Wealth and Poverty in Early Church and Society
Wealth
and Poverty in
Early Church and
Society

Edited by
Susan R. Holman
CONTENTS

Foreword—Archbishop Demetrios Trakatellis 7
Preface—Susan R. Holman 9

Part One  The New Testament Period
   1. Injustice or God’s Will? Early Christian Explanations of Poverty—Steven J. Friesen 17
   2. “Be not one who stretches out hands to receive but shuts them when it comes to giving”: Envisioning Christian Charity When Both Donors and Recipients Are Poor—Denise Kimber Buell 37

Part Two  Egypt in Late Antiquity
   5. Widening the Eye of the Needle: Wealth and Poverty in the Works of Clement of Alexandria—Annewies van den Hoek 67
   6. Care for the Poor, Fear of Poverty, and Love of Money: Evagrius Ponticus on the Monk’s Economic Vulnerability—David Brakke 76
   7. Wine for Widows: Papyrological Evidence for Christian Charity in Late Antique Egypt—Adam Serfass 88
   8. Rich and Poor in Sophronius of Jerusalem’s Miracles of Saints Cyrus and John—Susan R. Holman 103

Contents

Part Three  John Chrysostom, the Cappadocians, and Friends

9. This Sweetest Passage: Matthew 25:31–46 and Assistance to the Poor in the Homilies of John Chrysostom—Rudolf Brändle  127
10. Poverty and Generosity toward the Poor in the Time of John Chrysostom—Wendy Mayer  140
12. Wealthy and Impoverished Widows in the Writings of St. John Chrysostom—Efthalia Makris Walsh  176

Part Four  Wealth, Trade, and Profit in Early Byzantium

15. Wealth, Stewardship, and Charitable “Blessings” in Early Byzantine Monasticism—Daniel Caner  221
16. Trade, Profit, and Salvation in the Late Patristic and the Byzantine Period—Angeliki E. Laiou  243

Part Five  Patristic Studies for Today

18. The Use of Patristic Socioethical Texts in Catholic Social Thought—Brian Matz  287

Abbreviations  295
Select Bibliography  297
List of Contributors  300
Subject Index  302
Modern Authors Index  311
Ancient Sources Index  316
FOR E WO R D

Wealth and Poverty in Early Church and Society


The insights offered by the prolific Fathers of the patristic age continue to reverberate with striking and contemporary relevance. Such insights are vividly revealed in the arena of wealth and poverty in the period of the early church and society. What were the Fathers of the Church witnessing with regard to the plight of the poor in those first centuries of Christendom? How did they articulate a theology that could address the obligations of the wealthy to respond to the needs of the poor in their time? What impact did they have upon the structural functioning of their environments to address such complex needs? What parallels do the creation of charitable institutions and the formation of social policies to address wealth and poverty in their age share with contemporary models of the twenty-first century in our world?

Questions such as these, and indeed many more, are dealt with in the many essays that comprise the contents of this book, Wealth and Poverty in Early Church and Society, a publication made possible by the Holy Cross Orthodox Press and the Pappas Patristic Institute of Holy Cross Greek Orthodox School of Theology. The reader of this book will no doubt be struck by the sense of immediacy that runs as an underlying theme throughout the essays. For the Fathers of the Church, the “problem” of wealth and poverty demanded immediate action. More importantly, they knew that such action required that social, political, and religious actors in society have an informed Christian understanding of the wide-ranging issues pertaining to wealth and poverty. The Fathers used all possible means available to them for an effective,
pertinent education: the production of action-oriented literature, passionate preaching based upon the Holy Scriptures, and strong recommendations generated by Christian principles for implementing successful social policies and programs to alleviate dire conditions that were facing their communities in their respective times.

Today, we stand to gain much from returning to that same sense of urgent and sensitive action that the Fathers of the Church considered necessary when facing issues of wealth and poverty. We have witnessed in the very recent past the positive and negative effects of globalization on commerce, the outsourcing of labor and its effects, and the growing dependence upon technology for robust economies in varying regions of the world. All of these issues affect wealth and poverty. More importantly, from a Christian perspective, they affect the manner by which people of wealth interact with people in conditions of poverty. Here, perhaps, the insights offered by the patristic age continue to constitute invaluable and most effective tools for dealing with the issues of wealth and poverty in our contemporary times. While form may have changed much, substance has remained constant in terms of the importance of communicating Christian understandings of wealth and poverty and of the obligations of the wealthy toward the needy. Indeed, we have much to learn from the Fathers of the Church in this domain; and I am pleased to commend the present book of significant essays, offered by the Pappas Patristic Institute, as an important step forward in coping with the burning issue of wealth and poverty in our contemporary world.

† DEMETRIOS
Archbishop of America
This collection of essays represents a cross section of recent research on the dynamics of poverty and wealth in Christianity in late antiquity. The essays range from close textual readings to broad topical overviews, to creative application and contemporary issues, and were originally presented as papers at the conference on “Wealth and Poverty in Early Christianity,” sponsored by the Stephen and Catherine Pappas Patristic Institute at Holy Cross Greek Orthodox School of Theology in Brookline, Massachusetts, in October 2005. This was the Institute's second annual conference inviting international scholars, graduate students, and interested clergy together to discuss leading topics relevant to patristic studies. In addition to several papers that could not be included here for various reasons, the conference also included a panel discussion and dialogue between His Eminence Archbishop Demetrios, primate of the Greek Orthodox Church in America, and the Reverend J. Bryan Hehir, SJ, president and treasurer of Catholic Charities in the Archdiocese of Boston, on the contemporary topic of poverty and wealth as it relates to religion and patristic studies. The range of these conversations is a measure of the Institute's commitment to foster international and ecumenical participation in the study of patristic texts and the issues they raise.

Poverty and wealth are never purely academic. Human need and affluence have been treated as moral issues across most cultures throughout history. The Christian responses may have characteristics particular to Christian views on such things as the material world, the divine body, and the incarnation of God in Christ, but, as these essays show, there was a great deal of variety in the how and why of early Christian choices to speak and act on the economic discrepancies that existed—and bothered—writers in antiquity as much as they bother many of us today.

In examining these ancient views, the authors of these essays have asked of their sources certain basic questions: How did New Testament texts and
cultural ideals influence the development of social welfare in the subsequent centuries of the “patristic period”? How might modern readers understand the economic strata of the early church, and how did these differences in the community and church distribution between wealthy and poor influence the way they viewed human need and one another? What did these texts have to say about such issues as ownership, divestment, and the moral valence of poverty, and what are some ways they differ on these issues? What were the ideological differences between voluntary and involuntary poverty? What lifestyle did patristic authors expect, recommend, or even demand of the poor and their fellow believers? How did poor monks give alms, and what did they worry about when they did? What went on between rich and poor in healing sanctuaries, where both were sick? If *philanthrōpia* to the poor was so important, how did Christians justify the bejeweled splendor of magnificent churches? How did they understand work and trade? And what might these texts offer today in dialogue with modern efforts to address global poverty and injustice? The essays offer various frameworks for informed and thoughtful discussion of these and similar questions.

The book is divided into five parts that proceed more or less chronologically. Part 1 explores several texts and issues that are particularly relevant to New Testament studies. Steven Friesen begins with a look at how four early Christian texts explained the cause of poverty. Considering in turn passages from Revelation, the Letter of Jacob (or James), Acts, and the *Shepherd of Hermas*, he examines the distinctly different ways these texts explain poverty, with different calls to action, and suggests that patristic studies be more attentive to the reconstruction of submerged perspectives in considering models for the future. Denise Buell continues this challenge, also drawing from the *Shepherd of Hermas*, as well as the *Didache* and the so-called *First Letter of Clement*. Her study examines textual hints for Christian charity within a social setting where both donors and recipients were poor, and challenges the binary rhetoric of donor/recipient by interpreting these texts in light of the fact that most early Christians lived on the economic margins. Görgé Hasselhoff homes in on a single passage—James 2:2–7—and looks “back” at the scarce patristic exegesis of this passage, especially considering those sources that might have been available to Bede in the seventh-century West. His conclusions suggest a curious marginalization of this passage that may hint at a long-standing discomfort concerning its comments on rich and poor. Concluding the first section, Edward Moore looks at the gnostic *Hymn of the Pearl* as it too evokes the passage in James. The *Hymn*, Moore argues, understands the promise of wealth as a call to transcendence, and poverty as a lack of a transformative vision of God.

Part 2 brings the reader to four different case studies from Egypt in late antiquity: wealthy lay patrons, monks, church-supported widows, and the sick. Annewies van den Hoek offers a close reading of one of the most frequently
Preface

cited patristic texts on wealth and poverty: Clement of Alexandria’s treatise *Quis dives salvetur?*, one of the earliest exegetical studies on the story of the rich young ruler in Mark 10. Comparing Clement’s treatise with later texts from Augustine and Paulinus of Nola, van den Hoek suggests striking theological similarities among these authors’ defense of an intellectual detachment from wealth, a detachment that reflects a very cautious attitude toward renunciation. David Brakke unveils the anxieties about money, charity, and economic activity that percolate through Evagrius’s advice to those more seemingly intrepid about renunciation: his fellow hermit-monks in the Egyptian desert. In their battle against that crafty demon, Love of Money, monks ought to seek economic sufficiency combined with charity, Evagrius says, rather than fiscal security in this life. While Evagrius’s advice suggests that monks came from a range of social classes, his comments on the lower-class monks suggest that Evagrius, like Clement, wrote for upper-class readers. Adam Serfass pushes at the curtain of this literary bias in his essay, a detailed look at Egyptian papyri that provide documentary evidence for how churches sought to meet the everyday needs of the poor, testaments to the cautious redistribution of wealth in several churches, at least as it concerned the control and administration of wine (and clothing) donations for church-supported widows. Finally, I offer a few observations on the rhetoric of rich and poor in a text about an incubation-healing shrine near Alexandria as it operated in the late sixth and early seventh centuries, particularly as views on wealth and poverty may have related to monastic social ideals about humility and moral justice.

John Chrysostom and the fourth-century Cappadocians, particularly Basil of Caesarea, are perhaps the best-known Greek examples of patristic beneficence. Part 3 offers five studies on themes from this period in Antioch and Asia Minor. Rudolf Brändle builds on his 1979 landmark study of John Chrysostom’s use of Matt. 25:31–46 with several exciting new insights. Believing that all wealth was rooted in injustice, Chrysostom invited his audience to take on the self-ordained priestly dignity that accompanies the role of stewards for the poor. Arguing that the Matthew text is the integrative force behind the central thought in Chrysostom’s theology, Brändle’s theological study suggests that John Chrysostom offers a new approach to soteriology that deserves further study. Wendy Mayer then teases out the relationship, in John’s time, between private asceticism, wealth, and economic poverty. Her tightly nuanced essay suggests that economic and voluntary poverty were valued differently, and that these differences lie at the heart of understanding the shifting roles of wealth and poverty in society from the fourth century onward. She introduces the idea that beggars who “performed” for their alms were granted higher moral value, perhaps because such performance was regarded as a form of work, thus contributing to rather than threatening the social balance of the community. In the next essay, Francine Cardman builds...
on this theme of theater with a study of Chrysostom's sermons on Lazarus and the rich man, particularly focusing on the irony of John's use of theater. Even as he railed against the circus and the shows, John used theatrical devices as a deliberate preaching rhetoric. As we read these texts, Cardman suggests, we too must learn how to see the story play out in our own rhetoric and practice. Efthalia Makris Walsh then returns the reader's gaze to widows, with a short summary of Chrysostom's exegesis of Old and New Testament widows and its application to the theology about, and practical issues concerning, the care of widows in his day. Lest we judge too harshly John's use of Hellenistic culture to make his point, Demetrios Constantelos concludes the section with a reminder of how classical Greek texts influenced the development of Christian rhetoric about philanthropy in this period, particularly in the example of Basil of Caesarea.

Part 4 looks at several issues that characterized the tension between wealth and poverty in late antiquity and the early Byzantine period: church finery, monastic gift exchange, and the question of trade, profit, and salvation. Edward Siecienski begins with a turn of the coin, to discuss the dazzling liturgical splendor that characterized that space within which late antique ascetic preachers denounced ostentation and wealth. Their failure to denounce church finery universally and consistently may suggest in part the aesthetic pressures they faced from theological competitors, but it more likely relates also to patristic views of spiritual beauty. Gold and silver came to represent heaven's majesty, but such material substances remained relative in contrast with the souls that were the true body of the church. Daniel Caner asks how early Byzantine monks conceptualized their surplus resources, when they had any. Focusing on eulogia, or “blessings,” this essay suggests a monastic economy of charitable leftovers that might be compared with Jewish gleanings and that existed within an ascetic environment that was often characterized by extreme scarcity, where leftovers were a blessing indeed. Angeliki Laiou concludes part 4 with an examination of how hagiographical texts from the late patristic and Byzantine periods discuss trade and profit. Her examples suggest that merchants were not vilified, and that neither profit nor trade was considered illegitimate for Christians. The church may have sought to turn economic behavior upside down through its “miraculous economy,” but, as these texts show, both the saints and professional merchants were positive forces in the manner in which “charity” used the marketplace.

The two chapters in Part 5 turn to the modern problems of poverty to suggest ways that patristic texts might contribute to modern religious and policy dialogue. Timothy Patitsas offers an unusual, provocative study of modern international responses to need that have (or have not) worked, and what the Christian tradition might offer in building the future. Patitsas considers the work of economist Jane Jacobs as well as leading models for global microlending initiatives, and offers these as conceptual stimuli for
envisioning how Basil of Caesarea’s fourth-century philanthropic program might be instructive in contemporary development issues. Finally, Brian Matz concludes the volume with his description of a very different project, one emerging from the international academy, that seeks to develop and apply a systematic approach to patristic socioethical texts that directly relate to modern Catholic Social Thought, particularly in modern Europe. These two essays hint at the creative potential for patristic studies in the coming decades. They suggest the immediate relevance of such studies as those in this volume to a broad range of readers, both those working in an academic setting as well as those engaged in social justice and social action that serves the world through the ecclesia.

As volume editor and on behalf of the Institute, I am delighted to acknowledge those who made possible both the conference and this book. The Reverend Dr. Emmanuel Clapsis, then dean of Holy Cross Greek Orthodox School of Theology, brought the vision and gift of the late Stephen and Catherine Pappas for a patristic institute to a reality in 2003, inviting eminent scholars in patristic studies to draft the charter and to establish its founding board, with the support of His Eminence Archbishop Demetrios Trakatellis and the Reverend Nicholas Triantafilou, president of Holy Cross. The Reverend Dr. Thomas Fitzgerald, the present dean, carries the vision forward with his continuing support. The Reverend Dr. Robert J. Daly, SJ, founding chairman of the Institute’s board, has, with inspiring clarity, guided the practical concerns of the Institute to fulfill its goals by encouraging young scholars in patristic studies through conferences, research opportunities, and publications. My own role would have been far more onerous without the Institute’s board as conversation partners, including Drs. François Bovon, Demetrios Katos, James Skedros, and Aristotle Papanikolaou. And the book would not exist in its present form without the generous administrative and collaborative gifts of Dr. Bruce Beck, the institute’s director and series editor. Finally, we thank Dr. James Ernest, editor at Baker Academic and a fellow patristic scholar, who made it possible to publish the series with Baker in collaboration with Holy Cross Greek Orthodox Press.

Susan R. Holman