānī*] and needy [*’ebyōn*]” (Psalms 37:14; and e.g., 40:17; 70:5; 74:21). This may be a hendiadys and stock phrase to designate all the poor. Then, again, Psalm 72:13 reads, “He shall spare the poor [*dal*] and needy [*’ebyōn*],” which the ESV renders as “the weak and the needy.”
14. The phrase “the Lord” is the English substitution for the divine name *yhwh*, which in Hebrew is thought to have been pronounced Yahweh. “Jehovah” is a hybrid form of the consonants *yhwh* and the vowels of the Hebrew word translated “lord.” See Dana M. Pike, “The Name and Titles

- of God in the Old Testament," *Religious Educator* 11, no. 1 (2010): 17–31, especially 19–21.
15. See HALOT, s.v. *gzlh*.
 16. See, for example, NET Bible Notes, 2nd ed, n. 17, s.v. Isaiah 5:8. In Micah 2:1–2, Isaiah's contemporary Judahite prophet Micah had something even more explicit to say about this situation (cf. Proverbs 30:14).
 17. See Numbers 27:5–11; cf. Numbers 36:1–13; Leviticus 25:25–28; and the reply of Naboth to King Ahab in 1 Kings 21:1–4.
 18. The social setting for much of these corrupt activities was likely the gates of cities or towns, since gates and their surrounding areas were important locations for commerce, communication, and where local elders and other leaders would hear and render judgment on legal disputes (e.g., Deuteronomy 16:18–20). Ruth 4:1–12 recounts the story of Boaz at Bethlehem's gate with its elders.
 19. The story of Naboth, Ahab, and Jezebel provides a classic illustration of this type of corruption in the northern kingdom a century or so before Isaiah (1 Kings 21:1–16). Other prophetic books contain similar sentiments to those expressed in Isaiah (see, for example, Amos 5:12; 8:4; Micah 2:1–2; 3:1–4, 9–12; Jeremiah 2:34; 5:26–29).
 20. See statements to this effect in the book of Proverbs (e.g., Proverbs 6:6–11; 10:4; 21:17), which belongs to the genre designated "wisdom literature." For more on wisdom literature, see Holzapfel, Pike, and Seely, *Jehovah and the World of the Old Testament*, 238–45.
 21. Hoppe, *No Poor among You*, 73. Similar sentiments are expressed elsewhere in the Old Testament and in the Book of Mormon. See, for example, 2 Nephi 9:30; Helaman 4:12.
 22. See HALOT, s.v. "n-n." Malchow, *Social Justice in the Hebrew Bible*, 13, describes 'āniwwim as "a linguistic variant of 'āni. It has the same connotations of material want and oppression."
 23. John N. Oswalt, *The Book of Isaiah, Chapters 1–39* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1986), 537.
 24. For a more complete description of the occurrences and use of "Zion" in the Old Testament, see, for example, J. J. M. Roberts, "Zion Tradition," and W. H. Bellinger Jr., "Zion," in *The New Interpreter's Dictionary of the*

Bible, vol. 5, ed. Katharine Doob Sakenfeld et al. (2009; Accordance edition 1.2). And for further discussion of the issues of interpretation of this whole passage, Isaiah 14:28–32, see, for example, Oswalt, *Book of Isaiah, Chapters 1–39*, 605–6.

25. See, for example, the NET Bible rendition of 11:4: “He will treat the poor fairly, and make right decisions for the downtrodden of the earth.”
26. Not surprisingly, members of other faiths do not understand the “book” in question to be the Book of Mormon, as is generally accepted by Latter-day Saints. See, for example, <https://churchofjesuschrist.org/study/scriptures/gs/book-of-mormon>.
27. The word *ʾāniwwim*, translated “meek” in this verse and rendered “poor” in Isaiah 32:7 (KJV; mentioned above), is sometimes translated “downtrodden” in 29:19 (e.g., NET Bible). Again, see HALOT, s.v. “-n-n,” which suggests the sense of “bowed, dejected,” when people are in oppressed circumstances, and “humble, pious,” when people are worshipping Jehovah.
28. See this generally accepted interpretive approach in, for example, Pleins, “Poor, Poverty, Old Testament,” 408–9; Hoppe, *No Poor among You*, 96–97; and the *English Standard Version Study Bible* (ESV; 2008; Accordance version 2.0), s.v. Isaiah 40:1: “The assumed addressees in these chapters [Isaiah 40–55] are the exiles in Babylonian captivity; . . . Isaiah’s perspective moves forward from his own eighth-century setting to the Jews’ sixth-century exile predicted in 39:5–7.”
29. Two different exceptions to what has been reviewed above are cited here:
 1. Isaiah 51:17–22 and 54:11 each contain a form of *ʾāni*, and each prophesy a rescue and renewal of Jerusalem/Zion. Often understood as applying to Jerusalem at the end of Babylonian sovereignty, these may be best understood as having multiple applications. Either way, since it is Jerusalem that is figuratively designated as *ʾāni* (translated in the KJV as “afflicted”), these two passages are not further discussed here.
 2. The book of Isaiah contains one passage in which the word translated “poor” may be intended with a spiritual rather than a physical, economic sense. In Isaiah 66 the Lord reminds Israelites that he does not just want their external markers of worship, but their hearts as well, including this claim: “to this man will I look, even to him that is poor [*ʾāni*] and of a

contrite spirit, and trembleth at my word” (Isaiah 66:2). The word *ʿānî* in this passage is often rendered in modern English translations as “humble” (e.g., ESV, NET), in order to better capture its connotation in combination with “contrite spirit” and trembling at the word of Jehovah. The sense of humility is possible, since *ʿānî* derives from a lexical root, the verb of which means “to be or become oppressed, wretched, bowed down, humiliated” (see *HALOT*, s.v. *ʿ-ṇ-ḥ* II). And there are some uses of the noun *ʿānî* elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible that suggest humility rather than economic poverty (e.g., Psalm 18:27 [28 in Hebrew; KJV, “afflicted”]; Zephaniah 3:12 [*ʿānî* and *dāl*; KJV, “afflicted and poor”; ESV, “humble and lowly”]; Zechariah 9:9 [KJV, “lowly”]; cf. Matthew 5:3). In several such biblical passages there is disagreement on whether “poor” designates an economic poverty or a spiritual condition of humility. However, this use of *ʿānî* in Isaiah 66:2, in combination with “contrite spirit,” is generally understood as an isolated example in the book of *Isaiah* of “poor” having a spiritual connotation, indicating humility.

30. See for example, Hoppe, *No Poor among You*, 40.
31. Hoppe, *No Poor among You*, 102, speaks broadly about the presentation of the poor in the latter prophets, not just in Isaiah. See his similar assessment about passages in the Torah, p. 39.
32. This assertion is evident in, for example, the formal, institutional posture of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, which now has “caring for those in need” as one of its four core missions. See the Church’s 2020 *General Handbook*, §0.1. See also the remarks about this fourth mission already in 2010 by Elder Dallin H. Oaks, at <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/broadcasts/article/worldwide-leadership-training/2010/11/overview-of-the-new-handbooks>.