



**Briefing Paper 507**

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## **Advocacy for the Common Good in the Old Testament**

### **1. Introduction**

Advocacy implies speaking for the disadvantaged or marginalised in society. We tend to think of advocacy as a modern phenomenon, yet biblical literature has advocated for the marginalised in society since time immemorial. Our world today also marginalizes people, and we can take a leaf out of the Old Testament's advocacy in these troublesome situations. This briefing paper considers advocacy for the common good in the Old Testament. It divides up into three main parts. The first part—"The Common Good"—defines the common good from the Catholic Social Teaching perspective and delves into biblical illustrations of the same matter. The second part—"Advocacy in the Old Testament: For Whom?"—elaborates on the beneficiaries of advocacy in the Old Testament. The third part—"Old Testament Advocates as Counter-narrators"—concerns the operations of Old Testament advocates for the common good.

### **2. The Common Good**

The common good, which Vatican II defines as "the sum total of social conditions which allow people, either as groups or as individuals, to reach their fulfilment more fully and more easily,"<sup>1</sup> lies at the core of advocacy. A violation of those social conditions, such as "food, clothing, housing...set up a family, the right to education, work,"<sup>2</sup> etc., necessitates advocacy. The Old Testament highlights social conditions for the realisation of the common good. God makes a promise to Moses for the Israelites, who suffer in Egypt, that "I have come down to rescue them from the hand of the Egyptians and to bring them up out of that land into a good and spacious land, a land flowing with

milk and honey."<sup>3</sup> This text presents at least two elements that facilitate the common good: 'good and spacious land;' and 'a land flowing with milk and honey.'

In many African countries today, land stands out as a vexing issue because only a few out of the masses possess it, creating a huge gap between the rich and the poor. In South Africa, "this year, we implement key recommendations of the Presidential Advisory Panel on Land Reform...to accelerate land redistribution...prioritising youth, women, [and] people with disabilities."<sup>4</sup> Ownership of land also relates to citizenship, without which human beings cannot fulfil themselves in a particular country. To speak of 'a land flowing with milk and honey' echoes natural resources such as food and minerals, which human beings need to access in one way or another so that they can reach their fulfilment 'more fully and more easily.' The book of Genesis states that "the LORD God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to work it and take care of it."<sup>5</sup> The Garden of Eden can be analogous to the common good, into which the Creator invites human beings to participate through their work. Work thus stands out as a human right and a necessary condition to attain human fulfilment.

In this year's State of the Nation Address, President Cyril Ramaphosa highlighted government's commitment to create youth employment—an impeccable way to contribute to the common good. "More than half of all young people are unemployed. This is a crisis. We need to make this country work for young people, so that they can work for our country."<sup>6</sup> Poverty

breeds from the absence of social conditions for the majority to meet the common good. This lack constitutes an injustice, which manifests itself in poverty and unfathomable gaps between the rich and the poor. Thus, justice and righteousness in the Old Testament become means through which humanity attains and sustains the common good.<sup>7</sup>

Although the Old Testament uses the terms 'justice' and 'righteousness' interchangeably, we can say that justice pertains to 'a right social order' whereas righteousness applies to 'personal moral rectitude.'<sup>8</sup> In addition, justice and righteousness constitute entities inseparable from love and compassion, given their proximity in the Old Testament.<sup>9</sup> As such, if we lack love and compassion, we cannot exercise justice and righteousness. We choose to remain in an advantageous position while ensuring that the disadvantaged stay as they are. "The compassionate person understands the suffering of another and wishes to relieve it; the cruel person understands the suffering of another but wants to inflict it."<sup>10</sup> The loving and compassionate person can affirm that the Creator made human beings in His own image as male and female, so that no one class of persons may oppress or take advantage of another class. The Creator invites all to labour as equals in His garden—our common home—and profit equitably from its produce.<sup>11</sup> "The common good is not a synonym for social justice, but the desire for justice and wholeness expressed in human community implies a commitment by the people of God to the common good."<sup>12</sup>

### 3. Advocacy in the Old Testament: For Whom?

"Biblical laws not only prohibit mistreating various classes or categories of vulnerable groups of persons. Several laws also require Israelites and their descendants to act affirmatively on behalf of such persons."<sup>13</sup> In the Old Testament world, the blind<sup>14</sup>, the lame<sup>15</sup>, and the deaf<sup>16</sup> comprise a class of the vulnerable or marginalised. Their situation keeps them in a disadvantaged situation in society because they rarely do the things that the able-bodied, who are the majority in society, do. The latter can easily take advantage of the former in the facilitation of the common good. The disabled still remain vulnerable in our society today. Multi-storey buildings, as an example, lack facilities such as elevators or designated paths for wheelchairs for the physically disabled to exercise their freedom of movement towards realising the

common good. The idea of making sign language the twelfth official language in South Africa is timely for the deaf. "Following the recognition by the Department of Basic Education in 2018 of South African Sign Language as a home language and the recommendation by the Parliamentary Constitutional Review Committee that it be the 12th official language, we are now poised to finalise the matter."<sup>17</sup>

The oppressed also constitute a vulnerable group in the Old Testament that requires advocacy. God shows concern for Israel in Egypt because of the oppression that it experiences. "The fundamental moral perspective of the Biblical rules is its concern to protect the most vulnerable members of the community against advantage-taking or exploitation. In a word, the interest is justice."<sup>18</sup> Left to themselves, human beings tend to oppress one another, with the more powerful group or persons lording it over the weaker group or individuals. This explains some evils of society such as colonialism, apartheid, and neo-colonialism. Advocacy in this sense demands speaking for the disadvantaged or the vulnerable. The Old Testament singles out vulnerable groups such as the foreigner, the widow, and the orphan.<sup>19</sup> Advocacy demands speaking for and on behalf of the vulnerable in order that they may receive justice, without fail. For this reason, the Old Testament states: "cursed is anyone who withholds justice from the foreigner, the fatherless or the widow."<sup>20</sup> It deems these people as vulnerable—a situation which renders them poor in society—because they lack access to the common good.

As foreigners in Egypt, the Israelites lack means to fulfil themselves 'more fully and more easily' because of oppression at the hands of their masters. Their experience serves as a glimpse of what migrants experience today in foreign countries, where they seek refuge. Host nations curtail their rights—including the right to employment—on the basis of national status. In South Africa, "prior to issuing any right to seek employment to an asylum-seeker, an assessment must be completed to establish such person's ability to sustain himself or herself and any dependents."<sup>21</sup> This category of migrants enters a country without anything, because it flees from persecution and lacks opportunities to put things together for sustainability in a host country. In this regard, migrants form a part of God's creation that deserves consideration in the participation of the common good in the host nation. Responding to the 2020 State of the Nation Address, the Catholic

Parliamentary Liaison Office observes that “sadly, the speech was short on hope or even on recognition of the dire situation of migrants, refugees and asylum-seekers, and the haunting spectre of xenophobia.”<sup>22</sup>

The Old Testament treats the plight of a widow on a par with the plight of an orphan (the fatherless). It speaks of “the fatherless *or* the widow.”<sup>23</sup> Both have one thing in common: absence of a man in their charge. The widow lacks a husband, who plays the role of breadwinner in the Old Testament world, just as an orphan lacks a father, who fends for him or her in the household. Vulnerability renders these categories of people poor. It is little wonder that the Old Testament texts place the vulnerable side by side with the poor. In this vein, the Old Testament castigates those who “do not promote the case of the *fatherless*; [as] they do not defend the just cause of the *poor*.”<sup>24</sup> It also warns against those who “oppress the *widow* or the *fatherless*, the *foreigner* or the *poor*.”<sup>25</sup>

In general, the Old Testament exhibits a preferential option for the poor, whom it identifies as the widow, the fatherless and the foreigner. Just as the Old Testament defines the vulnerable in its milieu and advocates their cause, lawmakers and civil society have a mandate to identify and advocate the cause of the marginalised in our society today. In South Africa, as an example, many voices speak for women who may not find fulfilment in society due to effects perpetrated by male chauvinism that objectifies women. In a positive response announced by President Ramaphosa, the government “will amend the Domestic Violence Act to better protect victims in violent domestic relationships and the Sexual Offences Act to broaden the categories of sex offenders, and ... will pass a law to tighten bail and sentencing condition in cases that involve gender-based violence.”<sup>26</sup> The law as such fosters justice for the vulnerable to facilitate the reach of the common good, to the extent that a law which no longer serves sufficiently its purpose for justice ought to be amended. In the next section, we see how the Bible has amended its laws through biblical advocates who present counter-narratives to oppressive laws.

#### **4. Old Testament Advocates as Counter-narrators**

“The land of Israel, in more idyllic descriptions, was said to flow with ‘milk and honey,’ and

otherwise abound with nature’s (or YHWH’s) plenty. But not all Israelites owned land or otherwise had access to its benefits.”<sup>27</sup> Old Testament advocates stand out as counter-narrators to unfair laws. As an example, first comes an unfair law with regard to offering sacrifices to God: “No man who has any defect may come near: no man who is blind or lame, disfigured or deformed; no man with a crippled foot or hand, or who is a hunchback or a dwarf, or who has any eye defect, or who has festering or running sores or damaged testicles.”<sup>28</sup> Then follows another law to counter or amend the first: “He [the disabled] may eat the most holy food of his God, as well as the holy food.”<sup>29</sup> David practices this counter-narrative in his concern for Meribbaal, Jonathan’s “son who was lame in both feet.”<sup>30</sup> Meribbaal not only feeds at David’s table, but he also owns land and servants, which David grants him for his sustenance.

In a similar vein, the book of Ruth constitutes a counter-narrative to Old Testament laws that render difficult the facilitation of the common good for the marginalised or vulnerable. It is “an answer to Ezra’s and Nehemiah’s politics of demarcation against foreigners and their interpretation of Deuteronomy.”<sup>31</sup> Ruth in particular manifests several traits of vulnerability. She is at once a widow and a foreigner, who goes into Israel. Since she has no man [husband] in her life, she also embodies aspects of an orphan, who is fatherless. In Ruth, therefore, subsist qualities of the marginalised: the foreigner, the widow, and the orphan.

We now consider the unfair narrative surrounding the marginalised; and then we consider the counter-narrative as presented by the book of Ruth. Initially, the Old Testament portrays the foreigner in negative light because of the oppression<sup>32</sup> that characterises him or her as God’s punishment for the foreigner’s wickedness.<sup>33</sup> The book of Ruth portrays a sympathetic or compassionate view of the migrant. As matter of fact, before Ruth becomes a foreigner in Israel, Naomi and her husband Elimelek and their two sons first go into Moab as migrants.<sup>34</sup> They go there because of a famine in Israel, contrary to the view that their own wickedness renders them foreigners in Moab. Against the view that oppression must accompany them in Moab, the book of Ruth shows nothing of that nature. Moab proves to be welcoming to them to the extent that the two sons of the Israelite migrants marry Moabite women, Ruth and Orpah.<sup>35</sup> Thus, the Old Testament advocate for the

migrant highlights local integration through the natural bond of love.

The foreigner, particularly the woman, poses danger in the Old Testament, so much so that the Israeli man should avoid her at all costs because of her foreign, detestable practices. To marry her amounts to unfaithfulness and contamination of the holy race. The Old Testament further singles out Moab as a country to beware of in this avoidance of the foreign woman.<sup>36</sup> The book of Ruth offers a counter narrative of advocacy for the foreign woman in Israel. As Ruth is at once a foreigner and a widow, “the marriage of Boaz and Ruth is represented as having the same purpose as levirate marriage, ‘to raise up the name of the dead upon his inheritance, that the name of the dead be not cut off from among his brethren’ (4 5, 10; cp. Deut 25 6 f.).”<sup>37</sup> In so doing, the book of Ruth highlights the foreign woman’s right to be locally integrated into Israelite society and to be able to raise up a family with a man of her choice, even from amongst the Israelites. By granting Ruth the rights of a widow in Israel, the counter-narrative also highlights her right to citizenship in Israel.

In the book of Ruth, Elimelek and his two sons die and leave three widows behind: Naomi, Ruth and Orpah. When a woman without children becomes a widow, her brother-in-law marries her in order to perpetuate the family’s name.<sup>38</sup> Naomi finds herself in this situation because her husband as well as her two sons all die. Besides, she has passed her age of child bearing. The book of Ruth shows amendments to the law governing childless widows in this sense: Naomi adopts a child,<sup>39</sup> whom her daughter-in-law Ruth gives birth to through Boaz, Naomi’s kinsman. “The women said to Naomi: ‘Praise be to the LORD, who this day has not left you without a guardian-redeemer. May he become famous throughout Israel! He will renew your life and sustain you in your old age.

For your daughter-in-law, who loves you and who is better to you than seven sons, has given him birth.”<sup>40</sup> Thus the Old Testament advocate resolves the vulnerability of a childless and non-childbearing widow. And if the Old Testament law denies widows the right to inherit property,<sup>41</sup> the counter-narrative in the book of Ruth presents Naomi, a widow, as a property owner.<sup>42</sup> What strikes the eye as a violation of the Old Testament law on property rights proves to be Old Testament advocacy for widows’ property rights.

## 5. Conclusion

Government and civil society in modern times engage in what the Old Testament engaged in a long time ago, inasmuch as they promote justice for the common good. For governments, legislation encompasses a sure way to implement the common good in society. A significant role of civil society involves offering counter-narratives to those pieces of legislation that exhibit unfairness or inhibit access to the common good. The common good as such is a matter of (social) justice and righteousness, terms that biblical parlance interchanges. Just as the Old Testament identifies the poor in its midst and advocates their cause, civil society has a critical role of identifying the marginalised in society and advocating on their behalf.

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<sup>1</sup> Austin Flannery (ed.), *Vatican II: The Conciliar and Post Conciliar Documents* (New Delhi: St Pauls, 1975), 815.

<sup>2</sup> Austin Flannery (ed.), *Vatican II: The Conciliar and Post Conciliar Documents* (New Delhi: St Pauls, 1975), 815.

<sup>3</sup> Exodus 3:8.

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.gov.za/speeches/president-cyril-ramaphosa-2020-state-nation-address-13-feb-2020-0000>

<sup>5</sup> Genesis 2:15.

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.gov.za/speeches/president-cyril-ramaphosa-2020-state-nation-address-13-feb-2020-0000>

<sup>7</sup> Isaiah 32:16-17.

<sup>8</sup> <https://ethicsdaily.com/the-common-good-allowing-all-to-flourish-and-be-fulfilled-cms-22340/>

<sup>9</sup> See Hosea 2:19-20.

<sup>10</sup> Oliver Davies, “Rights and Revelation: A Study of Particularism and Universality in the Advocacy of Human Rights,” *New Blackfriars*, vol. 89, no. 1022 (July 2008): 458.

<sup>11</sup> See Genesis 1:27-28.

<sup>12</sup> <https://ethicsdaily.com/the-common-good-allowing-all-to-flourish-and-be-fulfilled-cms-22340/>

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- <sup>13</sup> Richard H. Hiers, "Biblical Social Welfare Legislation: Protected Classes and Provisions for Persons in Need," *Journal of Law and Religion*, vol. 17, no. 1/2 (2002): 66.
- <sup>14</sup> Deuteronomy 27:18.
- <sup>15</sup> Leviticus 21:18.
- <sup>16</sup> Leviticus 19:14.
- <sup>17</sup> <https://www.gov.za/speeches/president-cyril-ramaphosa-2020-state-nation-address-13-feb-2020-0000>
- <sup>18</sup> Paul B. Rasor, "Biblical Roots of Modern Consumer Credit Law," *Journal of Law and Religion*, vol. 10, no. 1 (1993-1994): 167.
- <sup>19</sup> Deuteronomy 10:18-19; Exodus 22:21-24.
- <sup>20</sup> Deuteronomy 27:19.
- <sup>21</sup> Quoted in <https://www.businesslive.co.za/bd/national/2020-01-03-government-tightens-its-grip-on-refugees-and-asylum-seekers/>
- <sup>22</sup> <http://www.cplo.org.za/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/SONA-14022020.pdf>
- <sup>23</sup> Exodus 22:22-24; Deuteronomy 27:19.
- <sup>24</sup> Jeremiah 5:28.
- <sup>25</sup> Zechariah 7:10.
- <sup>26</sup> <https://www.iol.co.za/news/politics/sona-2020-read-president-cyril-ramaphosas-full-speech-42675302>
- <sup>27</sup> Richard H. Hiers, "Biblical Social Welfare Legislation: Protected Classes and Provisions for Persons in Need," *Journal of Law and Religion*, vol. 17, no. 1/2 (2002): 49.
- <sup>28</sup> Leviticus 21:18-20.
- <sup>29</sup> Leviticus 21:22.
- <sup>30</sup> 2 Samuel 4:4.
- <sup>31</sup> Irmtraud Fischer, *Rut*, HTKAT (Freiburg: Herder, 2001), 89-91, in Agnethe Siquans, "Foreignness and Poverty in the Book of Ruth: A Legal Way for a Poor Foreign Woman to be Integrated into Israel," *Journal of Biblical Literature*, vol. 128, no. 3 (Fall, 2009): 449.
- <sup>32</sup> Deuteronomy 28:29
- <sup>33</sup> Deuteronomy 28:36-37, 64-65.
- <sup>34</sup> Ruth 1:1-2.
- <sup>35</sup> Ruth 1:4.
- <sup>36</sup> Ezra 9:1-2.
- <sup>37</sup> Millar Burrows, "The Marriage of Boaz and Ruth," *Journal of Biblical Literature*, vol. 59, no. 4 (Dec., 1940): 445.
- <sup>38</sup> Deuteronomy 25:5-6.
- <sup>39</sup> Ruth 4:16-17.
- <sup>40</sup> Ruth 4:14-15.
- <sup>41</sup> See Ruth 4:5.
- <sup>42</sup> Ruth 4:3, 5.

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