

## THE RELATIONSHIP OF POOR AND RICH IN JAMES

In order to see the relationship more clearly of *poor* and *rich* in James, it is necessary to examine how God used those words in the Old Testament. God, who wrote both Old and New Testament, saw fit to write the New Testament in Greek. Because it is our New Testament and written in Greek, as is James, it is even more important that the Greek meanings be taken into consideration. The context of James must be examined in light of both the Old Testament and the New Testament.

### The Old Testament Meaning of Poor and Rich

#### The Old Testament Usage of Poor

In the Old Testament there are many different words used which are translated as poor. Among them, there are four main words used, עני (58x), רל (43x), אביון (24x), and רוש (19x)<sup>1</sup>. עני is mostly described as “poor” and “afflicted.”<sup>2</sup> This word is described by Brown as being the “*poor, weak, afflicted Israel, or pious in Israel afflicted by wicked nations or the wicked in Israel itself*”<sup>3</sup>. Gesenius describes עני as being the “*wretched, poor, often with the added ideas of piety. . . meek, mild.*”<sup>4</sup> The main idea of עני is that it denotes *one who is deprived*

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<sup>1</sup> *Online Bible Hebrew Lexicon* (2000), in *Online Bible Millennium Edition* [CD-ROM] (Winterbourne, Ontario: Timnathserah, 2001).

<sup>2</sup> Francis Brown et al., *The New Brown-Driver-Briggs-Gesenius Hebrew and English Lexicon* (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson Publishers, 1979), 776; William Gesenius, *Gesenius' Hebrew and Chaldee Lexicon: To the Old Testament Scriptures* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Book House, 1979), 643; *Online Bible Hebrew Lexicon*.

<sup>3</sup> Brown, 776.

<sup>4</sup> Gesenius, 643.

of physical property, bodily strength, or peace of mind. Examples include Lev. 19:10 - those who have little physical property and Ps. 70:5 - one who needs God's strength.

The second most used word, דָּל, is commonly expressed as being "poor" or being "weak"<sup>5</sup>. Brown says that דָּל can also mean "low," "thin," "reduced," and "helpless"<sup>6</sup>. Gesenius declares this word to mean "feeble. . . powerless," "lean," and "ignoble"<sup>7</sup>. The main idea of דָּל is that of *one who is lacking physical property, bodily strength, fat, or honor*. One example is II Sam. 13:4, where it means healthiness, translated as "lean." Another example of דָּל is found in Jer. 39:10, where it refers to those who have little physical property.

The third most used word אֲבִיּוֹן, means "needy" or "poor"<sup>8</sup>. Usually this word is translated in the Bible as "needy"<sup>9</sup>. Brown says that this word means, "needing help, deliverance from trouble, esp. as delivered by God"<sup>10</sup>. Gesenius gives ideas for אֲבִיּוֹן, such as "oppressed" and "wretched"<sup>11</sup>. אֲבִיּוֹן's main idea is *one who is lacking something or someone that could help*. The poor person, in this case, needs something physical or someone to actually be there to help them. In Ps. 109:31, when it uses אֲבִיּוֹן, it shows the lack of someone, which is being fulfilled by God's saving help.

The fourth most used word, רָוַח, usually means "poor" or "poor man."<sup>12</sup> רָוַח can also mean, according to Gesenius, "to be needy," and "to suffer want."<sup>13</sup> It would seem that the main idea of this word is *extreme need*. This idea is found in Eccl. 4:14, where רָוַח is helping to

<sup>5</sup> Brown, 195; Gesenius, 199; *Online Bible Hebrew Lexicon*)

<sup>6</sup> Brown, 195.

<sup>7</sup> Gesenius, 199.

<sup>8</sup> *Online Bible Hebrew Lexicon*; Gesenius, 5; Brown, 2.

<sup>9</sup> *Online Bible Hebrew Lexicon*.

<sup>10</sup> Brown, 2.

<sup>11</sup> Gesenius, 5.

<sup>12</sup> *Online Bible Hebrew Lexicon*; Brown, 930.

<sup>13</sup> Gesenius, 763.

show a contrast between two levels of society, from captive to ruler and from having everything to having nothing (and therefore needy).

### The Old Testament Usage of Rich

There are less than half as many Hebrew words, which are translated as rich, as there are that are translated poor. The three most common words for rich in the Old Testament are עשיר (20x), עשר (14x), and הון (11x)<sup>14</sup>. עשיר usually means only “rich.”<sup>15</sup> Gesenius says that עשיר can mean both “honourable” and “noble” as well as “haughty” and “impious.”<sup>16</sup> Gesenius may have based these designations on the context of the verses since עשיר is not translated these ways out of the Hebrew. עשיר occurs only twenty-three times in the Old Testament, with twenty being translated as “rich” and three being translated as “rich man”<sup>17</sup>. The base idea behind עשיר would seem to be, *one who is full*. In II Sam. 12:2, the man is rich (עשיר) and has his “pockets full.” The question of whether being rich (עשיר) is good or bad is determined by what fills a person.

עשר usually means “rich” and “enrich.”<sup>18</sup> This word can also mean, according to Gesenius, “to prosper, to be happy,” and “to build up[Piel].”<sup>19</sup> Brown notes עשר as “make rich” and “gain riches.”<sup>20</sup> עשר's central idea is to *increase with material gain*. In Ezek.27:33, עשר describes a city that helped make others materially rich. In I Sam. 17:25, עשר is used to tell what will happen to the man that kills Goliath. He will be *enriched*.

<sup>14</sup> *Online Bible Hebrew Lexicon*.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid*.

<sup>16</sup> Gesenius, 660.

<sup>17</sup> *Online Bible Hebrew Lexicon*.

<sup>18</sup> *Online Bible Hebrew Lexicon*; Gesenius, 660.

<sup>19</sup> Gesenius, 660.

<sup>20</sup> Brown, 799.

דָּוָן usually has the idea of “rich” and “substance.”<sup>21</sup> Brown assigns it additional meanings of “wealth, sufficiency,” and “enough!”<sup>22</sup> This kind of riches(דָּוָן) is a *satisfying richness*. In Ps. 119:14, the person who possesses these satisfying riches, rejoices both in his riches and in the word of God. While both satisfy the author of Psalm 119, it is the word of God that brought the author to the satisfaction of his riches.

#### Proverbial Insight on Poor and Rich

The book of Proverbs, not being a narrative, is able to provide a deeper look at “poor” and “rich.” The wisdom of Proverbs spans everything from physical riches (Prov.10:4 - רוש, עשר) to beyond those physical riches (Prov. 13:7). This verse, Proverbs 13:7 demonstrates well the different uses of *poor* and *rich*. Proverbs 13:7 says, “There is that maketh himself rich[עשר-one who increases in material gain], yet *hath* nothing: *there is* that maketh himself poor[רוש-extreme need], yet *hath* great riches[דָּוָן-it is great enough to satisfy].” The first person, greedy in material gain, tried to get all he could, but came up wanting yet more. Because he was never satisfied, he was always “poor” in his own eyes. The poor man having little, was satisfied with the little that God had given him and thus was rich. He readily accepted the blessings God gave him, instead of being discontented.

The book of Proverbs mainly uses דָּל (one who is lacking physical property, bodily strength, fat, or honor) and רוש (extreme need) for *poor*, while עשיר (one who is full) and עשר (increase with material gain) are used for *rich*. The variety of the meanings of these four words lead to a wide variety of comparisons. Kidner believes that there should be “generosity [shown] to the poor,” referencing Prov.22:9 and Prov.29:7.<sup>23</sup> Both of these references are to דָּל

<sup>21</sup> Online Bible Hebrew Lexicon; Gesenius, 220.

<sup>22</sup> Brown, 223.

<sup>23</sup> Derek Kidner, *An Introduction to Wisdom Literature-The Wisdom of Proverbs Job and Ecclesiastes* (Downers Grove, Ill.: Intervarsity Press, 1985), 127.

(those who are lacking physical property, bodily strength, . . . or honor). Kidner’s advice fits well with the Biblical truth of giving to those who are lacking those material riches that they need. In Prov. 28:6, it says “Better *is* the poor[רש] that walketh in his uprightness, than *he that is* perverse *in his* ways, though he *be* rich[עשיר]. From this, one can see that no matter how poor a person is, as long as he walks righteously, he is better than an evil man full of riches. Each of these words has the ability to provide deeper meanings than any single word for many different situations.

## The New Testament Meaning of Poor and Rich

### The New Testament Meaning of Poor

In the New Testament there is only one main word used to denote “*poor*,” πτωχος(30x).<sup>24</sup> This word is usually used to mean “poor” or “beggarly.”<sup>25</sup> Perschbacher and Thayer give other meanings such as “reduced to beggary,” “mendicant,” and “lowly.”<sup>26</sup> Perschbacher also has other meanings for πτωχος, such as “indigent,” “spiritually poor,” and “a person of low condition.”<sup>27</sup> Thayer gives other possible meanings, such as “asking alms,” “afflicted,” and “needy.”<sup>28</sup> Thayer also gives a good overall definition of πτωχος, “destitute of wealth, influence, position, [and] honors.”<sup>29</sup> Mostly πτωχος is a general term for *a person lacking something*.

<sup>24</sup> J.B. Smith, *Greek-English Concordance: To the New Testament* (Eugene, Oreg.: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 1998), 313.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid; Wesley J. Perschbacher, *The New Analytical Greek Lexicon* (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson Publishers, 1990), 359; Henry Liddell and Robert Scott, *A Greek-English Lexicon* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996), 1550; Joseph H. Thayer, *Thayer’s Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament* (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson Publishers, 1996), 557.

<sup>26</sup> Perschbacher, 359; Thayer, 557.

<sup>27</sup> Perschbacher, 359.

<sup>28</sup> Thayer, 557.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

An example of *πτωχος* is Matt.5:3, “Blessed *are* the poor in spirit.” The type of this poorness(*πτωχος*) is designated by *spirit*. Grounds says it correctly, that “the poverty of which our Savior speaks is a consciousness of spiritual bankruptcy, an overwhelming sense that one is destitute of any claim to righteousness. It is the confession that, apart from God’s sheer munificence, one is worthless, without a penny to his credit.”<sup>30</sup> In Mark 14:5, a narrative, it is recounted that money should “have been given to the poor.” The reference is to people who are monetarily and materially poor. In Luke 16:20, *πτωχος* is used to describe the beggar Lazarus. Lazarus is described in Luke 16:20-21 as having the characteristics of being afflicted, poor, needy, and feeble. These examples show that context determines the full import of *πτωχος*

### The New Testament Meaning of Rich

There are two main words used for “rich” in the New Testament. The first is a noun, *πλουσιους*(28x) and the second is a verb, *πλουτεω* (11x). *Πλουσιος* is commonly described as “rich” and as “wealthy.”<sup>31</sup> Perschbacher gives a little bit broader picture of what this word can mean, *πλουσιος* is “rich in glory, dignity, bliss, etc.”<sup>32</sup> The main idea of *πλουσιος* is that *whatever is abounding in a person’s life is that in which they are rich*. An example of *πλουσιος* referring to physical wealth occurs often in Scripture, such as the following: Mk. 12:41; Luke 12:16; 14:12, 16:1, 19, 21-22; 18:23; 19:2; 21:1; 1 Tim. 6:17; and Rev. 3:17. Examples of rich which are not materially related are less prevalent, such as, 2 Cor. 8:9, Eph. 2:4, and Js. 2:5.

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<sup>30</sup> Vernon C. Grounds, “Mountain Manifesto,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 128 [CD-ROM] (April 1971): 137.

<sup>31</sup> Liddell and Scott, 1422; Smith, 295; Thayer, 519; Perschbacher, 333.

<sup>32</sup> Perschbacher, 333.

The word, *πλουτεω*, usually has the idea of “be rich” or “become “rich.”<sup>33</sup> Thayer describes this word as “to have abundance” and “to be richly supplied.”<sup>34</sup> Part of the idea that Thayer’s definition holds is that being rich is to have one’s needs met. While Smith does cite that the New Testament uses *πλουτεω* to refer to the physical, “be increased with goods,” *Πλουτεω* also, according to Perschbacher, can refer to the spiritual, “to be spiritually enriched”.<sup>35</sup> The main idea of this word is *to have been increased or to have been filled with something*. In Rev. 3:17, the church has been filled with material possessions. This filling has also caused the church to be rich in pride. In Rom. 10:12-13, Christ is filled with the ability to accept. Christ is rich with acceptance for those who call on Him.

## A Biblical Comparison of Poor and Rich

### Old Testament Comparison of Poor and Rich

The seven words denoting *poor* and *rich* displays to a certain extent, what God’s view of *poor* and *rich* are. It is important to remember when reading from the Bible, that *poor* or *rich* can have a deeper meaning than what one might at first think. It is definitely possible that God wants us to be both *poor* and *rich*.

God wants us to be poor in the sense that we lack enough that we will depend on Him for it. We might need to be עני while we are לך. Our lack of physical things might bring us closer to God as we depend on Him for them. He could want us to be ריש or אביון so that we are needful of His saving hand to come and help us in a time of need or desperation.

God wants us to be rich in that we are fulfilled in Him. God wants to bless us with material gain-עשר. God wants us to be full or rich in good things, such as mercy, truth, and love-

<sup>33</sup> Smith,295; Perschbacher, 333; Thayer,519; Liddell and Scott, 1423.

<sup>34</sup> Thayer, 519.

<sup>35</sup> Smith, 295; Perschbacher, 333.

עשיר. God wants us to be more than “rich.” He wants us to be satisfied with what we have-  
הון.

#### Old Testament Contrast of Rich and Poor

Although being *rich* and *poor* can point in a single direction toward godliness, they can also be opposites. Rich is having some sort of fullness, but poor is having some sort of emptiness. God does not want to make us poor spiritually(אביון), physically(רל, רוש), or emotionally(עני).

God does not want to make us rich, if we are going to be rich (עשיר) with pride. God does not want to let us be increased with material gain(עשר) if we are going to trust in that gain instead of Him. God also does not want us to be so satisfied with what we have(הון), thereby not wanting to grow in Christ. The context determines what kind of poor and rich are used. The key of *poor* and *rich* in the Old Testament is that we should be poor in evil and rich in godliness.

#### New Testament Comparison of Poor and Rich

Returning to Matt. 5:3, the people in this verse have been called by Grounds, “wealthy paupers.”<sup>36</sup> We should be poor in that spiritual poverty, and turning to God, thereby be made rich in heavenly treasure. We should be lacking pride(πτωχος), yet be abounding (πλουσιος) and filled(πλουτεω) with humility. God still wants us to strive to be poor in evil and rich in godliness, just as what can be gathered from the Old Testament. In the new testament, though, πτωχος takes the place of עני, רל, אביון, and רוש. The words πλουσιος and πλουτεω replaced עשיר and עשר, while there does not seem to be a particular replacement for הון. Luke 12:16-21, shows the unsatisfied condition of a rich(πλουσιος) man. Context plays a large part in determining how one type of poor is related to another.

#### An Evaluation of Poor and Rich in James

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<sup>36</sup> Grounds, 136.



The book of James might be a good book to discuss in relation to poor and rich because of its nature. Scott described James as being, an urging of Israel “to a life of good works as evidence of their faith in God.”<sup>37</sup> God wants us to do both “good works” out pouring from a “faith in God, whether one is rich or poor. This ground is good to evaluate *poor* and *rich*.

#### Chapter One: Rich in Relation to Poor in James

The first passage to consider *poor* and *rich* is 1:9-11. In verse nine, “the brother of low degree” represents the poor man (at least in the sense of לָדָבַר). The context would seem to indicate that it is spiritual riches that that “poor man” will receive (see v.7, 12). Hodges not only indicates there will be a “crown of life” for those “poor” people, but he also thinks that part of the “exaltation” is in the “present” time, because God is improving the “poor” through the use of “trials.”<sup>38</sup> In verse ten, the person who is rich(πλουσιος), is encouraged to rejoice also, even when he is “made low [i.e. abased].” “The natural tendency of wealth,” says Exell, “is to fill men with pride, self-confidence, [and] vainglory”.<sup>39</sup> A God fearing rich man can rejoice, remembering that he has been blessed in the past and knowing that life is transient. In verse eleven, James makes another comparison of how life is temporal, expanding on the previous verse (see also I Peter 1:24). The point drawn from these verses is that one should be thankful with what he receives, whither rich or poor, because it is transient. Poor and rich may be considered opposites here, yet neither is of much consequence.

#### Chapter Two: Poor in Relation to Rich in James

This is the only chapter that “poor” (πτωχος) actually shows up in James(4x).<sup>40</sup> This passage covers verses one to nine. Verse one brings up the subject matter, the “respect of

<sup>37</sup> Walter Scott, *The Story of Our English Bible* (Pensacola, Fla.: A Beka Book, 1995), 49.

<sup>38</sup> Zane Hodges, *The Epistle of James: Proven Character Through Testing* (Irving, Tex.: Grace Evangelical Society, 1994), 23.

<sup>39</sup> Joseph Exell, *The Biblical Illustrator* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Book House, 1954), 64.

<sup>40</sup> James Strong, *Strong's Exhaustive Concordance of the Bible* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Word Bible Publishers, 1986), 1075.

persons.” Verse two begins to tell of a contrast between someone who is “rich” and someone who is poor. Both of which are concerning material possessions. Verse three further explains the situation and how “respect of persons” comes about. Verse four incites the reader’s mind to think if they have done this sin. Verse five goes a step further. God says here that when you are having partiality against the poor, you are having partiality against those who may be brethren (i.e. “rich in faith” and “heirs of the kingdom”). Notice the contrast, physically poor but spiritually rich. In this case, they can go hand in hand; they are being like **עשיר** and **רוש** in faith. God uses verses six and seven to condemn the readers. The “richer” brethren (the readers) have maliciously treated the poor brethren, just as the ungodly rich have treated the “richer” brethren. The readers are richer than the poor believers, but those “richer” brethren should be treating the poor believers better than themselves (see Phil.2:3). The “richer” brethren are admonished to, according to verse nine, “love thy neighbour as thyself.” This includes not just the poor brethren but everyone(Luke 10:30-33). Because they believe in God, men should have these “good works” in their lives. This passage not only shows that “rich” is a relative term (v.6), but it also shows that God does not judge rich men to be better than poor men because of their riches (v.1, 4).

#### Chapter Five: Rich in Relation to Poor in James

“Rich” shows up in chapter five, once (5 : 1 – πλουσιος). This passage spreads for six verses and apparently is a condemnation on “rich men.” One might contend that the rich people here are probably based on either the typical rich man or a particular group that God is distinguishing. Hodges distinguishes them by saying, “James’s readers were afflicted with a severe case of worldly materialism.”<sup>41</sup> Each verse holds a truth about this group of rich men. The truth of how evil these men are, increase from verse to verse: material riches corrupt (v.1-

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<sup>41</sup> Hodges, 102.

2)-> rich men are testified against(v.4)-> they have lived in vanity(v.5)-> they have “killed the just”(v.6). These rich men are apparently both rich materially and rich in evilness. It might be that James is warning these rich men that if they do not turn from their ways they are going to go down the above path of wickedness. They are the epitome of being spiritually poor, having forgotten God. In this instance, they are the opposite of James 2:5, being rich physically but poor spiritually.

### Application of Poor and Rich in Today’s World

#### The Key

The Bible has several principles that should be kept in mind when dealing with the ideas of poor and rich. Neither being poor or rich materially, in itself is evil. Material property can become evil in a person’s life. While the natural tendency of rich men as seen in James chapter five might be to hoard and to be greedy, this in itself does not show the truth about physical wealth. House says, “The New Testament condemns not the possession of wealth but the wrong attitude toward it. Poor persons may often have greed whereas some rich persons may not.”<sup>42</sup>

The key is “Attitude.”

#### Keep Your Heart Right Toward Money

Another truth is that riches do not have to destroy a person’s life and spirit. An example is the “rich young ruler” in Luke 18:18-34, which Heard mentions in comparison to another rich man, Zacchaeus.<sup>43</sup> Heard says, “unlike the rich young ruler, Zaccheus [sic] responds to Jesus with joyful obedience; in fact, Zaccheus [sic] is willing to repay fourfold to any he had

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<sup>42</sup> H. Wayne House, “An Investigation of black Liberation Theology,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 139 [CD-ROM] (April-June 1982): 172.

<sup>43</sup> Warren Heard, “Luke’s Attitude Toward the Rich and the Poor,” *Trinity Journal* [CD-ROM] (Spring 1988): 71-72.

deceived.”<sup>44</sup> It is the heart and mind that can control the money flow to evil covetousness or to generous acts of goodness. The Grace of God is what needs to change the heart and keep riches in proper perspective as in James 1:9-11. It is better to not have any physical wealth if one is going to take pride in it or hoard it for himself. Exell says, “so many rich men utterly fail to realise [sic] what an opportunity wealth gives them.”<sup>45</sup> Exell also says that we should not be greedy, keeping the money hidden away for ourselves but to be givers of that money.<sup>46</sup> This agrees with the Biblical concept of Acts 20:35 and connects strongly to James 2:1-9.

### Non-Physical Riches

Non-physical riches are not nearly so neutral as material possessions. Non-physical riches are either great or terrible. To be rich in faith, love, patience, obedience, and gentleness, is to have great riches. To be poor in these is to be poor indeed. To be rich in disbelief, hatred, impulsiveness, rebellion, and violence, is to have terrible riches. To be poor in these is to have terribly good riches. Whatever fills a person is that which will guide them (עשיר).

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<sup>44</sup> Ibid., 72.

<sup>45</sup> Exell, 429

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 430.

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