Poverty and Poor

Concern for the poor is present throughout the biblical tradition. Although the OT sometimes uses "the poor" as a pious metaphor for those who must depend on God (see Pss. 40:17; 86:1), most often the term refers to those who find themselves on the margins of society because of their economic situation, which leaves them open to exploitation (e.g., Pss. 10:2; 72:12; 109:31). The prophetic tradition usually portrays poverty as the result of actions taken by people of means to deprive the vulnerable of their share of the bounty that God gave to Israel. The prophets condemned the economic exploitation made possible by the corruption of the ancient Israelite legal system. They announced divine judgment on the social, economic, and political system that, they insisted, created poverty (e.g., Isa. 1:21–26; Amos 4:1–4). Deuteronomy maintains that there would be no poor in Israelite society if the people observed the norms of traditional Israelite morality (Deut. 15:4–5). Still, Deuteronomy recognizes that poverty does exist in Israel (15:11), so it calls for Israelites to be generous to the poor (15:7) and suggests strategies to ensure that poverty would never become a permanent feature of Israelite society (15:12–14). Those who wish to follow Jesus are to sell their goods and give the proceeds to the poor (Matt. 19:21). Paul urged generosity toward the poor of Jerusalem (1 Cor. 16:1–3; cf. Rom. 15:26).

At first glance, the needs of poor people and the injustice they experience do not appear to be a central concern of the Torah. Various Hebrew words that are rendered in English as "poor" or "needy" occur fewer than twenty times in the first five books of the Bible. Yet this statistic does not tell the whole story. The narratives of the Torah include

stories of how wealthy people can use their economic power as an advantage in their dealings with those whose social standing is marginal because of their poverty. The stories about Hagar illustrate the vulnerability of the poor (Gen. 16; 21:1–21). Sarah and Abraham used their servant Hagar to meet their needs. She provided Abraham with an heir whom Sarah claimed as her child according to the customs of the day. But when Hagar's presence and service were no longer necessary and when she and her child were deemed troubling following the birth of Isaac, Abraham simply sent them away at Sarah's insistence. But God saved Hagar and her son Ishmael from certain death and promised to make of him "a great nation" (Gen. 21:18).

The story of Pharaoh's enslavement of Jacob's descendants living in Egypt is another case in point. This Egyptian king, who "did not know Joseph" (Exod. 1:8), exemplifies those who use their power to oppress people and thereby "make" poverty. God, of course, took the side of the poor Hebrew slaves against their Egyptian masters. Through Moses, God freed the slaves and brought them to a land where they enjoyed freedom and prosperity (Deut. 8:7–10).

The laws of the Torah serve not only to specify the rights of poor people but also to regulate how more successful Israelites are to deal with those on the margins of the ancient Israelite economy. For example, people who have completed service as bond slaves in repayment of a debt are not simply to be left to their own devices after regaining their freedom. The former slaves are to be given "gifts" p 609 that will enable them to make a fresh start (Deut. 15:13–14). Without such help, former slaves would eventually find that their newly reacquired freedom brought them to the same kind of destitution that led them into bond slavery in the first place. The Deuteronomic law, then, sought to break

the cycle of poverty that kept the poor in economic dependency.

The call for justice on behalf of poor people and the announcement of judgment on their oppressors are central concerns of prophetic preaching. Ancient Israel's prophets were not economic theorists or social critics, but still they were convinced that the traditional moral values of ancient Israel were being violated by people of means for their own enrichment. The prophets sought to make Israel appreciate the consequences of the injustice that infested the ancient Israelite social and economic system. The poor were created by the rich who, in their greed, disregarded the norms of traditional Israelite morality (Jer. 5:27; Ezek. 45:9; Amos 3:9; Hab. 2:9; Mal. 3:5). The prophets believed that the actions of those who oppressed people with no economic power and social standing would bring divine judgment on Israel. The prophets were certain that God called them to announce the inevitability of that judgment.

The preaching of the prophets often included intense criticism of the monarchy and associated institutions, especially the judicial system that facilitated the oppression of the poor (Isa. 5:23; Jer. 22:13–17; Amos 5:7; Mic. 3:9–11). Prophetic criticism was directed also at wealthy landowners. Ancient Israel witnessed the gradual concentration of land in the hands of a few and the creation of a great number of landless farmers who were reduced to hiring themselves out as agricultural workers to survive (Isa. 5:8; Ezek. 22:29; Mic. 2:1–3; Hab. 2:5–6). Also, the crops grown on the land taken from the poor were olives and grapes, since oil and wine made from these crops were valuable commodities. Less land was devoted to the cultivation of grains, which were the staples of the ancient Israelite diet. The result was that the price of grain rose, thus creating a cycle of poverty. The landless poor could not afford to buy

grain, and so they became more indebted to the wealthy landowners. Merchants who defrauded their customers and thereby made life more difficult for the poor also heard their practices condemned by the prophets (Isa. 3:14; Jer. 5:27; Hos. 12:7–8; Amos 8:5; Mic. 6:10–11). The economic system during the monarchic period guaranteed the continuation of poverty in Israel and so was the object of prophetic invectives.

The wisdom literature (e.g., Job, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes) deals with the theme of the poor, but its way of approaching this motif differs markedly from that of the Torah and the prophets. The origins of the wisdom tradition lie in the upper classes of ancient Israelite society. It is not surprising that one does not find the moral outrage at the oppression of the poor in the wisdom literature that one finds in prophetic literature, though the sages did regard the existence of poverty as an affront to God (Prov. 14:31). Ancient Israel's sages address the sons of society's upper class and warn them against laziness and inattention that will inevitably lead to poverty (Prov. 10:4). According to the sages, success demands a disciplined life. The book of Proverbs makes no connection between the problems faced by the poor and the actions of the wealthy, because it looks at the question of poverty not as a social or moral problem in Israelite society but as a potential threat to the well-being of Judah's elite. The sages assume that people "choose" poverty by failing to follow the advice of the elders and teachers to live a disciplined life. A fundamental assumption of the wisdom tradition is that actions have consequences and that these consequences are quite predictable. If experience has taught people anything, it is that poverty comes to those who are lazy and unproductive (Prov. 13:18; 20:13; 23:21; 28:19). Still, like the Torah and the prophets, the wisdom tradition also calls its readers to be

generous toward the poor (Prov. 19:17; 22:9).

The book of Psalms is replete with references to the "poor and needy." It is sometimes difficult to determine if the poor of the psalms are the economically poor or if the poor have become a metaphor pointing to the pious in ancient Israelite society. It appears that at times the language of social and economic stratification and conflict become simply a convention in some psalms to speak about the community of Israel as a whole or about a group of the pious within the community. The psalms consistently portray God as the protector and deliverer of the poor (e.g., 9:12, 18; 10:14; 35:1; 68:10; 69:33; 107:41; 109:31; 113:7; 140:12; 147:6; 149:4). Those who experience exploitation ask for God's protection and strength in their conflict with the rich (12:1; 69:33) because the poor are those who depend on God (10; 25; 34; 37; 82). The poor turn to prayer in the midst of their oppression because they believe in God's love and fidelity (69:13–15; 86:5, 15). They pray that God will vindicate them, establishing justice according to God's righteousness (35:23–24; 140:12). Because the biblical tradition regards material poverty as p 610 an evil, the book of Psalms is able to appropriate and reinterpret the vocabulary of poverty to speak about the life situations faced by the pious, whether they are poor or not.

When the NT speaks of "the poor," however, it speaks both of the "working poor" and the genuinely destitute. Members of both groups had little social status and no political power in the first-century Roman world. They existed on the margins of society and were vulnerable to exploitation at the hands of the wealthy. The apocalyptic perspective that helped shape the preaching of Jesus effects a noticeable shift in the assessment of poverty. Indeed, the poor are the fortunate ones given the reversal of fortunes that will happen when the reign of God begins (Matt.

5:3; Luke 6:20). Nevertheless, the Gospels do not idealize poverty, nor do they suggest that the poor have special access to God. But having no significant possessions, being without political power, and having no social standing eliminate one type of temptation to dismiss Jesus' call to repentance: the temptation that comes with the self-sufficiency brought by wealth (Matt. 19:24; Luke 12:16–21). While the Gospels recognize the injustice that gives rise to poverty, they hold that this injustice will be redressed in the world to come rather than in this world. Still, the Gospels do not imply that poverty can be ignored or that its existence must be fatalistically accepted.

Responding to Jesus' calls to repentance enables the disciples to hear the call for justice that comes from ancient Israel's prophetic tradition. It impels the disciples to sell what they have in order to give to the poor (Matt. 19:21). Indeed, one way for the wealthy to give a tangible sign of their repentance is for them to distribute their goods to people in need. An essential component of a proper response to Jesus' preaching is action that will benefit the poor (Luke 19:8). Generosity toward the poor, then, is a mark of an authentic disciple. The Gospels present the life and teaching of one who was able to live without the security that comes with political power, social status, or material possessions. They challenge his followers to do the same—to be content living on the margins—because the poor are blessed: the kingdom of God belongs to them (Matt. 5:3; Luke 6:20).

Paul gives no evidence of any spiritualization of poverty. For the apostle, the poor are simply those in need. He showed particular concern for the church of Jerusalem because so many of the faithful were in need there (Rom. 15:26; 1 Cor. 16:3). He also advised people to follow his example by supporting themselves from their work (1 Cor. 4:12; 1 Thess.

4:11) and by being happy with a less than comfortable existence.

The Epistle of James provides the single example of a NT author displaying the passion of the Hebrew prophets (5:1–6). James decried the economic stratification and marginalization of the poor that were evident in some Christian communities (2:2–6). James assumed that the Christian life ought to be characterized by a type of solidarity that should make social injustice and the marginalization of the poor unthinkable.

The biblical tradition is unanimous in asserting that material economic poverty should not exist. Poverty is clearly not in accord with the divine will, since God has provided all that is necessary for people to live a good life. Although the tradition is not unanimous in its explanations for the origin of poverty, it does suggest that poverty results from human decision-making. Poverty is not an inevitable feature of human existence. Poverty exists because people allow it to exist. Although sometimes these decisions can be laid at the feet of the poor themselves (e.g., Prov. 10:4), the predominant assertion made by the tradition is that the avarice and greed of the wealthy lead them to unjustly deprive some people of their essential needs (Isa. 10:2). There is no question that the Scriptures recognize the evil of economic oppression. In the face of this oppression, the tradition affirms that God is the protector of those who are unjustly deprived of their access to the bounty of the earth and the fruits of their labor (Jer. 20:13).

Both the OT and the NT pay attention to the people who are unable to control their own destiny because of their lack of economic independence. Without the power that wealth gives, poor people are especially vulnerable to exploitation and oppression. The biblical tradition also finds the experience of the poor people to be an apt

metaphor for the universal need for salvation. Poor people have no other choice but to depend on God. Nevertheless, while the Bible uses poverty as a metaphor to speak about the status of all human beings before God, it never overlooks the injustice that creates the poor. At the same time, the biblical tradition does not idealize the poor as having some sort of special access to God (see Jer. 5:4). Although the Bible uses the cries of the poor to speak about the universal human need for God, it does not confer an aura of holiness around the poor, nor does it understate the need to overcome the forces that create and sustain injustice and oppression.

Indeed, the Bible recognizes the evil of economic oppression and asserts that God hears the cry of the poor. The challenge that the biblical tradition p 611 offers believers is to imitate the character of God and stand with the poor in their struggle to overcome the oppression that they experience in their lives. Believers cannot acquiesce in the degradation and exploitation of the poor and oppressed. They will endeavor to end the marginalization and alienation of the poor. Today, standing with the poor is most often a political act, though there is room for expressing solidarity with the poor by individual acts of benevolence such as almsgiving. Still, those who stand with the poor today are resisting the structures of society that institutionalize poverty. This resistance takes different forms: public advocacy, lobbying, protesting, and other forms of political action. The biblical tradition pushes believers beyond simple benevolence toward poor people and beyond radical pronouncements and scathing criticism of unjust economic systems. Of course, the gospel calls believers to conversion, not revolution. It takes genuine conversion before one can really stand with the poor, before one can become an authentic instrument of justice,

liberation, and reconciliation.

Finally, the biblical tradition does not allow believers to leave social justice to secular political structures. The community of faith should model a type of society founded on solidarity rather than on competition between social and economic classes. The church must take action on behalf of the poor. Without such actions, the community of faith loses its reason for existence, as the people of ancient Israel and Judah discovered. The very existence of poverty is evidence that the church has not been living up to its responsibilities for "there shall be no poor among you" (Deut. 15:4).

Too often, texts such as Deut. 15:11, "there will always be poor people in the land" (NIV [cf. Matt. 26:11; Mark 14:7; John 12:8]), have been read as evidence that poverty is part of the natural order of things. But when these texts are read against the wider backdrop of the entire biblical tradition, it becomes clear that not poverty but mutual concern and support are to be the normal pattern of the community's life. The Bible does not demand that believers adopt any particular economic system. The biblical tradition serves to animate believers to respond to poverty with imagination, creativity, and generosity. Believers recognize that poverty is the creation of those who do not live according to the ideals of the Torah and the gospel, and they are confident that with God's help they can overcome the selfishness and sin that are the obstacles preventing people from standing with the poor so that the biblical ideal can become a reality: "there should be no poor among you" (Deut. 15:4 NIV).

See also Almsgiving; Collection for the Saints; Economic Ethics; Exploitation; Generosity; Greed; Justice; Koinonia; Property and Possessions; Sloth;

Solidarity; World Poverty, World Hunger

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Leslie J. Hoppe, OFM

Property and Possessions

From the beginning, the Bible devotes significant attention to possessions. The narratives of the patriarchs keep account of the flocks and herds that accompany the wanderings of Abraham and his descendants, and these are repeatedly referred to as evidence of divine blessing. Later, when agriculture replaces nomadic herding as a way of life, property comes to include land as well as livestock, and houses and fields are added to the inventory. Certainly this positive depiction of prosperity rules out certain attitudes toward property. There can be neither gnostic rejection of matter as tainted nor any pure asceticism that flatly equates material comfort with spiritual corruption. These and related motifs in Scripture, coupled with the values and inclinations of our own society, have given rise to a contemporary school of thought that understands wealth as an essential sign of God's favor. Some claim it as a central aspect of the welfare that God desires for the faithful, to be actively pursued as such. But the biblical witness is much more various than this suggests and much more ambivalent in its attitude toward possessions. We will return to this question after a summary review of canonical sources.

Paralleling the patriarchal stories of expanding household wealth are the covenant law and prophetic materials that associate well-being, including abundance and material security, with righteousness and fidelity (e.g., Deut. 11:13–15). (They correspondingly threaten disaster, poverty, and suffering as the consequence of faithlessness to God.) Framed in the legal and prophetic texts in terms of the covenant fidelity and well-being of Israel as a whole (e.g., Lev. 26:3–5), in the later wisdom tradition they become promises of abundance addressed to individuals

based on their personal righteousness and favor with God. This strand can be represented by a couple of examples: "The blessing of the LORD makes rich" (Prov. 10:22); "Prosperity rewards the righteous" (Prov. 13:21). Because of the close links between piety, moral rectitude, and practical prudence in this material, one finds in Proverbs a related strand of material that treats wealth and abundance as the natural reward of diligence and sound judgment—for example, "A slack hand causes poverty, but the hand of the diligent makes rich" (Prov. 10:4). Taken alone, these elements of the tradition seem consistent with the views of the popular "prosperity gospel."

But these are not the only biblical perspectives on wealth, even within the books cited above. Alongside Deuteronomy's promises of abundance and Isaiah's visions of grain and oil and tribute flowing into Jerusalem stand dire warnings. They caution against the temptation to trust in abundance and forget the God who provides it (Deut. 32:10–18), p 637 and they offer vigorous denunciations of those whose wealth turns them to idolatry (Isa. 2:7–8). Even the wisdom tradition is far from univocal. Proverbs can speak of ill-gotten riches (Prov. 10:2) and of the "deceptive wages" of the wicked (Prov. 11:18 NIV). The psalms that promise that those who fear the Lord "will abide in prosperity" (Ps. 25:13) are matched by those that lament the success of the ruthless and powerful and the impoverishment of the righteous (Ps. 10:1–6). If wealth and prosperity can be viewed as divine blessings on the righteous and as the natural result of hard work and sagacity, they can also be viewed as constant temptations to idolatry and as the tools and frequently the fruit of injustice and oppression. The prophets denounce the avid pursuit of wealth. Jeremiah declares, "Everyone is greedy for unjust gain" (Jer.

6:13), and "Their houses are full of treachery; therefore they have become great and rich" (Jer. 5:27). Zechariah pronounces judgment on those who accumulate wealth while ignoring the poor: "Just as, when I called, they would not hear, so, when they called, I would not hear, says the Lord of hosts, and I scattered them with a whirlwind among all the nations that they had not known. Thus the land they left was desolate" (Zech. 7:13–14).

The NT displays the same diversity and complexity of views about possessions, with both substantial overlap and significant departures from the OT. The theme of wealth as an occasion of idolatry, something that tempts its possessors to trust in economic security rather than in God, remains prominent. Along with explicit instruction equating covetousness with idolatry (Col. 3:5), multiple passages in the Pastoral Epistles warn against the love of money. In 1 Timothy the author goes so far as to call such love "a root of all kinds of evil" (1 Tim. 6:10). There are also multiple sayings of Jesus that address the problem of devotion to riches, including the blunt pronouncement "You cannot serve God and wealth" (Matt. 6:24; Luke 16:13).

Also brought forward from the OT is the suspicion of wealth as frequently being the result of injustice and the means of corruption. Luke repeatedly announces the coming reign of God in terms of the vindication of the poor over against the rich (e.g., Luke 1:53; 4:18), and the book of Revelation similarly identifies the saints as victims of economic oppression, whereas the whore of Babylon and her allies are wealthy and overindulged (e.g., Rev. 2:9; 17:3–4; 18:3, 23–24). Perhaps most vivid of all is the Letter of James, which contains a withering attack on the wealthy who hoard money while others are in want and use their economic power to exploit and cheat the poor, compromising the

systems of justice (Jas. 5:1–6).

Particular to the NT is the concern with property and possessions as barriers to following Christ. The story of a particular well-off individual called to follow Jesus and refusing to do so appears with variations in all three Synoptic Gospels (Matt. 19:16–22; Mark 10:17–22; Luke 18:18–23). In all three versions it is the fact of his many possessions that keeps him from heeding the call, and he departs grieving for the life he cannot embrace. The parable of the sower, likewise in all three Synoptic Gospels, makes a similar point: the "riches and pleasures of life" (Luke 8:14) choke off the seed of the gospel and prevent its coming to fruition.

Finally, ownership of property in the NT is regarded as a call to responsibility for the well-being of the whole community, ultimately extending even to enemies. Believers are to share the means of bodily support with those in need and thus show their love to be more than words on the tongue (1 John 3:16–18). The early community in Acts offers an example of property held in common and distributed according to need (Acts 4:32–37). Elsewhere, the practical aim of sharing within the church is said to be "balance" or "equity" between those who have abundance and those who are in want (2 Cor. 8:13), but its touchstone is the overflowing generosity of Christ, who "for your sakes became … poor, so that by his poverty you might become rich" (2 Cor. 8:9). We are to do good to all as it lies in our power and explicitly to provide for the needs of our enemies, giving them food and drink as need requires (Rom. 12:20). The weight and the seriousness of these obligations are indicated in Matt. 25:31–46, where material care for the needy serves as the test of discipleship and the gate of heaven.

It is worth noting what does not come forward into the NT, which is much of the wisdom literature's confidence that faithfulness will bring

prosperity. It remains that those who trust in God are promised the things they need to sustain their faithful service, but the emphasis is on necessities, not wealth. And numerous countertexts (e.g., Heb. 11:32–40), not to mention the Passion Narrative itself, make it difficult to maintain that fidelity will consistently find a material reward, or that material prosperity is an essential part of what God wants for faithful people. Similarly, the strand of wisdom literature that counts prosperity the reliable result of diligence and so to be taken as a mark of good character finds little validation in p 638 the NT. Traces of it remain in the insistence that those who expect to eat must continue to work and contribute to the community, and in the admonition that the former thieves take up work so that they may contribute to the poor.

The Bible gives us rich and theologically profound themes to guide our thinking regarding the accumulation, use, and distribution of property and possessions. The nuance, variety, and depth of its witness resist codification into simple rules about what one might earn, or own, or keep. At the same time, it provides powerful barriers against wholesale accommodation to consumer culture and its ethos of endless accumulation. Any version of the gospel that equates the fullness that God promises and desires for all with a celebration of personal wealth in the face of the dire poverty of millions of the world's inhabitants cannot stand as a credible response to the whole witness of Scripture.

See also Capitalism; Collection for the Saints; Consumerism; Economic Ethics; Greed; Idolatry; Koinonia; Land; Materialism; Poverty and Poor; Resource Allocation; Stewardship; Tithe, Tithing; Wealth

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Sondra E. Wheeler

Wealth

The Witness of Scripture

Scripture contains an abundance of material devoted to the topic of wealth. Yet, although the biblical writers speak consistently about wealth, they do not speak about wealth consistently. The variety of voices and perspectives within the canon means that the Bible's treatments of wealth and possessions cannot easily be synthesized. Here the data will be summarized in six categories, with the recognition that these representative divisions are illustrative and not exhaustive (see Wheeler 107–34).

Wealth as the result of God's blessing. With the biblical acknowledgment that God's creation of the material world is good comes the recognition that material possessions are gifts from God intended for use and enjoyment. In the Pentateuch, for example, God's promise of deliverance from Egypt is repeatedly framed with reference to the people's relocation to a fruitful "land flowing with milk and honey," a pledge of communal success in an agrarian context (e.g., Exod. 3:8; Lev. 20:24; Num. 13:27; Deut. 6:3). The blessing of land, however, is associated with the confession that all the earth ultimately belongs to Yahweh (Lev. 25:23; cf. Ps. 24:1: "The earth is the LORD's and all that is in it"). The theological conviction that Israel's land and possessions are held in trust on behalf of God places certain responsibilities on those who steward these material goods in the present. Custody of the land is a gift from God, given to the people at the time of their exodus from Egypt. Therefore, this divine blessing entails the duty of caring for the marginalized: "You shall not wrong p 828 or oppress a resident alien, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt" (Exod. 22:21; cf. 22:22–27; 23:9; for a

similar expression of the idea that national prosperity should be followed by generosity to the less fortunate, see Deut. 15:1–8).

The prophets also frequently articulate visions of future redemption in terms of abundance and agricultural prosperity (e.g., Isa. 60:6–18; Jer. 33:1–9). Even the book of Revelation, which contains one of the most stinging indictments of luxurious excess in the entire canon (17:1–18:24), is punctuated with an eschatological picture of material blessing for the people of God in the new heaven and new earth (21:1–22:21). Thus, the biblical tradition emphasizes the inherent goodness of both the created order and the enjoyment of material blessings as an aspect of God's creation.

If most of the texts in this category stress the collective dimensions of God's blessing, there is also a strand of the OT that tends to individualize these promises, so that personal prosperity becomes a sign of divine favor: "Who, then, are those who fear the LORD? He will instruct them in the ways they should choose. They will spend their days in prosperity, and their descendants will inherit the land" (Ps. 25:12–13 TNIV; cf. Prov. 10:22; 13:21, 25). That this notion of righteousness bringing riches is muted, if not altogether absent, in the NT witness is an important factor in the attempt to develop a biblical perspective on wealth and possessions.

Wealth as a resource for meeting human needs. Related to the affirmation of the inherent goodness of material possessions is the concept that those with wealth have a responsibility to share their resources with those in need. The legal traditions in the OT, for example, contain numerous provisions such as the poor tithe, the sabbatical year, and the Jubilee—all designed to provide assistance for the disadvantaged (e.g., Deut. 14:22–29; 15:1–11; Lev. 25:8–55; cf. Sir. 4:1–10). Indeed, a

frequent refrain in the Deuteronomic legislation centers on the responsibility of the community to care for the marginalized, particularly resident aliens, orphans, and widows (Deut. 14:29; 16:11, 14; 26:12–13; cf. Job 22:9; Ps. 68:5; Isa. 10:1–3). Adherence to the commandments is said in Deut. 15:4 to lead to an absence of the needy among the people of God.

In the NT, the book of Acts contains several examples of resource sharing within the early church. Picking up on the refrain of Deut. 15:4, the author of Acts notes that the result of the refusal of members of the messianic community in Jerusalem to claim private ownership of possessions, holding instead all things in common, was that "there was not a needy person among them" (4:32–35; cf. 2:44–45; 6:1–7). The NT Epistles provide numerous instances of, or calls for, the provision of material relief for those in need within the community of faith (e.g., Rom. 12:6–8; Phil. 4:10–20; Jas. 2:15–16). Paul's efforts to organize a financial contribution for impoverished believers in Jerusalem among the largely gentile congregations of his mission stands as an exemplary episode of mutual assistance within the nascent church (Rom. 15:25–32; 1 Cor. 16:1–4; 2 Cor. 8:1–9:15). The author of 1 John aptly summarizes the christological foundation for this kind of beneficence: "We know love by this, that he laid down his life for us—and we ought to lay down our lives for one another. How does God's love abide in anyone who has the world's goods and sees a brother or sister in need and yet refuses help?" (1 John 3:16–17). Thus, an important strand in the biblical tradition is the notion that those who receive the blessing of material abundance have an obligation to share with those of lesser means.

Wealth as a reward for labor. A third thread, found particularly in the wisdom literature in the OT and the Apocrypha, emphasizes wealth as

the outcome of diligent or prudent work. Conversely, a lack of resources is occasionally seen as the result of idleness: "The lazy do not roast their game, but the diligent obtain precious wealth" (Prov. 12:27; cf. 8:18, 21; 10:4; 12:11, 24; 13:4; Sir. 2:12). This notion is at least partially reflected in 2 Thess. 3:6–13, a passage that encourages work and warns against idleness for members of the Christian community.

Wealth as a temptation to idolatry. Whereas the three previous categories tend to view wealth in relatively positive light, the next three emphasize the perils of riches. Numerous texts in Scripture underscore, for example, the close relationship between wealth and idolatry. Here the danger of wealth is found particularly in (1) the ability of affluence to foster self-reliance rather than trust in God; and (2) the close connection between prosperity and the worship of pagan gods (Deut. 32:10–18; Isa. 2:5–18; Jer. 5:7–8; Ezek. 7:19–24; Hos. 2:5–9). Indeed, greed, idolatry, and sexual immorality form a kind of unholy triumvirate in Jewish assessment of pagan vice. Wealth is transitory and will mean nothing on the day of judgment (Ps. 49:10–20; Prov. 11:4, 28; 23:1–5; Eccl. 5:10–12; 5:1–6; Matt. 6:19–21; 1 Tim. 6:6–7; Jas. 1:9–11). Jesus' declaration that one "cannot serve God and wealth" emphasizes the enslaving, idolatrous power of wealth (Matt. 6:24 // Luke 16:13). Similarly, the parable of the rich fool in p 829 Luke 12:16–21 identifies the imprudence of an economic autonomy that ignores God. In both Colossians and Ephesians, the connection between greed and idolatry is explicit: greed *is* idolatry (Eph. 5:5; Col. 3:5; cf. 1 Tim. 6:17–19).

This connection between wealth and idolatry relates to an important aspect of the Bible's language about wealth and its converse, poverty: in the ancient world wealth and poverty were not merely economic categories. Since economic activities in antiquity were deeply embedded

in social relationships, to be wealthy was as much to enjoy cultural privilege, social power, and elite status as it was to possess money. Conversely, to be poor was to be marginalized, shamed, and excluded, quite often because of a lack of financial resources, but not exclusively so. This is perhaps best illustrated in the Gospel of Luke, where the rich (*plousios*, *plouteō*) often are identified as those with power and honor (1:53–54; 6:24–26; 14:12; 16:19–31; 21:1), while the poor (*ptōchos*) often are the socially excluded and dispossessed (4:18; 6:20; 7:22; 14:13, 21; 16:20, 22; 21:3; but cf. 18:22; 19:8, where the poor are recipients of alms) (see Green). To the extent that the wealthy possess power and prestige, they are perhaps particularly prone to the temptation of trusting in the idol of their own resources.

Wealth as the product of injustice. If the previous tradition stresses the spiritual threat of wealth, the next accentuates the extent to which wealth can stem from and perpetuate social injustice. Particularly in the prophetic tradition, wealth is frequently associated with dishonest gain (Mic. 6:10–14) or oppression of the poor (Eccl. 5:8; Isa. 10:1–4; Amos 2:6–8; 4:1; cf. Exod. 23:6). Zechariah 7:9–10 stands as an apt summary of much of the prophetic witness: "Thus says the LORD of hosts: Render true judgments, show kindness and mercy to one another; do not oppress the widow, the orphan, the alien, or the poor; and do not devise evil in your hearts against one another." Instead of unjust treatment of the poor, the people of God are consistently called to defend the cause of the needy. Psalm 72 is a royal psalm that voices the hope that the king will reflect God's justice on the earth: "Give the king your justice, O God, and your righteousness to a king's son. May he judge your people with righteousness, and your poor with justice. May the mountains yield prosperity for the people, and the hills, in righteousness. May he defend

the cause of the poor of the people, give deliverance to the needy, and crush the oppressor" (Ps. 72:1–4).

In the NT too the accumulation of wealth often is associated with economic injustice. The parable of the rich man and Lazarus offers an evocative commentary on the dangers faced by the wealthy if they neglect the responsibility to demonstrate justice for the poor (Luke 16:19–31). Perhaps more than any other NT book, James accuses the rich of economic oppression (5:1–6), and it defines "pure and undefiled religion" as "to care for orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world" (1:27). James's passionate denunciation of the rich is matched by the critique of the exploitative and dehumanizing nature of Roman imperial commerce found in Rev. 18:1–24. These texts that speak against the unjust pursuit and accumulation of wealth are, of course, protests against contingent abuses. Yet this biblical tradition ought to cause all those who possess (relative) wealth to think about the ways in which material prosperity and social power might result from and maintain unjust economic structures.

Wealth as an obstacle to discipleship. Related to the previous motif, a notable theme in the NT is that attachment to wealth can serve as a stumbling block to following Jesus. This notion is exemplified in Jesus' encounter with a rich man in Mark 10:17–31 (cf. Matt. 19:16–22; Luke 18:18–23). The man is saddened when Jesus instructs, "Sell what you own, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me" (10:21). Jesus' response to the man's grief and departure acknowledges the difficulty of discipleship for the wealthy: "How hard it will be for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God!" (10:23). Similarly, in the parable of the sower, "the lure

of wealth" is one of the thorns that choke the seed and prevent its growth (Mark 4:1–19, especially vv. 18–19; cf. 1 John 2:15–17; Rev. 3:14–22). Conversely, dispossession of goods sometimes signals faithful discipleship (Mark 10:28–31; cf. Mark 1:16–20; Matt. 9:9; 13:44–46; Luke 19:1–10).

The Tradition and Scripture

There is an equally great diversity represented among the early Christian authors of the second century and beyond who grappled with Scripture's witness as it bears on pecuniary matters. One point of unanimity among all church fathers, however, is the common assumption that faith and finance are intimately intertwined. This perspective, of course, is one that the patristic writers inherited from biblical tradition. Although today one sometimes observes—at least in practice, if not in pronouncement—a sharp division between theology and economics, no single important Christian author of the first several centuries of the Common Era advocates such a separation. Those who desire that their beliefs and practices p 830 be shaped by the teachings of Scripture, and those who wish to live under the moral authority of the OT and the NT, will necessarily have to wrestle with economic questions, for the questions are raised first and constantly within the Bible itself. Any individual, church, or tradition that fails consistently to identify economic issues as central to the understanding and embodiment of the Christian faith is simply unfaithful to the testimony of Scripture.

Given the number of harsh pronouncements against wealth found in Scripture, it is not surprising that as the church gradually rose in social prominence and collected a greater number of prosperous believers in

the second and third centuries, thoughtful Christians began to wrestle with the implications of the Bible's teachings on wealth. Clement of Alexandra (c. 150–211/216), for instance, penned what is probably the first extended reflection on the problem of wealth for believers. His treatise *Quis dives salvetur* ("Who Is the Rich Man Being Saved?") is an extended homily on Mark 10:17–31 aimed at demonstrating to rich Christians in Alexandria that salvation is possible for the wealthy. Clement interprets Jesus' command to dispossess goods allegorically, so that what one must abandon is not money but rather the desire for, and excessive attachment to, material goods. Such an understanding of this difficult text has been quite popular in Christian history. Clement does, however, advocate both unostentatious living for the wealthy as the outer form of interior detachment (see *Paed.* 3.10–11) and giving alms to the poor (*Quis. div.* 32). In his discussion of almsgiving, Clement suggests that it is possible for the rich to purchase eternal reward through the giving of money to the destitute in the present life. Clement's is an important early voice in the development of the doctrine known as "redemptive almsgiving," the notion that providing material assistance to the poor redeems (or cancels or cleanses) sin. Aside from Clement, advocates of redemptive almsgiving include such documents and church fathers as 2 *Clement* (16.1–4), *Didache* (4.5–8), *Epistle of Barnabas* (19.9–11), *Shepherd of Hermas* (51.5–9), Cyprian (*Works and Almsgiving*), Ambrose (*Hel.* 20; 76), and Augustine (*Enchir.* 67; 69; 70). This solution conveniently allowed the rich to maintain the bulk of their wealth while also providing tangible financial assistance to the poor.

Voices more radical than Clement's can be found. The preaching of John Chrysostom, for example, is at times quite sharp in its assessment of the dangers of wealth and abuses perpetuated by the wealthy. Even

more extreme is the development of the monastic tradition, with its emphasis on voluntary poverty and asceticism. The success of the monastic movement probably played a part in discouraging the church from serious reflection on the spiritual and ethical issues associated with wealth, for monastics could aspire to practices of limited and shared possessions, while the majority of believers were free to accumulate wealth of their own, sharing some of it with the religious and some of it with the involuntary poor.

In the twentieth century, advocates of the social gospel and liberation theology, along with certain strands of Catholic social teaching and evangelicals who emphasize biblical traditions of justice, have drawn upon the Bible to offer significant challenges to the self-interested accumulation of wealth that forms the basis of the modern capitalist system. However, proponents of the so-called prosperity gospel, both in the United States and increasingly in the developing world, have focused on one relatively minor strand in the scriptural witness to claim that material prosperity, including financial success, will accompany the faithful.

Any attempt to come to terms with Scripture's teaching on wealth and possessions must take into account the diversity of the canonical witness. There is no easy way to synthesize the various traditions. One approach would insist that economic ethics, or moral decisions about things such as wealth, must be rooted in the larger story of God's creativity and salvific action narrated in the witness of Scripture.

Yet, this canonical diversity can be seen as a good thing. The diversity of Scripture can be used to help articulate different messages to different audiences in different contexts. There are times when the harsh prophetic denunciations issued by Isaiah and James will need to serve as

a grave warning to rich Christians whose careless and selfish pursuit of wealth is defrauding and perhaps even murdering the poor. There are times when believers will need to be reminded that wealth can lead to idolatry, that wealth is portrayed in Scripture as an anti-God power that threatens to enslave the people of God (e.g., Luke 16:13). And there are times when followers of Jesus will need to be reminded of the powerful way in which wealth can be used to meet the material needs of others, when those with an abundance of possessions will be invited to participate in a sharing of goods aimed at providing financial relief for the poor—an endeavor itself modeled after the self-giving love of Jesus Christ (2 Cor. 8:9).

See also Almsgiving; Economic Ethics; Generosity; Idolatry; Jubilee; Justice, Distributive; Koinonia; p 831 Liberationist Ethics; Loans; Poverty and Poor; Property and Possessions; Stewardship; Tithe, Tithing

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David J. Downs