

WHAT DOES “SPIRITUAL ANOINTING” HAVE TO DO WITH MINISTRY TO THE POOR?

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Abstract

The Bible employs various tactics to draw readers' attention to its message. When something new is about to happen, the clearest, direct track is sometimes preferable: "I [the LORD] am about to do a *new* thing; now it springs forth; do you not perceive it?" (Isa 43:19; emphasis mine). Similarly, in Jeremiah: "The days are surely coming, says the LORD, when I will make a *new* covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah" (Jer 31:31; emphasis mine). Another method employed by biblical writers repeats carefully chosen words to garner attention: "The LORD has done great things for them.' The LORD has done great things for us, and we rejoiced" (Ps 126:2–3). Isaiah 61 uses yet another editorial device: a unique phrase that attentive listeners would hardly miss. This article is about this third tactic, a unique phrase used to introduce Isaiah's equally unique message in chapter 61. Most Bible readers are familiar with the moment in the Gospel of Luke when Jesus began his ministry by quoting an ancient passage from Isaiah 61: "The Spirit of the LORD God is upon me, because he has anointed me. . . ." The introductory phrase surely captured attention in Isaiah's day and again hundreds of years later when Jesus repeated it when speaking about himself. Many modern readers may lack a clear understanding of what "anointing" means and may wonder why both Isaiah and Jesus chose to mention anointing and the poor in the same context. This article examines the ancient concept of "anointing" in the Hebrew Bible/Old Testament, and then considers what was meant by "the poor" and the "year of the LORD's favor" (also mentioned in both Isaiah and Luke). It demonstrates that in both Testaments anointed ministry to the poor is a core mandate for all people of faith, and that the vision of social reform has never changed.

Introduction

This article considers a simple question from a well-known biblical passage: how does “anointing” affect the ministry foreseen by the prophet Isaiah in 61:1–3?¹ The passage reads:

¹The Spirit of the LORD God is upon me,
because the LORD has anointed me;
he has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed,
to bind up the brokenhearted,
to proclaim liberty to the captives,
and release to the prisoners;
² to proclaim the year of the LORD’s favor,
and the day of vengeance of our God;
to comfort all who mourn;
³ to provide for those who mourn in Zion—
to give them a garland instead of ashes,
the oil of gladness instead of mourning,
the mantle of praise instead of a faint spirit.
They will be called oaks of righteousness,
the planting of the Lord, to display his glory.²

Although the pericope is simple, the topic is vast and has been the focus of committed Bible readers for millennia. For Christians, the author of Luke draws attention to this passage as quoted by Jesus at the beginning of his ministry (Luke 4:18–19).³ It is a seminal passage in both the Old and New Testaments.⁴ Each phrase and every word has been closely scrutinized, yet questions remain. Who is the speaker in Isaiah? What does it mean to be “anointed”? Why are those in most need mentioned as central to the ministry of the anointed person? Why did Jesus use this reference to begin

¹ This article is a revised and expanded edition of “‘Anointed by the Spirit’ and Ministry to the Poor: The Core Biblical Mandate to All Generations,” in *Good News to the Poor: Spirit-Empowered Responses to Poverty*, eds. Wonsuk Ma, Opoku Onyinah, and Rebekah Bled (Tulsa, OK: ORU Press, 2022), 11–22.

² Isa 61:1–3, NRSV. With one exception, all biblical references are from the New Revised Standard Version unless otherwise noted and are formatted according to NRSV conventions. That exception is “Spirit,” translated “spirit” in the NRSV but capitalized in this article as part of the longer, unique special name for God (רוּחַ אֱלֹהִים יְהוָה) here adopted by the author of Isaiah. I prefer to read “Spirit” (not “spirit”) as part of the divine name. Here and throughout the Hebrew Bible/Old Testament, “LORD” and “Lord” translate different Hebrew words. “LORD” translates the tetragrammaton: יְהוָה (YHWH, understood as the covenantal name for God); “Lord” or “lord” translates אֲדֹנָי (*Adonai*, a common, general appellation for “master” or “lord”), as in Ps 110:1 and many other places in the Bible.

³ Luke also draws upon Isa 58:6 in this pericope.

⁴ Mariusz Rosik and Victor Onwukeme, “Function of Isa 61:1–2 and 58:6 in Luke’s Programmatic Passage (Luke 4:16–30),” *Polish Journal of Biblical Research* 2 (2002), 68.

his ministry centuries later in Luke?⁵ This article examines two central features of the passage, the words “anointed” and the “oppressed.” It then considers current Christian practice in light of the prophetic mandate.

Isaiah 61 commences with a *hapax legomenon*, a word or phrase that is unique in the Bible and occurs only once.⁶ By writing, “The spirit of the LORD God,” which appears only here in the Hebrew Bible, the prophet effectively captures the attention of his audience with a neologism. It is reasonable to assume, then, that Isaiah’s audience had never heard this specific phrase before (or at least not in biblical literature), and it effectively arrests the flow of the narrative momentarily and clearly marks the beginning of something new. Thus, along with ancient readers/listeners, we read special words announcing something equally special. Additionally, it should be noted that Jesus’ words quoted by Luke also harken back to the entire scope of the servant passages in Isaiah 40–55. As Brevard Childs holds, “[A] case can be made that [in Luke 4] Jesus himself ushers in the acceptable year of the Lord,⁷ and thus the citation of Isaiah 61 encompasses the entire mission of the servant, including his life, death, and offspring.”⁸

Anointing

Following the unique reference to the Spirit of the LORD God, readers/listeners also learned that the speaker had been “anointed” for something unique. At its simplest, *to anoint*, מָשַׁח, in the ancient Near East means essentially what it means for people today: to apply some type of ointment or oil on the skin for various purposes including

⁵ The author of Luke initiates his ongoing focus on the poor and needy in Mary’s Song of Praise, the *Magnificat*: “He has brought down the powerful from the thrones, and lifted up the lowly; he has filled the hungry with good tidings, and sent the rich away empty” (1:52–53). This canticle is traditionally included in liturgical services of both the Catholic and Orthodox churches and serves as a foundation for the ongoing Lucan focus on the poor throughout his Gospel: 6:20–49; 7:22; 12:13–21; 14:13–14, 21; 16:1–13, 19–31; 18:22; 19:8; 21:1–4.

⁶ Mary J. Obiorah and Favour C. Uroko, “‘The Spirit of the Lord God is Upon Me’ (Is 61:1): The Use of Isaiah 61:1–2 in Luke 4:18–19,” *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies* 74:1 (2018), 1. Even the conventions of English translations of this phrase are unique. The phrase literally reads, “The Spirit of the Lord, LORD,” (רוּחַ אֲדֹנֵי יְהוָה). A unique phrase like this requires an equally unique translation: “The Spirit of the Lord GOD” (see the NRSV and JPS translations). For an ancient testimony to the reading, see the Peshitta of Isa 61, which also has “the Spirit of the Lord God.” For additional information on this intriguing Hebrew phrase and the varied attempts to render it accurately across the centuries see, Jason A. Staples, “‘Lord, LORD’: Jesus as YHWH in Matthew and Luke,” *New Testament Studies* 64 (2019), 1–19. Staples notes that Ezekiel uses אֲדֹנֵי יְהוָה frequently: 217 of the 319 times it appears in the Hebrew Bible (8). What makes it unique in Isaiah is the addition of רוּחַ.

⁷ Greek κύριος is not in all caps; it does not adhere to the divine name capitalization conventions of translations of the Hebrew Bible.

⁸ Mark Gignilliat, “Theological Exegesis as Exegetical Showing: A Case of Isaiah’s Figural Potentiality,” *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 12 (2010), 229–30. Gignilliat draws this material from Brevard Childs, *Isaiah* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2000), 519.

medicinal,⁹ cosmetic,¹⁰ preparation for burial,¹¹ or even prior to cooking. It is a mundane action that here garners little attention. Elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible or Old Testament (hereafter HB/OT), in what has been called “Jotham’s fable,”¹² the trees discuss whom they might anoint as king over them in a vain attempt to find an appropriate leader (Judg 9:7–20, 57).

However, when used during special occasions, the act of anointing moves beyond a commonplace activity and assumes significant added nuances. In Genesis 28:18 (H16¹³), Jacob anointed a stone pillar to memorialize the LORD’s presence with him, when he “rose early in the morning, and he took the stone that he had put under his head and set it up for a pillar and poured oil on the top of it.” Similarly, the tabernacle was anointed with elaborately prepared, expensive, and unique oil *only* used for consecrating the holy place and those serving in it. Shields were anointed prior to battle.¹⁴ Bread was also anointed (usually translated as “spread” or “smeared” with oil¹⁵), and buildings could be anointed.¹⁶ Additionally, in both Isaiah and the Psalms, the king is anointed with the “oil of gladness” (Isa 61:3; Ps 48:6–8; cf. Heb 1:9). Thus, in the Bible, anointing could refer to something mundane or as the mechanism of consecration for special service including both inanimate objects or places and people.

Beyond consecration of people or places for “holy use,” anointing may assume added meaning, and the practice “served to convey power and ability to perform the function for which one was being anointed.”¹⁷ Early in the biblical narrative Moses anointed Aaron as the High Priest (Exod 29:7; see also Lev 8:12) and his sons as

⁹ Isa 1:6; Luke 10:34; John 9:6, 11; Jas 5:14.

¹⁰ Ruth 3:3; Amos 6:6; Luke 7:46.

¹¹ See Matt 26:12; Mark 16:1; Luke 23:56. Although there are many references to burials in the Hebrew Bible/Old Testament (hereafter HB/OT), anointing is never mentioned as part of funerary preparations. It must have seemed insignificant or perhaps had been a later development, as we read in the New Testament. The HB/OT does show that people of high social or political rank were often dressed for burial in garments that were appropriate to their office or position in society. This included ornamentation (medals or symbols of position or accomplishments) along with weapons (1 Sam 28:14; Isa 14:11; Ezek 32:27; cf. Josephus, *Ant* 15.3.4; 17.8.3; 13.8.4; 16.7.1). Apparently, to be buried without garments or ornamentation was a disgrace. Even criminals (Deut 21:23) as well as an enemy (1 Kgs 9:15; Ezek 39:15) were afforded proper burials with appropriate attire. See also Ludwig Köhler, ed., et al., “מִשָּׁח,” *The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Leiden: Brill, 2001), 2:643–44.

¹² Jotham was the youngest of Gideon’s many sons.

¹³ H stands for “Hebrew Bible” where the versification differs from the English translations.

¹⁴ See also Lev 8:10; Num 7:10; 2 Sam 1:21; Isa 21:5. If anyone used the holy consecrated oil for profane purposes, they were to be excommunicated (“cut off from the people,” Exod 30:33).

¹⁵ Exod 29:2; Lev 2:4; 7:12; Num 6:15.

¹⁶ Jer 22:14.

¹⁷ Timothy B. Cargal, “Anoint,” *Eerdmans Dictionary to the Bible*, eds. David N. Freedman et al. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009), 66.

priests.¹⁸ Likewise, Saul was anointed to be king by Samuel (1 Sam 9:16), and subsequent kings are understood to be “the LORD’s anointed” (24:6):¹⁹

1. David was anointed as king by the “men of Judah” (2 Sam 2:4–7); subsequently the “elders of Israel” also anointed him as king of Israel (5:3).
2. Absalom was similarly anointed as king (2 Sam 19:10).
3. Solomon was anointed as king by Zadok the priest and Nathan the prophet. Only here do we read of “the priest Zadok and the prophet Nathan anoint[ed] him king over Israel; then [blew] the trumpet, and [said], ‘Long live King Solomon!’” (1 Kgs 1:39, cf. 34 and 45). Like David, Solomon was also anointed a second time by the people: “they made David’s son Solomon king a second time; they anointed him as the LORD’s prince” (1 Chron 29:22).
4. Joash was anointed as king in 2 Kings 11:12 when Jehoiada, the Priest, “brought out the king’s son, put the crown on him, and gave him the covenant; they proclaimed him king, and anointed him.”
5. In 2 Kings 23:30, Jehoahaz is anointed as king “by the people of the land.”

As with any ancient history, biblical history must be reconstructed carefully by modern readers. These stories of anointing occur over hundreds of years and display a great variety of procedural variations. Nevertheless, we can say that these stories put “clear emphasis on YHWH’s initiative, election, and commission” acting through the people to anoint kings.²⁰

Although there are multiple references to anointing the kings of Israel,²¹ the Bible preserves only a single reference to an inaugural anointing of a prophet when Elijah anointed Elisha as his successor in 1 Kings 19:16.²² Nevertheless, biblical prophets clearly understood their work to be anointed by God. Psalm 105:15 parallels “my anointed ones” with “my prophets” in the context of divine protection for the people of Israel.

Do not touch my anointed ones;²³

Do my prophets no harm.

¹⁸ Elsewhere Lev 7:36 claims that the LORD anointed Aaron’s sons, thus the ancient Israelites understood that the active agent in Moses’ work of anointing in Exodus and Leviticus was the LORD.

¹⁹ This list is only a selection of royal anointings in ancient Israel; many more could be added.

²⁰ Marinus de Jonge, “Messiah,” *Anchor Yale Bible Dictionary*, eds. David N. Freedman et al. (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2007), 4:778. De Jonge includes an extensive discussion of anointing in biblical and post-biblical texts.

²¹ 1 Sam 10:1; 16:3; 1 Kgs 1:39; 2 Kgs 9:6; 11:12.

²² Although the actual anointing process/event is not preserved, it may be assumed from the text. Attesting to the power envisioned in a prophetic royal anointing, the military commander Jehu’s military leaders would not resist the anointing of their leader as king even though they abhorred the “anointer” Elisha; they nevertheless cried, “Jehu is king” (2 Kgs 9:4–13).

²³ Following the previous verses, “anointed ones” in Ps 105:15 refers to the ancient people of Israel, who though “few in number, of little account, and strangers, . . . wandering from nation to nation, from one kingdom to another people” (vv. 12–13), were the object of the special attention of God, that is, “do not touch. . . .”

The most notable prophetic reference to anointing is the focus of this article, the anointing of the prophet for the unique tasks before him in Isaiah 61.

As 1 Samuel 10:1 attests, anointing was understood to be an act of God and served to bestow divine favor upon someone (Pss 23:5; 92:10) or to appoint someone to a special place of divine service (Ps 105:15; Isa 45:1).²⁴

¹ Samuel took a vial of oil and poured it on his [Saul's] head and kissed him; he said, "The LORD has anointed you ruler over his people Israel. You shall reign over the people of the LORD, and you will save them from the hand of their enemies all around" (1 Sam 10:1).

Implicit in the act of anointing was also an outpouring of God's Spirit,²⁵ and this aspect is picked up by the New Testament writers as worthy of note (Luke 4:18; Acts 10:38; 1 John 2:20, 27).

There are only two places in the HB/OT where non-Israelites are referred to as "anointed": 1 Kings 19:15 and Isaiah 45:1. In the first instance, Elijah, after being fed by ravens in the wilderness following his encounter with the prophets of Baal and Asherah on Mount Carmel (1 Kgs 18), was directed to anoint Hazael as king of Aram.

¹⁵ Then the LORD said to [Elijah], "Go, return on your way to the wilderness of Damascus; when you arrive, you shall *anoint* Hazael as king over Aram."²⁶

The second instance involves Cyrus the Persian king, who liberated the Jews from Babylonian captivity and not only allowed them to return home but also provided for their needs along the way. In this passage, a non-Israelite king is called "God's shepherd (Isa 44:28) when Davidic kings fail."²⁷

^{44:24} Thus says the LORD, your Redeemer,
who formed you in the womb . . .

²⁸ who says of Cyrus, "He is my shepherd,
and he shall carry out all my purpose";
and who says of Jerusalem, "It shall be rebuilt,"
and of the temple, "Your foundation shall be laid."

^{45:1} Thus says the LORD to his *anointed*, to Cyrus, . . . (Isa 44:24–45:1;
emphasis mine).

²⁴ J. A. Motyer, "Anointing, Anointed," *New Bible Dictionary*, eds. J. D. Douglas et al., 2nd ed. (Wheaton: Tyndale House Publishers, 1987), 50.

²⁵ See 1 Sam 10:1, 9; 16:13; Isa 61:1; Zech 4:1–14.

²⁶ Emphasis mine. The Syrian king Hazael is mentioned in the Tel Dan Stele, however, as with Elisha, his actual "anointing event" is not mentioned.

²⁷ De Jonge, "Messiah," 779.

Regarding this reference in Isaiah, J. A. Motyer highlights five characteristics of the anointed person that he gleans from the passage, and he claims that there is “no better summary of the OT view of the ‘anointed’ person.”²⁸

1. Cyrus was chosen by God (Isa 41:25²⁹).
2. He was given dominion over the nations (Isa 45:1–3).
3. Throughout all the actions of the Persian king, the LORD is the *real* actor (Isa 45:1–7).
4. The king was appointed to set the exiles free and rebuild the city of the LORD (Isa 45:13).
5. Cyrus brought judgment upon the enemies of Israel (Isa 47).

Motyer is quick to note that “these five points are preeminently true of Jesus, who saw himself as the fulfillment of the OT Messianic expectations.”³⁰

The phrase, “the [LORD’s] anointed” (or a cognate phrase), deserves special attention. Saul is anointed by the LORD in 1 Samuel 10:1 by the prophet Samuel. In 1 Samuel 12:3–5 he refers to himself as anointed, and later David spared Saul’s life because he was “the LORD’s anointed” (1 Sam 24:6; mentioned three times for emphasis in the same verse). Later, when searching for Saul’s successor, Eliab (then eldest son of Jesse) was mistakenly referred to as “the [LORD’s] anointed” (1 Sam 16:6). Much later, the similar phrase appears in reference to David (2 Sam 19:21), and similar words appear in what the Bible calls the “last words of David,” which begin with,

Now these are the last words of David:

The oracle of David, son of Jesse,

the oracle of the man whom God exalted,

the anointed of the God of Jacob, the favorite of the Strong One of Israel

(Sam 23:1; emphasis mine).

Similarly in the Song of Hannah, the biblical poet twice exclaims, “The LORD! His adversaries shall be shattered; . . . The LORD . . . will give strength to his king, and exalt the power of his anointed” (1 Sam 2:10). In the same chapter and shortly before the death of Hophni and Phineas, the wayward sons of Eli who were priests at Shiloh, the theme of anointing continues:

²⁸ J. A. Motyer, “Messiah,” *New Bible Dictionary*, 764.

²⁹ In this verse, the phrase, God “stirred up one from the north,” is generally understood as referring to Cyrus (cf. also 41:1 where “a victor is roused from the east”). Persia is located east of ancient Israel, but ancient travelers would have followed the traditional travel routes in the Fertile Crescent moving generally northwest from Persia and then southwest toward Israel, or from the northeast.

³⁰ Motyer, “Messiah,” 764.

I will raise up for myself a faithful priest, who shall do according to what is in my heart and in my mind. I will build him a sure house, and he shall go in and out before *my anointed one* forever” (1 Sam 2:35; emphasis mine).

Other references to “anointed” include Lamentations 4:20, “The LORD’s anointed, the breath of our life, was taken in their pits,” which is most likely a reference to the death of Zedekiah, the final king of Judah, at the hands of the Babylonians. Elsewhere, in Habakkuk’s Song, the people of Israel were anointed when the LORD “came forth to save [his] people, to save your anointed [Israel]” (Hab 3:13).

Additional passages could be cited,³¹ however, these are sufficient to demonstrate that the LORD’s anointing highlights a special relationship between God and his anointed person or people. This relationship carries with it the authority and power to rule or work in God’s name. Notably, this person/these people could move beyond the failures of previously appointed people (see 1 Sam 2:35 above) and accomplish God’s purposes for his people. With the exception of Josiah, however, no biblical king—not even David—fulfilled God’s plan for his leaders. It is only of Josiah that we read:

Before him there was no king like him, who turned to the LORD with all his heart, with all his soul, and with all his might, according to all the law of Moses; nor did any like him arise after him (2 Kgs 23:25).

The biblical message on anointing is clear: anointing signifies divine blessing at the inauguration of a new initiative in the divine economy (God’s plans for his people) or for unique work or service. However, it is eclipsed by covenant infidelity.³² This study of anointing demonstrates that those who were anointed often failed. Even David, who certainly was anointed by God to be king, nevertheless failed, and his people bore the lasting consequences of his rebellious actions reiterated in the words of Nathan the Prophet:

⁷ Thus says the LORD, the God of Israel: I anointed you king over Israel, and I rescued you from the hand of Saul; ⁸ I gave you your master’s house, and your master’s wives into your bosom, and gave you the house of Israel and of Judah; and if that had been too little, I would have added as much more. ⁹ Why have you despised the word of the LORD, to do what is evil in his sight? You have struck down Uriah the Hittite with the sword, and have taken his wife to be your wife, and have killed him with the sword of the Ammonites. ¹⁰ Now therefore the sword

³¹ For example, the theme of the “anointed one” is expanded and elaborated upon in the Royal Psalms (2, 18, 20, 21, 45, 72, 89, 101, 110, 132, and 144). See de Jonge, “Messiah,” 779–80.

³² This is especially clear in 1 Sam 15:22: “Has the LORD as great delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices, [or rather] in obedience to the voice of the LORD? Surely, to obey is better than sacrifice, and to heed than the fat of rams.” Here cultic activities are eclipsed by covenant fidelity.

shall never depart from your house, for you have despised me, and have taken the wife of Uriah the Hittite to be your wife. ¹¹ Thus says the LORD: I will raise up trouble against you from within your own house; and I will take your wives before your eyes, and give them to your neighbor, and he shall lie with your wives in the sight of this very sun. ¹² “For you did it secretly; but I will do this thing before all Israel, and before the sun.” ¹³ David said to Nathan, “I have sinned against the LORD.” Nathan said to David, “Now the LORD has put away your sin; you shall not die. ¹⁴ Nevertheless, because by this deed you have utterly scorned the LORD, the child that is born to you shall die” (2 Sam 12:7—14).

How someone conducts his or her life when empowered by the anointing is primary. Put another way, biblical anointing never condones covenant disloyalty, and the Bible anticipates the day when the “Davidic ideal” of an anointed king who acts according to “all the law of Moses” (2 Kgs 23:25) would be realized.

The “Oppressed” Poor

The primary job of the “anointed one,” as conceived by Isaiah (61:1) and repeated by Jesus in Luke 4, was to “bring good news to the oppressed [poor].” Other responsibilities would follow and are listed by the prophet, but the priority of position is given to ministry to the poor. There are several different words for “the poor” in the HB/OT, including:³³

1. אֲבִיּוֹן: the begging poor.
2. דָּל: the poor farmer.
3. מַחֲסוֹר: the lazy poor.
4. עָנִי: the economically oppressed, exploited, or suffering poor.

Isaiah 61:1 uses עָנִי (a derivative of “4” above) and reads, “The Spirit of the LORD G [יהוה אֲדֹנִי רוּחַ] is upon me, because the LORD has anointed me; he has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed. . . .” Here “oppressed” may be translated as “bowed down or dejected,”³⁴ or in the case of Isaiah, “the oppressed poor.” The HB/OT preserves different perspectives on these people:³⁵

³³ J. David Pleins, “Poor, Poverty,” *Anchor Yale Bible Dictionary*, 5:403. A lengthy study of each of these terms follows with occasional references to similar words in cognate languages.

³⁴ “עָנִי,” *HALOT*, 2:855. For more on עָנִי see Bradley C. Gregory, “The Postexilic Exile in Third Isaiah: Isaiah 61:1–3 in Light of Second Temple Hermeneutics,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 126 (2007), 481–84. In his new translation of the Hebrew Bible, Robert Alter translates simply “poor,” but in the notes expands upon his translation and adds that it refers “to people in a state of wretchedness” (*The Hebrew Bible* [New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2019], 2:826). I think “destitute” accurately captures the nuances of עָנִי in English.

³⁵ Patrick J. Hartin, “Poor,” *Eerdmans Dictionary of the Bible*, eds. David N. Freedman et al. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 1070–71.

1. Biblical legal texts are concerned with the treatment of those who are poor and call for their protection.³⁶ Narrative literature in the Pentateuch and the Former Prophets (also called Historical Books) evinces little sustained consideration for the poor, but rather, focuses on the excesses of the kings that do not address the needs of the poor.
2. Prophetic literature, on the other hand, focuses on economic oppression of the poor by those who are wealthy. Isaiah chastises landowners who amass large portions of land but ignore the rights or needs of the poor.³⁷ Similarly, Amos repeatedly draws his readers' attention to the plight of the poor, "[The people of Israel] who trample the head of the poor into the dust of the earth and push the afflicted out of the way . . ." are condemned.³⁸
3. Wisdom Literature sees poverty variously: (a) as a consequence of someone's indolent lifestyle (Prov 6:10–11; 10:4, 15); or (b) as in Job, a result of political and economic exploitation. Job used his defense of the poor as an argument for his innocence (Job 29:12, 16).
4. The Psalms repeatedly present God as a defender of the עניים (e.g., Ps 22:26).

Moreover, it is not surprising that there were three groups in ancient Israelite society that were particularly susceptible to poverty: widows, orphans, and strangers. They were totally dependent upon others to help them and thus were susceptible to actions of unscrupulous people. Without a social network to assist them, or when legal protections designed to help them were ignored,³⁹ they suffered miserably, and the prophets are not averse to drawing attention to this need.

Later, the New Testament is not silent on the issue, and the book of James is foremost in its concern for the poor:

Religion that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father, is this: *to care for the infants and widows in their distress*, and to keep oneself unstained by the world.⁴⁰

Thus John the Baptist, Jesus, and the disciples embraced a lifestyle of poverty, and it is not surprising that Jesus began the Beatitudes with "Blessed are the poor in spirit" (Matt 5:3), but Luke simply says, "Blessed are the poor" (Luke 6:20).⁴¹ Other New Testament writings display continued concern for the poor and needy as the early church members sold their possessions to support those in need (Acts 2:45) and collections were received

³⁶ Lev 19:9–10; 25:35.

³⁷ Isa 5:8; 10:2.

³⁸ Amos 2:7; see also 4:1; 5:11. Here Amos reverses the imagery of "dust of the earth"; instead of a blessing (cf., Gen 13:16; 28:14) it appears in a derogatory context. The reverse imagery is vivid.

³⁹ Leviticus reminds its readers or listeners: "When you harvest the harvest of your land, you shall not reap to the edges of your field, or gather the gleanings of your harvest. You shall not strip your vineyard bare, or gather the fallen grapes of your vineyard; you shall leave them for the poor [עניים] and the alien: I am the LORD your God" (19:9–10; see also 23:22).

⁴⁰ Jas 1:27 (emphasis mine); see also 2:6; 4:13–17.

⁴¹ Hartin, "Poor," 1070.

to assist the poor.⁴² The very first action of Jesus' disciples in Acts following the Day of Pentecost was to minister to a person in great need outside of the Temple (Acts 3:1–10),⁴³ and in short order members initiated an early ministry to the widows and orphans.

This trajectory did not cease with the end of the New Testament. Much later, after the Roman empire had become Christian under Constantine, Emperor Julian (ca., 360–363 CE; remembered as “Julian the Apostate”) said: “It is disgraceful that, when no Jew ever has to beg, and the impious Galileans [the emperor’s name for Christians] support not only their own poor but ours as well, all men see that our people lack aid from us.”⁴⁴ By this time, the biblical mandate to care for the poor was a hallmark of faith in action.

Sabbatical and Jubilee Years

In addition to bringing “good news to the oppressed,” the anointed person described in Isaiah 61 would also “proclaim the year of the LORD’s favor” (61:2). The phrase is generally understood to refer to the Sabbatical Year or Year of Jubilee mentioned in the books of Exodus and Leviticus,⁴⁵ and may here be applying some of the core principles of the convention to the nation of Israel that lost everything during the Exile in Babylon (ca. 586–536 BCE).

Following six years of working the land, the Bible directs that the land was to lie fallow for a year and the dormant period was called a “Sabbatical Year” because “the land shall keep a sabbath” (Lev 25:2). Directives to allow the land to lie fallow appear in Exodus 23:10–11; Leviticus 25:1–7; and Deuteronomy 15:1–11. However, the special year is not mentioned again until Nehemiah 10:31, where the people forgo all debts in accordance with the biblical command.

The “Jubilee Year” was different. Following seven years with the Sabbatical Year ending each cycle, the fiftieth year was called a Jubilee Year—the land would continue to lie fallow for an additional year and all debts were cancelled. It is discussed at length

⁴² Rom 15:26; 2 Cor 8–9; Gal 2:10.

⁴³ William L. Lyons, “Extending the Right Hand: An Important Yet Overlooked Defining Action of the Nascent Church,” in *We, the Church: Studies in Mission & Evangelization: Essays in Honor of Bishop Dr. B. S. Moses Kumar*, eds. Smitha P. Coffee and Donna Tracy Paul (New Delhi, India: Christian World Imprints, 2017), 167–74.

⁴⁴ Julian, *Works* 157.22.430.

⁴⁵ Rosik and Onwukeme, “Function of Isa 61:1–2 and 58:6 in Luke’s Programmatic Passage (Luke 4:16–30),” 67, 71. See also Benjamin D. Sommer, “Isaiah,” *The Jewish Study Bible*, eds. Adele Berlin and Mark Zvi Brettler, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 888. Marvin A. Sweeney, “Isaiah,” *The New Oxford Annotated Bible: New Revised Standard Version with Apocrypha*, eds. Michael C. Coogan et al., 4th ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 1049.

in Leviticus 25:8–17 and 23–55.⁴⁶ Outside the Bible it is mentioned directly in Josephus *Ant* 3.280.3 and Sifra 8:2 (an early Jewish commentary on Leviticus). The Bible specifies the following:⁴⁷

1. The blast of the *shofar* on the Day of Atonement to begin the year-long observations.
2. The return of all Israelites to their ancestral lands and families.
3. All land was to remain fallow (crops were not planted, fields not “worked”).
4. Prices for the sale of land (except for houses in cities) remained fixed.
5. Ancestral lands that were previously sold were returned to the original owners.
6. The Levites were granted special land regulations.
7. All Israelite debt was remitted, and slaves were set free.

Moreover, the concept of a Sabbatical Year was not unique to ancient Israel, but was rather foreshadowed by Sumerian kings and their law codes that survived them. For nearly 800 years, these kings⁴⁸ directed a “fundamental restructuring of society,” eliminating the sources of injustice and establishing concrete laws to restore equilibrium to the community “in which the weak were not oppressed or taken advantage of by the strong.” Debt slavery was eliminated, and society was fundamentally recalibrated.⁴⁹

Similarly, Israelite society was reset (or adjusted) during these unique years.⁵⁰ There would be no generational indebtedness or slavery as debt was cancelled. The Bible justifies the Sabbatical and Jubilee Year regulations with two important principles: (1) God owns the land and directs its use (Lev 25:23); and (2) God retains undisputed possession of all Israelites, and he may do with them as he wishes (25:55). David Lieber adds that these ancient conventions “represent a unique Israelite attempt to combat the social evils that had infected Israelite society and to return to the idyllic period of the desert union when social equality and fraternal concern had prevailed.”⁵¹ Similarly, Christopher J. H. Wright comments, the HB/OT

laws and moral imperatives about loans, interest, debts, slaves, land wages, and justice in general indicate that the first concern of Israel was for human need, *not*

⁴⁶ See also Lev 27:16–25; Num 36:4; and perhaps Ezek 46:1.

⁴⁷ David L. Lieber, “Sabbatical Year and Jubilee,” in *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, eds. Fred Skolnik and Michael Berenbaum, 2nd ed. (Detroit: Macmillan Reference USA in association with the Keter Publishing House, Jerusalem, 2007), 624.

⁴⁸ Urukagina (d. 2371 BCE); Ur-Nammu (2112–2095); Lipit-Ishtar (1870–1860); Hammurabi (1728–1681); Ammisaduqa (1648–26).

⁴⁹ Noah Green, “(Social) Justice and Righteousness: The Biblical and Ancient Near Eastern Conception of Social Justice and How It Was Enacted in Leviticus 25,” unpublished paper presented at Oral Roberts University, 2022. This paper offers an extensive examination of social injustice in the ANE.

⁵⁰ See Isa 37:21–35; Lev 25:1–7; and perhaps in the background of Jer 34:8–22 and Ezek 11:15.

⁵¹ Lieber, “Sabbatical Year and Jubilee,” 625. I suspect that Lieber’s “idyllic period of the desert wanderings” is untenable, however, his focus on rebalancing ancient Israelite society is on target.

ownership. . . . The maintenance of property and possessions must come second to human need. Israelite law favored persons over property and possessions.⁵²

It is easy to see how far the modern world has strayed from these biblical directives to help the most needy among us, and countless human beings suffer because of it.

How Might Modern Bible Readers Respond to Poverty?

Reiterating the words of James, this study convincingly demonstrates that “[r]eligion that is pure . . . is this: to care for the infants and widows in their distress” (1:26). Everything else is secondary. It is not unlike Jeremiah’s much earlier prophecy regarding Josiah: “He judged the poor and needy; then it was well. Is this not to know me?” says the LORD” (22:16; cf. Phil 3:10).

How then should modern Bible readers respond? The book of Deuteronomy offers a clear way forward:

⁷ If there is among you anyone in need, a member of your community in any of your towns within the land that the LORD your God is giving you, do not be hard-hearted or tight-fisted toward your needy neighbor. ⁸ You should rather open your hand, willingly lending enough to meet the need, whatever it may be. . . . ¹⁰ Give liberally and be ungrudging when you do so, for on this account the LORD your God will bless you in all your work and in all that you undertake. ¹¹ Since there will never cease to be some in need on the earth, I therefore command you, “Open your hand to the poor and needy neighbor in your land.”⁵³

Conclusion

This study of anointing in Isaiah 61 and the prophet’s anticipated ministry among “the poor” has demonstrated that the passage is unique. Its distinctive wording, “The Spirit of the LORD God is upon me,” captures the attention of listeners or readers and directs their attention to the new message that would follow. Beginning with legal texts and early biblical narratives, it is reiterated in the cries of the prophets, and echoes through the Psalms and Wisdom Literature and into the New Testament writings. It is arguably the core biblical mandate for all generations.

⁵² Christopher J. H. Wright, *Old Testament Ethics for the People of God* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2004), 148 (emphasis mine). Here Wright quotes Robert Gnuse, “Jubilee Legislation in Leviticus: Israel’s Vision of Social Reform,” *Biblical Theology Bulletin* 15 (1985), 48.

⁵³ Deut 15:7–11. Similar words also appear in Lev 25. In *Old Testament Ethics*, Christopher J. H. Wright offers an in-depth analysis of “Economics and the Poor” and concludes with a helpful section on “Responses to Poverty” (172–79).

Anointing is nothing special in itself and was used for commonplace activities, including medicinal, cosmetic, and funerary needs. Places were also anointed and thereby set aside for special use or service. The word assumes special nuances, however, when used in the context of prophets, priests, or kings. Here, it announces a new beginning, inaugurates a new position, and signifies great blessing and empowerment on an anointed person or group of people. Moreover, it highlights a special and abiding relationship between God and the anointed one(s). Despite the special nuances of being “anointed,” however, the Bible is also clear: anointing is initiatory and empowering, while covenantal fidelity or obedience is primary. It is as if covenantal fidelity continues the nuances of blessing into the future. Many of those who were “anointed” in the Bible failed in their ministry, including judges, kings, and priests who left a sad legacy to history and provide a cautionary tale that speaks volumes to later biblical readers—“be careful how you live.”

Isaiah’s choice of עֲנִיִּים (the “oppressed poor”) for the focus of the anointed one’s work is unforgettable. It would be a ministry to those in greatest need: the economically exposed, exploited, suffering poor, or destitute. This is not to say that the passage overlooks other ministry objectives, but Isaiah 61 and Luke 4 direct readers’ attention first and foremost to the neediest people. As Julian the Apostate observed, caring for the poor and most needy is the hallmark expression of biblical faith.

Nowhere do we see this more clearly than in the fundamental restructuring of ancient Israelite society during the Sabbatical and Jubilee years. There, human economics meet godly design. Debts are cancelled, slaves set free, and society was to be readjusted according to godly dictates. It is certainly a far-reaching ideal, but it is not by happenstance that Jesus chose this passage to inaugurate his ministry in Luke. His vision, anchored in the HB/OT, is what marked biblical faith as clearly distinctive in his world, and that vision of social reform has never changed.



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