

UNIVERSITY OF SHEFFIELD

JESUS AND THE POOR:  
WESTERN BIBLICAL SCHOLARSHIP, STRUCTURAL VIOLENCE,  
AND POSTCOLONIALISM

SUBMITTED TO PROFESSOR JAMES G. CROSSLEY

IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF

PHD BIBLICAL STUDIES

BY

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## ABBREVIATIONS

AASOR	<i>Annual of the American Schools of Oriental Research</i>
ABD	<i>Anchor Bible Dictionary</i>
AJS	<i>Association for Jewish Studies Review</i>
ASQ	<i>Arab Studies Quarterly</i>
Bib Int	<i>Biblical Interpretation</i>
BBR	<i>Bulletin for Biblical Research</i>
CBQ	<i>Catholic Biblical Quarterly</i>
CBR	<i>Currents in Biblical Research</i>
Cross Curr.	<i>Cross Currents</i>
Crit. Inquiry	<i>Critical Inquiry</i>
EHR	<i>Economic History Review</i>
ExpTim	<i>The Expository Times</i>
HLS	<i>Holy Land Studies</i>
IEJ	<i>Israel Exploration Journal</i>
JAAR	<i>Journal of the American Academy of Religion</i>
JBL	<i>Journal of Biblical Literature</i>
JES	<i>Journal of Ecumenical Studies</i>
JCR	<i>Journal of Conflict Resolution</i>
JPR	<i>Journal of Peace Research</i>
JPS	<i>Journal of the Polynesian Society</i>
JRCP	<i>Journal of Religion, Conflict and Peace</i>

Journeys	<i>Journeys: The International Journal of Travel and Travel Writing</i>
J Rel	<i>Journal of Religion</i>
JSHJ	<i>Journal for the Study of the Historical Jesus</i>
JSJ	<i>Journal of Jewish Studies</i>
JSNT	<i>Journal for the Study of the New Testament</i>
JSOT	<i>Journal for the Study of the Old Testament</i>
JTS	<i>Journal of Theological Studies</i>
NTS	<i>New Testament Studies</i>
PR	<i>Politics and Religion</i>
RBL	<i>Review of Biblical Literature</i>
ZAW	<i>Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft</i>
ZNW	<i>Zeitschrift für die neutestamentliche Wissenschaft</i>

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significantly by Robert Beckford's response to my saying that I was 'doing a PhD on the historical Jesus'!

I am grateful for criticisms, feedback and encouragement from various people at the Sheffield biblical studies postgraduate seminar, to Harry Middleton for discussing aspects of this work with me on various occasions, and to Dan Robins and Pete Rawling for providing a mixture of encouragement and outright mockery. Thanks to Robert Myles for making valuable comments on chapter 5, and to Robert Logan for comments on my introduction, and helpful comments on lots of other things in life. I would give special thanks to my parents, whose support and kindness has effectively allowed me the privilege and leisure to simply ask and pursue questions that are important to me in depth, a benefit which will undoubtedly shape the rest of my life. And finally I would like to thank Chloe Skinner – who has had to put up with my ramblings and musings more than anyone else – for being supportive, unspeakably patient, and loving throughout.

## INTRODUCTION

The rich array of Historical-Jesus reconstructions calls for a critical epistemological inquiry not only into the authority but also into the rhetoricity of Historical-Jesus discourses, probing how they can say what they say and for whom and to what ends scholars produce Historical-Jesus research.

- Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza<sup>1</sup>

### **Introduction**

The fundamental aim of this work is to explore the relationship between Jesus and ‘the poor’, with a focus on Luke 4:18-19, and the presentation and treatment of this subject in Western scholarship in particular. Although the subject matter is close to the concerns of traditional liberation theology, as will be explained below, the perspective offered in this work is more in line with postcolonial theology than liberation theology.

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<sup>1</sup> Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *Jesus and the Politics of Interpretation* (London: Continuum, 2000), p.3



## Western Jesus Scholarship and Its Critics

The ‘correct’ way to read the New Testament is still often dictated by white men in the Western world, and there remains a pretention among many of these figures, known as New Testament scholars, that their exegetical and historical-‘critical’ tools will lead them – and the rest of the world – to understand these ancient texts properly and as they should be understood. In this respect, much Western New Testament scholarship appears to have a bloated sense of its own value and findings, a view which is allowed to persist because of the insularity of this discipline that appears at times to be desperately isolated, detached, and immune from any serious critique. In recent years some Western New Testament scholars have sought to address this problem, providing critiques of the discipline as a whole. R.S. Sugirtharajah’s extensive work on postcolonial biblical criticism should obviously be mentioned at this point,<sup>2</sup> and in particular, his recent volume *Still at the Margins*. As Ralph Broadbent contends in his contribution to the volume, ‘while lip service might occasionally be paid to the role of ideology within biblical studies, first-world scholarship is still largely configured to support the rich and powerful and to discriminate against women, the poor and the ‘other’. It is not a neutral enterprise.’<sup>3</sup> But postcolonial critics are not the only ones making such critiques. Other such critiques have also been offered by James Crossley, who has highlighted the way in which particular cultural and ideological trends – from neo-orientalism, to neoliberalism – have impacted the work of

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<sup>2</sup> See R.S. Sugirtharajah, *The Bible and the Third World: Precolonial, Colonial and Postcolonial Encounters* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), R.S. Sugirtharajah, *Postcolonial Criticism and Biblical Interpretation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), and R.S. Sugirtharajah (ed), *Still at the Margins: Biblical Scholarship Fifteen Years after the Voices from the Margin* (London: T&T Clark, 2008)

<sup>3</sup> Ralph Broadbent, ‘Writing a Bestseller in Biblical Studies or All Washed UP on Dover Beach? *Voices from the Margin* and the Future of (British) Biblical Studies’ in *Still at the Margins*, pp. 139-150 (148)

New Testament scholars,<sup>4</sup> and Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza has critiqued at length what she has called, ‘the elitist, anti-Jewish, colonialist, racist and anti-feminist tendencies of positivist Historical-Jesus scholarship.’<sup>5</sup> Although I will not step so far back from the discipline as Crossley, Fiorenza, and Sugirtharajah have done, such works have had a significant impact on my thinking, and their critiques will be incorporated.

At this stage I must make clear a fundamental contention of this work, which will be so obvious to some that it need not be said, and will be so unfamiliar to others that it will not even register: that Western New Testament scholarship – and the claims that it makes about Jesus – is nothing more than *Western* New Testament scholarship. Although the Western academy has professed a monopoly on knowledge in general, and especially on biblical interpretation, such a position can no longer be held in the postcolonial world. Integral to this work is the acknowledgement that the work I am discussing is merely ‘Western’ and should be framed as such, in order to dislodge any pretensions about the universality of the claims that emerge from North American and British university departments and seminaries. Academic work does not take place in an ideological vacuum, a fact that is completely obvious to many in other academic disciplines, but a fact that is apparently unpalatable or even incomprehensible to many New Testament scholars.

Before going any further, it will be necessary to define some terms. In this work I will use the term ‘Western’ interchangeably and almost as short-hand for ‘North American and British’, assuming North America and the UK as the ideological centres of ‘the West’.

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<sup>4</sup> James G. Crossley, *Jesus in an Age of Neoliberalism* (London: Equinox, 2012), James G. Crossley, *Jesus in an Age of Terror* (London: Equinox, 2008)

<sup>5</sup> Fiorenza, *Politics of Interpretation*, pp.13-14

By the terms ‘Western’ and ‘West’ I hope to connote a number of dominant and interconnected ideologies, including, first and foremost, imperialism, and then neoliberalism, (neo-)orientalism, and certain perspectives on Middle East politics,<sup>6</sup> all of which, broadly speaking, unite North America and Britain in particular, and which find manifestations in New Testament scholarship, as has been highlighted elsewhere,<sup>7</sup> and which I will expand upon at points in this work. As Germany has been replaced by North America as the centre for biblical scholarship, I will not discuss any German scholarship in particular depth. The term ‘scholarship’ also warrants definition here. By ‘New Testament scholarship’ I refer to the body of literature that is generally read and familiar within the discourse of New Testament studies. I do not use the terms ‘scholar’ and ‘scholarship’ reverentially, or to suggest the critical quality or value that these terms might imply, but simply to denote work that is part of the New Testament studies canon, or at least within the line-of-sight of the average Western New Testament scholar.

### **Postcolonialism**

The terms ‘postcolonial’ and ‘postcolonialism’ also need defining here, in some detail, for broadly speaking the following work could be classified as postcolonial in its methodological framework. Keller, Nausner and Rivera offer perhaps the most concise introduction to these terms as they relate to theology and biblical studies in their book *Postcolonial Theologies*. The authors argue that the ‘post’ in ‘postcolonial’ means

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<sup>6</sup> Which I will discuss more in chapters 4 and 5

<sup>7</sup> See Crossley, *Age of Neoliberalism* and Crossley, *Age of Terror*

something like ‘beyond’ – ‘as an ethical intention and direction’.<sup>8</sup> Western imperialism, they note, is, ‘the frame of reference for the term... which emerges in the struggles of the colonies of Europe for their independence.’<sup>9</sup> Keller, Nausner, and Rivera point out that postcolonialism is not simply anti-imperialism, a ‘simple and direct oppositionalism’; the use of ‘post’ here is similar, in this respect, to the ‘post’ in ‘postmodernism’, which implies a critique of and transcendence of modernism. Keller, Nausner and Rivera continue:

“post” indicates not a chronological but a critical idea, and so indicates the intention to go *beyond* the colonial in all its forms... And thus, postcolonialism is a discourse of resistance to any subsequent related projects of dominance – as, for instance, those of economic globalization and United States hyperpower.<sup>10</sup>

This present work seeks to examine recent Jesus scholarship from this perspective, paying particular attention to the way in which ‘projects of dominance’ have influenced Western constructions of Jesus, and seeking to expose and challenge these constructions. However, this work will not necessarily aim to construct Jesus as a necessarily liberating figure. The aim of this work is not to present an alternative, liberating construction of Jesus as many liberation theologians have attempted (although I imagine this work could contribute to such projects), for postcolonialism calls for a more fundamental repositioning of biblical texts and the way they should be treated. As Sugirtharajah puts it:

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<sup>8</sup> Catherine Keller, Michael Nausner, and Mayra Rivera, ‘Introduction: Alien/Nation, Liberation, and the Postcolonial Underground’ in *Postcolonial Theologies: Divinity and Empire* (St Louis, Missouri: Chalice Press, 2004), pp.1-19 (6)

<sup>9</sup> Keller, Nausner, and Rivera, ‘Introduction’, p.6

<sup>10</sup> Keller, Nausner, and Rivera, ‘Introduction’, pp.7-8

the Christian Bible is not subjected to a postcolonial gaze in order to make the texts come alive and provide solace and comfort to those devout (or in some cases not so devout) readers who also have social and political perceptiveness. In an age when many people question traditional sources of moral authority, sacred texts – the Bible among them – may not be the only place to look for answers to abstract or existential problems. The purpose of postcolonial reading is not to invest texts with properties which no longer have relevance to our context, or with excessive and exclusive theological claims which invalidate other claims. It seeks to puncture the Christian Bible's Western protection and pretensions, and to help reposition it in relation to its oriental roots and Eastern heritage.<sup>11</sup>

One could question the extent to which I, as a white British male, can employ the methods of postcolonial critique. Besides the fact that the discourse of postcolonialism has arguably been developed in the Western academy as much as anywhere else, as some of its critics have noted,<sup>12</sup> I would also cite Sugirtharajah, once again, in my defence, who states,

It would be lamentable to resort to personal experience as a hermeneutic trump card. In that case, one would have to be a Jew to resist anti-Semitism, a gay to support homosexual rights, and poor in order to advocate welfare reforms. If one took this to its logical conclusion, then only animals could do animal theology and only trees could talk about deforestation.<sup>13</sup>

Some have approached this subject of what part a 'white liberal' can play in postcolonial or liberation theology with quite some caution.<sup>14</sup> I am hopeful that skin colour and privilege do not necessarily prevent any person from being critical of what they see, whether that is a specific oppressive reading of a text, or a more general phenomenon, such as the Western academic pretence that we see across the discipline of biblical studies.

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<sup>11</sup> Sugirtharajah, *Third World*, pp.257-58

<sup>12</sup> See Arif Dirlik, 'The Postcolonial Aura: Third World Criticism in the Age of Global Capitalism', *Crit. Inquiry* 20 vol. 2, 1994, pp.328-356

<sup>13</sup> Sugirtharajah, *Third World*, p.270

<sup>14</sup> See, for example, Daniel L. Smith-Christopher, 'Abolitionist Exegesis: A Quaker Proposal for White Liberals' in *Still at the Margins*, pp.128-38

Nonetheless, it will be clear to any postcolonial biblical critic who encounters this work that I remain influenced by and (overly, some would say) engaged with Western scholarship and ways of reading the Bible. Indeed, I am not sure that many postcolonial biblical critics will appreciate my use of the term ‘postcolonial’, being that the first three chapters of this work probably appear quite safely camped within the paradigm of Western biblical studies. As Sugirtharajah has noted, even ‘outsiders’ who do not fit the profile of the ‘white, male and middle-class’ biblical scholar are ‘forced to interact with and become part of the ruling models provided by Western biblical scholarship... locked into an enterprise that is directed and constrained by Western interests and thought patterns.’<sup>15</sup> I am hopeful that, nonetheless, I can still bring something from postcolonial criticism to bear on the subject matter in a productive manner, and that perhaps my engagement in the first few chapters with more traditional Western discourses, like the Quest for the Historical Jesus, will make the following work more palatable to the average Western New Testament scholar, bringing some broad postcolonial critiques into specific Western-led debates, and creating some sort of dialogue between the marginal and the mainstream.

### **Jesus, the Quest, and Postcolonialism**

Postcolonial criticism seems to pose two immediate challenges to Western Jesus scholarship, and to the so-called Quest for the Historical Jesus in particular. Firstly, it seems apt for a postcolonial voice to critique the Quest for the faith that it professes in Western historical method. Chief amongst the aims of the Quest for the Historical Jesus has

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<sup>15</sup> R.S. Sugirtharajah, ‘Biblical Scholarship after *Voices*: An Introduction’ in *Still at the Margins*, pp.1-7 (6-7)

been to scrape away ideological presuppositions that may have influenced the New Testament writers' presentation of Jesus in order to find the facts about the man who once lived; the goal of scholars engaged in this task has been to be objective, detached and ideologically disinterested. In recent years, however, biblical scholars have begun to acknowledge that numerous different Historical Jesuses have been produced in recent decades and that they are invariably influenced by the ideological presuppositions and aims of their modern constructors themselves. As a result of this growing consensus, the dream of the Historical Jesus appears to be fading,<sup>16</sup> and Jacob Neusner's description of the Quest as 'monumentally irrelevant to the study of history', representing 'a brief chapter in Christian theology of our own times', appears ever more convincing.<sup>17</sup> It is worth noting, nonetheless, that despite the Questers' alleged interest in historical-critical method, the Quest is paradoxically marked by a neglect of basic Western historical methods. It is remarkable that after over a century of Jesus Quests, scholars such as Robert Miller and Amy-Jill Levine must still state, for example, that a historical approach to Jesus 'lacks integrity' if it cannot potentially lead to 'negative historical conclusions',<sup>18</sup> a statement which would be obvious to any historian who actually employs Western historical-critical tools, but a view which is strongly resisted by some conservative Jesus scholars. Miller's comments, however, bear repeating and highlight the way in which the gospels have been

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<sup>16</sup> See Scot McKnight, 'The Jesus We'll Never Know: Why Scholarly Attempts to Discover the "Real" Jesus have Failed. And Why that's a Good Thing', *Christianity Today*, April 2010 <<http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2010/april/15.22.html>> (1 June 2012)

<sup>17</sup> Jacob Neusner, 'Who Needs "The Historical Jesus"?' An Essay-Review', *BBR* 4, 1994, pp.113-126 (125)

<sup>18</sup> Robert J. Miller, 'When It's Futile to Argue about the Historical Jesus: A Response to Bock, Keener, and Webb', *JSHJ* 9, 1, 2011, pp.85-95 (89), Amy-Jill Levine, 'Christian Faith and the Study of the Historical Jesus: A Response to Bock, Keener, and Webb', *JSHJ* 9, 1, 2011, pp.96-106 (98)

given special treatment when compared with other ancient ‘biographical material’ in the Western academy. To state the obvious, if the sort of character recorded in the gospels – a person who heals without words or without even being near people, who raises the dead, who feeds thousands with an armful of food, who walks on water, who kills a tree by cursing it, who enables demons to possess animals, who reads people’s thoughts, who wins every argument he enters, who speaks to his followers even after he has died, and so on – were described in any other ancient literature, by Western historical standards it would demand, as Miller puts it, ‘robust skepticism’.<sup>19</sup> The Quest for the Historical Jesus, therefore, whilst presenting itself as a scientific project like any other Western academic pursuit, frequently undermines its own methodological underpinnings. Although it is an almost exclusively Western project, it frequently fails to fairly employ standard Western historical methods. Of course, a person does not have to consider themselves to be a postcolonial critic in order to notice the often dubious treatment of many Western Jesus scholars’ claims about ‘history’; but pointing to some of its fundamental contradictions in order to trouble and dislodge the Quest – which is frequently so pretentious and universalising in its aims – certainly seems like a useful task for a postcolonial critic. Although some years in the past now, intolerance to critique and other perspectives within the field is still well demonstrated by the case of Walter Wink being denied tenure at Union Theological Seminary, after the publication of his claim that ‘Historical biblical criticism is

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<sup>19</sup> See Miller, ‘When It’s Futile’, pp.91-2



bankrupt’;<sup>20</sup> and as Sugirtharajah’s recent volume has highlighted, non-Western voices remain firmly at the margins, if not altogether excluded from such debates.<sup>21</sup>

Secondly, the Quest may be criticised for its preoccupation with presenting Jesus as a *followable* character, an issue which also serves to undermine a large body of Historical Jesus literature from a Western historical methodology perspective, and which is also problematic from the perspective of postcolonial biblical criticism. Despite the quest being supposedly disinterested, Historical Jesuses frequently emerge as very followable role models, or ‘Great Men’. As E.P Sanders has stated:

[I]t becomes clear that it is very tempting to describe a Jesus who is a suitable person to follow, someone who represents the *right* ideas and ideals... The result is that the selection of evidence often reflects the scholar’s own estimate of what is worthy of emulation. What is common to all the questers, whether early or recent, is the view that some of the material in the Gospels is “authentic” and represents the real historical Jesus, *who should be followed* (my italics), while other material should be rejected.<sup>22</sup>

Besides the issue that most New Testament scholars are deeply uncritical of the sycophantic presentations of Jesus in the canonical gospels, there are clearly some issues with the way in which historical method is being employed in the discipline, when we see that the majority of Jesuses who emerge from Western theology departments and seminaries are not only supposedly historically accurate, but also function as ethical-

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<sup>20</sup> Walter Wink, *The Bible in Human Transformation: Toward a New Paradigm for Biblical Study* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1973), p.1 and Walter Wink, ‘Write What You See: An Odyssey’, *The Fourth R* 7.3, 1994, <[http://www.westarinstitute.org/Periodicals/4R\\_Articles/wink\\_bio.html](http://www.westarinstitute.org/Periodicals/4R_Articles/wink_bio.html)> (1 June 2012)

<sup>21</sup> Sugirtharajah, *Biblical Scholarship*, pp.1-7

<sup>22</sup> E.P. Sanders, ‘Jesus, Ancient Judaism, and Modern Christianity: The Quest Continues’ in *Jesus, Judaism & Christian Anti-Judaism: Reading the New Testament after the Holocaust* (eds. Paula Fredriksen and Adele Reinhartz; Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2002), pp.31-55 (34)

theological-cultural role models to reinforce and re-inscribe Western ideals.<sup>23</sup> Such constructions of Jesus ought to be probed. Not only is the Quest for the Historical Jesus an almost entirely Western pursuit – a discourse that has been carried out entirely within North America and Europe – but it is a discourse which places its projections of Jesus as the universal source for morality and ethics. It is a discourse that, without entering dialogue with the rest of the world, assumes authority with regard to describing and understanding Jesus, and as a result, describing who the rest of the world should be following in order to correctly conduct their lives; a very specific Jesus who is Western to the core, and stripped of his ‘otherness’.<sup>24</sup>

Here I should highlight that postcolonial biblical critics generally exercise caution with regard to presenting the gospels, or any biblical text as necessarily liberating, a point at which postcolonial hermeneutics parts ways with liberation hermeneutics. This distinction is perhaps best explained by comparing liberationist and postcolonial treatments of the exodus narrative. In liberation hermeneutics, the Exodus is generally interpreted quite simply as a story of Israelite liberation, which provides an analogy for other liberation movements. Postcolonial readings of the exodus narrative, however, consider the *Canaanite* perspective. Robert Allen Warrior argues that for Native Americans, as for Canaanites, the exodus narrative is not a liberation narrative but a narrative of terror; as it is also for modern Palestinians.<sup>25</sup> To give another illustration of the differences between these

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<sup>23</sup> Such as the supremacy of ‘Jesus’ religion’ (‘Christianity’) over all other religions

<sup>24</sup> Cf. Crossley, *Age of Neoliberalism*, pp.94-8, Slavoj Žižek, *The Puppet and the Dwarf: The Perverse Core of Christianity* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2003), p.96

<sup>25</sup> Robert Allen Warrior, ‘A Native American Perspective: Canaanites, Cowboys, and Indians’ in *Voices from the Margins: Interpreting the Bible in the Third World* (ed. R.S. Sugirtharajah; Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1991), pp.287-95. See also Nur Masalha, ‘Reading the Bible with the Eyes of the Canaanites:

two hermeneutical approaches, liberation theology tends to read the gospel story of the widow's mite moralistically as an example of commendable behaviour.<sup>26</sup> But postcolonial commentators have questioned whether this is what Jesus or the evangelists had in view;<sup>27</sup> is it really commendable for a poor widow to give *all she has to live on* to a religious institution whose temple is renowned for its grandeur and lavishness (Cf. *Ant* 15.11)?<sup>28</sup> As Keller, Nausner, and Rivera note: 'By contrast [to liberation hermeneutics], postcolonial readings operate with a more troubling ambivalence, tracing both decolonizing and colonizing themes within scripture.'<sup>29</sup> One of the aims of postcolonial biblical criticism, as Sugirtharajah puts it, 'is to make this ambivalence and paradox clear and visible.'<sup>30</sup> It is for this reason that some postcolonial biblical critics, most notably Liew, have stressed the 'dark and unholy' sides' of biblical texts.<sup>31</sup> Such an approach is necessary, and called for in Jesus scholarship.

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Neo-Zionism, Political Theology and the Land Traditions of the Bible (1967 to Gaza 2009)', *HLS* 8.1, 2009, pp.55-108, Nur Masalha, *The Bible & Zionism: Invented Traditions, Archaeology and Post-Colonialism in Israel-Palestine* (London: Zed Books, 2007), p.148-151 and Edward W. Said, 'Michael Walzer's Exodus and Revolution: A Canaanite Reading', *ASQ* 8.3, 1986, pp.289-303

<sup>26</sup> Sugirtharajah, *Postcolonial Criticism*, p.121, Cf. John J. Vincent. 'An Inner City Bible' in *Using the Bible Today: Contemporary Interpretations of Scripture* (ed. Dan Cohn-Sherbok; London: Bellew Publishing, 1991), pp.121-133 (126-7)

<sup>27</sup> For example Seong Hee Kim, *Mark, Women and Empire: A Korean Postcolonial Perspective* (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2010), pp.79-97

<sup>28</sup> And here I am, of course, aware of anti-Judaic readings which present the temple in wholly negative terms; readings which are also extremely problematic

<sup>29</sup> Keller, Nausner, and Rivera, 'Introduction', p.10

<sup>30</sup> Sugirtharajah, *Postcolonial Criticism*, p.101

<sup>31</sup> Tat-siong Benny Liew, *Politics of Parousia: Reading Mark Inter(con)textually* (Leiden: Brill, 1999), p.167

## Jesus and 'The Poor'

A word ought to be said here about the focus of this work on 'the poor'. The liberation theologies that emerged from South America, as well as their contemporary Western appropriations, have traditionally had a particular concern with the socioeconomically marginalised, often simply referred to as 'the poor'. Another respect in which postcolonial biblical criticism is distinguished from liberation theology is over this focus; while the ethical concerns of much of liberation theology have been largely socioeconomic, postcolonial theology is concerned with all instances of oppression, whether political, economic, cultural, sexual or otherwise. As Stephen Moore states, the 'contextual hermeneutics' of postcolonialism,

relinquish the central (frequently Marxist-driven) focus on economics and the universal plight of the poor typical of classical liberation theology for a focus on the local, the indigenous, the ethnic, and the cultural contingent, with the aim of recovering, reasserting, and reinscribing identities, cultures, and traditions that colonial Christianity had marginalized, erased, suppressed, or pronounced 'idolatrous'.<sup>32</sup>

As Keller, Nausner and Rivera have put it, postcolonialism is a discourse of resistance to 'every imperialism, every supremacism',<sup>33</sup> for as Liew has expressed, 'any liberational effort that focuses on a single issue to the exclusion of others will only perpetuate oppression'.<sup>34</sup> And it is for this reason that many postcolonial biblical critics' describe their work as both postcolonial and feminist, in recognition of colonialism and patriarchy's

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<sup>32</sup> Stephen D. Moore, *Empire and Apocalypse: Postcolonialism and the New Testament* (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2006), p.15

<sup>33</sup> Keller, Nausner, and Rivera, 'Preface' in *Postcolonial Theologies*, pp.xi-xii (xi)

<sup>34</sup> Liew, *Politics of Parousia*, p.133

overlapping and interconnected structures of domination.<sup>35</sup> Kwok Pui-Lan has noted that, ‘Postcolonial feminist critics have stressed the intricate relationship between colonialism and patriarchy such that the analysis of one without the other is incomplete.’<sup>36</sup> However, as Kwok notes, gender has remained a marginal issue in the postcolonial analysis of Sugirtharajah and Segovia,<sup>37</sup> as indeed it has to some extent in this work, a neglect which I am well aware of.

Despite ‘the poor’ – that is, the socioeconomic or materially poor – being a concern of more traditional liberation theology than of postcolonial biblical criticism, a postcolonial methodological approach to the subject has seemed fitting here nonetheless. Much of the scholarship that I will be examining has been produced in the *economic* superpower of the United States, and it seems reasonable, if not obvious to suggest that America’s privileged economic position may have had some bearing upon the academic work that has come from within its borders. I will not, as many liberation theologians have already attempted, aim to construct Jesus as a figure who necessarily opposed economic oppression, although there are many texts that suggest that he was, and although this may be an overall impression that emerges from this work. Rather, I will focus on the North American and British scholarship that discusses poverty and wealth as it relates to the figure of Jesus. I will critique such scholarship from both a standard Western historical-critical and ideological perspective, and will also aim to push forward certain work that seems to illuminate Jesus’ relationship

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<sup>35</sup> See Joseph A. Marchal, *The Politics of Heaven: Women, Gender and Empire in the Study of Paul* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2008), pp.1-10, Musa Dube, *Postcolonial Feminist Interpretation of the Bible* (St Louis, Mo: Chalice Press, 2000)

<sup>36</sup> Kwok Pui-lan, *Postcolonial Imagination and Feminist Theology* (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2005), pp.80-81

<sup>37</sup> Kwok, *Postcolonial Imagination*, p.80

to poverty and wealth in a historical-critically rigorous manner; I note again, for readers who are more familiar with postcolonial hermeneutics, that this work does not shun, but frequently engages polemics that are peculiar to Western New Testament studies, particularly in the first three chapters. However, this work will frequently entail ideological critiques of certain scholarly works, discussing why and how they have come to certain conclusions about Jesus and the poor, with the conclusions often pointing to the positionality of their authors: namely, white Western men, writing from Western Universities and seminaries, often constructing Jesus in such a way so as to defend – or at least not challenge – their privileged position in the world. To sharpen the focus of the work, I will repeatedly return to the text of Luke 4:16-30, the Nazareth synagogue episode in which Luke’s Jesus states, ‘The spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor’ (Lk 4:18a). Chapter 4 will in fact focus specifically on the reception of this text in recent New Testament scholarship.

### **Historical-Critical Method**

Despite the broad criticisms I have offered above about the Historical Jesus quests, I will nonetheless draw on some of the methodology that has been developed within Historical Jesus studies; although I do not value this methodology as highly as many others do, it is what is familiar to me. As will become clear, I do not write off all North American and British Jesus scholarship as useless, although I wish to emphasise its peculiarity, its limitedness. The following work will operate in a similar vein to other recent historical Jesus work which has been primarily interested in the ‘gist’ of what Jesus may have said or

done. I am seeking, as Dale Allison has recently put it, to ‘heed before all else the general impressions that our primary sources produce.’<sup>38</sup> Like Allison, I will not, in general, try to determine whether Jesus did or did not say any particular statement or saying, or whether particular events happened as narrated.<sup>39</sup> The ‘gist’ criterion, it has been noted, is not new, and has effectively been used by the Jesus Seminar, amongst others.<sup>40</sup> Although it is not necessarily always named, it is emerging as a ‘useful’ approach in terms of Historical Jesus scholarship. As a consequence of using this broad and less specific method, I will not tend to argue that any given saying was literally uttered by the historical Jesus, or that any event happened as recorded by the evangelists, but rather that a given saying or event would be broadly plausible or likely, or unlikely. In so-doing I hope to demonstrate at least a partial and deliberate undercutting of some particularly futile debates in Western Jesus scholarship.

I will, however, allude to recent discussions about ‘memory’ and the gospels. As Allison has recently highlighted, drawing on a wealth of theoretical material, human memory is not always accurate: ‘Personal reminiscence is neither innocent nor objective. Observers habitually misperceive, and they unavoidably misremember.’<sup>41</sup> In chapter 5 in particular I will consider the way in which highly

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<sup>38</sup> Dale C. Allison, *Constructing Jesus: Memory, Imagination, and History* (London: SPCK, 2010), p.16

<sup>39</sup> Allison, *Constructing Jesus*, p.10

<sup>40</sup> J.D.G. Dunn, *Jesus Remembered* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), R. Bauckham, *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses: The Gospels as Eyewitness Testimony* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006), R. Rodriguez, *Structuring Early Christian Memory: Jesus in Tradition, Performance* (London: T&T Clark, 2009)

<sup>41</sup> See Allison, *Constructing Jesus*, p.1

significant and traumatic events such as Jesus' execution and the destruction of the Jerusalem temple may have influenced memories and understandings of Jesus.

I will also make occasional use of the more 'traditional' criteria used in historical Jesus studies. Of the more traditional methods, the criterion of multiple attestation will be amongst the more useful. If a theme or idea is present in Matthew, Mark, Luke, John and Thomas, for instance, I will assume that because such a theme or idea was considered by five different redactors to have reflected a sentiment expressed by Jesus himself, it is may be more likely to represent the views of Jesus than a theme or idea that is only found in, say, only one gospel. Relatedly, if a theme or idea is found in separate gospels in a slightly different form, but expressing a similar 'gist' then I will argue that these texts may be particularly useful, for instance, in the case of the parable of the sheep and the goats which is unique to Matthew, and the parable of the rich man and Lazarus which is unique to Luke; these stories clearly derive from different sources, but both express a similar gist, namely that those who neglect charity will be condemned to *gehenna* or eternal punishment. Independent attestation of this sentiment could arguably confirm the likelihood that the historical Jesus expressed a view something like this.<sup>42</sup>

In very broad terms I will also appeal to the criterion of historical plausibility, that is, whether or not a particular saying of Jesus is in keeping with what we know of first century Judaism. I will favour this criterion over its

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<sup>42</sup> This argument will be developed in chapter 6



converse, the criterion of dissimilarity because as we will see in chapter 4, arguments that distance Jesus from Judaism have frequently been poorly thought out, and are indebted to the problematic history of Christian anti-Jewish hermeneutics which have functioned as a crude and simplistic way to try and provide a ‘context’ for any given saying or action of Jesus, by understanding any given saying or action as a fundamental undermining of Judaism.<sup>43</sup>

Another criterion to mention, although I will not make much use of it, is the criterion of embarrassment. In broad terms this criteria may be useful, for it is remarkable when a redactor uses a text that suggests a limitation or weakness of Jesus, because the evangelists tend to present Jesus as a powerful, miracle-working character who wins every argument, at least up until the passion narrative. However, the issue that what is considered embarrassing for one redactor may not be so for another points to one of this criterion’s serious weaknesses. Further, as there are few texts that meet this criterion in the first place, it has a limited use.

In the following work I will not refer to Q, although I will assume the existence of a source that was shared by Matthew and Luke, which may well have been Q. I will occasionally reference Thomas, which I believe to be a source that is early enough to be useful for historical Jesus studies. I will assume fairly typical dating of the canonical gospels, with Mark as the earliest, although not substantially earlier than Matthew and Luke, and John as the latest.

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<sup>43</sup> See Sanders, ‘Jesus, Ancient Judaism’, pp.31-55 and my discussion at the beginning of chapter 4

In the following pages I will refer to John's Gospel almost as frequently as the synoptic gospels. As is increasingly noted, John's Gospel provides a particularly interesting perspective on Jesus' relationship with Rome.<sup>44</sup> John also offers an important perspective on the relationship between Jesus and the Gentiles, although recent scholarship on John has tended to focus on the presentation of Jews, and has been largely uninterested in the presentation of Gentiles.<sup>45</sup> John includes few texts related to poverty and wealth, however, and so will not be discussed so much in the first four chapters.

In case this work is starting to sound too much like the work of traditional Western Historical Jesus Questers, I would highlight that I am making no claims of objectivity. I would rather emphasize the subjectivity of the construction of Jesus in this work, who is subjective like *all* constructions of Jesus. This work, like *all* Jesus scholarship, is ideologically influenced and motivated; but rather than trying to hide behind false and outdated notions of scholarly objectivity, I would like to be very clear about this, as any honest person should. This is not to say that the ideologies underlying the work will necessarily be discernible to the reader, or even the writer; precisely why I would construct whatever Jesus emerges from these pages is anyone's (second) guess. I, however, find the construction of Jesus in the following pages convincing, and believe that in the following pages I will elucidate some neglected texts from the gospel tradition, bringing them to the foreground, a position they are generally denied because of their content which

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<sup>44</sup> See for instance Tom Thatcher, *Greater than Caesar: Christology and Empire in the Fourth Gospel* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2009)

<sup>45</sup> Explored in chapter 3

troubles many affluent, respected and socially privileged Western biblical scholars.

### **Outline**

As I have noted above, the first three chapters of this work are fairly safely within the parameters of traditional Western biblical studies. Although these chapters will critically engage with Western scholarship and ideologies as they relate to Jesus and the poor, they are fundamentally concerned with historical questions that relate to placing Jesus in his social and economic context. The second half of this work is more adventurous, offering more radical critiques and propositions, and more obviously embracing the postcolonial methodology that I have outlined above.

The first chapter will provide an overview of recent work on the socioeconomic context of the gospel texts and of Jesus. A brief critique of some of this work will be offered, although, in the main part, I will draw on historical work that seems to be useful for providing a social history in which to place Jesus, and for examining Jesus' relationship to 'the poor'.

In chapter 2 I will consider a variety of ancient views towards poverty and wealth that may have feasibly influenced Jesus or the gospel writers. I will engage and critique work that discusses the 'social ethics' of the Hebrew Bible, elite Hellenistic literature, Philo of Alexandria, the Essenes and the Qumran community, the Cynics, the Galilean bandits, John the Baptist, and the Pauline Epistles, before examining the peculiar perspectives of each of the canonical gospels.

In chapter 3 I will examine the biblical vocabulary relating to poverty and the poor. I will pay particular attention to recent scholarship on ‘the poor’ (*hoi ptōchoi*) which has severely downplayed the economic dimension of the term. I will then examine the seemingly related terms ‘captives,’ ‘the blind’ and ‘the oppressed’, highlighting the interconnectedness of physical, social and economic conditions in the world of the gospels.

In chapter 4 I will examine the dominant Western Christian and scholarly interpretation of Luke 4:16-30. We shall see that recent scholarly work, rather than interpreting the text as having any significant meaning for the poor, has interpreted this text in missiological terms, through an anti-Judaic hermeneutic. After examining some recent work on ancient Jewish and Gentile relations – for notions of Jewish xenophobia undergird the aforementioned readings – I will consider the ‘problem’ of Jesus’ attitude to Gentiles, arguing that the evidence suggests that Jesus had a hostile attitude towards Gentiles. I will then briefly relate this issue to Jewish-Gentile relations in modern day Palestine/Israel.

In chapter 5 I will examine recent work that has positioned Jesus within the context of the Roman Empire, and I will also add my own contribution to this work, drawing parallels between the resistance of the contemporary Rastafari movement and the Jesus movement.

Finally, in chapter 6 I will examine the question of Jesus’ relationship with ‘nonviolence’. After situating the discussion in broader conversations about the meaning of nonviolence, and examining literature on the subject of Jesus and nonviolence, I will propose a possible way in which Jesus could have been paradoxically said to embody

nonviolence; through his threats of retributive divine violence against the rich – the structurally violent – in the afterlife.

## SOCIETY AND ECONOMY IN ROMAN PALESTINE: A BRIEF

### BACKGROUND

‘What do you think, Simon? From whom do kings of the earth take toll or tribute? From their sons or from others?’

- Matthew 17:25b-26

### **Introduction**

In Western Jesus scholarship, ‘historical context’ is of central importance, and because Jesus’ ‘social world’ has been a particular interest of so many Historical Jesus scholars in recent years, much work has gone into attempting to understand and conjure up a detailed image of the landscape against which the gospels may be read. In this chapter I will engage with some of the recent debates in Western scholarship about the social and economic world that Jesus occupied, with the ultimate aim of this chapter to shed some light on Western treatments of Jesus’ sayings about wealth and poverty. It will become clear that many Western scholars have been happy to discuss and even carefully quantify the level of poverty that existed in Jesus’ world, but that few have gone further to consider the implications of how this should affect their framing of Jesus, their interpretation of his sayings about wealth and poverty, and what significance this could have for the postcolonial world.

## The Agrarian Greco-Roman Economy

Any discussion of the ancient economy should probably begin with the work of Moses Finley. Although Finley's work has recently been subject to numerous critiques, his presentation of the ancient economy remains highly influential. Ian Morris, Richard Saller and Walter Scheidel provide a useful summary of Finley's most fundamental and widely accepted conclusions, amongst which are the idea that living off rent was idealised as morally superior to market activity, that 'Greek and Roman cities were consumer cities, exploiting the countryside through tax, tribute, and rent rather than by selling urban goods to rural consumers,' and that 'war and imperialism rather than trade policies dominated states' pursuit of revenues.<sup>46</sup> Even Kevin Greene, who challenges a significant part of Finley's work, nonetheless states that: 'His overall framework has remained intact: gross disparities in wealth, the importance of political power and social status, and the limitations of financial systems, are not in dispute.'<sup>47</sup> However, Greene contends that Finley's presentation of the ancient economy as 'primitivist' or 'static' – lacking in economic progress and technical innovation – has been outmoded by recent research. Greene notes that Finley's book *The Ancient Economy*, despite being somewhat outdated in its views on economic progress and technical innovation, has, unfortunately, continued to influence non-specialists.<sup>48</sup> In Finley's view, 'The idea that efficiency, increased productivity, economic rationalism and growth are good *per se* is very recent in human thinking.'<sup>49</sup> As Greene suggests, this 'primitivist' view of the

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<sup>46</sup> Ian Morris, Richard P. Saller and Walter Scheidel, 'Introduction' in *The Cambridge Economic History of the Greco-Roman World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), pp.1-14 (3)

<sup>47</sup> Kevin Greene, 'Technological Innovation and Economic Progress in the Ancient World: M.I. Finley Re-Considered', *EHR* 53.1, 2000, pp.29-59 (52)

<sup>48</sup> Greene, 'Technological Innovation and Economic Progress', p.30

<sup>49</sup> M.I. Finley, 'Technical Innovation and Economic Progress in the Ancient World', *EHR* 18.1, 1965, pp.29-45 (31), Cf. Greene, 'Technological Innovation and Economic Progress', p.34

ancient economy has indeed entered the work of recent biblical scholars, despite the shifting consensus amongst historians of the Greco-Roman world, as we shall see in chapter 2.<sup>50</sup>

Besides Finley, the work of the anthropologist Gerhard Lenski has also proved influential for understanding the social and economic structure of the Greco-Roman world, and has influenced the work of numerous Historical Jesus scholars who have employed social-scientific methods. In Lenski's terms, the Greco-Roman world was an 'advanced agrarian society'.<sup>51</sup> The economic basis of advanced agrarian societies, as with all societies throughout the ancient world, was agriculture. According to Lenski, advanced agrarian societies differed from earlier 'horticultural' societies in several significant ways. The development of the iron plough, which led to increased productivity and made it possible to achieve a greater economic output with less human energy, was one highly significant technological development.<sup>52</sup> Advances in military technology were also significant; advanced agrarian societies had reached a stage of military development where it was no longer possible for every person to make weapons as good as every other person.<sup>53</sup> This fact, paired with the training of professional armies that is characteristic of advanced agrarian societies, seemingly allowed for the socioeconomic structure of such societies to be maintained by military might.

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<sup>50</sup> See for example Justin J. Meggitt, *Paul, Poverty and Survival* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1998), pp.41-2, and Bruce J. Malina, 'Wealth and Poverty in the New Testament World' in *On Moral Business: Classical and Contemporary Resources for Ethics in Economic Life* (eds. Max L. Stackhouse et al.; Grand Rapids, Mi: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1995), pp.88-93

<sup>51</sup> Gerhard E. Lenski, *Power and Privilege: A Theory of Social Stratification* (Maidenhead: McGraw-Hill, 1966), pp.190-296

<sup>52</sup> See Ekkehard W. Stegemann and Wolfgang Stegemann, *The Jesus Movement: A Social History of Its First Century* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1999), p.11

<sup>53</sup> Lenski, *Power and Privilege*, p.194



Another characteristic that Lenski finds in advanced agrarian societies is social inequality. While the majority of the inhabitants of such societies were agriculturalists, advanced agrarian societies had small cities that were inhabited by a small elite class who owned large amounts of land that they rented out to fund their comfortable living. This phenomenon was prevalent in the Greco-Roman world. Throughout the Roman Empire, large estates or *latifundia* were owned by local gentry and members of the ruling class,<sup>54</sup> and were leased out to tenants who would undertake all farming activities, and pay the owner rent in the form of produce from the estate, or money. Land ownership was regarded by the elite as the preferred way of ‘earning’ a living,<sup>55</sup> and it is often suggested that the Roman era was marked by an increase of land-ownership among the elites and dispossession among the peasants.<sup>56</sup> As Stegemann and Stegemann note, ‘Since land was the basis of wealth, the increased well-being of the wealthy class was possible only through greater possessions of land.’<sup>57</sup>

These features of the Greco-Roman economy were broadly present in Roman Palestine also. Agriculture was undoubtedly the economic basis of Roman Palestine.<sup>58</sup> Josephus boasts:

‘For the efforts in agriculture are strenuous, and their [the Jews’] land is thickly planted with olive groves, grain, and legumes; there is also wine and much

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<sup>54</sup> From the Latin: *lātus*, "spacious" and *fundus*, "farm, estate"

<sup>55</sup> Peter Garnsey and Richard Saller, *The Roman Empire: Economy, Society and Culture* (London: Gerald Duckworth & Co., 1990), p.45

<sup>56</sup> Ramsey Macmullen, *Roman Social Relations: 50 BCE to AD 284* (London: Yale University Press, 1974), p.38

<sup>57</sup> Stegemann and Stegemann, *The Jesus Movement*, p.43

<sup>58</sup> Ze’ev Safrai, *The Economy of Roman Palestine* (London: Routledge, 1994), p.104

honey; their fruit and figs are immeasurable. One also finds many kinds of cattle and abundant pastureland for them' (*Ap.* 1.60).

Furthermore, Josephus states that Galilee 'is entirely under cultivation and produces crops from one end to the other' (*War* 3.4).<sup>59</sup> David Fiensy has demonstrated that there is ample literary, inscriptional, and archaeological evidence that large estates such as those throughout the Roman Empire existed in Palestine,<sup>60</sup> to give one example, Herod's councillor Ptolemy purportedly owned the whole village of Arus (*Ant* 17.11). The pervasiveness of agriculture in everyday life is also attested to by frequent reference to it in the gospels, for instance in the parables of the Wicked Tenants (Mk 12:1-12), the Rich Fool (Lk 12:16-21), the Labourers in the Vineyard (Mt 20:1-15), the Weeds (Mt 13:24-30), and the Prodigal Son (Lk 15:1-32). It is clear that the majority of the peasantry in Roman Palestine derived their living from agriculture.

But other trades were also present in this area. The 'Sea' of Galilee provided opportunities for fishing,<sup>61</sup> and some people kept sheep.<sup>62</sup> The Talmud lists various occupations including 'nail maker, flax trader, baker, miller of pearl barley, currier, scrivener, sandal maker, master builder, asphalt merchant and tailor' (*Bill.* II, 745f).<sup>63</sup> Ze'ev Safrai finds evidence of textile, glass, and pottery industries as well as some

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<sup>59</sup> K.C. Hanson and Douglas E. Oakman, *Palestine in the Time of Jesus: Social Structures and Social Conflicts* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1998), p.105

<sup>60</sup> David A. Fiensy, 'Jesus' Socioeconomic Background' in *Hillel and Jesus: Comparative Studies of Two Major Religious Leaders* (ed. James H. Charlesworth and Loren L. Johns; Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997), pp.225-255 (236) and David A. Fiensy, *The Social History of Palestine in the Herodian Period: The Land is Mine* (Lampeter: The Edwin Mellen Press, 1991), pp.21-73

<sup>61</sup> Hanson and Oakman, *Palestine in the Time of Jesus*, p.106

<sup>62</sup> Fiensy, 'Jesus' Socioeconomic Background', p.237

<sup>63</sup> J. Jeremias, *Jerusalem in the Time of Jesus: An Investigation into Economic and Social Conditions During the New Testament Period* (London: SCM Press, 1969), p.3

evidence for metal, papyrus, dye, and stone production.<sup>64</sup> These trades, however, were mostly restricted to urban areas. There is some evidence of occasional marketing and fairs taking place in villages, but it is clear that cities were the centres of such commercialised activity.<sup>65</sup> The primary occupation of the majority of peasants was still agriculture.

As for inter-regional trade, it appears that the Jewish people were self-sufficient to an extent.<sup>66</sup> As Josephus writes:

Ours is not a maritime country, neither commerce nor the intercourse which it promotes with the outside world has any attraction for us... there was clearly nothing in ancient times to bring us into contact with the Greeks, as the Egyptians were brought by their exports and imports and the inhabitants of the sea-board of Phoenicia by their mercenary devotion to trade and commerce (*Ag. Ap.* 1.12.60-1).

However, it is also clear that some products from Palestine were known widely in the Roman Empire; Pliny the Elder, for example, mentions balsam and dates (*Hist. Nat.* 12.11-124, 13.26-29, 43-49),<sup>67</sup> and Tyre had a long history of importing grain from Galilee (Cf. *Ant* 8.2.9, Acts 12:20).

Social inequality was also prevalent in Palestine as it was throughout the Greco-Roman world. Like any city in the empire, Jerusalem was home to a privileged aristocracy, including Herod and his lavish palace (Cf. *Ant* 15.331-341), and its wealth

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<sup>64</sup> Safrai, *The Economy of Roman Palestine*, pp.192-212

<sup>65</sup> Hayim Lapin, *Economy, Geography, and Provincial History in Later Roman Palestine* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2001), pp.123-152

<sup>66</sup> Safrai, *The Economy of Roman Palestine*, p.222

<sup>67</sup> Lapin, *Economy, Geography, and Provincial History*, p.124

was built on the labour of the surrounding villages. The prevalence of banditry throughout Galilee as reported by Josephus is one indication of the intense social unrest that abounded in this time and place.<sup>68</sup> The synoptic gospels also serve to illustrate social inequalities in Roman Palestine. One could point to the labourers in the vineyard who receive the same wages for unequal work (Mt 20:1-15), and their landlord who taunts them: ‘Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or are you envious because I am generous?’ Or one could point to the rebellious tenants who try to seize the absentee landlord’s property (Mk 12:1-9/Mt 21:33-41/Lk 20:9-16).<sup>69</sup> One could point to Jesus’ saying about how difficult it is for a rich man to enter the Kingdom of God (Mk 10:17-31), the parable of the Rich Fool (Lk 12:13-21, *Thom* 63), or the fiery end that awaits the rich man in the parable of the Rich man and Lazarus (Lk 16:19-31).<sup>70</sup> The extreme views of the Essene and Qumran communities on wealth, and the teachings of John the Baptist and the prevalence of banditry, and are also suggestive of social divisions. Both hegemonic and dissenting views on the issue will be expanded upon in the next chapter.

### **The Dawning of a New Economic Era?**

While we have a fair amount of understanding of Greco-Roman society and economics, the economic systems from the period during which the Hebrew Bible was produced are

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<sup>68</sup> See Richard A. Horsley with John S. Hanson, *Bandits, Prophets, and Messiahs* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1985), pp.48-9 and Richard A. Horsley, ‘Josephus and the Bandits’, *JSJ* 10.1, 1979, pp.37-63

<sup>69</sup> See further Norman K. Gottwald, ‘Social Class as an Analytic and Hermeneutical Category in Biblical Studies’, *JBL* 112.1, 1993, pp.3-22 (18-21)

<sup>70</sup> See further Richard Bauckham, ‘The Rich Man and Lazarus: The Parable and the Parallels’, *NTS* 37.1, 1991, pp.225-246. For more on Jesus’ parables as a reflection of social tensions see William R. Herzog II, *Parables as Subversive Speech: Jesus as Pedagogue of the Oppressed* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1994)

more disputed. D.N. Premnath maintains that the process of latifundialization can be identified in Old Testament texts, and stresses the exploitation of the peasant classes from the start of the monarchic era in a process of ‘rent capitalism’.<sup>71</sup> Others, however, have expressed doubt about the existence of rent capitalism in this period. Walter Houston notes the difficulty that there is no language of tenancy, renting and leasing in the Hebrew Bible, stating his doubt that ‘anything approaching a mercantile system of land tenure existed at any time before the Hellenistic period, and probably not even then.’<sup>72</sup> Philippe Guillamme has recently argued that the concept of land-ownership or *dominium* has been anachronistically read into the Hebrew Bible by modern exegetes. Guillamme suggests that even though Premnath and those who stress the economic oppression of ancient Israelite peasants would describe themselves as liberation theologians of sorts, such scholars are unconsciously perpetuating the classical liberal notion of private property by reading it into the biblical texts. Guillamme goes so far as to speak of the ‘myth of the helpless peasant,’ suggesting that the idea of a heavily exploited and powerless peasantry resulting from rent capitalism may be abandoned.<sup>73</sup> A more suitable model for understanding ancient Near Eastern economics has been proposed by Roland Boer, which he calls ‘theo-economics’.<sup>74</sup> While Boer acknowledges the role of exploitative or ‘extractive’ economics, he regards it as a minor factor in the overall economic structure. The primary way in which economics was understood was in terms of ‘allocation’; all economic activity was understood in

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<sup>71</sup> See D. N. Premnath, *Eighth Century Prophets: A Social Analysis* (Chalice Press, 2003)

<sup>72</sup> Walter Houston, *Contending for Justice: Ideologies and Theologies of Social Justice in the Old Testament* (London: T&T Clark, 2008), pp.23-24

<sup>73</sup> Philippe Guillame, *Land, Credit and Crisis: Agrarian Finance in the Hebrew Bible* (Equinox: 2012)

<sup>74</sup> See also Roland Boer, *Political Myth: On the Use and Abuse of Biblical Themes* (London: Duke University Press, 2009), pp.106-115

relation to the deities. According to Boer, ‘This means that not only are the gods attributed with the powers of production – of land, wombs, seasons, rains, and so on – but they are also the ones who allocate, who are at the center of each regime of allocation,’<sup>75</sup> a sentiment which, again, will be explored in more detail in the next chapter.

Despite the uncertainties surrounding the economic system that pre-dated the Greco-Roman system, several New Testament scholars have argued that the gospels were written in a time of dramatic social and economic change. A prevalent view is that the Greco-Roman economic system stood in opposition to ‘traditional’ values. David Fiensy, for example, suggests that for the Jewish peasants of Palestine – in sharp contrast to the Roman system of *latifundia* – land was not regarded as an investment and farming was not a business, but ‘land was an inherited means of life, and farming was a way of life.’<sup>76</sup> Similarly Richard Horsley has argued that rabbinic hostility to commerce and ideals of self-sufficient households reflect ‘traditional practices of peasant households attached to their ancestral lands.’<sup>77</sup>

Perhaps the most nuanced argument explaining the changes that took place in the Greco-Roman period has been developed by Sean Freyne. Freyne has argued that during Antipas’ reign, the economy of Galilee experienced three significant changes: increased organisational specialisation, monetisation of transactions, and attitudinal

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<sup>75</sup> Boer, *Political Myth*, p.112

<sup>76</sup> Fiensy, *The Social History of Palestine*, p.vii, 23

<sup>77</sup> Richard A. Horsley, *Archaeology, History, and Society in Galilee: The Social Context of Jesus and the Rabbis* (Mount Vernon: Trinity, 1996), pp.74-5

changes in production and consumption.<sup>78</sup> While Freyne does not see Antipas as being solely responsible for these changes, he suggests that there was an ‘intensification’ of these phenomena during this period. In a similar vein to Freyne, John Dominic Crossan has argued that the dawning of commercialisation brought about dramatic change. Drawing on John Kautsky’s model, Crossan argues that the cities of the Roman empire should be distinguished from ‘traditional agrarian societies’ and may be referred to as ‘commercialised agrarian societies’.<sup>79</sup> Crossan argues that ‘in a traditional agrarian empire, the aristocracy takes the *surplus* from the peasantry,’ but ‘in a commercializing agrarian empire, the aristocracy takes the *land* from the peasantry.’<sup>80</sup> Under commercialisation, the land becomes alienable from the peasants, and Crossan argues that this results in peasant resistance, rebellion and revolts, that are largely absent from traditional agrarian societies. In traditional agrarian societies, the exploitative aristocracy are regarded as something of a ‘natural evil’. But in commercialised agrarian societies, Crossan argues, peasants become aware that change can occur, because they have seen it in the dawning of commercialisation. As a result, the peasants come to desire social change that benefits them.<sup>81</sup> Building on the work of Freyne and Crossan, James Crossley has argued that commercialisation and urbanisation are in fact of fundamental importance for understanding the beginnings of the Jesus movement. Indeed, Crossley points to the urbanisation of Galilee at the time of Jesus as a ‘key

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<sup>78</sup> Sean Freyne, ‘Herodian Economics in Galilee: Searching for a Suitable Model’ in *Modelling Early Christianity: Social-Scientific Studies of the New Testament in its Context* (eds. Philip Francis Esler; NY: Routledge, 1995), pp.23-46

<sup>79</sup> John Dominic Crossan, *The Birth of Christianity: Discovering What Happened in the Years Immediately After the Execution of Jesus* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1999), p.157, Cf. John H. Kautsky, *The Politics of Aristocratic Empires* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1982), pp.20-5

<sup>80</sup> Crossan, *The Birth of Christianity*, p.157

<sup>81</sup> Crossan, *The Birth of Christianity*, p.159, Cf. Kautsky, *The Politics of Aristocratic Empires*, pp.288-92

reason' for the emergence of the Jesus movement, and a factor that would have influenced Jesus' teaching.<sup>82</sup>

### **Urban-Rural Relations**

It is generally accepted that the elite minority, who made up no more than 3 percent of the population, inhabited the cities of the Greco-Roman world, and that the peasant majority inhabited the countryside. It is also accepted that no more than 5-10% of the population inhabited the urban centres. Because of this geographical divide between the ruling elite and the peasantry, the relationship between cities and the countryside has become an important subject of discussion in New Testament scholarship.

It is clear that the countryside that surrounded a city was the source of its food. Richard Rohrbaugh notes that in the apocrypha and New Testament a city would be surrounded by villages that 'belonged' to it.<sup>83</sup> In an often quoted text, the second century physician Galen, reports how in times of famine the peasant producers would go hungry, while the city dwellers were provided for; although removed temporally and geographically from Jesus, Galen's text seems nonetheless illustrative:

The city-dwellers, as it was their practice to gather and store immediately after harvest corn sufficient for all the next year, lifted all the wheat together with the barley and beans and lentils, and left the remainder for the rustics – that is pulses of various kinds (and a good deal of those they took to the city). The country people during the winter finished the pulses, and so during the spring had to fall back on unhealthy foods; they ate twigs and shoots of trees and bushes, bulbs and roots of indigestible plants, they even filled themselves with wild herbs... or

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<sup>82</sup> James G. Crossley, *Why Christianity Happened: A Sociohistorical Account of Christian Origins (26-50 CE)* (London: Westminster John Knox Press, 2006), p.73

<sup>83</sup> Rohrbaugh cites 1 Macc 5:65, 'He struck Hebron and its villages' and Mk 8:27, 'the villages of Caesarea Philippi, Cf. Richard L. Rohrbaugh, 'The Pre-Industrial City in Luke-Acts: Urban Social Relations in *The Social World of Luke-Acts* (ed. Jerome H. Neyrey; Massachusetts: Hendrickson Publishers Inc., 1991), pp.125-150 (126)



cooked fresh grass... You could see some of them at the end of spring and practically all at the beginning of the summer attacked by various ulcers springing up on the skin... (*De Rebus Boni Malique Suci* 1.1-3)

Gerd Theissen has cited this text in relation to Galilee's relationship with the cities of Tyre and Sidon. Tyre was a wealthy city, but was on an island with little suitable farming space and so relied on surrounding areas for its agricultural production. We find suggestions of Tyre and Sidon's dependence on Galilee in the Hebrew Bible (1 Kgs 5:11; 17:7-16; Ezek 27:17), and this relationship is confirmed by Acts 12:20 and Josephus who writes clearly that Solomon sent grain, wine and oil to King Hiram of Tyre, explaining that because 'he inhabited an island, he was always particularly in need' (*Ant* 8.141).<sup>84</sup> The usefulness of the Galen text for understanding Galilee's relationship with Tyre and Sidon is perhaps speculative, but the text seems to demonstrate the sort of dynamic that may have frequently existed between town and country in the Greco-Roman period.

Rohrbaugh presents the city in emphatically negative terms, describing a social distinction between city and country that was marked by the dividing city wall. He suggests that the city wall functioned to shield the peasantry from the view of elite.<sup>85</sup> Rohrbaugh claims, that '[pre-industrial] Cities were neither commercial centres, nor loci of public agencies providing services to residents, nor marketplaces for the surrounding countryside.'<sup>86</sup> In Rohrbaugh's view, the city represented nothing positive for the peasantry, and was nothing more than a symbol of exploitation and social segregation. Similarly, Crossan has argued that 'peasants and cities... are the necessarily twin sides

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<sup>84</sup> See Gerd Theissen, *The Gospels in Context: Social and Political History in the Synoptic Tradition* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1992), pp.72-4

<sup>85</sup> Rohrbaugh, *The Pre-Industrial City*, p.144

<sup>86</sup> Rohrbaugh, *The Pre-Industrial City*, p.149

of an oppressive or exploitative system'.<sup>87</sup> More recently, Crossley has continued to emphasise the parasitic relationship between city and countryside in very strong terms.<sup>88</sup> Crossley draws several examples from Josephus that highlight the extent of the hostility that Galileans felt towards the cities of Sepphoris and Tiberias by the time of the Jewish revolt, and suggests that the very building of Sepphoris and Tiberias,

would have required from the local peasantry both labor and goods, including food for the elites among the urban dwellers...presumably the rural peasantry would also have contributed to the increase in luxurious goods for the urban elites. This would suggest that there would have been a visible gap between the wealth of the urban centers and the countryside at the expense of the rural peasantry, coupled with an even greater economic burden.<sup>89</sup>

This view of urban/rural relations, despite its firm grounding in our knowledge of ancient economics, has been disputed. Morten Jensen notes that scholars who present urban-rural relations as a 'picture of conflict' have generally used various sociological models in their analysis. Archaeologists, on the other hand, Jensen suggests, have generally presented urban-rural relations in Galilee at the beginning of the first century as a 'picture of harmony'.<sup>90</sup> The archaeologist James Strange, for example, has argued that 'we must give up the view that there is a sharp distinction between city dwellers and the peasants in the countryside.'<sup>91</sup> Strange argues that the villages of Galilee benefitted substantially from Sepphoris and Tiberias. He suggests that the market day in Sepphoris would have been extremely important for Galilean villagers, who would have

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<sup>87</sup> Crossan, *The Birth of Christianity*, p.218

<sup>88</sup> Crossley, *Why Christianity Happened*, pp.43-49

<sup>89</sup> Crossley, *Why Christianity Happened*, p.45

<sup>90</sup> Morten Hórning Jensen, *Herod Antipas in Galilee* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2006), p.16

<sup>91</sup> J.F. Strange, 'The Sayings of Jesus and Archaeology' in *Hillel and Jesus: Comparative Studies of Two Major Religious Leaders* (eds. J. H. Charlesworth and L. L. Johns; Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997), pp.291-305 (300)

distributed goods and produce, as well as ideas and knowledge in such a place, and that an extensive trade network existed in between villages, towns and cities throughout Galilee.<sup>92</sup> Jonathan Reed argues that whilst Sepphoris and Tiberias put a strain on the Galilean peasantry, Jesus did not single out these two cities for condemnation, unlike Capernaum, Bethsaida and Chorazin. Reed suggests that therefore they should not be regarded as the 'locus of animosity' for the Jesus movement, or Galilean society in general.<sup>93</sup>

One frequently cited argument for the 'picture of harmony' is the distribution of the pottery from the village of Kefar Hananya. It has been argued that the distribution of Kefar Hananya pottery all over Galilee and the Golan Heights suggests widespread trade between villages.<sup>94</sup> Much has been made, by some, of the significance of the Kefar Hananya pottery and its implications for urban and rural relations, and Adan-Bayewitz has gone so far as suggesting that the distribution pattern of Kefar Hananya pottery 'does not seem consistent with the picture, common among scholars, of the exploitation in the early Roman period of the Galilean peasant by the urban wealthy.'<sup>95</sup> Adan-Bayewitz is surely wrong to discredit such a widely-attested social phenomenon simply on the basis of the distribution of a particular type of pottery. If the Galilean peasantry were not 'exploited' to a notable extent by the urban elite then Galilee would be an anomaly in the ancient world. A picture of urban-rural conflict is entirely in keeping with our knowledge of ancient agrarian economies. Indeed, Crossan has contended that

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<sup>92</sup> Strange, 'The Sayings of Jesus and Archaeology', p.302

<sup>93</sup> Jonathan L. Reed, *Archaeology and the Galilean Jesus: A Re-examination of the Evidence* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 2000), pp.98-99

<sup>94</sup> D. Adan-Bayewitz, 'Kefar Hananya, 1988', *IEJ* 37, 1987, pp.178-179

<sup>95</sup> D. Adan-Bayewitz, *Common Pottery in Roman Galilee: A Study of Local Trade* (Ramat-Gan: Bar-Ilan University, 1992), p.219

evidence of pottery production in rural Galilee is in fact further proof of the exploitation of the Galileans, and of their desperation to create a second income in addition to agriculture. Crossan argues that pottery making was a second-choice option resorted to by those with poor quality, insufficient, or no land.<sup>96</sup> The distribution of Kefar Hananya pottery confirms that some amount of trade occurred in this region, but in no way does it demonstrate a generally affable relationship between city and countryside.

It must be noted, however, that cities were not exclusively inhabited by the rich. If Justin Meggitt's *Paul, Poverty and Survival* has made one thing clear, it is that material poverty was a reality to a notable proportion of urban dwellers under Roman imperialism. Even Rohrbaugh notes that in Luke's parable of the Great Banquet, 'the poor and maimed and blind and lame' are invited from the streets and lanes of the *city* (*poleōs*) (14:21), before those from the highways and hedges are invited (14:23). Strange claims that: 'Not only did absentee landlords live in cities, as many have suggested, but farmers also lived there. They left at dawn, when the city gates are opened, to tend their fields in the territory of the city.'<sup>97</sup> Conversely, Bruce Malina has suggested that some landowners may have had country dwellings, in addition to their city dwellings.<sup>98</sup> Luke's blurry use of the term 'city' (*polis*) also complicates the question of urban-rural relations. Luke calls both Bethlehem and Bethsaida cities, while

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<sup>96</sup> John Dominic Crossan, 'The Relationship between Galilean Archaeology and Historical Jesus Research' in *The Archaeology of Difference: Gender, Ethnicity, Class and the "Other" in Antiquity: Studies in Honor of Eric M. Meyers* (eds. Douglas R. Edwards and C. Thomas McCollough; *AASOR* 60/61, 2007, pp.151-162 (154). Crossan confirms this pattern with reference to Arnold's work on ceramic theory. Arnold notes: 'While agriculture provides food directly to a family, craft production does not, but requires additional labor and greater risks than agriculture... once there is a better living with agriculture or more secure or steady work, pottery making is abandoned.' D.E. Arnold, *Ceramic Theory and Cultural Process* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), p168, 193

<sup>97</sup> Strange, 'The Sayings of Jesus and Archaeology', p.300

<sup>98</sup> Malina claims that 'landowners... generally had two places of residence. One was a house in the countryside, on the land that provided this elite person with power and wealth. The other was a house built as part of a cluster of such houses of other land-owning elites in a central (or nodal) place, the city.' Bruce J. Malina, *The New Testament World: Insights from Cultural Anthropology* (London: SCM Press, 1983), pp.83-4

John (7:42) calls Bethlehem a village (*kōmē*) as Mark does Bethsaida (8:23). Josephus is similarly loose in his usage of the term calling Jotapata both city and village, and Hebron and Gischala both city and hamlet (*polichnē*).<sup>99</sup> As the boundaries between city and village were not clear to these two writers, it seems prudent not to distinguish too sharply between countryside and city. Although contempt is sometimes directed towards particular cities, rural and urban relations do not precisely mirror socioeconomic relations. Although certain locations in the city may have represented significant loci for animosity (such as treasuries, or palaces), the ‘city’ was not necessarily regarded as an inherently exploitative place, as some have suggested.

However, it should still be doubted that the city offered anything economically beneficial to the peasantry. It has been postulated that cities offered trading opportunities and economic potential for peasants, but such arguments are based upon modern capitalist presuppositions; as Horsley has argued, many peasants were conservative, even hostile in their attitude toward commerce.<sup>100</sup> Trading opportunities were not something that peasants were actively seeking, but something that they were forced to pursue in order to make ends meet. As Freyne suggests, the theory that the city was fundamentally parasitic on the countryside, as seminally argued by Moses Finley, ‘is never likely to be entirely abandoned’.<sup>101</sup> While the city should not be considered to be the loci of *all* peasant animosity, cities were centres for economic exploitation and imperialism where rulers and landowners were known to live at the expense of the rural peasantry.

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<sup>99</sup> Rohrbaugh, ‘The Pre-Industrial City’, p.126

<sup>100</sup> Horsley, *Archaeology, History, and Society in Galilee*, pp.74-5

<sup>101</sup> Freyne, ‘Herodian Economics in Galilee’, p.25

### Friesen, Longenecker and the 'Economy Scale'

In his book *Paul, Poverty and Survival*, Justin Meggitt has famously argued that a 'bleak material existence... was the lot of more than 99% of the inhabitants of the Empire.'<sup>102</sup> Meggitt's book has received no small amount of criticism,<sup>103</sup> but has nonetheless attracted a great deal of attention, and has provoked a renewed interest in the extent to which poverty was a feature of the world of the Pauline assemblies and the Jesus movement. The 'binary' distinction that Meggitt makes is not uncommon in scholarship; a binary view is, after all, the dichotomy that is repeatedly presented in discussions of social class in the elite literature.<sup>104</sup> But it is clear that this elite discourse should not be taken at face value, and in response to Meggitt's book, efforts have been made to produce a more economically nuanced picture of the New Testament world.

Steven Friesen built on Meggitt's work by developing a 'poverty scale' in which he distinguishes seven different economic levels. In developing this poverty scale, Friesen draws attention to a much neglected feature of the New Testament world, arguing that scholars in recent decades have 'tended to define poverty out of existence.'<sup>105</sup> Friesen argues that scholarship has tended to avoid the subject of poverty by focussing instead on 'social status', which he notes is an elusive and unquantifiable

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<sup>102</sup> Meggitt, *Paul, Poverty and Survival*, p.99

<sup>103</sup> See Dale B. Martin, 'Review Essay: Justin J. Meggitt, *Paul, Poverty and Survival*', *JSNT* 24, 2001, pp.51-64, Gerd Theissen, 'The Social Structure of Pauline Communities: Some Critical Remarks on J.J. Meggitt, *Paul, Poverty and Survival*', *JSNT* 24, 2001, pp.65-84 and then Meggitt's 'Response to Martin and Theissen', *JSNT* 24, 2001, pp.85-94. Theissen provides a further response in 'Social Conflicts in the Corinthian Community: Further Remarks on J.J. Meggitt, *Paul, Poverty and Survival*', *JSNT* 25.3, 2003, pp.371-391

<sup>104</sup> Walter Scheidel, 'Stratification, deprivation and quality of life' in *Poverty in the Roman World* (eds. Margaret Atkins and Robin Osborne; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), pp.40-59 (40-1)

<sup>105</sup> Steven J. Friesen, 'Poverty in Pauline Studies: Beyond the So-Called New Consensus', *JSNT* 26, 2004, pp.323-361 (332)

concept. Friesen suggests that this ‘capitalist’ focus on social status has caused scholars to avert their eyes to the issue of poverty.<sup>106</sup> Friesen highlights Gerd Theissen and Wayne Meeks in particular as scholars who have focused their attention on social status in preference of addressing issues of economic poverty, noting how Theissen’s evaluation of the Lord Supper’s conflict in 1 Cor 11.17-34 turns an issue of poverty into one of social inferiority and ‘feelings of rejection’.<sup>107</sup> Friesen claims that ‘instead of remembering the poor, we prefer to discuss upwardly mobile individuals and how they coped with the personal challenges of negotiating their ambivalent social status.’<sup>108</sup> Friesen proceeds to lay out a ‘poverty scale’ in which the top three categories (PS1, PS2 and PS3) make up the ‘elite’ who amount to 2% of the population, the next two categories (PS4 and PS5) make up the middle 29% including merchants, traders and artisans, and ‘some farm families’ who are described as fairly economically ‘stable’, and the bottom two categories (PS6 and PS7) which refer to those who are ‘often’ below subsistence level, which is 68% of the population.<sup>109</sup>

Peter Oakes, in an article that is generally positive towards Friesen’s work on the poverty scale, notes that Friesen’s exclusive focus on economic aspects of poverty results in an oversimplified definition of poverty.<sup>110</sup> Oakes suggests that Friesen’s minimum requirements – sufficient calories, a sufficiently warm garment and a rain proof shelter – are not enough to make a person free from poverty. Oakes notes that ‘In

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<sup>106</sup> Friesen, ‘Poverty in Pauline Studies’, pp.333-335

<sup>107</sup> Gerd Theissen, *The Social Setting of Pauline Christianity: Essays on Corinth* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1982), p.160

<sup>108</sup> Friesen, ‘Poverty in Pauline Studies’, p.336

<sup>109</sup> The scale is set out in table form in Friesen’s article on p.341 and separately in Longnecker’s article, with percentages added, on p.245

<sup>110</sup> Peter Oakes, ‘Constructing Poverty Scales for Graeco-Roman Society: A Response to Steven Friesen’s ‘Poverty in Pauline Studies’, *JSNT* 26, 2004, pp.367-371

all societies, the income level below which people are clearly poor is a considerable distance above subsistence level.<sup>111</sup> In this vein, Oakes cites Peter Townsend's sociological definition of poverty as 'the lack of resources necessary to permit participation in the activities, customs and diets commonly approved by society.'<sup>112</sup>

A response to Friesen's article by John Barclay was somewhat less positive. Barclay suggests that the percentages that Friesen provides for PS4 and PS5 are 'almost entirely arbitrary'.<sup>113</sup> Barclay suggests that the most that we can say is that 'most of Paul's converts (and Paul himself most of the time) lived at or near subsistence level,' with 'subsistence level' being a term which Barclay describes as 'necessarily vague'.<sup>114</sup> Despite Barclay's approval of Friesen's attempt to 'press beyond the vagueness endemic in scholarly references to "the elite", "the upper classes" or "the poor"',<sup>115</sup> Barclay seems to conclude that 'vagueness' is inevitable.

Friesen's poverty scale, however, has since been enthusiastically adopted by Bruce Longenecker, who renames it with the less 'value-laden' title as the 'economy scale'. Although Longenecker welcomes Friesen's attempts to create an explicit model, he notes several weaknesses. Firstly, Friesen depends heavily on C.R. Whittaker's study which estimated that those in the equivalent of PS7 were 24-28% of the population, and those in the equivalent of Friesen's PS6 made up 30-40% of the population.<sup>116</sup>

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<sup>111</sup> Oakes, 'Constructing Poverty Scales', p.368

<sup>112</sup> Peter Townsend, *Poverty in the United Kingdom* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1979), p.31

<sup>113</sup> John Barclay, 'Poverty in Pauline Studies: A Response to Steven Friesen', *JSNT* 26.3 2004, pp.363-366 (365)

<sup>114</sup> Barclay, 'A Response to Steven Friesen', p.365

<sup>115</sup> Barclay, 'A Response to Steven Friesen', p.363

<sup>116</sup> See C.R. Whittaker, 'The Poor in the City of Rome' in *Land, City and Trade in the Roman Empire* (Aldershot: Variorum Ashgate, 1993), p.4



Longenecker observes, however, that Friesen's estimates were simply based on Whittaker's upper estimates.<sup>117</sup> In so doing, Friesen is left with only 29% of the population to attribute to the PS4 and PS5, and he decides – without a huge amount of heuristic evidence – to attribute 7% to PS4 and 22% to PS5. Even if we accept Whittaker's study, Friesen chooses to use Whittaker's figures to maximise the number of people who lived in, or close to poverty.<sup>118</sup>

Longenecker also argues that Friesen relies too heavily on the work of Finley, whose views, Longenecker suggests, are no longer as well supported as Friesen makes out. Friesen cites Finley as one who succeeded in demonstrating the static nature of the ancient economy, and the lack of space for growth and entrepreneurial initiative.<sup>119</sup> But Longenecker notes that archaeologists such as Kevin Greene and Andrew Wilson, as well as repeatedly contesting Finley's model (as we have seen above), speak of an economic boom in the first and second centuries CE. Wilson postulates that the modularisation of materials and standardisation of material sizes that is testified to by material remains of the construction industry would have greatly benefited private brick makers and artisans throughout the empire.<sup>120</sup> Indeed, numerous scholars have argued for the occurrence of economic advancements that benefited non-elites in this period.<sup>121</sup> Longenecker notes however that the extent of this growth has been exaggerated by

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<sup>117</sup> Bruce W. Longenecker, 'Exposing the Economic Middle: A Revised Economy Scale for the Study of Early Urban Christianity', *JSNT* 31, 2009, pp.243-278 (253)

<sup>118</sup> Longenecker, 'Exposing the Economic Middle', p.253

<sup>119</sup> Friesen, 'Poverty in Pauline Studies', pp.338-39

<sup>120</sup> See Andrew Wilson, 'The Economic Impact of Technological Advances in the Roman Construction Industry' in *Innovazione Tecnica e Progresso Economico* (ed. Elio Lo Cascio; Bari: Edipuglia, 2006), pp.225-236

<sup>121</sup> John J. Patterson 'Production and Consumption' in *The World of Rome: An Introduction to Roman Culture* (eds. P. Jones and K. Sidwell; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), pp.181-207, Dennis P. Kehoe, 'The Early Roman Empire: Production' in *The Cambridge Economic History of the Graeco-Roman World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), pp.543-569

some. If 75-80% of the economy was agriculturally based, then developments in trade and industry alone could not have a particularly dramatic overall impact.<sup>122</sup>

Nonetheless, Longenecker convincingly argues that middling groups make up a more significant fraction of the population than Friesen allows. Additionally, Longenecker suggests that middling groups may have included people such as the *apparitores*, men who came from humble means but who were deemed able and trustworthy to civic goals, and so gained positions working for civic magistrates, scribes, messengers, lectors and heralds. Longenecker also mentions the *augustales*, who were normally emancipated slaves, who upon gaining their freedom were appointed by decurial patrons to ‘enhance local civic life’. Longenecker concludes that Friesen’s middling groups need to be bulked out somewhat and in his revised economy scale, Longenecker suggests that ES1-3 should account for 3% of the population, ES4 for 17%, ES5 for 25%, ES6 for 30% and ES7 for 25%.

Longenecker’s work is successful in some ways. He may be right to challenge the accuracy or usefulness of Friesen’s claim that ‘for nearly everyone in the Roman empire, poverty was a way of life’.<sup>123</sup> As Longenecker notes, poverty certainly affected groups ES5 through to ES7, but to differing extents; while those living just above the bread line would have been aware of their economic vulnerability, Longenecker could be right that they must not be lumped together with the absolute poorest.<sup>124</sup> In this respect his more nuanced scale is an improvement on Friesen’s. But Longenecker’s work has some serious flaws. Perhaps the most notable problem is that the scale would not work for women in the same way that it would for men, an issue which

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<sup>122</sup> Longenecker, ‘Exposing the Economic Middle’, p.257

<sup>123</sup> Friesen, ‘Poverty in Pauline Studies’, p.358

<sup>124</sup> Longenecker, *Remember the Poor*, p.55

Longenecker does not acknowledge at any point. Longenecker's classifications basically depend on the occupation of an individual, but as Stegemann and Stegemann note, the occupation of lower-stratum women is seldom explicitly stated.<sup>125</sup> While some wealthy women may have had a fairly high level of control over their wealth, this was rarely the case for peasant women, and the social mobility of all women was extremely inhibited by their sex. Furthermore, as Longenecker notes, slaves may not necessarily fit into the scale very well, because they may belong to a household structure and so they may be fairly well provided for.<sup>126</sup> But as women and slaves made up well over half of the population of the Greco-Roman world, the usefulness of Longenecker's scale appears to rapidly dwindle; in this respect, the extent to which Longenecker's scale can function as even a 'rough guide' is dubious.<sup>127</sup> Furthermore, Longenecker's economy scale seems to have moved away from Meggitt and Friesen's call for engagement with the reality of poverty in the Greco-Roman world. Longenecker's work does not help to uncover any sort of submerged subaltern history, but instead is mostly concerned with establishing various numbers and figures. Despite Longenecker's apparent caution regarding 'arguing over slight adjustments to percentages, especially since those percentages can never be anything more than rough guides',<sup>128</sup> in his 2010 work, Longenecker continued to make minute revisions to his 2009 scale. Longenecker's percentages are in fact in need of a major revision if his scale is to accommodate women; the politically active *apparitores* and *augustales* middling groups that Longenecker considers, for instance, could only be men. In his quest for numbers and

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<sup>125</sup> Stegemann and Stegemann, *The Jesus Movement*, p.377

<sup>126</sup> Longenecker, *Remember the Poor*, p.54

<sup>127</sup> Longenecker, *Remember the Poor*, p.53

<sup>128</sup> Longenecker, 'Exposing the Economic Middle', p.252

figures, Longenecker continues to marginalise the ancient poor, comprised substantially of slaves and women.

### **Taxation in Roman Palestine and the Role of Herod Antipas**

In Galilee at the time of Herod Antipas there are clear marks of latifundialisation, elite land ownership, and an extractive urban economy, such as we find throughout the ancient world. So while Josephus may boast about the fertility of the land in the region (*Ag. Ap.* 1.60, *War* 3.4), the peasantry were clearly not able to freely enjoy the fruits of their labour. While Galilee had the additional luxury of access to a fishing lake (the ‘Sea’ of Galilee), even fishing was controlled by the elite.<sup>129</sup> Despite the natural fertility of Palestine, Jesus was still evidently provoked to address the anxiety that many felt about maintaining subsistence, saying: ‘do not be anxious about your life, what you shall eat, nor about your body, what you shall put on’ (Mt 6:25, Lk 12:22), and the numerous stories surrounding Jesus about God’s miraculous provision of money for taxes (Mt 17:24-27) and food (Mt 15:29-38/Mk 8:1-8; Mt 14:15-21/Mk 6:30-44/Lk 9:10-17/Jn 6:1-13; Jn 2:1-11), are further suggestive of the need that was experienced in the region.

Besides the threat of natural disasters to crop yields, taxation was a serious economic burden for the peasantry. Applebaum has argued that the Jewish peasantry was ‘crushed with merciless exactions’ and that a threefold tax was required of them: tax to the temple, to Herod and to Rome.<sup>130</sup> Horsley has similarly described a situation

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<sup>129</sup> Hanson and Oakman, *Palestine in the Time of Jesus*, p.106

<sup>130</sup> S. Applebaum, ‘Economic Life in Palestine’ in *The Jewish People in the First Century: Historical Geography, Political History, Social, Cultural and Religious Life and Institutions* (Compendia

of rapidly increasing debt and poverty for Jewish agricultural producers who were ultimately 'subject to a double taxation, probably amounting to well over 40 per cent of their production',<sup>131</sup> and similarly, Marcus Borg claims that even without Roman customs, toll and tribute taxes, 'the combined total of Jewish and Roman taxes on farmers amounted to about 35 per cent.'<sup>132</sup> To this we might add Douglas Oakman who has argued that 50 per cent of the total crop of some farmers may have been extracted as tax.<sup>133</sup> But the extent of the taxation suffered by the Galilean peasantry is contested, and E.P Sanders has criticised the said studies for exaggerating the level of indebtedness and taxation that was faced.<sup>134</sup>

In contrast to the above studies, Sanders argues that the Roman tribute was in fact flexible, highlighting that after Julius Caesar defeated Pompey, Josephus tells us that he revised the financial obligations of Jewish Palestine. Sanders suggests that the fact that this revision occurred implies that circumstances were taken into account in the extraction of taxes.<sup>135</sup> However, this revision notably only tells us only that Caesar took *his own* circumstances into account. While it was in the Caesar's interests not to overtax a region to the point of causing social unrest, the revision of taxes after a military operation does not indicate that any concern was given to whether the population of

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rerum Iudaicarum ad Novum Testamentum, Section 1, Vol. 2; eds. S. Safrai and M.Stern; Assen: Van Gorcum, 1976), p.631-700 (661)

<sup>131</sup> Richard A. Horsley, *Jesus and the Spiral of Violence: Popular Jewish Resistance in Roman Palestine* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1987), p.56

<sup>132</sup> Marcus J. Borg, *Jesus, A New Vision: Spirit, Culture, and the Life of Discipleship* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1987), p.84

<sup>133</sup> D.E. Oakman, *Jesus and the Economic Questions of His Day* (Lewiston: Edwin Mellen Press, 1987), p.65 and D.E. Oakman, 'The Countryside in Luke-Acts' in *The Social World of Luke-Acts*, pp.151-179 (165)

<sup>134</sup> E.P. Sanders, *Judaism: Practice and Belief 63 BCE – 66 CE* (London: SCM Press, 1992), pp.157-69

<sup>135</sup> Sanders, *Judaism*, p.161

Jewish Palestine would be able to shoulder the financial burden of Caesar's military conquests.

With regard to Herod's taxes, Sanders argues that Herod did not fund his building projects entirely with taxation, but that Herod created 'a lot of new wealth',<sup>136</sup> with his development of Jericho and Caesarea. Sanders also suggests that Herod's development of the Temple would have included shops and services for pilgrims from other countries, which would also increase revenue. Furthermore, Sanders argues that Herod's projects would have provided employment; Josephus, for instance, claims that when the temple was finally completed, after Herod's death, 18,000 people were left out of work (*Ant* 20.219).<sup>137</sup> Sanders does not consider, however, who paid for the 18,000 people (if this is a trustworthy figure) to build the temple. This would surely have been a strain on the agricultural population who provided the economic base of this society. Sanders is correct however, to note that Herod probably paid taxes to Caesar from the same fund with which he built, as Rome levied tribute by requiring local leaders to pay it;<sup>138</sup> in this respect it is perhaps misleading to speak of threefold taxation as Applebaum does.

With regard to the Temple taxes, Sanders notes that although the cost of the Jerusalem temple was higher than the average temple, other countries had to support multiple temples. Furthermore, Sanders argues that the costliest sacrifices would have been paid for in part by the two-drachma temple tax, which was donated by Jews throughout the world, and not only in Palestine. Sanders concludes that 'the cost of the

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<sup>136</sup> Sanders, *Judaism*, p.164

<sup>137</sup> Sanders, *Judaism*, p.164

<sup>138</sup> Sanders, *Judaism*, p.162

temple lay less heavily on the shoulders of Palestinians than most people recognize'.<sup>139</sup> However, Sanders may be too optimistic in his treatment of temple. As Craig Evans has noted, although Sanders' repeated critiques of the way in which Christian scholars have characterised Judaism are to be fully appreciated, Sanders has seemingly lost sight of the possibility that there were things related to Judaism that Jesus – amongst other Jews – took issue with; and the temple was one such thing.<sup>140</sup> As Evans notes, the wealth of the temple was remarkable. Josephus describes the extravagance of the temple in detail (*JW* 5.5.6; *JW* 5.5.4). In 2 Macc 3:6 the temple captain Simon reports 'the treasury in Jerusalem was full of untold sums of money, so that the amount of funds could not be reckoned', and Tacitus writes that in Jerusalem there was 'a temple of immense wealth' (*Hist* 5:8, 1). Further, the temple had been linked with extortion. In one Talmudic lament, the High Priests are presented as oppressors, using violence and rumour to maintain their power:

Woe unto me because of the house of Baithos; woe unto me for their lances!  
Woe unto me because of the house of Hanin (Ananus)...  
Woe unto me because of the house of Ishmael b. Phiabi,  
Woe unto me because of their fists.  
For they are high priests and their sons are treasurers and their sons-in-law are  
Temple overseers,  
And their servants smite the people with sticks! (*Pesah. 57a*)<sup>141</sup>

Even Josephus attests that a few years before the first revolt the chief priests sent their servants to take the priestly tithes from lower ranking priests 'beating those who refused to give' (*Ant* 20.8.8).<sup>142</sup> The Qumran and Essene communities were also critical of the

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<sup>139</sup> Sanders, *Judaism*, p.164

<sup>140</sup> Craig F. Evans, 'Jesus' Action in the Temple: Cleansing or Portent of Destruction?' *CBQ* 51, 1989, pp.237-270 (257)

<sup>141</sup> Horsley, *Spiral of Violence*, p.47

<sup>142</sup> Evans, 'Jesus' Action in the Temple', p.259

temple, refusing to offer sacrifices there, and in the Qumran commentary on Habakkuk, accusing the High Priest, or as they call him, ‘the Wicked Priest’, of robbing the poor (1QpHab 8:12; 9:5; 10:1;12:10).<sup>143</sup> Jesus’ parable of the widow’s mite similarly demonstrates the financial difficulties the temple tax imposed on the poorest members of society;<sup>144</sup> Mark recounts the story of the poor widow (*chera ptōche*) immediately after denouncing the scribes for devouring widow’s houses (*oikias ton cherōn*) (12:40), and Luke proceeds to juxtapose the widow’s poverty with the extravagance of the temple (21:5). Jesus’ action in the temple paired with his invoking of Jeremiah’s ‘den of robbers’ (Jer 7:11) functioned to a similar effect.<sup>145</sup>

Sanders estimates that in an absolute worst-case-scenario in which a farmer had to pay all their taxes as well as addition costs for a first-born son and a first-born male donkey, the percentage of taxation due would be no more than 33 per cent, and that farmers’ taxes would normally be under 28 per cent.<sup>146</sup> Sanders’ warning against exaggerating the plight of the peasantry in Roman Palestine is fair enough. But it remains that the labour of the peasantry funded not only the extravagance of the local aristocracy, including Antipas’ building projects, but also the military that maintained these very structures and policed Galilee and Judea on behalf of Rome.

The economic disparity which was inherent to the ancient economy was largely achieved through taxation, which was maintained through military force, as well as, on occasion, by the temple. As Lenski notes, military technology in agrarian societies

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<sup>143</sup> Evans, ‘Jesus’ Action in the Temple’, p.260

<sup>144</sup> See Kim, *Mark, Women and Empire*, pp.79-97, and Sugirtharajah, *Postcolonial Criticism*, p.121

<sup>145</sup> See Evans, ‘Jesus’ Action in the Temple’, p.251

<sup>146</sup> Sanders, *Judaism*, p.167



meant that not every person could produce weapons as effective as everyone else.<sup>147</sup>

Philo graphically describes one instance of a family who could not afford to pay the tax:

So recently a man near us, who was summoned to the tax collector and was in arrears probably out of poverty, fled out of fear of unbearable penalties; his wife, children, parents, and all other relatives were taken away by force, beaten, mistreated, and forced to suffer all kinds of shameful acts of violence, so that they would betray the fugitive or pay his debts – neither of which they could do, the former because they did not know where he was, and the latter since they were no less poor than the fugitive. He [the tax collector] did not release them until he had punished their bodies with instruments of torture and torment and taken their lives through outrageous means of killing... (Spec. Leg. 3.159ff)

Refusal to pay taxes, as advocated by the so-called Fourth Philosophy with regard to the imperial tax (*Ant* 18.4-5), was apparently counted as potential grounds for execution (Cf. Lk 23:2). In 43 CE, Cassius sold four Judean towns into slavery because they were too slow to pay the demanded seven hundred talents of silver (*Ant* 14.272-275; War 1.219-220).<sup>148</sup>

However, the socioeconomic situation of Roman Palestine, it must be noted, is apparently not distinctly different from any other region under Roman imperialism. Although some have stressed the economic oppression in Roman Palestine above other places in the empire, similar economic burdens were experienced throughout the Mediterranean world. As we have seen, an increase in commercialisation and attitudinal changes towards production and consumption were occurring in this period. But Galilee may not have been special in this respect. As Morten Jensen's recent study has recently concluded, Antipas was a 'minor ruler with moderate impact'.<sup>149</sup> Jensen acknowledges 'it is beyond any doubt that poverty was a persistent fact of life in this period, and that

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<sup>147</sup> Lenski, *Power and Privilege*, p.194

<sup>148</sup> Horsley, *Spiral of Violence*, p.43

<sup>149</sup> Jensen, *Herod Antipas*, p.254

there were more than enough reasons for a social prophet to be loaded with discontent', but this fact is 'irrespective of the presence of Antipas';<sup>150</sup> simply because Antipas was contemporaneous with Jesus does not imply a causal link between Antipas' governance and the emergence of the Jesus movement.

### **Slavery and the 'Slave Economy'**

The central role of slavery in productive processes in Rome leads Walter Scheidel to refer to the Roman economy as a 'slave economy', claiming that ancient Rome created 'the largest slave society in history'.<sup>151</sup> Scheidel states:

In key areas, slaves were not merely present but supported what has been termed a 'slave mode of production,' a mode that rested both on an integrated system of enslavement, slave trade, and slave employment in production, and on 'the systematic subjection of slaves to the control of their masters in the process of production and reproduction.'<sup>152</sup>

Slaves participated in a wide range of occupations, from managing estates, to being field hands, shepherds, hunters, domestic servants, craftspeople, construction workers, retailers, miners, clerks, teachers, doctors, midwives, wetnurses, textile workers, potters, and entertainers.<sup>153</sup> The number of slaves in any time or place is difficult to establish.

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<sup>150</sup> Jensen, *Herod Antipas*, p.258

<sup>151</sup> Walter Scheidel, 'Slavery in the Roman Economy' <<http://www.princeton.edu/~pswpc/pdfs/scheidel/091003.pdf>> (14 July 2012), p.2

<sup>152</sup> Scheidel, 'Slavery in the Roman Economy', p.2

<sup>153</sup> Scheidel, 'Slavery in the Roman Economy', p.3

While Keith Hopkins has suggested that slaves constituted up to a third of the population in some parts of Italy,<sup>154</sup> Scheidel argues that the number of slaves in any particular ancient state or in particular sectors of its economy is invariably unknown.<sup>155</sup> This is no less the case in Roman Palestine; Catherine Hezser has similarly stated that it is difficult, if not impossible to distinguish slaves, free labourers, tenant farmers, and small freeholders in the rural labour force.<sup>156</sup>

Hezser argues that the same factors that lead to mass slavery in Rome – wars and the creation of large estates – were significant in the development of slavery in Palestine on a smaller scale.<sup>157</sup> For Jews, as for Romans, the main source of slaves was the capture of prisoners of war, a phenomenon that Josephus reports on several occasions (e.g. *Bell* 1.2.6-7; 1.4.2-3, 87-88). Hezser notes that while the quantity of enslaved prisoners cannot be precisely established, while some slaves would eventually be manumitted, children and grand-children born to such slaves would have automatically become slaves also increasing their population further. Enslaved prisoners would be used by the king on his estates and in his household, and the rest would be distributed to military leaders, or friends, or sold on the slave market.<sup>158</sup> Numerous Jews were enslaved by the Romans too (*Ant* 12.3.3, 144), and slavery was used as a punishment for Jewish uprisings (*Bell* 2.5.1, 68; *Ant* 17.10.9). The enslavement of Jews by Romans became particularly widespread during the first and second revolts against

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<sup>154</sup> Keith Hopkins, *Conquerors and Slaves* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978), p.9

<sup>155</sup> Walter Scheidel, 'The Comparative Economics of slavery in the Greco-Roman world' in *Slave Systems: Ancient and Modern* (eds. Enrico Dal Lago, Constantina Katsari; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), pp.105-126 (106)

<sup>156</sup> Catherine Hezser, 'The Social Status of Slaves in the Talmud Yerushalmi in Comparative Perspective' in *The Talmud Yerushalmi and Graeco-Roman Culture III* (ed. Peter Schäfer; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2002), pp.91-137 (94)

<sup>157</sup> Hezser, 'The Social Status of Slaves', p.94

<sup>158</sup> Hezser, 'The Social Status of Slaves', p.95

Rome; Josephus suggests that the total number of prisoners taken throughout the war amounted to ninety-seven thousand, although Josephus' figures may not be trusted. Hezser concludes that even if Josephus' figures are not quite accurate, the number of enslaved Jews would have been in the tens of thousands.<sup>159</sup>

Besides war, many became slaves through economic necessity. Although illegal by Roman law, debt slavery of Jews in Roman Palestine is also attested (Cf. 2 Kgs 4:1). The instance in Matthew 18:24-34 where the master commands his servant, his wife, his children and all that he had be sold is one example, and similar discussions can be found in rabbinic literature.<sup>160</sup> Economic hardships might also have forced the poor to sell themselves or their children as slaves, or to expose new-born babies, so that they would be enslaved by those who found them and reared them, in the hope that a life of slavery would be preferable to a precarious life in freedom and poverty.<sup>161</sup>

It has been suggested that slaves in the Jewish world were better treated due to some collective memory of slavery in Egypt and because of various Torah prescriptions protecting the rights of slaves.<sup>162</sup> But Hezser argues that the Jewish approach towards slavery was largely similar to the system throughout the Roman world. As Stegemann and Stegemann note, some slaves, with the security of living under the care of a master, may have been in a better position than the poorest of landless peasants;<sup>163</sup> and some public slaves like craftsmen and tradesmen had relative independence and the possibility of saving to purchase their freedom. For a large proportion, however, life

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<sup>159</sup> Hezser, 'The Social Status of Slaves', pp.95-96

<sup>160</sup> Hezser, 'The Social Status of Slaves', p.101

<sup>161</sup> Hezser, 'The Social Status of Slaves', p.99

<sup>162</sup> Richard N. Longenecker, *New Testament Social Ethics for Today* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1984), p.50

<sup>163</sup> Stegemann and Stegemann, *The Jesus Movement*, p.88, Lenski, *Power and Privilege*, p.289

was brutal. Xenophon advised masters to treat slaves as domestic animals; to punish disobedience and reward good behaviour (*Economics* 13.6), and many slaves were not even given proper names (Cf. Varro, *De lingua latina*, 8.21).<sup>164</sup> Floggings were not unusual, and slaves would run away to try and escape the violence (Cf. Aristophanes, *Peace* 743-749). The Stoic philosopher Epictetus, who was once himself a slave, claimed that many slaves would have preferred suicide to continued slavery.<sup>165</sup> Hezser notes that male Jewish slaves were patronisingly called ‘son’ or ‘boy’,<sup>166</sup> and like Roman slaves were denationalised and denied their history; it was reasoned that Jewish slaves did not actually have Jewish ancestors or the same god.<sup>167</sup> Male slaves were also frequently effeminised by their masters, creating a confusing distinction between male slaves and ‘the clearly inferior female’.<sup>168</sup> Female slaves had no protection against the sexual advances of their male masters, who painted them as sexually promiscuous to the effect that they could produce more slaves off them.<sup>169</sup>

As well as being a hugely significant economic issue, fundamental to the economic shape of the Greco-Roman world, slavery was also clearly a social issue. It is for this reason that Simon Bar-Giora proclaimed the emancipation of slaves during the Jewish war (*BJ* 4.508).<sup>170</sup> Slavery must therefore be borne in mind as a significant institution in the social and economic world of Jesus

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<sup>164</sup> M.I. Finley, *Economy and Society in Ancient Greece* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1981), p.171

<sup>165</sup> Longenecker, *New Testament Social Ethics*, p.49

<sup>166</sup> Hezser, ‘The Social Status of Slaves’, p.119

<sup>167</sup> Hezser, ‘The Social Status of Slaves’, p.104, 108, 111

<sup>168</sup> Sandra R. Joshel and Sheila Murnaghan, ‘Introduction: Differential Equations’ in *Women and Slaves in Graeco-Roman Culture: Differential Equations* (eds. Sandra R. Joshel and Sheila Murnaghan; London, 1998), pp.130-151

<sup>169</sup> Hezser, ‘The Social Status of Slaves’, p.136

<sup>170</sup> Fiensy, *The Social History of Palestine*, p.91

## The Roman Empire

As we have seen above, the economic burden that the Roman Empire placed on Galilee and Judea has not always been dealt with carefully by biblical scholars, and some have possibly overstated the extent to which Rome extracted from these distant regions. However, as we will see in chapter 5, Rome was not perceived by first century Jews to be a distant problem, and in some respects Galileans and Judeans alike witnessed the effects of Roman imperialism daily. Further, as Josephus explains, Rome's role was not only political, and the extraction of resources from Judea was at times severe:

We lost our freedom and were made subjects of the Romans, and the territory which we had taken away and acquired by arms from the Syrians we were forced to give back to them; moreover, the Romans exacted more than 10,000 talents in a brief space of time; and the kingship, which previously had been given to high priests by birth, became an office of common men (*AJ* 14.77-78).<sup>171</sup>

Josephus also reports an occasion when the Roman prefect Pontius Pilate lifted funds from the Temple treasury to build an aqueduct (*War* 2.175-177; *Ant.* 18.60-62). Such actions did not only represent blatant economic exploitation, but were a profound and deliberate demonstration of Roman power, and functioned to undermine indigenous culture and religion.

To be sure, Galilee and Judea were not directly occupied by the Romans in the time of Jesus, and the Jews were allowed to operate with a certain amount of political

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<sup>171</sup> Jonathan J. Price, *Jerusalem Under Siege: The Collapse of the Jewish State 66-70 C.E.* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1992), p.3

freedom. But the effects of Rome's dominion were experienced politically, socially and economically. Again, we explore the politics of the Jewish relationship to Rome in proper detail in chapter 5.

### **Conclusion**

This chapter has offered a brief outline of some of the recent debates about the social and economic world that Jesus inhabited, outlining the ancient context in which Jesus' sayings about poverty and wealth originated. I have highlighted some of the consensuses about the prevalence of economic disparities in Roman Palestine, as throughout the ancient world, and the economic burdens that were placed upon peasants. The issue of slavery, which was widespread in the time of Jesus, but often neglected in New Testament scholarship, has also been highlighted, as has the exploitative function of Rome and its potential implications for the gospel texts. Having outlined these social and economic issues, in the next chapter I will examine the responses of some of Jesus' contemporaries, before examining the way in which the gospels frame Jesus' response to the social and economic issues with which he was faced.

POVERTY, WEALTH, AND SOCIAL CHANGE:  
RESISTANCE AND CONSERVATISM IN JESUS' WORLD

Even in your thought, do not curse the king, nor in your bedchamber curse the rich; for a bird of the air will carry your voice, or some winged creature will tell the matter.

- Ecclesiastes 10:20

**Introduction**

In this chapter I will explore a variety of attitudes towards poverty and wealth that were held by different individuals and groups, before considering their potential influence upon the sayings of Jesus and the writers of the synoptic gospels. First I will examine different texts that advocate a conservative attitude towards the political economy that we examined in chapter 1; that is, texts that have emerged from individuals and movements who have sought to justify unequal distributions of wealth and the inevitability of a permanent poor class. I will begin this section by exploring some of the attitudes towards poverty and wealth in the Hebrew Bible, then the attitudes towards poverty and wealth in Greco-Roman elite literature, in the writings of Philo of Alexandria, and in the writings attributed to the apostle Paul, all of which, I will be argue, seemed to prop up the political-economic structures discussed in chapter 1. I will then move on to consider various movements and individuals who sought to challenge these social and economic structures, and their possible relationship to the Jesus.



Amongst these groups, I will argue, were the Galilean bandits, John the Baptist, the Essenes, the Cynics and James the ‘brother’ of Jesus. Finally, I will consider the attitudes presented in the synoptic gospels and the differences and discrepancies between them, concluding that they present a consistent picture of Jesus’ attitude towards poverty and wealth.

### **The Hebrew Bible**

Although liberation theologians have frequently used the Hebrew Bible as a resource for condemning economic oppression and even to argue that God has a ‘preferential option for the poor’, recent ‘ideological criticism’ has given rise to the view that numerous texts in the Hebrew Bible actually underpin conservative or even oppressive attitudes towards poverty and wealth. It has been increasingly acknowledged that the Hebrew Bible, like the New Testament, is shaped by the interests of its authors, who are generally representatives of a wealthy elite minority. As David Clines has stated:

The natural (not the cynical) assumption is that powerful groups do nothing against their interest; if they do, they threaten their own power. And it is in the interest of the dominant (hegemonic) class to secure the assent of the greatest number of people of their class; that makes for social stability and thus the continuance of their own power.<sup>172</sup>

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<sup>172</sup> David J.A. Clines, *Interested Parties: The Ideology of Writers and Readers of the Hebrew Bible* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1995), p.38

Mark Sneed notes that the increasingly argued view that the Hebrew Bible is a product of the elite and upper class has caused several scholars to question whether texts which ostensibly reflect the voice of the oppressed really do so at all.<sup>173</sup> Discussion of wealth and poverty appears to be one way in which elite ideology is clearly represented in the Hebrew Bible and as we shall see, is a way through which the authors maintain a social order beneficial to their interests.

Throughout the Hebrew Bible wealth is presented as a blessing from God or as a divine reward. The conclusion of the book of Job is categorical about the relationship between obedience to God and wealth; after demonstrating unfaltering loyalty throughout his trials, God rewards Job with some ‘fourteen thousand sheep, six thousand camels, a thousand yoke of oxen, and a thousand she-asses’ (Job 42:12). In 1 Chronicles, David states that wealth and honour are from God (1 Chr 29:12); Psalm 112:3 declares that wealth and riches are in the house of the man who fears Yahweh (Ps. 112:3); Proverbs 22:4 states that ‘Humility and fear of Yahweh bring wealth, honour and life’; Qoheleth says that wealth is a ‘gift of God’ (Eccl 5:198); and 1 Samuel 2:7 states that Yahweh sends both poverty and wealth. The extent to which Yahweh was impressed by the fact that Solomon did not ask for wealth, riches and honour (2 Chron 1:11; 1 Kings 3:11) confirms the way in which Yahweh was widely regarded as a dispenser of wealth and riches; a point which is reinforced by his subsequent bestowing of wealth and riches upon Solomon.

A few texts present a more negative view of wealth. The Psalms, Proverbs, and Ecclesiastes in particular offer caution about the dangers of wealth. Sometimes noted is the futility of obtaining wealth because it is fleeting and will not last past the grave (Ps

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<sup>173</sup> Mark Sneed, ‘Israelite Concern for the Alien, Orphan, and Widow: Altruism or Ideology?’, ZAW 111, 4, 1999, pp.498-507 (499)

39:6; 49:10, 12, 16; Prov 11:4; 23:5). The inconveniences and pressures of riches are also highlighted, such as sleeplessness (Eccl 5:12), and the amount of energy and effort that may be expended to obtain riches (Prov 23:4). A few proverbs suggest that those who pursue wealth will be met instead with failure, punishment or poverty (Prov 11:28; 28:20, 22). These texts also postulate that it is better to have little and be righteous, than to have wealth and wickedness (Ps 37:16; Prov 15:16). Psalm 52:7 mocks ‘the man who would not make his refuge in God, but trusted in the abundance of his riches and sought refuge in his wealth.’<sup>174</sup> A few fragments of these texts go further still in their disparagement of wealth and those who possess it. Psalm 73:12 seems to suggest a close relationship between the wicked and the wealthy, stating, ‘behold these are the wicked; always at ease, they increase in riches’. Yet, on the other hand, the Proverbs point out that there are various benefits to possessing riches, as well as the potential ‘dangers.’ Wealth offers a sort of insurance policy from threats (Prov 13:8), great security (Prov 10:15), and the assurance of friendship (Prov 19:4), all of which, according to the Proverbs, the poor are deprived of. The Proverbs also maintain that notion that wealth is a blessing from Yahweh (Prov 10:22). While these texts offer some gentle warnings about the possible snares of wealth, their criticisms are mild and fairly inconsequential; the overall portrayal of wealth that we find is that it is a generally pleasant and desirable thing. Qoheleth concedes that, at the end of the day, ‘money is the answer for everything’ (Eccl 10:19), the Psalmist confirms that wealth and riches are in the houses of those who fear Yahweh (Ps 112:1-3), and Proverbs 10:22 states that the blessing of Yahweh makes rich.

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<sup>174</sup> The NIV optimistically translates: ‘the man who did not make God his stronghold, but trusted in his great wealth and *grew strong by destroying others*’. There is little suggestion, however, of destruction toward others in the Hebrew, and the ך suffix indicates that the הוה ‘woe’ or ‘destruction’ belonged to the rich man himself. Furthermore, negative statements about wealth in the Psalms usually revolve around the problems that wealth causes for the wealthy party themselves, not for the problems that the wealthy cause for the others. The air of mockery, jeering and laughter that precedes this passage confirms that the ‘destruction’ was upon the wealthy man himself, and not ‘others’.

The normative presentation of wealth as a gift from God, which we find throughout the Hebrew Bible, functions to consolidate the socioeconomic order of the society from which these texts emerged. In several ways the notion that wealth is a gift from God justifies the position of the rich because it implies that God has willed them to be rich. Any suggestion that wealth is acquired through human efforts poses a threat to the social order and so is rebuked. Thus Deuteronomy 8:17 directly warns against saying ‘my power and the might of my hand have gotten me this wealth’. Because it is Yahweh ‘who gives you the power to get wealth’ (8:18). The rich have been favoured by Yahweh and given his blessing. The poor, on the other hand, are equally God-ordained to be poor. As Hannah claims in 1 Sam 2:7, ‘Yahweh makes poor and makes rich’. And in Job 1:21: ‘Yahweh gave, and Yahweh has taken away’. According to the authors of these texts, economic disparity is the will of God.

The Psalms frequently mention the poor, and this is often interpreted as genuine social concern.<sup>175</sup> But an ideological-critical reading suggests that the Psalms’ treatment of the poor amounts to a remarkable justification of inaction and disengagement. In the Psalms it is almost always God who helps the poor (Ps 12:5; 68:10; 22:26; 113:7; 140:12), and no explanation of how the assistance was practically manifested is ever given. There is no indication of in what respect the needy are lifted from the ash heap (Ps 113:7), or by what means the poor will eat and be satisfied (Ps 22:26), or on what grounds Yahweh will establish justice for the poor (Ps 140:12). The Psalmist renders himself and his audience exempt from addressing the existence of the poor, because ultimately, God will do ‘something’ to help them. For the meantime, the Psalmist gently advises not to *trust* in oppression or extortion, nor to *become vain* in robbing, nor to set your heart on riches if they happen to be increasing (Ps 62:10). It is notable that the

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<sup>175</sup> See, for instance, Sue Gillingham, ‘The Poor in the Psalms’, *ExpTim*, 100, 1988, pp.15-19

Psalms apparently needs to clarify that exploitation was not ideal; the timidity of the Psalmist's warning illustrates his relative tolerance of the injustices of which he speaks. Furthermore, while the Psalms occasionally commend charitable giving (Ps 112:5, 9), the end envisaged is not social justice or equality, but respect and honour for the giver (Ps 112:6, 9).

The Proverbs treatment of the poor is slightly more nuanced. Walter Houston suggests that while the compilers of Proverbs 10-31 have typically upper-class attitudes and they accept that society is divided into rich and poor as given, 'they attempt to bring up the youth of the ruling classes to be aware of their responsibility towards those who will be in their power, and to treat them in a way that recognizes their common humanity.'<sup>176</sup> Thus we find texts like Proverbs 31:9, which almost resembles some of prophetic calls for justice, exhorting the audience to 'speak out, judge righteously and defend the rights of the poor and needy'. However, charitable giving in the Proverbs remains integrally linked with personal reward (Prov 19:17; 28:27; 29:14). The Proverbs also provide justification for the rich to disengage with social concerns, with Proverbs 28:8, for example, proposing, rather glibly, that 'one who augments wealth by exorbitant interest gathers it for another who is kind to the poor.' This proverb thus effectively liberates the one who gains wealth by exorbitant interest to continue in the same vein because, apparently, by some mystical means, the poor will ultimately be provided for by a hypothetical benefactor.

Many more texts throughout the Hebrew Bible simply accept economic disparity and exploitation as a fact of life. 'The rich rule over the poor, and the borrower is slave

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<sup>176</sup> Walter J. Houston, 'The Role of the Poor in Proverbs' in *Reading from Right to Left: Essays in Honour of David J.A. Clines* (eds. J. Cheryl Exum, H.G.M. Williamson, David J.A. Clines; Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2003), pp.229-240 (237-238)

of the lender’, Proverbs 22:7 plainly states; ‘The poor use entreaties, but the rich answer roughly’, reports Proverbs 18:23; ‘The fallow ground of the poor yields much food, but it is swept away through injustice’, says Proverbs 12:23. As Houston says of the compilers of the Proverbs, it has not crossed their minds that the social order might be changed, or that it was the result of human decisions.<sup>177</sup> Similarly, Qoheleth states that there is nothing surprising or remarkable about this arrangement, saying: ‘If you see in a province the poor oppressed and justice and rights violently taken away, do not be amazed at the matter’ (Ecl 5:8). Qoheleth goes a great deal further, however, reinforcing the social order through the rhetoric of fear: ‘Even in your thought, do not curse the king, nor in your bedchamber curse the rich; for a bird of the air will carry your voice, or some winged creature will tell the matter’ (Ecl 10:20). A person is thus advised not to even internally question the hegemony of the wealthy and powerful, or they will be found out and, presumably, punished.

Proverbs 28:3 declares, ‘a poor man (*rash*) oppressing the poor (*dallim*) is like torrential rain which leaves no crop.’ Whybray notes that commentators have often struggled with this proverb.<sup>178</sup> Indeed, the translators of the NRSV and the NIV have rendered the first poor man as ‘a ruler’.<sup>179</sup> While the term *geber*, ‘master,’ that precedes *rash* suggests that the *rash* who oppresses the *dallim* in some way rules over the *dallim*, the oppressor is clearly described as poor. Although for modern translators this text has proved perplexing, this was not so for the ancient writer. The writer has no issue with discussing the bad things that poor people might do to each other; besides oppressing

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<sup>177</sup> Houston, ‘The Role of the Poor’, p.237

<sup>178</sup> R. N. Whybray, *Wealth and Poverty in the Book of Proverbs* (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1990), p.37

<sup>179</sup> With the NIV footnoting the alternative, ‘Or a poor person’

one another, he notes that the poor may also be driven to steal, which dishonours the name of God (Prov 30:9).

Similar issues arise in the Decalogue. Leslie Hoppe is clearly taken in by the apparent benevolence of the legislators, claiming that, 'it is clear that concern for the poor, for a just economic system, and for the elimination of the exploitation of the vulnerable members of society is at the heart of the Torah.'<sup>180</sup> On the contrary, in the legal texts, like much of the rest of the Hebrew Bible, the existence of a permanent class of poor was regarded as inevitable. Deuteronomy states this categorically: 'The poor will never cease out of the land' (Deut 15:11a), and therefore recommends gestures of charity to appease the conscience (Deut 15:11b). Hoppe does not note the conditions by which Yahweh claims 'there shall be no poor among you' (Deut 15:4); there will, apparently, only be no poor among the Israelites as long as they obey Yahweh's commands (Deut 15:5). Once again this reinforces the notion that prosperity and poverty are explained by whether or not a person was obedient to God, and shirks human responsibility for the social order. Hoppe is aware that widows and orphans had 'no right of inheritance' and that because aliens could not own land 'had no access to the means of production', and at the same time Hoppe notes that 'Kings proudly claimed to be protectors of the poor and widows and orphans'.<sup>181</sup> But Hoppe fails to see the vested interests at work in these texts, and accepts the pious claims of the landed nobility, not questioning why it is that if kings cared so much about aliens, widows, and orphans that these very same groups remained profoundly marginalised socially and economically. As Sneed argues, the apparently altruistic commands concerning the

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<sup>180</sup> Leslie J. Hoppe, *There Shall Be No Poor Among You: Poverty in the Bible* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2004), p.39

<sup>181</sup> Hoppe, *There Shall Be No Poor Among You*, pp.24-5

alien, orphan, and widow are ‘not laws with enforceable consequences for violation’, but are little more than ‘an externalized, informal, negative religious sanction,’<sup>182</sup> an example of *noblesse oblige*. Speaking of Exodus 22:20-26, Sneed writes:

Note that this is in apodictic form, and thus there is no fixed penalty for violation of this value, except perhaps shame. No doubt the collectors knew it could not be enforced. And that may be the point. By merely including it among the more self-serving legislation, they have fulfilled their responsibility; whether it is enforced or not is another matter. They also in the process assuage any guilt they might feel for the plight of these people. Again, perhaps as intellectuals have been known to do, they perceived themselves as going beyond the call of duty just in producing such benevolent legislation.<sup>183</sup>

In a similar vein, Clines argues that the Ten Commandments serve the interests of the ruling classes in numerous ways. The Sabbath law, Clines suggests, works against the interests of those that live on the poverty line and need to work every day, or those that look after animals that need to be fed, milked or pastured daily.<sup>184</sup> Clines notes that in Nehemiah 13:15-16 Nehemiah sees people in Judah treading wine presses, loading grain, wine and figs on asses and bringing them into Jerusalem on the Sabbath. Clines concludes that merchants and some home-based manufacturers wanted to work on the Sabbath and so were disadvantaged by the commandment. Clines argues that the commandments against stealing and coveting are also (self-evidently you could say) in the interests of those who are wealthy enough to own male and female slaves, oxen, asses, and houses.<sup>185</sup> Clines also argues that the commandment about adultery favours

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<sup>182</sup> Sneed, ‘Israelite Concern’, p.502

<sup>183</sup> Sneed, ‘Israelite Concern’, p.504

<sup>184</sup> Clines, ‘The Ten Commandments’, p.39

<sup>185</sup> Clines, ‘The Ten Commandments’, p.42



polygamous men who have numerous wives, who are generally from the upper-stratum;<sup>186</sup> and so on.

There are, nonetheless, a variety of texts in the Hebrew Bible that exhibit some concern for social change. While acknowledging the elite authorship and ideological motivations of the Hebrew Bible, Houston argues that Hebrew Bible texts that speak against oppression and favour care for the poor should be regarded as integral to its ideology because it is in fact in the interests of the rulers to provide ‘a decent provision for the poor’.<sup>187</sup> Or as Houston puts it elsewhere, ‘The class that claims to direct society must, in order to make good their claim, present themselves as guardians of the common interest.’<sup>188</sup> In the Prophets, the practices of usury, extortion and exploitation are explicitly linked with the rich, who are sharply criticised for the suffering that they bring upon others. Habakkuk declares woes upon him ‘who heaps up what is not his own,’ who has ‘plundered many nations,’ who ‘gets evil gain for his house but cutting off many peoples,’ and who ‘builds a town with blood, and founds a city on iniquity’ (Hab 2:7-12). Micah condemns ‘the man with wicked scales and with a bag of deceitful weights’ declaring ‘your rich men are full of violence’ (Mic 6:11-12). Hosea 12:7-8 speaks of a trader ‘in whose hands are false balances, he loves to oppress’ and of Ephraim who boasts ‘I am rich, I have gained wealth for myself’ but whose riches ‘can never offset the guilt he has incurred.’ Jeremiah declares, ‘like the partridge that gathers a brood which she did not hatch, so is he who gets riches but not by right; in the midst of his days they will leave him, and at his end he will be a fool’ (Jer 17:11) and ‘woe to him who builds his house by unrighteousness, and his upper rooms by injustice; who

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<sup>186</sup> Clines, ‘The Ten Commandments’, p.43

<sup>187</sup> Houston, ‘The Role of the Poor’, p.229

<sup>188</sup> Houston, *Contending for Justice*, p.13

makes his neighbours work for nothing, and does not give them their wages' (Jer 22:13).

The prophetic texts are no less the products of the upper-class, despite their criticisms of the rich. Thomas Schmidt has noted for example, that Isaiah had a central role in the political establishment, Zephaniah claimed lineage from King Hezekiah, and Zechariah was a priest.<sup>189</sup> As Houston notes, hegemonic classes and their critics can share a common culture.<sup>190</sup> But the difficulties of the prophetic call for justice are compounded by the punishments that are handed out. It has been noted, for example, that in Amos, the *whole* of Israel – not just the oppressive party – is destroyed on account of injustice that was carried out towards the poor.<sup>191</sup> Amos' prophecy proclaims punishment indiscriminately upon the whole nation, regardless of their complicity in the injustice. We might also note the case of Sodom and Gomorrah; Ezekiel explains: 'This was the guilt of your sister Sodom: she and her daughters had pride, excess of food, and prosperous ease, but did not aid the poor and needy' (Ez 16:49). But when Yahweh rained burning sulphur down on Sodom and Gomorrah (Gen 19:24), the poor and the needy were apparently not exempt from punishment. A similar destruction appears in Zephaniah, where Yahweh claims that he will 'utterly sweep away everything from the earth' (1:2), that he will stretch out his hand against '*all* the inhabitants of Jerusalem' (1:4).

Houston notes that while such texts may contain serious internal inconsistencies, in Amos, for example, condemnations of oppression are ultimately the 'indispensible

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<sup>189</sup> Thomas E. Schmidt, *Hostility to Wealth in the Synoptic Gospels* (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1987), p.56

<sup>190</sup> Houston, *Contending for Justice*, pp.73, 13-14, Cf. Michael Walzer, *Interpretation and Social Criticism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1987), pp.40-42

<sup>191</sup> David J.A. Clines, *Interested Parties*, pp.90-1, Houston, *Contending for Justice*, pp.70-73

basis' of everything else that is said. Houston comments: 'Amos is remembered, not primarily as the prophet of the fall of Israel, but as the prophet of justice for the poor, even though the structure of his text serves the former end rather than the latter.'<sup>192</sup> But while the Hebrew Bible has been appropriated for liberating ends and contesting injustice, ideological criticism calls into question whether this was necessarily the intended function of certain texts. It still remains that many of the authors of these texts sought to reinforce structural inequalities in terms of power and economics by addressing social inequality with vague and untenable 'solutions' that, while giving the appearance of altruism and concern for the oppressed and economically poor, in fact served to justify inaction on the part of the ruling upper-classes and to maintain an order that benefitted an elite minority.

### **The Greco-Roman Elite**

One of Moses Finley's arguments in his landmark work *The Ancient Economy* was that the ancient economy was primitive and static, and that the ancients had little concern with technical innovation and economic progress. As much as Finley's arguments have been contested in recent years,<sup>193</sup> such a view of the ancient economy has continued to find expression in the work of some biblical scholars. In his work *Paul, Poverty and Survival* Justin Meggitt, for example, refers to a debate between 'primitivists', who believe that the Greco-Roman economy bore little resemblance to market capitalism, and 'modernists', who find numerous similarities between the ancient and the modern

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<sup>192</sup> Houston, *Contending for Justice*, p.73

<sup>193</sup> See Greene, 'Technological Innovation and Economic Progress in the Ancient World' and also Alan Boman and Andrew Wilson, 'Quantifying the Roman Economy: Integration, Growth, Decline?' in *Quantifying the Roman Economy* (eds. Alan Bowman and Andrew Wilson; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), pp.28-53

economy.<sup>194</sup> Meggitt himself sides with the primitivists, holding the view that ‘the economy remained weak and rudimentary with little or no growth.’<sup>195</sup> Meggitt proceeds to suggest that ancient Roman agriculturalists had little interest in the productivity of their land, providing three examples. Firstly, Meggitt cites Cato’s agricultural manual which comments that ‘in addition to profitability, aesthetic factors, such as the beauty and healthfulness of an estate’s location, should be significant in determining its value.’<sup>196</sup> Secondly, Meggitt cites Varro who commented that farmers should be motivated by ‘profit’ and ‘pleasure.’<sup>197</sup> Thirdly, Meggitt mentions Columella who argued that economic efficiency should be paramount in farming; but Meggitt dismisses Columella’s view as ‘untypical.’ That Meggitt uses these sources to justify his argument is alarming. In the first example, Cato insists that aesthetic factors on an estate are only to be considered *in addition* to profitability. For Meggitt’s second example, he adds in a footnote pointing out that Varro goes on to say that ‘...the profitable plays a more important role than the pleasure.’ And Meggitt’s third example – one which precisely confirms the pattern of the first two – he dismisses as untypical. All three texts that Meggitt cites serve to demonstrate landowners’ primary interests in the profitability of their farms.

Bruce Malina has similarly downplayed the place of economic considerations in the ancient world. Malina rightly notes, rightly to an extent, that the economy of the ancient world was an ‘embedded economy,’ in which ‘economic goals, roles, production, hiring, firing, planning, and the like, are determined by kinship or political

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<sup>194</sup> Meggitt, *Paul*, pp.41-42

<sup>195</sup> Meggitt, *Paul*, p.42

<sup>196</sup> Meggitt, *Paul*, p.42 cf. Cato *De Agri Cultura* 1.1-3

<sup>197</sup> Meggitt, *Paul*, p.42

considerations, either alone or primarily and not purely or primarily on the basis of “economic” considerations.’<sup>198</sup> It is true that in this respect the ancient economy differed from modern neoliberal economies. But Malina goes much further than this, arguing that the acquisition of wealth as an end in itself was considered to be ‘inherently demented, vicious, evil.’<sup>199</sup> Malina begins by citing two texts from Pseudo-Pelagius: ‘For persons to cease to be greedy, they must cease to be wealthy’ (*On Wealth* II, PLSupp I, 1381) and, ‘It is scarcely possible for a rich person to keep from committing crimes’ (XX, 4; PLSupp I, 1417). Besides the fact that these texts present a much more moderate attitude towards wealth than Malina’s idea of inherently demented, vicious and evil wealth, Pelagius’ views are hardly representative of the ancient elite in general. Pelagius was a radical ascetic who denounced all personal wealth. Furthermore, pseudo-Pelagius is dated around the turn of the fifth century, making its relevance seriously questionable.

Malina also refers to Plutarch’s often quoted essay *On Love of Wealth*, in which Plutarch criticises those who place wealth above all else in life. Plutarch says:

The greedy miser feels compelled to acquire more and more, yet is forbidden to enjoy the acquisitions; he is miserly, unsocial, selfish, heedless of friends, indifferent to civic demands. The avaricious in general suffer hardships, lose sleep, engage in trade, chase after legacies, and truckle to others. (535C; 19)

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<sup>198</sup> Malina, ‘Wealth and Poverty’, p.92

<sup>199</sup> Malina, ‘Wealth and Poverty’, p.92

But like pseudo-Pelagius, Plutarch's essay is polemical. As Malina notes, Plutarch himself was rather 'well situated' – he came from a prominent family, he studied in Athens, he worked as a priest of Apollo and a magistrate and he still found time to produce a considerable body of writing – if Plutarch was claiming that wealth was evil in itself then he would be incriminating himself. Plutarch's essay represented a rare, dissenting, and in many ways hypocritical viewpoint.

Contrary to the statements of Meggitt and Malina, wealth was considered highly desirable amongst the Greco-Roman elite, and was actively sought after. Even Finley acknowledges:

...the ancient world was very unambiguous about wealth. Wealth was a good thing, a necessary condition for the good life, and that was all there was to it. There was no nonsense about wealth as a trust, no subconscious guilt feelings, no death-bed restitutions of usury.<sup>200</sup>

As Plutarch's polemic suggests, the pursuit of profit in fact became the central concern for some. As Aristotle makes plain: 'Some men turn every quality or art into a means of making money; this they conceive to be the end, and to the promotion of the end all things must contribute' (*Politics* 1).<sup>201</sup>

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<sup>200</sup> Finley, 'Technical Innovation and Economic Progress in the Ancient World', pp.31-2

<sup>201</sup> Citation from J.K. Galbraith, *A History of Economics: the Past as the Present* (London: Penguin, 1989), p.15 citing A.E. Monroe, *Early Economic Thought: Selections from Economic Literature prior to Adam Smith* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1924), p.17

Status and wealth were inextricably linked in the ancient world, and the importance of wealth among the Greco-Roman upper-classes is famously demonstrated by the practice of conspicuous consumption. Honour was integrally linked with public displays of wealth, and so lavish and public displays of prosperity were an important part of maintaining status.<sup>202</sup> On other hand, poverty was considered to be shameful. Ramsey MacMullen suggests that mocking those of a lower economic standing was something of a sport amongst the upper-classes, who would publicly humiliate the poor on account of their poverty, inviting them to dinner only to serve them insults, along with a meagre portion of food and cheap wine (cf. Juvenal *Sat.* 48; Pliny *Ep.*2.6). Macmullen suggests that the poor experienced ‘deliberate, unprovoked and unresisted’ mockery and scorn.<sup>203</sup> Furthermore, although their leisure depended on it, the elite scorned manual labour and those who undertook such work. A letter of Pliny the Younger, after detailing the way in which he spends his time in reading, writing and leisure notes: ‘I also devote time to my tenants, yet not enough in their opinion; their peasant complaints make me think longingly of our studies and the activity in the city’ (*Ep.* 9.36). Even the short time that Pliny spends with those who work on his land he considers loathsome. Cicero, commenting on skills and occupations speaks disparagingly of nearly every one, listing tax collectors, untrained day labourers, fishmongers, butchers, cooks, poultry dealers, fishermen, dancers, all craftsmen, and the whole retail trade. Agriculture, however, he praises highly, for agriculture was the way through which the wealthy estate owners made their fortunes (*Off.* 150-51).

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<sup>202</sup> J.E. Stambaugh and D.L. Balch, *The New Testament and Its Social Environment* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1986), p.65

<sup>203</sup> MacMullen, *Roman Social Relations*, p.111

In the Greco-Roman literature, wealth was virtually equated with virtue, and it was almost inconceivable that a poor person could be upright and moral. Roman texts tend to distinguish only between the *honestiores*, the wealthy, and the *humiliores*, the plebs;<sup>204</sup> so much so that Robin Osborne argues that it was a long-standing Greek habit to describe the wealthy as ‘good’ and ‘best’ (*chrestoi, beltistoi*) and the poor as ‘bad’ and ‘worse’ (*poneroi, kheirous*).<sup>205</sup> The peasantry were seen as a ‘rabble’ (Pliny the Younger, *Epistles* 9.6) or even ‘filth’ (Cicero, *Pro Flacco* 18).<sup>206</sup>

### **Philo of Alexandria**

As an elite first century writer who was significantly influenced by both Hellenistic and Jewish traditions, Philo’s perspective on poverty and wealth is interesting, and particularly worthy of discussion is Philo’s sustained denunciation of wealth, which has provoked quite some debate.

Some years ago, David Mealand argued that Philo was essentially hypocritical in his views on wealth for the obvious reason that at the same time as possessing great wealth, Philo frequently praised poverty.<sup>207</sup> Philo was certainly very wealthy, but Mealand was of the view that Philo ‘constantly commends renunciation’,<sup>208</sup> partly

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<sup>204</sup> See Scheidel, ‘Stratification, deprivation and quality of life’, pp.40-41

<sup>205</sup> Robin Osborne, ‘Introduction: Roman Poverty in Context’ in *Poverty in the Roman World* (eds. Margaret Atkins and Robin Osborne; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), pp.12-13

<sup>206</sup> Longenecker, ‘Exposing the Economic Middle’, p.247

<sup>207</sup> D.L. Mealand, ‘Philo of Alexandria’s Attitude to Riches’, *ZNW* 69, 1978, pp.256-264 (258)

<sup>208</sup> D.L. Mealand, ‘The Paradox of Philo’s Views on Wealth’, *JSNT* 24, 1985, pp.111-115 (111)



because of the influence of Greeks such as Seneca, but largely, Mealand argues, because of his influence from Jewish texts that reflect the outlook of less privileged groups.<sup>209</sup>

Thomas Schmidt responded to Mealand's article arguing that there was no discrepancy between Philo's praise of poverty and his apparent wealth. Schmidt noted that many aristocratic texts are negative about wealth. Schmidt argues that, 'Almost every source that exhibits a degree of hostility to wealth, from ancient Babylonian works to contemporary Jewish pseudepigraphical literature, shows evidence of aristocratic production. Philo is in fact the example *par excellence* of this phenomenon.'<sup>210</sup> Schmidt argued that 'will' was the key for Philo. Philo was positive about wealth when its acquisition was involuntary; if it is a gift of God to the Jews, an inheritance, or a plundered fortune. He was negative when the wealth represented acquisitiveness, which contradicts virtue.<sup>211</sup> Furthermore, Schmidt suggested that Philo was barely concerned with the involuntarily poverty of his fellow Jews;<sup>212</sup> his dislike for wealth was not because of his sympathy for oppressed Jews. Schmidt argues that Philo shares the Greek understanding that 'the giver's action is self-regarding';<sup>213</sup> in other words, Philo's disliking of wealth is essentially self-centred. Almsgiving is for the benefit of the giver, and renunciation of wealth is for personal virtuosity.<sup>214</sup>

Quite some criticism was then levelled at Schmidt for his minimising of the extent of Philo's association with his fellow Jews. Mealand rebutted Schmidt for

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<sup>209</sup> Mealand, 'Philo of Alexandria's Attitude to Riches', p.264 cited in Thomas.E. Schmidt, 'Hostility to Wealth in Philo of Alexandria', *JSNT* 19, 1983, pp.85-97 (85)

<sup>210</sup> Schmidt, 'Hostility to Wealth in Philo', p.85

<sup>211</sup> Schmidt, 'Hostility to Wealth in Philo', p.87

<sup>212</sup> Schmidt, 'Hostility to Wealth in Philo', p.87

<sup>213</sup> Schmidt, 'Hostility to Wealth in Philo', p.92

<sup>214</sup> Schmidt, 'Hostility to Wealth in Philo', p.92

overemphasising Philo's aristocratic status. Certainly, Philo was a wealthy aristocrat, but Mealand suggests that he was more loyal to Judaism than he was to Hellenistic traditions. Furthermore, Mealand suggests that the influence of the Cynic tradition that Schmidt claims to detect in Philo's writing was certainly not aristocratic.<sup>215</sup> Mealand also notes the concern that Philo expresses for his fellow Jews in his writings against Flaccus, who attacked and plundered the Jews in Alexandria.<sup>216</sup> Gerald Downing has also criticised Schmidt's claim that Philo was not concerned with the plight of fellow Jews who suffered oppression. Although Schmidt was correct in commenting on the biblical appreciation of wealth, and the Greek disparagement of wealth as a threat to virtue, Downing suggests that Philo's writing demonstrates compassion for the poor and oppressed on several occasions. Philo writes, for example:

Yet vast as are his excellences and powers, he takes pity and compassion on those most helplessly in need, and does not disdain to give judgment to strangers or orphans or widows. He holds their low estate worthy of his providential care, while of kings and despots and great potentates he takes no account. (*Spec. Leg.* 1.308)

Downing argues that Philo in fact enhances the Deuteronomic insistence on God's care for the 'underprivileged'.<sup>217</sup> Mealand and Downing, however, are evidently taken in by Philo's feigned altruism. Philo's concern for the poor in the face of his enormous wealth

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<sup>215</sup> Mealand, 'Paradox', p.112

<sup>216</sup> Mealand, 'Paradox', p.113

<sup>217</sup> F.G. Downing, 'Philo on Wealth and the Rights of the Poor', *JSNT* 24, 1985, pp.116-118 (116)

is evidently nothing more than lip-service. As Mealand initially argued, Philo's attitude towards poverty and wealth appears to be fundamentally hypocritical.

More recently, the debate on Philo's attitude towards wealth and poverty has been revisited by Thomas Phillips. Phillips argues that the most important thing for Philo is not the will, but the *desire* for wealth. Thus for Philo, 'one could muster up the will and voluntarily dispose of all of his or her possessions and still be without virtue due to the lingering presence of the real problem, *desire*.'<sup>218</sup> Phillips also disagrees that Philo saw wealth as a threat to virtue; Philo described the Temple as 'adorned so as to present a costly appearance' (*Spec. Leg.* 1.71),<sup>219</sup> and, like most Jews, saw wealth as a gift from God. Indeed, Philo was of the opinion that 'those who follow God' would be blessed with 'wealth' and 'abundance' (*Praem. Poen.* 98-105).<sup>220</sup> Thus he argues that Philo does not praise the Essenes and the Therapeutae for their impoverishment; in fact, Philo does not present them as impoverished, because their common fund 'provides food in abundance and anything else which human life requires' (*Hypoth.* 10). Rather, his praise for these groups concerns the manner in which they have overcome desire and provided for the needs of the whole community.<sup>221</sup> Similarly to Schmidt, Phillips concludes that,

Desire for wealth, not ownership of wealth, is the key to the observable pattern in Philo's ethical discourse regarding wealth and poverty. Philo does not idealize

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<sup>218</sup> T.E. Phillips, 'Revisiting Philo: Discussions of Wealth and Poverty in Philo's Ethical Discourse', *JSNT* 83, 2001, pp.111-121 (117)

<sup>219</sup> Phillips, 'Revisiting Philo', p.115

<sup>220</sup> Phillips, 'Revisiting Philo', p.116

<sup>221</sup> Phillips, 'Revisiting Philo', p.120

poverty; rather, he extols the virtues of overcoming the passions and of controlling desire.<sup>222</sup>

We observe a similar pattern in the case of Plutarch and his essay *On Love of Wealth*. Plutarch was also extremely wealthy, yet has particular views on the way in which wealth was managed. Plutarch was clearly not averse to wealth in itself, but to greed and the desire for wealth, because it resulted in vices that harmed the wealthy individual, making them ‘miserly, unsocial, selfish, heedless of friends’ and ‘indifferent to civic demands’ (525C; 19), and perhaps occasionally in behavior that hurt their wealthy friends, such as cheating (525F; 23) and stealing (526EF; 27).

Phillips’ estimation of Philo’s attitude towards wealth is probably correct, but his conclusions do not go far enough. When Philo talks about poverty and wealth, as Phillips realises, he is talking about personal piety, self-control or virtue. Philo notably refrains, of course, from discussing the fact that he has vast wealth while many others do not. Philo masks this over with the occasional altruistic word of sympathy for the poor, when as Schmidt notes, Philo did not have any serious concern for the poverty of his fellow Jews. In this respect, Philo’s attitude towards poverty, wealth and social change seats him firmly amongst the conservative elite.

### **The Pharisees and ‘the Retainer Class’**

According to Gerhard Lenski, the ‘retainer class’ in agrarian societies served two main functions. Firstly, they provided numerical support for the ruler and governing class, for

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<sup>222</sup> Phillips, ‘Revisiting Philo’, p.121

it would obviously not be possible for 1 to 2 percent of the population to subordinate the other 98 or 99 percent of society by themselves. Secondly, the retainers mediated relations between the governing class and the common people: ‘It was the retainers who actually performed most of the work involved in effecting the transfer of the economic surplus from the producers to the political elite.’<sup>223</sup> In Roman Palestine, these roles were clearly performed by (Herodian) soldiers and tax collectors. In the writings of Josephus we repeatedly see the way in which the military prevented peasant uprisings in Galilee. Similarly, it is soldiers who dispose of Jesus for disrupting the social order. Tax collectors were the agents who physically extracted the resources of the peasantry in order to redistribute them to the ruling class. In the process, tax collectors evidently managed to amass a fair amount of wealth for themselves, earning the disdain of the peasantry (Mt 5:46, 18:17, 21:32). Tax collectors and soldiers alike apparently sought to supplement their wages, perhaps to ‘tip’ themselves for the resentment that such dishonorable vocations earned them, through theft and fraud (Lk 3:12-14, 19:8).

It has been argued that the Pharisees may also be considered as part of the retainer class, most notably by Anthony Saldarini.<sup>224</sup> This argument has not been entirely popular. James Dunn argues that such a presentation of the Pharisees contradicts Josephus’ portrayal of the Pharisees as a group who were popular with the common people.<sup>225</sup> Roland Deines has also suggested that the portrayal of the Pharisees as ‘lovers of money’ (Lk 16:14) is not in-keeping with Josephus’ portrayal of the Pharisees who ‘simplify their standard of living, making no concession to luxury’ (*Ant*

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<sup>223</sup> Lenski, *Power and Privilege*, p.246

<sup>224</sup> Anthony J. Saldarini, *Pharisees, Scribes and Sadducees in Palestinian Society* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1989), p.284

<sup>225</sup> Dunn, *Jesus Remembered*, p.269

18.12).<sup>226</sup> Deines argues that ‘the topics the Pharisees are interested in are, with one exception, religious.’<sup>227</sup> Similarly, Patrick Mullen states, ‘The Pharisees appear to have directed their energies to lay observances in the home and the broader application of Temple and priestly ritual and cultic concerns in the lives of the laity.’<sup>228</sup> Saldarini’s arguments, however, seem to carry some weight and I would argue that the Pharisees played a profoundly important political role in Roman Palestine.

Undoubtedly, the Pharisees were extremely interested in ‘religious’ issues. But Deines’ presentation of the Pharisees as a group who are only interested in ‘religious’ topics is simplistic; religion and politics in first century Judaism cannot be separated so easily. For example, the Pharisees were extremely political in their concern for preserving Jewish identity. As Maurice Casey notes, Greek culture became so influential in Jerusalem that it threatened Jewish identity, and Hellenisation and the oppression of the Maccabean crisis may have been directly responsible for the development of the Pharisees’ particular form of law observance.<sup>229</sup> The Pharisees’ (and the Essenes’) hyper-concern for law observance was rooted, to a notable extent, in marking themselves off as separate, in response to severe assaults on their cultural and religious identity. While it is possible to say that Torah observance and Jewish identity is ostensibly a religious matter, the Pharisees’ concern with these issues had extremely political consequences. The refusal of six thousand Pharisees to swear an oath of loyalty to Caesar was extremely political (*Ant* 17.43), and the refusal of the Fourth Philosophy

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<sup>226</sup> Footnote 19 in Roland Deines, ‘The Social Profile of the Pharisees’ in *The New Testament and Rabbinic Literature* (ed. Reimund Bieringer et al.; Leiden: Brill, 2010), p.118

<sup>227</sup> Deines, ‘The Social Profile’, p.119

<sup>228</sup> J. Patrick Mullen, *Dining with Pharisees* (Collegeville, Minnesota: Liturgical Press, 2004), p.43

<sup>229</sup> P.M. Casey, *From Jewish Prophet to Gentile God: The Origins and Development of New Testament Christology* (Cambridge: James Clarke & Co., 1991), p.19

to pay the imperial tax, whilst grounded in the Torah, was profoundly political; and according to Josephus, the Fourth Philosophy ‘agree in all things with the Pharisees’ (*Ant* 18.23) – indeed, one of the founders of the Fourth Philosophy was known as Zadok *the Pharisee* (*Ant* 18.1). In a sense, the Pharisees in Jerusalem may have functioned as a sort of police-force for religion (Mk 7:1), as they sought to preserve their branch of Judaism throughout the region (Mt 23:15); the political role of the Pharisees, therefore, must not be so hastily dismissed as it frequently is.

Like most retainers, it is clear that the Pharisees had a relatively high social status compared with the peasantry. Josephus notes that the Pharisees had ‘very great influence with the masses’ (*Ant* 13.15), and the gospels confirm that the Pharisees were well respected; they apparently tended to receive seats of honour at banquets, and to be greeted with respect (Mt 23:6-7; Lk 11:43, 20:46). The Pharisees elevated social status was also matched by their economic status. Deines suggests that Luke’s accusation that the Pharisees are ‘lovers of money’ is an isolated saying,<sup>230</sup> but it is clear in the gospels that Jesus repeatedly clashed with the Pharisees on economic matters. In fact, Jesus repeatedly condemns the Pharisees for their economic activity. He accuses the Pharisees of saying ‘if any one swears by the temple it is nothing, but if any one swears by the gold of the temple, he is bound by his oath’ (Mt 23:16-17); in other words, he accuses the Pharisees of valuing money more highly than the temple. He accuses them of extortion and rapacity (Mt 23:25) and of adorning monuments (Mt 23:29).<sup>231</sup> Jesus condemns the Pharisees for diligently tithing, but neglecting the weightier matters of the law, justice and mercy (Mt 23:23, Lk 11:42). And Jesus accuses the Pharisees of

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<sup>230</sup> Deines, ‘The Social Profile’, p.118

<sup>231</sup> And lavish adornments are clearly not something that Jesus appreciates: in Luke, a widow’s poverty is contrasted with the extravagance of the temple (Lk 21:5)

encouraging the common people to give more to the temple, rather than support their families (Mk 7:11). That Jesus criticised the Pharisees' economic dealings is testified across the synoptic gospels, and so is likely to reflect an attitude of the historical Jesus.

Dunn's reservation, namely that the Pharisees could not be popular as well as being retainers, is understandable. Soldiers and tax collectors in particular were retainers and were clearly unpopular. But the Pharisees were in a special position, because they appealed to the general population on several grounds. Firstly, they found common ground, and thus popular support, with the peasantry in their shared disapproval of and disassociation from tax collectors (a point on which they disagreed with Jesus).<sup>232</sup> The Pharisees' and the masses' reasons for disliking tax collectors were quite different: the Pharisees' opposition to the tax collectors may be explained by the way in which tax collectors represented Roman domination; the peasantry hated the tax collectors because they forced them into poverty. But nonetheless, the Pharisees represented the views of the peasantry on this issue, bolstering their support. The Pharisees may also have received popular support because of their cultural conservatism in a time of dramatic economic and cultural change. Furthermore, the Pharisees functioned as symbols of aspiration. As Mullen notes, the majority of Pharisees seem to have originated among village folk.<sup>233</sup> Unlike soldiers and tax collectors, Pharisees were regarded as honest, pious characters that earned their wealth legitimately, and so were looked up to as pillars of success.

The Pharisees thus occupied a space between the ruling elite and the peasantry. While Zadok the Pharisee and the Fourth Philosophy were revolutionaries who objected to the imperial tax, most Pharisees were happy to go along with the tax when it suited

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<sup>232</sup> On the Pharisees disapproval of tax collectors see Mt 9:11/Mk 2:16/Lk 5:30, Lk 15:1-2

<sup>233</sup> Mullen, *Dining with Pharisees*, p.42



them, so long as their wealth and status were preserved. Thus tax refusal became a useful way of framing Jesus, who was so opposed to the Pharisees (Mt 22:17, Mk 12:13, Lk 20:20). The ‘craftiness’ of the Pharisees’ question about the imperial tax was that they themselves opposed it, but tolerated it for their own political ends; while the imperial tax undermined Jewish identity, it did not cause so much of a problem for the moderately powerful and well-off Pharisees. Whilst being profoundly nationalistic, unlike the Fourth Philosophy, the Pharisees made compromises to maintain their power and privilege. The Pharisees therefore, like the tax collectors and soldiers, functioned as a buffer between the ruling classes and the peasantry.

### **Paul**

Paul has generally been considered as a character who has very little to say on the issues of poverty, wealth, and social change, and this is usually justified by that the fact of his expectation of an imminent *parousia*.<sup>234</sup> Bruce Longenecker has recently challenged this consensus, arguing that care for the poor was integral to Paul’s theology, despite appearances. But, Longenecker’s arguments are tenuous at the best of times. Longenecker argues that Paul congratulates the Corinthian church for their generosity to ‘the needy’. But in the text that Longenecker discusses, Paul actually congratulates the Corinthians for their generosity to the Jerusalem church (who were not poor, as

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<sup>234</sup> Hoppe, *There Shall Be No Poor Among You*, p.158, also Peter H. Davids, ‘The Test of Wealth’ in *The Missions of James, Peter, and Paul: Tensions in Early Christianity* (eds. Bruce Chilton and Craig Evans; Leiden: Brill, 2005), pp.355-384 (358)

Longenecker acknowledges himself) and their generosity to ‘others’ or to ‘all’ (*pantas*), and there is no mention of ‘the needy’.<sup>235</sup> Longenecker attempts to draw another example from Galatians 6:9-10, ‘Let us not grow weary in doing good... Therefore, then, as often as God gives the opportunity, let us work the good for all people, especially for those in the household of faith.’ Longenecker’s method here is simply to assume that doing good included giving to the poor and highlight that various other scholars have made the same assumption.<sup>236</sup> Longenecker’s reference to Bruce Winter, claiming that ‘to do good’ equated to giving to others is misleading; according to Winter, the phrase denotes *civic* benefaction, and Winter gives no mention of the poor and needy.<sup>237</sup> Next Longenecker considers 1 Thessalonians 5:14, in which Paul charges the Thessalonians to ‘encourage the faint-hearted, help the weak, be patient with all of them’, arguing that the term ‘weak’ should be seen to include all those who are economically vulnerable.<sup>238</sup> Longenecker’s equation of ‘weak’ with ‘poor’ in 1 Thessalonians is unjustified. Why should Paul need to command the Thessalonians to be ‘patient’ with the weak, along with the faint-hearted and the idlers (5:14)? In what sense would a poor person be in need of patience? If Paul were addressing the poor here, we should expect him to exhort giving or charity, not patience. Furthermore, throughout the New Testament, there is not one instance where the terms *asthenes* or *astheneo* clearly refer to material poverty.<sup>239</sup> Weakness refers to primarily to

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<sup>235</sup> Bruce W. Longenecker, *Remember the Poor: Paul, Poverty, and the Greco-Roman World* (Cambridge: Eerdmans, 2010), p.141

<sup>236</sup> Longenecker, *Remember the Poor*, pp.141-142

<sup>237</sup> See Bruce W. Winter, *Seek the Welfare of the City: Christians as Benefactors and Citizens* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1994), pp.34-35

<sup>238</sup> Longenecker, *Remember the Poor*, p.143

<sup>239</sup> 2 Cor 11:29 is perhaps the best example, but an economic meaning here is by no means definite, and a variety of implications are possible

sickness,<sup>240</sup> but also to weakness of conscience, will or faith,<sup>241</sup> feebleness,<sup>242</sup> a lack of strength,<sup>243</sup> ineffectiveness,<sup>244</sup> a state of oppression,<sup>245</sup> or even sinfulness,<sup>246</sup> and there is no clear association between weakness and material or economic poverty. Longenecker's later argument that Paul is expressing concern for the poor in Acts 20:35, 'We must support the weak, remembering the words of the Lord Jesus, for he himself said, 'It is more blessed to give than to receive' similarly hinges on Longenecker's mistranslation of 'weak' and so also fails to verify his argument. Galatians 2:10, from which Longenecker derives the title of his book, is perhaps the most interesting passage that he considers. To his credit, Longenecker notes:

It might be argued that, even if the Jerusalem leaders considered remembrance of the indigenous poor to be essential to "the truth of the gospel," they nonetheless considered Paul himself to be deficient in this regard – explaining why the Jerusalem leaders urged Paul and Barnabas to "remember the poor."<sup>247</sup>

Longenecker argues, however, that the form of the verb 'remember' *might* carry a constative sense, rendering the translation 'continue to remember the poor.' However,

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<sup>240</sup> Mt 10:8; 25:36, 39; Mk 6:56; Lk 4:40; 7:10; 9:2; 10:9; Jn 4:46; 5:3, 7; 6:2; 11:1-3, 6; Acts 4:9; 9:37; 19:12; 5:15-16; Phil 2:26-27; 1 Cor 11:30; 2 Tim 4:20; Jas 5:14

<sup>241</sup> Mk 14:38; Rom 4:19; 14:1-2, 21; 1 Cor 8:7, 9-12; 2 Cor 11:21

<sup>242</sup> 1 Cor 12:22; 2 Cor 10:10

<sup>243</sup> Rom 5:6; 1 Cor 1:25, 27, 4:10; 2 Cor 13:9; 1 Pet 3:7

<sup>244</sup> Rom 8:3; Heb 7:18

<sup>245</sup> 2 Cor 12:10

<sup>246</sup> Gal 4:9

<sup>247</sup> Longenecker, *Remember the Poor*, p.190

the basis on which Longenecker proposes such a translation is only that he has, so he hopes, already demonstrated ‘that Paul expected care for the economically insecure to be built within the very character of Jesus-groups that he founded.’<sup>248</sup> Further, Longenecker fails to see the ideological underpinnings of ‘remembering’ the poor. Merely ‘remembering’ is a somewhat impractical solution to a situation of material poverty; like the majority of elite writers at his time, Paul is content to offer lip-service to the poor. Perhaps Paul, as he (defensively?) claims did ‘remember’ the poor. But what did he actually do in concrete terms? In what respect was his remembering manifested in actual alleviation of poverty, or in challenging the social structures that perpetuated inequality? Longenecker fails to provide a convincing argument.

Equally telling of Paul’s attitudes towards the political economy and his social world is his advocacy of slavery. As we have seen in chapter 1, slavery was hugely prevalent in the Greco-Roman world, and was a clear form of systemic exploitation and subjugation. While Paul (or, perhaps more accurately, the Pauline school of thought)<sup>249</sup> may take the moral high ground when it comes to slave-dealers (1 Tim 1:10), he is perfectly content to live with this system of oppression, and uses his influence to support the hegemonic discourse that justifies it:

Slaves, obey your earthly masters with fear and trembling, in singleness of heart,  
as you obey Christ (Eph 5:6)

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<sup>248</sup> Longenecker, *Remember the Poor*, p.190

<sup>249</sup> I refer here to both disputed and undisputed Pauline as the disputed texts reflect a fundamentally similar attitude to that which we find in the undisputed texts (1 Corinthians and Philemon). For a recent and thorough study see John Byron, *Recent Research on Paul and Slavery* (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2008)

Slaves, obey your earthly master in everything, not only while being watched and in order to please them, but wholeheartedly, fearing the Lord (Col 3:22)

Let all who are under the yoke of slavery regard their masters as worthy of all honour... Those who have believing masters must not be disrespectful to them on the ground that they are members of the church (1 Tim 6:1a, 2a)

Tell slaves to be submissive to their masters and to give satisfaction in every respect; they are not to answer back, not to pilfer, but to show complete and perfect fidelity, so that in everything they may be an ornament to the doctrine of God our Saviour (Tit 2:9-10)

Were you a slave when called? Do not be concerned about it. Even if you can gain your freedom, make use of your present condition now more than ever. For whoever was called in the Lord as a slave is a freed person belonging to the Lord, just as whoever was free when called is a slave of Christ (1 Cor 7:21-22)

Paul's unrelenting adherence to the social order that he inhabits is illustrated most clearly in what is possibly the most overtly hegemonic text in the whole Bible, Romans 13:1-7:

Let every person be subject to the governing authorities; for there is no authority except God, and those authorities that exist have been instituted by God. Therefore whoever resists authority resists what God has appointed, and those who resist will incur judgement. For rulers are not a terror to good conduct, but to bad. Do you wish to have no fear of the authority? Then do what is good, and you will receive its approval; for it is God's servant for your good... For the same reason you also pay taxes, for the authorities are God's servants, busy with this very thing. Pay to all what is due to them – taxes to whom taxes are due, revenue to whom revenue is due, respect to whom respect is due, honour to whom honour is due.

Neil Elliot is too optimistic in his reading of this text, suggesting that 'in a Roman official's ear, Paul's language would have seemed to offer a peculiarly grudging compliance, rather than the grateful contentment of the properly civilized.'<sup>250</sup> Paul is crystal clear that every aspect of the social order is ordained by God; and resisting the status quo is resisting God himself. As Longenecker's recent work illustrates, attempting to present Paul as someone who is concerned with economic and political injustices is a very difficult task, for Paul was seemingly not interested.

### **Resistance and Social Change**

Elite discourse functioned to maintain social and economic disparities throughout the ancient world. As we have seen, various elite texts offered a certain level of sympathy to the poor and endorsed charitable donations to those in need. These same texts, however, functioned to justify and legitimise disparities in wealth and power and

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<sup>250</sup> Neil Elliot, 'Strategies of Resistance and Hidden Transcripts in the Pauline Communities' in *Hidden Transcripts and the Arts of Resistance: Applying the Work of James C. Scott to Jesus and Paul* (ed. Richard A. Horsley; Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2004), pp.97-122 (120)

maintain political hegemony. The retainer class served as agents of the hegemonic powers, providing a locus of animosity and frustration for the peasants (tax collectors), a force for quashing rebellions and maintaining the social order (soldiers), and at the same time, a respectable face (the Pharisees). But despite the power of the Greco-Roman ruling classes and the ideological slant of the Hebrew Scriptures, numerous movements emerged in Roman Palestine that resisted the hegemonic social order. Four groups in particular were active in this region at the time of Jesus: the Galilean bandits, the Cynics, the Essenes, and John the Baptist and his disciples. To these groups we will now turn.

### **The Galilean Bandits**

It is clear that social unrest was escalating in Galilee from the Herodian period to the outbreak of the Jewish War in 66CE. That Galileans, like all peasants throughout the Roman Empire, were burdened by heavy taxation is certain, and it is evident that a notable few turned to violence to try and supplement their income. The clearest example of this phenomenon is banditry. Banditry is extremely well attested in first century Galilee,<sup>251</sup> as it is throughout the Roman Empire.<sup>252</sup> The prevalence of banditry in Galilee is reported in most detail by Josephus, who reports numerous individuals and gangs of brigands, the damage they induced, and the way in which they were eventually ‘brought to justice’. Josephus writes of cave-dwelling bandits in Galilee who ‘overran a great part of the country, causing the inhabitants as much misery as a war would have done’ (*War* 1.304); the ‘Sicarii’ who killed the high Priest Jonathan and many more,

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<sup>251</sup> Crossley, *Why Christianity Happened*, pp.49-57

<sup>252</sup> Lincoln H. Blumell, ‘Beware of Bandits! Banditry and Land Travel in the Roman Empire’, *Journeys* 8.1, 2008, pp.1–20

instilling fear ‘more terrible than the crimes themselves’ and causing every man to be ‘hourly expecting death, as in war’ (*War* 2.264); and the renowned Eleazar and his accomplices who had been ‘plundering the country for twenty years’, amongst others. On one occasion, on the event of the capture of Eleazar, Josephus reports that the number of bandits who were crucified, in addition to the local inhabitants in league with them who were also punished ‘were too many to count’ (*War* 2.253). Josephus gives the impression that banditry was widespread, endemic.

There were certainly religious, political and cultural factors that contributed to the rise of banditry in pre-70s Galilee, as well as economic factors. Richard Horsley, who has written most extensively of all on Galilean banditry,<sup>253</sup> notes that the insensitivity of Roman administrators to Jewish customs, and the declining legitimacy of the high-priestly and Herodian authority were exacerbating factors.<sup>254</sup> But socioeconomic factors may have played an even more important role. In examining the phenomenon of banditry in first century Galilee, many New Testament scholars have drawn on the work of Eric Hobsbawm. According to Hobsbawm, the conditions in which banditry tends to arise are: ‘wherever societies are based on agriculture... and consist largely of peasants and landless labourers ruled, oppressed and exploited by someone else—lords, towns, governments, lawyers, or even banks.’<sup>255</sup> This was clearly the situation in Roman Palestine. And many of the more specific features that typically produce banditry in traditional agrarian societies were present in Galilee. Horsley highlights the severe drought in the late 40s, heavy taxation leading to increased

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<sup>253</sup> See Richard A. Horsley, *Jesus and the Spiral of Violence: Popular Jewish Resistance in Roman Palestine* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1987), Richard A. Horsley with John S. Hanson, *Bandits, Prophets, and Messiahs: Popular Movements in the Time of Jesus* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1988), p.48-51, Richard A. Horsley, ‘Josephus And The Bandits’, *JSJ*, 10, 1979, pp.37-63.

<sup>254</sup> Horsley, *Galilee*, p.264

<sup>255</sup> E.J. Hobsbawm, *Bandits* (London: Weidenfield & Nicolson, 1969), pp.19-20



indebtedness, and continuous wars resulting in displacement and destruction of livelihoods for many peasants as some of the central causes of banditry.<sup>256</sup> Crossley makes the socioeconomic motivations for banditry even more explicit. Following problematic harvests, which led to hunger and inability to pay taxes, Crossley suggests that peasants were left with few options but to turn to banditry, noting that, ‘the very need to steal may itself be analyzed as a form of rebellion and reaction to socioeconomic circumstances.’<sup>257</sup> Banditry effectively offered a second income, in addition to agriculture, that was desperately needed by many.<sup>258</sup> The socioeconomic motivations of banditry are also confirmed by the obvious fact that banditry invariably entailed plundering, and was often targeted at the rich,<sup>259</sup> the ambush and plundering of baggage of the wife of Ptolemy being one clear example (*Life* 126-7).<sup>260</sup> The economic dimension of Galilean banditry is confirmed most forcefully, however, by the burning of the debt records at the start of the Jewish war, which according to Josephus, functioned ‘to cause a rising or poor against the rich’ (*J.W.* 2.427-48). This action, which Crossley describes as an example of ‘clear socioeconomic outrage’,<sup>261</sup> points to the crux of the phenomenon of social banditry that was so prevalent in Galilee.

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<sup>256</sup> Even the ancient historian Cassius Dio was aware of the part that war played in encouraging banditry: ‘Ever since war had been carried on continuously in many different places at once and many cities had been overthrown, while sentences hung over the heads of all the fugitives, and there was no freedom from fear for anyone anywhere, large numbers had turned to banditry’ (Cassius Dio 36.20.2), cited in Horsley, *Galilee*, p.261

<sup>257</sup> Crossley, *Why Christianity Happened*, p.50

<sup>258</sup> See Hobsbawn, *Bandits*, p.24

<sup>259</sup> Horsley, *Bandits, Prophets, and Messiahs*, pp.72-73

<sup>260</sup> Sean Freyne, ‘Bandits in Galilee: A Contribution to the Study of Social Conditions in First Century Palestine’ in *The Social World of Formative Christianity and Judaism: Essays in Tribute of Howard Clark Kee* (eds. J. Neusner, E.S. Frerichs, and R. Horsley; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1988), pp.50-69 (61)

<sup>261</sup> Crossley, *Why Christianity Happened*, p.54

Horsley has described the bandit as a ‘symbol of resistance to injustice as well as a champion of justice in his righting of wrongs for the poor villagers with whom he remains in close contact.’<sup>262</sup> Whilst the bandits may have been championed by some, as Horsley acknowledges, the bandits were effectively ‘terrorists’, and they did not only terrorise the rich. Some bandits may have received the support of some peasants; Eleazer’s success, lasting twenty years without capture, suggests that he received the support of at least some local communities.<sup>263</sup> And as Josephus reports, many were ‘in league with him’ (*War* 2.253). But as Crossley notes, the brigands and rioters led by Eleazar who in Acrabatene ‘massacred the inhabitants without distinction of age and burnt the villages’ (*J.W.* 2.232-35) are not quite the ‘idealized honorable defenders of the poor’ or ‘Jewish Robin Hoods’ that some make them out to be.<sup>264</sup> We may similarly point to Gaschala, which Josephus describes as a small town in Galilee where ‘the inhabitants were inclined to peace, being mainly farmers whose whole attention was devoted to the prospects of the harvest.’ Even these poor farmers were apparently ‘afflicted by the invasion of numerous gangs and brigands’ (*War* 4.84), although we must be mindful of Josephus’ tendency to present all bandits in the worst terms possible. Even Paul, who describes himself as ‘poor’ (2 Cor 6:10), claims to have been attacked by bandits on numerous occasions (2 Cor 11:26), and the Essenes who kept very little in the way of material possessions carried arms with them on journeys as protection against bandits (*War* 2.125).<sup>265</sup> These examples demonstrate the indiscriminate violence associated with bandits, who were apparently often willing to steal from anyone for their own personal gain.

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<sup>262</sup> Horsley, *Jesus and the Spiral of Violence*, p.37

<sup>263</sup> Horsley, *Jesus and the Spiral of Violence*, p.37

<sup>264</sup> Crossley, *Why Christianity Happened*, p.52

<sup>265</sup> Crossley, *Why Christianity Happened*, p.53

The Galilean bandits' attitude towards wealth and poverty clearly stemmed from their perception of social injustice. They were radicals who would not tolerate the social and economic situation that they inhabited, and challenged it through violent resistance, theft and terrorism. As with banditry in general, their philosophy was primitive; it did not address structural inequalities in any sustainable way, and the Galilean bandits extracted wealth in any way possible to alleviate their poverty.

### **The Essenes**

The Essenes and the Qumran Community are well known for their distinctive attitudes towards wealth, poverty and possessions. I will treat the Qumran Community here as an Essene sect and discuss these groups together, because the peculiarity of their beliefs and the time frame in which they existed suggest that these two groups were not independent from one another,<sup>266</sup> which is confirmed by the consistency of their respective attitudes towards wealth and poverty.

Philo writes that the Essenes 'were not lovers of money' (*Quod omnis probus* 84), and Josephus claims rather more forcefully that the Essenes were 'contemptuous of wealth' (*War* 2.122). Distrust of wealth was seemingly even more prevalent at Qumran. For the Qumran Community, wealth was almost invariably linked with the corruption, violence and injustice of the outside world. The Damascus document states that '(Those in the covenant are supposed) to separate from the sons of the pit and to sacredly separate from the wealth of unrighteousness' (CD 6:15), and the War Scroll speaks of the 'men of the staff', violent oppressors who 'stick out their finger, speak evil and are

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<sup>266</sup> T.S. Beall, *Josephus' Description of the Essenes Illustrated by the Dead Sea Scrolls* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), pp.3-6

zealous for wealth' (1QS 11:1-2).<sup>267</sup> Because wealth was invariably linked with violence and corruption, the Essenes and the Qumran community effectively opted out of the wider economy and created their own internalised 'community of goods'. Catherine Murphy states that, 'Through the sharing of wealth, the community becomes a single entity, a *yahad*, united in fidelity and purpose, no longer torn by the greed and violence that characterize the external economy.'<sup>268</sup>

The Essenes clearly sought to distance themselves from the conspicuous consumption that was associated with the Greco-Roman world. Philo describes the Essenes as 'lovers of frugality who shun expensive luxury as a disease of both body and soul' (*Hypothetica* 11:10-11). Some Essenes were averse to replacing essentials such as clothing or sandals (War 2.126; 1QS 7:13-14),<sup>269</sup> and all dressed humbly so that no member of the community would outshine another with extravagant clothing (*War* 8.7.140). But it should not be thought that such behaviour was derived from desperate material poverty. Philo explains that the communities provided for each member 'food in abundance and anything else which human life requires' (*Hypothetica* 10). This was made possible through the mutual pooling of possessions, which was the foundation of the Essenes' economy. Josephus explains,

...their rule is that novices admitted to the sect must surrender their property to the order, so that among them all neither humiliating poverty nor excessive

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<sup>267</sup> David A. Fiensy, *Jesus the Galilean: Soundings in a First Century Life* (NJ: Gorgias Press LLC, 2007), p.103

<sup>268</sup> C.M. Murphy, *Wealth in the Dead Sea Scrolls and in the Qumran Community* (Leiden: Brill, 2002), p.449

<sup>269</sup> Beall, *Josephus' Description of the Essenes*, p.123

wealth is ever seen, but each man's possessions go into the pool and as with brothers their entire property belongs to them all (*War* 2.121).

In general, all possessions were owned mutually (1QS 1:11-12; 5:1-2; 6:17-22), although some Qumran texts suggest that individual ownership may have occurred sometimes (CD 9:10-16; 14:12-13).<sup>270</sup> But admission into the sect was not easy. A person wishing to join the community would not have their wealth mingled into the communal pool until over a year of probation and a thorough examination of their lifestyle and thinking; in this way, the communal property would not be tainted by mixing it with the 'wicked wealth' of the outside world.<sup>271</sup> The Essene's unhurried approach to mingling the wealth of new members also served the purpose of making it easier for new members to join. Brian Capper notes that if a candidate wished to join, but found themselves unable to carry out their intent to live without property in practice, the delaying of the mingling of their wealth and possessions allowed them the possibility of changing their mind about such a radical decision.<sup>272</sup>

Sharing with those in need was another characteristic of the Essenes' and the Qumran Community's approach to poverty and wealth (*War* 2.127; 1QS 1:9; 2:24-5; CD 6:20-7:1).<sup>273</sup> Capper argues that Essene 'poorhouses' were scattered throughout

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<sup>270</sup> Beall, *Josephus' Description of the Essenes*, pp.126-127

<sup>271</sup> Fiensy, *Jesus the Galilean*, p.107

<sup>272</sup> Brian Capper, 'The Palestinian Cultural Context of Earliest Christian Community of Goods' in *The Book of Acts in Its Palestinian Setting* (ed. R.J. Bauckham; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), pp.323-356 (330-331)

<sup>273</sup> Beall, *Josephus' Description of the Essenes*, p.12

Judea, with a particularly prominent one located at Bethany, ‘the House of the Poor’.<sup>274</sup> In such places, the Essenes would care for the sick and the disabled out of their communal fund.

It is curious that the Essenes receive no explicit mention in the New Testament. In early debates after the publishing of the Dead Sea Scrolls, many scholars argued that the scrolls and the New Testament were similar in their descriptions of the practice of shared property. In recent scholarship, however, very few scholars have acknowledged the potential influence of the Essenes on the historical Jesus or the Jesus movement. Capper argues that this represents an uneven handling of the sources, for while the historicity of a community of goods in Acts is generally denied, it is almost universally accepted that the Essenes lived in such a manner.<sup>275</sup> Capper argues that the Jerusalem community of goods was so close to the Essenes’ community – ideologically, temporally and geographically – that Essene influence must be plausible.<sup>276</sup> Capper notes that for Philo and Josephus, the Essenes were supreme examples of Jewish piety, concluding that: ‘Since the issue of wealth and poverty was a theme of Jesus’ teaching, his disciples must have discussed and weighed the Essene lifestyle.’<sup>277</sup> Furthermore, it is easy to see parallels between the Essenes suspicion of wealth with the frequent near equation of wealth with wickedness that we find in the gospels, for instance in relation to Judas’ financially motivated betrayal of Jesus (Mt 26:14-5; Mk 14:10-11; Lk 22:4-5), and Jesus’ warning about Mammon (Lk 16:13; Mt 6:24). Despite the peculiar unpopularity of such a view, I find it is scarcely plausible that such a radical and

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<sup>274</sup> Brian Capper, ‘Essene Community Houses and Jesus’ Early Community’ in *Jesus and Archaeology* (ed. James H. Charlesworth; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006), pp.472-502 (496-501)

<sup>275</sup> Murphy, *Wealth in the Dead Sea Scrolls*, p.8

<sup>276</sup> Capper, ‘The Palestinian Cultural Context’, pP.326-34

<sup>277</sup> Capper, ‘The Palestinian Cultural Context’, p.334-5

esteemed Jewish community could have escaped Jesus' attention, especially considering the similarities in their view towards poverty and wealth.

### **John the Baptist**

Although several of the gospel texts that speak about John the Baptist refer to his views on poverty, wealth and society, his views on these matters have received little scholarly attention. John has been linked by some, quite sensibly, with the Essenes, on account of their shared ascetic practices.<sup>278</sup> Joan Taylor has argued against such a view, suggesting that neither John's ascetic practice, nor his concern with ritual purity and immersion, his priestly background, his call for the sharing of property, nor his sensitivity to incest necessitate Essene influence. She also argues that John, in contrast to the community-focused Essenes, was a loner, and that John's socioeconomic teachings were too mild for them to be considered Essene.<sup>279</sup> But Taylor's skepticism of an Essene influence on John is unfounded, and demonstrates a lack of appreciation for the fundamental principles of both the Essenes and John the Baptist. I am not arguing that John was a member of the Qumran Community; but the potential influence of the Essenes upon John's thinking, considering their proximity to John geographically and ideologically, is surely evident. John's special concern with ritual purity was akin to the Essenes' concerns (as it was to the Pharisees), and his call for the sharing of property is indecipherable from the Essenes views on the subject (Cf. Lk 3:11). John was not necessarily a loner as Taylor argues, for he clearly had an entourage of disciples, and

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<sup>278</sup> See O. Betz, 'Was John the Baptist an Essene?' in *Understanding the Dead Sea Scrolls: A Reader from the Biblical Archaeology Review* (ed. H. Shanks; London: SPCK, 1993), pp.206-214

<sup>279</sup> Joan E. Taylor, *The Immerser: John the Baptist within Second Temple Judaism* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1997), pp.20-24

John's views on socioeconomic relations are some of the most drastic that we can find in this period.

While John the Baptist's social ethics have received little attention, the manner in which John's ascetic practices may have functioned as a social critique have occasionally been noted. Warren Carter argues that John's diet 'presents a critique of the economic extravagance of the powerful elite, who maintain their own abundance at the expense of the poor.'<sup>280</sup> John certainly appeared to consume a restricted diet, and according to Luke ate no bread or wine (7:33), a point which James Kelhoffer does not seem to notice when he argues that there is no evidence to link locust eating with asceticism.<sup>281</sup> Furthermore, John wore basic clothes, and lived in the wilderness, in contrast, as Jesus says, to those who wear fine clothes and inhabit palaces (Mt 11:8/Lk 7:25). His disciples were known to fast regularly (Mt 9:14/Mk 2:18/Lk 5:33). There is no doubt that the gospel writers saw John as a typical ascetic, and John's asceticism, as Jesus suggested, functioned as a critique of the excesses of the rich.

John's critique of the social order was also expressed in his verbal addresses, as well as in his ascetic lifestyle. John preached redistribution of wealth in the most radical form, demanding that the person with two cloaks give one away, and the person with food do likewise (Lk 3:11); the logical outcome of John's teaching here is a radical redistribution of wealth resulting in absolute material equality. John's address to tax collectors – 'collect no more than the amount prescribed to you' – and soldiers – 'do not extort money from anyone by threats or false accusation, and be satisfied with your

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<sup>280</sup> See Warren Carter, *Matthew and the Margins: A Sociopolitical and Religious Reading* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2000), p.95

<sup>281</sup> See James A. Kelhoffer, *The Diet of John the Baptist: "Locusts and Wild Honey" in the Synoptic and Patristic Interpretation* (Tubingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2005), p.19



wages' – was no less revolutionary.<sup>282</sup> John directly challenged two of the key groups from the retainer class, the middlemen whose job it was to maintain the unequal structures of agrarian societies. While John's address to the crowds was technically more radical, demanding a greater level of equality, John's challenge to tax collectors and soldiers was clearly headed in the same direction.

John the Baptist, whose fate was remarkably similar to Jesus, led a movement with a remarkably comparable political and socioeconomic perspective. Jesus' message to John's disciples confirms that John was interested in the oppressed of society, unless we regard Jesus' message concerning the blind, the lame, the deaf, those with skin diseases and the poor (Lk 7:22/Mt 11:5) as a non-sequitur. Both John and Jesus lived itinerate, possession-free lifestyles and challenged the rich to their faces.<sup>283</sup> John and Jesus' disruptive social views were no doubt partly responsible for their popularity; they spoke against the wealthy minority, in favour of the peasant majority. In terms of politics and social ethics, John and Jesus appear to have been remarkably similar, and John's potential influence upon Jesus is surely beyond doubt.

## The Cynics

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<sup>282</sup> Joan Taylor suggests that John's teaching to the tax collectors and soldiers are relatively mild compared with his teaching to the multitudes. However, John's 'starting point' with the tax collectors and soldiers is quite different than his starting point with the multitudes. The tax collectors and soldiers would have had a long way to go before they could even consider John's demand not to even keep a spare cloak if someone else was in need. See Joan E. Taylor, *The Immerser: John the Baptist within Second Temple Judaism* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1997), p.24

<sup>283</sup> Although Jesus is accused of being a glutton and a drunkard in contrast with John's disciples and the Pharisees' disciples who fast, that Jesus' rejection of a home, possessions and personal wealth still firmly position him in the ascetic tradition. The anti-social behaviour he is accused of, however, makes him fit more comfortably with the Cynics than anyone else.

The Cynics are another group who were present in Roman Palestine, and in some respects, demonstrated the most extreme views of all on poverty and wealth. The Cynic philosophy was founded in the third century BCE by either Antisthenes, or his pupil Diogenes of Sinope, and is thought to have been influenced initially by Socrates.<sup>284</sup> The term ‘cynic’ comes from the Greek *kyon* for dog, which was used first by Aristotle as a nickname for Diogenes.<sup>285</sup> The term became used as an insult for those who practiced the Cynic lifestyle,<sup>286</sup> and it implies the Cynics’ disregard for social customs and for all things that were considered to be civilised and desirable in Greco-Roman society. Lucian comically describes the antisocial behaviour of the Cynics in his *Philosophies for Sale*:

Let your language be barbarous, your voice discordant and just like the barking of a dog: let your expression be set, and your gait consistent with your expression. In a word, let everything about you be bestial and savage. Put off modesty, decency and moderation, and wipe away blushes from your face completely. Frequent the most crowded place, and in those very places desire to be solitary and uncommunicative, greeting nor friend nor stranger... (Lucian, *Philosophies for Sale*, 9-11)<sup>287</sup>

In behaving in such a manner, the Cynics became free from the pressures of Greco-Roman society. Leif Vaage describes the forthright and shameless behaviour of the

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<sup>284</sup> D. R. Dudley, *A History of Cynicism from Diogenes to the Sixth Century* (London: Methuen, 1937), p.1

<sup>285</sup> John Dominic Crossan, *The Historical Jesus: The Life of a Mediterranean Jewish Peasant* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1993), p.74

<sup>286</sup> See F.G. Downing, ‘The Syrophoenician Woman and Her Doggedness’ in *Women in the Biblical Tradition* (ed. G.J. Brooke; Lewiston: Edwin Mellen Press, 1992), pp.130-149 (140-141)

<sup>287</sup> Cited in Crossan, *The Historical Jesus*, p.86

Cynics as an ‘explicit critique of the typical values of Greco-Roman civilisation’.<sup>288</sup> But as well as holding a general disregard for honour and status, the Cynics rejected wealth and possessions, and voluntarily strove towards poverty in what represented a critique of the greed and excesses of Roman culture, and this is what is of utmost interest to us here.

Cynics were commonly known by the fact that they possessed only three simple items: a cloak, a wallet and a staff.<sup>289</sup> Some Cynics, however, possessed even less than these three items; some would not carry a staff, and while some wore sandals, others went barefoot, because to wear sandals was ‘to be bound’.<sup>290</sup> The Cynics sought to rid themselves of any needless possessions; Diogenes allegedly carried a cup with him at one stage, but after seeing a boy drink water from a cupped hand, realised his stupidity for carrying the redundant vessel with him, and cast it aside. Cynics were also known to rid themselves of all forms of wealth. One account of Crates of Thebes, who was originally a wealthy elite, alleges that he turned his landed property into money and then redistributed it amongst his fellow citizens; another account records that Diogenes persuaded him to cast it into the sea.<sup>291</sup> The most extreme Cynics were homeless, claimed to have no homeland, and would have no spouse or children (Epictetus, *Discourses* 3.22:45-49).<sup>292</sup> Cynics would eat whatever simple food came their way, and

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<sup>288</sup> L. Vaage, *Q: The Ethos and Ethics of an Itinerant Intelligence* (Ann Arbor, MI: University Microfilms International, 1987), pp.375-80 cited in Crossan, *The Historical Jesus*, p.82

<sup>289</sup> Crossan, *The Historical Jesus*, p.82

<sup>290</sup> F.G. Downing, *Cynics and Christian Origins* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1992), p.11

<sup>291</sup> Fiensy, *Jesus the Galilean*, p.93

<sup>292</sup> Crossan, *The Historical Jesus*, pp.78-79

would sleep in tombs, empty towers or ‘tubs’. Although some saw it best to earn their own keep, many would beg for a living.<sup>293</sup>

The plausibility of the influence of Cynic philosophy in Galilee, and upon the Jesus Movement, has been repeatedly postulated. Burton Mack points out that Gadara, which was ‘just a day’s walk from Galilee’, was the home of three famous cynic philosophers, Meleager (100 BCE), Philodemus (110-30 BCE) and Oenomaus (120 CE).<sup>294</sup> There are several ways in which Jesus’ lifestyle and teachings closely resembled that of the Cynics. Jesus’ instruction to his disciples about what they should carry with them on their journeys is particularly reminiscent of the Cynic’s three possessions, the cloak, wallet and staff (Mt. 10:9-11; Mk. 6:8-10; Lk. 9:3-4). In Matthew Jesus instructs his disciples to take no money, no bag, no extra tunic, no sandals and no staff; in Luke, Jesus similarly prohibits carrying a staff, a bag, bread, money or an extra tunic. Mark, however, prohibits carrying bread, a bag, money or an extra tunic, but instructs the wearing of sandals and the carrying of a staff. Precisely what Jesus instructed his disciples does not particularly matter to us here; it is clear that he was commanding them to carry the bare minimum, and to depend upon the hospitality of sympathetic individuals. Another text that connects Jesus with the Cynic is the saying ‘foxes have holes and birds of the air have nests, but the son of man has no place to lay his head’ (Mt. 8:20; Lk. 9:58). Not only does this saying suggest detachment from a home that is characteristic of the Cynics, but it draws on observations of the animal kingdom, which is a common feature of Cynic thought.<sup>295</sup> Furthermore, we might mention the accusation of Jesus as ‘a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners’ (Mt. 11:19;

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<sup>293</sup> Downing, *Cynics and Christian Origins*, p.11

<sup>294</sup> B.L.Mack, *The Christian Myth: Origins, Logic, and Legacy* (New York: Continuum, 2003), p.53

<sup>295</sup> Downing, *Christ and the Cynics*, p.12

Lk. 7:34). This accusation, when viewed in connection with the two previous sayings, completes the very much Cynic-like image of one who is free from wealth, possessions, and earthly ties, and who is not even bound by social expectations of how he should behave and with whom he should socialise.

The Cynic hypothesis, however, has not been entirely popular. Vaage notes that it has been considered to be ‘ill-advised’, ‘unthinkable’, and ‘judging from the rhetoric of its rejection, inherently insalutary’.<sup>296</sup> While Vaage argues that Hans-Dieter Betz can come up with no good reason to dismiss the hypothesis besides ‘the present popularity of Nietzsche and his philosophy’,<sup>297</sup> in other work Vaage sees ideological factors at play. Horsley dismisses the hypothesis on the basis that the Cynics were in some ways individualistic in their goals and disengaged from community life.<sup>298</sup> Vaage suggests that, ‘For Horsley, it seems, the historical Jesus/movement must be, or should be, more readily practicable than deeply dissident and deliberately dissociating.’<sup>299</sup> Horsley’s dismissal of the Cynic hypothesis, according to Vaage, is theological or political. Others have dismissed the cynic hypothesis by attempting to link it with anti-Semitism. For N.T. Wright, there is apparently a ‘problematic analogy’ between the ‘New Questers’ and advocates of the Cynic Jesus and ‘those German scholars who, in the 1920s and 1930s, reduced almost to nil the specific Jewishness of Jesus and his message’.<sup>300</sup> This is despite the fact that, as Crossley highlights, the Jesus Seminar takes pains to stress

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<sup>296</sup> Leif E. Vaage, ‘Beyond Nationalism: Jesus the “Holy Anarchist”? The Cynic Jesus as Eternal Recurrence of the Repressed’ in *Jesus Beyond Nationalism* (eds. Halvor Moxnes, Ward Blanton and James G. Crossley; London: Equinox, 2009), pp.79-98 (79)

<sup>297</sup> Vaage, ‘Jesus the “Holy Anarchist”?’ , p.92, Cf. Hans-Dieter Betz, ‘Jesus and the Cynics: Survey and Analysis of a Hypothesis’, *J Rel*, 74.4, 1994, pp.453-475 (470)

<sup>298</sup> Richard A. Horsley, *Sociology and the Jesus Movement* (NY: Crossroad, 1989), pp.46-7

<sup>299</sup> Vaage, ‘Jesus the “Holy Anarchist”?’ , p.89

<sup>300</sup> N.T. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God* (London: SPCK, 1996), p.79

that they are engaged in combating anti-Semitism, Crossan writes of a Mediterranean *Jewish* peasant, and Mack denounces scholarly clichés about Jews; while Wright, on the other hand, at the same time as relentlessly telling us how Jewish Jesus was ‘consistently stresses that Jesus remained radically different from his social and theological context.’<sup>301</sup>

In some ways, the gospels present Jesus as quite different from the Cynics. The presentation of Jesus as one who is frequently surrounded by crowds, healing people and addressing multitudes, and who can scarcely find a moment of peace is not what we would expect of, as Vaage puts it, a ‘deliberately dissociating’ Cynic. But Jesus and the Cynics had some remarkably similar attitudes towards wealth and poverty. It is plausible that the Cynic movement had a direct influence on Jesus, although this has proven to be a surprisingly objectionable position to hold, and is in some ways problematic. But what is vitally relevant here is that both Jesus and the Cynics reacted similarly to the economic circumstances they faced, irrespective of whether there was any direct influence.

### **James**

The Epistle of James famously exhibits quite some concern about issues of poverty and wealth. The liberation theologian Elsa Tamez suggests that a text such as James would be branded as ‘subversive’ at her time of writing because of its vehement denouncements of exploitation and the carefree life of merchants, and its vision of true religion as care for orphans and widows and keeping oneself uncontaminated by the

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<sup>301</sup> Crossley, *Age of Terror*, pp.175-179

world.<sup>302</sup> James sees a direct link between poverty and exploitation, denouncing the practice of landowners exploiting their workers and proclaiming their eventual downfall (Jas 5:1-6). James appears to distrust the court institutions, which as Steven Friesen notes, he sees as a system that perpetuates injustice rather than promoting justice (Jas 2:1-7).<sup>303</sup> James not only appeals for support for the marginalised – the widow and the orphan (Jas 1:27) – but demands justice, envisaging the demise of those who perpetuate unjust structures.

James' concerns also have a clear tie with the sayings of Jesus. It has long been noted that James' short Epistle might contain more allusions to the sayings of Jesus than any other New Testament writing; so much so that, nearly a century ago, James Hardy Ropes argued that, 'James was in religious ideas nearer to the men who collected the sayings of Jesus than to the authors of the Gospels.'<sup>304</sup> The exact number of allusions that James makes to words of Jesus has proven difficult to establish; Dean Deppe concludes, rather ungenerously, that James makes eight allusions to sayings of Jesus. These notably include the pronouncement that the kingdom belongs to the poor (Jas 2:5 = Lk 6:20, Mt 5:3), woes to the rich (Jas 5:1 = Lk 6:24), teachings on the humble being exalted (Jas 4:10 = Lk 14:11; 18:14b, Mt 23:12), and not storing up wealth (Jas 5:2-3a =

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<sup>302</sup> Elsa Tamez, *The Scandalous Message of James: Faith Without Works is Dead* (NY: Crossroad Publishing Company, 1990), p.1

<sup>303</sup> Steven J. Friesen, 'Injustice or God's Will? Early Christian Explanations of Poverty' in *Wealth and Poverty in Early Church and Society* (ed. Susan R. Holman; Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008), pp.17-36 (26)

<sup>304</sup> James Hardy Ropes, *The Epistle of James* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1916), p.39

Lk 12:33b, Mt 6:19-20).<sup>305</sup> Others have suggested that James features more in the region of twenty allusions to sayings of Jesus.<sup>306</sup>

It is accepted that the author of James was intended to be understood as the brother of Jesus,<sup>307</sup> but whether the epistle is authentic or pseudonymous is contested. A strong argument can be made, however, that the author of the James was in fact the brother of Jesus. While it has frequently been argued that James was not a follower of Jesus because Jesus was estranged by his family, Painter and Bauckham have both argued that while there may have been some estrangement, by the end of his ministry Jesus' family, including James, had joined the movement.<sup>308</sup> Furthermore, James appears to predate the gospel texts, because while he frequently alludes to sayings of Jesus, he appears to have no awareness of Mark, Matthew and Luke. Although James has often been linked with Matthew, it appears that James did not use Matthew as a source but depended on an earlier source that may Matthew may also have had access to.<sup>309</sup> As James Adamson notes, James differs from Matthew in his hostility to riches, as Matthew is more tolerant (see below); James also differs from Matthew in his uncritical acceptance of Judaism, while Matthew is more critical.<sup>310</sup> James is also close to the

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<sup>305</sup> Dean B. Deppe, *The Sayings of Jesus in the Paraenesis of James* <[http://archive.org/stream/TheSayingsOfJesusInTheParaenesisOfJames/deppe\\_the.sayings.of.jesus.in.the.paraenesis.of.james#page/n0/mode/2up](http://archive.org/stream/TheSayingsOfJesusInTheParaenesisOfJames/deppe_the.sayings.of.jesus.in.the.paraenesis.of.james#page/n0/mode/2up)> (14 June 2012)

<sup>306</sup> Patrick J. Hartin, *James and the Q Sayings of Jesus* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1991), pp.141-2, Ralph P. Martin, *James (Word Biblical Commentary 48)*; Waco, Texas: Word Books, 1988), p.lxxiv-lxxvi

<sup>307</sup> John Painter, *Just James: The Brother of Jesus in History and Tradition* (Columbia, South Carolina: University of South Carolina Press, 1997), p.237

<sup>308</sup> Painter, *Just James*, pp.11-41, Richard Bauckham, 'James and Jesus' in *The Brother of Jesus: James the Just and His Mission* (eds. Bruce Chilton and Jacob Neusner; Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001), pp.100-137 (106-107)

<sup>309</sup> Martin Dibelius, *James: A Commentary on the Epistle of James* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1976), p.29, Painter, *Just James*, p.23

<sup>310</sup> James B. Adamson, *James: The Man and His Message* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989), pp.189-190



early sayings of Jesus in relation to his views on Law observance; James is clearly conservative in many of his views towards the Torah (Jas 1:25, 2:8-13, 4:11-12), and in Galatians appears as a ‘leading representative’ of the circumcision party.<sup>311</sup> This is of course clearly in line with Jesus’ conservative views on Torah observance (Cf. Mt 5:17-48),<sup>312</sup> and in contrast to Paul’s views. James’ low Christology could also potentially be suggestive of its early date (although low Christology was of course not necessarily limited to the first century). James features no discussion of the resurrection, and the only mentions of Jesus are in the opening address, ‘James, a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ’ (Jas 1:1) and the somewhat egalitarian exhortation (which bears close resemblance to Jesus’ teachings on hierarchy) ‘show no partiality as you hold the faith of our Lord (κυριου) Jesus Christ, the Lord (χριστου) of glory’ (Jas 2:2). The second mention of Jesus notably calls for the audience to have *the same* faith as Jesus, rather than any sort of faith *in* Jesus; he is not an object of faith as he is for Paul, but a *model* of faith. Furthermore, James does not even appear to have an awareness of Paul or his theology. Although James’ comments on faith and works are frequently read in relation to Paul, there is no compelling reason to presuppose such a polemic between these two figures at the James’ time of writing.

James’ views on poverty and wealth, which – as attested across the gospel tradition – were notably comparable to Jesus’, also suggest an early date for his Epistle. They are also notably comparable to the Qumran and Essene communities, as James Riley Strange has recently argued.<sup>313</sup> James wrote at a time when the Jesus movement

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<sup>311</sup> Painter, *Just James*, p.69

<sup>312</sup> See James G. Crossley, *The Date of Mark’s Gospel: Insight from the Law in Earliest Christianity* (London: T&T Clark, 2004), pp.82-124

<sup>313</sup> James Riley Strange, *The Moral World of James: Setting the Epistle in its Greco-Roman and Judaic Environments* (NY: Peter Lang Publishing, 2010), pp.163-169

had not yet departed from its initial egalitarian concerns (Cf. Acts 2:44-46), and at a time when it remained true to its social roots, and loyal to the sayings of Jesus; or put more strongly, James wrote before the triumph of Pauline Christianity, which resulted in the near eradication of social concern from the Jesus movement.

### **The Gospel Tradition**

Having considered numerous different attitudes towards poverty and wealth that might have influenced the Jesus' sayings on the subject, we may proceed to consider different attitudes towards poverty and wealth in the canonical gospels. Luke is frequently acknowledged to have had a particular interest in poverty, wealth and possessions, and a large body of scholarly literature now surrounds Luke's peculiar views on the subject, in part due to the sheer number of Lukan texts that refer to these issues, and in part due to the diversity of perspectives that appear in Luke and Acts.<sup>314</sup> Some have suggested that Luke's 'wealth ethics' are self-contradictory because, as Christopher Hays notes, in some passages, for example, Luke appears to demand absolute divestiture of wealth (Lk 14:33; 18:22), and in other passages he seems to require only half of one's belongings to be divested (Lk 3:11; 19:8).<sup>315</sup> For this current study, such distinctions are not particularly significant. It is clear that Luke contains some of the strongest denouncements of wealth that we find in the gospel texts; the woe to the rich (Lk 6:24) (in contrast to μακαριοι for the poor), the parable of the rich fool (Lk 12:13-21), and, most forcefully of all, the parable of the rich man and Lazarus (Lk 16:19-31) suggest

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<sup>314</sup> See Thomas E. Phillips, 'Reading Recent Readings of Issues of Wealth and Poverty in Luke and Acts, *CBR* 1.2, 2003, pp.231-269 (233). For a thorough study see Christopher Hays, *Luke's Wealth Ethics: A Study in Their Coherence and Character* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2010)

<sup>315</sup> Hays, *Luke's Wealth Ethics*, p.2

Luke' intolerance of economic disparity. Furthermore, redistribution or sharing of possessions features repeatedly in Luke's Gospel (Lk 3:10-14; 19:8) as it does at the beginning of Acts (Acts 2:44-45; 5:1-10).

Luke appears to be particularly concerned with socioeconomic structures and material disparities between the rich and the poor, even more so than the other gospel writers. The book of Acts, however, which is also allegedly authored by Luke, is notably different. Steven Friesen (seemingly unknowingly) highlights the paradox of the alleged continuity between Luke and Acts. Friesen argues that the book of Acts offers no comment on the issue of economic injustice. The author of Acts does not consider institutional causes of poverty, but focuses instead on charity. The author of Acts does not criticize the Roman 'system of inequality' and makes no attempt to explain the disparity between the wealthy imperial elites and everyone else. Furthermore, Friesen notes that the author does not present Paul as poor man, but as 'a man of the highest social skills who commands respect from some of the wealthiest and most powerful Roman imperialists.'<sup>316</sup> Friesen concludes that the author of Acts offers no explanation of structural inequality, no criticism of the causes of poverty, and no denunciation of exploitation. The complete discontinuity between Luke and Acts with regard to their treatment of poverty, wealth and socioeconomic change is so stark that it appears to undermine the alleged unity and shared authorship of these two texts. But as the unity of Luke and Acts remains a scholarly consensus,<sup>317</sup> I would suggest that the disappearance of social concern in Acts serves a deliberate narrative function. Luke makes his aims clear; he is laying out an orderly account of Jesus' ministry, before proceeding to

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<sup>316</sup> Friesen, 'Injustice or God's Will?', p.31

<sup>317</sup> See Mikeal C. Parsons and Richard I. Pervo, *Rethinking the Unity of Luke and Acts* (MI: Fortress Press, 1993)

describe the formation of the Jesus movement and its activity (Lk 1:1-4, Acts 1:1-2). The disunity between Jesus' consistent concerns about poverty, wealth and the social order and the early church's almost immediate forgetting of this after is clearly reflected in Luke-Acts. After initially embracing Jesus' teachings about possessions and sharing (Acts 2:46-47), these sorts of concerns were soon forgotten, as is clear in the writings of Peter, Paul and John, as well as in Jude, Hebrews and Revelation. Luke was surely aware of this fundamental shift in focus that he depicts in Luke-Acts.

Matthew's Gospel contains notably less specifically 'economic' material than Luke. Luke's blessing to 'the poor' (Lk 6:20) is famously rendered as 'the poor in spirit' in Matthew (Mt 5:3), seemingly reflecting the discrepancy between their individual theological interests. Further, where Luke pronounces a blessing on those who hunger and thirst, Matthew pronounces a blessing on those who hunger and thirst *for righteousness*.<sup>318</sup> Matthew also contains Jesus' apparently fatalistic invocation of Deuteronomy 15:11 that the poor will always be present (Mt 26:11), which will be discussed below. On the other hand, for Matthew, money presents a potential form of idolatry, as Matthew's Jesus states: 'You cannot serve God and mammon' (Mt 6:24). And, for Matthew, money can seemingly function as a hindrance to admission into the Kingdom of God, as the story of the so-called Rich Young Ruler demonstrates (Mt 19:16-26). For Matthew it is apparently money that corrupts Judas, with Judas plainly asking the chief priests 'what are you willing to give me if I hand him over to you?' (Mt 26:15). But as well as money being corrupting and a source of idolatry, money can be related to injustice. In Matthew's lengthy rebuke of the Pharisees Jesus criticises them on account of their concern for riches (Mt 23:16-17) and their neglect of justice (Mt 23:23, 25). And most importantly, the fiery parable of the sheep and the goats

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<sup>318</sup> See David L. Mealand, *Poverty and Expectation in the Gospels* (London: SPCK, 1980), p.1

(discussed further in chapter 6) is peculiar to Matthew (Mt 25:31-46). This parable clearly depicts the eternal punishment of those who do not feed the hungry, welcome the stranger, clothe the naked, visit the sick, and visit the prisoner (Mt 25:41-46). Thus despite Matthew's toning down of some material, the corrupting effects of money and eternal consequences of neglecting the needy in Jesus' teaching are attested.

Mark contains less material than Luke on poverty and wealth, but contains a couple of fragments that Matthew omits. Mark appears to be Luke and Matthew's source for the Rich Young Ruler (Mk 10:17-31), and Matthew's source for the problematic saying that the poor will always be present (Mk 14:7). But additionally Mark features the poor widow at the temple (Mk 12:41-44; Cf. Lk 21:1-4), and the condemnation of the 'corban' offering (Mk 7:9-12). While the widow's offering has traditionally been read as an exemplary act of charitable giving, commentators are now increasingly arguing that this was potentially not what was in view by Jesus, Mark or Luke, and that the widow's giving of all she had to live on demonstrates rather the extractive and impoverishing function that the temple had on the most marginalised;<sup>319</sup> in both Mark and Luke, Jesus' comment seems to be framed as a criticism, as Mark precedes the story with a condemnation of the scribes who devour widow's houses (Mk 12:40a), and Luke contrasts the widow's meagre offering with the extravagance of the temple (Lk 21:5). Similarly, Jesus' condemnation of the practice of corban may not be only a criticism of the Pharisees' interpretation of the Torah, but a condemnation of the way in which such a practice deprived the family household of money in order to concentrate more wealth in the temple treasury.<sup>320</sup>

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<sup>319</sup> See Sugirtharajah, *Postcolonial Criticism*, p.121

<sup>320</sup> Richard A. Horsley, 'The Politics of Disguise and Public Declaration of the Hidden Transcript: Broadening Our Approach to the Historical Jesus with Scott's "Arts of Resistance" Theory' in

Of the canonical gospels, concerns about wealth and poverty are least evident of all in John. The only mention of the poor in John's Gospel is when Jesus says that the poor will always be present (Jn 12:8), and John's comment that the disciples thought that Jesus may have been telling Judas to give something to the poor (Jn 13:29). John, like all the synoptics, includes Jesus' action in the temple which in John is perhaps most dramatic of all with Jesus driving out the money changers with a whip, pouring out their coins, and overturning their tables (Jn 2:15). But John offers little else on the socioeconomic dimension of Jesus' ministry. This is not surprising, however, considering the fact that John is undoubtedly the latest of the canonical gospels and has long been regarded as having little use in reconstructing the 'historical' Jesus.

### **The historical Jesus and the Poor**

The aforementioned individuals, movements and texts that challenged the social and economic structures that existed in Roman Palestine are likely to have either directly influenced the historical Jesus, or to have influenced the memory and understanding of Jesus that is presented in the gospel texts. As we have seen, each of the synoptic gospels has its own unique material denouncing the rich and those who have unjustly accumulated wealth; there can be no doubt that this was a recurrent and prominent

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*Hidden Transcripts and the Arts of Resistance: Applying the Work of James C. Scott to Jesus and Paul* (ed. Richard A. Horsley; Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2004), pp.61-80 (77)

theme in the historical Jesus' teaching.<sup>321</sup> There are also clear parallels between many of the sayings attributed to Jesus and the Essenes, the Cynics, John the Baptist and James; in this respect it appears that Jesus was part of a broader movement that confronted socioeconomic injustices throughout Palestine. Notably, Jesus did not seem to question the hegemonic function of certain Hebrew Scriptures as we have done above; on the contrary, Jesus used various texts from the Hebrew Scriptures to challenge various economic injustices (Cf. Mt 21:13; Mk 11:17; Lk 19:46).

There is one text in the gospel tradition, however, that seems to contradict this overall assessment of the historical Jesus' attitude towards poverty and wealth, and that is Jesus' paraphrasing of Deuteronomy 15:11 which expresses that the existence of a poor class is inevitable (Mt 26:11; Mk 14:7; Jn 12:8). This story is attested multiple times – unlike some of Jesus' forceful challenges to economic injustices – and is attested in our earliest source, Mark, as well as being copied by Matthew, and John. Furthermore, the saying comes linked with a promise of memorisation; it is said of the rich woman who anoints Jesus that, 'wherever the gospel is preached in the whole world, what she has done will be told in memory of her' (Mk 14:9/Mt 26:13), although that saying itself is more likely to be a Markan expansion because even if we accept Jesus' post-resurrection Gentile commission to be historical, the anointing occurred at a time when the gospel was allegedly restricted to Israel (Mt 10:5-6, 15:24). It seems likely that Jesus' anointing by the rich woman and his reference to Deuteronomy 15:11 are historical, and so at this point, while it seems clear that although the historical Jesus had a definite concern for socioeconomic injustices, he also subscribed to the hegemonic view of Deuteronomy 15:11, for whom fundamental social reform was

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<sup>321</sup> See also Crossley, *Why Christianity Happened*, pp.63-65, James G. Crossley, 'The Damned Rich (Mark 10:17-31)', *ExpTim* 116, 2005, pp.397-401

impossible. This was evidently problematic for Luke, who seems to be particularly concerned with presenting Jesus as a social critic, and for this reason omits the anointing scenario altogether; an omission which is telling of his programme for Jesus. At the risk of sounding like a liberationist apologist, it is possible that the intention behind Jesus' invocation of Deuteronomy 15:11 was different to the Deuteronomist's intention in writing it. Whereas the Deuteronomist's proclamation of the inevitability of an impoverished class functioned to justify and preserve economic disparities as we have seen, Jesus was speaking from rather a different context. Having effectively renounced home (Mt 8:20/Lk 9:58) and possessions (Mk 6:8, Mt 10:10, Lk 9:3) (assuming that he personally renounced possessions as well as teaching his disciples to do so) and proclaimed that it was near impossible for a rich person to enter the Kingdom of God (Mk 10:23), Jesus' suggestion that the poor will always exist may have been more like realism than scepticism; even the most radical advocates of socioeconomic equality presumably acknowledge that material poverty has existed to some extent in the vast majority of societies in history. It seems unlikely that a member of the peasant class who fiercely challenged economic inequalities would have wished to perpetuate the existence of a permanent poor class by making such a statement.

Another important feature of the gospel traditions concerning poverty and wealth is their perception of the relationship between wealth and poverty. Luke repeatedly envisages an unequivocal role-reversal of the rich and the poor, often resulting in the punishment or shaming of the rich (Lk 1:52-53; 6:24-25; 12:16-21; 16:19-31). And Mark's Jesus repeatedly repudiates structures that keep the poor in poverty and preserve the security of the rich (Mk 7:9-12; 10:17-31; 11:15-17; 12:41-44). But Matthew frames Jesus in quite different terms, and redaction criticism makes clear the ideological underpinnings of Matthew's peculiar redaction; it is quite clear that



Matthew has downplayed the material dimensions of his sources in order to make Jesus a little more palatable for the rich. The first clear instance is in the beatitudes where, instead of pronouncing blessings on the poor, the hungry and the thirsty, Matthew spiritualises his sources to pronounce blessings on the poor *in spirit*, and those who hunger and thirst *for righteousness*. Although some recent commentators have tried,<sup>322</sup> it is difficult to get away from Matthew's 'spiritualising' of the beatitudes to the poor, the hungry and the thirsty,<sup>323</sup> because the beatitudes are not the only time that Matthew downplays the material dimensions of his sources. When Jesus lists the commandments in the story of the Rich Young Ruler, Mark notably includes a commandment not to defraud (Mk 10:19), a command that is absent from the Decalogue and replaces do not covet (Ex 20:17/Deut 5:21). The term 'defraud' (*aposterēsēs*) in the LXX is frequently connected to the practice of depriving workers of their wages (Mal 3:5; Deut 24:14-15; Ex 21:10; Cf. Sir 4:11).<sup>324</sup> But Matthew omits this command altogether. Furthermore, where in Mark the rich man is told 'go and sell what you have', Matthew qualifies the imperative stating: 'if you would be *perfect*, go and sell your *possessions*' (Mt 19:21). And instead of having to sell everything, Matthew's rich man only has to sell his possessions, and Matthew states that it is hard only for a *rich* man (*plousios*) to enter the Kingdom (Mt 19:23), rather than being hard for the one who has money (*ta chrēmata echontes*) (Mk 10:23).<sup>325</sup> It is sometimes argued that Matthew's challenge to the rich man 'if you want to be perfect' does not tone down the saying because elsewhere Matthew demands perfection from all (Mt 5:48). But Matthew's interest in 'perfection'

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<sup>322</sup> Timothy J. M. Ling, *The Judean Poor and the Fourth Gospel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), pp.114-115

<sup>323</sup> Mealand, *Poverty and Expectation*, p.15

<sup>324</sup> Crossley, *The Damned Rich*, p.397

<sup>325</sup> Mealand, *Poverty and Expectation*, p.14

is telling of his agenda; Matthew's Jesus, at times at least, is only interested in economic concerns inasmuch as the correct management of wealth provides an opportunity for something like 'piety'. Matthew is not so much concerned about defrauding his workers. Much less does he wish to pronounce a blessing on the poor, the hungry and the needy. He warns that one cannot serve both God and mammon (Mt 6:24); but again, this statement is primarily concerned with idolatry and the management of (assumed) wealth. But while Matthew sought to create a slightly more bourgeois-friendly Jesus, Jesus' social critique still breaks through Matthew's ideology on several significant occasions. Matthew's Jesus remains intolerant of the way in which the temple has been turned into a 'den of robbers' (Mt 21:12-13); he is still critical of the Pharisees' neglect of justice (Mt 23:23); and he still condemns to eternal punishment those who neglect the hungry, the thirsty, the naked, the sick and the prisoner (Mt 25:41-46).

The synoptic gospels all point towards the importance of poverty, wealth and social critique within the ministry of Jesus. Each of the synoptic gospels, and additionally the gospel of John, contain Jesus' cleansing of the temple, paired with his protest that it had been made into a den of robbers; apparently a reference to the fraudulent money-changers whom he drove out.<sup>326</sup> Luke's Gospel contains numerous unambiguous condemnations of the rich, including their condemnation to Hades, and the promise of a change of fortunes for the poor; Mark contains further criticisms of the temple tithe and the Pharisees 'corban' teaching; and Matthew contains criticisms of the Pharisees emphasis on money instead of justice, as well as a forceful imperative to provide for the needy or receive eternal punishment. Similar attitudes are attested in the

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<sup>326</sup> Evans, 'Jesus' Action in the Temple', pp.237-70

Epistle of James which frequently alludes to the sayings of Jesus, and comparable views prevailed amongst the Essenes and John the Baptist and his disciples. The early Jesus movement, however, under the guidance of Paul, became quickly disinterested in these sayings which were so fundamental to the teaching of Jesus, as is vividly depicted in the narrative of Luke-Acts.

As well as the socio-economic critique that comes through so prominently in the gospel texts, there are a couple of other discernable features of Jesus' attitude towards poverty and wealth. Although John the Baptist was regarded as an ascetic, Jesus was evidently not. Jesus and his disciples had a relaxed attitude towards fasting (Mt 9:14, Mk 2:18, Lk 5:34), and Jesus was even accused of being a drunkard and a glutton (Mt 11:19/Lk 7:34). Jesus' distance from asceticism is also confirmed by the manner in which he did not condemn the rich woman for anointing him with costly perfume, but justified the action. Jesus was also critical of the hypocrisy that was connected with charity, and this theme is attested across the gospel tradition. Jesus rebukes the Pharisees for faithfully tithing but neglecting justice (Mt 23:23/Lk 11:42), and condemns the 'hypocrites' for sounding trumpets when they give alms. According to Matthew, Jesus teaches instead 'when you give alms, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, so that your alms may be in secret' (Mt 6:3-4a). This is probably the sentiment reflected in the Gospel of Thomas saying 'if you give alms, you will do harm to your inner spirits' (*Thom 14*). A consistent theme in Jesus' teaching was that almsgiving for some was nothing more than a self-gratifying act and functioned as an altruistic guise under which the giver could maintain a philanthropic face while continuing to perpetrate injustices.

## Conclusion

This chapter has positioned Jesus' views on poverty and wealth within a broader historical context. We have seen hegemony at work not only in Greco-Roman texts, but throughout the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament, where figures have justified the social order and structure of both ancient Israelite and Greco-Roman society as God-ordained. We have also seen that numerous movements in Roman Palestine brought forth radical critiques of the social order and the severe disparities in wealth that were so visible. Movements and individuals who formed this critique included the cynics, the Galilean bandits, the Essenes, John the Baptist, and James. Furthermore, it has been established that Jesus was firmly rooted in this movement. Each of the synoptic gospel authors, despite their occasionally conflicting agendas, attest that social criticism was fundamental to Jesus' ministry, as is confirmed by the Epistle of James, which may be considered as one of the earliest texts in the New Testament canon. However, as the Luke-Acts narrative clearly depicts, social criticism and attention to the questions of poverty and wealth was soon squeezed out from the Jesus movement as the Pauline school took over the reins. Paul advocated instead an obliging acceptance of all political and economic structures, which were marginal issues for his theological program (Cf. 1 Cor 9:19-23). Social concern was reduced to fleeting endorsements of charity for the proto-Christian community in Jerusalem, and little else besides. And the Pauline voice on the matter has remained the dominant one in the Christian tradition over the centuries, a tradition that has been maintained and supported by the Western powers of church, academy and state until the present day.

## INTERPRETING THE POOR IN WESTERN BIBLICAL STUDIES

‘The spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed, to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord.’

- Luke 4:18-19

### **Introduction**

In order to further examine Jesus’ relationship to poverty and wealth, to probe the treatment of Jesus’ sayings about poverty and wealth in Western scholarship, and to help us read Luke 4:18-19, it seems fitting to interrogate the term ‘the poor’ somewhat, as well as the seemingly related ‘captives’, ‘blind’, and ‘oppressed’. In the spirit of Western biblical studies, I will conduct a vigorous ‘word study’, examining the way in which ‘the poor’ have been understood both in the Hebrew Bible, and in New Testament scholarship. I will then turn to the captives, the blind, and the oppressed and begin to gesture towards a possible interpretation of the Lukan text; an interpretation which markedly departs from the bulk of Western scholarship, which has, in general, sought to redefine ‘the poor’ in abstract terms.

## The Poor in the Hebrew Bible

Throughout the Hebrew Bible at least five different terms are used to denote poverty: *'ani*, *'anawim* (or *'anaw*), *'ebyon*, *dal*, and *rash*. Not all of these terms necessarily denote physical poverty. As Sue Gillingham has found in her study of the poor in the Psalms, *'ani* and *'anawim*, from the root, *'ānāh*, 'to humble', as well as having associations with physical poverty also imply inner humiliation. *'ānāh* is notably the same verb that is used to describe 'humiliation' in the laws concerning sexual violation (Dt 21:14; 22:24, 29). In the Psalms, *'ani* is sometimes used to denote a state of inward lowliness, particularly when it is used with the adjective *w'ebyon*; for instance in Psalms 40:17, 70:5, 86:1, and 109:22 the Psalmist describes himself as *'ani w'ebyon*, usually translated as 'poor and needy'. In these texts, material poverty is seemingly not in view. For instance, in Psalm 109:22, the state of being 'poor and needy' is associated with a 'stricken heart', 'a shadow in the evening', and being 'shaken off like a locust'; although verse 24 talks of a weak knees and a gaunt body, this is apparently due to voluntary fasting, rather than involuntary hunger. In this text, a loose relationship is thus suggested between poverty and piety.<sup>327</sup> This relationship, however, has been grossly overstated by many, and has no doubt served to support the romanticisation of the poor.<sup>328</sup> Texts such as Psalm 10:17, 'you will hear the desire of the meek (*'anawim*)' and Psalm 37:11, 'the meek (*'anawim*) shall possess the land' have also probably also served to further this reading. But in these instances no particular connection is made between spiritual humility and outward deprivation. *'anawim* here seems to be referring purely to a spiritual state. Similarly, the Qumran community's self-designation as 'the poor ones' should not be taken to imply piety. As David Fiensy has argued, the

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<sup>327</sup> See Richard J. Coggins, 'The Old Testament and the Poor', *ExpTim* 99, 1987, pp.11-14

<sup>328</sup> See Sugirtharajah, *The Bible and the Third World*, pp.103-116

commentaries of the Qumran community which identify themselves with the term do so on account of the physical poverty they faced in their early days (which eventually passed as they became more prosperous) and the persecution and oppression that they faced.<sup>329</sup>

Besides these usages of the term, in Psalm 25:3 '*anawim* also appears in a 'motif of confidence': 'My soul makes its boast in Yahweh; let the afflicted (*'anawim*) hear and be glad'. Here, a state of humility seems to place a person a position that gives them favour with Yahweh. '*anaw* is also used three times in communal psalms that describe the crisis of the entire nation (76:10; 147:6; 149:4).

Elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible, however, '*ani* generally refers to a state of material poverty. Job offers a detailed description of the social situation of the '*ani* who is, according to Job, an exploited worker who lives in severe material poverty:

The poor (*'ani*) of the earth all hide themselves. Behold, like wild asses in the desert they go forth to their toil, seeking prey in the wilderness as food for their children. They gather their fodder in the field and they glean the vineyard of the wicked man. They lie all night naked, without clothing, and have no covering in the cold. They are wet with the rain of the mountains, and cling to the rock for want of shelter. (There are those who snatch the fatherless child from the breast, and take in pledge the infant of the poor.) They go about naked, without clothing; hungry, they carry the sheaves; among the olive rows of the wicked they make oil; they tread the wine presses but suffer thirst' (Job 24:4b-11)

The second term to consider is *dal*. Gillingham argues that *dal* consistently refers to the material poor throughout the Hebrew Bible, apart from on one occasion.<sup>330</sup>

*dal* is from the root *dālal*, 'to be low, inferior'; notably the Hebrew (and Sanskrit) term

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<sup>329</sup> Fiensy, *Jesus the Galilean*, pp.112-113

<sup>330</sup> Is 11:4

from which 'Dalit' is derived.<sup>331</sup> Gillingham argues that the *dal* in the Psalms are 'any within the community who lack physical means, and who, regardless of any moral or physical qualities, receive God's protection as it is expressed through the community's care.'<sup>332</sup> Gillingham's description is problematic in some respects, for as we have seen in chapter 2, the idea of a mediating community who 'protect' the poor is hypothetical, as the Hebrew wisdom literature and poetry ultimately proposes that not people but God will address the problem of human material poverty. It is clear, nonetheless, that *dal* should be understood as referring to material poverty.

Gillingham argues that '*ebyon* also consistently refers to the material poor. Gillingham suggests that '*ebyon*, is probably derived from the root '*ābāh*, 'to lack, to be in need', and it is usually translated as 'needy' or 'needy one.' Gillingham suggests that only on one occasion is '*ebyon* associated with spiritual need, in which 'the meek ('*anawim*) shall obtain fresh joy in Yahweh, and the poor ('*ebyōnē*) among men shall exult in the Holy One of Israel' (Is 29:19). Gillingham also notes that the '*ebyon* are often contrasted with the oppressive power of the 'wicked' (*resha'im*) and the material wealth of the rich ('*āshīr*),<sup>333</sup> implying that their need may result from the malevolent actions of others. '*ebyon* also appears frequently in the expression 'poor and needy' ('*ani w'ebyon*). Gillingham suggests that in the case of '*ani w'ebyon*, 'it is apparent that the psalmists believe that God will vindicate them, not only because they have been made poor, but because of the way they trust God with a corresponding humility or poverty of spirit' (the 'motif of confidence'),<sup>334</sup> we note again, however, that the

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<sup>331</sup> See C.I. David Joy, *Mark and its Subalterns: A Hermeneutical Paradigm for a Postcolonial Context* (London: Equinox, 2008), p.50

<sup>332</sup> Sue Gillingham, 'The Poor in the Psalms', *ExpTim* 100, 1988, pp.15-19 (16)

<sup>333</sup> Ps 37:14; 49:3; 107:41; 112:9; 132:15

<sup>334</sup> Gillingham, 'The Poor in the Psalms', p.17



Psalms belief that God will vindicate the poor is part of a hegemonic discourse that renders the rich exempt from addressing the material poverty of others.

The fifth term denoting a poor person in the Hebrew Bible is *rash*, and it appears most frequently in the Proverbs. It has been frequently argued that the poverty of the *rash* in the Proverbs is regarded by the writer as self-inflicted.<sup>335</sup> Norman Whybray suggests that *rash* is synonymous with *dal* and *'ebyon*, although Whybray was evidently not aware of the distinction between *dal* and *'ebyon* that is apparent in the Psalms.<sup>336</sup> Jeff Benner suggests the meaning 'one who hangs down the head and is in need,'<sup>337</sup> similar to *dal* which also implies the hanging or dangling of one's head in poverty.<sup>338</sup> Looking at each occurrence of the term *rash*, it appears to always denote a state of material destitution, possibly accompanied by abandonment (Prov 14:20; 19:7) and vulnerability to oppression (Prov 13:8, 23; 22:7, 28:3, 13; Eccl 5:8, 2 Sam 12:1-4).<sup>339</sup> The presentation of the poor in the Proverbs has more recently been addressed by Houston, who notes that it is not uncommon for scholars to see the poverty of the Proverbs' poor as self-inflicted;<sup>340</sup> more recently David Pleins has suggested that the authors of Proverbs were launching a 'veritable attack on the poor.'<sup>341</sup> However, Houston argues that although the Proverbs say that laziness leads to want, they do not

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<sup>335</sup> Coggins, 'The Old Testament', p.12

<sup>336</sup> R. N. Whybray, *Wealth and Poverty in the Book of Proverbs* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1990), pp. 17-19

<sup>337</sup> Jeff A. Benner, *The Ancient Hebrew Lexicon of the Bible* (College Station, TX: Virtualbookworm.com Publishing Inc., 2005), p.269

<sup>338</sup> Benner, *The Ancient Hebrew Lexicon*, p.92

<sup>339</sup> For further see J. David Pleins, 'Poverty in the World of the Wise', *JSOT* 12, 1987, pp.66-72

<sup>340</sup> Houston, 'The Role of the Poor in Proverbs', pp.231-233

<sup>341</sup> J. David Pleins, *The Social Visions of the Hebrew Bible: Theological Introduction* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001), p.437

postulate that poverty is necessarily caused by laziness. Houston admits the possibility that the writers could make such an assumption, but notes that there is only one place in the sentence literature of Proverbs that deduces conduct from results, which is 16:31: ‘Grey hair is a crown of glory; it is gained in a righteous life’.<sup>342</sup> Houston thus argues that Proverbs 10:4 does not postulate fecklessness as a prerequisite for poverty. However, it is clear that in the view of the author, slackness was associated with poverty, whereas diligence was associated with wealth. In a similar way, love of pleasure was considered to be a potential cause of poverty (Prov 21:17). But whilst the association that many have drawn between poverty and fecklessness is present in the Proverbs, it is perhaps marginal. There is, in fact, a wealth of different ways in which the poor are characterised in the Proverbs. Elsewhere in the Proverbs the *rash* are associated with friendlessness (14:20, 19:4, 7), low-spiritedness (16:19), pleading (18:23) and stealing out of need (30:9), and being mocked (17:5); they are frequently associated with injustice (13:23, 31:9), oppression (14:31a, 22:16, 22, 28:3, 30:14), and even debt slavery (22:7). Most frequently of all they appear as objects of charity (14:21, 31b, 19:17, 22:9, 28:8, 27, 31:20). The poor in the Proverbs are thus not only described as feckless, but as a friendless and depressed, and in desperate need due to injustices that have been carried out against them.

Pleins provides a good summary of the Hebrew Bible’s portrait of the poor, stating that the terms relating to poverty in the Hebrew Bible primarily denote a lack of economic resources and economic goods, and, secondarily, political and legal powerlessness and oppression.<sup>343</sup> Pleins states: ‘Neither a social class nor a political

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<sup>342</sup> Houston, ‘The Role of the Poor’, p.233

<sup>343</sup> J. David Pleins, ‘Poor, Poverty’, *ABD* Vol.5 O-Sh (eds. David Noel Freedman et al; NY: Doubleday, 1992), p.402

party in ancient Israel [as some have argued], the poor constituted a diverse body of social actors: small farmers, day labourers, construction workers, beggars, debt slaves, village dwellers.<sup>344</sup> Metaphorical meanings associated with poverty – spiritual poverty and the relationship the Psalmist occasionally draws between piety and poverty – are marginal. However, as Pleins notes, an etymological approach to poverty in the Hebrew Bible does not address the diverging ideologies that exist in these texts;<sup>345</sup> as we have seen in chapter 2, the Hebrew Bible features a diverse range of attitudes towards poverty.<sup>346</sup> This brief survey of the terms will suffice, however, to serve our current purposes.

Some other recent work on the subject of the Old Testament poor should be highlighted however. Several articles on the subject were published in the *Expository Times* just over two decades ago, and particularly noteworthy amongst these contributions was T.R. Hobb's article.<sup>347</sup> Hobbs argues, 'we have to understand what it was in ancient Israelite society that was valued, and that could be exchanged to the detriment of some and the advantage of others.'<sup>348</sup> The most highly valued thing in Israelite society, he suggests, was not money or property, but honour and social status, factors which, he argues 'play an extremely important role in the social life of the Middle East today'.<sup>349</sup> The blend of anachronism and orientalism is striking. Hobb's proceeds to attempt to strip the economic dimension of the poor throughout the Hebrew

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<sup>344</sup> Pleins, 'Poor, Poverty', p.402

<sup>345</sup> Pleins, 'Poor, Poverty', p.413

<sup>346</sup> For other detailed studies of the Hebrew Bible's social ideologies see Pleins, *The Social Visions of the Hebrew Bible* and Houston, *Contending for Justice*

<sup>347</sup> T.R. Hobbs, 'Reflections on 'The Poor' and the Old Testament', *ExpTim* 100, 1989, pp.291-294

<sup>348</sup> Hobbs, 'Reflections', p.293

<sup>349</sup> Hobbs, 'Reflections', p.293

Bible. His one example to justify his claims about honour and status is the incident in Genesis 34 about Jacob and the inhabitants of Shechem, in which preservation of group honour, following the rape of Dinah, according to Hobbs, takes precedence over economic concerns. Hobbs suggests that ‘in Western terms the failure of the union [between Jacob and Shechem] impoverished both sides. But in terms appropriate to the historical context, honour and status were maintained, thus justifying whatever action was necessary.’<sup>350</sup> Honour and shame certainly come into play in the story of Dinah, but this story cannot be used to demonstrate the primacy of honour and shame over material wealth. It is clear that Jacob and his sons benefitted materially from their arrangement; had they not allowed Dinah to be married to Shechem, then they would not have been able to plunder their city, taking their ‘flocks and their herds, their asses, and whatever was in the city and in the field; all their wealth, all their little ones and their wives, all that was in their houses’ (Gen 34:28-9). The outcome of retaining Dinah as well as plundering the wealth of the whole city sounds remarkably more profitable for Jacob and his sons than entering a mutual trade agreement. Indeed, it could almost be argued that Jacob and his sons used the situation of Dinah’s rape to their advantage, as a means of acquiring Shechem’s wealth. This is besides the fact that Hobbs’s comments about honour and social status play in the Middle East today are irrelevant and anachronistic, representing a bizarre exercise in historical method. Furthermore, Hobbs’ suggestion that ‘poor and needy’ in the Psalms must refer to honour and status rather than material wealth is based on similarly skewed logic. Hobbs states, ‘For a king to speak repeatedly of himself as ‘poor and needy’ is somewhat anomalous if not downright silly, unless it is understood that he is speaking not in terms of possessions, but of status and

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<sup>350</sup> Hobbs, ‘Reflections’, p.293

honour.’<sup>351</sup> Hobbs is obviously correct in stating that it would seem anomalous for a king to be materially poor; but would it not be equally anomalous for a king, the person with the single most power and influence in society, to consider himself as low status? Hobbs provides a classic example of the comfortable Western biblical scholar employing bizarre logic in order to erase the vocabulary of poverty from the Bible.

### The Poor in the New Testament

In the New Testament the most common word denoting poverty is *ptōchos*, with *penēs* (2 Cor 9:9) and *penichros* (Lk 21:2) also occurring once each. *ptōchos* is generally understood to denote to a more severe level of poverty than *penēs*.<sup>352</sup> In Aristophanes’ *Plutus* we find a clear summary of the distinction between the two words; in this play, the personification of *Penia*, the term normally translated as ‘poverty’, says that the life of a *ptōchos* ‘is to live having nothing’, whereas ‘the life of a *penēs* is to live a sparing life, working hard, with nothing to spare but not falling short’ (*Plutus* 552-4).<sup>353</sup> Another useful insight about the distinction between these terms comes from some early Christian writings that explicitly discuss the difference. Origen remarks that a ‘*ptōchos* is he who has fallen from wealth, whereas a *penēs* is he who earns his living by labor’ (Origen, *Fragmenta in Psalmos* 11.6) and Basil writes very similarly that, ‘I consider that a *ptōchos* is he who falls from wealth into need; but a *penēs* is he who is in need from the first and is acceptable to the Lord’ (*Regulae brevius tractatae* 262). Gregory of

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<sup>351</sup> Hobbs, ‘Reflections’, p.293

<sup>352</sup> Michael Prior, *Jesus the Liberator: Nazareth Liberation Theology (Luke 4.16-30)* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1995), p.165

<sup>353</sup> Robin Osborne, ‘Introduction: Roman poverty in context’ in *Poverty in the Roman World*, p.1-20 (11)

Nyssa suggests that a *penēs* who falls ill is ‘twice *ptōchos*’ (*GNys, Paup.* 1).<sup>354</sup> As well as supporting the idea that a *penēs* was a person who laboured for their living, it is significant that these texts all suggest that an element of misfortune may accompany a *ptōchos*. These texts also seem to agree that a *ptōchos* was generally more profoundly impoverished than a *penēs*.

Longenecker has recently challenged this view of the definitions of these two terms, arguing that neither the terminology nor the conceptualisation of *ptōchos* and *penēs* were stable<sup>355</sup> Longenecker’s argumentation, however, has some issues. Longenecker first cites Menander’s play *Dyskolos* in which the land-owning and slave-owning character Gorgias is described as *ptōchos*, despite the fact that he owns land and slaves (*Dyskolos* II. 284-86). But land and slave ownership do not necessarily exempt a person from severe poverty. Many land-owning peasants in the Roman period struggled increasingly to the point of having to sell their land, and owning an agricultural slave or two would not necessarily make one particularly well-off.<sup>356</sup> Not only does Gorgias (whose name means ‘farmer’ or ‘tiller of the soil’) describe himself as poor, but the other characters affirm his impoverished state: when seeking to provide a dowry for his sister, Gorgias states that he has ‘little,’ to which Kallippides responds that he has ‘nothing’ (V.834-36). Kallippides rejects Gorgias’ humble dowry payment of one talent, seeing that his intention was to sell his farm in order to pay it (V. 846). Longenecker also cites an example from Philo’s Laws of a person who is described as a *penēs*. But the character being described in this text is not, as Longenecker suggests, a destitute

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<sup>354</sup> Susan R. Holman, *The Hungry Are Dying: Beggars and Bishops in Roman Cappadocia* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), p.6

<sup>355</sup> Longenecker, ‘Exposing the Economic Middle’, pp.244-247

<sup>356</sup> Meggitt, *Paul*, pp.129-131 See also Aristophanes’ *Plutus* in which an unnamed poor man owns the slave Cario

person, but a slave. Slaves were not necessarily destitute, and even if they were brutally treated and of extremely low social status they were ultimately considered to be employed workers. Slaves would have generally been provided for by their owner and so would not necessarily be in a state of abject material poverty (*Laws* 2.83); indeed Philo suggests that on the release of a slave after 6 years, the owner should provide ‘plentiful supply for all his necessities’.<sup>357</sup> Thus Philo’s use of *penēs* to refer to a slave in this instance is not surprising, and does not, as Longenecker suggests, undermine the consensus on the meaning of these two terms.

The LXX may also provide some clues about the precise definition of the two terms. Out of 80 occurrences, ‘*ani*’ is translated by the LXX as *ptōchos* 38 times, and is translated by a form of *penēs* 13 times. Out of 61 occurrences, ‘*ebyon*’ is translated as *penēs* 29 times and by *ptōchos* 10 times.<sup>358</sup> Thus although it is clear that *ptōchos* was not a perfect translation for ‘*ani*’, it was deemed appropriate about half of the time, and although *penēs* was evidently not an exact translation of ‘*ebyon*’, it was also deemed appropriate around half of the time. For the LXX translators, the term *ptōchos* was evidently deemed to have some relation to the Hebrew terms ‘*ani*’ and ‘*anaw*’, deriving from the root ‘*anah*’, ‘to humble’. It is possible, then, that the New Testament usage of *ptōchos* may sometimes be intended to connote the Hebrew ‘*anah*’ and its cognates; particularly in the case of the gospel texts, assuming their Aramaic oral origins. This would also make sense of Luke and Matthew’s disagreement in their renderings of ‘blessed are the poor’ (Lk 6:20) and ‘blessed are the poor in spirit’ (Mt 5:3). If the original saying declared a blessing for the ambiguous ‘*anah*’ then the saying could

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<sup>357</sup> Alföldy suggests that urban slaves were often in a better position than ‘free’ country dwellers, Géza Alföldy, *The Social History of Rome* (London: Croom Helm, 1985), pp.145-6

<sup>358</sup> Gildas Hamel, *Poverty and Charity in Roman Palestine, First Three Centuries C.E.* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), p.171

legitimately be translated as either ‘blessed are the poor in spirit’ or simply ‘blessed are the poor’. The term *ptōchos* may well have inherited some of the connotations of the Hebrew *‘anah* which often pointed towards humility or humiliation.

It seems notable that New Testament texts favour the term *ptōchos*, when *penēs* is the favoured term for the poor in Greek literature, and Josephus prefers the term *apōros*, a term that does not appear at all in the New Testament.<sup>359</sup> Wolfgang Stegemann argues that the predominant use of *ptōchos* reflects the social reality of increasing destitution in the Roman imperial period,<sup>360</sup> and there may be some truth to this. In elite literature, the peasantry were generally described as an undifferentiated mass. The New Testament, however, as a collection of texts that are more representative of the common people than most surviving literature from this period, may demonstrate a more nuanced understanding of poverty which differentiates the destitute *ptōchos* from the average peasant who was a *penēs*. The *ptōchoi* may well have been selectively out of the line of vision of many of the elite. The influence of the LXX may also be a factor. The New Testament writers may have preferred the term *ptōchos* because of its frequent use in the LXX and the particular connotations that it would have acquired for readers of the LXX.

### **Recent New Testament Scholarship on ‘the Poor’**

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<sup>359</sup> Wolfgang Stegemann, *The Gospel and the Poor* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984), p.14

<sup>360</sup> Stegemann, *The Gospel and the Poor*, pp.14-15



In his recent monograph, Timothy Ling has discussed three significant attempts from recent years to understand the precise identity of the New Testament *ptōchoi*.<sup>361</sup> The first definition that Ling considers is what he calls Schottroff and Stegemann's 'economic' definition. Ling suggests that Schottroff and Stegemann assume *a priori* that the *ptōchoi* represent an economic category. The question with which Schottroff and Stegemann were largely concerned was how many people were classified as *ptōchoi*. As they regard widespread poverty to be a feature of first-century Palestine, the term *ptōchoi*, they suggest, must refer to a large proportion of the population. For this reason they suggest that the term is not applied just to those who are destitute in a 'strict sense', but should be understood more broadly. They suggest that *ptōchoi* may include, 'starving groups a cut "above" beggary: unemployed day labourers, fugitive slaves, or individuals rendered homeless by economic forces.'<sup>362</sup> Ling is dismissive of Schottroff and Stegemann's description because, as we shall see, Ling largely denies that the term *ptōchoi* had an economic dimension. But while Schottroff and Stegemann's description may not be perfect, it is far more accurate than Ling's suggestion. I will expand on this below.

The next definition that Ling considers is Bruce Malina's 'social' definition of the poor. Malina argues that the poor are to be understood as those who, through some misfortune, have lost their social status. Thus Malina writes, 'the poor would not be a social class but a sort of revolving class of people who unfortunately could not maintain their inherited status.'<sup>363</sup> Malina reasons this by explaining that all societies are

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<sup>361</sup> Ling, *The Judaean Poor*, pp.98-145

<sup>362</sup> Luise Schottroff and Wolfgang Stegemann, *Jesus and the Hope of the Poor* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1986), p.16

<sup>363</sup> Malina, 'Wealth and Poverty', p.89

governed by one of four social institutions; politics, economics, kinship and religion. According to Malina, 'Biblical literature developed exclusively within the contexts of kinship and politics.'<sup>364</sup> Therefore, while in societies that are governed by the institution of economics 'the poor' are those who are materially deprived, and in societies that are governed by the institution of religion 'the poor' are those who are ignorant, in the New Testament world, because the culture of honour and shame is so paramount, the poor are those who cannot maintain their status. Malina hopelessly dismisses all the passages where the poor are not mentioned in relation to another group as unhelpful because 'we simply cannot get any idea of what the authors are referring to without reading our own ideas into their words.'<sup>365</sup>

The third study that Ling considers is by Paul Hollenbach who accepts much of Malina's argument but also incorporates an economic element into his definition, producing what Ling calls a 'socio-economic' description of the poor.<sup>366</sup> Hollenbach notes several limitations of Malina's view, maintaining that although the poor should be understood in terms of social status, there was also a more permanent, structurally oppressed poor, as well as the temporary class of the social poor. Firstly, Hollenbach notes that if the poor were simply those who failed to maintain their inherited status, then peasants who did maintain their status should be considered rich. The issue here is that in the New Testament, the rich are evidently those with material wealth, as we see repeatedly in the gospels.<sup>367</sup> Secondly, Hollenbach notes that it does not seem quite

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<sup>364</sup> Malina, 'Wealth and Poverty', p.90

<sup>365</sup> He lists these passages as Mt 19:21; 26:9, 11; Mk 10:21; 14:5, 7; Lk 18:22; Jn 12:5-8; 13:29; Rom 15:26; 2 Cor 6:10; 8:9; 9:9; and Gal 2:10. See Malina, 'Wealth and Poverty', p.88

<sup>366</sup> Paul Hollenbach, 'Defining the Poor Using Social Sciences' in *Society of Biblical Literature 1987 Seminar Papers 5-63* (Ed. K.H. Richards; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1987), pp.50-63

<sup>367</sup> See Mk 12:41; Lk 16:19; Mk 10:22/ Mt 19:22/Lk 18:23

right to call day labourers, landless peasants and beggars ‘rich’, simply because they have maintained their social standing and not dropped any lower, as Malina’s argument suggests. Using Luke 4:16-30 as a hermeneutical key, Hollenbach suggests that the poor are ‘defined’ as ‘captives, blind, and oppressed.’<sup>368</sup>

Malina and Hollenbach’s definitions are problematic, and Ling has criticised Malina’s work in particular at some length. Firstly, Ling criticises Malina’s assertion that kinship took primacy over all other institutions, highlighting Malina’s neglect of religion, for, as Ling puts it, first century Judea was ‘practically a Temple-state.’<sup>369</sup> Ling also objects to Malina’s subordination of economics to kinship concerns and his statements about the unimportance of economic goals to in the ancient world, noting the exploitative taxation policies of the Ptolemies, whose end was clearly economic. Ling then criticises Malina’s somewhat pessimistic neglect of linguistic collocation in favour of his focus on honour status, the importance of which Malina drastically overstates.<sup>370</sup> Finally, Ling strongly criticises Malina’s downplaying of the extent of material poverty in the New Testament world, which, as we have seen in chapter 1, is certainly not negligible. Malina in turn has responded to Ling’s monograph as a whole,<sup>371</sup> but Ling’s criticisms of Malina’s socially defined poor could not be fairer (and Malina’s response could scarcely be more unfair or unproductive). Malina’s views on the primacy of the institution of kinship and his downplaying of the role of religion and economy are extremely questionable, his writing-off of many of the New Testament references to the

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<sup>368</sup> Hollenbach, ‘Defining Rich and Poor’, p.60

<sup>369</sup> Ling, *The Judean Poor*, p.103

<sup>370</sup> On the tendency of overstating the role of honour and shame, see F. G. Downing, ‘“Honor” Among Exegetes’, *CBQ* 61, 1999, pp.53-73

<sup>371</sup> Bruce J. Malina, ‘Review of Timothy Ling, *The Judean Poor and the Fourth Gospel*’ *RBL* 04, 2007 <[http://www.bookreviews.org/pdf/5587\\_5883.pdf](http://www.bookreviews.org/pdf/5587_5883.pdf)> (14 June 2012)

poor is unhelpful, and his insistence on a narrow, social definition of the poor is blinkered and simply ignores the texts that clearly depict the poor in relation to material poverty. Furthermore, although Malina is right in emphasising the element of misfortune that accompanies the *ptōchoi*, there is nothing anywhere in the New Testament that suggests there is anything ‘temporary’ or ‘revolving’ about the *ptōchoi*.

Hollenbach’s argument mostly falls down in his adoption of Malina’s notion of the ‘temporary poor’; simply none of the New Testament texts that mention the *ptōchoi* suggest that there is anything temporary about them. Hollenbach’s argument that the poor in Luke 4 are ‘the more permanent structurally oppressed poor’ also has difficulties. To a greater or lesser extent, the whole of the Roman world besides the elite minority were exploited; slaves were, practically by definition, exploited, as were any landless farmers and agricultural day labourers who worked on *latifundia*; and slaves and landless agricultural labourers alone probably constituted over half of the population of the Greco-Roman world. It could easily be said that the majority of the inhabitants of the Greco-Roman world were structurally oppressed to a fairly large extent; but the term *ptōchos* in the New Testament does not appear to refer to such a vast number of people. *ptōchos* appears to refer to a marginal group and so Hollenbach’s definition, although a welcome move away from Malina’s, seems to be too broad.

However, it is Ling’s understanding of the *ptōchoi* that is perhaps the most problematic. Ling’s primary objection to all of the previous arguments is their neglect of the ‘religious’ dimension of the *ptōchoi*. Central to Ling’s thesis is that Judea was a distinct social world within the ancient Mediterranean in which a radical form of piety,

or ‘virtuoso religion’, such as that practised by the Essenes, was prominent.<sup>372</sup> Ling basically defines the *ptōchoi* as pious, voluntarily poor Judeans. He concludes that ‘Whilst they [the *ptōchoi*] may have been understood as socio-economic actors, they may more frequently have been understood as religious actors adopting a form of piety indigenous to Judaea.’<sup>373</sup> Additionally, these pious *ptōchoi* are associated with providing social care for those who are economically poor.<sup>374</sup> Ling argues his case by considering several New Testament passages and the way in which the *ptōchoi* are presented as religious actors therein. Firstly, Ling considers the poor widow at the Temple treasury in Jerusalem (Mk 12:42/Lk 21:1). Although Ling notes that the poor widow is contrasted with the rich (whom he acknowledges are characterised by their clothing, positions of honour and feasting), he argues that ‘this apparently economic contrast is not the whole picture.’<sup>375</sup> Ling highlights that the widow’s offering is presented as her ‘whole life’ (Mk 12:44/Lk 21:4), and the religious nature of this gift is allegedly underscored by the inclusion of *tou theou* in some textual variants. Ling argues that the way in which the poor widow gives her ‘whole life’ to God is a typical feature of the religious virtuoso.<sup>376</sup> However, Ling ignores the fact that widows generally appear in the bible as objects of charity or protection.<sup>377</sup> It is vaguely conceivable that the widow who gave her ‘whole life’ was described as *ptōchos* because

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<sup>372</sup> Ling, *The Judaean Poor*, p.132

<sup>373</sup> Ling, *The Judaean Poor*, p.145

<sup>374</sup> Ling, *The Judaean Poor*, p.134, 145

<sup>375</sup> Ling, *The Judaean Poor*, p.133

<sup>376</sup> Ling refers to Max Weber’s understanding of virtuoso religion, as revised by Hill and Silber. See M. Hill, *The Religious Order: A Study of Virtuoso Religion and its Legitimation in the Nineteenth-Century Church of England* (London: Heinemann, 1973) and I. Silber, *Virtuosity, Charisma, and Social Order: A Comparative Sociological Study of Monasticism in Theravada Buddhism and Medieval Catholicism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995)

<sup>377</sup> Eg. Ex 22:22; Deut 10:18, 14:29, 24:17; 24:19, 20, 21; 27:19; Job 31:16-18; Ps 68:5; 146:9; Is 1:17; Jer 7:6; 22:3; 49:11; Zech 7:10; Mal 3:5; Mk 12:40; Lk 20:47; Acts 6:1; 1 Tim 5:3; Jas 1:27

of her piety, but it is rather more likely that she was described as *ptōchos* because she, like most widows, was economically dependent on others in the community, and as her small monetary offering suggests, was materially and economically of limited means. This is forcefully confirmed by the way in which Mark and Luke frame the narrative in the context of the exploitation of widows (Mk 12:40/Lk 20:47) and the opulence and wealth of the temple (Lk 21:5).

Next Ling considers the *ptōchoi* in James. Ling notes that the poor in James are collocated with ‘dirty clothes’ (Jas 2:2) and, once again, contrasted with the rich. Ling suggests, however, that the contrast between the rich and the poor is in terms of their ‘religious social practice,’ where the rich are said to ‘blaspheme that noble name by which you are called’ (2:7) and the poor, by comparison, are due honour (2:6), and have been chosen by God ‘to be rich in faith and to be the heirs to the kingdom which he promised to those who love him’ (2:5).<sup>378</sup> The *ptōchoi* in James are also dissociated from the world (1:27 and 4:4) and associated with those who love God. Thus Ling argues that these *ptōchoi* are associated with piety, and a piety that involves social practice in the form of care for the widows and orphans (1:27). These features, Ling suggests, are typical of virtuoso religion. However, Ling ignores the dimension of exploitation and injustice that is so apparent in James. The context in which the *ptōchoi* are mentioned is one in which they are neglected within in the congregation (2:2-3), exploited in their workplace (2:6; 5:4), and denied justice in the courts (2:6). The wider context makes it plain that the *ptōchoi* in James are primarily socially and economically poor.

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<sup>378</sup> Ling, *The Judaean Poor*, pp.133-134

Ling's argument comes into serious trouble, once again, with his third example of the rich man and Lazarus. Ling understates the matter somewhat when he begins by noting, 'The association of pious commitment with the *ptōchoi* is less obvious in the 'collocation' at Luke 16:19-31.'<sup>379</sup> Because there is evidently no hint of religious piety in this parable, Ling is forced to turn his attention entirely away from the rich man and Lazarus, and toward the Lazarus of the fourth gospel. Ling suggests that it is notable that Lazarus was 'loved' by Jesus (Jn 11:5) and suggests that the intimacy between Jesus and Lazarus was suggestive of Lazarus' piety.<sup>380</sup> However, Lazarus' alleged piety is not clear in the Johannine account, let alone in Luke; and that Jesus 'loved' Lazarus clearly does not mean that Lazarus was pious; rather famously Jesus associated with 'sinners' and not the pious (Mk 2:16-17/Mt 9:11-12/Lk 5:30-31). Furthermore, it is not at all clear that Luke's Lazarus and John's Lazarus are the same character. It is something of a quandary that Luke chooses to name the character in Luke 16 'Lazarus'; Luke's naming of Lazarus may have been intended to be dignifying, for the poor man with a skin disease could hardly be elevated in the same manner if he remained nameless. This could also explain why Luke does not name the rich man; despite his honour and riches, Luke does not wish to dignify this damnable character by naming him. But regardless, Luke does not suggest that any personal relationship existed between Lazarus and Jesus. Even if we accept that Luke's Lazarus and John's Lazarus are the same, there is no suggestion whatsoever that Luke was trying to illustrate Lazarus' piety. Luke was solely concerned with emphasising Lazarus' thoroughly impoverished state, his hunger and his shame; the additional note that Lazarus allowed

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<sup>379</sup> Ling, *The Judaean Poor*, p.134

<sup>380</sup> Ling, *The Judaean Poor*, p.136

the dogs to lick his wounds confirms the lengths that Luke goes to secure the fact of Lazarus' humiliating poverty above all else.

Ling also struggles somewhat with the *ptōchoi* in Revelation 3:17. In this passage, the *ptōchoi* are collocated with the wretched, miserable, blind and naked. But Ling reasons that 'these intra-textual states do not expose the true nature of the *ptōchoi*'!<sup>381</sup> Because the expression in Revelation uses the language of poverty to comment on the quality of the particular group's religious social practice, Ling argues that it therefore reinforces his (already questionable) preceding readings, 'which underline the contested and profoundly religious character of this language.'<sup>382</sup>

Turning elsewhere in the New Testament, Ling seeks to find evidence for a link between the *ptōchoi* and piety in the Pauline corpus in Rom 15:26; 2 Cor 6:10; 8:2, 9; and Gal 2:10. In 2 Cor 6:10, Paul commends himself as 'poor and yet making many people rich; having nothing, and yet owning everything,' and in 2 Cor 8:9 Paul says of Jesus, 'although he was rich, he became poor for your sake, so that you should become rich through his poverty (*ptōcheia*)'. Once again, there is no way in which these two texts suggest the *ptōchoi* are to be generally understood as pious religious virtuosos. When Paul calls himself poor in 6:10, he is referring to a lifestyle in which he is repeatedly attacked, tortured, imprisoned, betrayed, hungry, thirsty and even naked (Cf. 2 Cor 11:24-28). Similarly, when Paul writes of Jesus' poverty, he is referring to Jesus' lowliness and humiliation that he allowed himself to be abandoned, betrayed and crucified. Paul's description of Jesus as *ptōchoi* may also point towards the humiliation that it meant for Jesus to experience a degrading death, connotations derived from the

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<sup>381</sup> Ling, *The Judaean Poor*, p.136

<sup>382</sup> Ling, *The Judaean Poor*, p.136-137



Hebrew *'ani* and *'anaw*, with which Paul would have been amply familiar. The only two further examples that Ling details are references to Paul's collection for the Jerusalem church, in Gal 2:10 where Paul states that the 'Council of Jerusalem' placed an obligation upon him to 'remember the poor', and Rom 15:26 where Paul affirms the gifts of Macedonia and Achaia 'for the poor among the saints at Jerusalem'. Ling argues that 'poor' was a self-designating term used by the Jerusalem church who were 'a group who took on particular form of religious social practice, which resonates with prominent elements of the virtuoso piety of the Essenes.'<sup>383</sup> In other words, the Council of Jerusalem were talking about themselves in the third person when they were asking Paul to remember the poor; another argument which promptly falls flat.

In the remaining references to the *ptōchoi* in the New Testament they appear exclusively in relation to almsgiving; that is, as recipients of economic support. Although Ling is quite aware of this, noting 'There are nonetheless references to the *ptōchoi* that do not necessarily imply their piety, the 'poor' as recipients of alms',<sup>384</sup> Ling casually dismisses this fact by explaining 'what these references demonstrate is a religious social practice of radical discipleship: the surrender of property, sharing a common purse, and giving alms. They illustrate the practice of the pious poor caring for the economic poor.'<sup>385</sup>

A 'religious' dimension may occasionally be present when the *ptōchoi* are mentioned in New Testament texts; this is not surprising since, as Ling highlights, Judea was a profoundly 'religious' place generally, and the Hebrew *'ani* had occasional 'religious' connotations. But there are very few instances where there is even a mild suggestion

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<sup>383</sup> Ling, *The Judaean Poor*, p.140

<sup>384</sup> Ling, *The Judaean Poor*, p.145

<sup>385</sup> Ling, *The Judaean Poor*, p.145

that the *ptōchoi* are pious; most of the time, the *ptōchoi* are passive recipients. Of the 35 occurrences of *ptōchoi* in the New Testament, in 17 of these examples the *ptōchoi* explicitly appear as recipients of alms, prayer, or help,<sup>386</sup> and in 3 more examples they are recipients of ‘good news’.<sup>387</sup> Of the remaining 15 appearances of the *ptōchoi*, they are contrasted with the rich in 8 cases,<sup>388</sup> implying their economic poverty. After this, all we are left with is 2 Cor 8:9, ‘for your sake he became poor’, Matthew’s ‘blessed are the poor in spirit’ (5:3), Paul’s obligation to ‘remember the poor’ (Gal 2:10), Jesus’ statement ‘the poor you will always have’ (Mt 26:11/Mk 14:7/Jn 12:8) and Rev 3:17 in which the poor are listed amongst the wretched, pitiful, blind and naked. This clearly highlights the difficulties with Ling’s conclusion that the *ptōchoi* may have been less frequently understood as socio-economic actors and ‘more frequently understood as religious actors adopting a form of piety indigenous to Judaea.’<sup>389</sup> On the contrary, the *ptōchoi* are almost always presented in social and economic terms.

While Ling fervently criticises Schottroff and Stegemann, Malina, and Hollenbach for neglecting the ‘religious’ dimension of the *ptōchoi*, Ling positions himself as one in a long history of theologians who have turned biblical texts that are manifestly concerned with poverty and material suffering into something else. Susan Holman notes:

Many studies on Christianity in late antiquity consider the body in the social and religious context of all sorts of renunciation: voluntary fasting, ascetic eating, religious celibacy, and rigorous monastic exercises. For many people in the

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<sup>386</sup> Mt 12:42/Mk 10:21/Lk 18:22; Mk 29:9/Mk 14:5/Jn 12:5; Lk 11:41; 12:43; 14:13; Jn 13:29; Acts 9:36; 10:5, 31; 24:17; Rom 15:26; 1 Cor 13:3; 2 Cor 9:9

<sup>387</sup> Mt 11:5/Lk 4:18; 7:22

<sup>388</sup> Mk 12:42/Lk 21:2; Lk 6:20; 2 Cor 6:10; 8:9; Jas 2:2-3, 5, 6; Rev 13:16

<sup>389</sup> Ling, *The Judaean Poor*, p.145

ancient world, however, such choice was a luxury. The involuntary poor have often been neglected in favor of more ‘theological’ themes.<sup>390</sup>

Hobbs, Malina, and Ling are just three examples of a significant tendency in Western biblical scholarship to ‘define poverty out of existence’.<sup>391</sup> Although the term is occasionally used metaphorically, the vast majority of the time ‘the poor’ in both the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament are the materially and economically destitute, whose poverty was a physical and lived experience.

### **The Good News to the Poor in Luke’s Gospel**

Despite the attempts of some scholars to redefine poverty in spiritual or social terms, it is clear that in both the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament, the various terms used to denote poverty almost always refer to material poverty. This is equally the case in Luke’s Gospel. The poor are mentioned in Luke’s Gospel on 8 separate occasions,<sup>392</sup> and each time the context implies economic destitution. The meaning of the phrase ‘good news to the poor’, however, is peculiar to Luke, and requires some further examination.

As Craig de Vos notes, precisely what form the ‘good news to the poor’ was intended to take by Luke is not immediately clear. de Vos suggests that it was not simply the reversal of fortunes, because, he argues, in the parable of the rich man and Lazarus, there is no clear reversal of fortunes, for Lazarus does not explicitly change

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<sup>390</sup> Holman, *The Hungry are Dying*, p.vii

<sup>391</sup> Friesen, ‘Poverty in Pauline Studies’, p.332

<sup>392</sup> Lk 4:18; 6:20; 7:22; 14:13, 21; 16:20, 22; 18:22; 19:8; 21:2, 3

from being ‘shabbily and poorly dressed, hungry and ill’,<sup>393</sup> to being well dressed, fed and healthy. de Vos is right that Lazarus’ consolation does not seem to be presented in explicitly material terms; Lazarus is simply ‘comforted’ at Abraham’s bosom, and there is no mention of Lazarus now being lavishly dressed, or feasting. There may be some sort of reversal for the rich man, however, for he is experiencing torment rather than any sort of pleasure, and is subjected to physical pain, without even having access to material necessities like water. The absence of any clear reversal of fortunes here could be compared, however, with the story of the rich young ruler. Although in Luke, Jesus states, ‘there is no man who has left house or wife or brothers or parents or children, for the sake of the kingdom of God, who will not receive manifold more in this time, and in the age to come eternal life’ (Lk 18:29b-30), in Mark and Matthew, there is seemingly a more material dimension to the reward in heaven, with ‘lands’ also listed amongst ‘houses’ and family, which will be bestowed upon the person who gives them up for the kingdom (Mk 10:30, Mt 19:29). Nonetheless, there is no strong indication that ‘good news for the poor’ entails their becoming rich.

Throughout the earliest sources, Jesus appears to have been critical of the practice of almsgiving. In Matthew, Jesus condemned those who sounded ‘trumpets’ when they gave to charity, so that they would be admired by those around them (Mt 6:2). In the Gospel of Thomas, this sentiment is apparently taken even further: ‘if you give alms, you will do harm to your inner spirits’ (*Thom* 14); this saying suggesting that almsgiving in fact had a corrupting effect on the giver. In Luke Jesus tells a Pharisee to give for alms ‘those things which are within’ (Lk 11:41), and in Mark Jesus criticises

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<sup>393</sup> Craig S. de Vos, ‘The Meaning of the “Good News to the Poor” in Luke’s Gospel: The Parable of Lazarus and the Rich-Man as a Test Case’ in *In Other Words: Essays on Social Science Methods & the New Testament in Honor of Jerome H. Neyrey* (eds. Anselm C. Hagedorn, Zeba A. Crook, and Eric Stewart; Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2007), pp.67-86 (76)

the practice of corban (Mk 7:11). Perhaps the ultimate example of Jesus' negative attitude towards almsgiving is when Jesus challenges the disciples for suggesting that the money that a woman spent to anoint him would have been better spent on the poor, a notion which Jesus entirely dismisses (Mk 14:3-9; Jn 12:3-8). Yet another example might be Jesus' comments on the widow's offering at the temple. As we saw in chapter 2, although Western theologians have frequently described the widow's giving as exemplary, Jesus says nothing positive about the woman's action; unless we assume that he somewhat sadistically saw her giving all she had to live on as a good thing, a sentiment which is very unlikely considering that Jesus later describes the temple as a den of robbers. Jesus does recommend giving to the poor on occasion. When he commends it, however, he requires the selling of a person's possessions, for instance in Jesus' instructions to his disciples (Lk 12:33), and his instruction to the so-called rich young ruler. Numerous texts across all four gospels suggest that Jesus was not an advocate of giving to the poor, unless a person was first willing to address the problem of their own personal wealth. The good news for the poor that Luke's Jesus represents is therefore seemingly not charity. Jesus was not a generous benefactor, only a few texts suggest that he advocated giving to the poor, and many more suggest that he did not advocate giving to the poor.

Luke's good news for the poor seems to be integrally linked to the destiny of the rich. Not long after Jesus' announcement in the Nazareth synagogue, he says to his disciples, 'Blessed are you poor, for yours is the kingdom of God' (6:20), and then, 'woe to you that are rich, for you have received your consolation' (6:24). Jesus teaches that the poor and maimed and blind and lame shall be the ones present at the messianic banquet (14:21), and that the poor man Lazarus will be comforted, while the rich man suffers torment (16:19-31). Jesus preaches that it will be hard for those with riches to

enter the kingdom of Heaven (18:24), and he mocks a rich man who is killed (12:16-20). Luke also frames Jesus' good news to the poor in Mary's song, stating that God: 'has put down the mighty from their thrones, and exalted those of low degree; he has filled the hungry with good things, and the rich he has sent away empty' (1:52-53). The good news for the poor is certainly not charity, as we have seen above; and neither is it the poor becoming rich, although material provisions for the poor are discussed in certain texts (1:52-53); one of the central factors, however, is the demise of the rich, of those who may tithe, but continue to neglect justice provoke Jesus' anger (Lk 11:42; Mt 23:23).

### **The Captives**

John Roth's study demonstrates that in the Hebrew Bible and Septuagint various disadvantaged or oppressed groups are often linked together in a list form.<sup>394</sup> In Isaiah 58:6-7 it is the shattered, the hungry, the poor, and the naked; in Job 29:12-17 it is the poor, orphans, widows, the blind, the lame, and the weak or powerless; in Psalm 145:7-9 it is the shackled, the broken down, the blind, the righteous, the sojourner, the orphan, and the widow; in Isaiah 29:18-20 it is the deaf mute, the blind, the poor, and those without hope; in Isaiah 35:4-6 it is the blind, the deaf mute, the lame, and the dumb in; in Isaiah 42:6-7 it is the blind, those who are bound, and those who are imprisoned, and so on. Luke's choice of the specific groups the poor, the blind, the captive and the oppressed may therefore not be of *particular* significance. The terms seem to point to 'the neglected mass of humanity... They have no personality. They are anonymous.

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<sup>394</sup> S. John Roth, *The Blind, the Lame, and the Poor: Character Types in Luke-Acts* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1997), p.140

They do not act upon others; rather, they are acted upon in the course of human events.<sup>395</sup> Nonetheless, a brief examination of the terms is due. And as will become evident, the poor, the captive, the blind, and the oppressed were closely related, and not only as a literary construct as Roth suggests, but as people in the ancient world of the New Testament.

The sort of captive that Luke is referring to is contested. It is often suggested that captivity might refer to debt, for many have argued that the phrase about ‘the acceptable year of the Lord’ invokes the idea of the Jubilee year (Cf. Lev 25).<sup>396</sup> John Howard Yoder, for example, has argued that Jesus was heralding a ‘literal’ Jubilee year with all its social and economic stipulations.<sup>397</sup> Others have argued that this text functioned to herald an ‘eschatological Jubilee’ that brought an ‘eschatological redemption rather than a social and political reform’.<sup>398</sup> Michael Prior notes, however, that it remains to be proven that the ‘acceptable year’ of Isaiah 61 should in fact be understood as a reference to any sort of Jubilee year.<sup>399</sup> The context of Isaiah 61, Prior notes, is the return to a devastated Jerusalem in 538 after the Babylonian exile. And furthermore, verse 2b proclaims ‘the day of vengeance of our God’, a feature notably absent from the concept of the Jubilee year.

Another possible way of understanding captivity is in the context of widespread slavery. As we have seen in chapter 1, slavery was widespread in Roman Palestine, as it

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<sup>395</sup> Roth, *The Blind*, p.140

<sup>396</sup> James A. Sanders, ‘Sins, Debts, and Jubilee Release’ in *Luke and Scripture: The Function of Sacred Tradition in Luke-Acts* (eds. Craig A. Evans and James A. Sanders; Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), pp.84-92 (91)

<sup>397</sup> J.H. Yoder, *The Politics of Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1972), pp.34-77

<sup>398</sup> Charles A. Kimball, *Jesus’ Exposition of the Old Testament in Luke’s Gospel* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1994), p.104

<sup>399</sup> Prior, *Jesus the Liberator*, p.139

was throughout the ancient Mediterranean world. As we have seen, the primary way of procuring slaves in the ancient world was through military conquest. In military conquests, as well as the plundering of goods, people would be taken as prisoners of war and enslaved by the victor (Cf. 1 Sam 4:9; 1 Kgs 9:20-21). This was not an unfamiliar concept in first century Palestine; slavery was used as a punishment for Jewish uprisings (*Bell* 2.5.1, 68; *Ant* 17.10.9), and Simon Bar-Giora, not long after Jesus, proclaimed the emancipation of slaves during the Jewish war (*BJ* 4.508). The Greek term *aichmalōtois* ('captive') that appears only once in the New Testament, here in Luke 4:18, appears some 18 times in the LXX; and nearly every time it appears in the LXX it is in the context of foreign domination.<sup>400</sup> The captivity denoted by *aichmalōtois* may therefore be captivity to foreign powers, almost inevitably resulting in enslavement. The release of captives that is in view in this passage may thus refer to the release of slaves, particularly slaves who are prisoners of war.

Such an interpretation might also be supported by Jesus' teachings on authority which are consistent across the synoptic gospels. In each of the synoptic gospels we find the saying: 'You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great men exercise authority over them. It shall not be so among you; but whoever would be great among you would be your servant, and whoever would be first among you must be your slave' (Mk 10:42-44/Mt 20:25-27; Lk 22:25-27). In Matthew we also have the saying: 'but you are not to be called rabbi, for you have one teacher, and you are all brethren. And call no man your father on earth, for you have one Father, who is in heaven. Neither be called masters, for you have one master, the Christ' (Mt 23:8-10). In this saying, the only permitted figures of authority are the 'Heavenly Father' and 'the Christ'; although the latter saying notably conflicts with Jesus' saying in Mark and Luke

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<sup>400</sup> 1 Mac 2:9; Num 21:29; Is 5:3, 14:2, 23:1, 61:1; EpJer 1:1; Est 2:6; Am 7:11, 17; Na 3:10



that ‘no one is good but God alone’ (Mk 10:18/Lk 18:19). While the practice of enslaving other nations is assumed throughout the Hebrew Bible, and indeed condoned by Yahweh,<sup>401</sup> slavery was actively opposed by certain Jews. The Essenes were one such sizeable group who opposed slavery (*Quod Omnis Probus Liber Sit* 12.79), and Simon Bar-Giora was another vocal spokesperson. It is possible that Jesus’ proclamation of the release of captives should be understood in this light.

Relatedly, prisoners may also have been understood as those that are amongst the poorest, as is suggested in Matthew’s parable of the sheep and the goats. The persecution and imprisonment of followers of Jesus was, according to Luke, forewarned by Jesus (Lk 21:12), and in the New Testament, being put in prison generally meant that a person was doing the right thing; if the ‘heroes’ of the New Testament were not martyred (like Stephen, or, of course, Jesus), then they were put in prison at the very least. Prison was, at different points, the residence of John the Baptist (Mk 1:14, Lk 3:20, Mt 4:12), Paul and Silas (Acts 16:23), and Peter (Acts 12:5). Similarly, insurrectionists who were put in prison, such as Jesus Barabbas, apparently received public support (Mk 15:7, Mt 27:21, Lk 23:19, 25). While the freedom of captives announced by Jesus in the Nazareth synagogue may have referred to a different sort of prisoner, prisoners who were locked up by the imperial authorities faced poverty in a similar measure. Two sorts of political prisoners therefore – both prisoners of war forced into slavery, and prisoners associated with the early Jesus movement – are potentially implied by ‘the captive’.

### **The Blind**

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<sup>401</sup> Lev 25:44

In Luke's Gospel, there is one specific account of Jesus healing a blind man (18:35-43), and another occasion when Luke states that 'on many who were blind he bestowed sight' (7:21). When Luke's Jesus speaks of recovery of sight to the blind it seems, therefore, that Luke had the healing of physical blindness in mind. For Luke, the recovery of sight to the blind is, to an extent, just one example of a healing miracle that Jesus might perform.<sup>402</sup> Therefore, when Luke associates Jesus with Isaiah 61, he may not be saying that Jesus healed only the blind; for Luke, the 'recovering of sight to the blind' reference may have pointed to the general phenomenon of Jesus' healing miracles, which Luke describes repeatedly. Blindness may have simply been used as the most common of a number of disabilities and deformities in the ancient world, for elsewhere, Luke presents Jesus as performing miraculous healings of a number of disabilities and deformities.

The percentage of the population who were deformed or disabled in the ancient world was much higher than most places in the world today, largely due to advancements in modern medicine that mean that deformities and disabilities can be corrected or cured. The most common physical handicap mentioned in the all of the gospels, and in Greek literature, is blindness. Nicole Kelly suggests that accidental or purposeful damage (cf. Mt 5:38-39), battle, contagious disease, heredity, vitamin-A deficiency, and old age were amongst the causes. Galen lists over one hundred different

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<sup>402</sup> As Roth argues, the blind are one of many 'character types' who frequently appear in lists in the Hebrew Bible, and in the gospels. Elsewhere in Luke the blind appear in lists with the lame, lepers, the deaf, the dead, and the poor (7:22), with the poor, the maimed, and the lame (14:13, 21), and with those who suffer from diseases, plagues and evil spirits (7:21)

eye pathologies (*On Vision* 12.766-77).<sup>403</sup> Blindness, both figurative and literal, is mentioned extremely frequently in the gospels.<sup>404</sup>

Beside blindness there were other common deformities and disabilities in the ancient Mediterranean world, many of which we encounter in the gospels. Skin diseases were prevalent,<sup>405</sup> and people suffering from such diseases were often outcast from society, living in colonies (Cf. Lk 17:11-18), and having to constantly announce their state of ritual uncleanness (Cf. Lev 13:45). Stevan Davies comments that the skin diseases that are frequently mentioned in the gospels are not ‘leprosy’ as the term is usually translated. Davies argues that the skin disease most frequently referred to in the Hebrew Bible is psoriasis, which was characterised by flaking skin (white flakes that fall ‘like snow’). The skin disease most prevalent in the New Testament period, however, Davies suggests was ‘Hansen’s disease’, generally referred to as *elephas* or *elephantiasis*. Davies suggests that this disease appeared in the Mediterranean area not long before the time of Jesus, when it was carried by returning troops after the time of Alexander the Great, perhaps no sooner than 62 B.C.E.<sup>406</sup> Besides blindness and skin diseases, in the gospels we encounter paralytics,<sup>407</sup> a man with a shrivelled hand,<sup>408</sup> a

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<sup>403</sup> Nicole Kelly, ‘Deformity and Disability in Greece and Rome’ in *This Abled Body: Rethinking Disabilities in Biblical Studies*, (eds. Hector Avalos, Sarah J. Melcher and Jeremy Schipper; Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2007), pp.31-45 (42)

<sup>404</sup> Mt 9:27-8; 11:5; 12:22; 15:14, 30, 31; 20:30; 21:14; 23:16, 19, 24, 26; Mk 8:22, 23; 10:46-51; Lk 4:18; 6:39; 7:21; 14:13; 18:35; Jn 5:3; 9:1-41; 10:21; 12:40

<sup>405</sup> Cf. Mt 8:1-3; 10:8; 11:5; Mk 1:40-42; Lk 5:12-13; 7:22

<sup>406</sup> Stevan L. Davies, *Jesus the Healer: Possession, Trance, and the Origins of Christianity* (London: SCM Press Ltd, 1995), p.68

<sup>407</sup> Mt 9:1-6/Mk 2:1-10/Lk 5:17-22

<sup>408</sup> Mt 12:10-13/Mk 3:1-5/Lk 6:6-10

child who suffers from fits,<sup>409</sup> a woman with constant bleeding,<sup>410</sup> and a man with a severe mental disorder,<sup>411</sup> amongst others.

Kelly highlights that the practice of exposure for children who were born with deformities was widely encouraged in Greek and Roman literature, citing Plato (*Republic* 460c), Aristotle (*Politics* 1335b), Plutarch (*Lycurgus* 16.1) and Soranus (*Gynecology* 2.10) all of whom advocate the practice. Cicero refers to a 5<sup>th</sup> century CE Roman Law that makes the killing of a deformed child a requirement (*Laws* 3.19). Kelly notes however, that we have no evidence to show that parents who did not kill their child were ever prosecuted. There is also evidence that congenitally abnormal infants were raised, such as the emperor Claudius (Suetonius, *Claudius* 3.2) and Qunitus Pedius (Pliny, *Natural History* 35.21).<sup>412</sup> On the other hand, while some deformed children may have been exposed, Stegemann notes the practice of deliberately maiming abandoned infants and of subsequently exploiting them as beggars, a procedure gruesomely described by Seneca (*Controversies* 10:4).<sup>413</sup>

Kelly finds that in Greek literature the deformed and disabled were often subjects of ridicule. Hephaestus, a deity with crippled legs, is constantly the subject of mockery. Cicero states that ‘in deformity there and bodily disfigurement there is good material for making jokes’ (*On Oratory* 2.239). Greek vase paintings depict hunchbacks, cripples, dwarfs and obese women performing as entertainers, and Horace writes of two deformed men trading insults for the entertainment of onlookers (*Sat.*

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<sup>409</sup> Mt 17:14-18/Mk 9:14-30; Lk 9:37-42

<sup>410</sup> Mt 9:20-22/Mk 5:25-29/Lk 8:43-44

<sup>411</sup> Mk 5:2-10/Lk 8:27-31

<sup>412</sup> Kelly, ‘Deformity and Disability’, pp.36-9

<sup>413</sup> Stegemann, *The Gospel and the Poor*, p.16

1.5.50-70). Jesus' metaphor of the blind leading the blind and falling into a ditch (Mt 15:14/Lk 6:39) perhaps captures something of the humour that was often found at the expense of the disabled. In the Hebrew Bible, as well as the prohibitions to sacrifice deformed animals (Lev 22:21; Num 19:2; Mal 1:14), there is legislation to restrict the cultic activities of priests with disabilities. In Leviticus, God says to Moses:

No one of your offspring throughout their generations who has a blemish may approach to offer the food of his God. For no one who has a blemish shall draw near, one who is blind or lame, or one who has a mutilated face or a limb too long, or one who has a broken foot, or a hunchback, or a dwarf, or a man with a blemish in his eyes, or an itching disease or scabs or crushed testicles... He shall not come near the curtain or approach the altar, because he has blemish, that he may not profane my sanctuaries... (21:17-20, 23a)

Mephibosheth, Jonathan's son who had crippled feet, apparently regarded himself as a 'dead dog' (2 Sam 9:8).<sup>414</sup>

Greek sources suggest that deformed and disabled people may have had various occupations. As well as being entertainers, some, like the deity Hephaestus, who was a blacksmith, were skilled artisans. Alciphron writes of a tailor who limped (*Letters of Farmers* 24.1) and Aristophanes writes of a lame peddler (*Anagyryus* frag.57). Disabled people could work in the military, and blind people often appeared as prophets, poets and musicians (Dio Chysostom *Or.* 36.10-11; Homer *Od.* 8.62-70).<sup>415</sup> However, because agrarian economies depended on agriculture, Robin Osborne suggests that it would have been difficult for the disabled to find work, and as a result, they effectively lived in constant, structural poverty. Osborne does not comment on the possibility of

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<sup>414</sup> On disabilities in the Hebrew bible, see Saul M. Olyan, *Disability in the Hebrew Bible: Interpreting Mental and Physical Difficulties* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008) and Jeremy Schipper, *Disability Studies and the Hebrew Bible: Figuring Mephibosheth in the David Story* (London: T&T Clark, 2006)

<sup>415</sup> Kelly, 'Deformity and Disability', pp.40-41

employment for the disabled; rather, Osborne claims that the disabled 'relied on the charity of their families, their friends, and ultimately of strangers. If they exhausted local charity and moved away to seek alms from larger pools of beneficence they risked finding themselves isolated from all with whom they had affective bonds.'<sup>416</sup> This coheres with the fact that so many of the deformed and the disabled that we encounter in the New Testament are found begging; Blind Bartimaeus was 'sitting by the roadside begging' (Mk 10:46), the man born blind in John was recognised by his neighbours and others that saw him who asked 'isn't this the same man who used to sit and beg?' (Jn 9:8), and the man who Peter healed outside the temple in Acts asked for alms (Acts 3:2), and was also recognised by people who had seen him begging (Acts 3:10).

In the New Testament, deformed and disabled characters appear in a range of settings. Some are found, on the one extreme, ostracised from the community, such as those in leper colonies (Lk 17:11-18), or the Gerasene demoniac (Mk 5:2-10/Lk 8:27-31). Others, on the other extreme, appear in public places like Luke's Lazarus (Lk 16:20), the 'great number of disabled people' at the pool at Bethesda (Jn 5:1-3) or the crippled beggar outside the temple gate that Peter heals (Acts 3:2). Others, such as Simon the Leper, who apparently had his own home (Mt 26:6/Mk 14:3), and John's Lazarus (Jn 11:1), notably appear at Bethany, which, as Brian Capper argues, may have been the location of a prominent Essene poorhouse.<sup>417</sup> The disabled were not necessarily abandoned. The Gerasene demoniac and leper colonies were evidently ostracised, but the synoptic gospels all attest to a paralytic who was assisted by his friends, John's man born blind seemingly had some relationship with his parents (Jn 9:1-34), and the child who suffered from fits was cared for by his parents (Mt 17:14-

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<sup>416</sup> Osborne, 'Roman Poverty in Context', pp.5-6

<sup>417</sup> Capper, 'Essene Community Houses', p.496-497

18/Mk 9:14-30; Lk 9:37-42). However, having family did not mean that a disabled person was exempt from begging. Bartimaeus is identified by Mark as ‘the son of Timaeus’, and the parents of the man born blind in John are also mentioned; yet these characters still appear as beggars. Craig de Vos argues that being poor necessarily entails the absence of a kinship network,<sup>418</sup> but Bartimaeus and the man born blind in John’s Gospel seem to demonstrate that a person could be part of a kinship network and still have to beg.

Many of the deformed and disabled were dependent on the help of others, and many had to resort to begging, despite the support that they received from friends or family. The blind, the lame, the deaf, the crippled and those with skin diseases were considered socially inferior, and their disabilities often meant that it was harder to find work, meaning that material and economic poverty would follow. Amongst the *ptōchoi*, the permanently deformed and disabled were invariably of low social standing and experienced constant economic hardship. Luke’s presentation of Jesus as one who healed the blind (and other deformed and disabled characters) thus paints Jesus as a character who could radically transform a person’s life through miraculous healings.

It is also notable here that, throughout the synoptic gospels, Jesus *only* healed characters in a socially or economically disadvantaged position.<sup>419</sup> In the synoptic gospels, every character that is healed is disabled or deformed, a widow, a captive, or a combination of these. Jesus’ heals a widow’s son, rescuing the widow from inevitable

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<sup>418</sup> de Vos, ‘The Meaning of “Good News to the Poor”’, p.74

<sup>419</sup> Here I make no distinction between healings and exorcisms for no such distinction existed in the ancient world: ‘Exorcism is rooted in the sociocultural conviction that illness is caused by demons and is played out in socially conventional patterns of demonic behaviour.’ See Wayne G. Rollins, ‘Jesus and Miracles in Historical, Biblical, and Psychological Perspective’ in *Miracles: God, Science, and Psychology in the Paranormal (Religious and Spiritual Events, Vol. 1)*; ed. J. Harold Ellens; Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2008), pp.36-56 (45), see also Richard H. Bell, *Deliver Us from Evil* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2007), pp.66-71

poverty (Lk 7:12-15); Jesus' heals various lepers (Lk 17:12-14, Mt 8:2-4); Jesus' heals a paralytic rendering him capable of work and releasing him from an almost certain future of beggary (Mk 2:3-11/Lk 5:18-25), and also heals a paralytic in John's Gospel (Jn 5:2-9); Jesus heals a man in the synagogue with a crippled hand (Mk 3:1-5/Mt 12:10-13); Jesus' heals a blind beggar near Jericho (Lk 18:35-43), a man-born-blind in John's Gospel (Jn 9:1-7), and a blind and dumb demoniac in Matthew (Mt 8:14-15), releasing them from the need to beg; as with the blind and the lame that Jesus heals in the Jerusalem temple (Mt 21:14), and the lame, the maimed, the blind and the dumb who were healed by the Sea of Galilee (Mt 15:30-31); Jesus heals a woman who had been bleeding for 12 years, ending years of suffering, ritual uncleanness and social exclusion (Mk 5:25-34); and Jesus heals another woman who had been crippled for 18 years (Lk 13:10-17); Jesus heals the slave Malchus (Lk 22:50-51) (who is only actually healed in Luke and not in Mark, Matthew or John),<sup>420</sup> and a centurion's slave (Lk 7:2-10/Mt 8:6-13);<sup>421</sup> and Jesus heals a deaf and mute boy (Mk 9:17-27). Furthermore, we have the Syrophenician woman whose daughter is healed. We may assume the Syrophenician woman is a widow as there would be absolutely no other circumstances under which a woman would approach a man – especially a stranger – in the ancient Mediterranean world.<sup>422</sup> Both Matthew and Mark portray her 'leastness' in the strongest terms.<sup>423</sup> There is also the healing of Peter's mother-in-law, who, in the context of all

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<sup>420</sup> Cf. Mk 14:47, Mt 26:51, Jn 18:10-11

<sup>421</sup> Although in a later parallel in Jn 4:46-54 the servant becomes a 'son'. The relationship between healing and the poor is thus not so concrete in John's Gospel

<sup>422</sup> See Downing, 'The Woman from Syrophenicia', pp.133-134

<sup>423</sup> See David Rhoads, 'Jesus and the Syrophenician Woman in Mark: A Narrative-Critical Study', *JAAR* 62.2, 1994, pp.343-375 (366-367)



these other stories we may also assume to be a widow (Mt 8:14-15).<sup>424</sup> In this manifestation of ‘good news’ to the poor, good news came in the form of physical healings which had transformative social and economic consequences for the subject who was healed, invariably signifying the end of an incapacitating or debilitating illness, with the hope of the possibility of finding work, and a way out of poverty and beggary.<sup>425</sup>

### The Oppressed

The final term to consider here is the oppressed (*tethrausmenous*), whom according to the text in Luke 4:19 will be ‘set at liberty’. The term that Luke uses notably differs from the one used in Isaiah 61:1 in the LXX, *anablephon*, ‘the bound’ – which possibly has a clearer semantic connection with *aichmalōtois*, ‘the captive’ – to *tethrausmenous*, ‘the ones having been shivered’. The term that Luke uses here is broad and abstract, and does not refer to a specific oppressed group.

The vagueness of the term that Luke uses here possibly contributes to the usefulness of Jesus for liberation theology. Presumably, few would contend that Jesus addressed all imaginable forms of oppression; for example, as we have seen above and in chapter 2, Jesus regurgitated the hegemonic discourse about the inevitability of poverty (Dt 15:11; Mk 14:7; Jn 12:8). The claim of Luke’s Jesus ‘to set at liberty those

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<sup>424</sup> I exclude the non-specific healing/exorcism accounts like Mk 1:34, 3:10, 6:13; Lk 7:21, 4:40; Mt 4:24, 8:16, 14:14, 35-36, 9:35, and the ‘dead’ girl in Mark which lacks the verb to heal (*therapeusei*) and whom Jesus explicitly says is only sleeping (Mk 7:39-42)

<sup>425</sup> On this see also Eric Sorensen, *Possession and Exorcism in the New Testament and Early Christianity* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2002), p.127. Howard Clark Kee sees healings and exorcisms similarly as a way of allowing individuals to be reintegrated, although, problematically, he views reintegration in terms of Jewish rules of separation. See. Howard Clark Kee, *Medicine, Miracle and Magic in New Testament Times* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), pp.78-79

who are oppressed', nonetheless, has no doubt served a number of agendas within liberation theology. Here, however, we are concerned with which specific oppressed groups – besides the poor, the captives, and the blind – that the Jesus may have interacted with in his particular time and place. There are at least two further groups who might obviously fall into the category of oppressed, and who may have been in mind for Luke. One such group is widows, whom Luke explicitly mentions or alludes to on several occasions (see below). Although numerous legal texts purport to defend the rights of widows, it is clear that widows under normal conditions remained permanently at the lowest echelons of society. A widow's plight was that, as a woman, she was not entitled to an inheritance, and as a woman, she was not generally permitted to remarry. It is notable that the Torah prescriptions against violating widows rights do not enforce the law with any physical material sanctions, but only the threat of divine intervention that will kill the man who violates a widow (Ex 22:24); As Sneed notes, such 'laws' are might more accurately be called 'mores' as they have no enforceable consequences.<sup>426</sup> The situation of a widow thus remained one of vulnerability and extremely low social status, apparently a fitting metaphor to describe Zion's abandonment during the exile (Thr 5:2-3; Is 54:5).<sup>427</sup> Almost every time widows appear in the Hebrew Bible it is in relation to the way in which they are oppressed,<sup>428</sup> or reflects their need for charity and protection, which usually is said to be provided by Yahweh rather than any human agent;<sup>429</sup> on the other hand, even Yahweh's concern for the widow is proven somewhat

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<sup>426</sup> Sneed, 'Israelite Concern for the Alien, Orphan, and Widow', p.502

<sup>427</sup> Pnina Galpaz-Feller, 'The Widow in the Bible and in Ancient Egypt', ZAW 120, 2008, pp.231-253 (232)

<sup>428</sup> Ex 22:22; Deut 24:17, 27:19; Job 24:3, 21; Ps 94:6; Is 10:2; Zech 7:10; Mal 3:5

<sup>429</sup> Deut 10:18, 24:19-21, 26:12-13; Ps 68:5, 146:9

inconsistent as there are instances when Yahweh increases the number of widows in a place as a punishment,<sup>430</sup> or deliberately withholds compassion from them.<sup>431</sup>

In the New Testament period, the situation was evidently unchanged. In Mark and Luke Jesus charges the scribes of ‘devouring widow’s houses’ (Mk 12:40, Lk 20:46-47), and the parable of the persistent widow suggests the difficulties that widows faced in trying to procure a fair hearing in court (Lk 18:2-5). In Acts 6:1 the Hellenists complain that the Hebrews have been neglecting their widows. The Acts of John shows a similar situation, where on hearing the news that many elderly Christian women in Ephesus were of poor health John kept silent for a while, rubbed his face, and then rebuked the slackness of the people of Ephesus, before claiming that Jesus has given him a silent command to send for the old women who are sick and heal them (A. Jn. 30).<sup>432</sup> While the writer of 1 Timothy encourages Timothy to ‘honour widows who are real widows’ (1 Tim 5:3), he discriminates against young widows because they may wish to remarry at some point, which was, of course, unacceptable. Furthermore, the writer takes the opportunity to state that all such widows ‘learn to be idlers, gadding about from house to house, and not only idlers but gossips and busybodies, saying what they should not’ (1 Tim 5:13). The writer of 1 Timothy, who did not wish for the church to be ‘burdened’ unless by ‘real widows’ (1 Tim 5:16), was quite evidently part of the problem for many widows. On the other hand, the Epistle of James sees care for widows as a characteristic of pure religion (Jas 1:27).

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<sup>430</sup> Is 47:9; Jer 15:8, 18:21

<sup>431</sup> Is 9:17

<sup>432</sup> See Stevan L. Davies, *The Revolt of the Widows: The Social World of the Apocryphal Acts* (Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press, 1980), pp.74-75

Jesus' concern for widows is attested in the story of the widow's mite as we have seen, but comes up repeatedly in Luke's Gospel. In the Nazareth synagogue, shortly after pronouncing good news to the poor, Jesus recalls the story of Elijah healing the widow of Zarephath (Lk 4:25-26). On another occasion Jesus heals a man who is described as 'the only son of his mother, and she was a widow' (Lk 7:12); such a healing would have had huge significance for the widow, as her son, being her only son, would have been her only protector; Jesus' healing of the son therefore ensured the security of this widow. Widows, who were amongst the lowest, poorest and most vulnerable throughout first century Mediterranean society, were also clearly remembered by Luke as a group for whom Jesus had specific concern. Luke's presentation is supported by parallel sayings in Mark's Gospel about the widow's mite (Mk 12:42-44), and the accusation that the scribes and Pharisees devour widow's houses (Mk 12:40).

### **The Historicity of Luke 4:18-19**

It is obviously plausible that Jesus could have uttered the words of Luke 4:18-19 in the Nazareth synagogue, although it is only attested by Luke and in no other gospel. But whether or not Luke was intending to accurately describe a historical event is far from clear. The most significant clue we have to suggest that Luke was not reporting an actual event is the unusual manner in which he interpolates the text based on Isaiah 61. We read that the scroll was opened to the place where it was written (4:17): 'the spirit of the Lord is upon me...', before being closed again (4:20), with no explicit verb describing Jesus' reading of the text. Furthermore, the text that Luke quotes, while loosely resembling Isaiah 61, is not to be found anywhere in the Hebrew Bible; even if

we assume that Luke *intended* to precisely report an event that actually occurred in the Nazareth synagogue, then either Jesus read the scroll wrong, or Luke heard it wrong,<sup>433</sup> except, of course, Luke does not actually say that Jesus *read* the scroll. At most, Luke's portrayal of events here seems 'impressionistic', rather than clinically precise. As Hugh Pyper comments, 'the clue of the "impossible" text in Luke 4:18-19 gives us leave to question whether a realistic record of a plausible event is the point at issue in this text.'<sup>434</sup> Furthermore, the text speaks of giving sight to the blind, in other words, miraculous healing. Whether Jesus claimed to be able to give sight to the blind is beside the point, for clearly Luke, and all the other gospel writers present Jesus as actually performing numerous miracles, including giving sight to the blind. Mark Allen Powell correctly highlights the somewhat obvious point that the performance of miracles cannot be historically proven and so is dependent upon faith.<sup>435</sup>

## Conclusion

Much of this chapter has been devoted to examining some recent discussions that Western scholars have had about 'the poor' in the Bible, scholars who have often stripped the term of its economic meaning. A simple word study, however, has demonstrated that *hoi ptōchoi* are almost invariably associated with material poverty. Furthermore, examining the captive, the blind, and the oppressed in their historical

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<sup>433</sup> There is, of course, probably no way of producing a strong historical argument that Luke was actually present

<sup>434</sup> Hugh S. Pyper, 'Jesus Reads the Scriptures' in *Those Outside: Noncanonical Readings of the Canonical Gospels* (London: T&T Clark, 2005), pp.1-16 (7)

<sup>435</sup> See Mark Allan Powell, 'Evangelical Christians and Historical-Jesus Studies: Final Reflections', *JSHJ* 9.1, 2011, pp.124-136

context, I have highlighted the interconnectedness of poverty, 'captivity', disability and deformity, and oppression; conditions which Jesus purported to affect in the Nazareth synagogue episode, and conditions which are indeed repeatedly affected by Jesus in the gospel tradition. The good news to the poor thus appears to take two forms in Luke, and in the gospel tradition more generally: care for social and economic outcasts – those forced into poverty because of their social or physical status – predominantly through miraculous healing; and condemnation of the rich.

THE NAZARETH SYNAGOGUE EPISODE (LUKE 4:16-30):  
ANTI-JUDAISM, MISSION, AND SCHOLARSHIP  
OR  
GOOD NEWS FOR THE POOR BECOMES BAD NEWS FOR JEWS

In effect, much of the anti-Judaism found globally today is substantially a colonial product.

- Amy-Jill Levine<sup>436</sup>

### Introduction

Jesus' proclamation in the Nazareth synagogue is frequently understood as 'programmatic' for Luke's presentation of Jesus,<sup>437</sup> as a text which is suggestive of the trajectory of the rest of the gospel. As we have seen in the previous chapter, the proclamation about 'good news for the poor' does indeed seem to be a consistent theme in Luke's Gospel, as Jesus consistently condemns the rich, and repeatedly heals many social – and therefore economic – outcasts. Surprisingly, however, many Lukan scholars have interpreted the Nazareth synagogue episode as a text that is not concerned with the poor, but with a mission to the Gentiles; and such a reading has been enabled primarily through the use of an anti-Judaic hermeneutic lens. As Amy-Jill Levine has argued, there is a need for liberation and postcolonial theologians to address the problem of anti-Judaism;<sup>438</sup> after all, postcolonial theologies are now often concerned,

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<sup>436</sup> Amy-Jill Levine, *The Misunderstood Jew: The Church and the Scandal of the Jewish Jesus* (NY: HarperCollins, 2006), p.169

<sup>437</sup> See Prior, *Jesus the Liberator*, p.15, R.J. Karris, 'Poor and Rich: The Lukan Sitz im Leben' in C.H. Talbert, *Perspectives on Luke-Acts* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1978), pp.112-125 (117-8)

<sup>438</sup> Levine, *The Misunderstood Jew*, pp.167-90

as I have discussed, with ‘every imperialism, every supremacism’.<sup>439</sup> I will not, however, particularly seek to critique any liberation theologians or postcolonial theologians on the count of anti-Judaism. Anti-Judaic hermeneutics have been exported around the globe by Western Christian biblical interpreters, and the task at hand here is to critique Western scholarship, where anti-Judaism began and where it continues to abound.

### **Luke 4:16-30 Exegesis in Recent New Testament Scholarship**

Rather than being a text that is concerned with the liberation of the poor, Luke 4:16-30 is often read as a text that highlights the universality of Jesus’ mission, a mission which allegedly had no regard for ethnicity or national boundaries. Proponents of such a reading assume that Jesus was proposing that the God of Israel does not show an ethnic bias towards Jews, as he supposedly illustrates in his discussion of Elijah and Elisha, and this is understood as the catalyst for the outrage that he provoked in Nazareth; an outrage that caused the Nazarene crowds to want to throw him headlong down a cliff. Luke Timothy Johnson understands Jesus’ announcement as a proclamation that ‘God’s visitation and salvation were to be for the poor and oppressed *of all nations and not just for the Jews... for all and not just for them*’ (my emphasis). The reason for his rejection at Nazareth, according to Johnson, is because ‘his mission extends beyond his own country.’<sup>440</sup> Similarly I. Howard Marshall understands this text as an illustration that ‘God’s plan would find fulfilment in the extension of God’s mission to the gentiles.’ This, Marshall comments, ‘was more than the people of Nazareth could bear; they were

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<sup>439</sup> Keller, Nausner, and Rivera, ‘Preface’ in *Postcolonial Theologies*, p.xi

<sup>440</sup> Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Gospel of Luke* (Sacra Pagina Series 3; ed. Daniel J. Harrington; Collegeville, Minnesota: The Liturgical Press, 1991), p.82



filled with anger...'<sup>441</sup> Again, Joel Green describes Luke 4:16-30 as 'the dramatic account of Jesus' return to his hometown where, on the Sabbath, he proclaimed a message of *grace* (4:22) and met with a startlingly violent rejection by the people of Nazareth' (my emphasis).<sup>442</sup> Michael Prior sees the reaction of the Nazarenes' as an unsurprising response to Jesus' views about Gentiles. Prior states: 'Obviously, Jesus' statement that God could embrace a preferential option for Gentiles, as exhibited in the ministry of Elijah and Elisha to which he refers, and which he develops, would cause great resentment.' Prior adds that, 'Religious people, in general, find it difficult to allow God to act with a generosity that extends his salvation beyond the narrow confines of their tradition.'<sup>443</sup> For Prior, the hostility and exclusivity of the Nazarenes is so much to be expected that he sees it as an 'obvious' reaction; it is allegedly 'obvious' that the (Jewish) Nazarenes would be upset by the notion that their God may be concerned with non-Jewish ethnic groups. The religion of the Nazarenes, the 'religious people', is contrasted by Prior with the apparently non-religious view of Jesus whose God acts with generosity and whose vision extends 'beyond the narrow confines' of their implicitly Jewish traditions.

The reading that emerges from each of these four commentators is this: Jesus suggests that God's plan of salvation extends to Gentiles as well as Jews, and the people in Nazareth – who are, either explicitly or implicitly, Jews – are so outraged by such a suggestion, that they want to cause Jesus serious physical harm. And, apparently, such a reaction is not even surprising to these commentators. Such commentary perpetuates the

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<sup>441</sup> I. Howard Marshall, *The Gospel of Luke: A Commentary on the Greek Text* (Exeter: The Paternoster Press, 1978), p.178

<sup>442</sup> Joel B. Green, *The Gospel of Luke* (Cambridge: Eerdmans, 1997), p.207

<sup>443</sup> Prior, *Jesus the Liberator*, p.99

all too pervasive discourse that presents Judaism as a religion of legalism and xenophobia, and Christianity as a religion of grace and hospitality. This idea was taken to the absolute extreme by Bornhäuser who in 1924 suggested that the cause of the Nazarenes' upset was Jesus' omission of the verse in Isaiah 61 which proclaims the 'day of vengeance';<sup>444</sup> this deeply anti-Jewish argument assumes that Jesus' peers, in contrast to Jesus and his apparently non-Jewish followers, positively *wanted* a day of vengeance and were angry that Jesus robbed them of it in his address. I cite this argument not only because of the astonishingly anti-Jewish sentiments it expresses, but because it has, disturbingly, been considered as a plausible explanation by recent commentators.

A superficial reading makes it seem possible – at least to one consciously or subconsciously conditioned to anti-Jewish Christian readings – that Luke is plainly relating the Nazarenes' anger to Jesus' statements about Elijah and Elisha, especially following the Nazarenes' apparent change of heart in verse 22. But a lot hinges on verse 22, and when translated more appropriately, it starts to seem unlikely that Luke intended to suggest that the Nazarenes' outrage was directed at Jesus' alleged universalism. After Jesus' initial 'reading'<sup>445</sup> and proclamation, Luke states, in the RSV translation: 'And all spoke well of him, and wondered at the gracious words which proceeded out of his mouth; and they said, "Is this not Joseph's son?"' Such renderings have proliferated the interpretation that the first half of Jesus' address (Lk 4:18-21) – including the contentious statement 'Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing' – was an

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<sup>444</sup> Cf. K. Bornhäuser, *Das Wirken des Christus durch Taten und Worte* (Gütersloh: Bertelsmann, 1924), p.59

<sup>445</sup> Although we note that Luke does not say that the passage was read but only that 'He opened the book and found the place where it was written...' (4:17), and that the passage that is in fact a conglomeration of Isaiah 58 and 61 that does not appear in its Lukan form anywhere else in the Bible. Cf. Pyper, 'Jesus Reads the Scriptures', p.7

address that was positively received by the gathering in the synagogue, and the second half of Jesus' address (Lk 4:23-27) was the part of the address that provoked upset. A brief look at the Greek text and Luke's use of the verb *thaumazō*, however, renders such a reading as unlikely. Most important of all for understanding the Nazarenes' 'change of heart' is the verbs describing the reaction of the Nazarenes. *thaumazō*, translated in the RSV and elsewhere as 'amazed', should not necessarily be interpreted in the positive sense. Although O'Fearghail notes that Josephus and Philo's use of *thaumazō* does not attest the negative meaning, elsewhere in Luke we see a Pharisee who is 'astonished' (*ethaumazen*) that Jesus did not ritually wash his hands (Lk 11:38).<sup>446</sup> Prior notes that this incident also parallels the Nazareth incident in that in response to the Pharisee's astonishment, rather than explaining himself, Jesus launches into a series of criticisms of the Pharisees.<sup>447</sup> The term *thaumazō*, in Luke's usage, implies a sense of wonderment, puzzlement or astonishment; Prior understands the *thaumazō* and the reaction of the Nazarenes as: 'one of astonishment tainted with criticism, rather than one of admiring surprise. While appreciating the quality of his [Jesus'] character (*martureō*), they are astonished at, and critical of (*thaumazō*) his message (*logoi tēs charitos*, the saving words)'.<sup>448</sup> Therefore, Luke does not depict the Nazarenes as having a sudden change of heart when Jesus begins to talk about Gentiles; the Nazarenes' were already upset when Jesus declared that the scripture from Isaiah was being fulfilled in their hearing.

What then, is Luke presenting as the cause of offence at the Nazareth synagogue? The first part of such an explanation might be that Jesus' dealings with the

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<sup>446</sup> F. O'Fearghail, 'Rejection in Nazareth: Lk 4,22', *ZNW* 75, 1984, pp..60-72 (63)

<sup>447</sup> Prior, *Jesus the Liberator*, p.97

<sup>448</sup> Prior, *Jesus the Liberator*, p.97

blind, the lame, lepers, the deaf, the dead and the poor are associated with offence later on in Luke, when Jesus sends a message to John the Baptist concerning his involvement with these groups and adds, ‘blessed is he who takes no offence and me’ (Lk 7:22). Jesus’ statement to John the Baptist strongly suggests that Jesus identified himself with Isaiah 61 in a way that *could* cause ‘offence’,<sup>449</sup> and at the Nazareth synagogue *did* cause offence.

The key to Jesus’ rejection, however, seems to lie in the statement about a prophet not being accepted in his own town. This theme is confirmed rather forcefully by the fact that the episode ends with the Nazarenes physically removing Jesus from their town (4:29), strongly reinforcing the idea of rejection from a physical place. The theme is also strengthened by the exclamation of the congregation in verse 22, ‘Is this not Joseph’s son?’ And verses 25-27, the verses about Elijah and Elisha, also bolster this same sentiment. Elijah and Elisha were not, as some commentators have insisted, embarking on a form of Gentile mission; but they were prophets who, like Jesus, faced rejection in their ‘home town’.

### **Anti-Judaism and Historical-Critical Scholarship on Jewish-Gentile Relations**

Two factors seem to underlie recent work on the interpretation of the Nazareth synagogue episode, and the presentation of Jews and Judaism in this text. As we have seen, there is a clear element of Christian anti-Judaic hermeneutics, which tend to depict Judaism as a religion of exclusivity and Christianity as a religion of grace. On the other hand, there is the issue that, as Daniel Smith-Christopher puts it, ‘Even the most casual

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<sup>449</sup> An argument which Prior credits to Jeremias, Cf. Joachim Jeremias, *Jesus’ Promise to the Nations* (London: SCM Press, 1956), p.39

familiarity with the Hebrew Bible enables one to see that there are many texts that could be used to justify racist and oppressive attitudes and policies towards anyone considered the “foreigner” or the “enemy.”<sup>450</sup>

The homogenising references to ‘Gentiles’ in both the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament is one phenomenon that has been interpreted as evidence of Jewish exclusivism. But as John Elliot has recently noted, homogenising references to Gentiles are, in historical terms, to be expected, and say nothing about ancient ‘Judaism’, and much less modern Judaism, *per se*. As John Elliot notes:

In collectivist, group-oriented cultures like those of antiquity, groups speaking of each other regularly generalize and homogenize ‘the others’ using one collective term to embrace all – ignorant of, or unconcerned with, any distinctions or labels made by group members among themselves.<sup>451</sup>

Elliot notes, for example, the Hellenes who distinguished their civilized and cultured lives from the ‘barbarians’. This, Elliot suggests, is the same as the Israelites conceiving of themselves as ‘we’ in contrast to the ‘*goyim, ethnê, or nationes*’, or indeed, the ‘Gentiles’. Not only are these facts frequently overlooked, but ironically, Amy-Jill Levine argues, whilst today it is generally seen as a positive thing when ethnic or religious groups seek to maintain their practices and identity despite pressure to assimilate, ‘Christian readers are sometimes inclined to regard these [Jewish] efforts as

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<sup>450</sup> Daniel Smith-Christopher, ‘Between Ezra and Isaiah: Exclusion, Transformation, and Inclusion of the “Foreigner” in Post-Exilic Biblical Theology’ in *The Bible and Ethnicity* (ed. Mark G. Brett; Leiden: Brill, 1996), pp.117-142 (118)

<sup>451</sup> John H. Elliott, ‘Jesus the Israelite Was Neither a “Jew” Nor a “Christian”’: On Correcting Misleading Nomenclature’ *JSHJ*, 5.2, 2007, pp.119-154 (123)

retrograde or exclusive.’<sup>452</sup> Levine argues that the Jewish system was in fact no more exclusivist than the church, which restricted its roles to Christians.<sup>453</sup>

Another issue relating to alleged Jewish exclusivism is intermarriage. *Jubilees* 30 provides an extremely strong view on the subject:

If there is a man in Israel who wishes to give his daughter or sister to any foreigner, he is to die. He is to be stoned because he has done something sinful and shameful within Israel. The woman is to be burned because she has defiled the reputation of her father’s house; she is to be uprooted from Israel.

Jonathan Klawans frames such texts as *Jubilees* 30 in the context of idolatry, claiming, that intermarriage is not prohibited ‘because Gentiles are ritually impure, but because Gentiles commit adultery and sexual sins.’<sup>454</sup> Nonetheless, the threat of punishment is extremely severe. Intermarriage may sometimes have been disparaged because of concerns about idolatry, but on other occasions, an ethnic element also appears to have been present. Thus in Ezra, when some messengers report about how the Israelites had been intermarrying, they report that as well as failing to separate themselves from ‘the peoples of the land with their abominations’, they also comment that ‘the holy race has mixed itself with the peoples of the lands’ (Ez 9:2; Cf. Neh 13:23-31). Ezra’s insistence on racial purity, as Clines notes, can seem somewhat ‘uncongenial to modern liberal thought’<sup>455</sup> But Smith-Christopher argues that the circumstances in which such a text developed must be considered. Smith-Christopher argues that Ezra’s extremism was the

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<sup>452</sup> Levine, *The Misunderstood Jew*, p.159

<sup>453</sup> Levine, *The Misunderstood Jew*, p.159

<sup>454</sup> Jonathan Klawans, ‘Notions of Gentile Impurity in Ancient Judaism’, *AJS* 20, 2, 1995, pp.285-312 (295)

<sup>455</sup> David J.A. Clines, *Ezra, Nehemiah and Esther (New Century Bible Commentary)*; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984), p.116

result of his 'exilic, minority consciousness... when confronted with a possible break-up of the recognized community of former exiles during the Persian period.'<sup>456</sup> Ezra's upset may have been related to his desire to preserve and maintain cultural practices and identity, which, as Levine notes, is generally regarded as a good thing.

Nonetheless, schools-of-thought that were more hostile to outsiders in general seemingly did exist. Christine van Houten argues that there was a development in Israelite law from seeing aliens merely as subjects of protection, to people who could be almost completely included in the community.<sup>457</sup> The book of Jonah has frequently been regarded as a response to more exclusive views toward outsiders, although as Yvonne Sherwood has highlighted, such a reading is problematic. Sherwood argues that Christian readings of Jonah as a universalistic text make Jonah merely 'a tract for the times, an exhortation to Jews to abandon superstition and exclusivity'.<sup>458</sup> Sherwood argues that in the Christian scholarship, 'the book of Jonah becomes a progressive proto-gospel, a biblicised socio-political tract, a Christian outpost in the Old Testament, a righteous stowaway, compliantly critiquing Old-ness from the heart of an Old Testament text'.<sup>459</sup> As Sherwood rightly notes, Old Testament scholarship and Christian theology are themselves guilty of a tendency to essentialise Self and Other, in a way that is not inclusive but, rather, proselytising.<sup>460</sup>

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<sup>456</sup> Smith-Christopher, 'Between Ezra and Isaiah', p.124

<sup>457</sup> Christine van Houten, *The Alien in Israelite Law* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1991), p.158-165

<sup>458</sup> Yvonne Sherwood, *A Biblical Text and its Afterlives: The Survival of Jonah in Western Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), p.31

<sup>459</sup> Sherwood, *A Biblical Text*, p.32

<sup>460</sup> Sherwood, *A Biblical Text*, pp.29-30

Notably, however, ethnic exclusivism has not only been an issue for post-Enlightenment Christian interpreters. There is a fair amount of literature from the Greco-Roman world that presents the Jews as xenophobic. Indeed, Louis Feldman argues that, ‘The main, most serious, and most recurrent charge by [Hellenistic] intellectuals against Jews is that they hate Gentiles.’<sup>461</sup> Feldman describes the stubbornness of Jews in separating themselves from other people as ‘proverbial’; a sentiment captured neatly by writers such as Philostratus, who, at the beginning of the third century C.E. proposed that ‘the Jews have long been in revolt not only against the Romans but against humanity’ (*Life of Apollonius of Tyana* 5.33).<sup>462</sup>

Undoubtedly, many Jews avoided certain interactions with Gentiles, a phenomenon that is clearly demonstrated by the controversy that eating with Gentiles provoked at Antioch (Gal 2:11-14). Although some have argued that this disagreement was to do with association with Gentiles *per se*,<sup>463</sup> it is more likely that the disagreement was to do with concerns about the preservation of Jewish identity,<sup>464</sup> for table fellowship and food laws represented a very visual and distinctive identity marker. Feldman suggests that rulings to keep Jews and Gentiles separate, such as the prohibition against Gentiles entering the Temple precinct (*Ant* 15.417), and against teaching Gentiles the Torah (*Hagigah* 13a) may have contributed to rumours and misunderstanding about Jewish practice. And it is quite clear that there were some great misunderstandings amongst Greeks and Romans about Jewish practice; in *Against*

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<sup>461</sup> Louis H. Feldman, *Jew and Gentile in the Ancient World: Attitudes and Interactions from Alexander to Justinian* (Chichester: Princeton University Press, 1993)

<sup>462</sup> Feldman, *Jew and Gentile*, p.129, also see Mendels, *Rise and Fall*, pp.395-400

<sup>463</sup> P.J. Tomson, *Paul and the Jewish Law: Halakah in the Letters of the Apostle to the Gentiles* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1990), pp.228-230

<sup>464</sup> Crossley, *The Date of Mark's Gospel*, p.154



*Apion*, Josephus discusses Poseidonius and Apollonius Molon who are responsible for spreading rumours that Jews would annually kidnap and fatten a Greek citizen, fatten him up, eat him, and swear an oath of hostility to the Greeks (*Ag. Ap.* 2.79).<sup>465</sup>

With these things in mind, it is interesting to consider Josephus' *Antiquities*, which responded quite directly to allegations of Jewish misanthropy.<sup>466</sup> In the *Antiquities*, a text that was written specifically for the attention of a Gentile audience (*Ant* 1.5), Feldman notes numerous ways in which Josephus presents Judaism in a manner that will be pleasing to his Gentile audience. Josephus' Abraham, for instance, is not only a missionary, but a philosopher who debates with the Egyptian priests and is said to be ready to adopt their doctrines if he finds them superior to his own (*Ant* 1.161). On other occasions, Josephus sanitises various Hebrew scriptures; for instance, in a paraphrase of some text from Exodus, Josephus omits the passages in which God instructs the Israelites to destroy all statues, devastate all high places and make no covenant with the Canaanites upon entering their land (Ex 34:12-13; Dt 12:2-3). Conversely, Josephus reports that the Hebrews were forbidden by God to interfere with other countries (*Ant.* 4.102).<sup>467</sup> Josephus remains strongly convinced, however, of the merit of the Jewish tradition and attempts to communicate this also; Josephus writes, for instance, of a Jew who visited Aristotle in the fourth century BCE to converse and learn from him, but ended up sharing his own wisdom from the Jewish tradition (*Ag. Ap.* 1.176-83). Josephus also saw it as a source of great pride that Jewish customs had spread throughout the Mediterranean world, stating that 'the masses have long since shown a keen desire to adopt our religious observances' and that 'there is not one city,

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<sup>465</sup> See Feldman, *Jew and Gentile*, pp.126-127

<sup>466</sup> Feldman, *Jew and Gentile*, p.133

<sup>467</sup> Feldman, *Jew and Gentile*, p.137

Greek or barbarian, nor a single nation' to which Jewish customs have not spread (*Ag. Ap.* 2.282).<sup>468</sup> Josephus saw Jewish law as a universalistic ideal, inviting his readers 'to fix their thoughts on God and to test whether our lawgiver [Moses] has had a worthy conception of his nature' (*Ant.* 1.15), and he took pains to demonstrate that Judaism was a noble and distinguished form of piety that conformed to the highest ideals of the Greek world.<sup>469</sup>

Philo also negotiates the relationship of Judaism to other worldviews in an interesting way. Terence Donaldson claims that 'In all his writings Philo reveals himself as a devoted servant of two masters, Plato and Moses; the constant thrust of his intellectual and exegetical agenda was to demonstrate that these two masters ultimately spoke with the same voice.'<sup>470</sup> Philo claimed that Jews were pleased to welcome converts as 'our dearest friends and closest kinsmen' (*Virtues* 179). But his universalism went beyond merely the acceptance of proselytes; Donaldson notes that Philo presents the quest to find God in a manner that applies to 'all who are devoted to the philosophical life, irrespective of ethnic identity'. In *Migration* 56-59 he interprets Israel as referring to 'all the lovers of wisdom and knowledge', a group of 'world-citizens'. And when giving examples of people 'who took God for their sole guide and lived according to a law of nature's right reason' (*Good Person* 62), Philo lists groups that were not Jewish.<sup>471</sup>

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<sup>468</sup> Terence L. Donaldson, *Judaism and the Gentiles: Jewish Patterns of Universalism (To 135 CE)* (Waco, Texas: Baylor University Press, 2007), p.359

<sup>469</sup> Donaldson, *Judaism and the Gentiles*, pp.287-290

<sup>470</sup> Donaldson, *Judaism and the Gentiles*, pp.218-219

<sup>471</sup> Donaldson, *Judaism and the Gentiles*, p.222

Jacob Neusner has argued that ethnicity played virtually no part in rabbinic Judaism either. While James Dunn has claimed that the very ‘parting of ways’ between Judaism and Christianity was largely due to the particularity and ethnicity of Judaism, arguing that Judaism ‘found itself unable to separate ethnic identity from religious identity’,<sup>472</sup> Neusner argues that while this view may (according to Neusner) prevail amongst modern Jews, it is anachronistic and alien to rabbinic Judaism.<sup>473</sup> Neusner argues that in rabbinic Judaism ‘Israel’ was a ‘supernatural’ entity rather than an ethnic identity, and an entity which any Gentile could, and hopefully would become a part of. Neusner states:

A mission to Gentiles forms an ongoing and important conception in rabbinic Judaism (as in other Judaisms), and once the Gentile is converted, he or she becomes a wholly new creation, fully part of Israel, in a supernatural community, an Israel that stood for humanity sanctified by the Torah as against the humanity subject to the same divine command but sinful by reason of disobedience. None of this has any bearing on ethnic considerations, and the distinction between “the children of the flesh” and “the children of the promise” points to no difference whatsoever that rabbinic Judaism could have contemplated or ever did contemplate.<sup>474</sup>

Jon Levenson provides another interesting perspective on the issue. Levenson is upfront about his theological agenda, stating that he writes not only as a student of biblical thought but as a ‘committed Jew interested in defining a defensible contemporary appropriation of the ancient legacy’.<sup>475</sup> Levenson notes that ‘universalism’ and ‘particularism’ are insufficiently nuanced terms to deal with the Bible as a whole, but makes several observations about what he calls the ‘universal horizon’ of several texts

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<sup>472</sup> James D. G. Dunn, *The Parting of Ways between Christianity and Judaism and Their Significance for the Character of Christianity* (Philadelphia: Trinity International, 1991), p.230

<sup>473</sup> Jacob Neusner, ‘Was Rabbinic Judaism Really “Ethnic”?’, *CBQ* 57, 1995, pp.281-305 (283)

<sup>474</sup> Neusner, ‘Rabbinic Judaism’, p.305

<sup>475</sup> Jon Levenson, ‘The Universal Horizon of Biblical Particularism’ in *Ethnicity and the Bible*, pp.143-169 (143)

in the Hebrew Bible. For instance, Levenson contrasts the Israelite creation story with the Babylonian creation story; unlike the Babylonian creation story, in which Babylon is the centre of the world, Levenson argues that Genesis 1:1-2:3 ‘does not serve to buttress any particular political cultic order.’<sup>476</sup> Levenson notes that Proverbs, Job and Qohelet never refer to the people of Israel, the Exodus, the Covenant of Sinai or the gift of the land: ‘Instead they address what they perceive to be the general human condition and ground moral authority not in a historical revelation... but in direct observation of the world.’<sup>477</sup> Levenson also notes the international recognition of Solomon’s wisdom, which is presented as ‘the quintessence of something they [from surrounding nations] have esteemed and pursued, with no small success.’<sup>478</sup> Levenson acknowledges that his article is effectively apologetic, and acknowledges that whilst he may argue for the universalism of the Hebrew Bible, other Jews would not. Indeed, he notes that, ‘in the aftermath of the Holocaust, [some Jews] have reasserted and exaggerated the uniqueness of the Jewish people, even to the extent of denying the applicability of Jews to the outside world’s moral standards.’<sup>479</sup>

More recently, Robert Eisen has dealt at length with issues of Jewish and Gentile relations, and with what different Jewish traditions say about Gentiles.<sup>480</sup> Eisen notes that violence towards Gentiles can be and sometimes is justified from biblical texts. Unlike Levenson, whose article presents only the universalistic aspects of the Hebrew Bible, Eisen merely highlights the way in which it has been read in different

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<sup>476</sup> Levenson, ‘Universal Horizon’, pp.146-57

<sup>477</sup> Levenson, ‘Universal Horizon’, pp.149-50

<sup>478</sup> Levenson, ‘Universal Horizon’, p.150

<sup>479</sup> Levenson, ‘Universal Horizon’, p.143

<sup>480</sup> Robert Eisen, *The Peace and Violence of Judaism: from the Bible to Modern Zionism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011)

streams of Judaism, making no value judgements or attempts to challenge illiberal or perhaps even violent interpretations of scripture. Jeremy Milgrom notes that many Jews do not take their cues from violence in the Hebrew Bible, observing the way in which many react to violent biblical texts:

...the atmosphere that pervades every synagogue I have ever attended, or heard of, during the reading of even the most violent of these passages is (thank God) never one of agitation or incitement. It is, instead, something close to the meditative, contemplative, peaceful core of religion.<sup>481</sup>

But as Eisen notes, for other Jews – both secular and religious – biblical texts justify or even require hostility and violence towards Gentiles.<sup>482</sup> Indeed, for some groups such as the *Gush Emunim*, such texts provide justification for the ethnic cleansing of Palestine,<sup>483</sup> an issue which will be discussed further below.

Finally, before examining the gospel texts that discuss Jewish-Gentile relationships, the issue of ancient ‘Jewish nationalism’ should also be raised. Doron Mendels unambiguously states the importance of what he calls ‘Jewish nationalism’ for understanding the historical Jesus, stating that, ‘Jesus cannot be understood as historical figure unless he is seen within the context of Jewish nationalism’.<sup>484</sup> Mendel’s use of the term ‘nationalism’ is anachronistic and potentially misleading, considering that the

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<sup>481</sup> Jeremy Milgrom, “‘Let your Love for Me Vanquish your Hatred for Him’”: Nonviolence and Modern Judaism’ in *Subverting Hatred: The Challenge of Nonviolence in Religious Traditions* (ed. Daniel L. Smith-Christopher; Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Book, 2007), pp.144-170 (147)

<sup>482</sup> Eisen, *Peace and Violence*, p.171

<sup>483</sup> See Masalha, *Bible & Zionism*, pp.148-151

<sup>484</sup> Mendels, *Rise and Fall*, p.ix

nation state was certainly not an ancient phenomena,<sup>485</sup> but the sentiment is approximately correct. It is clear that Jesus and the gospel writers lived at a time of increasing political tension, leading to a grand scale Jewish revolt, the likes of which were seen nowhere else in the whole Roman Empire.<sup>486</sup> The concept of the Kingdom of God, furthermore, which was so central to Jesus' teaching, might also arguably be understood in relation to the ideology which sought to establish a politically independent Judea, as Mendels argues. The Jesus movement emerged in a context where many Jews wanted political freedom from Rome, and believed that it was God's will for them to do so, and this may have resulted in some friction between the Jews and their Gentile neighbours. As Martin Goodman has argued, opposition to Hellenism (demonstrated in part by the serious disputes between Jews and Gentiles that preceded the revolt), was an important factor in the run up to the revolt.<sup>487</sup> Mendels suggests that the revolt of 66-70CE represented in part a 'purifying' of the land from non-Jews,<sup>488</sup> and that the Bar Kokhba rebellion some years later was, 'to put it bluntly... a war of Judaism against Greco-Roman paganism.'<sup>489</sup> Political tension undoubtedly had a negative impact on Jewish and Gentile relations, and should certainly inform our understanding of Jesus and his contemporaries' views towards Gentiles.

With these issues in mind, we may turn to the gospel texts to consider Jesus' attitude towards Gentiles. Upon turning to these texts, however, we are immediately confronted with the issue that each of the gospels project different levels of interest and

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<sup>485</sup> See discussion in Keith W. Whitelam, *The Invention of Ancient Israel: The Silencing of Palestinian History* (London: Routledge, 1996), pp.19-20

<sup>486</sup> Mendels, *Rise and Fall*, p.355

<sup>487</sup> Martin Goodman, *The Ruling Class of Judea: The Origins of the Jewish Revolt Against Rome A.D. 66-70*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), p.13

<sup>488</sup> Mendels, *Rise and Fall*, p.363

<sup>489</sup> Mendels, *Rise and Fall*, p.386

differing views toward Gentiles. Each gospel, therefore, requires some individual consideration in turn.

### **John and the Gentiles**

John's relationship to Judaism has been much discussed, and in recent years, John's apparent 'anti-Judaism' has received special attention.<sup>490</sup> John's relationship with Gentiles, however, which may be just as complex and may shed some light on his relationship to Judaism, is discussed much less frequently.

John seemingly has some hostility towards some, although not all, Jews. But John is, of course, clear and explicit that Jesus himself is a 'Jew' (Jn 4:9; 18:35), and scholars are widely in agreement now that 'Jews' in the Fourth Gospel frequently represent only some Jewish authorities, or even merely 'the opposition'. Either way, John obviously does not oppose all Jews. Furthermore, as is frequently noted, John is very knowledgeable about Judaism, Jewish customs, and even the geography of Jerusalem.<sup>491</sup> On the other hand, John has very little to say about non-Jews. Maurice Casey has argued that John took on 'Gentile self-identification',<sup>492</sup> but Casey seems to find only two passages where John's vision may possibly extend beyond Israel: 'I have other sheep who are not of this fold' (Jn 10:16) and the high priest's statement that one man should die for 'the nation' (*ethnous*), 'so that he might gather together the scattered

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<sup>490</sup> See the volume *Anti-Judaism and the Fourth Gospel* (eds. Reimund Bieringer, Didier Pollefeyt and Frederique Vandecasteele-Vanneuville; Louisville, Ky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001)

<sup>491</sup> John Bowman, *The Fourth Gospel and the Jews: A Study in R. Akiba, Esther and the Gospel of John* (Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania: The Pickwick Press, 1975), p.32

<sup>492</sup> Maurice Casey, *Is John's Gospel True?* (London: Routledge, 1996), pp.111-116

children of God into one' (Jn 11:51-52). The vagueness of John's two allusions to Gentiles is so much that some commentators have suggested that the two passages in question do not refer to Gentiles at all, but to Diaspora Jews.<sup>493</sup> This is perhaps going too far, considering that the eschatological inclusion of Gentiles in the age-to-come occurs in a lot of Jewish literature over a long period of time.<sup>494</sup> But, unlike Luke-Acts, John shows no interest in 'conversion'. The Gentiles, if they feature at all in John, appear as a far off-people who are 'not of this fold' and who are 'scattered', but in accordance with scripture, may be gathered together by God in the end times. That a writer who identifies himself as a Gentile would be so unconcerned with his inclusion in the God of Israel's plan of salvation as to only include two vague suggestions about his eligibility for inclusion therein seems unlikely. John's lack of interest in Gentiles, I suggest, arises from the fact that he, like the vast majority of the early Jesus movement, was Jewish.

John's views with regard to ethnicity and boundaries are perhaps demonstrated most clearly by his use of his *leitwort* 'the world' (*kosmos*). John's conception of the world is basically restricted to Israel. Although it is frequently argued that the term may be intended to carry a cosmological sense more than an ethnic or national sense,<sup>495</sup> in a brief speech attributed to Jesus, John illustrates the scope of his *kosmos*. In a response to the high priests, John's Jesus states: 'I have spoken openly to the world (*kosmō*); I have always taught in synagogues and in the temple, where all Jews come together; I have said nothing secretly' (Jn 18:20). John's *kosmos* is the synagogues and the temple. As Wendy North argues, the Jews in John's Gospel, 'however alien they may appear... are

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<sup>493</sup> John A.T. Robinson, *The Priority of John* (London: SCM Press, 1985), p.60

<sup>494</sup> See Donaldson, *Judaism and the Gentiles*, pp.499-506

<sup>495</sup> See Francis J. Moloney, *The Gospel of John* (Collegeville, Minnesota: The Liturgical Press, 1988), p.44



representative of a Jewish community with whom John the Jew remains *heavily engaged*' (my emphasis).<sup>496</sup> Indeed, the Jews, the people of Israel, *are* John's world, the objects and subjects of his writing. John may have an antagonistic relationship with 'the Jews', but he is Jewish, and his *kosmos* is Jewish. Gentiles are outsiders, and are therefore of marginal concern to John.

### **Matthew and the Gentiles**

Matthew has generally been read by Christian interpreters throughout the centuries as a document that is particularly interested in and sympathetic toward Gentiles.<sup>497</sup> Advocates of such a view point to, for example, the opening sentence of the gospel which describe Jesus as the son of Abraham, the father of all nations; the mention of four gentile women in the genealogy; the magi's visit, the healing of a foreign soldier's slave and Jesus' subsequent praise of this non-Jew's faith; the healing of the Canaanite woman's daughter; and statements that Jesus makes such as the one to the soldier (8:11) 'many will come from east and west and sit at table with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven'; the parables of the vineyard and the wedding feast (21:28-22:14); the command to evangelise all nations (28:19); and the comment, 'the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a nation producing the fruits of it' (21:43).<sup>498</sup> The prevalence of pro-Gentile readings is alarming, however, when we

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<sup>496</sup> Wendy E.S. North, "'The Jews'" in John's Gospel: Observations and Inferences' in *Judaism, Jewish Identities and the Gospel Tradition: Essays in Honour of Maurice Casey* (ed. James G. Crossley; London: Equinox, 2010), pp.207-226 (220)

<sup>497</sup> See R.T. France, *Matthew: Evangelist and Teacher* (Exeter: Paternoster Press, 1989), pp.232-235, J.D. Kingsbury, *Matthew as Story* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1988), p.151 For a summary of different views see Graham N. Stanton, *A Gospel for a New People: Studies in Matthew* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1992), pp.113-145

<sup>498</sup> David C. Sim, *The Gospel of Matthew and Christian Judaism: The History and Social Setting of the Matthean Community* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1998), p.217

examine the strength of the anti-Gentile sentiments that Matthew presents just as consistently. Matthew makes it crystal clear that Jesus' mission was restricted to Israel, as he states, somewhat categorically, 'I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel' (Mt 15:24). Similarly, Matthew's Jesus commands that his disciples should, 'Go nowhere among the Gentiles, and enter no town of the Samaritans, but go rather to the lost sheep of the house of Israel' (Mt 10:5b-6). But Matthew's Jesus goes further than this, to the point of being actively disparaging toward Gentiles. For Matthew's Jesus, the Gentiles are on a par with tax collectors (Mt 5:47). They are people who 'heap up empty phrases' when they pray (Mt 6:7), and chase after material things, not trusting in God's provision (Mt 6:32/Lk 12:31). Another text in Matthew (although probably a text that does not originate with Jesus, considering its anachronistic reference to the *ekklesia*) states that unrepentant members of the church should be treated like tax collectors or Gentiles (*ethnikos*) (Mt 18:17).

Matthew's presentation of Jesus' interaction with the Canaanite woman is one of the most explicit anti-Gentile texts. After initially ignoring her, he states the ethnic-geographic boundaries of his compassion, before calling her a dog; he eventually heals her daughter upon her acceptance of his insult. A similar sentiment is expressed in the saying, 'do not give to dogs what is holy; and do not throw your pearls before swine, lest they trample them underfoot and turn to attack you' (Mt 7:6, *Thom* 93). As David Sim notes, elsewhere Matthew compares the Kingdom of Heaven to pearls (13:45-46), and so it is reasonable to assume that the pearls in this saying represent the kingdom too. Pigs, of course, were unclean according to Jewish law (Cf. Lev 11:7; Dt 14:8) and 'dog' was a common derogatory term for Gentiles, which Jesus uses elsewhere in Matthew for the Canaanite woman (15:26). As Sim states, 'If we put together the

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component parts of this text, then its meaning for Matthew is evident. The members of his Christian Jewish community are not to take their proclamation of his kingdom to the unclean Gentiles.<sup>499</sup>

As Levine has argued, Matthew does envisage the eventual inclusion of Gentiles after the great commission; the accounts of the soldier's faith (8:5-13) and the Canaanite woman's faith (15:21-28) – which as Levine notes, deviate from Matthew's temporal view of the inclusion of Gentiles – could be said to demonstrate the importance of 'faith' over 'ethnicity' after the great commission, as Levine argues.<sup>500</sup> But Matthew's negative attitude toward Gentiles persists nonetheless, in tension with the notion of the Gentiles' eventual eschatological acceptance into the Kingdom. Although Matthew envisages the eventual inclusion of Gentiles in God's plan for salvation, it is seemingly not only in temporal terms that Matthew and his Jesus consider the Gentiles to be second in line. Furthermore, it must be strongly doubted whether the great commission can be attributed to the 'historical Jesus', for this speech is explicitly attributed to a *resurrected* Jesus. In no other area of historical enquiry, to my knowledge, are words attributed to a person who has previously died considered as weighty historical evidence.<sup>501</sup>

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<sup>499</sup> Sim, *The Gospel of Matthew*, p.238

<sup>500</sup> Although I disagree with Levine that Matthew suggests 'faith rather than ethnic origin separates those who will attain salvation and those who will be denied at the last judgement'. The theme of judgement does not come up at all in Jesus' interaction with the soldier or the Canaanite woman. In the parable of the sheep and the goats, on the other hand, judgement for 'all nations' is dispensed according to one's provision for the suffering and marginalised, and has nothing to do with faith. Cf. Amy-Jill Levine, *The Social and Ethnic Dimensions of Matthean Salvation History* (Lampeter: The Edwin Mellen Press, 1988), p.278

<sup>501</sup> For further see Miller, 'When It's Futile', pp.91-92

## Luke and the Gentiles

Luke's view toward Gentiles as expressed in Luke-Acts has been the subject of much debate,<sup>502</sup> and scholars have reached wildly different conclusions. One important text examining this issue is Joseph Tyson's volume *Luke-Acts and the Jewish People* which explores the question in depth, and in which the contributors reach almost diametrically opposed readings.<sup>503</sup> Jacob Jervell argues that Luke's church 'consists primarily of Christian Jews, the heirs of Israel.' Gentiles, Jervell argues, are 'more semi-Jews than Gentiles'; they are not pagans, who are 'the idolaters and people without knowledge of the Torah and its precepts, the enemies of God and Israel.'<sup>504</sup> Jervell argues that the same goes for Paul, who addresses the Israelites and the Godfearers in the synagogue in the same way, because both groups belong to the synagogue.<sup>505</sup> Jervell argues that when Paul encounters actual pagans, the 'preaching is without any effect, if they preach to them at all.'<sup>506</sup> Throughout Acts, pagans are depicted as wild idolaters, desperate to offer sacrifices to almost anything that moves. Jervell notes that 'Paul and Barnabas are horrified when the people of Lystra try to offer sacrifices to them as if they were gods' (Acts 14:7).<sup>507</sup> And furthermore, in contrast to the popular view that Paul's mission to

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<sup>502</sup> See Stephen G. Wilson, *The Gentiles and the Gentile Mission in Luke-Acts* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1973), Robert L. Brawley, *Luke-Acts and the Jews: Conflict, Apology, and Conciliation* (Atlanta, Georgia: Scholars Press, 1987), the volume edited by Joseph B. Tyson, *Luke-Acts and the Jewish People: Eight Critical Perspectives* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1988), and slightly more recently David A.S. Ravens, *Luke and the Restoration of Israel* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1995)

<sup>503</sup> For the most recent summary of scholarly discussions see Joseph B. Tyson, *Luke, Judaism, and the Scholars: Critical Approaches to Luke-Acts* (Columbia, South Carolina: University of South Carolina Press, 1999)

<sup>504</sup> Jacob Jervell, 'The Church of Jews and Godfearers' in *Luke-Acts and the Jewish People: Eight Critical Perspectives* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1988), pp.11-20 (11)

<sup>505</sup> Jervell, 'The Church of Jews and Godfearers', p.14

<sup>506</sup> Jervell, 'The Church of Jews and Godfearers', p.16

<sup>507</sup> Jervell, 'The Church of Jews and Godfearers', p.18

the Jews failed, Jervell notes that there are several mass Jewish conversions (Acts 2:41; 4:4; 5:14; 6:1, 7; 9:42; 12:24; 13:43; 14:1; 17:10; 21:20).<sup>508</sup>

Jack Sanders, on the other hand, concludes that Luke is largely negative toward the Jews. Stephen's speech for example, appears to blame all Jews for the execution of Jesus, as it accuses *all* descendents of the ancient Israelites: 'Whom of the prophets did your fathers not persecute? And they killed those who proclaimed beforehand the coming of the Righteous One, whose deliverers and murderers now you have become' (Acts 7:52).<sup>509</sup> Sanders concludes that, 'Luke has portrayed the Jews as totally rejecting Jesus, the church, and the message of salvation and as thereby bringing themselves God's condemnation and punishment.'<sup>510</sup> Sanders then points to Robert Tannehill's interpretation of Luke 4:16-30. Tannehill understands the Nazareth synagogue episode as one announces that 'it is not those who are closest to Jesus but others who will benefit from his work, and by establishing the pattern of rejection of Jesus' own people and moving on to others which will be typical of the mission as a whole... [It] is to be understood as a summary of Jesus' work and message throughout Luke's gospel.'<sup>511</sup> It is telling that Sanders uses Tannehill's anti-Judaic misreading of Luke 4:16-30 to support this reading of Luke-Acts, which distances Jesus from Judaism so drastically.

Despite the radical disagreement between of the readings presented by Jervell and Sanders, Tyson concludes the volume by stating that 'two facts seem clear: for

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<sup>508</sup> Jervell, 'The Church of Jews and Godfearers', p.18

<sup>509</sup> Jack T. Sanders, 'The Jewish People in Luke-Acts' in *Luke-Acts and the Jewish People*, pp.51-75 (51)

<sup>510</sup> Sanders, 'The Jewish People in Luke-Acts', p.74

<sup>511</sup> Robert. C. Tannehill, 'The Mission of Jesus according to Luke IV 16-30' in *Jesus in Nazareth* (eds. Erich Grässer and Walther Eltester; Berlin: de Gruyter, 1972), p.60

Luke the mission to the Jewish people has failed, and it has been terminated.’<sup>512</sup> Besides the fact that neither of these ‘two facts’ are made at all clear in the volume, largely because of Jervell’s contribution, this conclusion ignores the opening chapters of Luke’s Gospel. Such a conclusion seems to ignore the songs in Luke 1 and 2, which speak of God helping his servant *Israel* in remembrance of his mercy (Lk 1:54), the Lord God of *Israel* visiting and redeeming *his* people (Lk 1:68) and for *glory* for Israel (Lk 2:32).<sup>513</sup> This conclusion also seems to ignore Luke’s numerous negative statements about the Gentiles. In response to Sanders’ comments about the way in which the Jews are blamed for Jesus’ death, Luke is explicit that Jesus will be handed over to the *Gentiles* to be mocked, shamefully treated and spat upon (Lk 18:32). And Luke is clear that *Gentiles* are the ones who will tread down Jerusalem, until ‘the time of the Gentiles’ is fulfilled (Lk 21:24). The work of Robert Brawley on this subject, published the year before Tyson’s volume, seems to offer a better solution. Brawley’s concluding remarks should be welcomed: ‘Rather than setting Gentile Christianity free, Luke ties it to Judaism. And rather than rejecting the Jews, Luke appeals to them.’<sup>514</sup>

Luke is certainly not as negative towards Gentiles as Matthew is, but on the other hand, the extent of Luke’s interest in Gentiles is questionable. Throughout Acts, Paul frequently appears in synagogues, and when he preaches to pagans, he is generally very unsuccessful. And, naturally, in Luke’s Gospel there are virtually no Gentiles at all. While Luke is not explicitly negative about Gentiles, neither does he embrace them in the way in which so many commentators have argued, in Luke’s Gospel, or in Acts.

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<sup>512</sup> Joseph B. Tyson, ‘The Problem of Jewish Rejection in Acts’ in *Luke-Acts and the Jewish People*, pp.124-177 (137)

<sup>513</sup> See further in chapter 5

<sup>514</sup> Brawley, *Luke-Acts and the Jews*, p.159

## Mark and the Gentiles

Several texts in Mark are generally proposed to gesture towards a Gentile mission; the reference to ‘others’ in the parable of the vineyard (Mk 12:1-9), Jesus’ statement in the temple about a house of prayer for ‘all nations’ (Mk 11:15-17), and the two references to the gospel being preached in the ‘whole world’ (Mk 13:10; 14:19).<sup>515</sup> But that these texts ought to be understood as referring to a Gentile mission is uncertain. The reference to ‘others’ is ambiguous, and the reference to ‘all nations’ is a passing comment, and nothing to do with Gentiles is suggested by the context. The references to the gospel being preached to the whole world are likely to be post-resurrection developments, for as Karen Wenell has recently argued, Jesus focused his ministry on Israel, and universalist perspectives that embrace the whole world did not develop until later.<sup>516</sup> Mark’s story of the Syrophenician woman seems to confirm such a view as it depicts Jesus’ apparent ambivalence to the Gentile woman, paired with a reluctance to heal her daughter, although Mark’s version of this text is less hostile than Matthew’s. Daniel Cohen has also argued against a Gentile mission in Mark. He notes that many scholars have interpreted Jesus’ statement to the demoniac ‘go home to your family’ as a command to evangelise the Decapolis. Cohen argues however that what the former demoniac preaches in the region seems to produce unbelief. Cohen thus concludes that Mark was not seeking to set up a Gentile mission, but to show that Jesus was usually

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<sup>515</sup> See Wilson, *The Gentiles*, pp.29-30

<sup>516</sup> Karen Wenell, *Jesus and Land: Sacred and Social Space in Second Temple Judaism* (London: T&T Clark, 2007), pp.133-134

misunderstood: ‘Even when Jesus expects people simply to repeat a simple phrase of appreciation, they get it wrong.’<sup>517</sup>

In a similar manner to what we have seen in John’s Gospel, there is little evidence that Mark or his Jesus were concerned with non-Israelites. Besides the appearance of the Syrophenician woman and the jarring, passing references to ‘others’ and predictions of the preaching of the gospel to the whole world, the only mention of Gentiles is the statement that after Jesus is delivered to the chief priests and scribes, he will be condemned to death and delivered to the Gentiles (Mk 10:33), and a disparaging reference to Gentile political arrangements (Mk 10:42). Naturally, Mark was most likely written by a Jew,<sup>518</sup> and Mark’s interest in Gentiles is, as we might expect, minimal. It is possible that Mark expresses the motif of Jew first then Gentile, which we find in Matthew, in Luke and explicitly in Paul’s letter to the Romans; the feeding of the four thousand occurred in the Decapolis region, which, it is frequently argued, had a large population of Gentiles;<sup>519</sup> It is perhaps notable, therefore, that the Gentile region received a smaller feeding miracle (8:1-9) than the Jewish feeding miracle of five thousand (6:30-44). One significant Markan reference in which Mark explains that ‘the Pharisees, and all the Jews, do not eat unless they wash their hands, observing the traditions of the elders’ (Mk 7:3) may imply some concern for a Gentile readership. But it remains, nonetheless, that Gentiles occupied a secondary position for Mark, when he shows any interest in them at all.

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<sup>517</sup> Daniel Cohen, ‘The Gerasene Demoniac: A Jewish Approach to Liberation before 70 CE’ in *Judaism, Jewish Identities and the Gospel Tradition*, pp.152-173 (168)

<sup>518</sup> Joel Marcus, *Mark 1-8: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (The Anchor Bible, Vol. 27; New York: Doubleday, 2000), pp.19-24

<sup>519</sup> Marcus, *Mark*, pp.490-497



## Jesus and the Gentiles

The Jesus of each of the canonical gospels has a different attitude towards Gentiles, reflecting the interests of each individual writer. John and his Jesus are overwhelmingly disinterested in the Gentiles; Mark and his Jesus similarly do not really address the question of non-Jews, except in passing predictions about a post-resurrection Gentile mission; and Matthew and his Jesus are superficially very hostile towards Gentiles, although they accept their eventual inclusion in the Kingdom of God. Luke and his Jesus have the most complex relationship with Gentiles; Luke's Gospel lacks the hostility that we find in Matthew, and frequently looks forward to the Gentile mission, as it appears in Acts. The interpretation of the Gentile mission in Acts, however, cannot be taken for granted. As Jervell has demonstrated, the Gentiles in Acts may not have been 'pagans', as they are often imagined, but 'god fearers' who were already sympathetic to Judaism, and probably already practiced many of its customs.

It is now more-or-less axiomatic in historical Jesus scholarship that Jesus did not frequently interact with Gentiles.<sup>520</sup> The statement of Matthew's Jesus – that he has come only for 'the lost sheep of Israel' – probably reflects a general attitude that may have been held by Jesus. None of the gospels suggest that Jesus regularly interacted with non-Jews, and John and Mark take particularly little interest in the question of Gentile interactions. John and Mark's general neglect of the Gentile question is not because Jesus did not *ever* interact with Gentiles; from time to time, he evidently did, and Mark depicts one such interaction in the story of the Syrophenician woman. John and Mark's elision is due to the fact that interaction with Gentiles was seemingly a marginal issue for Jesus, and an issue which could just as well be left out. It was an

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<sup>520</sup> E.P. Sanders, *Jesus and Judaism* (London: SCM Press, 1985), pp.212-221, Wenell, *Jesus and Land*, pp.133-134

issue that Matthew and Luke took interest in, but was not – whichever way we look at it – a particular concern of Jesus.

The readings of the Nazareth synagogue episode presented at the start of this chapter thus find no historical basis. The interpretation of Luke 4:16-30, for many commentators, has hinged on the stereotype that the people of Nazareth could not bear the thought that their deity had an interest in other ethnic groups; this stereotype, as we have seen, finds limited expression in first century Jewish thought, in Second Temple Jewish texts or rabbinic texts. On the contrary, we have seen that some Jewish apologists, such as Josephus and Philo, were seemingly more congenial towards Gentiles than Jesus, who avoided interactions with non-Jews, and when he did interact with them, tended to treat them with hostility.

### **The historical Jesus, the Gentiles, and Palestinian Liberation Theology**

The above argument and conclusions should not simply be left there, however, for the question of Jesus' relationship to Gentiles is ostensibly of some importance to certain modern readers. I am responsible to consider the implications of the above construction of Jesus for marginalised readers, a construction of a Jesus who is basically scornful towards 'non-Jews'. In particular, the question of Jesus' attitude towards other ethnic groups is ostensibly of significance for modern day Palestinian Christians, and as Mark Lewis Taylor has highlighted, Palestine should be of particular concern of postcolonial theologians, as a people 'long repressed at the hands of British, Israeli, and U.S.

powers.’<sup>521</sup> As Michael Prior has demonstrated, Palestine is one of many places where the Bible has been instrumentalised in colonial projects.<sup>522</sup>

Naim Ateek, one of the foremost Palestinian Christian theologians, states that, ‘in Christ and through Christ and because of Christ Christians have been given a revealed insight into God’s nature and character’,<sup>523</sup> and therefore, the question of Jesus’ views on a particular subject – for instance, justice, equality, or ethnicity – are important. Relatedly, the issue of the ‘universalism’ of God is extremely important for Palestinian liberation theology. Since the establishment of the State of Israel, Palestinian Christians have been forced to contend with Zionist theology which holds that the creation of the modern State of Israel was ordained by God. The implications of such a theological position are that the *Nakba*, entailing the dispossession of 750,000 Palestinians, and the continued ethnic cleansing of Palestine is reduced to a side-product of the execution of God’s will; indeed for some extreme groups the ethnic cleansing of Palestine is seen explicitly as God’s will.<sup>524</sup> Thus Ateek’s reading of the Bible is acutely sensitive to questions of universalism and nationalism. He states that:

The Bible is a record of the dynamic, sometimes severe, tension between nationalist and universalist conceptions of the deity. For Palestinian Christians, this theme is one of the most fundamental theological issues, since it is directly

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<sup>521</sup> Mark Lewis Taylor, ‘Spirit and Liberation: Achieving Postcolonial Theology in the United States’ in *Postcolonial Theologies*, pp.39-55 (54)

<sup>522</sup> Michael Prior, *The Bible and Colonialism: A Moral Critique* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1997), pp.106-173

<sup>523</sup> Naim Stifan Ateek, *Justice and Only Justice: A Palestinian Theology of Liberation* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1989), pp.79-80

<sup>524</sup> See Masalha, *The Bible & Zionism*, pp.148-151

related to the concept of God. This is why it demands attention in a Palestinian theology of liberation.<sup>525</sup>

In *Justice and Only Justice* Ateek discusses Jesus' relationship to universalism and nationalism to some extent. He highlights, for instance, the way in which Jesus' eschatological and apocalyptic conception of the Kingdom of God differed from the 'nationalism' of the 'Zealot' movement,<sup>526</sup> a distinction similar to that which I will make in chapter 5, and a distinction that has been made by numerous New Testament scholars.<sup>527</sup> Jesus' non-participation in 'nationalistic' movements is potentially remarkable and seems to distinguish him from more overtly anti-Imperial Jewish peasants of his time.

Certain readings, however, such as the one I have outlined above, are potentially problematic for Palestinians. Ateek deals with the 'difficult' story of Jesus and the Syro-Phoenician woman, arguing that, 'Even the story of the healing of the Syro-Phoenician woman, which some have used to point to the bigotry of Jesus and his exclusive outlook, in reality supports his inclusive character',<sup>528</sup> because, ultimately, 'the daughter was healed, and this is what reflects the real character of Jesus.'<sup>529</sup> It could be asked, however, whether the historical Jesus really did espouse modern liberal ideals such as 'inclusivism'. As we have discussed above, it seems likely that Jesus' worldview was ethnocentric, unless he stood out somewhat like a sore thumb in the ancient world. Indeed, Matthew's Jesus is explicitly ethnocentric, as he declares the

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<sup>525</sup> Ateek, *Justice*, p.92

<sup>526</sup> Ateek, *Justice*, p.97

<sup>527</sup> See my discussion in chapter 5

<sup>528</sup> Ateek, *Justice*, p.98

<sup>529</sup> Ateek, *Justice*, p.99

ethnic-geographic boundaries of his mission to be constrained to the lost sheep of ‘the house of Israel’.

Another significant issue relating to Jesus and Palestinian liberation theology is the question of Jesus’ Jewishness. As James Crossley has demonstrated, the Jesus of Western scholarship frequently emerges as ‘Jewish... but not *that* Jewish’;<sup>530</sup> whilst many scholars have insisted on Jesus’ ‘Jewishness’, they ultimately rob him of it, by removing him from Jewish belief and practice. The Jesus of Palestinian liberation theology certainly tends to be distanced from Judaism, and as Adam Gregerman and Amy-Jill Levine have noted, some Palestinian liberation theologians may perpetuate Christian anti-Judaism in their presentation of Jews as ‘Christ killers’, Herods and other negative images.<sup>531</sup> But while this is problematic, Palestinian liberation theology is not unique in this respect. Anti-Judaism in Palestinian liberation theology is no doubt indebted, at least in part, to a discourse that has been perpetuated first and foremost by Western biblical scholarship. As Sugirtharajah has commented, indigenous liberation theologies tend to suffer from excessive interaction with the conservative Western church,<sup>532</sup> and it is certainly possible that anti-Jewish sentiments may have manifested themselves in Palestinian liberation theology in part as a result of this dialogue with Western Christian theologians. But another, more obvious fact may also explain the distancing of Jesus from Judaism in Palestinian liberation theology, and that is the fact that Judaism, for many Palestinians, appears to be intimately linked with the ideology of Zionism that has displaced and caused so much suffering for so many Palestinians. As Ateek states:

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<sup>530</sup> Crossley, *Age of Terror*, pp.177-194

<sup>531</sup> Adam Gregerman, ‘Old Wine in New Bottles: Liberation Theology and the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict’, *JES* 3, 2004, pp.1-20, Levine, *The Misunderstood Jew*, pp.183-185

<sup>532</sup> Sugirtharajah, *The Bible and the Third World*, p.242

Since the creation of the State, some Jewish and Christian interpreters have read the Old Testament largely as a Zionist text to such an extent that it has become almost repugnant to Palestinian Christians. As a result, the Old Testament has generally fallen into disuse among both clergy and laity, and the Church has been unable to come to terms with its ambiguities, questions, and paradoxes – especially with its direct application to the twentieth-century events in Palestine.<sup>533</sup>

Above we have seen that anti-Judaism seems to have strongly influenced some Western Christian interpretations of the Nazareth synagogue episode. In Palestinian liberation theology, however, we have reason to suspect that it is the close relationship between Zionism and Judaism, first and foremost, that has lead some Palestinian theologians to participate in what Levine and others have called Christian anti-Judaism.

As William Arnal highlights, ‘Jesus today is a symbolic battleground over which occur intellectual skirmishes about traditional identity-conceptions that have been, in our own “period of cultural complexity,” subjected to flux and challenge.’<sup>534</sup> It is therefore not surprising that the Jesus of Palestinian liberation theology is frequently presented as a Palestinian *rather than* a Jew. If for some black liberation theologians Jesus is black,<sup>535</sup> then it is easy to see how Jesus can be appropriated by Palestinian liberation theologians as a Palestinian; Jesus did once live, after all, in Palestine. In recent years, however, British and American scholars have paid a great deal of attention to constructing Jesus as a Jew. Particularly important and influential works might include Geza Vermes’ *Jesus the Jew* and E.P. Sanders’ *Jesus and Judaism*, although one could easily present a plethora of titles from well-known and well-respected biblical

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<sup>533</sup> Ateek, *Justice*, p.77

<sup>534</sup> William E. Arnal, ‘Jesus as Battleground in a Period of Cultural Complexity’ in *Jesus beyond Nationalism: Constructing the Historical Jesus in a Period of Cultural Complexity* (eds. Halvor Moxnes, Ward Blanton and James G. Crossley; London: Equinox, 2009), pp.99-117 (99)

<sup>535</sup> See William David Spencer, *Dread Jesus* (London: SPCK, 1999), pp.1-18

scholars and theologians that highlight the importance of Jesus' relationship to Jewishness, Judaism, and being a Jew. Emphasis on Jesus' Jewishness may be in part a response to Nazi scholarship that sought to distance Jesus from twentieth century Jews. But the construction of Jesus as a Jew would seem to have further political ramifications relating to American support for the State of Israel. The phenomenon of Christian Zionism is remarkably widespread in the US with Tim LaHaye's *Left Behind* franchise selling millions of books (including a 'kids' edition), computer games, and films, and Hal Lindsey's *Late Great Planet Earth* reportedly selling over fifteen million copies.<sup>536</sup> Christian Zionism moreover has played a vital role in the initial establishment of the State of Israel.<sup>537</sup> And constructions of Jesus as a Jew strengthen the implied relationship between Jesus, modern Jews and the State of Israel. Unless we wish to very unwisely deny the influence of broad cultural and political trends upon scholarship, it is sensible to assume that the construction of Jesus as a Jew has broader political and ideological implications, and that the success of the construction of Jesus the Jew should be understood partly within the context of Christian Zionism, and ultimately, American and British support for the State of Israel.<sup>538</sup>

Palestinian liberation theology also raises more general questions about the usefulness of the Bible for confronting certain injustices. Particularly notable here is the lack of any inherent concern for indigeneity in both the Hebrew and Christian Bibles. Palestinian liberation theologians are obviously well aware of the way in which the Hebrew Bible has been used to support the expulsion of Palestinians from the land. The

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<sup>536</sup> Crossley, *Age of Terror*, pp.152-160

<sup>537</sup> See Yaakov Ariel, "'It's All in the Bible": Evangelical Christians, Biblical Literalism, and Philosemitism in Our Times' in *Philosemitism in History* (eds. Jonathan Karp and Adam Sutcliffe; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), pp.257-285

<sup>538</sup> For further see James G. Crossley, 'Jesus the Jew since 1967' in *Jesus beyond Nationalism*, pp.119-137

influential *Gush Emunim* rabbis, for instance, have identified the indigenous Palestinians population as ‘Canaanites and Amalekites’, whose annihilation, Nur Masalha notes, ‘became a sacred duty and against whom war should be waged until their ‘memory be blotted out’ forever’ (Ex 17:16; Dt 25:17-19).<sup>539</sup> Indeed, the Bible has, for many, provided a ‘mandate’ that has led to the oppression and suffering of the indigenous population of Palestine since the *Nakba* and up until the present day.<sup>540</sup>

And the New Testament arguably retains similar colonial dynamics to those notions in the Hebrew Bible that are being used to further the oppression of the indigenous people of Palestine today. Benny Liew has argued that Mark’s Gospel basically mimics the ‘tyrannical, exclusionary and coercive politics’ of the Roman Empire,<sup>541</sup> and Stephen Moore has argued that Revelation, ‘though passionately resistant to Roman imperial ideology, paradoxically and persistently reinscribes its terms’.<sup>542</sup> Perhaps the most powerful emulator of such dynamics is John’s Gospel. As Musa Dube argues: ‘The mission passages – which can be fairly termed the central Christian narratives that authorize travelling and entering into foreign cultures and lands exemplified by John 4 – hardly propose relations of liberating interdependence between races, cultures and genders.’<sup>543</sup> The Christian Bible, like the Hebrew Bible, has been used to authorise colonial projects, and as Dube puts it, binds the Bible to a history of subjugation and exploitation.

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<sup>539</sup> Masalha, *Bible & Zionism*, pp.148-151

<sup>540</sup> Masalha, *Bible & Zionism*, pp.15-84

<sup>541</sup> Liew, ‘The Gospel of Mark’, p.117

<sup>542</sup> Moore, *Empire and Apocalypse*, p.118

<sup>543</sup> Musa W. Dube, ‘Reading for Decolonization (John 4.1-42)’ in *John and Postcolonialism: Travel, Space and Power* (eds. Musa W. Dube and Jeffrey L. Staley; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2002), pp.51-75 (74)



On the other hand, it is not surprising that Palestinian Christians mine the Bible for liberative strands. As Sugirtharajah highlights, in colonial contexts, colonised people tend to mine their literary and cultural traditions in an attempt to ‘retrieve cultural memory from the amnesia caused by colonialism’, often through ‘reinterpretation of stories, myths, and legends’.<sup>544</sup> In some respects, it is therefore little wonder that Palestinian liberation theologians have drawn on the imagery of, for example, Jesus’ crucifixion or the slaughter of the innocents to describe their situation. Such imagery, as Gregerman notes, may be unhelpful or offensive to some Jews,<sup>545</sup> but as Sugirtharajah’s work helps to demonstrate, the re-appropriation of such imagery is not surprising in colonial contexts. Sugirtharajah’s work suggests that the use of such imagery by Palestinian liberation theologians is not intended to be deliberately inflammatory or offensive to Jews, but is a natural (albeit ‘insensitive’) response to colonial violence.

### **The Nazareth Synagogue Episode in Western Christian Scholarship: A Postcolonial Critique**

Mainstream Western Christian scholarship has tended to understand the Nazareth synagogue episode as a text that points towards Jesus’ concern for a ‘Gentile’ mission, and as we have seen, this interpretation has rested heavily on anti-Jewish hermeneutics. Such an interpretation has also relied on the view that Jesus exhibited some sort of special concern for non-Jews, despite the fact that many historical Jesus scholars, as we have seen, agree that this was not the case. Such interpretations, therefore, have relied

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<sup>544</sup> Sugirtharajah, *Postcolonial Criticism*, p.55

<sup>545</sup> Gregerman, ‘Old Wine’, p.20

not only on the Othering and demonising of Judaism, but on an extremely selective and particular use of historical sources about Jesus.

Besides these two serious methodological issues, there is also the issue of what the mainstream scholarly Christian exegesis of this text implies for Christian theology. By the estimation of many Lukan scholars, Luke 4:16-30 points towards, and implicates Jesus in, the evangelisation of ‘the nations’. This text – having been run through a process of anti-Judaisation, having been invested with Christian missionary ideals, and having received exemption from the historical evidence about Jesus’ views on Gentiles – has thus been twisted by biblical scholars into the artillery of texts that justify Christian missionary activity and colonialism. The exegesis outlined at the start of this chapter thus constitutes not only a misrepresentation of the historical Jesus, a misrepresentation of Luke, and a misrepresentation of Judaism, but furthermore, it provides a justification for colonial activities. A brief and basic historical enquiry and a concern for establishing even the most fundamental facts about the Jesus who is presented in the canonical gospels is enough to highlight the problems with such insidious – yet nonetheless influential – views, which are common currency in New Testament scholarship.

### **Conclusion**

Many Western New Testament scholars have interpreted Luke 4:16-30 with an anti-Judaic hermeneutic, relying on the construction of Judaism as a religion of ‘exclusivism’ and Christianity as a religion of ‘grace’. On the contrary, I have argued that Jesus was actually less amiable towards non-Jews than some of his contemporaries, and furthermore, that Luke 4:16-30 does not concern any sort of ‘Gentile mission’. With

respect to the above discussion, it has seemed appropriate to discuss Palestinian Christian readings, and I have argued that the 'Christian anti-Judaism' identified by Levine in others in Palestinian liberation theology is indebted not only to the Western tradition of anti-Judaism, but to a lived experience of oppression, enabled by Western support for the Zionist occupation of Palestine. Finally, I highlighted the way in which the popular anti-Judaic reading of Luke 4:16-30 has served to justify colonial missionary activity, tragically and ironically tying this text not to a history of liberation, but a history of domination.

CHANTING DOWN BABYLON: JESUS, EMPIRE, AND CULTURAL  
RESISTANCE

OR

WHAT THE RASTAFARI MOVEMENT CAN TELL US ABOUT THE JESUS  
MOVEMENT

In the Rastas' conception of Babylon, the experience of forced captivity of Africans in the West parallels the Babylonian experience of the ancient Hebrews, and their own constant subjugation and downpression recall the Roman iron rule over its empire... Rastas find the spirit of Babylon surviving as an oppressive force in twentieth-century political and economic systems and institutions in the West...

- Ennis B. Edmonds<sup>546</sup>

**Introduction**

In the last couple of decades there has been an increased interest in Jesus' relationship with the Roman Empire, in certain schools of Western scholarship. Some of this scholarship has come from the sphere of postcolonial biblical criticism,<sup>547</sup> and some from scholars more frequently associated with historical Jesus studies.<sup>548</sup> Some of this

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<sup>546</sup> Ennis B. Edmonds, 'Dread "I" In-a-Babylon: Ideological Resistance and Cultural Revitalization' in *Chanting Down Babylon: The Rastafari Reader* (eds. Nathaniel Samuel Murrell, William David Spencer, Adrian Anthony McFarlane; Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1998), pp.23-35 (25)

<sup>547</sup> For example Moore, *Empire and Apocalypse*, Tat-siong Benny Liew, 'The Gospel of Mark' in *A Postcolonial Commentary on the New Testament Writings*, pp.105-132, Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, 'Introduction: Exploring the Intersections of Race, Gender, Status and Ethnicity in Early Christianity' in *Prejudice and Christian Beginnings: Investigating Race, Gender, and Ethnicity in Early Christian Studies* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2009), pp.1-23

<sup>548</sup> For example Horsley, *Jesus and Empire*, John Dominic Crossan, *God and Empire: Jesus against Rome, Then and Now* (New York: HarperOne, 2008)

work has emphasised Jesus' role as an opponent of the empire,<sup>549</sup> and some, on the other hand, has emphasised the way in which colonial dynamics have been mimicked in the gospel texts.<sup>550</sup> In this chapter I will explore Jesus' relationship to the Roman Empire by using the Rastafari movement under the British Empire as a contemporary comparison. As will become clear, numerous parallels can be drawn between Jewish resistance movements and the Rastafari movement, and these parallels, I suggest, may offer some insights about resistance movements in general, and the context from which the Jesus movement sprang.

### **Roman Imperialism and Jewish Resistance**

Understanding Roman imperialism and the ways in which it was manifested in Palestine in the time of Jesus seems to be important for understanding the earliest sources that speak of him; the role of the Roman authorities in Jesus' execution alone should raise questions about precisely what Jesus' relationship to Rome was. The effects of Roman imperialism were in fact likely to have been far reaching. Not only did Roman imperialism ultimately lead to the execution of Jesus, but it may have contributed to shaping Jewish identity, and to shape the way in which Jesus was remembered.

In chapter 1, I discussed the way in which the Empire extracted a notable amount of economic resources from Galilee and Judea. But Rome's interaction with Israel was more than merely economic. Indeed, it is often noted that the nature of Roman imperialism was particularly aggressive. As David Joy has recently stated, 'Although

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<sup>549</sup> Horsley concludes, 'In both his actions and teaching Jesus opposed the Roman imperial order and its effects on subject peoples.' Horsley, *Jesus and Empire*, p.126

<sup>550</sup> Again see Moore, *Empire and Apocalypse*, and Liew, 'The Gospel of Mark'

Palestine had undergone many stages of foreign occupation and domination, Roman policies were more imperial in character than the previous regimes'.<sup>551</sup> Examples of this sort of domination include events like when the Roman prefect, Pilate, set up effigies of Caesar in Jerusalem (*War* 2.169). Knowing that this would cause immense upset, Pilate erected the statues by cover of night, in an act which, in popular Jewish opinion, represented their laws being 'trodden under foot', according to Josephus. The Jews protested bitterly at this profound desecration of the holy city, but Pilate refused to move the statues. Upon Pilate's refusal, Josephus reports that 'they fell down prostrate upon the ground, and continued immovable in that posture for five days and as many nights'. Eventually, Pilate brought in soldiers and threatened that unless the Jews accepted the images of Caesar, they would be killed immediately. They responded by exposing their necks and crying out that they would sooner be killed than have their laws transgressed. Only after this did Pilate concede and have the images removed. This event is perhaps the most discussed and most explicit example of Jewish resistance to Roman imperialism.<sup>552</sup>

On another occasion, Pilate had the audacity to borrow money from the Temple treasury to finance the building of an aqueduct (*War* 2.175-177; *Ant.* 18.60-62). The Jews were in uproar that the sacred institution of the Temple was exploited in this way, and when Pilate was on a visit to Jerusalem they protested angrily. This time, however, Pilate was not so gracious to the protestors. He sent soldiers into the crowds disguised in civilian dress, and ordered them to beat the crowds with cudgels. Josephus reports that: 'Large numbers of the Jews perished, some from the blows which they received, others trodden to death by their companions in the ensuing flight. Covered by the fate

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<sup>551</sup> Joy, *Mark and its Subalterns*, p.74

<sup>552</sup> For further see Horsley, *Spiral of Violence*, pp.59-89

of the victims, the multitude was reduced to silence.’ We have little reason to distrust these reports of Josephus, even in their horrific brutality. It must be borne in mind that these were the sorts of events that led up to the revolt of 66CE, which the early Jesus movement grew up with, and which will have been known to the writers of the gospels.

The second important factor for understanding Jesus’ relationship to Roman imperialism is the phenomenon of Jewish resistance, which was at odds with Roman imperialism. Considering that the Jewish revolt was the biggest ever seen in the Roman Empire,<sup>553</sup> at around the time when the synoptic gospels were written, it ought to be treated as a significant historic event that may have had some bearing upon the gospel texts.<sup>554</sup> Jesus lived at a time when a small but vocal minority of Jews were refusing to pay taxes to Rome (an accusation that, according to Luke, was brought against Jesus himself), at a time when disputes frequently broke out with surrounding Gentile communities,<sup>555</sup> and when many Jews were pressing for political independence from Rome, believing that it was God’s will for them to do so.<sup>556</sup> Matthew and Luke, or so the consensus says, were written merely 5-10 years after a massive Jewish revolt against Rome, and Mark was likely written only a matter of 5-10 years before.<sup>557</sup> Arguably we should account, therefore, for the relationship toward Rome and resistance that was held by the four evangelists, before we can really begin to look at their presentation of Jesus. We will return to this issue, however, after examining the some of the manifestations of

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<sup>553</sup> Mendels, *Rise and Fall*, p.355

<sup>554</sup> Mendels, *Rise and Fall*, p.ix

<sup>555</sup> Goodman, *The Ruling Class of Judea*, p.13

<sup>556</sup> Mendels, *Rise and Fall*, p.369

<sup>557</sup> These figures are of course not particularly specific, but they need not be here; by almost all scholarly estimates, all of the canonical gospels were written nearer to the time of the Jewish war than to the execution of Jesus

Jewish resistance, and some of the ways in which Palestinian Jews responded to Roman imperialism.

### **Postcolonial Theory and Imperial Resistance**

With the introduction of postcolonial theory to biblical studies around two decades ago, there has been a renewed interest in the role of Roman imperialism for reading the gospel texts. Numerous biblical scholars have drawn on postcolonial theory as a tool for reading the gospels and rest of the New Testament, in several different ways. Benny Liew, for instance, has drawn on Homi Bhabha's concept of mimicry to argue that Mark's Gospel effectively presents Jesus and the Kingdom of God as a simple alternative to the Roman Empire, and which basically replicates or 'mimics' its 'tyrannical, exclusionary and coercive politics'.<sup>558</sup> Others, generally those who distance themselves somewhat from the discourse 'postcolonialism' but draw on the theory nonetheless, have focused more on the relationship of Jesus (or Paul) to Roman imperialism, as Richard Horsley has done so effectively in his book *Jesus and Empire*. Horsley, however, in contrast to Liew, tends to highlight the ways in which Jesus *opposed* the dynamics of Roman imperialism. The subtitle of his recent edited volume *In the Shadow of Empire: Reclaiming the Bible as a History of Faithful Resistance* highlights the fundamental assumptions of such an approach which seeks to treat the bible as a text that we may expect to resist imperialism.<sup>559</sup> Numerous parallels can be drawn between liberation hermeneutics and postcolonial biblical criticism, but here, I concur with Sugirtharajah, we encounter a fundamental divergence; whereas liberation

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<sup>558</sup> Liew, 'The Gospel of Mark', p.117

<sup>559</sup> Richard A. Horsley (ed.), *In the Shadow of Empire: Reclaiming the Bible as a History of Faithful Resistance* (Edinburgh: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008)



hermeneutics treat biblical texts as unambiguously good, postcolonial biblical criticism tends to treat the bible as a mixed bag, containing texts which may be used both to liberate and to oppress. Such an approach, it seems to me, is a more even-handed way to treat biblical texts, especially if we are using them as a historical sources.

One key text to consider in discussions about the gospels, Roman imperialism, and postcolonialism is the Gerasene Demoniac episode (Mk 5:1-20). This text has long been considered to be saying something about Roman imperialism, although precisely what it is saying is, of course, debated.<sup>560</sup> Frequently noted, however, is that ‘Legion’ is a Latin term that referred to a Roman military contingent, and Jesus’ casting of a ‘Legion’ of demons into a herd of unclean swine is suggestive of either Jesus or Mark’s desire for the casting out of Roman influence from Israel. Also frequently noted is the relationship between colonialism and mental disorders, with the suggestion that the Gerasene demoniac represents such a case.<sup>561</sup> Less frequently noted is that the drowning of the swine in the sea is in fact highly suggestive of the drowning of the Egyptians in the Red Sea (Ex 14:22-23),<sup>562</sup> giving this interpretation an intertextual precedent. There is no need to discuss this incident in detail here, but I will note a few things. That an anti-imperial ideology informed this text seems likely, and, as we shall, would not be surprising to see from Mark. But discussing the historicity of this incident, it scarcely needs saying, is pointless. Even if some explanation were given for the problem that the

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<sup>560</sup> For a very detailed bibliography see Moore, *Empire and Apocalypse*, pp.25-26

<sup>561</sup> In this regard Horsley and others have pointed to Fanon’s work (first published in 1961) which examines the relationship between colonialism and mental disorders in depth. See Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth* (London: Penguin, 2001), pp.200-250

<sup>562</sup> See Crossan, *The Historical Jesus*, p.314

Gerasenes is several miles away from the Sea of Galilee,<sup>563</sup> one cannot establish the historicity of such a miraculous event as two thousand pigs committing suicide because they became possessed.

As Mark Chancey has highlighted, strictly speaking, neither Galilee nor Judea were Roman colonies, and so I shall avoid using the term ‘colonial’ to speak of Roman Palestine. There may have been very little in the way of a Roman military presence in Galilee and Judea (although Herod’s army served a similar function for some years at least) and as Horsley has noted, most of the time it was through fear that the Roman imperial order was maintained, rather than through physical force. It is surely beyond dispute, however, that Galilee and Judea were subject to Roman dominion or ‘imperialism’, even if they were allowed relative freedom. As we have seen above, the maintenance of Roman hegemony cost the Jews economically, Roman governors like Pilate deliberately undermined Jewish customs, and as Chancey and others have shown,<sup>564</sup> the spread of Roman and Hellenistic culture throughout Palestine in the Roman period was notable, and was perceived as threatening. These factors certainly all added fuel to the fire of Jewish resistance movements.

It must be fully appreciated that there were three major Jewish revolts against Rome (66-73 CE, 115-117 CE and 132-135 CE), and, in the years following the execution of Jesus, there was escalating unrest and minor rebellions amongst the peasantry.<sup>565</sup> But the work of James Scott, introduced formally to New Testament

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<sup>563</sup> See discussion in Robert H. Gundry, *Mark: Volume 1 (1-8): A Commentary on His Apology for the Cross* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1993), pp.255-256, Morna D. Hooker, *The Gospel According to St Mark* (London: Continuum, 1991), p.142

<sup>564</sup> See Mark C. Chancey, *Greco-Roman Culture and the Galilee of Jesus* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005)

<sup>565</sup> See my section on ‘The Galilean Bandits’ in chapter 2

studies by Horsley in his book *Hidden Transcripts and the Arts of Resistance*, has helped to highlight that peasant resistance throughout history has not been limited to major uprisings and revolts, and that the absence of major uprisings and revolts does not imply that there was no unrest. Scott argues that discontent can be expressed through, ‘the ordinary weapons of relatively powerless groups: foot dragging, dissimulation, false compliance, pilfering, feigned ignorance, slander, arson, sabotage, and so on.’<sup>566</sup> In a similar vein, Stephen Duncombe highlights that political action does not always look like political action:

Countless times throughout the day each of us thinks and acts through a culture which reflects and reinforces a dominant way of seeing and being in the world, or we think and act in ways which challenge and undermine this culture... While these everyday events frequently take place in the margins of what is commonly understood as politics, these cultural practices are, indeed, political.<sup>567</sup>

Such acts, I will argue, were common amongst Jewish groups in Roman Palestine. As a contemporary and more theorised imperial resistance movement in which cultural resistance has played an important role, I will refer now to the Rastafari movement as a guide for exploring the possible forms of cultural resistance that were practiced by Jews at the time of Jesus and in the years immediately following his execution.

### **Cultural Resistance: From the Rastafari Movement to Jewish Resistance against Rome**

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<sup>566</sup> James C. Scott, *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance* (Yale University Press, 1985), p.29

<sup>567</sup> Stephen Duncombe, *Cultural Resistance Reader* (London: Verso, 2002), p.82

The Rastafari movement is fundamentally and emphatically anti-imperial, and integral to its critique of Empire are acts of cultural resistance. Writes Ennis Edmonds:

Any interpretation of the significance of Rastafari must begin with the understanding that it is a conscious attempt by the African soul to free itself from the alienating fetters of colonialism and its contemporary legacies. To accomplish this freedom, Rastas have unleashed an ideological assault on the centre and institutions that have dominated the African diaspora since the seventeenth century. In Rastafarian terms, this consists of “beating down Babylon.” They have also embarked upon an ambitious endeavour of “steppin’ outa (out of) Babylon” *to create an alternative culture that reflects a sense of their African heritage*’ (my italics).<sup>568</sup>

Before considering precisely how cultural resistance has been practiced by the Rastafari, it is worth briefly considering the Rastas complex relationship with the Bible. Despite the fact that the Bible – more specifically the King James Bible – was brought to Jamaica by the colonisers, the Rastafari movement has notably made use of the Bible to challenge the oppression of Jamaicans. In the Rasta view, writes Edmonds, ‘the experience of forced captivity of Africans in the West parallels the Babylonian experience of the ancient Hebrews, and their own constant subjugation and downpression recall the Roman iron rule over its empire.’<sup>569</sup> For this reason, ‘Babylon’ is precisely the name that Rastas give to Western imperialism. In Rasta theology, like in many biblical liberation theologies, connections are made between modern oppressed people, and the stories of biblical people under oppression and imperial domination. Although some Rastas have acknowledged the way in which the Bible, through the institution of the Church, played a part in the oppression of Jamaicans, in general it

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<sup>568</sup> Edmonds, ‘Dread “I” In-a-Babylon’, p.23

<sup>569</sup> Edmonds, ‘Dread “I” In-a-Babylon’, p.25

remains, nonetheless, a tool for fighting oppression and imperialism.<sup>570</sup> Bob Marley's lyric, 'Jah will rule equality, break down downpression, wipe away transgression, and set the captives free', it has been argued, is derived from Luke 4:18-10 (or Isaiah 61:1-2). And Bob Marley, as we will see, like many other Rastas utilised the Bible in his cries for justice.<sup>571</sup>

In his study *Rasta and Resistance*, Horace Campbell identifies four main areas in which Rastas practiced cultural resistance: language, diet, music and politics.<sup>572</sup> Other categories may also be added to these. Rasta dress, for example, specifically the wearing of Ethiopian colours and dreadlocks, is also frequently cited as fundamental to Rasta cultural resistance.<sup>573</sup> While Rasta cultural resistance should not be boiled down to merely five categories, these sites of cultural resistance which were so apparent in the Rastafari movement flag up potential sites where, I will argue, we might see cultural resistance in Jewish groups under Roman imperialism.

### **Language as Cultural Resistance**

In postcolonial theory, language has frequently been identified as a location for resistance. Celia Britton states that, in European colonialism,

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<sup>570</sup> For further see Robert Beckford, *Dread and Pentecostal: A Political Theology for the Black Church in Britain* (London: SPCK, 2000)

<sup>571</sup> See Noel Leo Erskine, 'The Bible and Reggae: Liberation of Subjugation?' in *The Bible in/and Popular Culture: A Creative Encounter* (eds. Philip Culbertson and Elaine M. Wainwright; Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2010), pp.97-110

<sup>572</sup> Horace Campbell, *Rasta and Resistance: From Marcus Garvey to Walter Rodney* (London: Hansib Publishing Ltd, 1985), p.121-150

<sup>573</sup> Edmonds, 'Dread "I" In-a-Babylon', p.33

Language became an instrument for control and command and anticolonial resistance therefore necessarily included as one of its dimensions resistance to the colonizer's language... Both during the colonial period and in the aftermath of decolonization, language was and is a key site of conflict.<sup>574</sup>

This phenomenon is illustrated particularly well by the Rastafari movement. Rastas developed their own new vocabulary, known as *Iyaric*, which modified English words to create a dialect somewhat removed from the language of the colonisers. Edmonds suggests that the linguistic devices used by Rastas not only 'directly attack the integrity of the English language' but 'make their speech almost incoherent to the uninitiated.'<sup>575</sup> Rastas avoid some words that possess negative connotations; 'Jesus' for example, associated with the white, Western figurehead of Christianity and the *S.S. Jesus* slave ship,<sup>576</sup> becomes 'Yeshua' for some. 'Understand' becomes 'overstand' and 'everlasting' becomes 'everliving'. Perhaps most illustrative of the anti-colonial sentiments entrenched in Rastafari vocabulary is the nickname first given to Queen Elizabeth I and now to Queen Elizabeth II, 'Elizabitch'.<sup>577</sup> Even today Queen Elizabeth remains the Head of State of Jamaica, continuing to function as a symbol of Western imperialism and oppression.

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<sup>574</sup> Celia M. Britton, *Edouard Glissant and Postcolonial Theory: Strategies of Language and Resistance* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1999), p.1

<sup>575</sup> Edmonds, 'Dread "I" In-a-Babylon', p.32

<sup>576</sup> See Spencer, *Dread Jesus*, p.4

<sup>577</sup> Thomas H. Slone, *Rasta is Cuss: A Dictionary of Rastafarian Cursing* (Oakland, California: Masalai Press, 2003), p.45

Another reason why language becomes a significant location for colonial resistance is because of its ties with history and culture. Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, writing from his experience of colonialism in Kenya argues: 'Culture is almost indistinguishable from the language that makes possible its genesis, growth, banking, articulation and its transmission from one generation to the next.'<sup>578</sup> For Ngũgĩ, culture is completely embedded in language. The use of the mother-tongue in a colonial or postcolonial context not only represents a rejection of the colonisers' language, but invokes the history and culture of the colonised people, which is inherently connected to their language. For this reason Ngũgĩ has now stopped writing in English altogether.

On the other hand, throughout history language has frequently been used by colonisers as part of the project of cultural imperialism. In New Zealand, for instance, the Maori language was outlawed for several decades by British colonisers, to suppress Maori culture and identity.<sup>579</sup> Although nothing this severe happened in Roman Palestine, it is telling that the whole of New Testament, despite being written by Aramaic speaking Jewish communities, was composed in Greek. Similarly, it is telling that *Iyoric* is derived from English, the language of the coloniser, and shares many of its features.<sup>580</sup>

Postcolonial criticism provides a helpful perspective for looking at the use of Aramaic – the Jewish mother-tongue – which is so frequently scattered around Mark's Gospel. Why does Mark (and why Mark, more than Matthew, Luke and John, we might

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<sup>578</sup> Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, *Decolonising the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature* (London: Currey, 1986), p.15

<sup>579</sup> See W. Parsonage, 'The Education of Maoris in New Zealand' *Journal of the Polynesian Society*, 65, 1, 1956, pp.5-11 <<http://www.jps.auckland.ac.nz/document/?wid=2799>> (18 June 2012)

<sup>580</sup> Bhabha's concept of hybridity helps to explain this phenomenon of 'hybrid' language. See Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 2004), pp.58-60

also ask) use Aramaic words at certain points, and to what effect? It has long been noted that the use of Aramaic terms may have helped audiences to identify the words more closely with their original speaker.<sup>581</sup> I would suggest, however, that the use of Aramaic had an additional, more political function than just this, and may have been used by Mark, as it likely was by Jews in general, as an expression of cultural resistance.

The first term to consider is *abbā*. Most commentators state that the word that Jesus uses when praying in the Garden of Gethsemane (14:36) is indicative of the intimacy of Jesus' relationship to God. A popular speculation has been that the term may be translated as something like 'Daddy', a now discredited view.<sup>582</sup> When we read this text we should consider instead that the term *abba* is derived from the Hebrew 'av, meaning 'father' or 'ancestor'. It has an extremely historic dimension. 'av does not merely connote a person's father, but it points to all Hebrew forefathers (cf. Gen 32:9; 1 Chron 29:10; Is 38:5; Jer 31:9).<sup>583</sup> The term is deeply culturally loaded, and with this term Mark is seeking to invoke the God of Jesus' Israelite ancestors. When viewed in these terms, Mark's use of *abbā* takes on profound cultural and political significance. Further, as Levine has noted, Roman Caesars were called 'father'. According to Levine: 'By speaking of the "Father in heaven," Jesus thus insists that Rome is not the "true" father.'<sup>584</sup> The term *abbā* therefore simultaneously asserts Israelite heritage and rejects Roman claims to authority.

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<sup>581</sup> As Howard Clark Kee states: "(Mark) ... is writing from within a circle for whom Aramaic expressions would serve neither scholarly interests in historical precision nor antiquarian curiosity, but would enable the reader to identify more fully with the poignant and powerful narrative than a purely Greek account could accomplish.' See Howard Clark Kee, *Community of the New Age: Studies in Mark's Gospel* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1984), p.102

<sup>582</sup> For a detailed discussion see James Barr, 'Abbā Isn't Daddy', *JTS* 39, 1988, pp.28-47

<sup>583</sup> See Georg Fohrer, *Hebrew and Aramaic Dictionary of the Old Testament* (London: SCM Press, 1973), p.309

<sup>584</sup> Levine, *The Misunderstood Jew*, p.45



Two more Aramaic usages to consider are ‘*talitha koum*’ (‘arise, little girl’),<sup>585</sup> and ‘*ephphatha*’ (‘be opened’).<sup>586</sup> What is the explanation for Mark’s inclusion of Aramaic words in these two instances? The girl-thought-dead who, according to Jesus, is only ‘sleeping’, is apparently revived by Jesus’ words in her native language (5:41). The man who was deaf, and resultantly had a ‘speech impediment’, is similarly healed by Jesus’ speaking of Aramaic words (which he presumably could not hear), and, viscerally, Jesus’ spit (7:32-35). Naturally, but in stark contradistinction, Mark does not bestow the mother tongue upon the non-Jew, the Syrophenician who appears in between the two Aramaic healings, and who is instead reviled as a dog (7:27).<sup>587</sup> In these two Jewish healings, Jesus’ use of the mother tongue – which functions, as we have seen, as a conduit to cultural heritage – serves to rouse the senses of the sleeping girl and the deaf man. Jesus’ use of Aramaic terms here invokes the ancestral culture of the little girl and the deaf man, and restores them.

Some more Aramaic terms that appear in Mark’s Gospel are the names provided for Jesus’ three disciples, Peter, who is *Cephas*, or, ‘rock’, and James and John who are nicknamed *Boanerges*, or, ‘Sons of Thunder’.<sup>588</sup> Name giving in a colonial context is of renowned importance. One of the ways in which Daniel and his friends are colonised is through having their names changed (Dan 1:7). A similar phenomenon occurred in colonial Hong Kong, a parallel that has been commented upon by at least a couple of

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<sup>585</sup> Mk 5:41

<sup>586</sup> Mk 7:34

<sup>587</sup> Or in Matthew, ignored on account of her ethnicity before being reviled as a dog (Mt 15:21-28). For a detailed reading of Matthew’s story of the Canaanite woman see Dube, *Postcolonial Feminist*, pp.127-183

<sup>588</sup> See Maurice Casey, *Aramaic Sources of Mark’s Gospel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), p.84

biblical scholars who have experienced the phenomenon first-hand.<sup>589</sup> Philip Chia notes that:

Identity and name are very personal belongings – being and existence are rooted in them. The change of one’s name without one’s consent or by force, not only is an insult to one’s integrity and dignity, but also a denial of their ancestry.<sup>590</sup>

In restoring Peter, James and John’s Aramaic identity through their names, Mark de-Hellenizes them, decolonises them, and gives them back their Jewish identity.

The naming of Cephas and Boanerges may have another function too. In a time of increasing resistance to imperialism and guerilla-style rebellions the names ‘Rock’ and ‘Sons of Thunder’ become rather suggestive; it is not hard to imagine that the names Cephas and Boanerges identify revolutionaries. If Jesus used these names to refer to Peter and James and John, only Aramaic speakers could understand, and so their radical identity as ‘Rock’ and ‘Sons of Thunder’ could remain a secret from any prying Roman. The masculinity of these names also suggests their connotations of revolution and uprising. As Harold Washington notes, ‘in the Hebrew bible... a capacity for violence is synonymous with manliness’.<sup>591</sup> The Philistines exhort one another to ‘become men... and fight’ (1 Sam 4:9).<sup>592</sup> Yahweh himself mocks the armies of Nineveh for their femininity (Nah 3:13), and the warriors of the imperial force of Babylon are

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<sup>589</sup> See Philip Chia, ‘On Naming the Subject: Postcolonial Reading of Daniel 1’ in *The Postcolonial Biblical Reader* (ed. R.S. Sugirtharajah; Oxford: Blackwell, 2006), pp.171-185 (177) and Tat-siong Benny Liew, ‘Tyranny, Boundary and Might: Colonial Mimicry in Mark’s Gospel’, *JSNT* 21, 1999, pp.7-31 (9-10). Ngũgĩ, as well as declining to write in English, has also rejected his ‘colonial’ name, in favour of his actual name.

<sup>590</sup> Chia, ‘On Naming the Subject’, p.177

<sup>591</sup> Harold C. Washington, ‘Violence and the Construction of Gender in the Hebrew Bible: A New Historicist Approach’, *Bib Int*, 5.4, 1997, pp.324-363 (326)

<sup>592</sup> Clines, *Interested Parties*, pp.218-219

mocked when they give up fighting: ‘their strength has failed, they have become women’ (Jer 51:30).<sup>593</sup> In deriding these dominating armies as feminine, these texts seek to reassert the masculinity of the Hebrew armies. War, Washington notes, being an activity historically described as performed by men only, in a space containing nothing but men, is acutely gendered.<sup>594</sup> Jesus’ nicknaming of his three closest disciples as Cephas and Boanerges not only renders them as Aramaic speaking Israelites, but it appears to ‘masculinise’ them as anti-Roman warriors.

The phrase *‘eloi eloi lema sabachtani’* is another important Aramaic phrase in Mark’s Gospel. To shed some light on the significance of this phrase, it will be helpful to introduce another concept from postcolonial theory, ‘heritagist readings’. This concept has been introduced to biblical studies by Sugirtharajah, and Sugirtharajah’s definition warrants quoting at some length here:

This mode of interpretation [heritagist reading] is an attempt by the colonized to find conceptual analogies in their high culture and textual traditions and philosophies, and also in their oral and visual art forms. It is an attempt to retrieve cultural memory from the amnesia caused by colonialism. This retrieval takes place sometimes in the form of reinterpretation of stories, myths, and legends as a remembered history of a region, class, caste, gender, or race, sometimes as intertextual interpolation of quotations, allusions, and references.<sup>595</sup>

The process that Sugirtharajah outlines, I would argue, neatly describes what we find in each of the gospels’ retelling of Jesus’ execution. The execution narrative, in all four of the canonical gospels, draws heavily on the ‘high culture and textual traditions and

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<sup>593</sup> Washington, ‘Violence and the Construction of Gender’, p.331

<sup>594</sup> Washington, ‘Violence and the Construction of Gender’, pp.329-330

<sup>595</sup> Sugirtharajah, *Postcolonial Criticism*, p.55

philosophies' of Palestinian Judaism, by reinterpreting Jesus as the character from Psalm 22 in almost minute detail; Jesus, like the character in Psalm 22, is beaten and wounded,<sup>596</sup> scorned and mocked,<sup>597</sup> and surrounded by enemies,<sup>598</sup> with hands and feet pierced,<sup>599</sup> even the seemingly obscure detail of lots being cast for his clothes<sup>600</sup> is interpolated by the evangelists. And in Mark he cries out in his native language, like the Psalmist, 'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?' It is clear that for each of the gospel writers, the Hebrew Scriptures, specifically Psalm 22, provided a conceptual analogy from the Hebrew cultural tradition with which to understand Jesus' execution.

To take this line of thought further, according to Sugirtharajah's understanding of heritagist readings, the way in which the gospel writers invoke their cultural and literary traditions at this point may also have a liberative function in a colonial context. Sugirtharajah explains that:

Heritagist reading offered potentially a positive space for overcoming the trauma of colonialism and for regaining the lost indigenous cultural consciousness. Delving into their heritage not only helped the colonized to cope with colonialism... but it helped them to nurture cultural pride.<sup>601</sup>

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<sup>596</sup> Ps 22:14-15

<sup>597</sup> Ps 22:6-7/Mk 15:17-20, 29-31

<sup>598</sup> Ps 22:13-14/Mk 15:16, 29, 31-32, 39

<sup>599</sup> Ps 22:16b

<sup>600</sup> Ps 22:18/Mk 15:24

<sup>601</sup> Sugirtharajah, *Postcolonial Criticism*, p.61

Through interpolation, then, the gospel writers turned Jesus' execution –what could have been seen as a devastating event for Jewish resistance – into a source of pride. The gospels' reinterpretation of Psalm 22 functions to assimilate Jesus into Hebrew history and turns the execution from an outworking of imperial domination, into the fulfillment of scripture, and into a significant or even liberative episode in Jewish history. The later notion of the resurrection, although absent from the earliest copies of Mark, achieves this end even more so. That Mark has Jesus referencing the Psalm here in Aramaic, is entirely natural. Mark's use of the mother tongue at this point functions as a portal to Israelite cultural heritage, and serves to position Jesus as a guardian and champion of it.

### **Food as Cultural Resistance**

Different cultures frequently cultivate their own distinctive foods and preparation techniques. Historically, this has been, in part, down to the particular foods that grow in a particular region, depending on climate, soil type and other factors. In this respect the diet of a particular community is inextricably connected with the land that that people initially inhabited; this explains the frequency with which we find the triad of oil (from olives), bread (from wheat or barley), and wine (from grapes) in biblical texts.<sup>602</sup> That the 'promised land' is repeatedly described as a land flowing with milk and honey confirms the intimate relationship that can be shared between land and the food that it produces.<sup>603</sup> But the relationship between food and culture can go even further than that, and in colonial contexts, food can become a key site for resistance.

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<sup>602</sup> Nathan MacDonald, *What Did the Ancient Israelites Eat? Diet in Biblical Times* (Cambridge: William B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2008), pp.3-4

<sup>603</sup> Cf. Ex 3:8, 17, 13:5, 33:3; Lev 20:24; Num 13:27, 14:8; Deut 6:3, 11:9, 26:9, 15, 27:3, 31:20; Josh 5:6; Jer 11:5, 33:22; Ez 20:15 and MacDonald, *What Did the Ancient Israelites Eat*, pp.3-9

The Rasta diet, known as 'Ital', formed a distinct part of Rasta cultural resistance. Through corporate globalisation, the US sought to export their industries and culture to Jamaica in the form of the likes of Kelloggs, KFC and McDonalds. The Rastas, however, resisted this form of cultural colonialism by breaking dependence on imported foods, and embarking on a project to use the fruit, vegetables and plants that grew in the Jamaican countryside. Instead of buying imported American food, Rastas insisted on eating yams, boiled bananas, plaintains, callaloo, chocho and the food that grew locally.<sup>604</sup> Almost all Rastas, taking their cue from the Hebrew Scriptures, also renounced the consumption of pork, providing another way in which to distinguish their diet from that of their colonisers.<sup>605</sup> The Ital diet demonstrates the way in which Rastas sought to resist assimilation into the coloniser's culture and to establish their own cultural identity through the food that they ate.

Jewish cultural resistance through diet predates the Roman period, with the first instance appearing in the book of Daniel. The Levitical food laws were fundamental to Hebrew cultural tradition (Lev 11:1-47, Deut 14:1-29), and when Daniel and his friends refused to eat the food that was presented to them in the Babylonian royal courts, it represented a clear form of cultural resistance. Daniel and his friends, living under Babylonian rule, were displaced, renamed and educated to speak the language of the coloniser. But in spite of this, they insisted that they would not 'defile' (*gā'al*) themselves with the food of King Nebuchadnezzar (Dan 1:8), preferring to eat only vegetables and water (Dan 1:12); in so doing, they avoided inherently unclean foods (like pork), meat that may not have had the blood drained from it (Lev 17:13-14), and

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<sup>604</sup> Campbell, *Rasta and Resistance*, p.122

<sup>605</sup> Campbell, *Rasta and Resistance*, p.123

meat and wine that may have been first sacrificially offered to Babylonian gods.<sup>606</sup> We find numerous similar instances in the apocryphal literature – in the books of Tobit, Judith, and 1 and 3 Maccabees – where Jews reject the food of Gentiles or dominating people.<sup>607</sup>

Cultural feasts are another highly significant way in which food was wrapped up with resistance. It is no surprise that Luke tells us that Jesus was ‘eager’ to share the Passover feast with his disciples (Lk 22:15). Simon Samuel in his *Postcolonial Reading of Mark’s Story of Jesus* puts it far too mildly stating that ‘preparation of a meal in the context of the Passover festival indicates the affiliation of the Jesus community to its native religio-cultural tradition’;<sup>608</sup> the Passover was seemingly the most important feast of the year, and was *intimately* tied-up with Jewish identity and heritage. It is no wonder that Maurice Casey postulates an Aramaic source for this text. As Casey observes, ‘This source was written by an Aramaic-speaking Jew from Israel, who was writing for people who shared *his* cultural assumptions’ (italics original).<sup>609</sup> The Passover was always profoundly connected to Israelite heritage and Jesus’ so-called ‘last supper’<sup>610</sup> was no different. The celebration of the Passover under Roman imperialism had heightened political and cultural significance in two ways. Firstly, being a deeply-rooted ritual from Israelite heritage, the very performance of such a ritual in a colonial context was of profound importance for reaffirming a culture and identity that was perceived to

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<sup>606</sup> Stephen R. Miller, *Daniel* (The New American Commentary Series, vol.18; Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1994), p.66-7. See Sanders, *Judaism*, p.216

<sup>607</sup> Cf. Tob 1:10-12; Jud 10:5, 12:2, 9, 19; 1 Mac 1:62-63; 3 Mac 3:3.4-7

<sup>608</sup> Samuel Simon, *A Postcolonial Reading of Mark’s Story of Jesus* (University of Sheffield doctoral dissertation, 2002), p.231

<sup>609</sup> Casey, *Aramaic Sources*, p.237

<sup>610</sup> ‘The Last Supper’ being a term which notably distances this event from Jewish practice, reframing it as a Christian custom

be under threat of erosion by imperial rule.<sup>611</sup> Secondly, the Passover feast explicitly recalled the liberation of the Israelites from the Egyptians. The Passover entailed a proclamation of the Israelites' freedom from foreign domination, a proclamation that did not sit well with any Roman claim to power.

The symbolism of the Passover, which was already saturated with meaning, took on yet another dimension when Jesus celebrated it with his disciples for the last time. Jesus' frequent predictions of his own death could well be historical as he was undoubtedly aware of the opposition that he faced; it is possible that he even foresaw that it would be the Gentiles who would ultimately execute him (Mk 10:33; Mt 20:19; Lk 18:32). I would suggest that Jesus' 'embodying' of the Passover feast was another form of a heritagist reading. In identifying himself with this deeply cultural act, he sought to proclaim himself as a martyr for the liberation of his people.<sup>612</sup> The celebration of the Passover, then, for Jesus and his disciples, served to mark (and possibly to subsequently commemorate) the death of a Jewish martyr, a prophet, and, in the view of the early Jesus movement, the promised messiah (Cf. Mt 23:37/Lk 13:34, 11:49).

Another way in which food functioned as cultural resistance may be demonstrated in the free provision of food taught by John the Baptist, and practiced by the Essenes, and by Jesus and his disciples. As we have seen in chapter 1, poverty was rife in the Greco-Roman world – a situation exacerbated by imperial taxes – and this

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<sup>611</sup> On this point I strongly disagree with Samuel who alarmingly suggests 'For Mark the Passover presents only a general framework to conduct such an empowering meal without any direct interest in Jewish Passover traditions' (my italics), and seeks out the themes of mimicry and hybridization in this text, themes which in this instance seem to highlight very little about the scenario, Cf. Samuel, *A Postcolonial Reading*, pp.232-233

<sup>612</sup> In this respect I agree with Jonathan Klawans' interpretation of Jesus' meaning in the last supper: 'This too is divine service', See Jonathan Klawans, 'Interpreting the Last Supper: Sacrifice, Spiritualization, and Anti-Sacrifice', *NTS* 48.1, 2002, pp.1-17 (17)



poverty meant that hunger was not uncommon for poorer peasants.<sup>613</sup> In a time of economic hardship, worsened throughout the Mediterranean world by the Roman dominium, free food distribution from below provided a radical alternative to the ‘bread and circuses’ provided for the *plebs* by the Roman elite, the meagre provisions that were begrudgingly forked out to appease some of the poor in Rome.<sup>614</sup> Many different groups counteracted the imperial economics of extraction and exploitation. John the Baptist taught that everyone who had food should share it with the one who had none (Lk 3:11), and the Essene poorhouses provided food for the hungry.<sup>615</sup> Each of the gospels report that Jesus performed feeding miracles: from the wedding at Cana,<sup>616</sup> to the feeding of the four thousand,<sup>617</sup> the feeding of the five thousand,<sup>618</sup> and the miraculous haul of fish.<sup>619</sup> The generosity of free food distribution may have represented a critique of imperial economics, which sought to extract the maximum amount possible from the peasantry and to give as little as possible in return. The giving of free food functioned as fundamental cultural resistance in its rejection of imperial economics and its embrace of sharing and egalitarianism.<sup>620</sup>

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<sup>613</sup> For a summary of recent discussions in relation to the New Testament see Longenecker, *Remember the Poor*, pp.36-59. For a thorough study see Margaret Atkins and Robin Osborne (eds), *Poverty in the Roman World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006)

<sup>614</sup> Juvenal, Sat. 10.77-81

<sup>615</sup> *War* 2.127, 1QS 1:9, 2:24-5; CD 6:20-7:1. See Capper, ‘Essene Community Houses’, pp.496-501 and Beall, *Josephus’ Description of the Essenes*, p.123

<sup>616</sup> Jn 2:1-11

<sup>617</sup> Mt 15:29-38, Mk 8:1-8

<sup>618</sup> Mt 14:15-21, Mk 6:30-44, Lk 9:10-17, Jn 6:1-13

<sup>619</sup> Jn 21:6-13

<sup>620</sup> Free food distribution is notably practised today in a similar vein today. See Amory Starr, *Naming the Enemy: Anti-Corporate Movements Confront Globalization* (New York: Zed Books, 2000), p.114

## Music as Cultural Resistance

Music was another site for resistance that was particularly significant for the Rastafari movement. Music was the means by which the Rastafari movement became world renowned, in particular through the songs of Bob Marley and the Wailers, who encapsulated many of the core values of the Rastafari movement in song, and performed them at venues all around the world. Indeed, the importance of Marley's music as part of Rasta resistance was so great that a recent biography has framed him as a 'herald of a postcolonial world.'<sup>621</sup> Lyrically, many of Marley's songs express deep discontentment with structures of oppression, and call for active resistance. In *Get Up, Stand Up*, Marley incites his audiences to 'stand up for your rights', rather than idly waiting for 'great God to come from the sky, take away everything, and make everybody feel high'.<sup>622</sup> In *Talking Blues*, after claiming 'I feel like bombing a church now that I know the preacher is lying', Marley asks 'who's gonna stay at home, when the freedom fighters are fighting?'<sup>623</sup>

In dub music, resistance took on a distinctly different form to Marley's popular reggae songs. Dub is a harmonically sparser, instrumental form of reggae which is based around the rhythm section – guitar, bass guitar and drums – and was played through homemade sound systems with the bass frequencies hugely amplified. Campbell explains that 'the *dub* version was a non-verbal form of communication, reminiscent of the intense drumming of the slaves... dub encapsulated a form of

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<sup>621</sup> See Jason Toynbee, *Bob Marley: Herald of a Postcolonial World?* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2007)

<sup>622</sup> Bob Marley and the Wailers, 'Get up, Stand up' (Tuff Gong Records, 1973). See Toynbee, *Bob Marley*, p.152

<sup>623</sup> Bob Marley and the Wailers, 'Talking Blues' (Tuff Gong Records, 1973-1975). See Campbell, *Rasta and Resistance*, p.141

communication which said that the levels of ‘downpression’ were too dread to be spoken about.’<sup>624</sup> While Marley’s music was radio friendly and heavily influenced by Western musical forms, according to Campbell, dub pointed more towards African musical traditions, and its distinct lack of lyrics served as an expression of protest. For Campbell, however, all Rasta musical forms could serve as ‘a means of both communication and inspiration.’<sup>625</sup>

Music appears as a site of resistance several times in the Bible. The first obvious place is Psalm 137 in which the Psalmist laments:

By the waters of Babylon, there we sat down and wept, when we remembered Zion.  
On the willows there we hung our lyres.  
For there our captors required of us songs, and our tormentors, mirth, saying,  
‘Sing us one of the songs of Zion!’  
How shall we sing the Lord’s song in a foreign land?

According to Samuel Murrell, a Rastafarian reading of Psalm 137 says that during the Israelites’ Babylonian exile, ‘enthusiasm for creating and singing happy songs and psalms so characteristic of the ancient Israelites was lost, or abandoned altogether.’<sup>626</sup> According to Murrell, a Rasta interpretation of the Psalm seeks to reverse the Israelites’ experience by turning it into ‘a militant song to rub Babylon’s nose in the dust – to

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<sup>624</sup> Campbell, *Rasta and Resistance*, pp.139-140

<sup>625</sup> Campbell, *Rasta and Resistance*, p.125. See also Beckford who describes dub as a process of deconstruction, Robert Beckford, *Jesus Dub: Theology, Music and Social Change* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2006), pp.70-75

<sup>626</sup> Nathaniel Samuel Murrell, ‘Tuning Hebrew Psalms to Reggae Rhythms: Rastas’ Revolutionary Lamentations for Social Change’, *Cross Curr.* 50.4 , 2001, <<http://www.crosscurrents.org/murrell.htm>> (18 June 2012)

chant down Babylon in “ah ridim” – and effect social change.<sup>627</sup> Murrell suggests that the Israelites’ refusal to sing may be read as a case of ‘wallow(ing) in the mire of hopelessness and self-pity’.<sup>628</sup> The Israelites’ refusal to sing, however, could equally be read as an act of defiance. The Babylonians’ demanding of songs and mirth was clearly an act of mockery; the Israelites’ refusal to sing could thus easily be read as an act of non-cooperation. Furthermore, as Murrell himself notes, ‘remembering is an act of resistance.’<sup>629</sup> That the Israelites chose to remember Jerusalem, indeed vowed to never forget it, could also be read as resistance.

Under Roman imperialism, music also apparently functioned as a site for resistance, as we observe in several New Testament texts. In Luke’s Gospel we find three songs; the first performed by Mary (1:46b-56), the second performed by the priest Zechariah (1:68-79), and the third song performed by Simeon (2:29-32). The shared, emphatically revolutionary tone of these songs can hardly be stated strongly enough.<sup>630</sup> In the first song, in which Mary celebrates her impregnation with one who will be called ‘holy, the son of God’ (1:35), she proclaims that God has ‘scattered the proud in the imagination of their hearts’ and moreover that he has ‘put down the mighty from their thrones’. This is the time, according to Mary, that God has ‘helped his servant Israel in remembrance of his mercy, as he spoke to our fathers, to Abraham’ (1:54-55). Mary could scarcely be any more explicit that she regards this as a time of liberation, and she

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<sup>627</sup> Murrell, ‘Tuning Hebrew Psalms’

<sup>628</sup> Murrell, ‘Tuning Hebrew Psalms’

<sup>629</sup> Murrell, ‘Tuning Hebrew Psalms’

<sup>630</sup> Cf. Joel B. Green, *The Theology of the Gospel of Luke* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), pp.1-16. In a more recent commentary, Brendan Bryne, despite seeing Mary’s song as ‘a powerful challenge to existing structures of power and oppression’ (p.26), quite remarkably manages to see Zechariah’s songs as one which is concerned with ‘conversion’ (p.28). See Brendan J. Bryne, *The Hospitality of God: A Reading of Luke’s Gospel* (Collegeville, Minnesota: The Order of St. Benedict, Inc., 2000)

effectively forecasts the imminent dethronement of Caesar, Pilate, and any authority that was in league with them. If Mary's song has not made it plain enough, Zechariah's song clarifies the situation. According to Zechariah, the God of Israel 'has visited and redeemed his people, and has raised up a horn of salvation for us in the house of his servant David' (1:68-69). 'Horn' in Hebrew literary tradition means 'King'; Jesus, who according to Luke is descended from David, has been raised up by God to be the new King, the King who brings liberation and salvation to Israel. What does this entail? Of course, as Zechariah sings, it entails 'that we should be saved from our enemies, and from the hand of all who hate us' (1:71). Who else could Luke have in mind, in the second half of the first century, other than the Romans?<sup>631</sup> The third song, which is somewhat shorter than the first two, is performed by Simeon (2:29-32). On seeing the baby Jesus, Simeon declares 'my eyes have seen salvation, which you [God] have prepared in the face of all people (2:30-31), a light for revelation to the Gentiles (*ethnōn*) and glory for your people Israel'. Simeon's prediction of glory for God's people, Israel, could scarcely be more incompatible with Roman dominion. The songs of Mary, Zechariah and Simeon unambiguously announce the arrival of the messiah and the imminent liberation of the Jewish people from Roman authorities.

There also are several instances where music appears as a site for resistance in the early church. While the Psalmist asked 'how shall we sing the Lord's song in a foreign land?', Paul and Silas do not seem to have the same reservations. When Paul and Silas were thrown into prison in the Roman colony of Philippi, under the accusation

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<sup>631</sup> It is also significant that an Aramaic source may underlie these texts. Wink notes that these songs both explicitly mention Israel, and when translated into Hebrew take on a regular metre. Furthermore, Luke 1-2 features an abundance of Semitisms, and accurate reflections of Palestinian customs and practises (such as the drawing of lots, the burning of incense, the angel of the presence, the celebration after John's birth, the Shepherds in Bethlehem). For a more thorough argument see: Walter Wink, *John the Baptist in the Gospel Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1968), pp.61-62

of being Jews who advocated customs that were not lawful for Romans to accept or practice (Acts 16:20-21), they were found ‘praying and singing hymns to God’ (16:25), in spite of their imprisonment by the imperial forces. Paul and Silas’ singing was a clear indication that even imprisonment would not stop them proclaiming about the Jewish King, Jesus of Nazareth.

Paul uses songs for resistance on another occasion too. In his letter to the Romans, to those living in the administrative heart of the empire, Paul quotes from several songs that are all explicitly concerned with proclaiming the God of Israel amongst the Gentiles. Paul encourages the Roman Christians thus:

For I tell you that Christ became a servant to the circumcised to show God’s truthfulness, in order to confirm the promises given to the patriarchs, *and in order that the Gentiles might glorify God* for his mercy. As it is written, “Therefore *I will praise thee among the Gentiles*, and sing to thy name”; and again it is said, “*Rejoice, O Gentiles, with his people*”; and again, “*Praise the Lord, all Gentiles*, and let the peoples praise him” (Rom 15:8-11).

Paul makes it clear that the Gentiles – in this case the Roman Gentiles – will glorify and praise the God of Israel. But the climax comes in verse 12, where Paul quotes Isaiah saying that not only will the Gentiles praise Yahweh, but that the root of Jesse shall come ‘*to rule the Gentiles*’ (15:12). The songs from which Paul quotes proclaim the submission of the imperial powers to the God of Israel, and that Jesus, the root of Jesse, will rule over the Gentiles.

### **Dress as Cultural Resistance**

Another important site for cultural resistance in the Rastafari movement was dress. Dreadlocks are perhaps the most obvious example. According to Edmonds, dreadlocks represent a rejection of Western definitions of beauty that require European features and hair quality.<sup>632</sup> Dreadlocks express a commitment to nature, which Rastas contrast with the artificiality of Western or ‘Babylonian’ society, and dreadlocks are said to have a spiritual power, functioning as a ‘psychic antenna’ connecting Rastas with God. The shaking of dreadlocks is thought to unleash spiritual energy that will bring about the destruction of Babylon. Edmonds writes that, ‘The very sight of the locks is supposed to generate fear in the hearts of Babylonians, and that is part of the reason for calling them *dreadlocks*.’<sup>633</sup>

Rastas’ adoption of the colours black, red, green and gold (or yellow) in their clothing is also part of cultural resistance through dress.<sup>634</sup> These colours – which make up the design of some sixteen out of forty-nine sub-Saharan African national flags, including, of course, Ethiopia – symbolise the blood of Jamaican martyrs (red), the Africans whose descendants form 98 percent of the population of Jamaica (black), the colour of Jamaica’s vegetation (green), and the Rastas hope of victory over oppression (gold).<sup>635</sup> The Rastas’ wearing of these colours consolidates their relationship with their homeland, Africa, and symbolically proclaims the end of ‘Babylonian’ oppression.

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<sup>632</sup> Edmonds, ‘Dread “I” In-a-Babylon’, p.32

<sup>633</sup> Edmonds, ‘Dread “I” In-a-Babylon’, p.32

<sup>634</sup> ‘Posters, caps, badges, bracelets, pendants, scarves, dresses, and T-shirts adorned in various combinations of these four colors represent just a sampling of the many items worn and displayed by Rastas, Rasta emulators, and sympathizers worldwide.’ See Neil J. Savishinsky, ‘African Dimensions of the Jamaican Rastafarian Movement’, in *Chanting Down Babylon*, pp.125-144 (134)

<sup>635</sup> Savishinsky, ‘African Dimensions’, pp.134-135

To some extent, dress may have served a similar function for Palestinian Jews, and several examples are available to us. The first example is the Essenes. The Essenes shared their clothing, owning everything mutually, and allowing any member of the community to take whichever garment they liked (*Hypothetica* 11.1.2). They would not replace a worn out piece of clothing until it was torn to pieces (*War* 2.8.4, 8.4.125), and their garments were humble so that no Essene would outshine another ‘whether by dress or some form of extravagant appearance’ (*War* 8.7.140). However, at certain times they would dress completely in white linen, clothing which represented purity from the corruption of the outside world (*War* 8.3.123, 8.7.137). The Essenes’ clothing was one dimension of their ascetic lifestyle, which stood in contrast to Roman imperial culture which was associated with materialistic conspicuous consumption, liberal sexual ethics and hedonism. To the Qumran Community, the Romans (or ‘the Kittim’) were the embodiment of satanic forces,<sup>636</sup> and they sought to cut themselves off from their influence completely. Even the Jerusalem temple was regarded as too impure for the Essenes, so they bypassed it and made their own sacrifices (*Ant.* 18.1.2). The Essenes thoroughly detached themselves from the impurities of Roman imperial society, and even from many Jewish groups whom they regarded as corrupt, and their clothing symbolically demonstrated this.

John the Baptist’s clothing also served a special sort of function. According to Matthew and Mark, John wore clothing made of camel hair and a leather belt around his waist (Mt 3:4, Mk 1:6). John’s clothing was clearly considered to be a significant part of his identity, as Matthew has Jesus directly contrast John with those who live in palaces and wear fine clothes (Mt 11:8, Cf. Isa 3:24). John’s camel hair clothing was probably

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<sup>636</sup> Richard A. Horsley, ‘Renewal Movements and Resistance to Empire in Ancient Judea’ in *The Postcolonial Biblical Reader* (ed. R.S. Sugirtharajah; Oxford: Blackwell, 2006), pp.69-77 (72), Cf. 1QM



recognised as a form of sackcloth, which was made from coarse animal fur, such as that of a goat,<sup>637</sup> and was associated with repentance and mourning. John's clothing was visual evidence of his mourning for the state of the Jewish people, and represented a call for repentance; that is, a call for loyalty to the laws of the God of Israel.

The Pharisees' dress, in an entirely different way, also functioned as a site for cultural resistance. The Pharisees made a point of certain features of their clothing; in Matthew's Gospel, Jesus chastises the Pharisees for making their phylacteries wide and the tassels on their garments long, so that they will be noticed (Mt 23:5). The exaggerating of these two features is highly significant. Tassels served as a constant reminder of God's commands (Num 15:38-39, Cf. Deut 22:12). Phylacteries or *teffilin* were boxes containing extracts from the Torah, worn as a constant reminder of God's commands (Deut 11:18) or, according to Exodus, as a reminder of the Israelites' liberation from Egypt (Ex 13:16). The exaggeration of these features by the Pharisees clearly represents a reassertion of their Israelite heritage and Jewish identity as represented by these visual symbols worn on their bodies. The function of the *teffilin* as a reminder of the Israelites' liberation from Egypt is particularly notable in yet another time of imperial domination. It is not hard to imagine the Pharisees expanding the size of their *teffilin* more and more as tension grew in the Jewish population in the run up to the revolt.

### **Politics as Cultural Resistance**

Here I depart slightly from Campbell's categories of Rastafari resistance, for 'politics' as cultural resistance is too broad a topic. Instead I will focus here primarily political

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<sup>637</sup> Cf. Rev 6:12

theology as cultural resistance. In the Rastafari movement, almost all imperial authorities are deeply distrusted. The political actions of the imperial elite are described as ‘politricks’, the arts of ‘deception, machination, and manipulation’.<sup>638</sup> On the other hand, Haile Selassie, the Emperor of Ethiopia, has been venerated by some Rastas to the level of divinity. The precise extent to which Selassie should be esteemed is disputed amongst Rastafari; to some he is merely ‘a great man’, to others a ‘prophet’, but for many, writes Eleanor Wint, he is regarded as ‘the Son of God, who springs from the root of David, and the righteous branch that shall execute judgement and justice in all the earth.’<sup>639</sup> The very name of the Rastafari movement derives from Selassie’s pre-reigning name, Ras Tafari.<sup>640</sup> Much to the frustration of his admirers, Selassie consistently denied his divinity.<sup>641</sup>

The deifying of Selassie in the Rastafari movement functions as a rejection of Western Christianity, the religion of the empire, and a reorientation around African heritage. Selassie for Rastas is seen as a symbol of power and pride. Whereas, for some Rastas at least, Jesus is seen as an oppressed figure worthy of pity, in Selassie, writes William Spencer, ‘Christ makes a new manifestation, a new incarnation, this time not in meekness but in power’.<sup>642</sup> As Edmonds puts it, ‘The act of deifying Selassie signals a break with, and a rejection of, white European religion and the whole cultural system

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<sup>638</sup> Edmonds, ‘Dread “I” In-a-Babylon’, p.28

<sup>639</sup> Eleanor Wint, ‘Who is Haile Selassie? His Imperial Majesty in Rasta Voices’ in *Chanting Down Babylon*, pp.159-164 (159)

<sup>640</sup> Ras being a title that means ‘head’ in Amharic, and Tafari being his given name

<sup>641</sup> Spencer, *Dread Jesus*, pp.44-45

<sup>642</sup> Spencer, *Dread Jesus*, p.35

that it legitimated.’<sup>643</sup> Consolidating Selassie’s divinity, some Rastas to this day continue to tell miracle stories about him.<sup>644</sup>

The Jesus movement emerged in a not-too-dissimilar context. The Fourth Philosophy, we read in Josephus, took a vote of no confidence in the Roman administration and rejected the imperial tax outright. The Qumran Community took a similar stance, writing off the Romans as the embodiment of evil, and retreating to the wilderness. The tax collectors, agents of the imperial order, were popularly regarded as objects of disparagement and ridicule amongst the Jews (Mt 5:46, 18:17, 21:32). And in Luke’s Gospel Jesus himself directly rejected the Roman claim that they functioned as ‘benefactors’ (Lk 22:25-26), however much they may have aired such rhetoric. Jesus, like the Rastas, frequently seemed to have a similar distrust toward authorities. His preaching of an alternative empire, the Kingdom of God, may have easily been understood as a rejection of Caesar’s empire. And besides rejecting Roman claims of benefaction, he rejected the hierarchical structures of imperialism, teaching instead: ‘let the greatest among you become as the youngest, and the leader as one who serves’ (Lk 22:25-26, Mt 20:25-26, Mk 10:42-43). Jesus encouraged tax collectors, like Levi and Zaccheus (Mt 9:9; Lk 19:1-10), to repent. While Jesus may not have publicly endorsed tax refusal like the Fourth Philosophy (although this is a charge brought against him in Luke 23:1-4), he certainly disowned Caesar’s currency in the ‘render unto Caesar’ saying (Mk 12:17, Mt 22:21, Lk 20:25). Jesus had no regard for Herod’s authority, responding to the Pharisees claim that Herod wanted him killed by saying, ‘Go and tell that fox, “Behold, I cast out demons and perform cures today and tomorrow, and the third day I finish my course”’ (Lk 13:32). Jesus also treated the religious authorities in

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<sup>643</sup> Edmonds, ‘Dread “I” In-a-Babylon’, p.30

<sup>644</sup> Spencer, *Dread Jesus*, pp.41-42

Jerusalem with suspicion. The chief priests were installed by Herod and functioned as indirect rulers from Rome,<sup>645</sup> and they were conspicuously privileged, socially and economically.<sup>646</sup> In John's Gospel, the chief priests' allegiance to Rome is made explicit as John has them saying 'we have no king but Caesar' (19:15) and 'if you let this man go, you are no friend of Caesar; anyone who claims to be a king opposes Caesar' (19:12).<sup>647</sup> Like the Qumran and Essene communities, Jesus had clear issues with the way in which the chief priests were operating the temple. Recent postcolonial readings of the widow's mite story make clear that Jesus was opposed to the economic strain that the temple tithe imposed on people.<sup>648</sup> Mark recounts the story of the poor widow (*chera ptōche*) immediately after denouncing the scribes for devouring widow's houses (*okias ton cherōn*) (12:40), and Luke proceeds to juxtapose the widow's poverty with the extravagance of the temple (21:5). The story of the poor widow demonstrates Jesus' distrust in an institution which deepened poverty for the poorest and functioned as a source of pride for the rich. Jesus' negative attitude towards the temple's extractive function are also expressed in his rebuke of the Pharisees who faithfully tithe but neglect justice (Lk 11:42), and in his disparagement of the practice of neglecting one's parents in order to give yet more money to the temple (*korban*) (Mk 7:9-13).<sup>649</sup> Jesus' disillusionment with the temple's corruption is of course expressed most dramatically in

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<sup>645</sup> Horsley, *Jesus and Empire*, pp.31-34

<sup>646</sup> See Fiensy, 'Jesus' Socioeconomic Background', p.231

<sup>647</sup> Although whether would ought to trust John's presentation of the chief priests is, of course, debatable.

<sup>648</sup> See Kim, *Mark, Women and Empire*, p.121

<sup>649</sup> Richard A. Horsley, 'The Politics of Disguise and Public Declaration of the Hidden Transcript: Broadening Our Approach to the Historical Jesus with Scott's "Arts of Resistance" Theory' in *Hidden Transcripts*, pp.61-81 (77)

the driving out of traders and money changers from the temple courts (Mk 11:15-17, Mt 21:12-13, Lk 19:45-46, Jn 2:14-16).<sup>650</sup>

At the same time as expressing distrust of imperial structures and discontent at the resulting corruption of the sacred institution of the Jerusalem temple, the gospel texts serve to venerate historic figures from Israelite heritage and to position Jesus as the crowning figure of Israelite history. The gospels present Jesus in relation to Jonah<sup>651</sup> and Elijah,<sup>652</sup> to Abraham,<sup>653</sup> Abraham, Isaac and Jacob as a trio,<sup>654</sup> and David.<sup>655</sup> They even present Jesus supernaturally in conversation with Elijah and Moses.<sup>656</sup> The gospel texts are repeatedly concerned with venerating prophets and Kings from their history, and ultimately venerating Jesus as the supreme prophet, Messiah, and King. The gospels, therefore, function as texts which seek to deny imperial authority and replace it with authority figures that are appropriate to their heritage, characters such as Abraham, David, Elijah, Moses, and, ultimately, Jesus.

The deification of Haile Selassie in the Rastafari movement, I suggest, has resonances with the deification of Jesus in the Jesus movement. As we have seen with the phenomenon of heritagist reading, in an ‘attempt to retrieve cultural memory from the amnesia caused by colonialism’, the colonised may reinterpret stories, myths, and

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<sup>650</sup> An action which Luke portrays in notably less dramatic terms, omitting the overturning of tables, and with Jesus continuing to teach daily in the temple after the incident (Lk 19:37)

<sup>651</sup> Mt 12:38-41, 16:4; Lk 11:29-32

<sup>652</sup> Mt 16:14/Mk 8:28/Lk 9:19; Jn 1:21; Lk 4:24-27

<sup>653</sup> Mt 1:2; Lk 16:22-30; Jn 8:37-58

<sup>654</sup> Mt 8:11, 22:32; Mk 12:26; Lk 13:28, 20:37

<sup>655</sup> Mt 9:27, 20:30; Mk 12:35; Lk 18:38

<sup>656</sup> Mt 17:3/Mk 9:4/Lk 9:30

legends, by ‘intertextual interpolation of quotations, allusions, and references’,<sup>657</sup> as we have seen with the interpolation of Psalm 22 and Jesus’ execution at the hand of the Romans. Furthermore, as we have seen, heritagist readings, to quote Sugirtharajah once again:

offered potentially a positive space for overcoming the trauma of colonialism and for regaining the lost indigenous cultural consciousness. Delving into their heritage not only helped the colonized to cope with colonialism... but it helped them to nurture cultural pride.<sup>658</sup>

Such a dynamic, as it is acknowledged by many, was clearly present with the deification of Haile Selassie in the Rastafari movement; and such a dynamic, I suggest now, was also present in the deification of Jesus in the Jesus movement, the example *par excellence* of this phenomenon being the transfiguration, where Jesus, exalted as a figure of cultural pride, appears radiantly and miraculously in conversation with Moses and Elijah, long-dead but centrally important figures in normative ancient Judaism.

The deification of Haile Selassie was rightly acknowledged by the British imperial elite as a belief that threatened their power; they arrested the Jamaican activist Leonard Percival Howell for selling pictures of Selassie and proclaiming that black people could not have two kings, and the true king was Haile Selassie.<sup>659</sup> The deification of Jesus

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<sup>657</sup> Sugirtharajah, *Postcolonial Criticism*, p.55

<sup>658</sup> Sugirtharajah, *Postcolonial Criticism*, p.61

<sup>659</sup> Campbell, *Rasta and Resistance*, p.71

took place in a remarkably similar way, and was similarly suppressed as a political threat. It is highly significant that the titles attributed to Jesus, ‘King of the Jews’,<sup>660</sup> ‘Son of God’,<sup>661</sup> and ‘King of Israel’,<sup>662</sup> directly contradicted the claims of Roman imperial theology.<sup>663</sup> As John Dominic Crossan observes:

Before Jesus the Christ ever existed and even if he had never existed, these were the titles of Caesar the Augustus: Divine, Son of God, God, and God from God; Lord, Redeemer, Liberator, and Savior of the World. When those titles were taken from him, the Roman emperor, and given to a Jewish peasant, it was a case of either low lampoon or high treason.<sup>664</sup>

It is for this reason that in John’s Gospel the Jewish authorities claim ‘If you release this man, you are not Caesar’s friend; every one who makes himself a king sets himself against Caesar’ (Jn 19:12). The inflammatorily anti-imperial function of the gospels’ veneration of Jesus as the King of the Jews and Son of God is clear. The veneration of Jesus in these terms constituted overt political cultural resistance to Roman imperial theology, and furthermore, allowed Jewish culture – in the form of Christian Judaism – to emerge victorious, despite the destruction of the Temple.

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<sup>660</sup> Mt 27:11, 29, 37; Mk 15:2, 9, 12, 18, 26; Lk 23:3, 37, 38; Jn 18:39, 19:3, 14, 19

<sup>661</sup> Mt 27:40, 43, 54; Mk 15:39

<sup>662</sup> Mt 27:42; Mk 15:32

<sup>663</sup> On the term ‘Roman Imperial Theology’ and its usefulness for understanding Roman ideology see Crossan’s illuminating article: John Dominic Crossan, ‘Roman Imperial Theology’ in *In the Shadow of Empire*, pp.59-73

<sup>664</sup> Crossan, ‘Roman Imperial Theology’, p.73

Another significant way in which political theology served as cultural resistance was in the gospel writers' presentation of the power and authority of Jesus. Liew has argued this point at length with relation to Mark's Gospel, as I have noted above, suggesting that Mark's gospel ultimately mimics the power relations of the Roman Empire. Liew argues, for example, that Jesus becomes a new supreme authority in Mark, as 'God's last authorized agent, God's one and only regent.'<sup>665</sup> Elsewhere Liew notes how Jesus, in line with hegemonic ideals of masculinity, defeats all of his opponents, with Mark noting 'no one dared to ask him any questions any more' (12:34), for Jesus provides all answers, and Jesus' questions leave his opponents without any answers (12:35-37).<sup>666</sup> A similar presentation of this dominating and powerful Jesus can be found in all of the gospels. Warren Carter has similarly argued that 'In announcing the triumph of God's empire over Rome, Matthew ultimately employs the imperial and destructive "power over" model in presenting God's final salvation.'<sup>667</sup> Carter argues that even 'the "kingdom/empire of the heavens"', employs imperial language and mindset denoting domination, oppression, violence, hierarchy, patriarchy, injustice and elitism.'<sup>668</sup> And again, Colleen Conway argues, that 'the Johannine Jesus claims an astounding range of authority'.<sup>669</sup> She notes his position as executioner of judgement (5:27), his power over his own life and death (10:18), and his power over the lives and deaths of others (5:21, 6:40, 11:1-44). She notes that the Johannine Jesus assures his

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<sup>665</sup> Liew, 'The Gospel of Mark', p.113

<sup>666</sup> Tat-siong Benny Liew, 'Re-Mark-Able Masculinities: Jesus, the Son of Man, and the (Sad) Sum of Manhood?' in *New Testament Masculinities* (eds: Stephen D. Moore and Janice Capel Anderson; Brill: Leiden, 2003), pp.93-136 (105)

<sup>667</sup> Warren Carter, 'The Gospel of Matthew' in *A Postcolonial Commentary on the New Testament Writings*, p.69-194 (95)

<sup>668</sup> Carter, 'Matthew', p.96

<sup>669</sup> Colleen M. Conway, *Behold the Man: Jesus and Greco-Roman Masculinity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), p.151



disciples that ‘the ruler of this world’ has no power over him (14:30), and that Jesus claims in prayer that the Father has given the Son ‘power over all flesh’ (17:2, her translation). It follows that Pilate, naturally, has no authority over Jesus on his own accord (19:11).<sup>670</sup> In this respect, each of the gospels presents Jesus as above and beyond any Roman claim to power, while ultimately operating on the same terms and within the same power structures.

### **Conclusion**

Using the Rastafari movement as a lens for looking various historical phenomena amongst Jesus’ contemporaries in the run up to the Jewish War, various ‘everyday’ acts may be seen as acts of cultural resistance: the use of a particular language, especially the mother tongue; the symbolic eating of certain foods, the rejection of other foods, or even the distribution of free food; the use of music and song, either because of the content of the songs, or simply because of the singing itself; the wearing of certain symbolic clothing, or uniforms; and the choice of theological beliefs, particularly the veneration or deification of people who represent dissent against the empire.

It should be borne in mind that the gospels were written in a time of growing resentment of and resistance toward Rome, culminating in the destruction of an ancient nation, and the dispersion of its people. This undoubtedly affected the gospel writers’ framing of, memory of, and understanding of Jesus, and the shaping of the texts that we are left with today. As Fiorenza has argued,

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<sup>670</sup> Conway, *Behold the Man*, p.151

The gospel transmitters and writers were not concerned with simply writing down what Jesus said and did; rather, they attempted to comprehend what Jesus meant to his first followers and what meaning his life and ministry had for their own time and communities. Most importantly, they had to come to terms with the historical event of his execution by the Romans as an insurrectionist.<sup>671</sup>

For this reason, I would not go so far as some in stressing the level of resistance that the *historical* Jesus expressed towards Rome. The historical figure is so deeply embedded in the events of his time, and it is difficult to imagine that the writers of the gospels were not influenced by such significant events as the destruction of their national identity; and indeed, this may be precisely why he was remembered by the gospel writers in such markedly ethnic terms as the ‘King of the Jews’, the inscription above the cross provided by the Romans (Mk 15:26; Lk 23:38; Mt 27:37).

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<sup>671</sup> Fiorenza, *Politics of Interpretation*, p.7

‘FEAR HIM WHO, AFTER HE HAS KILLED, HAS POWER TO CAST INTO  
HELL’: STRUCTURAL VIOLENCE, DIVINE WRATH, AND THE PARADOX OF  
THE NONVIOLENT JESUS

People try nonviolence for a week, and when it ‘doesn’t work’ they go back to violence,  
which hasn’t worked for centuries

- Theodore Roszak<sup>672</sup>

**Introduction: Jesus, Nonviolence and Postcolonialism**

Numerous liberation and postcolonial theologians place a concern to confront all forms of oppression as central to their agendas.<sup>673</sup> As Ched Myers has noted,<sup>674</sup> it is therefore surprising how rarely these disciplines have engaged with the theory and practice of nonviolence,<sup>675</sup> which has been the underlying philosophy of at least two of the most influential social movements in the last century; namely the Indian independence movement, led by Mohandas Gandhi, and the black civil rights movement led by Martin Luther King. The apparent lack of interest in these nonviolent social movements and their underlying philosophy is even more surprising considering that one was primarily concerned with opposing British imperialism in India, and one was primarily concerned with discrimination against black Americans, both of which are oppressions that have been closely linked to European colonialism. The neglect of theories of nonviolence in

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<sup>672</sup> Cited in Thomas Weber, ‘Nonviolence in Theory and Practice’ in *Encyclopedia of Violence, Peace & Democracy* (London: Academic Press, 2008), pp.1362-1372

<sup>673</sup> Keller, Nausner, and Rivera, ‘Preface’, p.xi

<sup>674</sup> See Ched Myers, ‘Political Theology and Nonviolence: Three Significant North American Contributions’ in *An Eerdmans Reader in Contemporary Political Theology* (eds. William T. Cavanaugh, Jeffrey W. Bailey, Craig Hovey; Eerdmans, 2011)

<sup>675</sup> Exceptions who have drawn on the tradition of Christian nonviolence include certain Palestinian liberation theologians, for instance, Naim Stifan Ateek, *A Palestinian Christian Cry for Reconciliation* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2008), pp.136-138

postcolonial theologies is even more alarming when we consider that both Ghandi and King were influenced, at least to an extent, by a perceived biblical imperative in support of nonviolent action.

The question of nonviolence in biblical scholarship and Christian theology has been addressed only occasionally over the last century, and when it has been addressed, only occasionally has it been related in any depth to specific teachings and actions of Jesus. Indeed, it is only in the last three decades or so that a handful of works have specifically discussed Jesus' teaching and actions in any detail in relation to nonviolence. Furthermore, much of this work has been simplistic in its discussions about Jesus and nonviolence, freely describing Jesus as a practitioner of nonviolence despite the issue that several texts in the gospel tradition seem to severely trouble this notion. Much of the most widely influential work on Jesus and nonviolence has not only failed to provide an adequate definition of violence and nonviolence, but has simply not addressed those problematic texts which seem to depict Jesus using forms of violence. In this chapter I will seek to address these issues and to move forward the discussion about the possibility of a nonviolent Jesus.

### **Defining Violence and Nonviolence**

Previous work dealing with violence, nonviolence and Jesus has generally lacked a strong theoretical basis, or even an adequate definition of violence and nonviolence. But a growing amount of literature exploring and developing the concept of nonviolence is emerging from the field of Peace Studies in particular, and a survey of this literature is due here to inform any sort of meaningful discussion that we might hope to have about Jesus and nonviolence.

It is important to note early on that nonviolence is almost always intended by its practitioners to be more than ‘non’-something. Michael Nojeim argues that for Ghandi and King, it ‘underscores a *positive* affirmation of life and spirituality that binds every human’ (my italics).<sup>676</sup> And as we shall see, many definitions of nonviolence try to reach beyond the idea that nonviolence is simply passive; far from it, Nojeim argues that violence and nonviolence are positioned on the same continuum and that it is in fact difficult to separate violent actions from nonviolent actions.<sup>677</sup> Nojeim asks for example whether labour strikes, boycotts, or government-imposed economic trade sanctions might be seen as forms of violence or nonviolence.<sup>678</sup> In the same vein, Ghandi asserted that “strictly speaking, no activity and no industry is possible without a certain amount of violence.”<sup>679</sup> Thus Nojeim suggests that there is no clear-cut boundary between violence and nonviolence. The primary significant distinction between nonviolence and violence for Nojeim relates to intention: ‘With violence, the aim is to deliberately harm the opponent in order to compel the opponent’s defeat or destruction.’<sup>680</sup> With nonviolence, however, ‘although some harm is being done, the intention is not to destroy the opponent, which is contrary to violence.’<sup>681</sup> Nonviolence uses power and

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<sup>676</sup> Michael J. Nojeim, *Gandhi and King: The Power of Nonviolent Resistance* (London: Praeger, 2004), p.xi

<sup>677</sup> Nojeim, *Gandhi and King*, p.3

<sup>678</sup> Nojeim, *Gandhi and King*, p.10

<sup>679</sup> Nojeim, *Gandhi and King*, p.9 Cf. Guiliano Pontara, ‘Rejection of Violence in Gandhian Ethics of Conflict Resolution’, *JPR* 2, 3, 1965, p.187-215 (199)

<sup>680</sup> Nojeim, *Gandhi and King*, p.9

<sup>681</sup> Nojeim, *Gandhi and King*, p.11

coercion to promote change *without* harming the opponent, or by inflicting as little harm as possible.<sup>682</sup>

Before coming to this definition, Nojeim's discussion outlines the definitions provided by five significant scholars of nonviolence, and these are all worth considering here. First, Nojeim considers Gene Sharp. Sharp distinguishes 'generic nonviolence', which is simply characterised by abstaining from physical violence; pacifism, which is the refusal to kill or participate in wars; and nonviolent resistance or nonviolent direct action, which are acts that 'defy' an opponent but ultimately aim to reject violence.<sup>683</sup> Next Nojeim considers the work of Douglas Bond. Bond distinguishes between the absolute pacifist, the principled pacifist and the pragmatic pacifist. The absolute pacifist endures suffering and sacrifice until death, and is unable to help reduce the suffering of others, and by their omission, may indeed increase the suffering of others. The principled pacifist aims to mitigate violence, but faces difficulties because they have no way of knowing what path is ultimately reduces violence the most. The pragmatic pacifist uses nonviolence for specific socio-political ends, as a means to a specific end. Central to Bond's understanding is that nonviolence must combine a sense of unity between conflicting groups, with the underlying premise of the sanctity of life, or it risks becoming just another type of violence.<sup>684</sup> Third, Nojeim considers Johan Galtung. Galtung argues that the dominant meaning of nonviolence in the West reflects Sharp's definition, which is simply refraining from physically harming others, which Galtung calls 'negative nonviolence'. Galtung argues that negative nonviolence cannot be used

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<sup>682</sup> Cf. Joan V. Bondurant, *Conquest of Violence: The Gandhian Philosophy of Conflict* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1988), p.9

<sup>683</sup> Gene Sharp, 'The Meanings of Nonviolence: A Typology', *JCR* 3, 1, 1959, pp.41-66 (44-45)

<sup>684</sup> Douglas Bond, 'The Nature and Meaning of Nonviolent Direct Action: An Exploratory Study', *JPR* 25, 1, 1988, pp.81-89 (86-87)

to eliminate 'structural violence', a concept that Galtung has developed which refers to the damage done to people by the structures of society; structural violence is the systematic political, social, or economic exploitation or oppression of individuals and groups which is frequently seen as 'natural', and Galtung calls for 'positive nonviolence', acts which seek to combat these oppressions.<sup>685</sup> Fourth, Nojeim highlights the work of Joan Bondurant. For Bondurant, violence is force that is used to intentionally harm the opponent, whereas nonviolence is force used to make a change and not to harm another.<sup>686</sup> Finally, Nojeim considers the work of Michael Nagler. Nagler defines nonviolence as 'that force or principle which comes increasingly to motivate a human being as he or she transforms the desire to injure others into its positive counterpart'.<sup>687</sup> Nojeim notes that, again, nonviolence here is much more than simply the absence of violence, but that it includes the presence of an opposite, positive quality.<sup>688</sup>

As this brief survey demonstrates, nonviolence is a much theorised and contested term. It is clear, however, that for most practitioners and scholars of nonviolence, nonviolence is more than simply pacifism or the refusal to use physical force against another person. Indeed it is clear that many practitioners and scholars acknowledge that there is no clear distinction between nonviolence and violence. It also appears that nonviolent action is understood as possessing a positive quality, and has the

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<sup>685</sup> Johan Galtung, 'Violence, Peace, and Peace Research', *JPR* 6, 2, 1969, pp.167-191

<sup>686</sup> Bondurant, *Conquest of Violence*, p.9

<sup>687</sup> Michael Nagler, 'Nonviolence' in *World Encyclopedia of Peace* (eds. Ervin Laszlo and Jung Youl Yoo; NY: Pergamon Press, 1986), pp.72-78 (72)

<sup>688</sup> Nojeim, *Gandhi and King*, p.8

aim of ultimately countering what might be called structural violence, and promoting some form of social change.

### **Nonviolence, Pacifism and Early Christianity**

Before examining recent scholarship on Jesus and nonviolence, it may be instructive to consider the way in which Jesus' relationship to violence was understood in earliest Christianity. As we have seen in the above discussion, nonviolence is much more than simply abstaining from physical violence; it is remarkable, however, and seemingly quite relevant that, as Roland Bainton argues, from the time of Jesus until 170 CE there is no evidence of followers of Jesus participating in the military. Numerous texts illustrate not only the early Church's abstention from war, but their disapproval of physical violence. Justin Martyr stated: 'We who were filled with war and mutual slaughter and every wickedness have each of us in all the world changed our weapons of war... swords into plows and spears into agricultural implements' (*Trypho* 110), and, 'We who formerly murdered one another now not only do not make war upon our enemies, but that we may not lie or deceive our judges, we gladly die confessing Christ' (*I Apol* 39). Clement of Alexandria proclaimed:

If the loud trumpet summons soldiers to war, shall not Christ with a strain of peace to the ends of the earth gather up his soldiers of peace? A bloodless army he has assembled by blood and by the word, to give to them the Kingdom of Heaven. The trumpet of Christ is his gospel. He has sounded, we have heard. Let us then put on the armour of peace. (*Protr.* 11, 116)



Tertullian was unambiguous in his statement: ‘Christ in disarming Peter ungirt every soldier’ (*De Idolotria* 19). His question, ‘Shall the son of peace... be engaged in battle when for him it is unlawful to go to war?’ (*Idol* 19, *Corona* 11) demonstrates that he considered participation in warfare as disobedience to God.<sup>689</sup> As Bainton notes, this trend did not last long. From 173 CE onwards, it became increasingly normal for Christians to join the military. From this period onwards, abstention from war has not been a mainstream Christian doctrine or practice, although it has been practiced for some centuries by Mennonite, Amish, Quaker and Brethren communities.<sup>690</sup>

Bainton’s discussion is useful, and the attitudes of early Christians to war and violence are of profound relevance for understanding how Jesus was understood by his earliest followers. Indeed, the early Church Fathers’ reflections on violence may arguably inform our understanding of the ‘historical’ figure of Jesus, for they suggest that the idea that Jesus advocated pacifism was an influential one that held for several decades. It is important to note, however, that the early Church fathers and Bainton’s study do not deal with the concept of nonviolent resistance as distinct from pacifism; the nonviolence of the early Church appears to be something like what Bond describes as absolute pacifism. In recent decades, however, it has been argued not only that Jesus abstained from violence, but that he used nonviolence positively to bring about social change as a tool for achieving specific socio-political ends. This is the argument with which I am primarily interested in this chapter. I will return our focus, therefore, to the extent to which Jesus has been seen as an advocate of nonviolence resistance, and whether such a claim may be historically accurate.

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<sup>689</sup> Roland Bainton, *Christian Attitudes towards War and Peace: a Historical Survey and Critical Re-Evaluation* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1961), p.72-74, 81

<sup>690</sup> For further see Daniel A. Dombrowski, *Christian Pacifism* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1991)

## The Nonviolent Jesus: A Brief Survey of Scholarship

As I have noted above, of the small amount of scholarly literature on Jesus and nonviolence that has been produced in the last century or so, much of it has not discussed the teachings and actions of Jesus in much detail and many scholars have seemingly been satisfied to construct a general impression of Jesus as nonviolent, hanging loosely on a couple of sayings. Furthermore, much of this work has not been clear about what it means by nonviolence, and terms like ‘pacifism’, ‘nonretaliation’ and ‘nonviolence’ have been used almost interchangeably by many. It will be useful, nonetheless, to revisit discussions that have taken place and to try and glean, where possible what has been said specifically about the Jesus of the Gospels and his relationship to nonviolence.

### Leo Tolstoy

The work of Leo Tolstoy must be considered first, for he is frequently cited as one of the foremost proponents of Christian nonviolence, and his work had a direct influence on both Gandhi<sup>691</sup> and King.<sup>692</sup> Furthermore, Tolstoy has specifically discussed the teachings and actions of Jesus, building a thesis around some of the sayings and actions of Jesus in Matthew’s Gospel.

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<sup>691</sup> See Anthony Parel, ‘Nonviolence: The Tolstoy-Ghandi Legacy’ in *Nonviolence for the Third Millennium* (ed. G. Simon Harak; Macon, Georgia: Mercer University Press, 2000), pp.43-62

<sup>692</sup> Cf. Martin Luther King, ‘Address at the Thirty-fourth Annual Convention of the National Bar Association (1959)’ in *The Papers of Martin Luther King, Jr.: Volume 5: Threshold of a New Decade* (ed. Clayborne Carson; London: University of California Press, 2005), p.269

Although Tolstoy's work *The Kingdom of God is Within You* is generally referred to as his most important work on Christian nonviolence, Tolstoy seems to articulate his views on Jesus most fully in his book *What I Believe* in which he uses three main texts to support his argument that Jesus taught nonviolence: the imperatives 'resist not evil' (Mt 5:38-42), 'judge not' (Mt 7:1-5), and 'love your enemies' (Mt 5:43-45), all of which he finds in the sermon on the mount. Alexandre Christoyannopoulos notes that Tolstoy was extremely rationalist in his readings of the gospels, disregarding all supernatural elements as superstition and arguing that they were inserted by political manipulators. Tolstoy also dismissed other orthodox Christian teachings including the divinity of Jesus, the doctrine of original sin, and the doctrine of redemption through Jesus' death. Tolstoy concerned himself with finding the 'true meaning' of Jesus' teaching, which he believed had been missed or ignored by mainline Christianity for centuries, and which pointed in some way to the practice of nonviolence.<sup>693</sup>

Tolstoy's discussion of the resist not evil teaching (Mt 5:38-42) is the most important and most insightful part of his argument. Tolstoy argued that violent resistance tended to aggravate a problem, and would frequently lead to more violence from the other side. In Tolstoy's view, Jesus' 'resist not evil' saying represented an explicit condemnation of violent resistance, and Jesus' response to his arrest and execution – which he did not resist even to the point of death – was a confirmation of his teaching. The message of Jesus, Tolstoy summarises, was:

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<sup>693</sup> For further see Alexandre J.M.E. Christoyannopoulos, 'Turning the Other Cheek to Terrorism: Reflections on the Contemporary Significance of Leo Tolstoy's Exegesis of the Sermon on the Mount' (*PR* 1.1, 2008), pp.27-54 (29)

You think that your laws correct evil; they only increase it. There is only one way of extirpating evil – to return good to all men without distinction. You have tried your principle for thousands of years; now try mine, which is the reverse.<sup>694</sup>

To bolster this argument, Tolstoy drew in Jesus' 'judge not' commandment (Mt 7:1-5). For Tolstoy, judging another person was not simply having a negative opinion of their actions. Punishing another person for their wrong doing is also judging, and judging was condemned, quite clearly, by Jesus. Since no person is completely free from evil, a point illustrated for Tolstoy by the story of the woman caught in adultery (Jn 8:1-11), to punish another person is hypocritical. According to Tolstoy, a person cannot resist evil accurately and fairly because no person can assess their own evil correctly in the first place, as Jesus' beam in the eye metaphor illustrates (Mt 7:3-5).

Finally, Tolstoy draws in the commandment to love enemies. According to Tolstoy, because 'neighbour' meant fellow Jew, 'enemy' meant a national enemy. Therefore Tolstoy argues that with this saying Jesus is not teaching that one must love their personal enemies – which Tolstoy considers to be something of a contradiction in terms – but he is teaching his followers to love foreigners, that is, non-Jews, just as they love their fellow Jews.

From a historical perspective, there is only one serious problem with Tolstoy's argument, and that is his final argument about the commandment to love enemies, which draws upon an anti-Jewish hermeneutic. Tolstoy openly states that he considers Jesus' commands to supersede the commandments of Moses.<sup>695</sup> However, it is in Tolstoy's beloved sermon of the mount that Jesus states: 'till heaven and earth pass

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<sup>694</sup> Leo Tolstoy, *What I Believe: My Religion*, (London: C.W. Daniel, 1902), p.41

<sup>695</sup> Christoyannopoulos, 'Turning the Other Cheek', p.30

away, not an iota, not a dot, will pass from the law until all is accomplished' (Mt 5:18). It would perhaps, in theory, be possible for Jesus to see his teaching not only as midrash but as an expansion or development of the law; but Tolstoy's presentation of Jesus becomes untenable when we consider the relationship that Tolstoy creates between Jesus and Judaism. For instance, Tolstoy's suggestion that Jesus would say that Jewish law (which is presumably what he means by 'your laws') does not correct evil but increases it is doubtlessly inaccurate in the light of Matthew 5:18, as well as being a potentially offensive and divisive statement. Furthermore, Tolstoy's exegesis of 'love your enemies' is also rooted in an unhistorical picture of first century Judaism. As we have seen in chapter 4, Jews have frequently been regarded by Christians as 'exclusive' people, and this problematic notion is uncritically replicated by Tolstoy's sloppy exegesis of this passage. There is no strong argument to suggest that 'enemies' referred to non-Jews.<sup>696</sup> The idea of a nonviolent Jesus cannot depend on any argument that suggests that Jesus fundamentally sought to undermine Judaism. Such readings do not find a historical basis (although a wealth of dated Christian 'scholarly' writing will argue that it does), and such readings are not conducive to mutual respect and a commitment to overcome all oppressions. Tolstoy's reading of the resist not evil passage, nonetheless, is forceful and convincing and as we shall see, has been picked up and developed in later works.

John Howard Yoder

Although John Howard Yoder is known for his work on nonviolence, and his book *The Politics of Jesus* is largely an attempt to state the relevance of New Testament studies

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<sup>696</sup> See Carter, *Matthew and the Margins*, p.154

for contemporary social ethics,<sup>697</sup> he does not spend much time addressing the question of Jesus' relationship to nonviolence, dedicating only about four full pages to exploring the possibility that Jesus himself may have plausibly participated in nonviolent resistance. In some respects, Yoder's aims do not seem dissimilar to Tolstoy's. In the preface to *The Politics of Jesus* Yoder describes his work as: 'On the least sophisticated, most argumentative level... the simple rebound of a Christian pacifist commitment as it responds to the ways in which mainstream Christianity theology has set aside the pacifist implications of the New Testament message.'<sup>698</sup> However, Yoder seems to take 'the pacifist implications of the New Testament message' for granted somewhat, and does not build upon Tolstoy's exegetical work. Yoder only briefly alludes to Jesus' 'nonviolent seizure of the holy place',<sup>699</sup> and is dismissive, moreover, of problematic texts such as Jesus' statement, 'I have not come to bring peace, but a sword',<sup>700</sup> a statement which we will deal with below.

Yoder offers one argument which is useful for the present study, in which he highlights that successful nonviolent resistance was not unfamiliar to first century Jewish experience.<sup>701</sup> Yoder points to Josephus' reports of Pilate's attempt to erect standards in Jerusalem and the ensuing protests (*Ant* 8.3, *War* 2.9), and Petronius's attempt to install a statue of Caligula in the temple and the 'general strike' which followed (*Ant* 8.8, *War* 2.10). Both of these texts are clear examples of resistance to the systemic violence of the Roman occupation. By the definitions of nonviolence that we

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<sup>697</sup> See Yoder, *The Politics of Jesus*, pp.11-15

<sup>698</sup> Yoder, *Politics of Jesus*, p.5

<sup>699</sup> Yoder, *Politics of Jesus*, pp.49-51

<sup>700</sup> Yoder, *Politics of Jesus*, p.44

<sup>701</sup> Yoder, *Politics of Jesus*, p.90

have considered above, these appear to be entirely plausible examples of nonviolent resistance. Bearing in mind the temporal proximity of these events to Jesus' ministry, Yoder convincingly argues that Jesus' participation in nonviolent resistance would be quite feasible in broad historical terms.<sup>702</sup>

### Walter Wink

Walter Wink presents the most detailed and perhaps the most well-known argument for a nonviolent Jesus, which is detailed in a chapter of *Engaging the Powers*,<sup>703</sup> in *Violence and Nonviolence in South Africa*,<sup>704</sup> and *Jesus and Nonviolence*.<sup>705</sup> Wink begins by addressing the way in which Matthew 5:38-42 – the key text for Tolstoy – has been ignored and written off as ‘impractical, masochistic, suicidal – an invitation to bullies and spouse-batterers to wipe up the floor with their supine Christian victims’.<sup>706</sup> Wink suggests that texts like this have ‘become the basis for systematic training in cowardice, as Christians are taught to acquiesce to evil.’<sup>707</sup> Wink proceeds to argue that this is a drastic misunderstanding which is made by the majority of its readers. This misunderstanding, Wink argues, is partly due to a common mistranslation in 5:39a which renders *antistēnai* as ‘resist not’ evil, which has caused most readers to interpret

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<sup>702</sup> A more detailed version of this argument has since been made by Richard Horsley, Cf. Horsley, *Spiral of Violence*, pp.59-89

<sup>703</sup> Walter Wink, *Engaging the Powers: Discernment and Resistance in a World of Domination* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992), p.175-194

<sup>704</sup> Walter Wink, *Violence and Nonviolence in South Africa* (Philadelphia: New Society Publishers, 1987)

<sup>705</sup> Walter Wink, *Jesus and Nonviolence: A Third Way* (Abingdon Press, 2003)

<sup>706</sup> Wink, *Engaging the Powers*, p.175

<sup>707</sup> Wink, *Engaging the Powers*, p.175

the meaning of the saying as ‘submit to evil’. Wink notes that, almost on the contrary, *antistēnai* means to strongly stand against something, indeed even to resist *violently*; for in the LXX the term is used primarily to refer to armed and violent struggle.<sup>708</sup> Wink also defends the historicity of the statement by arguing that it is preserved not only in Matthew, but in Romans 12:17, 1 Thessalonians 5:15 and 1 Peter 3:9, which all prohibit repaying evil with evil, or state, as Wink puts it, ‘do not mirror evil’.

Wink bulks out his argument by exploring in depth the sayings ‘turn the other cheek’, ‘give the undergarment’ and ‘go the second mile’, each of which, he argues, are examples of nonviolent resistance. First, Wink argues that turning the other cheek is a subversive action that a person can use to assert their dignity and humanity. According to Wink:

The person who turns the other cheek is saying, in effect, “Try again. Your first blow failed to achieve its intended effect. I deny you the power to humiliate me. I am a human being just like you. Your status does not alter that fact. You cannot demean me.”<sup>709</sup>

In support of this idea, Wink notes that Jesus’ listeners are not those who strike people, initiate lawsuits, or impose forced labour, but are the *victims*; thus Jesus says if anyone strikes *you*, or wants to sue *you* or forces *you* to go one mile. Wink suggests that turning the other cheek is the notion that Jesus recommends to those subjected to the indignities of hierarchical systems of ‘class, race, gender, age, and status, and as a result of imperial occupation.’<sup>710</sup>

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<sup>708</sup> Wink, *Engaging the Powers*, pp.184-185

<sup>709</sup> Wink, *Engaging the Powers*, p.176

<sup>710</sup> Wink, *Engaging the Powers*, p.176



With the ‘give the undergarment’ saying, Wink suggests that Jesus is encouraging those who have been driven into debt by their landowners to make a public mockery of the economic system that has made them so poor that they are left without clothing. Wink notes that the Torah prohibits a person to keep a poor person’s garment taken in pledge overnight, ‘for it may be your neighbour’s only clothing to use as cover’ (Ex 22:27). But Jesus, according to Wink, suggests that if sued, a person should give not only their outer garment but their undergarment too, shaming the person who has brought about the nakedness (Cf. Gen 9:20-27). The now de-robed person, Wink argues, is saying ‘“You want my robe? Here, take everything! Now you’ve got all I have except my body. Is that what you’ll take next?”’<sup>711</sup> Wink argues that this gesture unmasks the cruelty of the economic system, supported, ironically, by the law courts that are supposed to provide justice.

Finally Wink argues that the saying ‘go the second mile’ refers to the practice of *angareusei*, where an occupying military forces a subject person to carry their equipment for them. Rather than being forced to carry a soldier’s equipment, if a person voluntarily agrees to carry it then they undermine the soldier’s authority and assert their own freewill. In recommending such an action, Jesus is ‘helping an oppressed people find a way to protest and neutralize an onerous practice despised throughout the empire.’<sup>712</sup> Wink concludes:

Just on the grounds of sheer originality, the examples of unarmed direct action in Matt 5:39b-41 would appear to have originated with Jesus. No one, not only in the first century but in all of human history, ever advocated defiance of oppressors by turning the cheek, stripping oneself naked in court, or jeopardizing a soldier by carrying his pack a second mile. For three centuries,

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<sup>711</sup> Wink, *Engaging the Powers*, p.179

<sup>712</sup> Wink, *Engaging the Powers*, p.182

the early church observed Jesus' command to nonviolence. But nowhere in the early church, to say nothing of the early fathers, do we find statements similar to these in their humor and originality. These sayings are, in fact, so radical, so unprecedented, and so threatening, that it has taken all these centuries just to begin to grasp their implications.<sup>713</sup>

Wink's arguments have been challenged, however, from various perspectives. Firstly, Richard Horsley has addressed the historical-critical scholarship underlying Wink's work. In Willard Swartley's volume *The Love of Enemy and Nonretaliation in the New Testament*, both Horsley and Wink put forward their thesis, and then provide a brief response to each other's work. Horsley is critical of the way in which Christian ethics on nonviolence have generally been developed on several counts. Horsley is critical, for example, of the way in which Jesus has frequently been contrasted with the (violent) Zealot movement which, Horsley argues, is a scholarly construct. Further, Horsley contends that the saying 'love your enemies' was not political, as many have argued, but interpersonal and referred to disputes that would occur on a local level. Horsley also questions that way in which sayings of Jesus have been taken as universal ethical principles, when Jesus said them in a particular context and referred to specific situations and events, and Horsley questions whether it is fair for comfortable first world scholars today to argue that the oppressed should not use violence.<sup>714</sup> Horsley concludes that although he is critical of pacifist readings such as that of Yoder, he reaches 'fundamentally similar conclusions about the serious implications of these sayings of Jesus for ethical judgements regarding political-economic structures.'<sup>715</sup>

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<sup>713</sup> Wink, *Engaging the Powers*, p.184

<sup>714</sup> Richard A. Horsley, 'Response to Walter Wink' in *The Love of Enemy and Nonretaliation in the New Testament* (ed. Willard M. Swartley; Louisville, Ky: Westminster John Knox Press, 1992), pp.126-132 (131-134)

<sup>715</sup> Richard A. Horsley, 'Ethics and Exegesis: "Love Your Enemies" and the Doctrine of Nonviolence' in *The Love of Enemy and Nonretaliation in the New Testament*, pp.72-101 (96)

Horsley makes the implications of his work clear in his response to Wink's article in Swartley's volume. In particular, Horsley emphasises that the sayings that Wink builds his thesis on did not necessarily refer to especially political situations (like face-offs with occupying soldiers), but may well have referred to interactions with local adversaries: the backhanded slap, for instance, was not used only to demonstrate one person's authority over another, but could have been a serious insult in a local quarrel; a creditor asking for a cloak is likely to have been a local wealthy person rather than an absentee official or landowner; and the presence of the Roman military in Galilee is not proven, making the practice of *angariae* seem unlikely.<sup>716</sup>

Wink's counter-response in the same volume deals with some of the issues that Horsley raises to an extent. Wink argues, for instance, that the practice of *angariae* could have been enforced by Antipas' soldiers, and that Roman soldiers may have passed through Galilee.<sup>717</sup> But it is interesting how Wink comments at length on his apparent confusion at Horsley's disagreement with him. Wink goes so far as suggesting that he is a better Horsleyan than Horsley because he advocates a nonviolent Jesus even though he does not personally see himself as a pacifist, and Horsley does not advocate a nonviolent Jesus although he does identify himself as a pacifist.<sup>718</sup> It is telling that Wink struggles with this notion. Why should Horsley imagine that Jesus was a pacifist, simply because he himself is a pacifist? Horsley evidently finds the evidence that Wink provides to be insufficient to make the argument that Jesus is a pacifist, and is not willing to abandon his analysis of the historical data.

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<sup>716</sup> Horsley, 'Response to Walter Wink', p.130

<sup>717</sup> Walter Wink, 'Counterresponse to Richard Horsley' in *The Love of Enemy and Nonretaliation in the New Testament*, p.133-136 (134)

<sup>718</sup> Wink, 'Counterresponse to Richard Horsley', p.134-135

A critique from a different perspective has been offered by Julie Todd, who notes the influence and value of Wink's work, but asks whether Wink's promotion of nonviolence as taught by Jesus has the potential to promote any positive change. Todd argues that turning the other cheek, giving the undergarment and going the second mile – the actions that Jesus, according to Wink, recommends as resistance – are not actions that will bring about change, but merely actions that allow a person to assert their human dignity. Todd agrees that Wink's emphasis on affirming the dignity and agency of the oppressed is good when structural change is not immediately possible, but Todd argues that Wink does not offer a constructive proposal for bringing about 'the foundation for the social revolution' about which he writes. Todd asks, 'What might coerce the "Powers that Be" to give up power and change the structures of oppression themselves? How does Wink square his un-revolutionary proposals with his earlier contention that the gospel is Jesus' "radical assault" on the presuppositions of oppression...?' <sup>719</sup> Nonetheless, Wink's work remains probably the most widely read, influential, and valuable contribution to discussions about Jesus and nonviolence to date.

#### Massyngbaerde Ford

A much less widely read work that argues for a nonviolent Jesus is Massyngbaerde Ford's *My Enemy is My Guest*. Focusing on Luke's Gospel, Ford analyses an entirely different set of texts to the Sermon on the Mount texts that Tolstoy and Wink relied upon so heavily. One part of Ford's argument is related to Jesus' approach to

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<sup>719</sup> Julie Todd, 'Engaging the Powers of Nonviolence: A Critique of Walter Wink's "Third Way"', *JRCP* 2, 1, 2008, <<http://www.religionconflictpeace.org/node/41>> (19 June 2012)

Samaritans. After outlining the level of hostility that generally existed between Jews and Samaritans, Ford argues that Jesus' approach to Samaritans was notably positive. Ford notes that in Luke 9:51-56, when passing through Samaria, Jesus shows no resentment that he does not receive hospitality from the Samaritans. When James and John ask whether they should bid fire to come down from heaven to consume the Samaritans as Elijah did (2 Kgs 1:2-16), Jesus responds, 'You do not know what manner of spirit you are of; for the Son of Man came not to destroy men's lives but to save them.' Ford argues that Jesus' 'peaceable' approach towards Samaritans is also confirmed in the parable of the Good Samaritan (Lk 10:25-37), in which Jesus explicitly sets up the Samaritan as 'the one who showed mercy'. Further, there is the case of the Samaritan leper who Jesus heals (Lk 17:11-19). These texts, Ford notes, are the only pro-Samaritan texts in the canonical gospels besides John 4:1-42; although Ford might have noted that John's text increases the likelihood that Jesus was remembered correctly by Luke to have made some positive statements about Samaritans.<sup>720</sup>

Another text that Ford draws upon is Luke 13:1-9, in which a group of people approach Jesus and tell him 'of the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices.' Ford suggests that Jesus' audience were expecting him to react to the news about the slaughtered Galileans 'with indignation, or with a statement that death was due to sin'. But according to Ford, 'Jesus' attitude is one of nonviolence and he teaches that all should repent.'<sup>721</sup> Ford is not quite clear, however, about where nonviolence enters this passage. In response to the crowds questions, Jesus repeats 'unless you repent you will all likewise perish' (13:3, 5), which, despite being a call to righteous

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<sup>720</sup> J. Massyngbaerde Ford, *My Enemy is My Guest: Jesus and Violence in Luke* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1984), p.79-95

<sup>721</sup> Ford, *My Enemy is My Guest*, p.98

living of some sort, also entails the threat of death. The threat of death here does not particularly seem to demonstrate a nonviolent ethic very well.

Ford also makes reference to the messianic banquet in Luke 14:15-24. But Ford's argument here, while suggesting that *Luke's* Jesus 'is not to be associated with violence and retribution',<sup>722</sup> does not convincingly argue that Jesus disassociated himself from violence and retribution. Ford notes that Luke omits violent features that Matthew includes, such as the 'warlike king' host (Mt 22:2), and the brutal behaviour of the servants (Mt 22:6); Ford notes that although Luke describes the host as angry, he does not say that he sent for troops to destroy the murders and burn their city as Matthew does (Mt 22:7), and he does not report the man without a wedding garment being cast into outer darkness (Mt 22:11-14).<sup>723</sup> But Matthew *does* include these features. It is feasible that Matthew, for some reason, added the violent features to the text from Q; but to make such an argument thoroughly, it would first be necessary to explain why Matthew added the violence, and to make a case for a completely 'nonviolent' Jesus – in the sense that most commentators have interpreted nonviolence – it would be necessary to work all the way through all of the gospels and argue that *every* violent image was added by the redactors and that none originated with Jesus. Furthermore, a reason would have to be provided for why the redactors consciously chose to attribute violent language and imagery to Jesus if they did not think that Jesus actually said such words.

Ched Myers

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<sup>722</sup> Ford, *My Enemy is My Guest*, p.103

<sup>723</sup> Ford, *My Enemy is My Guest*, pp.102-105

Ched Myers offers quite a different angle to the above discussions on the question of Jesus' relationship to nonviolence, although similar arguments can be found in some of Wink's work. Like Wink, Myers sees Jesus' execution as an act of nonviolence. Myers is critical of liberation theologians' negative attitude towards the crucifixion which they tend to see as an 'abandonment of politics',<sup>724</sup> and argues that, on the contrary, the cross was integral to Jesus' 'mission'. Myers says of Jesus' execution:

It is a deliberate revolutionary strategy, embraced in the conviction that only nonviolence can break the most primal structures of power and domination in the world, and create the possibility for a new order to dawn in the world. This proposition overturns all traditional notions of political efficacy, social power, and economic security. And truly it is the one that followers of Jesus (both in the story and throughout Christian history) have found most difficult to accept.<sup>725</sup>

Myers also adds that Jesus taught nonviolence through 'the daily exercise of power'. Myers argues that Jesus advocated a 'culturally novel' nonpatriarchal and nonhierarchical social program that 'applies to real-life courtrooms and real-life community and family conflicts' and which 'includes every form of relationship, from the systemic to the interpersonal, in order to address fundamental social and economic patterns of dominations at their roots.'<sup>726</sup>

Myers view of Jesus' execution hinges on the question of Jesus' intentions. In support of his argument, it is suggested in all of the canonical gospels that Jesus was expecting his execution (Mk 10:33; Mt 20:18-19; Lk 18:32-33), and further, it is clear that Jesus did not resist his arrest or execution. In this respect, Myers may be correct in viewing Jesus' execution as 'deliberate' on Jesus' part, for it seems that not only did

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<sup>724</sup> Ched Myers, *Binding the Strong Man: A Political Reading of Mark's Story of Jesus* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1988), p.471 See also Wink, *Engaging the Powers*, p.139-56

<sup>725</sup> Myers, *Binding the Strong Man*, p.286

<sup>726</sup> Myers, *Binding the Strong Man*, p.288

Jesus fail to defend himself, but he is depicted as being resigned to his eventual death. Myers argument that Jesus practiced nonviolence through the daily exercise of power is also plausible, although he does not make the argument in detail. Wink makes a similar case in more detail, arguing, ‘His assault was against the basic presuppositions and structures of oppression itself’,<sup>727</sup> and Wink provides some more depth on how Jesus may have expressed ‘God’s domination free order’. Wink admits that in his analysis he has ‘not attempted to maintain a careful distinction between statements and deeds that are authentic to Jesus and those ascribed to him by the church, so long as they both reflect the values of partnership and reject the System of Domination.’<sup>728</sup> However, whilst he states that he is not attempting to present a ‘definitive picture’ of the historical Jesus, he claims to focus ‘on an originating impulse that issued from him and was continued by his disciples.’<sup>729</sup> I have much sympathy with Wink’s pursuit of an ‘originating impulse’, and as we have seen, searching for the ‘gist’ of the historical Jesus has now become a common approach in historical Jesus studies. Wink’s hand-washing in relation to historical Jesus studies, however, apparently gives him the freedom to write off Jesus’ ‘vindictive’ sayings about judgement, hastily dismissing them by claiming that, ‘they are not made central, and in most cases do not appear to go back to Jesus either.’<sup>730</sup>

Mark Brett

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<sup>727</sup> Wink, *Engaging the Powers*, p.136

<sup>728</sup> Wink, *Engaging the Powers*, p.110

<sup>729</sup> Wink, *Engaging the Powers*, p.111

<sup>730</sup> Wink, *Engaging the Powers*, pp.135-136



The most recent discussion of the idea of a nonviolent Jesus in Western scholarship comes from Mark Brett. Unfortunately however Brett's discussion mainly consists of retailing various arguments that have previously been raised in support of a nonviolent Jesus, and while he raises some problematic passages, he dismisses them abruptly. Brett repeatedly asserts that Jesus was nonviolent as opposed to violent. Brett states: 'Jesus... embodies and espouses a "non-violent social revolution" that challenges all the conventional constructions of power and order',<sup>731</sup> and that 'Nothing in the life and death of Jesus corresponds to the violent motifs generated by Israel's messianic imagination'.<sup>732</sup> Brett adds that, 'The theme of non-violence appears repeatedly in the parables and teachings...',<sup>733</sup> and 'His approach often provokes shame, but he does not promote violence'.<sup>734</sup> He summarises his discussion by stating: 'one conclusion in relation to the Gospels is clear: nothing in the Jesus, traditions, whether "early" or "late", can provide a sanction for colonial violence.'<sup>735</sup>

Despite Brett's insistence that Jesus had nothing to do with violence but was constantly talking about nonviolence, from his discussion one can glean only a handful of examples; one is the overturning of the tables in the temple (Mk 11:15-19), which Brett actually describes as 'symbolic violence',<sup>736</sup> another is Jesus' healing of the servant's ear in Gethsemane (Lk 22:49-51),<sup>737</sup> and another is in the parable of the

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<sup>731</sup> Mark G. Brett, *Decolonizing God: The Bible in the Tides of Empire* (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2008), p.137

<sup>732</sup> N.B. Brett's contrasting of a nonviolent Jesus with a violent Israel. Brett, *Decolonizing God*, p.139

<sup>733</sup> Brett, *Decolonizing God*, p.139

<sup>734</sup> Brett, *Decolonizing God*, p.141

<sup>735</sup> Brett, *Decolonizing God*, p.147

<sup>736</sup> Brett, *Decolonizing God*, p.137

<sup>737</sup> Brett, *Decolonizing God*, p.147

workers in the vineyard (Mk 12:1-2) where Brett suggests that the possibility of revolt is contemplated only to be dismissed as unrealistic, which is, to say the least, an unusual interpretation of this parable. Beyond these arguments, the only notable substance that Brett provides to demonstrate that Jesus practiced nonviolence is a brief summary of Wink's arguments.<sup>738</sup>

On the other hand, while Brett addresses what he sees as an 'overshadowing' of 'the non-violent resistance that Jesus embodies' with the 'traumatic visions of divine judgement',<sup>739</sup> he effectively dismisses all violent apocalyptic passages by remarking quite simply that they 'may not be part of the early Jesus traditions'.<sup>740</sup> Brett's raising of the problem of the Canaanite woman, which he uses to attempt to illustrate that Jesus' self-understanding was developed dialogically,<sup>741</sup> is a red-herring, better illustrating a practice of racial discrimination than nonviolence.

Brett does make one convincing argument however, which is that if, according to Jesus, final judgement is 'God's business alone' then as Brett notes, 'human agencies are necessarily excluded.'<sup>742</sup> As Tolstoy has argued, if, according to Jesus, judgement is always wrong and hypocritical, then violent punishment is surely not the job of human agents. Violent judgement is notably described by Jesus as an activity of God, however, a point to which we shall return.

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<sup>738</sup> Brett, *Decolonizing God*, p.142

<sup>739</sup> Brett, *Decolonizing God*, p.144

<sup>740</sup> Brett, *Decolonizing God*, p.146

<sup>741</sup> Brett, *Decolonizing God*, p.144

<sup>742</sup> Brett, *Decolonizing God*, p.147

## Summary

Brett's work brings us to the present stage of discussion about Jesus' relationship to nonviolence. Scholarship on Jesus and the practice on nonviolence has unfortunately not been particularly developed since Wink and Myers' work. Furthermore, many scholars who have argued for a nonviolent Jesus have not adequately engaged the problem that it is not hard to find violence in the gospels, and in the sayings and actions of Jesus. To this problem we shall now turn.

### **The Violent Jesus in Postcolonial and Ideological Criticism**

Postcolonial biblical criticism has generally been extremely sensitive to the ambivalence of biblical texts; that is, the fact the biblical texts can be used both for liberative and oppressive purposes. It has therefore been the aim of some postcolonial biblical commentators to specifically highlight the potentially oppressive elements of any given text. Most relevant to our discussion here is the work of Liew, who argues that Mark duplicates many aspects of the imperial power relations of his time. For instance, Liew notes how Mark's Jesus functions as an unquestionable figure of authority, for 'those who criticize him are "guilty of an eternal sin"' (Mk 3:29).<sup>743</sup> Further, Liew argues that Mark replicates the political structures of imperialism. He notes that 'with Jesus reappearing in power and judgement (8:38-9:1; 12:9, 36; 13:36; 14:61-62), the parousia will bring about a realignment of socio-political power and the full establishment of God's reign, the "wicked" authorities will be destroyed, and the temple built by

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<sup>743</sup> Although Liew is perhaps failing to explain here that Mark 3:29 seems to be referring specifically to the Holy Spirit and not to Jesus, See Liew, 'The Gospel of Mark', p.115

“indiscriminating builders” will be dismantled.’<sup>744</sup> In terms of violent retribution, in Liew’s view, Mark seems to go especially far. Liew argues that:

Mark actually has in mind something worse than a “tit-for-tat” policy; as his Jesus declares, “What measure you measure with, it will be measured against you, *with added proportion*”... The horror of this “interest-incurring” repayment of violence is reflected in Jesus’ comment regarding his betrayer, that “it would have been better for that man if he had not been born.”<sup>745</sup>

Liew surmises that Mark presents, ‘an all-authoritative Jesus who will eventually annihilate all opponents and all other authorities’, and thus for Liew:

Mark’s utopian, or dystopian, vision, in effect, duplicates the colonial non-choice of “serve-or-be-destroyed”. This non-choice is, in turn, based on another colonial rationalization that Mark shares, namely, that certain people have proven to be too barbaric, too evil or too underdeveloped to be given autonomy, or even the right to live.<sup>746</sup>

Stephen Moore describes Benny Liew’s method of postcolonial biblical criticism as one that ‘meshes seamlessly with... that other relatively recent development in biblical studies known as “ideological criticism”’.<sup>747</sup> It is interesting that one of the few other Western scholars who have discussed the violence of Jesus may also be identified with the school of ideological criticism. David Clines has briefly raised the issue of Jesus’ violence, specifically in relation to his gendering. Besides the sorts of points that we

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<sup>744</sup> Liew, ‘The Gospel of Mark’, p.116

<sup>745</sup> Liew, ‘The Gospel of Mark’, p.116

<sup>746</sup> Liew, ‘The Gospel of Mark’, p.116

<sup>747</sup> Moore, *Empire and Apocalypse*, p.21

have already considered, Clines suggests that cursing may be understood as violent language for it invokes physical violence. Clines notes several examples of cursing including the ‘woes’ pronounced upon various towns (Mt. 11.21), a woe to the world because of temptation and to the man by whom it comes (Mt 18.7), woes to scribes and Pharisees (Mt 23.14, 15, 16, 23, 25, 27, 29), woes upon the man who betrays Jesus (Mt 26.24), the cursing of the fig tree (Mt 21.19-20), and the threat of future punishment, like the casting of worthless servants into outer darkness where there is weeping and gnashing of teeth (Mt 25:30; cf. 8:12; 22:13).<sup>748</sup>

Michel Desjardins has also drawn attention to violence within the Jesus tradition in his short book *Peace, Violence and the New Testament*. Desjardins argues that while many Christians suggest that the ‘vengeful, wrathful God who leads his people into war’ is only the ‘God of the Old Testament’,<sup>749</sup> on the contrary, ‘violence abounds within the New Testament.’<sup>750</sup> Desjardins makes several points that specifically relate to Jesus. Firstly, along with Liew, Desjardins notes that Jesus suggests that God will react to evil forces with extreme violence (Mk 13; Mt 24; Lk 21).<sup>751</sup> Furthermore, Jesus explicitly states that he will cause disruption, and he states this with a violent metaphor: ‘Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth; I have not come to bring peace but a sword’ (Mt 10:34).<sup>752</sup> Desjardins also draws attention to two specific acts; firstly, Jesus’ actions in the temple (Mk 11:15-19; Mt 21:12-13; Lk 19:45-48; Jn 2:13-

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<sup>748</sup> David J.A. Clines, ‘*Ecce Vir*, or, Gendering the Son of Man’ in *Biblical Studies/Cultural Studies: The Third Sheffield Colloquium* (eds. J. Cheryl Exum and Stephen D. Moore; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1998), pp.352-375 (357)

<sup>749</sup> Michel Desjardins, *Peace, Violence and the New Testament* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1997), p.84

<sup>750</sup> Desjardins, *Peace*, p.108

<sup>751</sup> Desjardins, *Peace*, p.72

<sup>752</sup> Desjardins, *Peace*, p.73

17) where he makes a whip to drive out the animals; significantly, the Greek text leaves open the possibility that the whip was also used to drive out people, and the Johannine description that is given of Jesus deliberately constructing a whip gives the whole action a premeditated dimension (Jn 2:15). Secondly, Desjardins notes that when one of Jesus' disciples draws a sword in the garden of Gethsemane, in all four gospels the context suggests that there is nothing unusual about one of the disciples possessing such an item. Indeed, the context suggests that any one of them might have had a sword, for they state that merely 'one of those who stood near drew his sword' (Mt 26:51; Mk 14:47). Desjardins states that Jesus is neither offended nor pleased by the violence.<sup>753</sup> Such a reaction should perhaps be no surprise, considering that in Luke's Gospel Jesus has at this stage already commanded his disciples to sell their mantle in order to buy a sword (Lk 22:36).

There are some further suggestions of violence that I would also add to the above. In addition to Jesus' action towards people and animals in the temple is his far more threatening statement about what will happen to the temple itself: 'Truly, I say to you, there will not be left here one stone upon another that will not be thrown down' (Mt 24:2; Mk 13:2; Lk 21:6). This saying was clearly remembered as a threatening statement, and it is a statement that is used against him in his trial. According to one accuser, Jesus was thought to have said, 'I am able to destroy the temple of God, and build it in three days' (Mt 27:40; Mk 14:49). Although Jesus did not mean to fundamentally undermine the role of the temple<sup>754</sup> – we note that he defends it elsewhere (Mt 5:24, 23:16-22; Lk 17:14) – that such an accusation was made is perhaps not surprising, considering Jesus' overturning of tables and driving out of animals with

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<sup>753</sup> Desjardins, *Peace*, p.77

<sup>754</sup> See Sanders, *Jesus and Judaism*, pp.63-64

a whip, and considering his suggestion that the temple would be thrown down. These words and actions were apparently misunderstood as violence against the temple, which was certainly offensive to some. Either that, or, as some commentators may argue, these words were correctly understood and Jesus in fact was predicting the Roman destruction of the Jerusalem temple, which is to this day lamented by Jews as an action of extreme cultural violence.<sup>755</sup> Either way, violence seems to be present here.

### **Jesus and the Violence of Eternal Punishment**

I would suggest that the most violent texts of all, however, which have only been touched upon in the above discussions, are Jesus' sayings about eternal punishment. The idea of hell or eternal punishment is articulated most fully and most forcefully in Matthew's Gospel, and is also expanded upon in Luke. We will begin, however, by looking at Mark. Mark contains only one episode that discusses hell, which is paralleled and expanded upon in Matthew:

And if your hand causes you to sin, cut it off; it is better for you to enter life maimed than with two hands to go to hell, to the unquenchable fire. And if your foot causes you to sin, cut it off; it is better for you to enter life lame than with two feet to be thrown into hell. And if your eye causes you to sin, pluck it out; it is better for you to enter the Kingdom of God with one eye than with two eyes to be thrown into hell, where the worm does not die, and the fire is not quenched. For every one will be salted with fire. (Mk 9:43-49)

Mark's Jesus makes it quite clear that certain misdeeds increase the chances of a person finding themselves in hell. In Matthew, this text is expanded in to a midrash-style discussion on the commandments not to commit adultery and not to commit murder, in

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<sup>755</sup> For further see Pheme Perkins, 'If Jerusalem Stood: The Destruction of Jerusalem and Christian Anti-Judaism' in *Virtual History and the Bible* (ed. J Cheryl Exum; Leiden: Brill, 2000), pp.194-204

which Jesus proves himself to be more conservative than other Torah observant Jews of his time.<sup>756</sup>

Matthew's Jesus raises the issue of hell two further times also. The next instance is in his attack on the scribes and Pharisees, when he asks of them, 'how are you to escape being sentenced to hell?' (23:33). In Jesus' speech in Matthew 23:2-39, he expands on the faults of the scribes and the Pharisees a little more; they commit various faults such as loving honour (23:6-7), loving gold more than they love God's temple (23:16-22), and, despite tithing fastidiously, neglecting justice, mercy and faith (23:23-28). In other words, because they love money and fame, and do not really care about fairness and 'doing the good', they are headed for hell. This sentiment is developed in the parable of the sheep and the goats, where it is spelt out with great clarity exactly who will find themselves in eternal torment and why. Matthew's Jesus is plain that those who feed the hungry, give drink to the thirsty, welcome the stranger, clothe the naked, and visit the sick and the prisoner will inherit the kingdom prepared for them at the foundation of the world (25:34-40); he is also clear that those who do not feed the hungry, give drink to the thirsty, welcome the stranger, clothe the naked, and visit the sick and the prisoner 'will go away into eternal punishment' (25:46).

Besides the warning to fear him who has the power to cast a person into hell (12:5), Luke makes two significant comments on hell and Hades. First, Jesus proclaims that the town of Capernaum 'shall be brought down to Hades' (10:15), presumably indiscriminately. Capernaum's fatal error, if we may assume that it is the same fault committed by Chorazin and Bethsaida, is their failure to repent upon seeing 'mighty works' (10:13). Luke also contains the parable which gives the most detailed picture of

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<sup>756</sup> See Levine, *The Misunderstood Jew*, p.47



the afterlife that we can find in the canonical gospels, and that is the parable of the rich man and Lazarus (16:19-31). Luke provides a concise explanation of why the rich man found himself in Hades and Lazarus in Abraham's bosom; when the rich man calls to Abraham for mercy, Abraham replies: 'Son, remember that you in your lifetime received your good things, and Lazarus in like manner evil things; but now he is comforted here, and you are in anguish' (16:25). The explanation on the lips of Abraham is quite simply that the rich man has already had his share of fortunes in his life on earth.<sup>757</sup> According to Luke, a person may go to hell because they are rich; and there is no way back. This idea is not unique to Jesus. As we have seen in chapter 2, 1 Enoch makes similar statements about the fiery destiny of the rich. It is also significant that the tradition of divine violence against the rich finds continued expression in the second part of Luke's writing, the book of Acts. In the story of Ananias and Sapphira – to the immense fear of the early Church (Acts 5:11) – this wife and husband were apparently struck dead for withholding some of their wealth for themselves. Divine violence against those who withheld their resources for selfish ends was thus clearly a significant tradition both in the gospels, and in the early Church.

John's Gospel is the most reserved gospel on the subject of judgement. Although John frequently talks about eternal life, the term 'hell' (*gehenna*) is absent from John's Gospel. The closest thing to the idea of eternal punishment that we find in John's Gospel is the statement that the wrath of God rests upon the one who does not 'obey the Son' (3:36), and the person who does not believe 'him who sent me [Jesus]' will avoid judgement (5:24). Thus although violent punishment is there for the person who does not obey Jesus in John's Gospel, the violence experienced by such a person is not explicitly described as eternal punishment or hell.

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<sup>757</sup> For further discussion see Crossley, *Why Christianity Happened*, pp.63-65

The presence of sayings about hell in all three of the synoptic gospels suggests that the historical Jesus did say something on the matter of hell. As Allison concludes, ‘Divine judgement does not appear in a mere isolated verse or two in the canonical gospels; it is rather a significant element of the Jesus tradition as we have it.’<sup>758</sup> The theme recurs consistently in Matthew, Mark, and Luke, according to Allison, it is central to Q, and it is also suggested in John. This seems to pose a serious issue for certain arguments that Jesus was ‘nonviolent’, for there is arguably nothing more violent than eternal punishment; which surely suggests eternal torment, and perpetual violence.

### **The Continuum of Violence/Nonviolence**

We have seen above that recent scholars of nonviolence have generally agreed that violence and nonviolence belong on the same continuum, and that in many respects, ‘intention’ may often be the only clear difference between violence and nonviolence. Many of the sayings attributed to Jesus are, similarly, not easy to distinguish as simply either violent or nonviolent.

As I have noted in chapter 5, all of the synoptic gospels were written in a time of spiralling resentment towards Rome and probably within just ten years of what Josephus calls ‘the greatest not only of the wars of our own time, but... well nigh of all that ever broke out between cities or nations’ (*War* 1.1).<sup>759</sup> Further, as Horsley has noted, all three synoptic gospels begin and end with conflict, which is often violent. Not only do they all end with a crucifixion, but Matthew begins with a massacre of infants

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<sup>758</sup> See Dale C. Allison, ‘Jesus and Gehenna’ in *Testimony and Interpretation: Early Christology in its Judeo-Hellenistic Milieu: Studies in Honor of Petr Pokorný* (eds. Jan Roskovec, Jiří Mrázek, Petr Pokorný; London: T&T Clark, 2004), pp.75-122 (122)

<sup>759</sup> See also Ford, *My Enemy is My Guest*, p.136

(Mt 2:16), Luke with the proclamation that God will ‘put down the mighty from their thrones and exalt those of low degree’ (Lk 1:52) and Mark with an unclean spirit crying out “‘What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us?’” (Mk 1:24).<sup>760</sup> But precisely what each of the gospel writers is trying to demonstrate in their use of violence is not as clear as some commentators have suggested.

The ambiguity and mystery of the gospels’ presentation of Jesus’ relationship with violence is demonstrated pointedly by one rarely examined text that we find in Matthew and Luke. Matthew’s Jesus states: ‘From the days of John the Baptist until now the kingdom of heaven has suffered violence, and men of violence take it by force’ (Mt 11:12). Luke’s Jesus states: ‘The law and the prophets were until John; since then the good news of the kingdom of God is preached, and every one enters it violently’ (Lk 16:16). The language of violence is present in both texts, but towards whom the violence is directed seems to be different. For Matthew, although the Kingdom of Heaven is being violently forced, it appears that the Kingdom of Heaven is also being opposed by violence by the forceful or violent ones (*biastai*) who are snatching (*harpazousin*) at it. Here it seems notable that the performers of violence are gendered as masculine, and the Kingdom of Heaven is gendered in the feminine (*autēn*); in Matthew’s gendering the feminine Kingdom of Heaven is the subject of male violence. But Luke’s version is quite different. Luke contains no suggestion of violent opposition, and excludes the verb to snatch (*harpazousin*). But Luke includes instead the verb *euaggelizetai*, and uses the verb *biazetai* to refer to those who are being ‘evangelised’. Although Luke seems to tone down the overall violence of the passage, read literally Luke states: ‘the Kingdom of God is having its good message and everyone is being forced into it’. Although the Greek is ambiguous, for Matthew, the Kingdom of Heaven

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<sup>760</sup> Horsley, *Spiral of Violence*, p.156

appears to be the subject of violence, whereas on the contrary for Luke, the Kingdom of God itself appears to be committing the violence. This text points to Jesus' ambivalent relationship with violence; Matthew and Luke seemingly disagree on who Jesus considered to be the violent party out of God and the opponents of God, but either would make sense, for neither Matthew nor Luke are opposed to representing the violence of God in their stories of Jesus. Matthew and Luke's ambiguity on the matter makes it extremely difficult to argue that, regardless of the way he is framed in the sources, that Jesus was nonviolent.

### **Jesus and Positive Nonviolence: An Alternative Proposal**

The gospels do not clearly present Jesus as an absolute pacifist, or as a person who refused to use any sort of violence in the sense that some commentators have tried to argue. The gospels' presentation of Jesus' relation to violence is complex and sometimes seemingly conflicting, and this is demonstrated perhaps most forcefully in Jesus' sayings about hell. But as we have seen above, violence and nonviolence are not easily defined concepts, and so it would not be necessary, helpful or good to write-off the idea of a nonviolent Jesus. Furthermore, as we have seen above, much of the work of Myers and Wink is historically rigorous and convincing.

Jesus' nonviolence is not self-evident as some have deemed it to be and have argued, but it seems possible – indeed appropriate – to speak of Jesus as nonviolent in Galtung's conception of the term. Galtung has developed the concept of 'structural violence', which is the damage that is caused by political, social and economic exploitation and the oppression of individual groups. Throughout this thesis I have argued that Jesus challenged many of these forms of structural violence; in chapters 2

and 3 in particular we have considered Jesus' challenges to economic exploitation, and to the oppression of various oppressed groups. Jesus' resistance to these oppressions could thus be described, in Galtung's terms, as 'positive nonviolence'. In Horsley's discussion of Jesus and nonviolence, he concludes that:

We have no evidence that he ever directly or explicitly addressed the issue of violence. Certainly nonviolence was not a principal theme in his preaching and practice... On the other hand, there is no evidence that Jesus advocated violence, either, at least, not overt individual acts of violence.<sup>761</sup>

But Horsley nonetheless asserts that Jesus actively opposed 'institutionalized oppressive and repressive violence, and its effects on a subject people.'<sup>762</sup> To Horsley's conclusion I would add that Jesus' sayings about hell in fact represent a significant and forceful response to structural violence; a structural violence that caused so much suffering that Jesus wished to condemn its perpetrators to suffer eternal retributive violence. Scholarly discussion about the idea of hell has been avoided by theologians of most religious leanings, and as a result the liberative potential of these seemingly violent texts has generally remained submerged. The concept of hell has long been used by hegemonic forces to instil fear in people, but this represents a profound irony, for Jesus seemingly used the concept of hell more frequently in an attempt to instil fear in the ones who misused their power, in those who neglected the needy, and in the rich.<sup>763</sup> The threat of divine retribution, therefore, functioned as an integral part of Jesus' positive

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<sup>761</sup> Horsley, *Spiral of Violence*, p.318

<sup>762</sup> Horsley, *Spiral of Violence*, p.326

<sup>763</sup> Perhaps in this sense, the story of the rich man and Lazarus, the parable of the rich fool, and the parable of the sheep and the goats, for instance, might be considered as 'weapons of the weak'.

‘nonviolent’ assault on those who failed to address, or perpetuated the suffering of others.<sup>764</sup>

### **Conclusion**

A significant number of the earliest Christians were seemingly absolute pacifists, opposed to all forms of violence. While there is no evidence, besides the interpretations of the early Church fathers, that Jesus himself was completely opposed to violence, neither is there strong evidence that he advocated any specific acts of violence. It is clear, however, that Jesus pronounced divine judgement – divine violence – upon certain people. Jesus was understood by the gospel writers to have used the threat of eschatological violence to coerce his audiences not only into careful Torah observance (Mk 9:43-49), but to use their relative power to assist the needy (Mt 25:31-46), and to condemn the authors of poverty and structural violence, the rich (Lk 16:19-31).

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<sup>764</sup> In this respect these sayings might be described in Galtung’s terms as ‘truncated violence’ or ‘psychological violence’, See Galtung, ‘Violence’, p.170

## CONCLUSION

We always encounter the biblical text with interests. We always have a stake in our reading of it. We always have angles of vision, which can be helpful or harmful in interpreting texts.

- Walter Wink<sup>765</sup>

In this work I have presented a critique of recent Western Jesus scholarship, by bringing a perspective heavily influenced by postcolonialism and liberation theology to bear on discussions about Jesus and ‘the poor’ in British and North American scholarship. In the introductory chapter I highlighted some fundamental flaws in the Quest, for instance the way in which Questers often fail to even employ their own methods correctly, gesturing towards the idea that ideological factors might influence the supposedly ‘scientific’ work of these scholars. This served to justify, as if it were necessary, the need for Western scholars to listen to perspectives that do not claim to be objective, and to weigh such perspectives as equally valid. Throughout this work, I implicitly reiterated this critique by prioritising postcolonial and liberationist hermeneutical approaches, whilst remaining heavily engaged with more traditional Western ‘historical-critical’ methods. The result is a work that has utilised both standard methods associated with the Quest and postcolonial hermeneutics to highlight the way in which Western scholars have neglected or even rejected Jesus’ fierce condemnations of the rich. The reason for this

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<sup>765</sup> Walter Wink, ‘Write What You See: An Odyssey’, *The Fourth R*, 7.3, 1994, <[http://www.westarinstitute.org/Periodicals/4R\\_Articles/wink\\_bio.html](http://www.westarinstitute.org/Periodicals/4R_Articles/wink_bio.html)> (1 June 2012)

neglect, I have argued, is the positionality of the scholars who have been constructing Jesus: New Testament scholars from the ‘economic superpower’ of America, and from Britain, who have hegemonic interests to protect when they construct such culturally significant figures as Jesus.

The first half of this work, in a manner fairly typical of much Western Jesus scholarship and even of the Quest, was largely concerned with positioning Jesus in his historical context; specifically, this work was concerned with positioning Jesus in his social and economic world. In the first chapter I evaluated many of the recent discussions relating to Jesus’ social world. After establishing some of the basic facts about ancient agrarian economies and the peculiarities of the economy of Jewish Palestine, I critiqued, in particular, recent scholarship on ‘poverty scales’, highlighting some of the huge flaws with Friesen and Longenecker’s studies which ignore women and slaves, who comprised well over half of the population of any ancient society. Such a glaring neglect may be explained when we consider the positionality of the scholars involved in the discussion. Just as ancient elite males tended to neglect women and slaves in their historical writings, women and slaves do not seem to feature in the historical reconstructions of these modern scholars either. I addressed this imbalance, albeit partially, by offering further discussion of the role of slaves, and female slaves, in first century Jewish Palestine.

In the second chapter I examined various ideologies concerning poverty and wealth which might have been ‘in the air’ at the time of Jesus. I critiqued readings of the Wisdom literature in the Hebrew Bible and of the Pauline epistles which suggest that these texts exhibited a genuine concern for social and economic disparities, arguing that these texts, along with various Greco-Roman elite texts, perpetuated hegemonic discourses which helped to maintain vast economic disparities. On the other hand, I



identified a large variety of people and resistance movements which sought to challenge such discourses and the status quo which they defended, including the Galilean bandits, the Cynics, the Essenes, John the Baptist and his disciples, and Jesus.

In the third chapter, with a view towards reading Luke 4:18-19, I examined recent scholarship which discusses the meaning of the term 'the poor' in the Bible. I highlighted that much Western scholarship seeks to diminish the economic meaning of the term by arguing that it refers to social status (Hobbs, Malina), or even religious piety (Ling) – with the effect of diminishing various radical biblical imperatives to address the situation of the materially poor. I followed this discussion by offering a materially grounded discussion of the meaning of the term, its usage in Luke's Gospel, and its relation to 'captives', 'the blind', and 'the oppressed'. I argued that the 'good news for the poor' of Luke's Gospel primarily entailed the miraculous healing of the sick and marginalised, and the denouncement of wealth, rather than charity.

In the fourth chapter I began to move slightly away from discussions about the poor and poverty, for recent Western commentary on the key text of this work, Luke 4:16-30, has frequently overlooked verses 18-19 and the 'good news for the poor'; Western commentary on this text has instead tended to produce a mission-centred reading that rests on an anti-Judaic hermeneutic, an issue which it was necessary to address in this chapter. I interrogated popular scholarly readings that present Jesus' religion as one of 'grace' and 'Judaism' or 'the Jews' as xenophobic and inhospitable, proceeding to contradict such readings by suggesting that, on the contrary to the popular Christian reading of this text, Jesus was more hostile towards Gentiles than the majority of his fellow Jews. My reading, however, raised the question of modern Jewish-Gentile relationships in Palestine/Israel and the role of Jesus in Palestinian liberation theology. After highlighting this significant issue, I argued that the use of anti-Judaic rhetoric in

Palestinian liberation theology represents a form of heritagist resistance reading (Sugirtharajah) born out of colonial violence, and so whilst problematic, is not deserving of the intense criticism which it receives from certain Western scholars.

In the fifth chapter my focus turned to the question of Jesus and Empire. After examining some of the recent discussions on the subject, I brought the Rastafari movement – a contemporary, fundamentally anti-imperialist movement – to bear upon the discussion. Besides bringing in some Rasta readings of biblical texts and discussing their relationship to imperialism, I proposed a comparison between Rasta cultural resistance to the West, and ancient Jewish cultural resistance to Rome, shedding light on some of the ‘everyday’ ways in which Roman imperialism may have been resisted by Jesus and his contemporaries.

In the sixth chapter I turned to the question of Jesus and nonviolence, contending that violence and nonviolence are significant issues for postcolonial theology to address. After grounding the discussion in contemporary debates about the meaning of nonviolence, I examined recent literature from over the last century or so which presents Jesus as an advocate of nonviolence, and literature which presents Jesus as an advocate of violence, concluding that there is no strong basis on which to argue that Jesus was or was not an ‘absolute pacifist’. I proceeded, however, drawing on Galtung’s concept of structural violence, to argue that Jesus may be described as an advocate of positive nonviolence in a Galtungian sense, perhaps especially, paradoxically, in his use of threatening divine violence towards the rich.

A tension that has been present throughout this work is that in spite of the critiques that I have offered of Western scholarship, and despite my developing desire to leave much of it behind, this work has interacted a great deal with traditional ‘historical-

critical' Western Jesus scholarship. As Sugirtharajah has noted, Western biblical studies is a discourse that one can easily find oneself locked into;<sup>766</sup> not to shirk all responsibility, but working in a University library that is stocked with decades of Western biblical scholarship has, unfortunately, helped to lure me into this discourse. Nonetheless, this work depicts a journey of growing disillusionment with a discipline, and it has been largely in the stages after writing the vast majority of the manuscript that I have started to lose faith and to lose interest in the Quest as a worthwhile pursuit; not only because the questions that it asks are frequently impossible to answer, but also because of the presuppositions that lie beneath the surface: for instance, the notion that a Western science (for biblical studies functions like a science for many) will lead us, the West, to universal truths, that may be disseminated around the world from our English speaking centres in Britain and America, and consumed..Some explicit criticisms of Western methods and assumptions have nevertheless been offered, and I have implicitly reinforced these criticisms with my repeated prioritisation of liberationist interests and postcolonial hermeneutics over more traditional and more thoroughly Western paradigms, such as the Quest for the historical Jesus.

In an obvious sense, this work offers what might look like a fairly classic liberationist reading of the key text, Luke 4:18-19. With standard Western historical critical methods, I have emphasised the centrality of economic and material issues in biblical texts, such as Luke 4:18-19. This began in chapter 1 with the work on the social and economic climate of Roman Palestine, and was developed throughout chapters 2, 3, 4, and 6, in which I effectively argued that biblical texts which are either seemingly or demonstrably concerned with socioeconomic issues have been downplayed and suppressed by privileged scholarly readers in the West. Such readings, I have implied,

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<sup>766</sup> Sugirtharajah, 'Biblical Scholarship after *Voices*', pp.6-7

ultimately function to maintain the privileged position of the West, by reinterpreting Jesus – the supposed patriarch of Western morality – as a figure who did not actually have any concern about poverty existing in the face of enormous wealth.

Despite the conclusions that have been drawn, this thesis departs from more classic liberation readings in several important respects. Firstly, in this work I have highlighted both potentially liberating and oppressive sayings that might be attributed to Jesus, as well as the paradoxical sayings on divine judgement of the rich, which I suggest, whilst being seemingly psychologically violent, may ultimately serve to challenge deep-seated structural violence; in this respect, I have avoided presenting Jesus as a particularly ‘followable’ character, as is generally done in both liberation theology, and the Quest. Furthermore, I have disengaged from traditionally prioritised Western Church doctrines regarding Jesus’ divinity, the trinity, the resurrection, and so on. Moreover, I have not even particularly pushed the argument that Jesus advocated the redistribution of wealth in a Marxian sense, but merely that he condemned the rich; although I have argued, at times, that Jesus advocated basic provision of material needs for the impoverished, as evidenced by the socioeconomic function of healing miracles (see chapter 3), and parables such as the sheep and the goats.

The perspective offered in this work, like all perspectives offered on Jesus, is subjective. One feature of this work, however, gives it a certain critical edge that has been lacking in the majority of the history of Western biblical scholarship; my insistence upon the issues of poverty, oppression and imperialism as essential for reading the gospel texts, both from a historical and moral perspective. The world that spawned the gospels and the world today are both marked by stark material inequalities, structural violence, and suffering. Failure by Western biblical scholars to address such issues in the ancient texts not only betrays a profound neglect of this basic fact of

history, but can be said to demonstrate tacit complicity in and consent to Western projects of dominance today; a complicity inherent to the Western intellectual tradition, stemming from a culture based on centuries of power and privilege at the expense of the Majority World.

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