

JESUS AND POVERTY

by Obery M. Hendricks, Jr.

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A. N. Sherwin-White observes that the world reflected in the Gospels “presents two classes, the very rich and the very poor.” The “very rich” in Israel was a tiny upper class, no more than five percent of the population. It was comprised of Roman bureaucrats, aristocratic priests, a handful of rich landowners, and successful tax collectors. The rest of the people of Israel were poor, many to the point of destitution. The rabbinic writings tell of bands of homeless poor roaming the countryside, so desperate that when the poor tithe was distributed they sometimes stampeded like cattle. Matthew's Gospel tells of standing pools of unemployed village workers so desperate for a day's wage that they accepted work without even asking how much they would be paid. (Mt 20:1-16) Poverty was so widespread that the Gospel of Luke portrays Mary as giving thanks to God that one of the acts of salvation by the messiah she carried in her womb would be to “fill the hungry with good things.” (Lk 1:53) The second-century rabbi's sad observation, “The daughters of Israel are comely, but poverty makes them repulsive,” could easily have been written with the Israel of Jesus' day in mind.

Although in first century Israel there was profound poverty and destitution, most of the poor were working poor. The great majority were peasants engaged in subsistence farming, which means that after payment of Roman taxes, there was barely enough for survival, and certainly no surplus for long-term planning, or even enough to meet emergencies. As biblical scholar John Dominic Crossan observes, “Peasants ... were structured inferiors.”

Most peasant farmers had land holdings of less than six acres, of which on average only 1.5 acres was available for cultivation, hardly enough to support a family. That is, if they were fortunate enough to have saved their farms from outright seizure by the Romans, or from dispossession for tax default, or from the machinations of the Herodians and their cronies who, it is estimated, owned one-half to two-thirds of the land in Galilee. To make ends meet, most farmers either had to hire themselves out for wages to supplement their meager crops, or go into debt, which was usually a worse alternative. Tenant farmers and share-croppers often fared even worse, ending up in prison or enslaved by their creditors.

The presence of poverty in Israel pervades the Gospels and is reflected in narratives as diverse as Judas' complaint that the cost of the expensive perfume used to anoint Jesus' feet should have been “given to the poor” (Jn 12:4-5), and Luke's account of “a poor man named Lazarus, covered with sores, who longed to satisfy his hunger with what fell from the rich man's table.” (Lk 16:19-31)

So deep and so debilitating was the effect of impoverishment on the psycho-emotional health of his people that Jesus found it necessary to explicitly affirm their worth with the validation, “Blessed are you who are poor.” (Lk 6:20) When his disciples asked him how and what to pray for, he told them to keep the poverty and hunger of the people of Israel in view by praying: “Give us this day our daily bread.” (Mt 6:11) And to give the people hope in the face of their profound poverty, Jesus himself modeled the largesse that God's kingdom of justice promised on the occasions he fed the hungry thousands who had gathered to hear him share his vision of God's kingdom.

An additional factor contributing to the poverty in Israel was widespread indebtedness. Because with subsistence farming there is no surplus left after basic consumption, large numbers of peasants had to borrow funds from the wealthy in order to pay Roman taxes. Similar to the experiences of sharecroppers in America's southland, many farmers had no choice but to repeat this pattern of borrowing every year until their burden of debt became so great that they were no longer able to meet their debt payments and were forced into default.

The terrible consequence of debt default is reflected in Matthew 18:25-35, which describes two ways in which the lender could collect on a defaulted debt. The first was for the debtor himself to be sold into slavery. Some farmers with smaller defaults discharged them by making the painful choice of selling their eldest children (who commanded higher prices) into slavery so they could stay to support the remaining family. Others committed suicide to avoid enslavement and the torture that often accompanied it. The practice of torturing enslaved debtors is reflected in Matthew 18:21-34 which, when correctly translated, matter-of-factly mentions that a lender seized his indebted worker and, “delivered him to the ‘torturers’ (*basanistais*) till he should pay all his debt.”

In cases of extraordinary default, the lender could enslave the debtor's wife and children, then seize extended family members and all their possessions, down to the most distant relations. If the sale of those already seized still did not satisfy the debt, the lender could even enslave the debtor's neighbors. In at least one case a whole village was emptied in this way because everyone was either sold into slavery or escaped into the surrounding hills. Debt slavery was such a bitter issue in Israel that one of the first acts of the rebels in the Jewish War was to seize and burn the records of debts that were stored in the Temple.

A significant indicator of the degree to which the effects of taxation and indebtedness pervaded the lives of the people of Israel is seen in the words of Jesus himself. In Matthew's Gospel, Jesus matter-of-factly

mentions debt default as if it were a reality with which everyone was familiar: “as he could not pay, his lord ordered him to be sold, together with his wife and children and all his possessions.” (Mt 18:23-35). When asked by the disciples how to pray and what they should pray for, Jesus told them to ask, "Forgive us our debts." (Mt 6:12) The Greek word signifying "debts" in Jesus' prayer is *opheleimata*, which does not occur often in the New Testament, but when it does appear in any of its forms, it refers to debt or other legal obligations, not “trespasses,” as the King James Version translates it.

Furthermore, *apheimi*, from which “forgive” is translated, also has “release” as a primary meaning, which would mean that Jesus' instruction to his disciples is that their prayer should be, “release us (from) our debts.”

In short, apparently Jesus was deeply concerned about the spiral of financial indebtedness and dispossession that devastated so many in Israel. Jesus' concern to banish it from their lives is enshrined in his model prayer.

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Discussion question from Dr. Nolan:

Very often in sermons one hears references to Jesus' (supposed) teachings about today's “poor” in the United States. Are today's U.S.A. “poor” in equivalent circumstances to those about whom Jesus was speaking (according to Dr. Hendricks)? If yes, how so? If no, how so? Can Jesus' teachings about the poor be applied to anyone today?