

Loving the Poor, Saving the Rich

Wealth, Poverty, and Early Christian Formation

▶●◀ HELEN RHEE ▶●◀

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Abbreviations

Primary Sources

<i>Acts Andr.</i>	<i>Acts of Andrew</i>	<i>Cod. theod.</i>	<i>Codex theodosianus</i>
<i>Acts John</i>	<i>Acts of John</i>	<i>Comm. Matt.</i>	<i>Commentarium in evangelium Matthaei</i>
<i>Acts Just.</i>	<i>Acts of Justin and Companions</i>	<i>Comm. Rom.</i>	<i>Commentarii in Romanos</i>
<i>Acts Paul</i>	<i>Acts of Paul</i>	<i>Cultu fem.</i>	<i>De cultu feminarum</i>
<i>Acts Paul Thec.</i>	<i>Acts of Paul and Thecla</i>	<i>De dom.</i>	<i>De domo suo</i>
<i>Acts Pet.</i>	<i>Acts of Peter</i>	<i>Demetr.</i>	<i>Ad Demetrianum</i>
<i>Acts Scill.</i>	<i>Acts of Scillitan Martyrs</i>	<i>De off.</i>	<i>De officiis</i>
<i>Acts Thom.</i>	<i>Acts of Thomas</i>	<i>De vit. beat.</i>	<i>De vita beata</i>
<i>Adu. Christianos</i>	<i>Adversus Christianos</i>	<i>Dial.</i>	<i>Dialogue with Trypho</i>
AGIBM	<i>Ancient Greek Inscriptions in the British Museum</i>	<i>Did.</i>	<i>Didache</i>
<i>Ann.</i>	<i>Annales</i>	<i>Didasc.</i>	<i>Didascalia apostolorum</i>
<i>Ant.</i>	<i>Jewish Antiquities</i>	<i>Diog. Laert.</i>	<i>Diogenes Laertius, Lives of Eminent Philosophers</i>
<i>Ap. Const.</i>	<i>Apostolic Constitution</i>	<i>Diogn.</i>	<i>Epistle to Diognetus</i>
<i>Ap. Trad.</i>	<i>Apostolic Tradition</i>	<i>Dom. or.</i>	<i>De dominica oratione</i>
<i>Apoc. Paul</i>	<i>Apocalypse of Paul</i>	<i>Don.</i>	<i>Ad Donatum</i>
<i>Apoc. Peter</i>	<i>Apocalypse of Peter</i>	DSS	Dead Sea Scrolls
<i>Apol.</i>	<i>Apologeticum</i>	<i>Eleem.</i>	<i>De opera et eleemosynis</i>
<i>Autol.</i>	<i>Ad Autolyicum</i>	<i>Ench.</i>	<i>Enchiridion</i>
<i>Barn.</i>	<i>Epistle of Barnabas</i>	<i>Ep., Epp.</i>	<i>Epistulae</i>
<i>Bell.</i>	<i>Wars of the Jews</i>	<i>Eph.</i>	<i>Ignatius, To the Ephesians</i>
<i>Ben.</i>	<i>De beneficiis</i>	<i>Exh. cast.</i>	<i>De exhortatione castitatis</i>
<i>Cat.</i>	<i>Bellum catalinae</i>	<i>Fort.</i>	<i>Ad Fortunatum</i>
CD	Cairo Damascus Document	<i>Fr. Luc.</i>	<i>Fragmenta in Lucam</i>
<i>Cels.</i>	<i>Contra Celsum</i>	<i>Fug.</i>	<i>De fuga in persecutione</i>
CIL	<i>Corpus inscriptionum latinarum</i>	<i>Hab. virg.</i>	<i>De habitu virginum</i>
<i>1–2 Clem.</i>	<i>1–2 Clement</i>	<i>Haer.</i>	<i>Adversus haereses</i>
<i>Clem.</i>	Seneca, <i>De clementia</i>	HE	<i>Historia ecclesiastica</i>
		<i>Hist.</i>	<i>Historiae</i>

<i>Hom. Jer.</i>	<i>Homiliae in Jeremiam</i>	<i>Mart. Ptol.</i>	<i>Martyrdom of Ptolemaeus and Lucius</i>
<i>Hom. Jos.</i>	<i>Homiliae in Josuem</i>		
<i>Hom. Lev.</i>	<i>Homiliae in Leviticum</i>	<i>Mor.</i>	<i>Moralia</i>
<i>Idol.</i>	<i>De idololatria</i>	<i>Mort.</i>	Lactantius, <i>De mortibus persecutorum</i>
<i>Comm. Tit.</i>	<i>Commentariorum in Epistulam ad Titum liber</i>	<i>Mort.</i>	Cyprian, <i>De mortalitate</i>
<i>IGRRP</i>	<i>Inscriptiones Graecae ad Res Romanas Pertinentes</i>	<i>Nat. Hist.</i>	<i>Naturalis historia</i>
<i>Inst.</i>	<i>Divinarum institutionum libri VII</i>	<i>Nic. Eth.</i>	<i>Nichomachean Ethics</i>
<i>Instr.</i>	<i>The Instructions</i>	<i>NT</i>	New Testament
<i>Laps.</i>	<i>De lapsis</i>	<i>Oct.</i>	<i>Octavius</i>
<i>Leg.</i>	<i>Legatio</i>	<i>Or.</i>	<i>Oratio ad Graecos</i>
<i>Magn.</i>	<i>Ignatius, To the Magnesians</i>	<i>OT</i>	Old Testament
<i>Mand.</i>	<i>Shepherd of Hermas, Mandate(s)</i>	<i>Paed.</i>	<i>Paedagogus</i>
<i>Marc.</i>	<i>Adversus Marcionem</i>	<i>Paen.</i>	<i>De paenitentia</i>
<i>Mart.</i>	<i>Tertullian, Ad martyras</i>	<i>Pan.</i>	<i>Panegyricus</i>
<i>Mart. Agapê</i>	<i>Martyrdom of Apapê, Irenê, Chionê, and Companions</i>	<i>Pat.</i>	<i>De patientia</i>
<i>Mart. Apol.</i>	<i>Martyrdom of Apollonius</i>	<i>Phil.</i>	<i>To the Philippians</i>
<i>Mart. Carp.</i>	<i>Martyrdom of Carpus, Papyrus, and Agathonicê</i>	<i>P. Oxy.</i>	The Oxyrhynchus Papyri
<i>Mart. Dasius</i>	<i>Martyrdom of Dasius</i>	<i>Ps.-Crates</i>	<i>Pseudo-Crates</i>
<i>Mart. Felix.</i>	<i>Martyrdom of Felix the Bisbo</i>	<i>Quis div.</i>	<i>Quis dives salvatur</i>
<i>Mart. Julius</i>	<i>Martyrdom of Julius the Veteran</i>	<i>Ref.</i>	Hippolytus, <i>Refutation of All Heresies</i>
<i>Mart. Lyons</i>	<i>Letter of the Churches of Lyons and Vienne</i>	<i>Rom.</i>	Ignatius, <i>To the Romans</i>
<i>Mart. Mon. and Luc.</i>	<i>Martyrdom of Montanus and Lucius</i>	<i>Rom. Hist.</i>	<i>Roman History</i>
<i>Mart. Pal.</i>	<i>De martyribus Palaestinae</i>	<i>Sat.</i>	<i>Satirae</i>
<i>Mart. Perp.</i>	<i>Martyrdom of Perpetua and Felicitas</i>	<i>Scap.</i>	<i>Ad Scapulam</i>
<i>Mart. Pion.</i>	<i>Martyrdom of Pionius</i>	<i>Sim.</i>	<i>Shepherd of Hermas, Similitude(s)</i>
<i>Mart. Pol.</i>	<i>Martyrdom of Polycarp</i>	<i>Smyrn.</i>	Ignatius, <i>To the Smyrnaeans</i>
<i>Mart. Potam.</i>	<i>Martyrdom of Potamiaena and Basilides</i>	<i>Spec.</i>	<i>De specialibus legibus</i>
		<i>Strom.</i>	<i>Stromata</i>
		<i>Trall.</i>	Ignatius, <i>To the Trallians</i>
		<i>Unit. eccl.</i>	<i>De catholicae ecclesiae unitate</i>
		<i>Ux.</i>	<i>Ad uxorem</i>
		<i>Vir. ill.</i>	<i>De viris illustribus</i>
		<i>Vis.</i>	<i>Shepherd of Hermas, Vision(s)</i>
		<i>Vita Olymp.</i>	<i>Vita Olympiadis</i>
		<i>Vit. Const.</i>	<i>Vita Constantini</i>

Secondary Sources and Modern Editions

<i>ABD</i>	<i>Anchor Bible Dictionary</i>	<i>ANF</i>	<i>Ante-Nicene Fathers</i>
<i>ACW</i>	<i>Ancient Christian Writers</i>	<i>ANRW</i>	<i>Aufstieg und Niedergang der römischen Welt</i>
<i>AJP</i>	<i>American Journal of Philology</i>		

ATR	<i>Anglican Theological Review</i>	JSNTSup	Journal for the Study of the New Testament: Supplement Series
BJRL	<i>Bulletin of the John Rylands Library</i>	JSOT	<i>Journal for the Study of the Old Testament</i>
BJS	<i>British Journal of Sociology</i>	JSOTSup	Journal for the Study of the Old Testament: Supplement Series
BTB	<i>Biblical Theology Bulletin</i>	JTS	<i>Journal of Theological Studies</i>
CBQ	<i>Catholic Biblical Quarterly</i>	LCL	Loeb Classical Library
CBQMS	<i>Catholic Biblical Quarterly Monograph Series</i>	Mid-AJT	<i>Mid-American Journal of Theology</i>
CCSL	Corpus Christianorum Series Latina	NIDNTT	<i>New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology</i>
CSEL	Corpus scriptorium ecclesiasticorum latinorum	NTA	<i>New Testament Apocrypha</i>
EHR	<i>Economic History Review</i>	NTS	<i>New Testament Studies</i>
ETL	<i>Ephemerides theologicae lovanienses</i>	OECT	Oxford Early Christian Texts
FC	Fathers of the Church	PBSR	<i>Papers of the British School at Rome</i>
GP	Gospel Perspectives	PG	Patrologia graeca
HPT	<i>History of Political Thought</i>	PL	Patrologia latina
HSCP	<i>Harvard Studies in Classical Philology</i>	PTS	Patristische Texte und Studien
HTR	<i>Harvard Theological Review</i>	QR	<i>Quarterly Review</i>
JAAR	<i>Journal of the American Academy of Religion</i>	SBL	Society of Biblical Literature
JAC	<i>Jahrbuch für Antike und Christentum</i>	SecCent	<i>The Second Century</i>
JBL	<i>Journal of Biblical Literature</i>	StPatr	<i>Studia Patristica</i>
JECS	<i>Journal of Early Christian Studies</i>	StTheol	<i>Studia Theologica</i>
JEH	<i>Journal of Ecclesiastical History</i>	TAPA	<i>Transactions of the American Philological Association</i>
JESHO	<i>Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient</i>	TDNT	<i>Theological Dictionary of the New Testament</i>
JFSR	<i>Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion</i>	TS	<i>Theological Studies</i>
JHI	<i>Journal of the History of Ideas</i>	VC	<i>Vigiliae Christianae</i>
JMM	<i>Journal of Markets & Morality</i>	VCSup	Vigiliae Christianae: Supplement Series
JNES	<i>Journal of Near Eastern Studies</i>	WUNT	Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament
JRE	<i>Journal of Religious Ethics</i>	ZNW	<i>Zeitschrift für die neutestamentliche Wissenschaft und die Kunde der älteren Kirche</i>
JRH	<i>Journal of Religious History</i>	ZPE	<i>Zeitschrift für Papyrologie und Epigraphik</i>
JRA	<i>Journal of Roman Archaeology</i>	ZTK	<i>Zeitschrift für Theologie und Kirche</i>
JRS	<i>Journal of Roman Studies</i>		
JSNT	<i>Journal for the Study of the New Testament</i>		

Preface

Writing on a topic of wealth and poverty has not been easy. For one thing, it is deeply personal even if you treat this as an academic subject; it naturally leads you to reflect on, wrestle with, and evaluate your own beliefs and practices. This is a good thing. At the same time, it has not been easy because it could so easily slip into a mere theoretical, scholarly project. I had to remind myself that it was about not just theological ideas, rhetoric, or societal/institutional values and systems but actual people—of the past and the present—enjoying, using, and working for their wealth, struggling with their wealth and poverty, and suffering from poverty.

Writing this book has also been a laborious and challenging journey. Since the inception of this project and initial research in the summer of 2005, exigencies of life prevented me from progressing and moving toward the finish line for a while: my father's heart attack and ensuing heart reconstruction surgery in the same summer; a loss of my backpack, which, among other things, contained my thirty-six-page-plus handwritten research notes and outlines during a conference in Australia in January 2008; the Tea Fire that gravely damaged the Westmont College campus and faculty housing community (in which I live) in November 2008; my serious car accident in February 2009, which has severely aggravated a preexisting condition and acutely compromised my health ever since; the death of my beloved grandmother, whom I still miss, in 2010, just to name a few major ones. It has been a journey of faith, hope, and perseverance against hope, and I have written a major portion of the book in significant pain and groaning aches. I am exceedingly grateful for the support, encouragement, and assistance of many who enabled me to see the completion of this book.

My gratitude first goes to my family of God in the Westmont community (especially the faculty housing community) and my local and home churches. Their consistent prayers, love, care, and tangible and intangible support

throughout this journey, especially since my car accident, have been truly remarkable; they have been the embodiment of the early Christian *koinonia* and hospitality to me even as I strived to return their love (not quite successfully) and pass it on to others. The administration of Westmont—Richard Pointer, the former acting provost, and Bill Wright, associate provost and director of off-campus programs, in particular—offered me generous institutional support for coping with my physical challenge and granted me medical and sabbatical leaves. My colleagues at Westmont, both within and outside the Religious Studies Department, embraced my condition and walked with me along this journey. I also remember many of my current and former students who cared to understand my condition and encouraged me along the way. One of them, Mariah Kimbriel, proofread this manuscript with care and diligence. I would like to acknowledge consistently timely and professional assistance of all the staffmembers of Voskuyle Library at Westmont College (particularly the interlibrary loan department).

I want to acknowledge my professional colleagues outside Westmont for their works in this field that I could draw on and for exchanges of stimulating ideas, correspondences, feedback, and comments, including Bronwen Neil, Wendy Mayer, David Downs, and others, as well as the COMCAR organizers—Steven Friesen, Christine Thomas, Dan Schowalter, and James Walters—for helping me appreciate archaeology and material culture better. I am grateful to the excellent editorial team at Baker Academic—Robert Hosack, Robert Hand, and Hillary Danz—for their meticulous and efficient work. Last but not least, I owe an enormous debt of love and prayers to my family, my parents in particular—ever so sacrificial, ever so understanding, and ever so accommodating to my needs and challenges.

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Introduction

The issue of wealth and poverty and their relation to Christian faith is as ancient as the New Testament and reaches farther back to the Hebrew Scriptures. As frequently noted, Jesus's teachings in the Synoptics demanded a kind of discipleship that barred any competing commitment to peoples or things other than himself, including money and possessions. From the very beginning of the Christian movement, how to deal with riches and how to care for the poor were important aspects of Christian discipleship and were thought to express "an essential articulation of our faith in God and of our love for our fellow humans."¹ This study examines the ways that early Christians interpreted, applied, communicated, and struggled with what they understood as the Christian mandate regarding wealth and poverty while they were still "strangers" in Greco-Roman society. I aim to show how early Christians adopted, appropriated, and transformed the Jewish and Greco-Roman moral teachings and practices of giving and patronage, as well as how they developed their distinctive theology and social understanding of wealth/the wealthy and poverty/the poor. By doing so, I hope to demonstrate their critical link to early Christian identity formation.

It is my thesis that Christian reformulation and practice of wealth and poverty were indispensable for shaping Christian self-definitions vis-à-vis the Greco-Roman and Jewish worlds. The concept of identity is a twentieth-century notion typically associated with modern individualism, and scholars tend to qualify its usage when speaking of the "emergence of Christian identity" in the first two centuries.² Nevertheless, it is still possible to speak of "Christian identity" in order to construct a sense of Christian continuity and com-

1. L. T. Johnson, *Sharing Possessions: Mandate and Symbol of Faith* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1981), 16.

2. For example, J. M. Lieu, *Christian Identity in the Jewish and Graeco-Roman World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004).

mon boundaries in relation to (or in terms of) otherness and differentiation; boundaries of Christian identity “involve selection out of both similarity and difference, and promote interchange as well as distancing.”³ This (collective) identity is constructed in constant social interactions with the surrounding societies and cultures, and it defines and redefines those “others,” such as Jews, pagans, heretics, etc. The distinctiveness of a Christian way of life is formed not just by the boundary but also *at* the boundary according to Kathryn Tanner, who states, “Christian distinctiveness is something that emerges in the very cultural processes occurring *at* the boundary, processes that construct a distinctive identity for Christian social practices through the distinctive use of cultural materials *shared with others*.”⁴ Therefore, as with any other identities, Christian identity is “essentially relational”⁵ and “contextualized and contingent”⁶ upon time and space; yet it also presents and projects Christian ideals and universal claims through the selective process of self-definition.⁷ Since the second and third centuries are critical for the formation and development of distinct (gentile) Christian self-definitions, my main focus is the social and theological development in that era, leading up to the “Constantinian revolution” of the early fourth century. In that regard, I will explore the vital role and intricate relationship of wealth and poverty to the construction of eschatology, soteriology, and ecclesiology in the social and cultural context of the time. I will also trace the development of the institutionalization of (alms-)giving and its theological and social rationale, on the one hand, and the limits of institutionalization and social and ecclesiastical conservatism, on the other. Regardless of how they theologized wealth and poverty, early Christians had to grapple with and respond to the clear call of the social responsibilities of the gospel.

I will pursue this thesis with some fundamental assumptions. First of all, early Christians were part of a larger Greco-Roman world, which means that they lived and operated within the existing social, economic, political, religious, and cultural framework of the Mediterranean world dominated by the Roman Empire. Therefore, understanding the Greco-Roman economy, social structure and values, and attitude toward wealth and poverty is not only illuminating but also critical to understanding early Christian social thoughts and engagement. Christian social practices were formed by creative processes of incorporating, engaging, and negotiating with “institutional forms from

3. J. M. Lieu, “‘Impregnable Ramparts and Wall of Iron’: Boundary and Identity in Early ‘Judaism’ and ‘Christianity,’” *NTS* 48 (2002): 311.

4. K. Tanner, *Theories of Culture: A New Agenda for Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1997), 115 (italics added).

5. *Ibid.*, 112.

6. Lieu, *Christian Identity*, 18.

7. H. Rhee, *Early Christian Literature: Christ and Culture in the Second and Third Centuries* (London: Routledge, 2005), 7.

elsewhere” in dominant culture.⁸ Second, most of the literary texts of the time come from the elite—the rich and powerful—and therefore inherently carry a perspective of the upper order, even when the authors write about the poor and poverty. Consequently, we must use caution in assessing the reliability of these literary texts and recognize their rhetorical constructions and effect. They need to be juxtaposed with other “hard” evidences such as archaeological artifacts, inscriptions, papyri, etc., when appropriate and possible.

The primary sources for this study include a variety of Christian literary and nonliterary sources of the pre-Constantinian era: the respective literary categories known as the Apostolic Fathers, the Apologies, the Martyr Acts, the New Testament Apocrypha, the gnostic writings (Nag Hammadi), and the heresiologist writings such as those of Irenaeus, Tertullian, and “Hippolytus” provide scattered and incomplete, but still substantial, records and information; the literary works (treatises, letters, apologies, etc.) of the “old catholic” Greek Fathers such as Clement of Alexandria and Origen, and the Latin Fathers, Tertullian and Cyprian, offer critical witnesses to the changing theological and social dynamics of wealth and poverty from the late second to the mid-third centuries. Eusebius’s *Church History* illuminates (and sometimes complicates) a larger context and helps connect the dots between individuals and events. Furthermore, the church manuals, such as the *Didache* (Antioch), *Didascalía* (Antioch?), and *Apostolic Tradition* (Rome), allow us to observe the developing institutionalization of hospitality, liturgy, and “social ministries” of the clergy and church as a whole in the first three centuries. Finally, the often neglected but invaluable nonliterary sources, such as inscriptions, material objects, art, and architecture, shed light on and complement the literary ones when used judiciously.

The first group of sources can be further specified within each literary category; I mention here only the substantial works upon which I will consistently draw: The Apostolic Fathers include *The Didache: The Teachings of the Twelve Apostles*, *The Shepherd of Hermas*, *1 Clement*, the seven letters of Ignatius of Antioch, Polycarp’s *To the Philippians*, and the *Epistle of Diognetus*. Among the Apologies, Aristides’s apology (fragment), Justin Martyr’s apologies, Tertullian’s *Apologeticum*, Origen’s *Contra Celsum*, Minucius Felix’s *Octavius*, and the works of the early fourth-century apologist Lactantius are significant for this study. For the Martyr Acts, I select the most relevant ones (e.g., *The Martyrdom of Polycarp* and *The Martyrdom of Apollonius*) from Herbert Musurillo’s (somewhat dated) edition as the most historically reliable, important, and instructive martyr accounts from the mid-second to the early fourth centuries.⁹ From the New Testament Apocrypha, I will mainly deal with the *Acts of Peter* and *Acts of Thomas* along with the *Gospel of Thomas*, and for

8. Tanner, *Theories of Culture*, 112; cf. Rhee, *Early Christian Literature*, 194.

9. See *The Acts of the Christian Martyrs* (1972; repr., Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).

the gnostic writings, I will focus on the *Acts of Peter and the Twelve Apostles*. Lastly, the main heresiologist writings include Irenaeus's *Against All Heresies*, Tertullian's *Against Marcion*, and the *Refutation of All Heresies* attributed to a certain Hippolytus (along with *The Apostolic Tradition*).

A few words may be appropriate concerning these sources. First, many do not directly take up our topic but rather provide various and composite social situations and theological assumptions for our topic, so we must exercise caution when using them. I recognize their different genres, natures, and intentions and try to situate them both socially and historically. Yet, I also attempt to engage with them in their distinctive symbolic and theological worlds, which are equally significant in constructing the complex Christian realities and ideals of dealing with wealth and poverty in the second and third centuries that were decisive for subsequent Christian history.

One might notice a general absence of the voice of the poor themselves in these (literary) sources. This, unfortunately, is not a unique problem when studying any underrepresented group, particularly in antiquity. It raises formidable challenges to studying poverty and the poor at first hand and almost inevitably makes studies related to wealth and poverty more like studies on wealth rather than on poverty.¹⁰ While I recognize the unilateral dimension of extant ancient texts, this apparent silence should not undermine the relevance and value of the sources available; given this reality, a selection of comprehensive and wide-ranging sources seems justified and necessary, and it can rather underscore the constructive and interpretive nature of early Christian social consciousness. Lastly, these sources represent a broad spectrum of Christian contextualization of Greco-Roman culture and Jewish practices in light of their respective interpretations of the gospel. In this study, I will examine these Christian sources in relation to the relevant contemporary Greco-Roman and Jewish texts when appropriate: for example, Cicero's *On Duty*, Seneca's *On Benefits*, Plutarch's *On Love of Wealth*, as well as various texts of the Second Temple literature, rabbinic Judaism, and the Dead Sea Scrolls.

These diverse sources moreover testify to the vibrant and multifaceted nature and forms of second- and third-century Christianity. Christians of this time period created various communities and even competing claims among themselves and at the same time increasingly developed core doctrines, structure, and practices that defined a certain common Christian identity (or identities) in relation to the Greco-Roman and Jewish worlds. These apparently paradoxical developments were in fact indicative of the significant growth of Christianity over various regions of the empire (especially in urban centers) and of its active interaction with the existing culture and milieu of those areas. Christian expansion was not limited to geography and numbers, however; converts to

10. This is also acknowledged in S. Holman, *The Hungry Are Dying: Beggars and Bishops in Roman Cappadocia* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 12.

Christianity came from various social strata, especially in the third century, including the elite in the upper order and the people with financial means and relative security (though they did not belong to the official upper order)—as well as the poor and the marginalized. This social advance created as many challenges and conflicts as opportunities for Christian communities. In an ever-widening gap between the rich and the poor within Christian communities, securing one's salvation and heavenly abode directly entailed sharing one's possessions, sometimes giving them away altogether, and the miracle of the rich entering heaven was becoming more and more humanly possible. Theology thus was to accommodate and address this changing social reality and practicality.

This book is a work of social *and* theological (and to an extent, cultural) history. Utilizing and drawing from the insights of social historians, social scientists, and even Christian ethicists, I seek to show how theology and social phenomena intersect and mutually inform and influence, and how they together shape certain ethical norms. I approach this topic not from the perspective of a history of ideas¹¹ or ethics per se but from that of a sociocultural *and* theological historian using diverse interdisciplinary tools and sources. I have arranged the chapters by topic with reasonable chronological developments in each given topic.

This study proceeds in chapter 1 with the socioeconomic, cultural, and theological context of early Christian teachings and behaviors with regard to wealth and poverty. I will present, on the one hand, the basic structure of the Roman economy and of Greco-Roman perceptions and practices of benefaction and patronage based on the principle of reciprocity and embedded in social hierarchy. I will also introduce, on the other hand, the Jewish understanding of almsgiving mandated in the Hebrew Bible and developed in the Second Temple literature. In this context, I will bring in Greco-Roman and Jewish moral teachings on wealth and avarice and their respective understandings of the rich and the poor in their social, economic, and theological worlds; the notion of “the pious poor and the wicked rich” in some Jewish apocryphal writings will prove to be particularly significant for early Christians. Then I will provide general observations on the New Testament teachings concerning the rich and the poor, wealth and poverty, in light of their larger context, noting the reality of social stratification and differences within the growing Christian communities that began to produce *Christian* material culture in the early third century. This social composition and stratification would only intensify as Christianity made great inroads into Greco-Roman society in the second and third centuries.

From chapter 2 forward, I will explore how the specific social realities and issues facing Christian communities shaped theological concerns and

11. This approach is taken by Justo González, *Faith and Wealth: A History of Early Christian Ideas on the Origin, Significance, and Use of Money* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1990).

were in turn reflected and affected by these concerns. In chapter 2, I will discuss the relationship of wealth, poverty, and eschatology. Because eschatological concerns were still alive within Christian communities, discussions of wealth and poverty were colored by eschatological expectations of Christ's return and the judgment. The visions of the future kingdom of Christ and God's reign, and of the accompanying judgment (projected in material and physical terms), shaped Christian understandings of earthly conduct involving wealth and poverty. In this context, I will discuss how our sources interpreted and reformulated definitions of wealth and poverty and the inherited notion of "the pious poor and the wicked rich." The notion of eschatological prosperity and justice, aided by a biblical theme of the eschatological "great reversal," encouraged the rich to leave their enslavement to earthly wealth and to invest in heavenly riches through almsgiving. Therefore, the dualism of heavenly and earthly riches corresponds to eschatological dualism as almsgiving becomes a means of relativizing earthly riches and heightening a symbiosis between the rich and the poor in this world and the world to come.

Chapter 3 deals with the related and pointed issue of wealth, poverty, and salvation. Salvation, which is an eschatological reality, starts with baptism in the name of the Trinity in the present and involves a continuing journey toward spiritual and moral maturity and perfection. In light of the apparent delay of Christ's coming and the thorny problem of postbaptismal sin, how are the rich to be saved, if it is at all possible? What about the salvation of the poor? I will examine the theology and practice of "redemptive almsgiving" in the context of developing soteriology in the Alexandrian/Egyptian and the North African milieu. I will focus on how Clement of Alexandria's *Who Is a Rich Man That Is Saved?* and Origen's writings spiritualize wealth and poverty, and the rich and the poor, and how they relate almsgiving to the care of self in the soteriological continuum. One also notices seemingly contrasting movements of the radical interiorization and renunciation of wealth and poverty appearing in the similar theological milieu of several Nag Hammadi texts. Then moving to North Africa, I will engage with how Tertullian interprets the salvation of the rich against Marcion's asceticism and Cyprian's understanding of almsgiving as merit and penance that sustains the salvation of the rich in his challenging historical situation. By the time of Lactantius in the early fourth century, this notion of almsgiving would be firmly established. Redemptive almsgiving not only opens the way of salvation for the rich by deconstructing "the pious poor and the wicked rich" but also makes the poor visible and indispensable for the salvation of the rich (though in a restricted way) by confirming the spiritual imbalance between them. In this context, some pointed issues will also receive attention, such as the relation between the sufficiency of Christ's atoning sacrifice and redemptive almsgiving, repeated appeals to the self-interest of almsgivers, the

“utility of the poor,”¹² and the proper recipients of almsgiving (the Christian poor or all poor in general).

In chapter 4, I move on to the role of wealth and poverty in Christian koinonia. In light of the eschatological and soteriological significance of almsgiving in the previous chapters, this chapter deals with the practical workings of these theological developments in concrete Christian communities. I will remind readers of the reality of diverse social composition and stratification within Christian communities as the by-product of Christian growth and the challenges it poses to inner and outer workings of Christian self-definition. As is often observed, what bound Christian communities together was the great commandment of loving God and one’s neighbors. Based on the love of God, the primary obligations of Christian love and fellowship were for fellow Christians and were demonstrated in acts of mercy and justice: common chest, common meals, and hospitality. Hospitality took further shape in entertaining missionaries and strangers, burying the dead, caring for confessors, ransoming captives, and caring for the sick. I will highlight the role of women in these concrete forms of Christian koinonia as well as how these acts of mercy constituted acts of justice: merit and obligation were not to be separated in Christian ways of life.

Chapter 5 traces the development of the institutionalization of almsgiving and the Christianization of patronage. I will first revisit Greco-Roman philanthropy and patronage and then chart how the church as a formidable institution (by the mid-third century) fused Christian charity and Greco-Roman benefaction for the care of the poor and the vulnerable. At the center of this significant development were the clergy, particularly the bishop, who, acting as patron, centralized almsgiving as a means of social cohesion and social control. This is most clearly exemplified in the theology and activities of Cyprian, bishop of Carthage. In this context, I will further chart the development of church treasury (common chest), which allowed the church to collect, own, and distribute alms and services on behalf of the poor and others in need and therefore made the church the rightful recipient of alms and their sole dispenser. This transition into church ownership also accompanied ecclesiastical business and commercial dealings and will be treated in relation to the process of the larger institutionalization of the church.

In chapter 6, I turn to the theme of wealth, poverty, and Christian identity; this theme has been an undercurrent of the entire book but receives explicit and focused attention in this chapter. Christians considered their understanding and treatment of wealth and poverty (particularly the use of wealth) “to communicate a distinctive self-image of the community”¹³ that set them apart

12. This phrase comes from C. Lindberg, *Beyond Charity: Reformation Initiatives for the Poor* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993), 30.

13. P. Brown, *Poverty and Leadership in the Later Roman Empire* (Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 2002), 3.

from their surroundings. The negative association of wealth and Christian identity is clearly seen, for example, in the concerns of *Hermas* and Tertullian about wealth leading to a blurring of Christian identity and possibly even apostasy by the rich; and in Cyprian's interpretation of the cause of the Decian persecution as the attachment to earthly wealth. In this sense, Christian self-definition includes unequivocal denunciation of avarice and luxury as irrational desires and displays of wealth. The positive association of wealth and Christian identity is through almsgiving as a Christian boundary marker; it is what distinguishes Christians from pagans and "orthodox" believers from "heretics," for it is ultimately an imitation of Christ. I will conclude this chapter by exploring how the Constantinian revolution reinforced and changed this Christian self-definition in relation to wealth and poverty, which paved a way for the recapitulation of the earlier Christian teachings in a new, altered context. With overwhelming imperial favors, the church was given new privilege and new responsibility to care for (all) the poor on behalf of the emperor, and the bishop emerged as the lover of the poor par excellence. With the rise of the elitist monastic asceticism, is the church calling for a radical democratization of almsgiving or default two-tier Christianity?

Finally, chapter 7 will present my reflection on wealth, poverty, and Christian formation in the contemporary postmodern world as a way of concluding this study on early Christianity. How can our study of early Christian understandings of and practices on wealth and poverty shed light on the contemporary scene? I will engage with this question partly by relating to the works of prominent contemporary authors—sociologists, economists, ethicists, and theologians—on this theme. I will also bring in the Catholic Social Teaching and the phenomenon of "prosperity Pentecostalism" in the global South, in which poverty defines the existence of an overwhelming majority of people. Given that the majority of world Christians live in the "non-Western" Southern Hemisphere, and that many of those Christians live under the poverty line, the issue of riches and Christian faith not only is all the more poignant, complex, and pressing, but calls Christians to act—in one way or another—especially if we take the early Christian witness seriously. The coexistence of the rich and the poor always presented to early Christians an "inconvenient truth" of Christian material responsibility regardless of the "worthiness" of the poor in *collective* social consciousness and practices. Even with growing social conservatism in the subsequent centuries, the church never ceased to define its mission and identity in terms of serving the poor and caring for the needy (along with salvation), a task that the contemporary church needs to recover, reform, and reinforce. The blessed rich are the obligated rich.

1

The Social, Economic, and Theological World of Early Christianity

The social, economic, and theological world of early Christianity belongs to that of the Greco-Roman world, and in this chapter we will broadly chart the relevant issues of wealth and poverty in that context. I will first present a fundamental analysis of the Roman economy in light of recent studies and archaeological data, and in relation to Rome's sociopolitical structure and systems, which governed and controlled the basic social values and ways of life in the vast empire. This will lead to a discussion of the Greco-Roman understanding of and attitude toward wealth and poverty, mainly reflected in elite literary sources. Then I will switch gears to traditional Israelite and Jewish understandings of and teachings on wealth and poverty within a general historical framework. In the collection of the earliest Christian literatures, the New Testament, early Christians inherited and shared the Jewish teachings on the rich and the poor while selectively incorporating and responding to Greco-Roman social values and practices. I will lastly describe the Christian growth and expansion in the second and third centuries, giving particular attention to its social aspects, composition, and challenges vis-à-vis the dominant culture.

1.1. Economy and Social Structure in the Greco-Roman World

1.1.1. Roman Economy and Social Structure

Since Moses Finley's monumental and influential study, *The Ancient Economy*, it has become a truism that the ancient economy (including the Roman

economy as part of all premodern economies) was a preindustrial and underdeveloped economy, and that it was primarily based on subsistence agriculture, with the role of cities as loci of consumption rather than production.¹ According to Finley and his protégés (the so-called primitivists²), ancient, preindustrial economies were qualitatively different from modern industrial economies because they did not take the notions of market economy and economic growth for granted, nor were they aided by major technological advancement. In the Roman world, agriculture, the backbone of an agrarian economy, was mostly for subsistence, not for the market, and the vast majority of the population lived by agriculture in the country. Business and trade were neither market-driven nor market-oriented, but rather were based on scarcity and were mainly used for consumption and self-sufficiency. Landed aristocracy and craftsmen did not aim for maximizing profits in interregional markets nor for surplus-oriented agricultural or industrial specialization through investing capital (land) in trade or manufacturing. Technologically, neither mass production of goods nor their mass transportation was possible, with the exception of some high-value or specialized commodities such as grain, wine, oil, pottery, bricks, and textiles. Both small-scale production and the high costs of land transportation of goods limited large-scale manufacturing and transregional trade in general and therefore created a mainly local exchange economy. Cities usually functioned as centers not of production but of consumption, and urban artisans provided for the needs of the urban settlers. While most inhabitants of the Roman imperial society lived in the country and worked the land for subsistence, the elite lived in the cities as owners of landed properties and controlled both city and country with judicial underpinnings. Since the wealth of the elite was concentrated on land, the organization and management of resources tended to be acquisitive and conservative rather than productive. Though fractional in terms of actual numbers, these landed elites governed local, regional, and empire-wide politics and policies that allowed them to profit from taxation and other imperial policies.³ In this context (to borrow Polanyi's term) Roman economy was "embedded" in social institutions such as

1. M. I. Finley, *The Ancient Economy* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1973; updated ed., with a forward by I. Morris, 1999).

2. There have been prolonged debates among the scholars, the classicists and archaeologists, and some economists, in particular, about how to understand and assess Roman economy (and ancient economy in general). The so-called primitivists or minimalists like Finley laid out fundamental characteristics of the Roman (ancient) economy in contrast to the "modernists" or "maximalists," such as Michael Rostovtzeff, who approached Roman economy as an early form of capitalism with the early twentieth-century sociological interpretations. The former in general emphasize the qualitative difference while the latter stress only the quantitative difference between Roman (ancient), preindustrial economy and modern market economy.

3. See S. Friesen, "Injustice or God's Will? Early Christian Explanations of Poverty," in *Wealth and Poverty in Early Church and Society* (ed. S. R. Holman; Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008), 19.

kinship, marriage, and age groups, and was particularly tied to the hierarchical social and political power structure.⁴ Hence, in Roman society, “economic behaviour was governed more by the value systems of social groups than by economic rationality (thus precluding the use of modern economic theory for the analysis of the ancient economy).”⁵

This does not mean, however, that the Roman economy did not experience any growth or development. Recent studies, especially aided by archaeology and quantitative studies, have provided important correctives to Finley’s argument without necessarily trumping his overall thesis. They underscore a more advanced and complex nature of Roman economy (“advanced agrarian economy”), highlighting a boom in production and trade, technological development, and their combined positive impact on Roman economy.⁶ For example, there was “intensive” growth and large-scale investment as well as technological advance in provincial agriculture (e.g., improved olive production through advanced olive presses, water mills, manuring, terracing, and iron tools), especially in North Africa, facilitated by rising urban demand and documented by archaeological record.⁷ A wealth of papyrological and archaeological evidence in Roman Egypt reveals the sizable growth of viticulture and agriculture due to investments and technical improvements (e.g., greater use of animals in irrigation, cultivation, and transport) and a lively market-oriented economy with increased urban production and consumption not only in agriculture (wheat in particular) but also in textiles and glass.⁸ Egypt also had a heyday in trade with “the development of Alexandria as the commercial center of the eastern Mediterranean, mediating the east-west flows of goods and wealth” to and from Italy, Asia Minor, Arabia, and India with an efficient transport system.⁹ Roman mining (e.g., in Britain and Las Medulas

4. K. Polanyi, *Primitive, Archaic, and Modern Economies: Essays of Karl Polanyi* (Garden City, NY: Anchor Books, 1968), 84.

5. W. Jongman, “The Roman Economy: From Cities to Empire,” in *The Transformation of Economic Life under the Roman Empire: Proceedings of the Second Workshop of the International Network, Impact of Empire (Roman Empire, c. 200 BC–AD 476)* (ed. L. de Blois and J. Rich; Amsterdam: Gieben, 2002), 33.

6. For a helpful overview of Roman imperial economy, see parts 6, “The Early Roman Empire,” and 7, “Regional Development in the Roman Empire,” in *The Cambridge Economic History of the Greco-Roman World* (ed. W. Scheidel, I. Morris, and R. P. Saller; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 543–740.

7. See Hitchner, “‘The Advantage of Wealth and Luxury’: The Case for Economic Growth in the Roman Empire,” in *The Ancient Economy: Evidence and Models* (ed. J. G. Manning and I. Morris; Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005), 207–22; Hitchner, “Olive Production and the Roman Economy: The Case for Intensive Growth in the Roman Empire,” in *The Ancient Economy* (ed. W. Scheidel and S. von Reden; New York: Routledge, 2002), 71–83; D. J. Mattingly, “Oil for Export: A Comparison of Spanish, African and Tripolitanian Olive Oil Production,” *JRA* 1 (1988): 33–56.

8. D. W. Rathbone, “Roman Egypt,” in *Cambridge Economic History* (ed. Scheidel, Morris, and Saller), 700–709.

9. *Ibid.*, 710–11.

in Spain) underwent great technological developments too (such as the use of hydraulic techniques), and its imperial enterprise operated “on a scale and at a level of sophistication unequalled until the industrial age”—as was also the case of stone extraction and transportation in the eastern Egyptian desert.¹⁰ Furthermore, ample evidence of Roman coinage (throughout the empire) that was used in commercial transactions and interest-bearing loans, and of prices equilibrating grain markets in the early empire, points to extensive market exchanges typical of the market economy seen in other advanced agrarian economies.¹¹ This increased monetization of the economy could be witnessed in taxation and rents as well, and though it was imposed by coercive imperial policies, it increased the volume of trade in the empire in the first few centuries because producers—farmers, cultivators, artisans, etc.—were forced to produce and sell more food and products beyond subsistence and local consumption in order to pay taxes and rents in money.¹² Its cumulative impact over time suggests “a significant increase in agricultural production, an increase in the division of labour, growth in the number of artisans, . . . development of local markets and of long-distance commerce, . . . the commercialization of exchange, an elongation of the links between producers and consumers, the growth of specialist intermediaries (traders, shippers, bankers), and an unprecedented level of urbanization.”¹³ This rise in interregional trade (especially in the period 200 BCE–200 CE) is confirmed by archaeological findings from the numerous shipwrecks mostly in the western Mediterranean during this time (545 dated).¹⁴ Moreover, careful studies on the distributions of amphorae (thick ceramic containers used extensively for transporting wine, oil, and fish products) along the Mediterranean and Adriatic coasts (e.g., Gaul, Italy, Spain, North Africa, and even Britain) identify a number of regions as loci of (surplus) production (rather than consumption) for distant consumption.¹⁵

10. D. J. Mattingly and J. Salmon, “The Productive Past: Economics beyond Agriculture,” in *Economics beyond Agriculture in the Classical World* (ed. D. J. Mattingly and J. Salmon; London: Routledge, 2001), 6; G. D. B. Jones and D. Mattingly, *An Atlas of Roman Britain* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), 179–96; V. A. Maxfield, “Stone Quarrying in the Eastern Desert with Particular Reference to Mon Claudianus and Mons Porphyrites,” in *Economics beyond Agriculture* (ed. Mattingly and Salmon), 143–70; C. E. P. Adams, “Who Bore the Burden? The Organization of Stone Transport in Roman Egypt,” in *Economics beyond Agriculture* (ed. Mattingly and Salmon), 171–92.

11. See P. Temin, “A Market Economy in the Early Roman Empire,” *JRS* 91 (2001): 169–81; on the rise of money supply, cf. K. Hopkins, “Taxes and Trade in the Roman Empire [200 BC–AD 400],” *JRS* 70 (1980): 106–7.

12. Hopkins, “Taxes and Trade,” 101–25.

13. *Ibid.*, 102.

14. *Ibid.*, 105–6; A. J. Parker, “Classical Antiquity: The Maritime Dimension,” *Antiquity* 64 (1990): 335–46.

15. For example, G. Woolf, “Imperialism, Empire and the Integration of the Roman Economy,” *World Archaeology* 23 (1992): 283–93; J. Paterson, “Salvation from the Sea: Amphorae and Trade in the Roman West,” *JRS* 72 (1982): 146–57.

This in turn confirms the different scales of exchange—local, regional, and empire-wide trades—though the last category was indeed rare.¹⁶

Nonetheless, one should be careful not to overreach by seeing the Roman economy as “proto-capitalism” as a result of these findings (the so-called modernists). Given the overwhelming importance and dominance of agriculture (75–80 percent) in Roman economy, other economic activities beyond agriculture would have had a limited scope and impact overall.¹⁷ In Kevin Greene’s words, Finley’s “overall framework has remained intact: gross disparities in wealth, the importance of political power and social status, and the limitations of financial systems, are not in dispute.”¹⁸ But “most commentators are more positive about the level and nature of economic activity that took place within this framework. A lack of ‘capitalist spirit’ is not a sign of aversion to growth, but one of caution.”¹⁹ In other words, the Roman economy, with local and regional variations, experienced “significant” growth and was market-oriented from the perspective of that historical period and place; from the perspective of modern economies, however, the growth was “imperceptible” and unsustainable²⁰ since “under ancient social and political conditions the interests of the elite were well served without it.”²¹ After all, the Roman economy was “predominantly a subsistence economy” even with contextualized economic rationalism and “economics beyond agriculture” in trade and industry,²² which meant that the bulk of self-sufficient production “always stood outside the money economy” and that “on average levels of consumption were not dramatically above the minimum level of subsistence.”²³ Indeed, markets and economic behaviors were still embedded in and determined by society.²⁴

In light of this understanding of the Roman economy, what were the dominant social values and systems in the Roman empire that influenced economic behaviors and social conditions, and how were they constructed? Roman society was formally and informally divided into hierarchical distinctions and categories, and our sources (which mainly contain the perspectives of elite men) present more or less a unified vision of a conservative and stable social order. As Richard Saller notes, this aristocratic ideology of social

16. Woolf, “Imperialism,” 287.

17. Temin, “Market Economy,” 180; cf. Mattingly and Salmon, “Productive Past,” 11.

18. K. Greene, “Technological Innovation and Economic Progress in the Ancient World: M. I. Finley Re-considered,” *EHR* 53 (2000): 52.

19. *Ibid.*, 52.

20. See R. P. Saller, “Framing the Debate over Growth in the Ancient Economy,” in *The Ancient Economy* (ed. Manning and Morris), 223–38, esp. 237.

21. Mattingly and Salmon, “Productive Past,” 11.

22. Hopkins, “Taxes and Trade,” 102; “Economics beyond Agriculture” is the subtitle of Mattingly and Salmon’s volume.

23. Hopkins, “Taxes and Trade,” 104.

24. Temin, “Market Economy,” 180.

hierarchy and order was taken for granted and strongly justified by the elite: “if these distinctions [of *ordines* and *dignitas*] are confused,” writes Pliny the Younger, “nothing is more unequal than equality itself.”²⁵ Then, enormous and structural inequalities constituted the very fabric of sociopolitical stratification and the values that governed the economic behaviors of various social groups. Ekkehard and Wolfgang Stegemann single out the three criteria for stratification:

1. power through position (political office or role) and power through acquisition and transmission of property and wealth (influence);
2. privilege in legal, socioeconomic, and political realms—for example, there were two tracks in criminal law and double standards at court (differential evaluation of legal testimony) according to rank,²⁶ as well as reserved seats in theaters and banquets;
3. prestige, i.e., social esteem as a function and result of that power and privilege.²⁷

Indeed, Roman society was obsessed with maintaining social distinctions and hierarchy.

The formal orders (*ordines*) consisted of senators, equestrians (knights), regional and municipal decurions, and undifferentiated plebs (freeborn citizens). These orders formed a steep social pyramid in terms of power, privilege, and prestige, and they were based upon and reinforced the traditional aristocratic criteria of birth, wealth, esteem, and (moral) excellence.²⁸ Augustus introduced properly defined social orders between senators and equestrians not only by

25. Pliny the Younger, *Ep.* 9.5; R. P. Saller, “Status and Patronage,” in *The High Empire, AD 70–192* (vol. 11 of *The Cambridge Ancient History*; 2nd ed.; ed. A. K. Bowman, P. Garnsey, and D. Rathbone; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 818.

26. See G. Hamel, *Poverty and Charity in Roman Palestine, First Three Centuries CE* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1990), 195, no. 175: “in the matter of punishments, their severity had less to do with the crime itself than with the dignity of the person involved. This becomes particularly true in the Severan period.” Hamel also includes a quote from the late *Historia Augusta, Alexander Severus*: “Moreover, if any man turned aside from the road into someone’s private property, he was punished in the Emperor’s presence according to the character of his rank.” A. Giardina, in “The Transition to Late Antiquity,” in *Cambridge Economic History* (ed. Scheidel, Morris, and Saller), 761, notes that this judicial double standard is first attested in the Hadrian era. Finally, consider this statement by M. Peachin, “Introduction,” in *Speculum Iuris: Roman Law as a Reflection of Social and Economic Life in Antiquity* (ed. J.-J. Aubert and B. Sirks; Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2002), 13: “In short, a highly conservative legal tradition of the rich, by the rich, and essentially for the rich should not be a surprise in the Roman context.”

27. E. Stegemann and W. Stegemann, *The Jesus Movement: A Social History of Its First Century* (trans. O. C. Dean Jr.; Minneapolis: Fortress, 1999), 60–65. Cf. Saller, “Status and Patronage,” 852.

28. Cf. Saller, “Status and Patronage,” 817; Cassius Dio, *Roman History* 52.19.1–4.

prescribing minimum census requirements of one million and 400,000 sesterces respectively²⁹ but also by mapping out their respective careers, ranks, honors, and privileges as well as judicial boundaries of marriage and inheritance. Senators, the highest office holders, numbering in the hundreds, wore a toga with a broad purple stripe, and their sons were allowed to enter the senate as observers; they were given special seats in the theater and arena and were prohibited to marry persons of freed status (this applied to their children and grandchildren as well). The “second order,” equestrians, numbering in the thousands, were the nonsenatorial, landed aristocracy of Italy but evolved to fill important positions in the army and governmental offices in Rome and the provinces (such as prefects and procurators); they wore a toga with a thin purple stripe and a gold ring and were given separate seats at the spectacles as well. Both orders, though not legally prescribed, practically functioned hereditarily due to these aristocratic criteria. Their provincial and municipal counterparts were the decurions, civic elites who filled the important political and religious positions in the cities (especially of the East) with attendant privileges. They had a minimum census requirement of 100,000 sesterces (this requirement varied city to city). In the second and third centuries, the decurionate increasingly became a channel to the equestrian and even senatorial orders. Then, though not part of these three orders, a rather amorphous group of the rich, who lacked adequate pedigree but possessed considerable wealth, such as the vassal kings and their families of Rome, retainers, and wealthy (imperial) freedmen with prominent cultic, military, and administrative positions (see below on social mobility) rounded up the upper strata. Finally, “plebs” referred to the common people, the ordinary freeborn citizens, but later came to mean masses in general; they were the ones who lacked power, privilege, and prestige. These formal orders excluded citizen women and children, not to mention ordinary noncitizens, the freed, and slaves, since the *ordines* point to the essentially legal (not economic) nature of these orders—as illustrated by the fourth group of the elite, which does not nicely fit the status distinctions within the upper stratum.

These orders were further reflected in a conceptual distinction (by the elite) between *honestiores* (the honorable) and *humiliores* (the humble) that came to be *legally* formalized in the second century.³⁰ To the former belonged the imperial family, senatorial and equestrian aristocracies, provincial decurions, and the “other rich” (later it would include army veterans, certain judges, and officials as well); they were typically the landed aristocrats who lived off

29. See R. Alston, *Aspects of Roman History, AD 14–117* (London: Routledge, 1998), 216. Cf. *The Letters of St. Cyprian of Carthage* (vol. 3; trans. and anno. G. W. Clarke; ACW 46; Mahwah, NJ; Newman, 1986), 284n11: “a day-labourer’s basic wage at this period [mid-third century] could be put somewhere (very approximately) in the vicinity of 30 HS [sesterces] per month.”

30. See Saller, “Status and Patronage,” 851–52.

of the rent and labors of others, and it was they, comprising approximately 1–3 percent of the population of the empire,³¹ who constructed the prevailing value system. The *humiliores* served as a sort of “catch-all” term for the nonelite, encompassing “everybody else,” the mass (97–99 percent)³² of the population. In the eyes of the *honestiores*, they were the ones who had to earn a living for themselves and their families through their own work and labor.³³ Among them, fundamental distinctions were between free and slave, and between citizen and noncitizen. Both distinctions indicated again a legal status, not necessarily economic or social status, however; free citizens could be rich or poor, just as slaves could be rich or poor.

We should note here that in Roman society, while “a sizeable heterogeneous group of men of free birth can be distinguished from both the elite orders and the humble masses, . . . there was no ‘middle class’ in the sense of an intermediate group with independent economic resources or social standing.”³⁴ In principle, Roman society (ancient societies in general) had a dichotomous model of social stratification (cf. Stegemann, Brunt, etc.). The ancient writers consistently envisioned and divided a society in binary terms (early Christian writers were not exceptions to this conceptualization), as exemplified by the second-century orator Aelius Aristides’s social division in the opposites of the rich and the poor, the great and the humble, the esteemed and the unknown, and the noble and the ordinary.³⁵ This does not mean, however, that the elite and nonelite consisted of respective homogeneous groups. There were gradations and differentiations within the elite (the upper strata) and the nonelite (the lower strata). We have already discussed the three distinct *ordines* and the vague fourth group within the *honestiores*—the elite, which as a whole controlled 15 to 25 percent of total income (see table 1 for heuristic mapping of Roman economic scales; PS 1–3;

31. These percentages tend to shift among scholars, though not significantly. See W. Scheidel, “Stratification, Deprivation and Quality of Life,” in *Poverty in the Roman World* (ed. M. Atkins and R. Osborne; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 42, no. 6, for 1 percent; but in his latest collaborative work with S. Friesen, “The Size of the Economy and Distribution of Income in the Roman Empire,” *JRS* 99 (2009): 83, the percentage is expanded to 1.5 percent out of seventy million. Steven Friesen’s earlier poverty scale estimates the elite 1 percent of the total population and 2.8 percent of the urban population: see “Poverty in Pauline Studies: Beyond the So-Called New Consensus,” *JSNT* 26 (2004): 323–61; Friesen, “Injustice or God’s Will?” 17–36. Stegemann and Stegemann, *Jesus Movement*, 77, estimate the upper stratum (elite) to be between 1 and 5 percent of the overall population. In any case, one can clearly see a very thin upper stratum, a tip of the vast iceberg of the Roman world.

32. Scheidel and Friesen, “Size of the Economy,” 85, distinguish military families (1.5 percent) “who were maintained by the public sector share” from both the elite (1.5 percent) and nonelite people (97 percent).

33. Cf. Cicero, *De off.* 1.150–51; cf. Stegemann and Stegemann, *Jesus Movement*, 70–71.

34. P. Garnsey and R. Saller, *The Roman Empire: Economy, Society and Culture* (London: Duckworth, 1987), 116.

35. *Ad Romans* 39.

ES 1–3).³⁶ Within the *humiliores*, differentiations were a lot more fluid and even extreme, ranging from the moderately prosperous, to the relatively poor, to the absolutely poor, as their occupations varied from propertied merchants, middle-lower level civic or imperial administrators, veterans, ordinary centurions, (large or small) shop owners, artisans, traders, builders, clothing manufacturers, to tenant farmers, unskilled day laborers, and beggars. With the help of heuristic outlines of Roman economy, we may call about the top 7–12 percent of the *humiliores*, the relatively prosperous, a socioeconomic “middling” group with moderate surplus resources above subsistence (PS 4; ES 4),³⁷ which took in another 15–25 percent of the total income (see table 1).³⁸

Table 1:
Comparison of Population Percentage
in Poverty Scale (PS) of Friesen (2004)
and Economic Scale (ES) of Longenecker (2010)
in Urban Context of the Roman Empire

Scale: Friesen (Longenecker)	Categories	Include	Friesen %	Longenecker %
PS 1 (ES 1)	Imperial elites	Imperial dynasty, Roman senatorial families, a few retainers, local royalty, a few freedpersons	0.04%	ES 1–3: 3% (the same percentage for the total elite groups; no further breakdown given)
PS 2 (ES 2)	Regional or provincial elites	Equestrian families, provincial officials, some retainers, some decurial families, some freed persons, some retired military officers	1%	(See above)
PS 3 (ES 3)	Municipal elites	Most decurial families, wealthy men and women who do not hold office, some freedpersons, some retainers, some veterans, some merchants	1.76%	(See above)
PS 4 (ES 4)	Moderate surplus resources	Some merchants, some traders, some freedpersons, some artisans (especially those who employ others), and military veterans	7% (estimated)	15% (adding two particular groups: <i>apparitores</i> ^a and <i>Augustales</i> ^b)

36. Scheidel and Friesen, “Size of the Economy,” 85.

37. Ibid., 84, estimate a middling income as “2.4 times ‘bare-bones’ gross subsistence.”

38. Ibid., 84–85.

Scale: Friesen (Longenecker)	Categories	Include	Friesen %	Longenecker %
PS 5 (ES 5)	Stable near subsistence level (with reasonable hope of remaining above the minimum level to sustain life)	Many merchants and traders, regular wage earners, artisans, large shop owners, freedpersons, some farm families	22% (estimated)	27%
PS 6 (ES 6)	At subsistence level (and often below minimum level to sustain life)	Small farm families, laborers (skilled and unskilled), artisans (especially those employed by others), wage earners, most merchants and traders, small shop/tavern owners	40%	30%
PS 7 (ES 7)	Below subsistence level	Some farm families, unattached widows, orphans, beggars, disabled, unskilled day laborers, prisoners	28%	25%

a. Those “working for civic magistrates as scribes, messengers, lectors, and heralds”: see Bruce W. Longenecker, *Remember the Poor: Paul, Poverty, and the Greco-Roman World* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010), 329, for his sources.

b. Mostly freedmen who constituted the priesthood of the cult of Augustus: see Longenecker, *Remember the Poor*, 330–32, for his sources and discussion.

This leaves 85–90 percent of the population, which took in about the remaining 50 percent of all income, close to subsistence level—near, at, or below.³⁹ These relatively poor (*penētes*) are the ones who can afford to provide “at least an adequate subsistence” for themselves and their families, i.e., “an appropriate dwelling and sufficient food and clothing.”⁴⁰ They could be subdivided into those who are relatively stable near subsistence level (PS 5), comprising about 22 percent of urban population (8–19 percent in total population), and those right at subsistence level (PS 6), comprising about 40 percent of urban population (55–60 percent in total population), according to Steven Friesen’s seven-point poverty scale,⁴¹ which attempts to do justice to the complexities of the composition of the often undifferentiated mass population. The absolute

39. *Ibid.*, 84–85; see also Friesen, “Injustice or God’s Will?” 20.

40. Stegemann and Stegemann, *Jesus Movement*, 71. Cf. the similar working definition of the poor in P. Garnsey and G. Woolf, “Patronage of the Rural Poor in the Roman World,” in *Patronage in Ancient Society* (ed. A. Wallace-Hadrill; New York: Routledge, 1989), 153: “The poor are those living at or near subsistence level, whose prime concern is to obtain the minimum food, shelter and clothing necessary to sustain life, whose lives are dominated by the struggle for physical survival.”

41. See Friesen, “Injustice or God’s Will?” 20, for percentage in urban population; and Scheidel and Friesen, “Size of the Economy,” 82–84, for percentage in total population.