

**For where
your
treasure
is...**

What the Bible says
about Wealth

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INTRODUCTION

For more than two years, from October 2009 to early 2012, a small group met monthly at the Meeting Place, Wymington Chapel, to ask “What does the Bible say about Wealth?” Each month a summary of our discussions was shared by e-mail with a much wider group, inviting their comments and criticisms. This document is the result of that process- not so much a record of those meetings as a reflection on the subject in the light of our discussion.

There are two questions which must be asked about Biblical ideas on economic justice:

First: what did those ideas mean in their own time and for the society of their day?

Second: do the underlying principles which were embodied in Biblical economic laws and prescriptions have any relevance for our own society and economics today?

It is tempting to confuse these two- our desire for guidance and clues to our present economic dilemmas can prevent us from seeing clearly what Biblical ideas meant in their own context. But if we can understand that we might find those ideas have more relevance to our own time than isolated texts taken completely out of context.

So this paper is an attempt to deal with the first question- what did the Biblical ideas mean in their own time. If it also contributes in a small way to the debate about the second question it will have served its purpose well.

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We began our first meeting (on Thursday, October 1st, 2009) by asking the group what they already had in their minds about the Bible’s teachings on money. A wide variety of verses and sayings were mentioned:

“What good does it do to gain the whole world and lose your own soul” (*found in Mark 8:36 and other places in the Gospels*)- one member had attended a funeral for a very wealthy man, but it was sparsely attended- as if his life had been concerned with amassing wealth rather than developing friendships.

But isn’t there a verse about using money to make friends? (*that’s in Luke 16:9, from the Parable of the Cheating Manager*), and another about inviting the poor to share your feasts, being generous with wealth (*that’s Luke 14:12 to 14, and perhaps also Proverbs 9:1 to 5*).

There are other sayings in Proverbs: “The more easily you get your wealth, the less good it will do you” (20:21), and “Be wise enough not to wear yourself out trying to be rich” (23:4).

So what about “the love of money is the root of all evil” (1Timothy 6:10)?

And “Neither a borrower nor a lender be” (*that’s Shakespeare, not the Bible!!*)

Some parts of the Bible seem to have a friendly attitude towards wealth, and do not show antagonism to wealth as such. (Compare John Wesley's "Get all you can, save all you can, give all you can.") So is the important thing how we use our money?

Isn't there a verse that says we should not charge interest on loans to our own family? (*Psalm 15:5 seems to ban interest on any loan, not just to family members, and "brothers and sisters/family" in the Hebrew Scriptures may mean members of the same community or nation*).

Equally there are some passages that seem more directly opposed to wealth:

"It's harder for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the Kingdom of Heaven." (*Mark 10:25- "easier" was what he actually said!!*)

and "Blessed are you poor..... Woe to you who are rich" (*Luke 6:20 to 25*).

But isn't that just masochism- taking pleasure in poverty and suffering for its own sake?

Is one clue that we should give the first-fruits, or a tithe (ten percent) to God, and the rest is ours to use how we wish? (*Malachi 3:8 to 12 mentions tithing.*)

Who said "Love God and do what you like"? (*that was Augustine*)- but what does it mean to "Love God" as far as money is concerned?

And Deuteronomy 14:22 to 29, which is one text about tithing, says that the Hebrews were told to use their tithe for a celebration party- "spend the money for whatever you wish- oxen, sheep, wine, strong drink, or whatever you desire". Except that every third year the tithe was to be given to the Levites, widows and orphans, in other words all the people in the community who had no land of their own, and therefore no secure income.

This was getting confusing! We need to try to put some shape onto our discussions. So we agreed, for next time, to read the laws for the Sabbath and Jubilee Years found in Leviticus chapter 25, verses 1 to 28.

WEALTH IN THE HEBREW SCRIPTURES

1. The Sabbath Year and the Jubilee of Leviticus 25

The Hebrew Scriptures come from a time in human history when pastoral herding of sheep and cattle was still important, while commerce and trade were growing in significance. For the majority of people, however, the production of food from agriculture was the dominant occupation. So laws for the control, ownership and use of land were crucial.

Chapter 25 of the Book of Leviticus sets out important principles for the way land was to be regarded in Israel. The first part of the chapter (verses 1 to 17) describes the laws for the Sabbath Year and the Jubilee.

In the Sabbath Year (every seventh year) the land is to be given a complete rest and allowed to lie fallow, with no planting or harvesting. The Hebrew word “Sabbath” means “to stop, to rest, to come to an end”. The Sabbath Year rest for the land is the equivalent of the weekly Sabbath Day rest given to all workers (Exodus 20:8 to 11 and Deuteronomy 5:12 to 15). Exodus and Deuteronomy give two distinct reasons for this time of resting- even God rested in the work of Creation on the final day (Genesis 2:2 and 3), so the principle of rest is built into nature itself- for the land and for animals as much as for people. And the people have been set free from the subservience they experienced in Egypt, and must never be returned to that state. There can be no exploitation, no ‘working to death’ of land or people. All have their own independent existence and rights, they do not ‘belong’, in any absolute sense, to others.

After seven cycles of Sabbath Years, after the forty-ninth year, the fiftieth year was to be a Jubilee. In the early autumn of that fiftieth year a trumpet was to be sounded (the Hebrew word for a “blast of a trumpet” - and also a “shout of joy” - is “Yobel”). This is the sign that everyone may regain their property and return to their family and family holding. Small farmers are always at risk of losing their land, through crop failures, disease in animals, or even family conflict and simple mismanagement. The first recourse in a crisis is a loan, but repeated failure can force farmers to sell their land and become hired labourers working for others. This ‘natural’ and ‘inevitable’ process would eventually create a deep class division in society, with a few wealthy landowners employing large numbers of landless families. The Jubilee is intended to set a limit to that process. In it land which had been lost to families in the previous half-century should be restored, and that family given a fresh start. And the Jubilee year itself would be a second fallow year, where the land should be given rest, not planted or harvested.

Following this statement of the basic law, some practical consequences are drawn out in the following verses (18 to 28). There is first an assurance that the land, if properly treated, will always produce enough, even in the Jubilee, when two fallow years follow one another. Land that is exploited to the limit is soon exhausted. Resources which are treated with

respect renew themselves naturally and provide, not only what is needed, but enough for generosity and for celebration. We might also speculate that the fallow years could provide time for the cultivation of crafts and art.

Secondly, the implication of the Jubilee restoration of land are spelled out. Land must never be sold “in perpetuity” (verse 23)- in modern language land must only ever be bought and sold leasehold, never freehold: as verses 15 and 16 have already indicated, the length of the lease depends on the number of years left until the next Jubilee. If only a few years, the original sellers would hope to recover their land in their own lifetime- if the years were many, only a future generation could hope to restore the family’s fortunes.

And the Jubilee is a last resource, a final ‘safety net’- if a family has to sell its land, their next of kin have the first responsibility to buy it back (the Hebrew word is “go’el”, which also means “redeemer”, as in Job 19:25). **IF** there is no family member who can buy back a poor relative’s land, the sellers have the right to buy back the land themselves if they can afford it (which implies that a hired labourer could perhaps earn enough to save money). And **IF** neither of these happens the buyer retains the land until the Jubilee. Then it must be returned, and without any payment.

Under such a system agricultural land could never become a means of speculation or investment, or the way to build up power and status in the community- it must only ever be the means for earning a living. Here there is no attempt to impose an artificial equality of incomes- hard work and ingenuity should have their reward. But the inevitable successes and failures of economic life must never be allowed to create a growing gulf between rich and poor, between owners and dispossessed. It is this principle of Jubilee which is at the heart of the understanding of economic justice found in the Hebrew Scriptures.

THE BASIC PRINCIPLE OF JUBILEE IS THAT EVERY FAMILY SHOULD POSSESS THE MEANS TO EARN ITS OWN LIVING. IF FOR ANY REASON THEY FALL INTO DEBT AND POVERTY AND ARE FORCED TO SELL THEIR LAND, JUSTICE REQUIRES THAT THERE MUST ALWAYS BE A WAY FOR THEM TO RECOVER.

Under such a system children should be able to leave home, gain experience by working in other places, and later return to take part in the family property. But population growth depends on the availability of land (as in the Rabbinic advice “build a house, plant a vineyard, and then marry a wife”- in the Babylonian Talmud, Sotah 44a). This breaks down if families are forced to become landless labourers, where child labour (and therefore large families) becomes an economic necessity.

Some important questions are not directly dealt with by the Jubilee provisions in this chapter- for example how mineral and water rights should be allocated, or land of unequal fertility shared fairly. At first sight a system which regularly returns land to well established families could leave no room for newcomers- but Ezekiel 47:21 to 23 says that resident foreigners should also be included in the Jubilee.

A significant question is whether the Jubilee was ever put into practice, or if it remained an unrealised (and possibly unrealisable) ideal. Most Biblical scholars argue that form of the Sabbath Year and Jubilee laws which we have now in the book of Leviticus come from relatively late in Israel's history, probably from the time of the Exile in Babylon, when the people were forced to face what had gone wrong with their society, and were determined to make a new beginning. But that does not deny that, even if many details are a later development, they were an attempt to restore what was felt to be an older and fairer pattern of society in which equality was valued, and powerful families were not so free to monopolise land and reduce their neighbours to poverty. Jeremiah 25:11 and 2 Chronicles 36:21 claim that even the seventh (Sabbath) fallow year had been ignored for many generations. If that was the case any Jubilee, which depended on the regular reckoning of seven Sabbath Years, would have been forgotten. Any system of regular redistribution of landholdings would certainly have been resisted by those who had an interest in seeing it neglected. But a principle that is hard to implement and is strongly resisted by those who have power does not for that reason lose its validity or importance.

A story in the later chapters of the book of Genesis perhaps gives the clearest picture of the processes which Jubilee was designed to prevent, even if its success in achieving that aim was at best partial or intermittent.

2. Joseph's agrarian policy in Egypt

In the earlier and better-known part of the story of Joseph (Genesis chapter 41), we read how he became Pharaoh's Chief Minister to implement measures dealing with the threat of famine- he takes a fifth of the produce of good harvest years to set up as grain reserves to supply the years of dearth. In the far less well-known sequel (47:13 to 26), we see the consequences in the famine years. In the first year of famine, starving people ask for the release of their stored grain, but Joseph demands cash payment. So in the second year, because they have no money left, he is able to demand their flocks and cattle in return for the food which they themselves had grown and supplied. Finally in the third year, with no money or animals left, he can demand their land itself for the food. Thus Joseph "made slaves of them from one end of Egypt to the other" (47:21), forcing them to pay a fifth of their harvest to Pharaoh perpetually. Pharaoh now owns all agricultural land in Egypt (except for that belonging to the priests- verses 22 and 26). The people accept their new position of subservience, because they believe that Joseph's action saved them from certain death (verse 25).

Why did Joseph act in this way? Was he perhaps taking some kind of revenge on the people of Egypt for the way he felt he had been treated earlier by their leaders? History has many examples of people recruited from abroad (as slaves, or soldiers) and later because of their skills appointed to high office. Often because they have no family ties to the people of the country and no sense of loyalty to them, they become far more reliable servants to the monarch than local people would be- especially at times when policies and systems are being radically changed. Perhaps Joseph is simply another example of that phenomenon.

It is not entirely clear what the writer of the Genesis story thinks of Joseph's actions. During his earlier years in Egypt Genesis often says "The Lord was with Joseph" (eg 39:2, 5, 21 and 23; 41:51 and 52). But that 'refrain' is not heard in the later part of the story. Is that significant? What is clear is that the call for justice and fairness in the Hebrew Scriptures is expressly targeted against the concentration of power and wealth which Joseph's policy in Egypt had brought about.

Years of famine and shortage can bring about the same results without a government intervention which takes advantage of the people's vulnerability. Farmers whose harvest is not sufficient for the needs of their families are forced to borrow from wealthier neighbours and their inability to repay those loans if famine persists for more than one or two years can lead to precisely the same loss of animals and eventually lands that happened in the Joseph story. The crucial importance of debt in reducing small farmers to poverty and eventual slavery became the reason for another set of laws in ancient Israel.

3. The Cancellation of Debt

The Sabbath (seventh) Year was not only to be a year of rest for the land (fallow)- it was to be the time when debt should be cancelled and bonded labourers (slaves) set free again. Those provisions are described in Deuteronomy 15:1 to 18. The frequency with which small farmers need to borrow from their neighbours exposes them to the risk of losing all their assets, including their land, if they are unable to repay their creditors. Regular debt forgiveness is designed to prevent this from happening, as verse 4 makes clear- the purpose is that “there will be no poor among you.” No one should be brought through debt to permanent and inescapable poverty. As the law itself recognises, the risk of falling into temporary poverty is always present: “there will never cease to be poor among you” (verse 11)- debt cancellation eliminates the fastest route by which such temporary need turns into a permanent ‘class division’ in society.

This, of course, is the verse Jesus quotes in John 12:8: “You will always have the poor with you.” Taken completely out of context, this might imply that there is nothing to be done about poverty. Charity can alleviate, but never eradicate poverty, which is how it has been misunderstood by many Christians. In its true context, that of Deuteronomy 15, it is clear that justice and charity belong together. Charity is needed to answer the immediate needs of people who have fallen into poverty. But justice requires that the causes of that poverty (including debt) must be tackled, to prevent temporary need becoming permanent impoverishment.

In Deuteronomy debt forgiveness is only offered to other members of the community of Israel- it does not apply to foreigners. It is part of the hope that Israel will never again be subject (slaves) to other nations, but instead will “rule over” them (verse 6). In the history of Western Europe this has been twisted into a justification for anti-semitism. But it also expresses the conviction that Israel must operate in a different way to other nations, and so set an ‘example’ to them (Genesis 12:2; Isaiah 2:2 to 5; Zechariah 8:23). If Israel can find a way of dealing with debt, poverty and class divisions, it will have something worth saying to others. As Deuteronomy 4:6 to 8 puts it: “This will show your wisdom and discernment to the peoples, who, when they hear all these statutes, will say: What other nation has statutes and ordinances as just as this...?”

The success of such a law clearly depends on a degree of trust within the community- verse nine already hints at the risk that lending may dry up as the seventh year approaches; and perhaps also at the suspicion that some people will deliberately get into debt then in the hope of never having to pay back. Some agricultural societies have no concept of ‘lending’ or ‘borrowing’- there is instead an absolute obligation to give help to a neighbour in need, in full confidence that when you are in need, your neighbour will help you in return. Israel was developing into a more money-based economy, and risked giving rise to semi-professional money-lenders who would always be able to exploit debtors to their own advantage. The purpose of the Sabbath Year debt cancellation was to prevent this.

One consequence of debt is that debtors (or members of their family) may become bonded labourers ('slaves') working for their neighbours (sometimes those who have lent them the money) in order to repay what they owe. At the Sabbath Year not only is their remaining debt to be cancelled, but they are to be set free from their bond (verses 12 to 15). No one in Israel is to be forced into permanent slavery, since the whole nation was set free from slavery in Egypt. When bonded labourers are released, provision must be made for them to make a fresh start (verses 13, 14 and 18). If, however, someone feels unable to make that fresh start they have the option permanently to remain a servant (verses 16 and 17). Some would no doubt prefer this security of permanent employment to the risks of independent farming, but it would be a mistake to assume that modern assessments of the relative attractions of secure employment or risky independence apply to Biblical times.

In summary:

Temporary poverty is inevitable, can be caused in many ways, and must be met with generous charity. But permanent poverty, and the division of society into rich and poor, is unacceptable. It must be eradicated by the creation of just structures in society.

4. Stories of Wealth and Poverty

The attitude of the Hebrew Scriptures to wealth is often revealed most clearly in its stories. In the tales of the early patriarchs wealth is seen as a blessing, a gift of God, something to be enjoyed. Abraham's story unashamedly revels in his wealth (Genesis 12:2, 5 and 16; 24:35)- though it can see that wealth needs wise handling if it is not to lead to conflict (13:2 to 12). Isaac settles in Philistine territory during a time of famine, and becomes a successful and wealthy farmer (Genesis 26:1 and 12 to 22), which provokes conflict, particularly when Isaac's people started to reopen ancient wells. The Philistines clearly resent someone they had generously allowed to settle with them when he was in need, and is now asserting his independence. Is that inevitable, or could wiser handling have avoided conflict? Jacob's wealth is gained mainly by trickery, first against his twin brother Esau (Genesis 25:29 to 34 and chapter 27), and then against his father in law Laban (although in that case the trickery is mutual- 29:15 to 30 and 30:25 to 43). Jacob's inner struggle during the night before he met his brother again (32:22 to 32) perhaps bears witness to the ambiguities of such a pursuit of wealth, though the story as a whole almost seems to justify the attitude "Get rich- by fair means if you can, by foul if necessary."

It is in later stories that the concentration of wealth is questioned, because it has become a means of exploitation and a cause of division in the community. 1 Kings 21:1 to 19 tells of king Ahab's desire for the vineyard which belongs to Naboth's family. Queen Jezebel urges him to use his authority as king to take what he wants. In this way much of the blame is put on her, a 'foreign' wife. Ahab's marriage had been part of his kingdom's emergence from relative isolation and 'underdevelopment' to share in the commercial and trading wealth of the region- Jezebel's cultural sophistication could easily override her more hesitant husband. When Israel first asked for a king, it was because they wanted to be like other nations (1 Samuel 8:4 and 5)- they were beginning to feel a sense of inferiority. But, as Samuel warns them (verses 7 to 22), abandoning their 'simple' ways would expose them to exploitation. The ordinary people of the community would be the ones to suffer from the change.

Even after the bitter experience of exile in Babylon the people had not learned the lesson. Nehemiah 5:1 to 13 tells how debt and slavery quickly re-emerged. Though the initial cause of the trouble was the tax demanded by the Persian government, it was the way some Israelites used this to take advantage of their poorer neighbours that Nehemiah condemns. Once more the community is in danger of becoming divided into classes of powerful rich and dependent poor.

5. Other laws and provisions

There are many other laws in the Hebrew Scriptures which deal with money and wealth. Some examples are:

Don't harvest to the edge of your field. Leave some for the poor (Leviticus 19:9 and 10, and 23:22). Don't exploit all your resources for yourself, or try to wring the last ounce of profit out of them. Leave some leeway for others.

When you lend to someone in need you must never charge interest (Leviticus 25:35 to 38; Exodus 22:25 to 27, Psalm 15:5). The only loans recognised in the Hebrew Scriptures are those made to people in poverty and temporary distress- to take advantage of another person's misfortune by demanding interest (usury) is unacceptable. Lending as part of a business partnership or for investment was unknown at the time, and so not regulated in any way. In medieval Europe this was thought acceptable provided the lender shared the profit and loss of the business. It is only in the modern world that lenders must be repaid, with interest, irrespective of the success of the project, and the only risk they face is that of bad debt.

You must to treat foreign settlers fairly (Deuteronomy 10:17 to 19).

You must use fair weights and measures (Deuteronomy 25:13 to 16)

Tithing- the giving of ten percent of income- was an important institution in ancient Israel. In its origin it is an acknowledgment of dependence on a superior, including a landlord. In the Genesis story (14:18 to 20) Abram gives a tenth of all his possessions to Melchizedek, the king of Salem. Such a rent, or tribute, expresses an enforced 'gratitude' to an overlord who graciously 'permits' the use of his land. The lord responds by providing a feast (verse 18) which cements the bonds between them. But God is Israel's 'landlord' ("the land is mine; with me you are but aliens and tenants" Leviticus 25:23), so is owed the tithe. Deuteronomy 14:22 to 27 says that this 'rent' of ten percent of the produce should be used for a party. God returns the rent to his 'tenants', and their celebration recognises their dependence on God's goodness. To the party are invited the landless Levites (the sanctuary ministers). And every third year the whole tithe is to be given to the Levites, the foreigners and the poor (14:28 and 29; 26:12 and 13).

In other passages, however, the tithe is to be used exclusively for the support of the Temple and its ministers (Numbers 18:21 and 24; 2 Chronicles 31:2 to 6; Nehemiah 10:37; Malachi 3:8 to 10)- perhaps a symptom of how eventually the royal temple and its service became a real burden on the people and their prosperity.

In its intention the practice of tithe encourages a generous attitude to wealth, teaching that prosperity is a gift, not exclusively 'your own possession'- you give, because you know you will always have enough.

6. The Prophets and Wealth

The Hebrew prophets have a great deal to say about wealth and the injustices caused by the concentration of wealth in the hands of a small elite.

Amos (who worked seven hundred and fifty years before the time of Christ) condemns those who “sell the poor for a pair of sandals” (2:6) and fill their houses by crime and violence (3:10 and 11), who devote themselves to luxury (4:1 and 2) and hate those who challenge their lifestyles (5:10 to 12). They cheat in the market-place (8:4 to 6) and without justice their religion is meaningless (5:21 to 24).

Micah, who worked soon after Amos, has similar complaints (2:1, 2, 8 and 9; 6:11 and 12), but looks forward to a time when all families will enjoy their own property in security (4:1 to 4) and will understand what loyalty to God means (6:8).

Isaiah worked in the southern kingdom (Judah) from the final years of king Uzziah’s reign (he died in 740 BCE) to the beginning of the following century. During his lifetime the northern kingdom (Israel, or Ephraim) with its capital at Samaria, was destroyed by an Assyrian invasion. The Assyrians also threatened Judah in 701. Isaiah complains that the people’s worship of God is false, because it bears no relation to the way they live (1:1 to 4 and 12 to 17). Instead the community is being destroyed by injustice- his picture of a vineyard, well tended but producing a bad harvest, vividly describes what is happening (chapter 5). Land has fallen into the hands of a few powerful people who now are able to monopolise the economy (verse 8). Isaiah predicts that this will lead to famine (verses 9 and 10)- when large tracts of agricultural land are owned by a powerful elite production is geared to their interest and profit and many people go hungry. Isaiah clearly has a different view from many in the modern world who say that the only way to feed a large population is to concentrate land in the hands of big companies.

Isaiah had faith that Judah would survive Assyria’s invasion, and would have time to rebuild a just society, but he knew that an even bigger threat, that of Babylon, was just over the horizon (chapter 39).

Jeremiah lived around six hundred years before Christ, at the time of the Exile to Babylon. To him the whole nation, from the “poor” to the rich and powerful, have forgotten God’s justice (5:1, 4 and 5). But in Exile they must not give up hope, instead they must prepare to return and rebuild their life (28:4 to 11; 31:11 and 12). As a symbol of that hope he buys land (32:6 to 15). By contrast, the Israelites who fled to Egypt to escape the Babylonians have abandoned all faith in God’s justice, and now rely completely on other ‘gods’ to give them prosperity and security (44:1 and 15 to 19)- “We used to have plenty of food, and prospered, but from the time we stopped making offerings to the queen of heaven we have lacked everything, and have perished by the sword and famine”.

Like Jeremiah, Ezekiel also lived through the Exile and looked forward to the time of renewal and rebuilding. Essential to his vision of the new community was that the strong who once pushed aside the weak would be restrained (34:20 to 23), the rights and powers of the kings will be restricted (46:16 to 18), and foreign settlers will be given a permanent share in the community (47:21 to 23).

Nor do surrounding powers escape Ezekiel's notice: for example, the "prince of Tyre" is held to account for claiming "I am a god" (28:2)- the same offer put to Adam and Eve, that they could be "like God, knowing good and evil" (Genesis 3:5), able to decide what is just and right according to their own interests. "You were in Eden, the garden of God" says Ezekiel to the prince (28:13), and, like Adam and Eve, his arrogance leads to his downfall (verses 18 and 19). It is the same with any political or economic system or ideology which claims to be above the challenge of justice or morality.

For Zechariah this demand for justice in the life of the people is no new thing, a recent reaction to the catastrophes they suffered- in reality it has been part of their identity from long ago, though they had lost sight of it for many years (7:7 to 10).

Later in the book of Isaiah (chapter 55) there is a vision of a future Israel, when it has learned from the bitter experiences of invasion and exile, and has placed the justice of God at the heart of its life. The vision is one of productivity so abundant and food so plentiful that it cannot command a price- like a glut of fruit that "You can't give away". This is not a hope for some 'miraculous' super-abundance, but a sober expectation of what normal life could be like if God's justice and care for the earth is consistently followed.

For commercial farming, in which food is produced for sale at a profit, such an outcome would be a complete disaster, a 'crisis of over-production', to be managed by the destruction of part of the harvest and cut-backs in production. Only in that way could the shortages that alone create a good price be restored. Commercial farming will always feed those who can pay- those who cannot depend on government subsidies (to themselves or to the farmers).

The prophet's vision is of a healthy and prosperous community (65:17 to 25), where religion and justice go hand in hand (58:6 to 11), and where people enjoy the fruits of their own labour instead of working for others' benefit (62:8 and 9; 65:21 and 22).

7. Hebrew words for Poverty

The Hebrew Scriptures have a number of words which translate into English as “poverty” or “the poor”:

‘Aniy comes from a verb which means “to toil, to be bowed down, oppressed, humbled, miserable”. It also means “to reply, to answer, to respond”. It describes people who are burdened and crushed by their experience of life, those who are allowed no voice of their own, but can only speak “when they are spoken to”. They are utterly dependent on others, and have no one to help them or stand up for them. Because of this they can rely and hope only on God.

Dach comes from a verb which means “to be cast down, to be humbled” and describes people who are crushed, oppressed and wretched.

Dal comes from a verb meaning “to totter, to languish”, and means the poor, the low.

‘Evyon means the needy, poor, miserable, wretched.

There are other words with a similar range of meanings: **Rus** to be poor, to be needy, to be a beggar; **Miscen** poor, wretched; **Muk** to become poor, to be reduced; **Machsur** want, need, poverty; **Melcah** unfortunate, wretched. What is significant about these Hebrew words is that they do not merely refer to material deprivation. They express the sense of loss of dignity and self-respect that comes from being oppressed and treated with utter contempt because you have lost your position in society and your ability to provide for yourself and your family. The Hebrew Scriptures are clear that this happens because powerful people take advantage of the misfortunes that befall ordinary people and reduce them to a position of dependence and slavery.

Such injustice has a more profound impact on people’s mind and spirit even than on their pocket. It creates such a sense of devastation that any message of hope and liberation is met with the despairing cynicism of Exodus chapter 6, verse 9:

“...they would not listen to Moses, because of their broken spirit and their cruel slavery.”

8. Psalms and Wisdom

In the Psalms the poor have a place of honour. Psalm 9 (verses 9, 12 and 18) promises that they will never be forgotten. Psalm 10 depicts the experience of people who are hunted down by oppressors- but celebrates the God-given courage that enables them to stand up against violence and never be afraid of anyone (verses 17 and 18). Psalm 37 promises that in the end the “meek” and the “righteous” will inherit and possess the land (verses 11 and 29). The Hebrew word in verse 11 that is translated “meek” is **anawim**, the plural of **aniy**- those who have been trodden down and impoverished by others more powerful than they. It does not mean, as we sometimes think, those who “wouldn’t say boo to a goose” (compare Matthew 5:5). The “righteous” (verse 29) are those who are in the right, who have justice on their side. There are many other references in the Psalms, for example 41:1; 62:9 and 10; 72:4 and 12 to 14; 82:3 and 4; 113:7 and 8; 146:1, 7 to 9 and 147:3 and 6.

Proverbs has common sense about money and wealth: “Don’t promise to be responsible for someone else’s debts. If you should be unable to pay, they will take away even your bed.” (22:26 and 27). It prescribes hard work: “Keep busy and you will have plenty to eat” (20:13); says that money isn’t everything: “Better to eat a dry crust of bread with peace of mind than to have a banquet in a house full of trouble” (17:1); and contrasts the insecurity wealth sometimes brings with the relative peace of modest means: “A rich man has to use his money to save his life, but no one threatens a poor man” (13:8).

The book of Job begins and ends with a story (possibly ancient) of a wealthy man who loses everything, but in the end has far more restored to him (chapters 1 and 2; 42:10 to 17). Between those ‘frames’ there is a debate about the meaning of suffering. Job’s ‘friends’ blame his present misery on his past injustices: “Surely you know that from ancient times, no wicked man has been happy for long..... You used your power and position to take over the whole land” (20:4 and 5 and 18 to 23; 22:5 to 9). Job protests against their accusations: “When the poor cried out, I helped them; I gave help to orphans who had nowhere to turn” (29:12 to 18; 31:16 to 25). He claims that even if God seems unjust (chapter 24), he himself will not abandon justice.

Ecclesiastes (the “Preacher”) expresses the disillusionment of someone who has worked hard for wealth only to experience its futility (2:4 to 11, 21 to 24)- it brings only trouble (4:7 and 8, 13 and 14; 5:8 to chapter 6:2 and 7 to 9). And the Song of Songs puts modest security and prosperity far above great wealth: “Solomon has a vineyard in a place called Baal Hermon. There are farmers who rent it from him; each one pays a thousand silver coins. Solomon is welcome to his thousand coins, and the farmers to two hundred as their share; I have a vineyard of my own.” (8:11 and 12). Such contentment, however, depended on standards of justice which would support small farmers, and defend them against the exploitation of rich and powerful people who would try to take advantage. And in the history of Israel that justice repeatedly broke down and was ignored.

9. In Conclusion

Deuteronomy 8:7 to 18 reminds the people not to forget God when they come into the Promised Land: “remember the Lord your God, for it is he who gives you power to get wealth”. This is no formula promising divine rewards for the performance of ‘magical’ rituals, but a warning that only God’s principles of justice guarantee security and prosperity. Abandoning them risks a collapse into conflict, division and poverty.

Similarly, the ‘liturgy’ for harvest time in Deuteronomy 26:1 to 11 voices the people’s dependence on God’s goodness and justice, made known in their history:

“A wandering Aramean was my ancestor; he went down to Egypt and lived there as an alien, few in number, and there he became a great nation, mighty and populous. When the Egyptians treated us harshly and afflicted us, by imposing hard labour on us, we cried to the Lord, the God of our ancestors; the Lord heard our voice and saw our affliction, our toil, and our oppression. The Lord brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm, with a terrifying display of power, and with signs and wonders; and he brought us into this land, a land flowing with milk and honey. So now I bring the first of the fruits of the ground that you, O Lord, have given me.”

They had begun their history as “Hebrews”- a word that means nomads or travellers. It was as marginalised, and despised outcasts that God had “chosen” them (Deuteronomy 7:7 and 8) and set them free. But settled in the “Promised Land” they were tempted to become “like other nations”- often led down that path by their own rulers. The ancient sense of justice they had once learned had to be re-affirmed in the bitter experience of Exile in Babylon, and afterwards when they returned with a chance to rebuild their life.

So the attitude to wealth in the Hebrew Scriptures can be summed up in this way:

It is God’s will that all people should prosper.

Every family therefore has the right to possess the resources they need to earn for themselves a decent living.

If through debt or any other misfortune they lose control of those resources, society must make provision for their restoration.

Charity and generosity are important as temporary means to alleviate poverty, but they can never be a substitute for the justice that shares basic resources equally among all the people.

Additional note: The Hebrews and the Canaanites

There is still one question which remains, like the 'elephant in the room', to be faced in this survey of the Hebrew Scriptures- the way the Israelites treated the Canaanites in their conquest of the "Promised Land". All the structures of land sharing and justice we have noted were founded on the elimination of the Canaanite towns, and often the massacre of their inhabitants. This is particularly important because of the way, during the European expansion into America, Africa and Australasia, the story was used to justify the extermination of indigenous people. There may still be echoes of it at work today in Palestine.

It is important to understand the conquest of the Promised Land in terms of the political theology of the Hebrew Scriptures and the world-view that represents. The Hebrews, nomadic, transient herders of flocks, found themselves face to face with powerful empires and states in the Middle East, stretching from Mesopotamia through Canaan into Egypt. As those states developed their power and wealth they treated the nomad Hebrews more and more harshly- perhaps why Abram and his family first left Mesopotamia, and certainly the reason why the Israelites fled from Egypt after four hundred years of settlement there.

These power relationships are depicted in the story of Noah's three sons (Genesis 9:18 to 27). There, because of the youngest son Ham's disrespectful behaviour towards his father, he and all his descendents, especially Ham's son Canaan, are put under a curse. There are similar stories of brothers told in many cultures, for example in Central Africa, which serve to 'explain' the power relationships between groups of people inhabiting the same area. In the genealogies of Genesis chapters ten and eleven, the city states of Mesopotamia, Canaan and Egypt are seen collectively as the "sons of Ham". They show the same disregard for what is just and right as their 'father' did. Power, rather than justice, has become the basis of their morality and life. These are precisely the powers who oppress and marginalise the Hebrews. By contrast, the people who live on the coast and the islands ("sons of Japheth") are potential allies to the Semitic Hebrews (Genesis 9:27 and 10:2 to 5).

It is that relationship of power and oppression that, to the Hebrews of the time, justified their attack on the Canaanite cities, the 'weakest link' in the powerful chain of Empire which confronted them. It is important that we understand that reasoning, even though today we must repudiate their actions.

The name "Cush", which in Genesis 10:6 to 12 refers to Mesopotamia, is also used in other later parts of the Hebrew Scriptures to mean Sudan and Ethiopia (for example Isaiah 18:1; Jeremiah 46:8 and 9; Ezekiel 29:10; Psalm 68:31). This led some commentators to regard all Africans as "sons of Ham", and therefore cursed, for ever incapable of creating viable and thriving societies.

In his introduction to 'Brown's Self-Interpreting Family Bible', the Revd John Brown (1722 – 1787) wrote: "The rest of Ham's offspring, after parts of them had continued for some generations in Asia, removed south-westward to Africa, and peopled it. No doubt some of them from thence, by means of tempests, or otherwise, crossed the ocean into South America and the islands adjacent. Distinguished estrangement from the knowledge of the true God, miserable bondage to Satan and to their fellows of mankind, have in every age been the general characteristics of the descendents of Ham, particularly of those by Canaan. Never, that we know of, did they form themselves into any extensive and lasting empire. Never, except for a short time, and in a very restricted extent, have they been able to rule over the descendents of Shem or Japheth." Such ideas were an important underpinning and justification for the Atlantic slave trade of the 15th to 19th centuries, and for colonisation of the world up to the 20th century. Bad theology has disastrous political consequences in all places where it takes hold.

WEALTH IN THE GOSPELS

1. Banking on Heaven's Future

In Matthew 6:19 to 34 and Luke 12:13 to 34, Jesus tells his disciples not to set their hearts on material possessions, or “store up ... treasures on earth”. Instead they should “strive first for the Kingdom of God.” and ‘bank’ on heaven. Does this mean that material things are of no importance- that what matters is a ‘spiritual’ life to be discovered when our souls are set free from prison of this earthly existence? Certainly Greek culture would be strongly tempted to understand him in this way- but that flies in the face of all that the Hebrew Scriptures say about the physical world as God’s creation, and therefore to be valued and celebrated as something good. Those Scriptures are the core of everything Jesus said and did.

So what does he mean? A thorough reading of the Gospels shows that for him, the ‘Reign’ (Kingdom) of God is not something apart from this world- it is the life of heaven breaking into human history to challenge the powers of evil that corrupt human life, and to mend what has gone wrong. To “store up for yourselves treasures in heaven” (verse 20, Matthew) and to be “rich towards God” (verse 21, Luke) is to put your faith and hope in that Reign of God’s justice, and the lasting transformation of life it promises.

The New Testament is convinced that the present structures of society are unsustainable, already beginning to collapse under their own weight of injustice and violence. It is the height of folly to trust in them, to devote attention to building up your own personal security through wealth and possessions. That way leads only to insecurity and fear, suspicion of your neighbours and conflict. And when everything falls apart, as the New Testament is sure they will, all the effort will have led to nothing.

By contrast, true security comes from God’s justice, which exposes society’s failings and points the way to a new world. The response of Jesus’ disciples must be to build together a new community of love and sharing, putting the justice of God into practice in the face of the world’s corruption and violence. Only such a community will be able to support people through the coming years of chaos and suffering. And its sharing of resources is a vital way for their basic needs for food, drink and clothing (verse 31, Matthew and verse 29, Luke) to be met.

2. The Gospel of Mark

Mark's Gospel begins with the announcement of God's Reign dawning on the world: "The time is fulfilled, and the Kingdom of God is at hand" (Mark 1:15). Its final fulfilment is still future, but its impact can already be felt in the present. The same sense of the present reality of God's Reign is found, for example, in Matthew 12:28- "If it is by the Spirit of God that I cast out demons, then the kingdom of God has come to you" and Luke 17:21- "The kingdom of God is among/within you".

Jesus chooses his first disciples in Mark 1:16 to 20. These men are not the poorest people in society- they, like his own family, have some limited resources. Such people often had no land, but were not forced to beg for employment in the market place as did unskilled landless labourers (Matthew 20:1 to 16). They were dependent on the ebb and flow of the economy, so had no real security. But they could choose to identify with those who had nothing, as Jesus himself does, or aspire to greater wealth, perhaps even to join the ranks of the rich. Tax collectors (2:14 to 17) were a case in point- they were despised by everyone, not only because they worked for the occupying Romans, but also because the 'tax-farming' system they operated gave plenty of opportunity to cheat people. They were not paid a wage, but had to pay the authorities what was required, and what they could extort in addition was their own profit. Jesus chooses one of them, also.

In the parables (chapter 4) the seductiveness of wealth is one of the things that can stifle God's word in people's minds (verse 19). And in verses 24 and 25 the way the economy works (as we would say today "the rich get richer and the poor get poorer") is a lesson for disciples- those who listen carefully and notice what is happening in the world grow in their understanding, while those who fail to do so lose even what little understanding they may originally have had.

Soon the Twelve are sent to take the message of Jesus to a wider audience (6:7 to 13). The fact that they are allowed no resources of their own to support them will make them completely dependent on the welcome they receive. They will be unable to 'impose themselves' on unwilling hearers- perhaps wise advice for all Christian missionaries.

The Hebrew Scriptures often picture the coming Reign of God as a great feast (for example Isaiah 25:6 to 9 and 55:1 and 2). The two stories of feeding great crowds (Mark 6:30 to 44 and 8:1 to 9) bring that promised future into the present. (The *denarius*- 6:37- was the usual daily wage for a worker. "200 denarii" would be the equivalent of several month's wages!). Some scholars suggest that the repetition of the stories (also in Matthew, though not in Luke or John) is intended to convey that the feast is intended not only for Jews but also for Gentiles (the detailed numbers mentioned would probably have been understood in that way).

In Mark 10:17 to 31 Jesus encounters a rich man who asks about eternal life, and is told that the one thing he lacks is that he must give up his possessions. Not because his wealth made him unhappy, or 'luxuries' were hindering his 'spiritual development'. Nor because absolute poverty is a 'calling' for some disciples, though not for most. Rather, it is the concentration of wealth in the hands of such an elite that is a denial of the justice of God, expressed in the Hebrew Scriptures above all in the Jubilee (Leviticus chapter 25). This Jubilee had been ignored for generations, and the rich man belongs to the landowning class who had benefitted most by its long neglect. It was the 'system' under which he had grown up, and so there is no point in blaming him personally (as verse 21 says "Jesus, looking at him, loved him"). But to share in the "good news" that Jesus brings he must now take the risk of abandoning his unjust wealth and trusting his future to the community of disciples where all things are shared ("houses, lands, brothers, sisters, fathers and mothers" - verses 29 and 30). Humanly speaking this is impossible ("easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle", verse 25), and will only happen if God changes their minds to abandon their false self-made security and their claims to privilege (verse 31).

Many of the Temple authorities in Jerusalem were already rich (Sanhedrin members usually came from wealthy landowning families) but the market was a vital source of funding for the system of control and prestige they led. Jesus threatens this by disrupting what is going on (11:15 to 17). Money-changing was involved because 'secular' Roman coinage was not permitted within the Temple- only Jewish shekels could be used. His reply to their trap question about Roman taxes not only exposes that they were carrying this 'forbidden' coinage in the Temple, but makes his own position crystal clear- let Caesar have his money: but give your loyalty to God alone (12:13 to 17).

Of all the poor who suffer at the hands of the existing system, none are more vulnerable than widows, like the one who has been deluded into giving all she has to an institution that will soon be destroyed (12:38 to 13:2). Sacred monuments save no one (compare Jeremiah 7:1 to 11).

Two days before his death Jesus is anointed by a woman who lavishes the equivalent of a year's income on him (14:3 to 11- most workers could only expect 300 days' employment in a year, at a *denarius* per day). Some disciples complain about the waste of what could have relieved a great deal of poverty, but "You will always have the poor with you", says Jesus, quoting Deuteronomy 15:11. The risk of falling into poverty is an ever-present reality- only justice (such as the Sabbath Year law of debt forgiveness) can solve that. Charity can do no more than alleviate it, so must never have the absolute value some at Bethany were giving it. As Mark's Gospel tells it, it is this clash that finally provokes Judas Iscariot into abandoning Jesus and betraying him to the authorities (verses 10 and 11).

3. Teaching about Wealth in both Matthew and Luke

Most Biblical scholars think that the Gospel of Mark was the first to be written, then used by both Matthew and Luke as a 'framework'. But they also have many sayings of Jesus in common, often reported in identical words, which are not in Mark. So perhaps in the early Church there was a collection of the teachings of Jesus, in oral or even written form. This is often called "Q" (the initial letter of the German word "Quelle", meaning "source"). One example of this has already been discussed: the words about seeking "God's kingdom first" in Matthew chapter 6 and Luke chapter 12.

In the stories of the Wilderness (Matthew 4:1 to 11 and Luke 4:1 to 13) Jesus is tempted to turn stones to bread, no doubt because of his own hunger, but also, like all the temptations, a question about how he will work: will he become a wonder-worker to dazzle people, or a political power-broker to control them? Can he gain popularity and support by giving people what they want, especially food? When people are starving this sometimes must be done, but such munificence changes nothing- tomorrow the crowds will be back needing more. Change comes only when society is based on "every word that comes from the mouth of God", including the justice God's Law requires. And this Jesus recognises.

The coming Reign of God's justice and love is a blessing for "the poor in spirit" (Matthew 5:3) and "you who are poor" (Luke 6:20). These two have often been interpreted almost in opposition to one another- Matthew as those who bear suffering humbly and patiently, Luke straightforwardly as those who suffer material poverty. But the Hebrew words for "poor" and "poverty" describe people who are thrust to one side, downtrodden, unjustly treated, deprived of dignity, oppressed and depressed. The damage done to them by injustice is not only material, but leads to the destruction of their 'spirit', their sense of self-worth, hope and confidence. These are the words that are at the heart of what Jesus is saying. The Gospels were written to communicate him to the world outside Palestine, and so must use Greek, a language which lacks the words to express his meaning accurately (as does English). Matthew and Luke have chosen different Greek words, but the underlying meaning is the same. It is the meek who "will inherit the earth", (Matthew 5:5, quoting Psalm 37:11 and 29)- those who have been forced into a position of humility, deprived of their rights and made poor. Those who are "hungry now" (Luke 6:21), and who therefore "hunger and thirst" to see "justice" done (Matthew 5:6), who "weep now" (Luke 6:21) and "mourn" (Matthew 5:4) find God working on their behalf. In contrast, those who are "rich", "full" and "laughing" (Luke 6:24 and 25) will see an end to the injustice which rewards them with their present wealth, leaving them destitute.

But when is this to be? "Your reward is great in heaven" says Jesus (Matthew 5:12; Luke 6:23). We might assume that this means that only when we 'get to heaven' after death will the justice of God be seen- there can be no change in this life or on this earth. But this

would be to seriously misunderstand what the New Testament means by “heaven”. For people in the ancient world ‘heaven’ is what governs the life and history of this world- the stars and planets which are clearly visible ‘in the heavens’ control humanity’s fate. But to anyone schooled in the Hebrew Scriptures (and that includes Jesus himself) it is not stars and planets that govern the future, but God. God’s purposes will determine how human history develops. It is in that sense that God is “in heaven” (as Psalm 115:3 says “Our God is in the heavens; he does whatever he pleases”). So to say that “your reward is ... in heaven” is to say that it is already in the mind, will and purpose of God, a purpose which is already beginning to be worked out in the life of this world. It is not something to be known and experienced only ‘after death’ in ‘another world’. This is the consistent faith of the New Testament- so much so that Paul has to deal with the fear in the Thessalonian church that people who die before the kingdom of God is finally accomplished will miss out. Paul assures them that they will share equally in the future promised for the whole world (1 Thessalonians 4:13 to 18). In this working out of the purposes of God’s justice in the world is the “reward” Jesus promises, already fixed and certain in the mind and plan of God and becoming true in the present, though still to be finally completed in the future.

In Matthew’s ‘Sermon on the Mount’ and Luke’s ‘Sermon on the Plain’ Jesus has some strong words to say about wealth and property: “If anyone sues you for your coat, give your cloak as well” (Matthew 5:40; Luke 6:29), “Give to everyone who begs from you, and do not refuse anyone who wants to borrow from you.... and if anyone takes your goods, do not ask for them back” (Matthew 5:42; Luke 6:30), “Lend, expecting nothing in return..... give, and it will be given to you... for the measure you give will be the measure you get back” (Luke 6:35 and 38). These sayings seem impractical and idealistic- they ignore the common sense and prudence that weighs up a likely advantage in any action. The disciples are being asked to go beyond common sense in order to establish justice. In the world as it is, that involves risk, but without that risk nothing can be achieved. In some cases doing this would also ‘wrong-foot’ the authorities, who had the right to demand goods and services from the people, but within strict legal limits. Going beyond those limits (by giving your cloak as well as your coat, or going a second mile when only one could legally be demanded) could be a way of showing up an occupying power who wished to disguise their control with a pretence of legality- perhaps they were intended to achieve precisely that.

In the Lord’s Prayer (Matthew 6:9 to 13 and Luke 11:2 to 4), we ask for “our daily bread” (perhaps a more accurate translation would be “bread for tomorrow”, since it is prepared in the evening for the following morning). This is part of the abundance promised by God’s Reign (as in Isaiah 55:1)- but in the present as likely to be ‘emergency provisions’ from others’ generosity. So the forgiveness that holds together the community of Jesus’ disciples involves finance as much dealing with the other hurts people inflict on one another (Matthew 6:12 can also be translated “Forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors”).

Jesus warns those who want to follow him that there is no security in becoming his disciple (Matthew 8:18 to 20 and Luke 9:57 and 58). His message is bound to be rejected by those in power, so their only security the disciples will have is in one another and their faith in God's justice. Crowds are bound to be fickle and unreliable- they call John the Baptist mad because he rejects all luxuries, but at the same time criticise Jesus because he accepts and enjoys the 'good things' of life (Matthew 11:7 to 19 and Luke 7:24 to 35).

"To those who have, more will be given; but those who have nothing will lose even what they have" says Jesus in the Parable of the Talents (Matthew 25:14 to 30 and Luke 19:11 to 27). It is a saying he repeats often (Mark 4:25; Luke 8:18; Matthew 13:12)- perhaps a popular proverb, familiar to anyone who knew how business and trade worked. The harsh injustices of the world, rewarding some and throwing others into destitution and starvation, were well known. So also was the cruelty of those who held power, slaughtering without mercy those who resisted their rule (in Luke's version of the parable- 19:14 and 27). So what is Jesus saying? That God is exactly like those unjust and cruel masters and rulers, throwing failures into "outer darkness" and utterly destroying those who question God's rule? Or that, although God is love and justice, the opposite of the men in the parable, the challenge to respond to that love and justice is just as critical and far-reaching? We must remember that the word 'parable' might equally be translated 'riddle'. Like a riddle, the meaning of parables is often anything but plain- the purpose is to make us think, question our assumptions and challenge the 'common-sense wisdom' we have always accepted. That is the case with this parable, and with many others in the Gospels.

4. The Gospel of Matthew

Worship must never be separated from justice and reconciliation, says Jesus in the 'Sermon on the Mount' (5:23 to 26). Paul makes the same point in 1 Corinthians 11:20 to 22 and 29. Coming to terms with adversaries is far better than digging in your heels and being dragged into court. Generous giving is important, provided it is done in secret (6:1 to 4). What does this say about the much-publicised charitable giving of some large companies and wealthy individuals? Or is it acceptable because it may encourage others?

The crowds would all have known people who risked everything they had for the sake of great wealth- would they have laughed at them or admired them? Jesus says that God's Kingdom is worth risking everything for (13:44 to 46), because it will bring about a complete transformation of the world, and by comparison nothing else matters.

Despite the levy of half a shekel imposed on all adults to maintain the sanctuary (Exodus 30:11 to 16), Jesus asserts that his disciples are under no obligation to pay the Temple tax (Matthew 17:24 to 27). Is this because the Temple is now redundant, to be abolished in the coming Reign of God (Revelation 21:22)? Or because the Temple is now so corrupt that it is no longer a simple sanctuary for worship but a burdensome imposition used by a powerful elite to overawe and impress ignorant people? Whatever the truth, there are times when it is better not to insist on your rights, says Jesus- not all battles are worth fighting at once.

The parable of the two debtors (18:21 to 35) is about forgiveness: if God has forgiven us so much, how can we balk at forgiving others the little they owe us? But, like many parables, the details of the story tell us much about the economic realities people faced in the time of Jesus, and still today. If you are a debtor, it is better to be a big debtor- because your failure to pay threatens the whole financial system. So the debts of a large bank or big country are far more likely to be rescheduled or even cancelled, whereas small debtors pose no such threat to the stability of financial system, and will be pursued for full payment, with disastrous consequences for them.

The Parable of the Vineyard Labourers (20:1 to 16) similarly reveals a great deal about life for many people in the time of Jesus. Because of the long neglect of the Jubilee laws much of the agricultural land had fallen into the hands of wealthy families. As a result, landless labourers were forced to stand in the market place waiting to be hired- and the regular daily wage of a *denarius* was barely enough for basic needs. If no one hired you there was no pay for that day (a system well known in British docks until relatively modern times). At the end of the day the owner does something totally unexpected- he gives everyone the day's subsistence, whether they were hired early or late. This creates real dissension among the workers- those who worked the whole day resent the owner's generosity to those who did not.

What does this parable- or riddle- mean? Is it perhaps a warning not to be taken in by the divisive tactics of powerful people, who deliberately sow dissension and set poor people against one another to suit their own ends? Is it a message to those who have served God for a long time (the Jewish people, for example) that they must not resent those (like the Gentiles) who come in later? Or does the parable reflect the nature of God, who gives everyone what they need, whether earned or not- “God makes his sun rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the just and the unjust” (Matthew 5:45)? If so, should society do the same, ensuring that people’s basic needs are met, even if, or perhaps especially if they have been unable to provide for themselves, like the workers who spent most of the day idle? And if, as in the parable, injustice has already deprived them of the resources they need to support themselves, such generosity can only be the first necessary step towards the restoration of what is rightfully theirs. As usual, the parable leaves us with more questions than answers. But that is its purpose.

Pharisees and other Jewish religious leaders get a very bad press in the Gospels. This reflects conflicts between them and Jesus, and also the tensions between the synagogues and Christians the time the Gospels were being written. But it would be unfair to think of the Pharisees always in this light. They began as a movement within Judaism to encourage the people to restore God’s law as the basis of their lives. There were heated debates among them about the interpretation of that law- and sometimes Jesus appears to side with one school more than with another. The criticism that Jesus levels at the scribes and Pharisees- that they stressed minor details of the law, while neglecting its underlying important principles (Matthew 23:1 to 4, 23 and 24)- was a debate within the Jewish community itself and is in no way a condemnation of Judaism as such.

The Temple and Sanhedrin authorities were concerned to preserve as much Jewish identity and religion as possible in the almost impossible situation of life under Roman occupation. But the compromises this involved could undermine the very faith they hoped to defend. Combined with the accusation that the authorities were using their positions as means to enrich themselves at the expense of others (see Mark 12:38 to 40) it became a fundamental challenge to their authority.

(It has also been suggested that the way the Gospels were written- especially their account of the trial of Jesus- was a deliberate attempt to put the Church ‘in favour’ with the Roman authorities and shift all blame onto the Jews. This certainly became a preoccupation of later Christian theology, once the Church became the established religion of the Empire under Constantine and his successors. But the early Christians had no such hopes. They expected Rome to collapse very soon, and there is great antagonism throughout the New Testament to the religious ideology that underpinned Roman power. To say “Jesus is Saviour and Lord”, both titles claimed by the emperors, was the equivalent of saying “Jesus is Führer” (Leader) in Nazi Germany.)

Matthew links Judas' betrayal of Jesus with the story of Jeremiah's purchase of a field in Anathoth (Matthew 27:3 to 10; Jeremiah 32: 6 to 15). But his quote is from the parable in Zechariah (11:4 to 14) where the people's hired shepherd is dismissed and paid off for thirty silver shekels, the price Judas receives for his service.

Matthew's account of the burial of Jesus in the tomb of "a rich man" (27:57 to 60) alludes to Isaiah 53:9: "They made his grave with the wicked, and with a rich man in his death, though he had done no violence, and there was no deceit in his mouth." To the very end there is ambiguity and irony in the story of Jesus. Like the 'Suffering Servant' he has spoken up continuously for God's justice, and has been condemned as a criminal for it. Even his body is taken by someone who belongs to the wealthy class he has spoken against, though one who perhaps has begun to see the truth.

5. The Gospel of Luke

In Luke's account of the birth of Jesus Mary's song celebrates the overturning of power and wealth in the world promised by his coming (1:46 to 55- closely related to Hannah's Song in 1 Samuel 2:1 to 10). It is said that in many poor communities all pregnancies are greeted with a similar hope- perhaps this is to be the child who will liberate our people. So is it any more than a burst of enthusiastic fantasy, an expression of hope that can never be fulfilled in the real world? The New Testament claims that in the work of Jesus this process has already begun, though it is yet to be completed.

At this stage in the story it is hard to see how it can happen under the power and authority of an empire which can order people around at will and control their lives (2:1 to 7). But already the message of a new beginning is taken to poor shepherds, who live on the fringes of society (2:8 to 19), and in the Temple at Jerusalem Mary and Joseph offer the sacrifice "of the poor" (2:24, compare Leviticus 12:8). Is this because they are away from home, and only temporarily in need? Or is it because they are part of the landless deprived majority of the population (though Joseph may have been better off than some, able to rely on his skills as a carpenter to earn a living)? These birth stories reflect the constant hopes of deprived and downtrodden people that in some way the reality of their life can change, and justice can be done.

The preaching of John the Baptist (3:10 to 14) is a direct challenge to the way the society of his day was organized by emperors, client kings and religious leaders (3:1 to 3). He demands that all people change their ways: those who have enough must share with others who have nothing; tax collectors must take only the amount they must pay to the authorities; soldiers must not extort and rob, but should live off their pay. But given the existing system, what John is asking is impossible- the system of tax-farming, where collectors were not paid a salary, but lived off the difference between what they could collect and what they had to pay in, would be totally undermined; no soldier could live on his pay, instead they were forced to live off the population they occupied by intimidation and force. You can almost hear the crowds laugh. To implement what he says requires a radical change in the system set up by the emperors, kings and religious leaders. In fact, if people did what John asks that system would rapidly fall apart.

In the synagogue at Nazareth (4:14 to 22), Jesus presents a 'manifesto' for his mission, in words based on Isaiah 61:1 and 2. Later lectionaries prescribed for synagogue services, which paired passages from the prophets with parts of the law, set Isaiah 61 with the Jubilee laws of Leviticus chapter 25. This may not have been so in the time of Jesus, but there is already a close link between the two- both "proclaim release/liberty" (verse one of Isaiah and ten of Leviticus). And the same theme is found in Jeremiah 34:8 to 17, where it deals with the liberation of slaves. Jesus is here to set people free from bondage and slavery; from injustice and poverty and their 'spiritual' consequences of self-despair, sickness, anger and guilt.

Regular synagogue attenders knew these readings well- and they would also know that Isaiah 61 goes on to speak of the time when other nations would serve Israel (verses 5 to 7). The fact that Jesus seems to repudiate this and gives foreigners, rather than his own people, the first place in the promised liberation (Luke 4:25 to 29) provokes their violent anger.

The debate about the interpretation of Sabbath law at a meal in a Pharisee's house (14:1 to 23) was typical of Jewish life, for example between the schools of Hillel and Shammai- and often Jesus sides with one or the other. But this argument turns (verses 12 to 14) to the issue of the wealthy sharing their feasts with the poor, rather than only with friends who can return the hospitality. A contentious question that is still with us today, for example whether job markets in Europe and Britain should be open to people from poorer countries.

All those who want to be his disciples are warned to count the cost (14:28 to 33). That involves giving up "all your possessions". Poor communities already know that their only chance of survival is to share what little they have. So does this mean that wealthy people should not hoard property and riches, but be prepared to share them (to "live more simply, so that others may simply live" perhaps)? Or is the long-neglected Jubilee in the mind of Jesus here? If so, this is a straightforward demand that wealthy landowners give up their unjust possessions, and share the resources God gave to all people with those they have dispossessed. In this sense "possessions" are not so much the everyday things we use, which wear out and need replacing, but the capital which, when put to use, creates income and enables us to live with dignity. In the time of Jesus this meant land above all- which the Jubilee principle says must be shared by all the people, not concentrated in the hands of very few powerful and wealthy families.

The parables which follow in chapters 15 and 16 are full of details about wealth. It is not surprising that illustrations from wealth occur so often, since it is a constant preoccupation for people (then and now), and Jesus is skilled at using familiar things in his teaching. Lost coins and sheep are clear enough, but the story of the Prodigal can provoke questions about the property involved- will the younger son still possess his inheritance after his return, or will everything now belong to the elder son, with the younger working as a labourer, and able to be kicked out when the father dies? Under the Jubilee Law his inheritance (as a family member) would be restored, of course, whether he 'deserved' it or not, though he might have to work as a labourer for some years. But the Jubilee did not operate in the time of Jesus, so what would his position be? These speculations, though intriguing, are not the point of the story- these three parables are addressed to the "Pharisees and scribes", who by their objections to Jesus mixing with "sinners" show that they have forgotten the lessons about God's undeserved forgiveness and generosity offered to all people. But that is also the principle of Jubilee- whatever people's failures they must always have a second chance- and that repeatedly.

The Parable of the Cheating Manager, however (16:1 to 15), is addressed to the disciples, and provokes even more questions. It seems to have bewildered the early Church- the series of explanations in verses 8 to 13 look like attempts to explain its meaning, but some only confuse the issue further!. The manager alters the bills of the creditors, in order to earn their gratitude and secure their help when he has lost his job. The master commends him for at least taking some action, dishonest though it is. Jesus seems to be urging his followers to take action to face the crisis that is about to overwhelm the world. But too many 'holy' people are so afraid of putting a foot wrong that they end by doing nothing. The rich, in particular, if they have any sense will use the wealth they still have generously (by giving it away!) to win friends for themselves for the future. Cynics may accuse them of acting 'unethically', but it is the only option they have, given the instability of the present system, and the certainty, as the New Testament sees it, of its imminent collapse. Those who realise the reality of their situation and face up to it will indeed be "faithful in little" (verse 10), and give their loyalty to God's justice rather than to wealth (verse 13).

The Parable of the Rich man and Lazarus (16:19 to 31), perhaps based on a familiar folk-tale, seems to deal directly with issues of wealth. The rich man wears "purple", (associated with Roman rule, and also the priestly robes of the Sadducees, who were allies of Rome). Lazarus was a common enough name (from the Hebrew "Eleazar" which means "God helps"), and there is no suggestion of identity with Lazarus of Bethany (John chapter 11). The idea of reward in an after-life comes late in the Hebrew Scriptures (for example Daniel 12:2)- earlier writings seem to be more confident that justice will always be done in the present world. So is this 'pie in the sky'? Yes, if it is only the poor who believe, and so put up with injustice in the hope of future recompense. In the time of Jesus many rich people also believed and were quick to abandon the wealth that would become such a burden to them. However it is no coincidence that the wealthy, landowning Sadducees also denied the Resurrection (Luke 20:27 to 40). Jesus says they are deluded, not only about their own future, but also about the existing society, which stands condemned by "Moses and the prophets" in whom they claim to believe.

There is perhaps an (intended?) irony in the story of Zacchaeus (19:1 to 10)- whereas the sycamore was sometimes considered 'impure' because its fruit was used to feed pigs, his name means "pure, righteous", the opposite of his reputation with the people (verse 7). After his encounter with Jesus, he commits himself to giving away "half of my possessions", and a fourfold restitution of all his fraud (verse 8)- more than enough, you would think, to justify his name. But why does Jesus not ask him to "give up everything", as he did the rich young man (Mark 10:17 to 31)? Clearly because Zacchaeus is still only a 'man on the make', rich in cash and goods, but not (yet) in land. He has not yet 'arrived' with that class of wealthy landowners whose way of life blatantly contradicts the notion of Jubilee. What he does is right for a man in his situation, and shows that he is in truth a "son of Abraham", part of that people Jesus sought to recall to their task of living out God's justice in the world as a witness to all people (as, for example, in Isaiah 49:6).

In the Upper Room, just before his arrest, Jesus countermands the instructions he gave his disciples at their first mission. Then they had no resources of their own (10:4)- they could rely on getting a welcome and support from at least some people. Now everyone will be against them, and they must provide for themselves (22:35 to 38). It recognises what life will be like in the real world. At what point, though, does this acceptance of 'reality' begin to undermine all that Jesus stood for? Even modest resources need some protection, if only as a deterrent (which fails if it ever needs to be used). But deterrents can lead to escalating violence- as Jesus himself said "Those who live by the sword, die by the sword" (Matthew 26:52). A society which allows a small minority to monopolise wealth, and to protect that wealth by force, is a society heading for disaster. But the disciples will have to live in such a society. This will demand all their wisdom and shrewdness, and to prescribe beforehand how they must react in every case would be impossible.

6. In Conclusion

In the Gospel of John (6:25 to 27), Jesus warns people not to work for food that perishes, but for that which lasts “to eternal life”- εἰς ζωὴν αἰώνιον, eis zōēn aiōnion, a phrase which means ‘the life of the age to come’. This is the future, the New Testament believes, which God is already giving to the world, not to be experienced only beyond death, but in essence (though not yet complete) in the present. Jesus wants people to put their faith in that future, and not in some continuous repetition of the provision they had in the desert.

It used to be said “Give a man a fish and you feed him for a day; teach him to fish and you feed him for a lifetime”. In fact, of course, he knew perfectly well how to fish- his problem was that he had been forced to sell his fishing boat to pay his debts, and the exorbitant interest rates they carried; in any case trawlers from wealthy countries had over-fished the nearby seas, leaving him little to catch and sell. Dealing with those issues demands far more than charity or education. The teaching of Jesus about wealth does not merely satisfy the need of the poor for one day, but addresses the root cause of their poverty. It challenges the injustice that permeates the whole of society, and creates a community of people who are prepared to stand and work for justice, despite the vilification and violence they will suffer as a result. This is an integral part of the lasting life, the ‘life of the new age’, which the Reign of God’s love brings to the world.

WEALTH IN ACTS, THE LETTERS AND REVELATION

1. The Story of the Early Church- the Book of Acts

The early Christians confronted the dominating Roman Empire with the conviction that it was not their Emperor who was 'Lord and Saviour' (as was often claimed) but Jesus of Nazareth. And that he was the expected 'Anointed One' ('Messiah' in Hebrew, 'Christ' in Greek- Acts 2:36)- one who behaved, however, more like the 'Suffering Servant' that the prophet of the Exile believed would be needed to redeem humanity (8:32 to 35).

They also knew that his understanding of wealth- that the kingdom belongs to the poor, and that true security comes only from the sharing of property- would have to be theirs. So the first Church in Jerusalem acted on his teachings, owning "all things in common" and "distributing.... to all, as any had need", so that "there was not a needy person among them." (2:44 to 46; 4:32 to 37). It is possible that the Jerusalem Christians created a form of complete 'communism' where even the concepts of 'mine' and 'yours' were replaced by 'ours'. But the reference to those who "owned lands or houses" (4:34- large agricultural estates, or urban housing from which the owners were able to derive substantial wealth) implies that underlying their action was the principle emphasised by Jesus, that of Jubilee (Leviticus chapter 25). Their aim was to curb the accumulation of property, power and wealth in fewer and fewer hands, which was the root cause of poverty for so many. Of course the actions of a tiny community in Jerusalem could have little impact on such a vast Empire, at least at first. But if you live in an unjust society you must decide what can be done now. That perfect justice is not immediately possible is no excuse for inaction. What the Jerusalem Church did was to take the basic principle of Jubilee and the sharing of property and apply it to their own situation, sowing a tiny "mustard seed" (Mark 4:30 to 32) which could take root and grow.

The fate of Ananias and Sapphira (5:1 to 11) comes as a shock in what is supposed to be a loving and forgiving community. It was understood as God's judgement, though the sudden discovery of hidden deception can indeed be devastating. Peter's comment that "Satan filled your heart to lie" almost makes Ananias a mere puppet in the hands of 'supernatural forces'. In the Bible there is often a sense that human beings are subject to pressure from 'beyond' or 'outside' their own personalities- Genesis 4:7; Job 1:6 and 1 Peter 5:8 are examples, and Paul speaks about "principalities and powers" in many of his letters. In the modern world we are more likely to interpret these as pressures that society puts on individuals. But however they are understood, in the Bible such 'outside forces' are never regarded as irresistible- they can be withstood and overcome.

As the Jerusalem Church grew the task of managing the community's needs became too much for the original leaders (6:1 to 6). Greek-speaking members (the "Hellenists") felt they were neglected, no doubt because the original leadership were all Palestinians who spoke Aramaic ("Hebrews"- both groups were Jewish; according to Luke's account Gentiles came

into the church only later, Acts chapter 10). The “daily distribution” is therefore handed over to newly elected officers, who, judging from their names, are all Greek-speakers. By a change of structure the group who felt marginalised were brought nearer to the centre of the community’s life. And of the seven originally elected to “serve tables”, two (Stephen and Philip) soon became prominent preachers and evangelists.

Samaritans were historically an excluded and despised people (Acts 8:4 to 24, and compare John 4:9 and the story of their origins in 2 Kings 17:24 to 41). Their welcome into the full fellowship of the Church was not a foregone conclusion- it had to be confirmed by the action of the apostles, and only in that united community could the Holy Spirit, God’s real presence, be experienced. The position of Simon the Samaritan magician in his community is probably much the same now they have become Christians as it was before- one of respect and leadership. But his story has given rise to our word “Simony”, the attempt to buy a spiritual office or power. He has to learn quickly that there are some things money cannot buy.

The Antioch church reacts to the threat of famine by agreeing to send help to the believers in Judaea (Acts 11:27 to 29), scattered by the persecution described in 8:1. (There seems to be no evidence for the claim that their poverty was because of the sharing of property the Jerusalem Christians practised from the early days- other than a prejudice that to follow seriously the teaching of Jesus about wealth would be a reckless dissipation of resources).

Many groups in Roman society could feel threatened by the preaching and actions of the early disciples of Jesus. Acts 16:11 to 21 and 19:23 to 41 describe two such groups who react violently (perhaps understandably) when the Church’s success undermines the living they had from traditional religion.

2. New Testament letters

God has chosen the weak, despised and powerless to “put to shame” those who are strong, says Paul the Apostle in 1 Corinthians 1:26 to 29. Throughout the Bible it is clear that what is important about wealth is the power it gives to those who possess it to oppress and push around those who have been deprived of what should rightfully be theirs. Deuteronomy 7:7 and 8; Matthew 11:25 and Luke 10:21 all stress God’s choice of the poor and powerless. So does this mean that God has no concern for rich people? By no means. As individuals they have precisely the same share in God’s love as poor people. But as disciples of Christ they are not entitled to keep their wealth and power. The Gospel means liberation for the rich because it sets them free from the unjust system from which today they benefit, but which in the end will bring them down. This does not obscure or dilute the fundamental Biblical truth that in this present age God is ‘for’ the poor, ‘on the side’ of those who suffer injustice in the existing economic system.

The community meals in the church at Corinth almost certainly followed a common Jewish practice, in which a symbolic meal is followed by a common sharing of food. Paul criticises what is happening (1 Corinthians 11:17 to 24) because what should have been times of equality and sharing have become examples of the competitiveness they should have left far behind. Their actions have destroyed its meaning as the “Lord’s supper”. Paul is clear that people who eat and drink with no regard for the fellowship (“the body” of Christ, verse 29) condemn themselves.

Also in his letters to Corinth Paul speaks at length about the relief collection for the poor in Judea (1 Corinthians 16:1 to 3 and 2 Corinthians chapters 8 and 9). This was first organised at Antioch, Acts 11:27 to 29. The richer Christians in Greece were being urged to help those living in poverty in Palestine. They should take their example from Christ, who gave up his own riches to make others rich. He probably has in mind the same thought as the ‘hymn’ in Philippians 2:7- “he emptied himself, taking the form of a slave”. But some might recall that Jesus gave up the modest security of a carpenter’s family to identify with those who were destitute. For Paul it is equality that is vital (2 Corinthians 8:13 to 15). He does not wish to make the Greeks poor in order to favour Palestinians, but to restore the equality that enables people to be part of the same community and share a common humanity. Help and support should be two-way, rather than one group always needing to depend on another’s generosity. Today it is often argued that equality is not important- that wide differences of wealth are necessary for economic efficiency, even that allowing the rich to prosper is the only way of dealing with poverty. Others say that wide differentials of wealth and poverty are destructive (“The Spirit Level” by Richard Wilkinson and Kate Pickett argues this). These arguments would have been alien to Paul’s thinking: equality is clearly part of God’s will for society, and the generosity which seeks to build such a community is a vital part of the openness that can recognise and respond to God’s love (2 Corinthians 9:6 to 10) in contrast to a calculating, mean attitude.

Such generosity, however, should never descend to mere foolishness. In Thessalonika there were clearly people in the church who were taking advantage by refusing to do any work. Paul says (2 Thessalonians 3:6 to 12) that they should not be supported until they change their attitude. In rural areas the fact that a great deal of agricultural land was owned by a tiny elite meant that many people were left under-employed, able to find work only at certain times of the year, especially at harvest time. The wealthy spent most of their money in the cities, and there work could be more plentiful. Or perhaps the church itself was organising and offering employment to those who had none- but that would depend on having the resources to do that. In a situation where work is available Paul is not prepared to countenance deliberate idleness. His principle makes good sense in an economy which is working well enough to provide full employment at a reasonable wage to everyone. But when that is not the case a rigid application of his advice would be nothing short of cruel and unjust.

1 Timothy 6:6 to 10 warns against an obsession with money, and the letter of James speaks repeatedly about wealth and poverty: 1:9 to 11; 2:1 to 9, 15 to 16; 5:1 to 6. Jewish thinking distinguishes between '*Tikkun ha-nephesh*', the healing of the soul, and '*Tikkun ha-'olam*', the healing of the world, but asserts that these two can never be separated. James consistently follows this tradition. Riches are far from secure and the present insecurity of the world will easily remove them. The imminent collapse of the system the rich have come to rely on will soon show up the hollowness of their pretensions. And those in the Church who fail to recognise this fact, and still show exaggerated deference to the rich, have forgotten the true meaning of the Gospel.

3. “Lifting the lid”- Power and Wealth in the Apocalypse

The Book of Revelation uses images which people who knew the symbolism of Jewish Apocalyptic writings would have no difficulty in understanding, but which are strange and obscure to us. The Greek word ἀποκαλυψις, apocalypsis, which means an ‘uncovering’ or ‘revelation’- bringing to light the hidden truth about contemporary events, and the way history is heading. (It is not a prediction of some distant and far-off future). To use symbols familiar to readers but not to anyone else is good way to convey a message to people living under an oppressive regime. The authorities cannot see what is being said- at first they may regard the writer as suffering from delusions and allow the message to pass.

History can only be understood, says Revelation, through the Jesus who was crucified in Jerusalem by the Romans- he alone can open the “seven seals” to unlock its mysteries (5:1 to 5). The image of the “four horsemen” (6:1 to 8) says that military power, aggression and conquest (the first “horse”) inevitably lead to warfare (the second “horse”), and the disruption of the economic system (the third “horse”). In particular this means steeply rising prices for staple products, like wheat and barley, on which ordinary people depend, while luxury goods such as olive oil and wine are still secure (the bankers still get their bonuses!). The result for a quarter of the population is death (the fourth “horse”).

In chapter 7 of the Book of Daniel beasts symbolise great empires, and their horns are symbols of the kings who rule within those empires. Revelation chapter 13 describes two such beasts, one emerging from the sea, the other from the land. The first of these two (verses 1 to 10) combines several characteristics of Daniel’s four beasts; the second (verses 11 to 18) is a religious priesthood dedicated to securing support for the first beast. They exercise control over the economy (verses 16 and 17), rewarding their political supporters with wealth, trade permits etc, and leaving opponents to suffer poverty.

Chapter 17 clearly identifies this oppressive regime under which the people are suffering. The city built on seven hills (verse 9) is well known as Rome, here called “Babylon”. Babylon was the city where the Jews were taken into exile in 598 to 538 BCE, and its name is applied to any similarly oppressive system (just as Rastafarians call the British colonial and capitalist system “Babylon”). This Empire has seven successive rulers (verses 9 and 10)- the Emperors from Augustus to Titus (ignoring the civil war of 69, where three claimants each claimed power for only a few months). Titus ruled from 79 to 81, the “only a little while” of verse 10. After him comes an eighth ruler (Domitian was Emperor from 81 to 96), who is the “beast” of chapter 13. He is described as a ‘re-incarnation’ of an earlier Emperor (verse 11)- almost certainly Nero, the instigator of an earlier persecution in 64.

In the time of this eighth ruler the writer of Revelation predicts that the Empire will fall apart. Rome ruled through a network of local client kings (such as Herod in Judaea at an earlier period) and these, he says, will rebel and destroy the whole system (17:16 to 18). This will bring down the imperial economy of trade and exploitation (18:10 to 19)- so God’s

people must take good care not to put their faith in that system (18:4), but to create the alternatives that can sustain people through the crisis. Out of the chaos of Rome's collapse will be born God's new realm of justice, prosperity and peace (the New Jerusalem of chapter 21). This is the hope and faith of the New Testament Christians.

Postscript- Biblical Principles in the Modern World

Today many people would agree that society can be healthy only if wealth is shared- though some dispute it. Far fewer, however, would argue that a 'fair' distribution of goods is not enough; it is the resources which produce wealth that must be shared.

The Bible does not oppose differences of income as such- they may reward hard work and good management. But it does reject the division of the community into classes where a minority own the resources, and rest only earn a living if their labour and skills are profitable to that elite. Today's world is superficially very different from the agricultural and trading society of Biblical times, but it was the growth of settled agriculture several thousand years ago that brought conflict about the control of resources which was still being faced in the time of Jesus and persists today. The Bible's laws about debt and land ownership were specifically intended to stem the divisions being created. But they were repeatedly ignored, and an unjust and ultimately unsustainable society was the result.

Although New Testament Christians expected Rome's unjust system to collapse very soon, the Empire struggled on and survived. Three hundred years later the Church accepted its new role as the 'established' religion of a 'Christian' Roman state. Revelation's hopes were postponed to a distant future, even beyond death. One result was that teaching on wealth changed radically. Voluntary poverty (in the sense of having no personal possessions) was a 'special' vocation for the few. Aristocratic control of land and government was accepted as the norm, and peasant small-holders increasingly abandoned to bad harvests and debt. The Church might urge wealthy people to act charitably towards their dependents, but not all followed that advice.

Western society has inherited that legacy. We still run our economy on the assumption that prosperity requires the concentration of wealth-producing property in a few 'expert' hands. Only this, we say, guarantees well-paid work for most people, and the taxes to fund vital public purposes and maintain those who, in a complex technological society, will never be profitable employees. In any case much wealth-producing capital (machinery, for example) now comes from human ingenuity rather than as 'a gift of God' (like land). It might not exist at all if it did not receive an adequate reward. The same can be said of improvements in agriculture (though whether this justifies a permanent monopoly of the wealth produced is another matter).

So far our system has proved adaptable and resilient, confounding predictions that it would create so much poverty that revolution would be inevitable. Its ideology is confidently 'offered' to poor countries as the only way to solve their problems. Most voters are content to see it continue indefinitely- we argue about welfare benefits, immigration, and the earnings of the richest one percent, but rarely about the patterns of ownership and control the Bible says are crucial.

But is this sustainable in the long term? The planet sets severe limits to the growth on which the system has come to depend. The cost of containing tensions between rich and poor (globally and locally) seems likely to escalate. And the power of modern banks to turn money into capital by creating almost unlimited credit could lead to greater instability. But does this mean the economy is likely to fall apart soon in the way New Testament Christians believed Rome would collapse?

For a long time we thought that Biblical ideas about wealth might be relevant in an ancient agricultural society, but had little to say now. The Church saw its task as encouraging those it could influence to make best use of opportunities offered by today's economy. But that is to ignore both those whom the economy excludes, and its potentially destructive impact on the environment.

So what are the options? One is to challenge our society to consider again the Biblical idea that when all people share equally in the ownership and control of the means to produce wealth the community is more prosperous, stable and healthy than when other ideologies apply. This means becoming much clearer about Biblical principles, and also working with others to find practical ways to implement them today.

But what if society refuses to accept that challenge? It may choose to pursue its present course, which may prove durable, or may lead to chaos and collapse. The second option, or rather necessity, is to work with excluded and marginalised communities to build just and stable alternatives. In fact, both these options need to work in parallel together.

What cannot be an option is to put the blame simply on individual greed- of bankers, trades unions or welfare 'scroungers' (even our own). Human actions are powerfully influenced by the structures of society, which can transform what would otherwise be seen as destructive behaviour into the only rational response to the system's demands. To expect individuals to change while ignoring that system is to betray both the Gospel and the people involved.

Appendix: The Wellingborough Diggers

In the late 1640s in England, after the Civil War had (temporarily) abolished the monarchy, a number of groups emerged claiming that “the earth shall be made a common treasury of livelihood for all”. The most famous of these were the “True Levellers”, or “Diggers” as they came to be popularly known, who set to work in April 1649 to cultivate common land at St George’s Hill, near Weybridge in Surrey. But other groups followed their example, including one at Wellingborough in Northamptonshire, who published a manifesto to publicise their case. Part of the reason for Oliver Cromwell becoming “Lord Protector”, in effect a military dictator, was to resist such radical experiments, which were greatly feared by the wealthy:

A Declaration of the Grounds and Reasons why we the poor Inhabitants of the Town of *Wellingborrow*, in the County of *Northampton*, have begun and give consent to dig up, manure and sow Corn upon the Common, and waste ground, called *Bareshank*, belonging to the Inhabitants of *Wellingborrow*, by those that have subscribed, and hundreds more that give Consent.

We find in the Word of God, that God made the Earth for the use and comfort of all Mankind, and set him in it to till and dress it, and said that in the Sweat of his brows he should eat his bread; and also we find, that God never gave it to any sort of people, that they should have it all to themselves, and shut out all the rest, but he says, “The Earth hath he given to the children of men”, which is every man.

2. We find, that no creature that ever God made was ever deprived of the benefit of the Earth, but Mankind; and that it is nothing but covetousness, pride, and hardness of heart, that hath caused man so far to degenerate.
3. We find in the Scriptures, that the Prophets and Apostles have left it upon Record, That in the last days the oppressor and proud man shall cease, and God will restore the waste places of the Earth to the use and comfort of Man, and that none shall hurt or destroy in all his holy Mountain.
4. We have great Encouragement from these two righteous Acts, which the Parliament of England have set forth, the one against Kingly Power, the other to make England a Free Common-wealth.
5. We are necessitated from our present necessity to do this, and we hope that our Actions will justify us in the gate, when all men shall know the truth of our necessity: We are in *Wellingborrow* in one parish 1169 persons that receive Alms, as the Officers have made it appear at the Quarter Sessions last: we have made our Case known to the Justices, the Justices have given Order that the Town should raise a Stock to set us on work, and that the Hundred [*the local district*] should be enjoined to assist them; but as yet we see nothing is

done, nor any man that goes about it; we have spent all we have, our trading is decayed, our wives and children cry for bread, our lives are a burden to us, divers of us having 5,6,7,8,9 in Family, and we cannot get bread for one of them by our labour; rich men's hearts are hardened, they will not give us if we beg at their doors; if we steal, the Law will end our lives, divers of the poor are starved to death already, and it were better for us that are living to die by the Sword than by the Famine: And now we consider that the Earth is our Mother, and that God has given it to the children of men, and that common and waste Grounds belong to the poor, and that we have a right to the common ground both from the Law of the Land, Reason and Scriptures; and therefore we have begun to bestow our righteous labour upon it, and we shall trust the Spirit for a blessing upon our labour, resolving not to dig up any man's propriety until they freely give us it; and truly we find great comfort already, through the goodness of our God that some of those rich men amongst us, that have had the greatest profit upon the Common, have freely given us their share in it, as one Mr John Freeman, Thomas Nottingham and John Clendon, and divers others; and the Country Farmers have proffered divers of them to give us Seed to sow it, and so we find that God is persuading Japheth to dwell in the tents of Shem: and truly those that we find most against us are such as have become constant enemies to the Parliament's Cause from first to last.

Now at last our desire is, That some that approve of this work of Righteousness, would but spread this our Declaration before the great Council of the Land, that so they may be pleased to give us more encouragement to go on, that so they may be found among the small number of those that considers the poor and needy, that so the Lord may deliver them in the time of their troubles, and then they will not be found amongst those that *Solomon* speaks of, which withhold the Corn (or the Land) from the Poor, which the people shall curse, but blessing shall be upon the heads of those rulers that sell Corn, and that will let the poor labour upon the Earth to get them Corn, and our lines shall bless them, so shall good men stand by them, and evil men shall be afraid of them, and they shall be counted the Repairers of our Breaches, and the Restorers of our Paths to dwell in. And thus we have declared the truth of our necessity; and whosoever will come in to us to labour with us, shall have part with us, and we with them, and we shall all of us endeavour to walk righteously and peaceably in the Land of our Nativity.

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