**Book Reviews**

**Wealth and Poverty in Early Christianity**

*Reviewed by Kurt C. Schaefer, Calvin University*

The Ad Fontes series aims to chronicle, in accessible English translation with brief introductions, early Christian texts (roughly 100–700 CE) that are considered primary for understanding the diversity and development of early Christian theology, practice, and church structure. The series aims for a representative sampling, directed to a non-specialist college-level audience. This particular volume surveys a broad range of developments in thought and practice around the topics of wealth and poverty. Editor Rhee is Professor of History of Christianity at Westmont College, where she specializes in developments among the early Christians.

I gather from my time in seminary that the study of church history in general and early history in particular has fallen on hard times, much like the study of the history of economic thought among economists. Protestants like me are apt to suffer from generalized amnesia about the origins of their own ardently held convictions. To the extent this scenario is common, Rhee’s return to the sources of the common Christian tradition may help.

Readers of the New Testament will appreciate that dealing with wealth and poverty was at the heart of Jesus’ teaching and discipleship, central to the expression of both faith and love, an important marker of the Christian’s distinctive social identity. Rhee’s volume considers how Jesus’ movement spread (and in some cases mutated) through space, time, institutionalization, and historical circumstance. The readings portray a movement that responds distinctively to the teaching and practice of surrounding cultures. It also typically engaged the intellect to propose theologies and social understandings that tethered practice and thought to each other. The genres are diverse. The subject matter, more often than not, addresses directly what the authors considered their most vexing moral and theological problem: wealth and the wealthy, rather than poverty and the poor.
Rhee's introduction offers a survey of the socio-economic, theological, and moral contexts in which the source documents were constructed, then introduces the authors and texts individually. The Roman Empire is presented as predominantly a subsistence, agrarian economy with a deep sense that existence is a zero-sum game. This would imply, as they followed Aristotle, that the only "natural" (that is, just or innocent) way to acquire wealth is through inheritance or self-production. Trading, hoarding, usury, and profit-seeking (as opposed to self-sufficiency) bore the stench of greed and pettiness, and the rich are usually viewed negatively by Roman moralists (who nevertheless, as we shall see, generally ignored the poor and poverty).

All this is reflected in the social distinctions, hierarchies, and patronage system of the Roman order. Stunning social inequalities, and the values cited to support them, were deeply structural, the canvas upon which everything else was painted. The result was an empire in which roughly 80–90% lived in a tight bell curve centered at subsistence, with roughly a quarter chronically below subsistence, a quarter slightly above, and a third hovering at bare maintenance. Another 10% of the population sat precariously above these plebeians, generating a moderate surplus (think of Lydia or Philemon), and another (roughly) 2% occupied imperial and aristocratic elite positions. The reciprocity of a widespread patronage system both reinforced the hierarchy and lent a thin veneer of justification: superiors granted favors (food, land, housing, insider influence), and clients reciprocated with loyalty and public praise/rationalization of the patron. You can see that this structure presumes and feeds a ravenous zero-sum vision of access and power. It also expresses a particular vision of justice: equals must be treated equally; each should receive according to one's status, not one's need. To do otherwise would be unjust. None of the patronage seems to be aimed at poverty alleviation *per se*. The working poor might participate in public-works patronage (water, entertainment) because of their status as members of the civic community, but the destitute were not even considered a part of that community, and thus could not think it unjust if excluded from many of life's basics. This attitude toward justice frames the Roman conception of generosity, which was thought to be the essential virtue of a good aristocrat.

The first Christians were certainly conversant and engaged with these realities, but they were also in conversation with Israelite and
Jewish traditions and texts. These sources affirmed God's ownership of all, the goodness of creation in general and righteous prosperity in particular, the dangers attendant to that good prosperity, the obligation to prophetically challenge those who succumb to these dangers, the existence of poverty as a form of injustice and oppression, and the defense and care of the marginalized. In fact, the Jewish prophetic tradition, of which Jesus is certainly a part, foresaw the coming reversal of "the pious poor and the wicked rich." The concentration of first-century Palestine's wealth among a few pro-Roman Jewish aristocrats made Jesus' era volatile, and also informed his teaching, as he frequently turned the Roman patronage pyramid and its conception of justice on its head.

Rhee affirms that the same situation framed the values and practices of Jesus' first followers in the first century, who believed he had inaugurated the eschatological new age. Luke and James are mentioned as especially pointed in their analysis of poverty and wealth. (I would only add that the New Testament authors and their collaborators are offering an alternative not only to this Roman–Sadducee political economy but also to the Pharisee, Essene, and Zealot political economies that had emerged as counter-movements. The New Testament is a stunning, creative work of economic/social protest and innovation.)

Where did all of this work by Jesus' direct followers lead to in the succeeding centuries? Rhee suggests a rough demarcation between the second/third centuries (six authors are represented) and the fourth/fifth centuries (eight authors)—that is, before and after Constantine.

In the first period, the church expanded significantly, if unevenly, through the urban centers of the Greek-, Latin-, and Syriac-speaking world, with converts from across the social strata. Some outreach activity appears to have been directed toward the upper echelons. By the third century, the church likely reflected the general socio-economic makeup of the rest of Roman society. This expansion of upward mobility for believers implied expanding socio-economic disparities and tensions within the church, accompanied by administrative/financial capacity and the development of distinctively Christian literary/intellectual traditions, samples of which fill this book's pages.

Given the circumstances, perhaps it was inevitable that the mass of the surviving literature comes to us from relatively well-off authors. Thus this volume's pieces disproportionately address wealth and the wealthy, even while they maintain that salvation is a corporate, communal reality
bearing social responsibilities and the sharing of material resources, not just another privatized eastern-Empire mystery religion. By the mid-third century the church’s charitable works fell increasingly under the jurisdiction of the clergy, particularly the bishops.

To summarize the topics and approaches of these early centuries, Table 1 offers without further comment a box score for our six second- and third-century authors. I have starred (*) the authors we know to have received a strong Classical education.

For the second period—the fourth and fifth centuries—Constantine’s legalization and establishment of Christianity brought a new set of opportunities and challenges. The church already operated a massive charity system for its own, but this now became an obligatory public service, with the church mediating between the rich and the poor of the entire empire. Though one might have expected this to result in a cool, administrative attitude toward the work, church leaders endlessly and persistently insisted on personal charity and almsgiving by the wealthy, and developed ascetic monastic movements. These developments amplified themes from Table 1: earthly wealth in tension with heavenly prosperity, the possibility of becoming the “wicked rich,” the common intended destination of all earthly goods, the identification of all the poor with the incarnate Christ, and the condemnation of usury. The authors here continued to attach deep, nearly salvific significance to almsgiving; they were aware that forgiveness and salvation are entirely by grace, but also aware that grace, as in the death, resurrection, and the ascension of Jesus, generally comes by a means that is tactile and practical. The New Testament word koinonia referred not to a warm feeling of affirmation but to the radical sharing of resources in Jerusalem and in Paul’s collections for the poor.

All the authors included from this period seek a synthesis of Christian traditions of concern for the poor with Greco–Roman traditions of the civic responsibilities of the wealthy. The three fourth-century Cappadocian fathers (Basil, Gregory of Nyssa, Gregory of Nazianzus) combined radical personal discipleship with aggressive social activism for distributive justice: those with wealth commit injustice, violate “human rights,” and fail to love—even commit the equivalent of murder—when they do not share possessions to alleviate the suffering of others, who share God’s image. Sufficiency/simplicity should be the norm for all, not exclusive or absolute private ownership. John Chrysostom (turn of
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<td>Wealth is good?</td>
<td>Dangerous—it demands preoccupation and complacency, distracts from care of needy</td>
<td>Yes, potentially</td>
<td>Complex: riches (and sexuality) bind people to earth, so must be renounced; almsgiving approaches salvific status</td>
<td>Granted by God but fraught with dangers to the soul and relationships</td>
<td>Oversaw two imperial persecutions and a plague in eight years, with wealthy Christians committing mass apostasy; greed and complacency are blamed</td>
<td>Paganism breeds social inequality and cannot practice true justice; yet God judges inner virtue, so private property/economic distinctions may be defensible</td>
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<td>Are riches/the wealthy redeemable?</td>
<td>Yes, with difficulty, if there is speedy repentance, turning from wealth-seeking, and seeking out the poor</td>
<td>“Wealth” and “poverty” in scripture are spiritual; anyone, including the rich, can have spiritual detachment and contentment.</td>
<td>Complex: Jesus was rich in heavenly wealth and dispensed it to others, yet offered this out of earthly poverty</td>
<td>Rejects Marcion’s rejection of the material world. Riches can potentially serve God’s purposes, yet wealth is a unique challenge to salvation</td>
<td>Worldly possessions must be scorned and forsaken by the (repentant) lapsed, through almsgiving</td>
<td>Christian generosity should seek the most “unsuitable” recipient, in justice, piety, and common humanity</td>
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*Table 1. Second-century and Third-century Works*
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<th>Relationship between the pious poor and the pious rich</th>
<th>Shepherd of Hermas (early second century)</th>
<th>*Clement of Alexandria (turn of third century)</th>
<th>Acts of Thomas (early third century)</th>
<th>*Tertullian (turn of third century)</th>
<th>*Cyprian of Carthage (mid-third century)</th>
<th>*Lactantius (turn of fourth century)</th>
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<td>Symbiotic: riches in things meet riches in prayer</td>
<td>Symbiotic: almsgiving (out of self-care) meets intercession</td>
<td>Imitation of Christ and mediation between God and earth involves (requires) earthly poverty</td>
<td>Affirms Jewish tradition of pious poor and oppressive rich; wealth/ poverty are not allegorized, as with Clement</td>
<td>Almsgiving is, for the wealthy, God's way out of post-Baptismal sin</td>
<td>Our common humanity creates solidarity and compassion; patronage systems are unjustifiable and destructive</td>
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<td>Is Christianity compatible with Classical philosophy?</td>
<td>Likely not</td>
<td>Definitely (at least for Plato and the Sophists)</td>
<td>Likely not. (This is a Manichaean, dualistic, enigmatic alternative gospel)</td>
<td>Famously suspect of compatibility</td>
<td>Obvious extreme tensions, considering the two recent imperial mass persecutions</td>
<td>He is in dialogue with classical works; parallel in style with fundamental disagreements</td>
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the fifth century) turned the full force of his striking oratorical powers against materialism, arguing that the essence of wealth is its value to the common good and the reduction of suffering; failure to share is the equivalent of theft. He organized extensive relief efforts, and preached against misuses of wealth and power with such bracing clarity and honesty that he was twice deposed and eventually exiled from being Patriarch of Constantinople. Augustine considers wealth as only a means for pursuing the true/right intent of our desire—which is ultimately God; vice consists of reversing the proper object of love with the proper instrument for pursuing it, which is not to be loved in itself or accumulated beyond necessities. The wrongful use of goods invalidates the possessor’s “right” of ownership.

Ambrose of Milan really deserves a separate article in Faith & Economics. Trained to be roughly the equivalent of an imperial economist in a tradition emphasizing efficiency and lacking categories for valuing distributive justice, upon conversion he gave all his property to the poor. He condemned destructive greed and usury, defined justice in relation to securing the common good, and argued that resources are the common property of all humanity. Every person has the natural right to make use of the world’s resources; private ownership is not a natural right, and is always contingent and restricted. To the modern economist who might turn from this book review thinking that it has nothing to say about “real economics,” one pictures Ambrose fixing a level stare, then saying: “That’s what I thought... before my conversion.”