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BLESSED ARE THE POOR (IN SPIRIT): WEALTH AND POVERTY  
IN THE WRITINGS OF THE GREEK CHRISTIAN FATHERS  
OF THE SECOND CENTURY

by

Jacob D. Hayden

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree

of

MASTER OF ARTS

in

Ancient Languages and Cultures

Approved:

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Logan, Utah

2021

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## ABSTRACT

Blessed Are the Poor (in Spirit): Wealthy and Poverty  
in the Writings of the Greek Christian Fathers  
of the Second Century

by

Jacob D. Hayden, Master of Arts

Utah State University, 2021

Major Professor: Dr. Mark Damen  
Department: History

This paper examines how Greek Christian authors engaged with the topics of poverty and wealth during the second and third centuries CE - a period of major transition for the Christian movement. Beginning with the Antilegomena of the Greek New Testament (c. 90 - 120), this study traces these themes through the works of the Apostolic Fathers, including Clement of Rome (c. 35 - 99), Ignatius of Antioch (c. 34 - 108), and Polycarp of Smyrna (c. 69 - 155). It then addresses to the apologetic authors Justin Martyr (c. 100 - 165) and Irenaeus (c. 130 - 202). In the works of all these authors, “the poor” were considered to be a theologically privileged class. However, this status came to be questioned by Clement of Alexandria (c. 150 - 215), whose work *Quis Dives Salvetur* is demonstrated to have fundamentally deviated from the traditional understanding of wealth and poverty. Clement eschewed the notion of an inherently “blessed” class of the poor in order to make Christian doctrine welcoming to more

wealthy individuals. Clement's work altered part of the character of Christian theology, but in doing so, he helped the movement expand throughout the Roman Empire.

(81 pages)

## PUBLIC ABSTRACT

Blessed Are the Poor (in Spirit): Wealthy and Poverty  
in the Writings of the Greek Christian Fathers  
of the Second Century

Jacob D. Hayden, Master of Arts

This paper examines how Greek Christian authors engaged with the topics of poverty and wealth during the second and third centuries CE - a period of major transition for the Christian Church. Beginning with the latest documents in the Greek New Testament (c. 90 - 120), this study traces these themes through the works of the Apostolic Fathers, including Clement of Rome (c. 35 - 99), Ignatius of Antioch (c. 34 - 108), and Polycarp of Smyrna (c. 69 - 155). It then addresses to the apologetic authors Justin Martyr (c. 100 - 165) and Irenaeus (c. 130 - 202). In the works of all these authors, “the poor” were considered to be a privileged class in the eyes of God. However, this status came to be questioned by Clement of Alexandria (c. 150 - 215), whose work *The Rich Man’s Salvation* is demonstrated to have fundamentally deviated from the traditional understanding of wealth and poverty. Clement eschewed the notion of an inherently “blessed” class of the poor in order to make Christian doctrine welcoming to more wealthy individuals. Clement’s work altered part of the character of Christian theology, but in doing so, he helped the movement expand throughout the Roman Empire.

As he was setting out on a journey, a man ran up and knelt before him, and asked him, “Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?” Jesus said to him, “Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone. You know the commandments: ‘You shall not murder; You shall not commit adultery; You shall not steal; You shall not bear false witness; You shall not defraud; Honor your father and mother.’” He said to him, “Teacher, I have kept all these since my youth.” Jesus, looking at him, loved him and said, “You lack one thing; go, sell what you own, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me.” When he heard this, he was shocked and went away grieving, for he had many possessions.

Then Jesus looked around and said to his disciples, “How hard it will be for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God!” And the disciples were perplexed at these words. But Jesus said to them again, “Children, how hard it is to enter the kingdom of God! It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God.” They were greatly astounded and said to one another, “Then who can be saved?” Jesus looked at them and said, “For mortals it is impossible, but not for God; for God all things are possible.”

Mark 10:17-31 (NRSV)

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## Chapter I: Introduction & Historiography

Concerning the issues of wealth and poverty, Jesus of Nazareth left such radically clear instructions that some later Christians had to assume that they were not, in fact, clear. Was the basic meaning of the story of Jesus and the Rich Man - that one should give up all his wealth and give it to the poor - actually the position of God?<sup>1</sup> At the most elementary level, Jesus is saying it is basically impossible for a rich person to go to heaven. There does not seem to be much room for debate here: it is bad to be rich. But within mere decades, two distinct traditions had developed to explain what the words of Jesus of Nazareth *really* meant: one insisted that Jesus meant exactly what he said, while the other argued that something deeper had to be at play.

It is an overstatement to say that the Gospel of Luke and the Gospel of Matthew each belong exclusively to these two traditions: nevertheless, their different versions of the beatitudes do demonstrate the division aptly. In Luke's version, taken at its simplest meaning, Jesus seems to be indeed talking about those who literally do not have wealth or resources:

Then he looked up at his disciples and said:

“Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God.

“Blessed are you who are hungry now, for you will be filled.

“Blessed are you who weep now, for you will laugh.

“Blessed are you when people hate you, and when they exclude you, revile you, and defame you on account of the Son of Man. Rejoice in that day and leap for joy, for surely your reward is great in heaven; for that is what their ancestors did to the prophets.

“But woe to you who are rich, for you have received your consolation.

“Woe to you who are full now, for you will be hungry.

“Woe to you who are laughing now, for you will mourn and weep.

“Woe to you when all speak well of you, for that is what their ancestors did to the false prophets.”<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Mark 10:17-31

<sup>2</sup> Luke 6:20-26 (NRSV)

But according to Matthew, what is really at issue is a poverty of the spirit and a desire for righteousness:

Then he began to speak, and taught them, saying:  
 “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.  
 “Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.  
 “Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.  
 “Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.  
 “Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy.  
 “Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.  
 “Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.  
 “Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.  
 “Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.”<sup>3</sup>

While there is significant debate, many scholars of the historical Jesus argue that Jesus was a prophet who preached of a coming apocalypse, during which God would intervene in human history to right the manifold wrongs facing the Jewish people.<sup>4</sup> In this context, with God about to enter the world at any moment and turn society on its head, Jesus’ command to forsake worldly wealth and devote oneself to helping the poor made perfect sense.<sup>5</sup>

As Christianity developed after his death, however, this view began to change quickly. As has been seen, there was apparent disagreement before the end of the first century, when Matthew and Luke were written. Coming out of this period, the developing Christian movement received two different, though not mutually exclusive, ways of

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<sup>3</sup> Matthew 5:3-12 (NRSV)

<sup>4</sup> E.g. Bart D. Erhman, *Jesus: Apocalyptic Prophet of the New Millennium* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), x, 141 - 143.

<sup>5</sup> Erhman, *Jesus*, 149.

understanding “poverty,” one of which emphasized actual poverty and physical need, while the other used poverty as a metaphor for spiritual need. The latest writings of the New Testament, as well as the documents of the so-called “Apostolic Fathers” document this, as do the writings of the earliest Christian apologists, Justin Martyr and Irenaeus. But the second view came to be championed more and more throughout the later part of the second century, beginning with Clement of Alexandria.

Alexandria at the turn of the third century was a diverse metropolis, second only to Rome in its significance to the Empire. Its population at the time was possibly as large as half a million inhabitants.<sup>6</sup> Massive grain trade went through Alexandria, which served as the main port of the breadbasket which was Roman Egypt. Coupled with this, the city was the center of important industries, producing textiles, glasswares, papyrus, and other goods which were traded throughout the Roman world. Alexandria was also an important centre for the trade in imperial luxuries.<sup>7</sup>

The city was home to a religiously and ethnically diverse population. Originally founded by Greeks, its population mainly spoke Koine Greek and not the native Demotic Egyptian of local natives. The citizens of Alexandria enjoyed unique privileges, like lower taxes, and during the Roman period, the Romans did not count them as “Egyptian,” suggesting that the majority of the population was of Greek and not of Egyptian extraction. But the city was not homogenous, and it had a sizable Jewish community.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> John E. L. Oulton and Henry Chadwick, *Alexandrian Christianity* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1954), 15. See also Christopher Haas, *Alexandria in Late Antiquity: Topography and Social Conflict* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997), 45 - 46. Haas offers a more conservative estimate of 200,000 inhabitants.

<sup>7</sup> *Brill's New Pauly Encyclopaedia of the Ancient World*, vol. 1, eds. Hubert Cancik, Helmuth Schneider, Christine F. Salazar, and David E. Orton (Leiden: Brill, 2002), 497.

<sup>8</sup> Haas, *Alexandria in Late Antiquity*, 49.

It is likely the Christian community in Alexandria grew quickly out of this large Jewish sector and soon included non-Jews as well. Overtime, this community became very influential, eventually being listed as one of the five patriarchates of the pentarchy, once it was established in the sixth century.

As the population of Alexandria included a significant number of wealthier and more educated Jews and Greeks, the Church in the city was forced to confront, early on, issues concerning wealth, especially after rich, educated individuals began to join the movement in large numbers. Earlier Christian documents which presented a negative view of wealth posed a serious stumbling block to the conversion of the more prosperous segments of the population.

Enter Clement of Alexandria, a Greek-speaking Christian who became a significant figure in the church of Alexandria in the years before the persecutions of Alexandrian Christians in 202 CE, at which point Clement fled the city. Clement preached to the church in Alexandria, and tradition holds that he was the head of a Catechistic School which instructed students on Christian topics. Clement viewed the received interpretation of certain earlier Christian passages concerning wealth and poverty as a pastoral problem for wealthy Christians and potential converts. To address this concern, Clement wrote a short document called "Who Is the Rich Man Who May Be Saved?" This work upended much of previous Christian understandings about wealth and made a significant change in the course of Christian doctrine. In what is the first extant, extended commentary on the text of Mark 10:17-31, Clement argues that the literal meaning of Jesus' words is simply not true, and they conceal a spiritual connotation of much greater worth. He writes:

Why, if this were so [that poverty is righteous], those men who have nothing at all, but are destitute and beg for their daily bread, who lie along the roads in abject poverty, would, though “ignorant” of God and “God’s righteousness,” be most blessed and beloved of God and the only possessors of eternal life, by the sole fact of their being utterly without ways and means of livelihood and in want of the smallest necessities...

It is possible for a man, after having unburdened himself of his property, to be nonetheless continually absorbed and occupied in the desire and longing for it. He has given up the use of wealth, but now being in difficulties and at the same time yearning after what he threw away, he endures a double annoyance, the absence of means of support and the presence of regret. For when a man lacks the necessities of life he cannot possibly fail to be broken in spirit and to neglect the higher things, as he strives to procure these necessities by any means and from any source...

We must not then fling away the riches that are of benefit to our neighbors as well as ourselves. For they are called possessions because they are things possessed, and wealth because they are to be welcomed and because they have been prepared by God for the welfare of men. Indeed, they lie at hand and are put at our disposal as a sort of material and as instruments to be well used by those who know.<sup>9</sup>

As can be seen, Clement’s interpretation flips the literal meaning on its head. This makes the Gospel argue the opposite point to what the text says on the surface, which for all intents and purposes is that the poor are seen as deserving and the rich are admonished to give their wealth to them. In Clement’s version, however, there is a vague disdain for the *ptochoi*, the absolutely poor, and the rich are warned not to give away all their money, lest they become destitute themselves.

Clement’s work marks a significant shift in Christian history. Whereas before Clement, there were at least two competing views of wealth and poverty within the tradition, after Clement one position, that wealth is not an obstruction to salvation, became overwhelmingly dominant. The prevalence of the interpretation championed by Clement, and his “successor” Origen, changed the character of Christianity and at the same time rejected important parts of the tradition’s past, opening up a different potential

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<sup>9</sup> Clement of Alexandria, *Quis Dives Salvetur*, 11 - 14. Translated by G.W. Butterworth (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1960), adapted.

for the future. While this never became the sole view held by every subsequent Christian author, Clement's reinterpretation guided the church in a new direction. This ensured a place for wealthy Romans within the church, and thus in turn, a place for Christians in the Roman world of the day. Without this, it is hard to imagine how the new religion would have survived.

### **Historiography:**

#### **I. Jesus and the Apostolic Age**

Recent work on the historical Jesus sheds critical light on the historiography of this topic. In recent years, scholars researching this field have produced a variety of arguments about the character and focus of Jesus of Nazareth and the early Jesus movement. At the same time, most scholars of the historical Jesus could accept that the earliest Jesus movement was an apocalyptic sect which was resistant to Roman rule over Judaea and argued in favor of those who were able to care for the poor.

Among scholars who are particularly well known in the field today is Bart D. Ehrman, a well-respected professor of religious studies at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, and a prolific writer who presents an updated version of Albert Schweitzer's general theory, that Jesus of Nazareth was a Jewish prophet of the apocalypse. Ehrman endorses the view that Jesus preached an "imminent eschaton," meaning that God would, in the immediate future, "...perform a mighty act of destruction and salvation for his people."<sup>10</sup> Ehrman's Jesus stands against Rome, but Ehrman does

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<sup>10</sup> Bart Ehrman, *Jesus: Apocalyptic Prophet of the New Millennium* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 18.

not argue that Jesus called for violence against Rome, as such action would be unnecessary given the apocalyptic expectations of the movement he began.<sup>11</sup>

Conversely, John Dominic Crossan, who has written many books on the historical Jesus, including *Jesus: A Revolutionary Biography*, presents the historical Jesus as adamantly opposed to the Roman Empire. His understanding, however, is nuanced, arguing not that Jesus intended to start a political revolution or that he expected God to intervene in history and end the oppression of the Jewish people, rather Jesus was a “peasant Jewish Cynic” and wise man who advocated for radical social change.<sup>12</sup> In this version, Jesus is a wandering wise man who performs free healings and advocates for communal eating. In doing this, he is arguing for a social revolution to uplift the lower classes and to create an egalitarian society. Unlike Ehrman, Crossan argues that Jesus taught about a “participatory eschatology,” which meant that God had called humanity to take an active role in bringing about an egalitarian and peaceful “Kingdom of God” on earth, one of the most controversial of Crossan’s points.

One more study of the historical Jesus deserves mention in this context, that of the late William R. Herzog II. In *Parables of Subversive Speech: Jesus as Pedagogue of the Oppressed*, Herzog lays out a unique theory that Jesus was a social teacher who argued for the subversion of class hierarchy. Herzog’s work is informed by Marxism and the views of Liberation Theology, and thus for Herzog, class plays a much stronger role in early Christian history than for others. He also rejects Ehrman’s argument that Jesus is

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<sup>11</sup> Ehrman, *Jesus*, 243.

<sup>12</sup> J. D. Crossan, *Jesus: A Revolutionary Biography* (New York: HarperOne, 1994), 222.

concerned with an eschaton, stating instead that Jesus' discussion of the "Kingdom of God" is an ironic commentary on peasant life in the Roman Empire.<sup>13</sup> Herzog's argument resembles Crossan's except that he does not label Jesus a "cynic philosopher" the way Crossan does.

It can thus be seen that, while there are numerous important differences among scholars, several key points are shared. First, Jesus of Nazareth condemned the Roman rule of Judaea. Second, he sided with the poor against the wealthy. Finally, Jesus expected the world order in his day to be subverted, either by divine intervention, human action, or both (but probably in a non-violent fashion).

With this in mind, many scholars have taken the first step in applying this research to answer the broader questions of Christian origins. In his new work, *The Forgotten Creed: Christianity's Original Struggle against Bigotry, Slavery, and Sexism*, Stephen J. Patterson argues that the egalitarian message of the historical Jesus was adopted by the earliest form of the Jesus movement, and this can be seen in the figure of the historical Paul. For Patterson, the early message of Christianity was one of radical equality and peace, in line with the message of the historical Jesus.

## II. Christianity after the Apostles

The fields of the historical Jesus and the historical Paul focus on the earliest period of Christianity, only about the first thirty years of the movement. In order, then, to understand the further development of Christianity, it is necessary to consider a broader

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<sup>13</sup> William R. Herzog II, *Parables as Subversive Speech: Jesus as Pedagogue of the Oppressed* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1994), 97.



time period. Here, two important works on early Christianity deserve mention. The first is Ramsay MacMullen's often-cited monograph *Christianizing the Roman Empire (A.D. 100 - 400)*.<sup>14</sup> MacMullen examines the growth of Christianity through the lens of "conversion," which he sees as central to the history of Christianity, and rightly so. Among his many points, MacMullen argues that non-religious reasons such as money drove the expansion of Christianity. For example, after Constantine the Great, Christianity became wealthy under imperial patronage, and this gave Christian churches an edge against pagan temples which began to struggle financially.<sup>15</sup>

MacMullen's work, and its focus on the gradual conversion of the Roman Empire, is updated and expanded in another of Bart Ehrman's works, *The Triumph of Christianity*.<sup>16</sup> Unlike MacMullen, Ehrman expands the time-frame back and puts more focus on Paul of Tarsus. He also expands the discussion with an upfront historiography of the reasons for Christian expansion. However, he does not spend much time on the economic history of the period, focusing more on the ideas of the period, including more traditionally "religious" reasons for conversion which MacMullen leaves out. This focus, as it turns out, is fairly common for the majority of works about Christian history.

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<sup>14</sup> Ramsay MacMullen, *Christianizing the Roman Empire (A.D. 100 - 400)* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1984).

<sup>15</sup> MacMullen, *Christianizing*, 53.

<sup>16</sup> Bart D. Ehrman, *The Triumph of Christianity: How a Forbidden Religion Swept the World* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2018).

### III. Intellectual History of Roman Christianity

Beyond this general background discussion, a variety of works address the intellectual history of Christianity. This is the primary field into which the current project fits. The major work of Christian intellectual history is Jaroslav Pelikan's five-volume *The Christian Tradition: A History of the Development of Doctrine*. The first volume, *The Emergence of the Catholic Tradition (100 - 600)* is an authoritative study of early patristics up through the ecumenical councils, discussing in detail the evolution of doctrine and its different forms among the various Church Fathers. Pelikan discusses the Greco-Roman and Jewish contexts of Christianity in brief, which helps tie the context of Christianity to its evolution. The book is organized according to major topics, which are presented in a rough chronological order. Given the wealth of sources analyzed and its stated purpose, it is hard to overestimate the worth of this work.

That said, the style is dense and often uninviting. Not many will read with pleasure even the first volume cover to cover. To fill the void, then, of having an accessible, one-volume account of early Christian intellectual history, Robert Doran wrote *Birth of a Worldview: Early Christianity in Its Jewish and Pagan Context*. Doran's work is in many ways an abridgement and an update of the first volume of Pelikan's work. Rejecting the idea that the growth of the Church was a miraculous process, often held by members of the Church, Doran instead ties Christianity directly to its social context.<sup>17</sup> While shorter than Pelikan's work, Doran's text covers the same broad topics as Pelikan does.

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<sup>17</sup> Robert Doran, *Birth of a Worldview* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 1999), 2.

In contrast to this, Geza Vermes provides a narrower intellectual history in *Christian Beginnings: From Nazareth to Nicaea*. Vermes focuses on the elevation of the status of Jesus from the historical Jesus up through the ecumenical councils of the fourth century. Vermes does this effectively by presenting several close readings of key texts and authors to demonstrate the evolution of this particular doctrine. Tied to the works of Ehrman, Crossan, and Vermes himself, *Christian Beginnings* is founded on research into the historical Jesus. The book begins with a discussion of Jesus' life and teachings in order to point out the aspects of "eschatological action" in Jesus' teachings and how those features were eventually lost in the wider church.<sup>18</sup> Vermes' goal is to demonstrate how important ideas which can be traced back to the historical Jesus and the early Jesus movement were de-emphasized in later centuries, in particular, eschatology which is tied to concern for the materially destitute.

Many of the above monographs are focused on tracing doctrinal changes over time, which represents one way of doing patristic studies. Another important kind of monograph focuses on a single author and examines either their entire corpus or a single major work. Since this paper is focused on the context and influence of Clement of Alexandria and one essay of his in particular, it is worth discussing at least one recent work centering on Clement alone. Synthesizing and expounding upon various prior studies of Clement, Eric Osborn lays out three main ways in which intellectual historians have dealt with Clement: first, a retrospective method which examines how influential Clement was on later church doctrine; second, a doxographical method which examines

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<sup>18</sup> Geza Vermes, *Christian Beginnings: From Nazareth to Nicaea* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2012), 58.

the verbal similarities between Clement and his contemporaries; and finally, a very fruitful analytical method, which seeks to understand the problems that Clement saw and how he addressed them.<sup>19</sup> Championing the last, Osborn applies the analytical method to Clement's major works, the so-called *Trilogy* (*Protrepticus*, *Paidagogus*, and *Stromateis*), and seeks to understand what problems Clement sees for the Church and what he proposes as solutions. In doing so, Osborn provides an extensive examination of Clement's major philosophical and theological points. He also provides commentary on the relationship between Clement and earlier authors such as Justin and Irenaeus.<sup>20</sup>

#### IV. Economic and Social History

Intellectual histories of Christianity, such as the ones above, generally have the same problem, though some of the more recent works try to avoid this error. Put simply, they are removed from the social and economic history of the period. While there is always some mention of persecution and martyrdom, intellectual histories have tended to ignore larger themes of lived Roman experience. Although this is somewhat inevitable given the need to produce concise and focused arguments, the fact that the intellectual development of Christianity had important social and economic impacts must not be ignored. It is obvious that a study of the economic and class history of Christianity must be based on the broader economic history of the Roman Empire.

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<sup>19</sup> Eric Osborn, *Clement of Alexandria* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), xii.

<sup>20</sup> See Osborn, *Clement*, 282 – 292.

The first major monograph in this field was Michael Ivanovich Rostovtzeff's *The Social and Economic History of the Roman Empire*.<sup>21</sup> This work is simultaneously regarded as a classic of great importance and a dated and largely discredited piece of scholarship. Rostovtzeff's work introduced a Marxist understanding of history into classical scholarship, an important step in understanding the lower classes of Rome. While he was obviously influential, Rostovtzeff's actual thesis has largely been rejected by the academy. For instance, Rostovtzeff uses modern phrases and social classifications without qualification to describe the classes and peoples of the ancient world. Many scholars have objected to this, arguing that it diminishes the viability of his argument.

Henry C. Boren's work, *Roman Society*, reflects a traditional stream of scholarship around the Roman Empire.<sup>22</sup> Taking the view that Roman history is the most important period of world history, and that studying Roman social structures is essential in understanding the general scope of western history, Boren seeks to incorporate the work of Rostovtzeff and the Roman economic and social historians who followed him into a more traditional narrative of political history.<sup>23</sup> Unlike Rostovtzeff, Boren lays out this history in Roman terms, using Latin words for the classes, not anachronistic Marxist nomenclature. The result of Boren's efforts have proven useful in providing a multi-faceted narrative of political, economic, and social change, marred mainly by an outdated, overly-grand vision of Roman importance.

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<sup>21</sup> Michael Ivanovitch Rostovtzeff, *The Social and Economic History of the Roman Empire*, 2nd ed., rev. P. M. Fraser, 2 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1957).

<sup>22</sup> Henry C. Boren, *Roman Society: A Social, Economic, and Cultural History* (Lexington, MA: D. C. Heath and Company, 1977).

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, i.

*The Cambridge Economic History of the Greco-Roman World* is a more recent survey of the economic background of the broader classical world.<sup>24</sup> This work presents a more updated “state-of- the-field” approach, laying out several important themes and areas of modern scholarship, namely, how goods were produced in Rome, how they were distributed across geographical and class boundaries, the ways consumption of goods differed among the classes, and the question of economic growth during the Principate and the Empire proper. This book’s extensive bibliography ties it back to older works such as Rostovtzeff’s, and also to the broader conversation ongoing today.

In large part, the economic history of Christianity is tied to the social history of the movement. Much of current scholarship in the socio-economic histories of Christianity is based on the groundbreaking and well-known scholarship of the sociologist Rodney Stark and his work *The Rise of Christianity: A Sociologist Reconsiders History*. In this book, Stark lays out a view of Christian growth centered around the fact that Christianity grew by 40% every decade after the death of Jesus of Nazareth up through the reign of Constantine. This figure roughly conforms with the historical evidence and the growth of later religious groups such as the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints which has expanded at a similar rate since its foundation in the 1830s.<sup>25</sup> Using the growth of other New Religious Movements as a guide, and again looking at the extant textual evidence, Stark argues that, while the earliest form of the Jesus movement was popular among the lower classes, the Christian Church would come

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<sup>24</sup> Walter Scheidel, Ian Morris, and Richard P. Saller, eds, *The Cambridge Economic History of the Greco-Roman World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

<sup>25</sup> Rodney Stark, *The Rise of Christianity: A Sociologist Reconsiders History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996), 7.

to see growth during the second and third centuries predominantly from among middle- and upper-class Romans in urban centers throughout the empire, a position many church historians accept.<sup>26</sup> Stark's analytical and statistical evidence provides a firm footing for examining the social and economic history of the period in terms more familiar to economic historians.

Since the release of *The Rise of Christianity*, Rodney Stark has been a prolific author in early Christian history. In 2011, he released *The Triumph of Christianity* which expands on much of his previous work. It looks both backwards and forwards in time, and attempts to answer more broadly a seminal question of Christianity: how did the expansion of the Church take place?<sup>27</sup> This work resembles more traditional efforts like that of Erhman and MacMullen who was a major influence on Stark. *The Rise of Christianity*, however, is more focused on the sociology of religion than on intellectual history.

Another well-known book on this subject is Ekkehard W. Stegemann and Wolfgang Stegemann's massive tome, *The Jesus Movement: A Social History of Its First Century*. Whereas Rodney Stark's work focuses on the long history of Christianity up through to the age of Constantine, the Stegemanns' work is focused entirely on the first century of the Common Era, keeping its focus on Roman Palestine and major Christian urban centers. The authors argue that the world in which early Christianity developed should be understood as a collection of "advanced agrarian societies," and that there was

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<sup>26</sup> Stark, *Rise of Christianity*, 45.

<sup>27</sup> Rodney Stark, *The Triumph of Christianity: How the Jesus Movement Became the World's Largest Religion* (New York: HarperOne, 2011).

an important divide between “Christians” in Roman Palestine and those in urban centers throughout the Empire.<sup>28</sup> Utterly removed from traditional, intellectual history, this work presents a social and economic history in the most traditional sense. Going further than MacMullen or Stark, Stegemann and Stegemann dive into this early period using the traditional methods of sociology and economics, seeking not so much to argue a specific point about Christian history, but to lay out what can be said definitively about the social context of Christianity’s rise.

#### V. Towards a Blended History – Economics and Theology

Several more recent works have sought to bridge the divide between the conservative histories and those which are more non-traditional. Robert B. Ekelund Jr. and Robert D. Tollison present an “economic” history that uses the lens of modern economic theory to answer many of the same questions as intellectual histories. Building off the works of MacMullen and Stark, Ekelund and Tollison argue that the evolution of western Roman Christianity is the story of the development of a religious monopoly, which, having established itself and defeated all of its major competitors in a religious marketplace, gained significant monetary and political power.<sup>29</sup>

Michele Renee Salzman’s *The Making of a Christian Aristocracy* is a narrative of conversion which focuses exclusively on the Roman aristocracy.<sup>30</sup> This interesting work

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<sup>28</sup> Ekkehard W. Stegemann and Wolfgang Stegemann, *The Jesus Movement: A Social History of Its First Century* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1999), 3.

<sup>29</sup> Robert B. Ekelund Jr., and Robert D. Tollison, *Economic Origins of Roman Christianity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011).

<sup>30</sup> Michele Renee Salzman, *The Making of a Christian Aristocracy: Social and Religious Change in the Western Roman Empire* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002).



on class dynamics examines the reasons for which the aristocratic caste adopted a seemingly anti-aristocratic religion. This engendered an elevation of Christianity to an honorable place in society, followed by an evolution of Christian doctrine to be more accepting of high status and to pay greater attention to aristocratic concerns.<sup>31</sup> A related monograph, which references Salzman, is Carlos R. Galvão-Sobrinho's *Doctrine and Power: Theological Controversy and Christian Leadership in the Later Roman Empire*.<sup>32</sup> This work demonstrates how the intellectual contentions of the early Church period were not purely theological but tied to structures of power as the leadership of the church became stabilized.<sup>33</sup> In some ways it resembles the work of Ekelund and Tollison, but unlike them, Galvão-Sobrinho does not ground his thesis purely in economic theory. Instead, this work helps to continue bridging the gap even further between predominantly intellectual history and history which is tied to the daily realities of power, class, and economics.

Given these discussions of the Roman upper-class in general and the church in particular, it is also imperative to provide examples of works, where possible, which focus on the writings and actions of lower-class and oppressed people. While Salzman's work examined Christians who adhered to or adopted a triumphalist narrative of Christianity which embraced the Roman Empire and its new role in it, David A. Lopez's *Separatist Christianity* examines those earlier Christians who rejected the power of Rome

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<sup>31</sup> Salzman, *The Making of a Christian Aristocracy*, 16 - 18.

<sup>32</sup> Carlos R. Galvão-Sobrinho, *Doctrine and Power: Theological Controversy and Christian Leadership in the Later Roman Empire* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2013).

<sup>33</sup> Galvão-Sobrinho, *Doctrine and Power*, 6.

and sought to distance themselves from it through a focus on the “spiritual” over the “corporeal,” including monasticism and martyrdom.<sup>34</sup>

While Lopez studies Christians who denied the worldly aspects of life, Peter Brown’s recent *Through the Eye of a Needle* is an excellent economic history of the Latin West. Brown focuses on the acquisition of wealth by the church and the impacts of this on Christianity at and around the time of the fall of the Roman Empire in the West.<sup>35</sup> Clearly to some extent in conversation with Salzman’s work, this book looks at individual Christian leaders and examines how their actions and ideas reflect the growth of Christian wealth and the developing relationship the church had with money and property as it became an enormous financial storehouse. Brown’s work is similar to this thesis, insofar as it grounds theological controversy in everyday realities. It is part of a new trend exploring these economic issues within the context of the traditional, patristic histories.

In recent years, the blend of intellectual and socio-economic history has begun to come to fruition with works such as *Wealth and Poverty in Early Church and Society*, a collection of essays by Susan R. Holman.<sup>36</sup> In this book, various authors examine specific topics relating to the New Testament period, second-century Egypt, fourth-century patristics, and the early Byzantine period. The collection is not a comprehensive examination of the topic, but it is nevertheless full of useful articles. Among them is

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<sup>34</sup> David A. Lopez, *Separatist Christianity: Spirit and Matter in the Early Church Fathers* (Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2004).

<sup>35</sup> Peter Brown, *Through the Eye of a Needle: Wealth, the Fall of Rome, and the Making of Christianity in the West, 350 - 550 AD* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012).

<sup>36</sup> Susan R. Holman, ed., *Wealth and Poverty in Early Church and Society* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008).

Annewies van den Hoek's discussion of wealth and poverty in the writings of Clement of Alexandria, where she argues that Clement's view of charity is informed by Roman socio-economic customs.<sup>37</sup>

Following a rough chronology and introducing major themes as they became predominant in history, Helen Rhee's *Loving the Rich, Saving the Poor*, is more exhaustive.<sup>38</sup> She covers much of the same material as this thesis does. Rhee, however, discusses more authors from various branches of Christianity, including the Latin Fathers and heterodox teachers outside of the "proto-orthodox" tradition. Her focus on how the issues of wealth and poverty are tied to the creation and maintenance of Christian identity, a topic which is also addressed in this paper, provided me the general framework for this thesis. I, however, posit a more pivotal role for Clement of Alexandria than Rhee gives to him.

## VI. Conclusion

To say that much has been written about the history of the early church is hardly fitting. The output has been enormous. Yet, even with all the new research into the historical Jesus and novel efforts of various sorts to focus on long-dismissed groups, there is still plenty of room for new arguments about the process by which the intellectual tradition of Christianity developed. In particular, the new interdisciplinary approach

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<sup>37</sup> Annewies van den Hoek, "Widening the Eye of the Needle: Wealth and Poverty in the Works of Clement of Alexandria," in *Wealth and Poverty in Early Church and Society*, ed. Susan R. Holman (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008), 68.

<sup>38</sup> Helen Rhee, *Loving the Rich, Saving the Poor: Wealth, Poverty, and Early Christian Formation* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2012).

which examines how the intellectual, social, and economic histories of the period are tied together has the potential to shed new light on a complicated and much-discussed field.

The importance of this project lies in its examination of the process by which individuals seek to preserve their religious tradition while at the same time admitting innovation. Nothing can demonstrate this better than Clement's radical reinterpretation of the position of the rich and the poor in the eyes of God. Tying intellectual history to the social and economic history of the period, as other scholars have recently begun to do, will be the new lens through which I hope to challenge more traditional narratives about Christian intellectual history. Even in works that do not seem to contain much about the rich and the poor, these issues spring up in important ways.

Whereas the most traditional histories of this period present the evolution of dogma as a slow climb to the inevitable conclusions of the councils of Nicaea and Chalcedon, with each generation taking another step towards the catholic views, I will argue that elite Christians adapted church teachings for observable social functions, predominantly to convert Christianity from a movement of the lower classes into a respectable, elite institution which supported and integrated with the Roman Imperial system, thus ensuring the survival of the church.

## Chapter II: “Blessed Are the Poor”

The Roman Empire during the late first and early second centuries was an advanced agrarian society, meaning that agriculture was the basis of its economy, even though it had other specialized types of work.<sup>39</sup> The majority of the population lived in rural areas, near the subsistence level.<sup>40</sup> This population was made up of free families which owned their own small farms, tenant farmers who lived on and worked land owned by a wealthy landlord, wage-earners and day-laborers who worked on larger farms, and of course, enslaved individuals.<sup>41</sup> Throughout this period, the number of small farming families decreased while that of tenant farmers and wage-earners increased.<sup>42</sup> This was in part the result of unsustainable tax practices, which led to small independent farmers selling off their land to pay debts accrued because of their tax burden.<sup>43</sup> The poor were continually made more destitute while the elite continued to centralize wealth and land.

It was an old adage that the Roman *rus* was the place of production while the *urbs* was a place of consumption, but this misses an important nuance.<sup>44</sup> These urban areas were the home of the wealthy elite, as well as a highly-differentiated workforce of low-

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<sup>39</sup> Ekkehard W Stegemann and Wolfgang Stegemann, *The Jesus Movement: A Social History of Its First Century*, trans. O. C. Dean, Jr. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1999), 7.

<sup>40</sup> Stegemann and Stegemann, *The Jesus Movement*, 12.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 28.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 49.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 30.

income artisans, laborers, and service workers.<sup>45</sup> Urban centers were major producers of textiles and other goods, a vital portion of the economy. Additionally, some of those living in the city worked on farms in suburban communities.<sup>46</sup> Stegemann and Stegemann note that within the cities there existed two upper-class groups, the ruling elites and their retainers; in both the cities and the rural areas, the majority of people belonged to the lower classes who lived near the limit of subsistence. They divide the poor into two groups: the *penetes* who lived at or above minimum existence, and the *ptochoi*, the abjectly poor.<sup>47</sup>

Stegemann and Stegemann also detail the potential socio-economic make-up of the early Christian *ekklesia* after the year 70 CE. They first note the differences between the earliest followers of the Jesus Movement in the land of Israel, and those in the rest of the empire. Notably, the communities inside Israel were predominantly Jewish, while the communities elsewhere were of mixed ethnicity, with Gentiles constituting the majority. This meant that the early “Christ-confessing communities” in the Roman Empire were outsiders from certain parts of pagan life, such as the sacrifices to the state deities, due to their refusal to participate in these activities, but they also did not reflect the Jewish diaspora communities which were predominantly Jewish, although there was a minority of Gentile “God-fearers” who took part in the synagogue as well.<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> Ibid., 29 - 30.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 28.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., 71-72.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid., 251.

These communities, throughout the empire, developed within urbanized areas, though this includes some who had close ties to the cities but lived outside them in nearby rural areas and villages.<sup>49</sup> While it is difficult to make any definite statement, Stegemann and Stegemann make compelling arguments on the basis of intertextual analysis and prosopographic evidence to say that the majority of the Christian community was composed of those among the lower classes whom they label “*penetes*” existing at or just above the level of subsistence. Although it is hard to be sure, they conclude that there was probably not a significant number of the absolutely destitute (*ptochoi*) alongside these *penetes*.<sup>50</sup>

As early as the late first century, it is likely that some members of the more well-off class of retainers began to join the Christian community.<sup>51</sup> While this would still have been a minority of the community, the existence of this class of Christians is supported in the documents of Luke-Acts.<sup>52</sup> In addition to this group, there were possibly some individuals of significant wealth, likely often women, who supported the Christian community, but as yet, there were no members of the official Imperial orders.<sup>53</sup>

The individual Christian communities varied, no doubt, in their exact socio-economic composition, and this is perhaps reflected in documents which they produced

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<sup>49</sup> Ibid., 265-266.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid., 303-305.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., 312.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid., 313-314.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid., 313, 315-316.

around the turn of the second century.<sup>54</sup> In these, both literal and metaphorical understandings of “wealth” and “poverty” are employed, with different authors favoring one over the other.

In the late first century and most of the second century, all of the major authors who address the subject of the poor seem to agree on the privileged status of the financially impoverished. Put simply, they prefer Luke’s version of “Blessed are the Poor” to Matthew’s “Blessed are the Poor in Spirit.” Their writings can be divided into two groups: those who praise the faith of the poor, and those who go further and condemn the wealthy.

## I. “Blessed Are the Poor”

### A. Clement of Rome, c. 95 CE

Of the first group, the exemplar is Clement of Rome. This Clement, a different figure from his Alexandrian namesake, was the Bishop of Rome around 95 CE. For this reason, he is sometimes called Pope Clement I, although the papacy was not yet established in any meaningful way during his day. Nevertheless, his work, a single letter from the Church in Rome to the Church in Corinth, was much loved and was considered by some Christians to be part of the New Testament canon.

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<sup>54</sup> The dates and places of composition of the individual documents in the New Testament and among the “Apostolic Fathers” are up for debate. Within the New Testament, several texts are clearly earlier than others, notably the Synoptic Gospels and the Pauline Material. These texts are most definitely first-century productions. The Johannine Materials and the “Antilegomena,” on the other hand, were more likely written towards the end of the first century or at the beginning of the second. As such, they warrant consideration along with the texts of the Apostolic Fathers, of which the earliest documents date from the same general time.



Clement's principal concern is pastoral in nature, and lies with the position of both rich and poor within the Christian community. Clement first mentions the poor in a quote from Psalm 12, "Because of the hardship of poor people and the groaning of the impoverished, now I shall rise up, says the Lord: I shall establish them in safety, I shall speak openly on this."<sup>55</sup> In this passage, chapter fifteen of the letter, Clement ties poverty to the virtues of humility and piety. He employs many quotations from the Old Testament to argue that God does not side with those who are boastful or hypocritical. Instead, God is moved by the plight of those who suffer on earth, not simply those who worship correctly.<sup>56</sup> As the Jesus of Mark had, Clement makes it clear that those who are literally poor occupy a privileged place in the eyes of God.

All the same, Clement does not condemn wealth or rich people in turn. In chapter thirty-eight of the letter, he writes,

Let the strong one take care of the weak one, and let the weak give respect to the strong. Let the rich man supply (what is needed) to the poor man, and let the poor give thanks to God, because God has given to him through him who supplied his need.<sup>57</sup>

Clement of Rome here suggests that there should be a mutual respect between different classes within the Christian community. Drawing upon Paul's argument in 1 Corinthians 12, he argues that diversity among members of the faith is a benefit, as different types of people complement each other.<sup>58</sup> He blends the need to care for the poor into an argument for Christian unity and interdependence which ultimately judges neither the poor nor the

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<sup>55</sup> 1 Clem. 15:6 - 7.

<sup>56</sup> 1 Clem. 15:2.

<sup>57</sup> 1 Clem. 38:2.

<sup>58</sup> 1 Clem. 37:5.

rich as inherently better, so long as they are devoted to God and each other. Clement, quoting Jeremiah 9:22-23, does offer an extra warning to the wealthy, however:

For the holy spirit says: the wise man should not boast in his wisdom, not should the strong man in his strength, nor the wealthy man in his wealth, but the one boasting should boast in the Lord, to seek after him and to do what is lawful and righteous.<sup>59</sup>

While he warns the rich not to become prideful because of their wealth, he does not state that wealth itself is the problem. What seems to matter more is one's mental and emotional orientation towards wealth and a willingness to provide charity.

It is notable that Clement also reminds the poor Christians in his audience that they are not lesser in the eyes of God because of their poverty, nor are the wealthy greater in his sight. Here he deploys another quotation from the Psalms, in this case Psalm 69:30-32, "For David the elect said: 'I will praise the Lord, and it will please him above a young calf bearing horns and hooves: let the poor see this and rejoice.'"<sup>60</sup> This is an old motif in the Hebrew Bible, which argues that, even though the wealthy are able to give more offerings in the Temple, God does not actually care about these physical sacrifices. Instead, Clement, following certain Psalms and the prophet Isaiah, insists that the worship of God is based on giving praise, which both the rich and the poor are able to do alike.<sup>61</sup> Once again, Clement is clear in his theme that all Christians, regardless of their socioeconomic status, are equal before God. Wealth and poverty are not, in and of themselves, markers of Christian identity; rather, worship of God and a willingness to give charity stand as the most important markers.

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<sup>59</sup> 1 Clem. 13:1.

<sup>60</sup> 1 Clem 52:2.

<sup>61</sup> 1 Clem. 52:1.

### B. Ignatius of Antioch, c. 108 / 140

This is related to a short passage in one of the genuine letters of Ignatius of Antioch. Ignatius, perhaps the most widely studied of all the Apostolic Fathers in the modern day, says little about the poor, at least at first glance. Yet in one important passage, Ignatius adopts a Johannine concept of *agape*, or love, as an important marker of Christian identity, and then proceeds to define it as concern for the unfortunate and the oppressed. In his letter to the Smyrneans, Ignatius warns his reader to beware of false teachers, in this case, most likely the Docetists who denied the physical death of Jesus,<sup>62</sup> and thus to Ignatius also the importance of the corporal works of mercy.<sup>63</sup> For Ignatius, like Clement, the willingness to give to those who hunger and thirst are important markers of Christian identity. The fact that charitable giving is an expectation of the community points, again, to the likelihood that the majority of these Christians, while they were not wealthy, still had sufficient means for giving to others. That is, Ignatius serves as further evidence that the major Christian communities were largely comprised of the relatively poor rather than the totally destitute.

### C. Polycarp of Smyrna, c. 150 - 160

Polycarp of Smyrna agreed with this principle. His Epistle to the Philippians, likely one of the later documents among the Apostolic Fathers, is similar in tone to 1 Clement, in that the poor are clearly held in special status, but he reserves room for the

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<sup>62</sup> Helen Rhee, *Loving the Rich, Saving the Poor: Wealth, Poverty, and Early Christian Formation* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2012), 173.

<sup>63</sup> Ignatius of Antioch, *Letter to the Smyrneans*, 6.2

rich within the community as well. He therefore gives instructions which are directed at those who are otherwise more well-off. For instance, on the subject of avarice (Gk.

*philargyria*) among Christians, Polycarp writes:

Love of money is the start of all difficulties (*or*, evils). And so, knowing that we have brought nothing into the world, and we hold nothing to take out from it, we ought to arm ourselves with the arms of righteousness and we ought to teach each other, first of all, to walk in the commandment of the Lord.<sup>64</sup>

“Love of money” is a very serious issue for Polycarp who instructs his audience to teach others to reject greed and devote themselves to God instead.<sup>65</sup> He further argues that greed is akin to idolatry, if not a form of idolatry itself.<sup>66</sup> Avarice thus belongs among those things which could prevent a Christian from receiving salvation:

But he, the one having raised him from the dead, will raise us also, if only we do his will and we walk in his commandments and love those things which he loved, rejecting all injustice, greed, love of money, slander, and false witness.<sup>67</sup>

Instead of giving into greed, Christians are called to actively reject it by giving charity to those in need. He quotes from Tobit in the Septuagint, instructing his audience, “When you are able to do good, do not hesitate, because almsgiving frees one from death.”<sup>68</sup> Charity is presented as a practice which trains Christians to resist avarice and serves as an essential commandment from God which is necessary to follow. For Polycarp then, the proper use of money and the role of wealth in a Christian’s life is the central issue. He admonished the elders (presbyters) of the church “not [to] neglect the

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<sup>64</sup> Poly. 4:1.

<sup>65</sup> Poly. 4:3.

<sup>66</sup> Poly. 11:2.

<sup>67</sup> Poly. 2:2.

<sup>68</sup> Poly. 10:2 (Tob. 4:10).

widow, the orphan, or the poor.”<sup>69</sup> He is also quick to remind his audience of Luke’s version of the Beatitudes, paraphrasing, “...blessed are the poor and those persecuted for the sake of righteousness, because the Kingdom of God is theirs.”<sup>70</sup> Christians should not, therefore, hold onto excess wealth, but give it freely to those in need.

#### D. *The Shepherd of Hermas*, c. 110 - 140

One of the most popular documents of the Apostolic Fathers, oft-quoted by other Church Fathers and included in some early canons of the New Testament, was the *Shepherd of Hermas*, likely written between 110 and 140 CE. Charitable giving is an important part of Hermas’ message. His predominant viewpoint is that wealth is a distraction from and a disruption of the Christian life.<sup>71</sup> In the first chapter of the text, the author condemns those “...who are concerned with this age and are rejoicing in their wealth and do not hold on to the good things which are to come.”<sup>72</sup> If Christians remain focused on their wealth and worldly affairs, Hermas warns that they will be in danger, as they will not be able to understand God’s word.<sup>73</sup> He explains that evil desires, such as wealth, luxury, and amoral sexual desire, lead to death.<sup>74</sup>

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<sup>69</sup> Poly. 6:1.

<sup>70</sup> Poly. 2:3.

<sup>71</sup> Herm. 97:1-2.

<sup>72</sup> Hermas 1:8.

<sup>73</sup> Herm. 40:4.

<sup>74</sup> Herm. 45:1-3.

Hermas calls on wealthy Christians to give up their riches; otherwise, he states, they cannot be useful to God.<sup>75</sup> For, to him, God has allowed some to be wealthy only so that they can give to others.<sup>76</sup> To do so, they should share their abundant resources with those who are lacking. He argues that excess greed and gain are harmful to the wealthy, and that judgment is coming on those who maintain a disparity of wealth.<sup>77</sup> Like previous authors, Hermas encourages his fellow Christians to give generously to all without “...wondering over to whom you should give and to whom you should not give.”<sup>78</sup> He makes it clear that Christians should never refrain from doing good whenever they are able.<sup>79</sup>

Hermas makes his point most dramatically in chapter 51, the Second Parable in the last section of the text. In this passage, rich and poor Christians are likened to elm trees and grape vines. In Hermas’ somewhat romanticized view of poverty, only poor Christians, the grape vines, are able to “bear fruit,” meaning that only they are able to focus on living a godly life of prayer, petition, and confession, as the wealthy simply become distracted by business.<sup>80</sup> However, just as the vine does not grow as well if it is on the ground, unsupported, the poor do not thrive without the help of those who have more resources. The wealthy are thus like elm trees: they do not bear fruit on their own,

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<sup>75</sup> Herm. 14:5-7.

<sup>76</sup> Herm. 50:8.

<sup>77</sup> Herm. 17:3-5.

<sup>78</sup> Herm. 27:4.

<sup>79</sup> Herm. 38:2.

<sup>80</sup> Herm. 51:5.

but they can support the vine which does. Thus the wealthy, who are too distracted by this world to live the Christian life properly, need to support the poor, and in that way they can establish a proper relationship with God.<sup>81</sup> Hermas plays on the metaphor of physical and spiritual wealth, arguing for a complementary relationship between the wealthy and the poor. The poor person, who is rich in spirit and prayer, shares that godly wealth with the rich person who in turn shares his physical wealth with the poor.<sup>82</sup>

Thus, Hermas, like Clement of Rome, seems to view Christians as a community which includes both the rich and the poor. At the same time, he views wealth itself as an attribute of non-Christian Romans, given that wealthy Christians retain high-standing among outsiders.<sup>83</sup> But simply continuing to endorse Christian faith without the good works of charity is not enough. These wealthy Christians need to repent and begin to give from their excess to those who have less. Hermas thus shares a similar position to 1 Clement but is more overtly critical of wealth.

## II. Woe to the Rich

### A. The Revelation of John, c. 95 CE

Perhaps this more critical view held by Hermas is due to the genre of writing. Apocalyptic literature of this period tended to be critical of material, earthly power, disparaging it harshly in contrast to the power of God. The most famous piece of

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<sup>81</sup> Herm. 51:5-6.

<sup>82</sup> Herm. 51:7.

<sup>83</sup> Herm. 75:1.

apocalyptic literature from this period, the Revelation of John, is the first in the exceptionally critical group of documents. There, wealth and poverty are mentioned as such several times. One instance describes the literal poor, within the context of an allegorical narrative:

And it makes all, both the small and the large, both the wealthy and the poor, both the free and the slave, so that they give to them the mark upon their right hand or upon their forehead, so that no one is able to sell or buy if he does not have the mark, the name of the beast or the number of his name.<sup>84</sup>

Once again, this comes in a narrative section, like the two examples from the Gospel of John, and the meaning may be taken as either literal or metaphorical depending on how one reads the allegory, and likely can be taken simultaneously as both in many instances.

In another passage from Revelation, the meaning is more clearly metaphorical:

Because you say "I am wealthy and I have prospered and I have no need," and you do not see that you are suffering and pitiable and poor and blind and naked. I counsel you to purchase from me gold refined in a fire so that you may be wealthy, and white robes to clothe you and not make manifest the shame of your nakedness, and a salve to anoint your eyes so that you may see.<sup>85</sup>

In this passage, "poor" is clearly used as a metaphor for spiritual need, as the speaker is clearly said to have money and possessions. The Revelator warns those who have worldly wealth that in terms of spirit, they are the ones who are poor.

To judge from how often he does it, he also seems to prefer the metaphorical usage. Towards the beginning of the document, the author gives a message to the Church at Smyrna, in which he describes the people as wealth (*plousios*), a metaphor for spiritual wealth, while at the same acknowledging their literal poverty.<sup>86</sup> Importantly, his use of

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<sup>84</sup> Rev. 13:16-17

<sup>85</sup> Rev. 3:17-18

<sup>86</sup> Rev. 2:9.



this metaphor is not disconnected from literal wealth and poverty. Indeed, the author seems to prefer the worldly poor to the literally rich, as can be seen in at 6:15-17, which places the rich in a list of the condemned, along with the powerful people and leaders of the earth. This makes sense in an apocalyptic document such as this, as John expects “power and wealth and wisdom and might and honor and glory and blessing” to be given to the Messiah and not to worldly rulers.<sup>87</sup> It would be a mistake, however, to argue that Revelation is calling for a social movement towards economic equity, even within the Christian communities. The Revelator’s focus is on how the world will be transformed when God steps in to change it. The document does not provide a call-to-action to alter the world; instead, it provides an expectation of the changes God will make in the world during the eschaton.

#### B. The Epistle of James, c. 90

More critical and more overt than the Revelation, the Epistle of James is the starkest of the second set of documents in terms of its condemnation of the wealthy. The writer of this work discusses economic issues throughout the piece and more openly attacks the wealthy than the Revelator or any other previous author. In an extended passage, James condemns the Christian community’s tendency to welcome the rich and shun the poorest of the poor. He begins with a narrative:

For if ever a gold-ringed man in fine clothes comes into your synagogue, and if a poor man in dirty clothes comes in, and you observe the one wearing fine clothing and say, "Sit here, please," and you say to the poor man, "Stand here," or, "Sit here at my feet," have you all not made divisions amongst yourselves and become judges of evil inquiries? Listen, my beloved siblings. Has God not chosen the poor in the world to be wealthy in

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<sup>87</sup> Rev. 5:12.

faith and to be heirs of the kingdom which he has promised to those loving him? But you dishonor the poor man. Are not the wealthy oppressing you all, indeed are not the wealthy themselves oppressing you all, and don't they themselves drag you all to court? Do they not blaspheme the beautiful name, the one invoked over you on your behalf?<sup>88</sup>

James' letter, dated to around 95 CE, does not argue that wealth and poverty are irrelevant to a Christian's identity. He places the poor in a higher position than the rich and declares that the rich are oppressive and blasphemous. While he employs a metaphor of spiritual wealth versus material wealth to defend this assertion that the poor are godlier than the rich, his assertion that oppression of the poor is a central problem makes it clear that he is predominantly concerned with the injustices brought on by poverty and the suffering which it causes. James suggests that wealthy people are ruinous to the community, not beneficial despite their charity. What is more, he seems to urge his audience, likely members of Stegemann's *penetes* class, to view themselves as siblings to the utterly destitute, the *ptochoi*, and not as fellows of the upper class.

Early in the letter, he writes:

Let the brother, the lowly one, boast in his being raised up, and let the rich man boast in his being made low, because he will pass away like a flower of the field. For the sun rises up with its heat and withers the field, and its flower falls and the beauty of its appearance is destroyed: thus also the rich man, in his course, shall die away.<sup>89</sup>

James does not view the rich as potential members of the community; rather, he ties members of the Christian community to poverty itself. For James, wealth is a problem, and he condemns the wealthy consistently, a point he makes clear at the end of his letter, in chapter five, where he is exceedingly critical of the wealthy.

Come now, O wealthy, and mourning, weep for your miseries, the ones coming for you. Your wealth has rotten, your clothes have become moth-eaten, your gold and your silver

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<sup>88</sup> James 2:2-7.

<sup>89</sup> Jam. 1:9 - 11.

has been rusted, and the rust itself will be as a witness against you, and it will eat your flesh just like a fire. You have all stored up for the last days! Look! The wage of your laborers, the ones having been kept back by you, cries out, and the groans of the harvesters have come up to the ears of the Lord Sabaoth. You all lived delicately upon the earth and ran riot, you fattened your hearts on the day of slaughter. You have condemned, you have murdered the just one — when he did not resist you.<sup>90</sup>

James warns the wealthy that in the coming age the reversal of fortunes which God will bring about will result in their destruction.<sup>91</sup> He argues that worldly wealth is destined to be destroyed by rot and decay, and that this is evidence of the moral corruption of the wealthy.<sup>92</sup> The reason for this is not the existence of their wealth, but the source of it, since, according to James, the wealthy have gained their riches from the exploitation of the poor. He states that the very *wages* of the poor will cry out to God against the rich, as they held back proper compensation of their workers through fraud.<sup>93</sup> Moreover, the wealthy have actively sought to kill and condemn poor people; therefore, they are cursed by God.<sup>94</sup> There is a ring of eschatological expectation in this rhetoric as well, and it is perhaps the most obvious attack on wealth as such in these early documents.

### C. The Didache, c. 100 - 110

The so-called *Διδαχὴ τῶν Δώδεκα Ἀποστόλων* (commonly called the Didache) also seems to sequester the wealthy as a group outside of Christian fellowship. The Didache, along with the Epistle of Barnabas, is part of a Jewish-Christian tradition which

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<sup>90</sup> Jam. 5:1-6.

<sup>91</sup> Jam. 5:1.

<sup>92</sup> Jam. 5:2 - 3.

<sup>93</sup> Jam. 5:4.

<sup>94</sup> Jam. 5:6.

is referred to as the “Two Ways.” This school of thought describes, as the name implies, two mutually exclusive ways of living: the “Way of Life,” which focuses on the worship of God and the maintenance of a virtuous life, and its complete opposite, the “Way of Death.”

In chapter five, which contains the first mention of the rich and the poor, the unnamed author lays out what it means to be on the “Way of Death” and the types of people who belong to this path:

[They are] persecutors of good people, haters of truth, lovers of a lie, those not knowing the reward of righteousness, those not holding to good or right judgement, those alert not to the good, but toward the evil; those loving things which are vain and far from gentle and enduring - *not showing mercy to the poor, nor striving on behalf of the oppressed, nor knowing what it was that made them; murders of children, corrupters of the creation of God, those turning away from the needy, those oppressing the afflicted, those supporting the wealthy, those lawless judges of the impoverished, totally sinful: Be taken away, children, from all such people.*<sup>95</sup>

The Didache recalls the language of James, inasmuch it casts the poor as the victims of oppression at the hands of the rich. At 13:4, the author advocates giving choice food and drink to the poor in communities which do not support a prophet. This contrasts the Christian community as opposed to the “Way of Death,” in that Christians aid the poor instead of oppressing them further. Charity (Gk. *ἐλεημοσύνη*) is a major concern of many authors among the “Apostolic Fathers.” The Didache instructs the Christians to give alms as an essential part of their practice, saying, “Thus do your prayers and your almsgiving and all your deeds as you have them in the gospel of our Lord.”<sup>96</sup> Furthermore, charity is

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<sup>95</sup> Did. 5:1 - 2. Italics added for emphasis.

<sup>96</sup> Did. 15:4.

not simply something to be given out at random. The Didache urges that the community take care that almsgiving is done responsibly and to those who actually need it.

To every person asking you, give and do not request something in return: for the Father wills all to give out of his own gifts. Blessed is the one giving according to the commandment. But warning to the one receiving. For if someone receives when they have need, they will be blameless. But the one not having need will give an account as to what he received and to what purpose... For it has been said, "Let your alms sweat in your hands, until you know to whom you should give."<sup>97</sup>

This instruction makes it clear that the almsgiving is meant to benefit not only the one who gives the gift, but also those in actual need. For this reason, the Didache insists that church leaders not be greedy or money-loving, as such people would abuse alms.<sup>98</sup>

#### D. The Epistle of Barnabas, c. 110 - 130

As mentioned above, the Epistle of Barnabas also represents the Two Ways school of early Christian ethical and wisdom literature. Both the Didache and the Epistle of Barnabas contain several passages which mirror each other's language directly. For instance, Barnabas 20 is almost a verbatim copy of Didache 5. It is possible that both of these documents independently preserve an earlier, lost work. The version in Barnabas says:

[They are] persecutors of good people, haters of truth, lovers of a lie, those not knowing the reward of righteousness, those not holding to good or right judgement, *those not having a care for the widow or the orphan*, those alert not toward the fear of God, but toward evil, those loving vain things, from whom gentle things and enduring things are very far off removed - those pursuing a reward, *not showing mercy to the poor, nor*

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<sup>97</sup> Did. 1:5 - 6.

<sup>98</sup> Did. 15:1. It is worth noting that this is the opposite of the advice given by Hermas in the Shepherd. Hermas instructed his community to give without worrying over the proper recipients, but the Didache instructs the audience to discern who would benefit most from their aid. It is difficult to say why this difference of opinion exists, but the mere fact that the difference exists points to the diversity of understandings held by the various Christian communities.

*pressing on in behalf of the oppressed, those being disposed to slander, those not knowing what it is that made them, those killing children, those corrupting the creation of God, those turning away from the needy, those oppressing the afflicted, those supporting the wealthy, lawless judges of the poor - totally sinful!*<sup>99</sup>

However, Barnabas' version contains additional instructions to care for widows and orphans, along with a few changes of phrasing. Once again, the plight of the literal poor is emphasized, and Christians are encouraged not to support the wealthy but to side with the impoverished.

Barnabas also uses the metaphor of spiritual wealth much more often than the Didache. This is important to note, as the literal and metaphorical emphases are not mutually exclusive. Barnabas encourages those in his audience who are poor in reality that they can be wealthy in spirit, which is a greater kind of wealth. He also notes that among his audience "...the Spirit has been poured out upon you out of the richness of the fountain of the Lord."<sup>100</sup> In this vein, Barnabas encourages his audience to be "wealthy in spirit" and to give wealthy offerings to God.<sup>101</sup> This kind of wealth, the spiritual variety, is the kind which is to be prized in the Christian community.

#### E. The Second Epistle of Clement, c. 140

Much like the two documents that follow the Two Ways school of thought, the so-called Second Epistle of Clement stresses the utter importance of almsgiving (*ἐλεημοσύνη*). This later document, also known as 2 Clement, was attributed to, but most

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<sup>99</sup> Barn. 20:2. Italics added for emphasis.

<sup>100</sup> Barn. 1:3.

<sup>101</sup> Barn. 19:2, 1:7.

likely *not* written by, Clement of Rome, and while it has been transmitted as a letter, it was more likely written originally in the form of a sermon. The author explains:

For almsgiving is as good as repentance from sin. Fasting is better than prayer, and almsgiving is better than both. Love covers the mass of sins, and prayer out of a good conscience will pull one from death. Everyone who is found to be full in these things is blessed: for almsgiving becomes an alleviation from sin.<sup>102</sup>

This sentiment recalls that of Polycarp 10:2, emphasizing the importance of substantial action on the part of Christians to benefit those less fortunate. As with many of these documents, there is no evidence of an understanding of salvation by grace alone without works. Instead, these early Christians viewed proper actions and charity as an essential part of the process.

Like Polycarp, the author of 2 Clement encourages his audience to be charitable and not money-loving.<sup>103</sup> He argues that the world that is and the world to come are diametrically opposed to each other on the issue of wealth, and therefore Christians cannot properly serve God while they store up wealth for themselves in this world.<sup>104</sup> The author of 2 Clement condemns this life, saying, “These two are enemies: this age and the age-to-come. This one speaks of adultery and deterioration and greed and fraud, but the next one excludes these things.”<sup>105</sup> He therefore instructs his audience not to be troubled “that we see the unrighteous getting rich and the slaves of God suffering,” seeming to

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<sup>102</sup> 2 Clem. 16:4. Note that the Greek of the first sentence is ambiguous and could also be translated as “For almsgiving is good, as is repentance from sin.” However, the first translation makes more sense in the context of what follows.

<sup>103</sup> 2 Clem. 4:3.

<sup>104</sup> 2 Clem. 6:1-5.

<sup>105</sup> 2 Clem. 6:3-4.

suggest, in contrast with 1 Clement, that the Christian community is composed predominantly of those who are not rich.<sup>106</sup>

### III. Transitional Period: The Early Apologists

#### A. Justin Martyr, c. 100 - c. 165 CE

Around 150 CE, Christian authors began to transition into writing defense speeches (*apologiai*) and apologetic dialogues, traditional genres of Greco-Roman philosophy. Justin Martyr wrote two such apologies for Christianity, the first addressed to the Roman Emperor and the second to the Roman Senate. In both cases, the nominal address does not likely represent the actual audience: Justin's primary audience was likely not powerful Romans, but rather, his own Christian community. Justin casts Christians as the opposite of worldly pagans, arguing that the Roman deities are in fact "evil spirits," whereas the Christians worship a righteous God.<sup>107</sup> He differentiates the worship of these spirits, performed by offering sacrifices at their altars, from the worship of the Christian God, which he maintains is based on the believer "...imitating the good things being present in him [i.e. God]," including charitable actions towards others.<sup>108</sup> For Justin, the expectation of Christianity is the hope of the Kingdom of God to come as opposed to a human kingdom.<sup>109</sup>

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<sup>106</sup> 2 Clem. 20:1.

<sup>107</sup> Justin Martyr, *First Apology*, 5.1.

<sup>108</sup> Justin, *First Apology*, 10.1.

<sup>109</sup> Justin, *First Apology*, 11.1-2.



The contrast between the worldly lives of the pagans and the godly practices of Christians becomes Justin's predominant theme throughout the *First Apology*. This may, at first, seem at odds with the central fact that the apologies are addressed to the Emperor and the Roman Senate. That he, at least nominally, engages in dialogue with Roman leaders, suggests that Justin does not seek to separate entirely from the Roman world. However, Justin's apology clearly lays out limitations on what he views as the proper relationship between Christians and the leaders of the secular state. Justin calls on believers to respect earthly rulers, but only within certain limitations, and urges Roman leaders to exercise sound judgement and protect the Christian community's right and freedom to worship. At the same time, he also draws a distinction between the respect Christians should show worldly authorities and the faith that they hold in God.<sup>110</sup> So even in his acceptance of the reality of Roman authority, Justin Martyr maintains a divide between Christian and pagan society.

Part of this contrast is the difference between the economic system of the Empire and that which Justin Martyr describes as practiced within the Christian Church. He notes that, when they were still pagans, Gentile Christians had engaged in the greed and "acquisition of wealth and possessions" that was prevalent in Greco-Roman culture.<sup>111</sup> But when they became members of the Christian church, these same people rejected this Roman economic ethic. Justin insists that the Christians contribute their wealth into a "common stock" for the benefit and care of all members of the community.<sup>112</sup>

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<sup>110</sup> Justin, *First Apology*, 17.

<sup>111</sup> Justin, *First Apology*, 14.

<sup>112</sup> Ibid.

The concept of the “common stock” is not unique to Justin Martyr. Several ancient sources record this tradition of economic communitarianism. However, both the extent of the practice of the common stock (Grk. *κοινόν*), and the ways in which it actually functioned in the community are unclear, even in the best sources, the earliest of which are the Pauline epistles and the *Acts of the Apostles*. It seems that the various Christian communities from almost from the beginning maintained a communal chest into which those who were able donated funds. These would later be allocated to those in need. This practice was common enough that the proper use of the funds was a constant topic among the early Christian writers.<sup>113</sup> Clement of Rome and Ignatius of Antioch both maintain that the “common stock” was an important part of church activity. During this time, control of the communal chest was likely given to the *episcopos* of a given church. This bishop would likely have both received all the alms and then dispersed them to those he knew were in need, including widows, orphans, young people, and the poor, any community members whom the bishop was entrusted to serve.<sup>114</sup>

In the *First Apology*, Justin describes this very system of the well-to-do members of the Church giving voluntarily to the leaders of the congregation, who then distribute their contributions to orphans, widows, and the poor among them.<sup>115</sup> Clearly, voluntary giving is a large part of Justin’s Christian ethic. Moreover, in the *Dialogue with Trypho*, Justin suggests that what differentiates proper Christian fasting from the kinds of fasting practiced by Jews is that Christians are beholden to give the food that they are not eating

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<sup>113</sup> Rhee, *Loving the Poor, Saving the Rich*, 108.

<sup>114</sup> Rhee, *Loving the Rich, Saving the Poor*, 141 - 142.

<sup>115</sup> Justin, *First Apology*, 67.

to those who are hungry, and at the same time clothe and shelter the abjectly poor as much as they can.<sup>116</sup>

The *Dialogue* is not a focused discussion on issues of wealth, poverty, or power. However, Justin mentions these issues often, as if he expects his audience is very well aware of the assumptions he presents. For instance, in the twelfth chapter, Justin argues that the Jews are metaphorically blind because they cannot see the truth of Christian teaching. He asserts that “Gospel is preached to the poor” who understand it, and yet a learned Jew like Trypho does not.<sup>117</sup> Clearly, Justin’s mention of the poor is for rhetorical purposes, and yet he points out that the poor are among the primary audiences for the growing Church’s message.

In this document, Justin does not assume an overtly anti-rich stance. An educated author, he works in the same vein as Clement of Rome, envisioning a place for both more and less wealthy members in the Church. However, he still reflects earlier ideas that the wealthy will someday be harshly judged and the poor be saved by God, especially in the eschaton. To wit, the *Dialogue* cites the fifty-third chapter of Isaiah numerous times, which Justin argues is a prophecy that the Messiah shall be killed and the rich will be punished with death because of this.<sup>118</sup> Justin thus seems to assume that his audience would agree it is the wealthy and powerful who bear the responsibility for Jesus’ death. In contrast to this indictment of the rich, Justin’s quotations of Psalm 72 argue there will soon be an eschatological period of salvation, in which the poor especially will be

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<sup>116</sup> Justin Martyr, *Dialogue with Trypho*, 15.

<sup>117</sup> Justin, *Dialogue*, 12.

<sup>118</sup> Justin, *Dialogue*, 13, 32, 97.

rewarded and protected by God, and that they will be saved from the oppression which they faced at the hands of the rich during their lifetimes.<sup>119</sup> Even though Justin argues that the wealthy and the poor can both be part of the Christian community, he nevertheless reflects the more harsh dichotomy between God's position on the *divites* and the *pauperes* seen in the Gospel of Mark. However, it is important to note that, unlike the writer of the Letter of James, Justin's position on this issue is stated only briefly and rather vaguely, based as it is on quotations from the Bible, and is given extended discourse in neither the *Apologies* nor the *Dialogue*.

Ultimately, none of Justin's surviving works focuses on the issues of wealth and poverty; rather, they center around defining and defending the identity of Christians, addressing in the *Apologies* a nominally Roman Gentile audience and in the *Dialogue* a nominally Jewish readership. As is typical of the apologetic period of Christian writing, Justin's larger purpose is to provide exhortation to his own community and reinforce the audience's sense of identity.

### B. Irenaeus of Lyons

Like Justin, Irenaeus of Lyons sought to explain the boundaries of what he viewed as proper Christian ideas and practices. For example, the primary goal of his *Adversus Haereses* is to establish the difference between Christianity and several of the so-called "Gnostic" movements. Therefore, Irenaeus does not dwell on the issues of money and charity either. But as with Justin, these issues are important enough in the Christian tradition that they nevertheless come up in his work.

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<sup>119</sup> Justin, *Dialogue*, 34 & 64.

One Irenaeus' major aims is to not over-spiritualize Christianity. To that end, he defines his version of Christianity in terms of its belief in the literal incarnation of Jesus, as well as the redemption of the physical body in the eschaton.<sup>120</sup> As an extension of this, Irenaeus also addresses the importance of a material eschaton and with that expresses material concern for the poor. In Book V of his major work, Irenaeus creates a clear line between himself and those he views as heterodox on the matter of the material eschaton. For Irenaeus, the end of the world is defined by the remaking and perfecting of the physical world.<sup>121</sup> In this vision, the world will be full of tangible abundance, with crops and fruits growing miraculously in extravagant amounts.<sup>122</sup>

The result of this post-apocalyptic *cornucopiae* is an eschatological feast in which those who were once poor will have the prime place. For the needy and for those who gave themselves to Jesus' ministry, God will prepare a feast, in recompense for the lack of earthly joys they experienced during their lives.<sup>123</sup> Irenaeus derives this belief from the Hebrew Bible, especially the prophet Jeremiah, who describes a time in which hunger will end.<sup>124</sup>

While the poor are promised abundance in the new world, the rich do not receive such encouragement. Across *Adversus Haereses*, Irenaeus raises the issue of wealth briefly at various points, and his message is always the same. For him, to possess wealth

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<sup>120</sup> Lopez, 106.

<sup>121</sup> Irenaeus, *Adversus Haereses* 5.32.1.

<sup>122</sup> Irenaeus, 5.33.3.

<sup>123</sup> Irenaeus, 5.33.2.

<sup>124</sup> Irenaeus, 5.34.3, quoting Jer. 31:10.

is problematic, and he sees the enjoyment of wealth and luxury as sinful. One example comes in Book I, where Irenaeus criticizes the heretic Marcus as a wealth-seeker who takes advantage of wealthy women and desires luxury.<sup>125</sup> In Book III, he explicates his opinion of wealth more fully. Quoting a warning from Luke's Gospel, "woe to the rich, for you have received your consolation,"<sup>126</sup> he argues that Christians should reject the love of money and instead focus on imitating Jesus and his disciples, who preferred to share their meals with the poor instead of feast with those who have money and high status.<sup>127</sup>

Irenaeus follows Hermas in declaring business and wealth accumulation as un-Christian and wrong. Instead of enjoying what they have and constantly seeking to expand it, Irenaeus calls for Christians to focus on humility by practicing almsgiving and charity, a topic visited often in Book IV of his work. Irenaeus argues that wealthy Christians have acquired their gains "unrighteously" before joining the faith.<sup>128</sup> He ties property ownership and the relative comfort of well-off members, himself included apparently, to greed. In particular, he is arguing here against a view he deems heretical that the God of the Old Testament is evil because he ordered the Jews to take spoils from the land of Egypt when they left during the Exodus. Irenaeus argues, instead, that the Jews were not thieves, and adds that wealthy Christians have received their wealth in ways more immoral than the departing Jews had.<sup>129</sup> Thus he turns the argument back on

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<sup>125</sup> Irenaeus, 1.8.3.

<sup>126</sup> Irenaeus, 3.14.3.

<sup>127</sup> Irenaeus, 3.14.3.

<sup>128</sup> Irenaeus, 4.30.1.

<sup>129</sup> Irenaeus, 4.30.3.

those who question the ethical nature of God’s action by attacking their own ethics and behavior.

So, given that many Christians had not received their property in appropriate ways, Irenaeus must walk a fine line. What should he tell them to do? Irenaeus’ community clearly included Christians of some financial standing — possibly even some retainers of the imperial court — as is evident from the way he advises them to act.<sup>130</sup> Primarily, he enjoins Christians to abhor “luxury,” interpreting the story of the Rich Man and Lazarus from Luke 16 to mean that Christians should reject the joys of earthly life, including luxurious clothing and continual feasting.<sup>131</sup> While he does not preach the total abandonment of wealth, he strongly warns against the improper use of wealth. Instead of living amidst the display of overt wealth, Christians with means should instead focus on redemptive almsgiving, which acts as a kind of cure for avarice.<sup>132</sup> This charity is an outward sign of the person’s faith, a mark that they are “bearing fruit” as a follower of Christ.<sup>133</sup> Thus, instead of spending their money on gaudy displays of wealth, Christians, as they are able, should focus on giving alms, and in this way their ill-gotten gains become a positive expression of their devotion.

Irenaeus does not focus solely on the literal meanings of wealth and poverty. Notably, he also uses wealth in two metaphorical ways. First, he makes it a characteristic of God, analogous to the way earlier authors, who saw spiritual wealth and resources as

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<sup>130</sup> Irenaeus, 4.30.1.

<sup>131</sup> Irenaeus, 4.2.4.

<sup>132</sup> Irenaeus, 4.12.5.

<sup>133</sup> Irenaeus, 4.18.6.

positive attribute, set it in opposition to the more negative connotations attached to literal wealth. When Irenaeus argues that God created matter *ex nihilo* (or something close to it), he notes that one quality of God is that, by being the fount of creation, he is “rich in all resources.”<sup>134</sup> Here, abundant and rich are positive attributes when applied to God and must be taken in a metaphorical and spiritual sense. Irenaeus describes further in the preface to Book III that God’s love is “rich and ungrudging,”<sup>135</sup> clearly a model for wealthy Christians’ behavior. The love of God in its vastness and abundance, especially to his followers, shows how charity is the righteous obligation of God’s wealthier followers.

The second way that Irenaeus uses wealth as a metaphor is to describe how the Church functions for believers. Service to the Christian community is a must for those who are wealthy because the Church acts as a sort of spiritual bank. The rich support the community with material resources, and the Church stores up divine truths from which all Christians can draw.<sup>136</sup> Once again, while Irenaeus still presents material goods as something bad, metaphorical riches shine in a positive light.

By doing this, Irenaeus ushers the wealthy into the Christian community more overtly than his predecessors. In many ways, he is borrowing and updating themes from the ever popular letter of Clement of Rome, and although wealth and poverty are not his primary topics of concern, as more and more Christians are drawn into the Church from higher positions in society, he and his community clearly have no choice but to address

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<sup>134</sup> Irenaeus, 2.8.3.

<sup>135</sup> Irenaeus, 3 Preface.

<sup>136</sup> Irenaeus, 3.4.1.



the issue of money. While Irenaeus acknowledges that greed as such is bad, he echoes the positive uses of wealth which his predecessors clearly held out to their well-off believers.

In all, the overall critique of material wealth during this period varies from author to author. However, taken as a whole, these early documents gravitate toward a focus on the importance of caring for those who are indigent and economically destitute. Most exalt those who lack worldly needs; some even condemn outright those who have wealth. Quite a few acknowledge the privileged place of the poor but still try to find room for the wealthy within the church. But for the most part, the poor are labelled as wealthy in spirit, and thus blessed by God despite their standing in the world. These authors, in general, see “the poor,” the economically poor, as blessed, not “the poor in spirit.” This view, however, would be challenged at the turn of the third century.

### Chapter III: Blessed Are the Poor in Spirit

The shift from viewing the indigent as a blessed class to honoring those who are “poor in spirit” occurred for three major reasons. First, there was a growing, general preference for the spiritual over the corporeal in the writings of the apologists, especially the Alexandrians. Second, the need evolved to defend and justify Christianity in the face of a still-hostile Roman Empire. Finally and most importantly, a demographic shift resulted toward increasingly wealthy and better educated Christians populating the urban churches.

In the first case, the spiritualization and metaphorization of conceptions of wealth was a byproduct of Christian authors after 150 CE who often demonized the physical world, branding it as pagan and antithetical to true Christianity. There are several reasons for this, perhaps best exemplified by the failure of the Bar Kokhba Revolt in 135 CE, which resulted in many Christians and Jews alike largely abandoning the idea of a political revolution against Rome and the institution of a worldly “kingdom of God.”<sup>137</sup> Coupled with the periodic persecution of Christians, these events led many to reject the physical world altogether and set their expectations and hopes on a spiritual afterlife.<sup>138</sup> The apologetic authors considered the entire material world, “pagan” religion, and imperial authority to be part of a “corporeal category” which many Christians in their day had come to reject in its totality.<sup>139</sup>

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<sup>137</sup> David A. Lopez, *Separatist Christianity: Spirit and Matter in the Early Church Fathers* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2004), 10.

<sup>138</sup> Ibid.

<sup>139</sup> Ibid., 37.

During this time of opposition to the Roman empire and its religious practices, the Christian community continued to grow and evolve which entailed an increase in the number of well-off Christians. As the second century gave way to the third, some believers, albeit not many, belonged to the urban elite and retainer classes.<sup>140</sup> Hellen Rhee notes that part of this evolution is visible in the shift from the writing of pastoral letters and quasi-scriptures to the publication of apologetic works where Christian writers joined the intellectual debates of Greco-Roman elites. These apologies, particularly those composed by Justin Martyr, Clement of Alexandria, and Origen, attest to the fact that Christianity had slowly begun to permeate the educated ranks of the empire.<sup>141</sup> Clement of Alexandria, in particular, seems to have been especially well-off, possibly connected to very influential Romans through his family, but in any case he was prosperous enough to achieve a degree of education and familiarity with Greco-Roman philosophy hitherto unattested among Christian writers.<sup>142</sup>

While there are clearly some differences between the first apologists of the second century and the authors who preceded them, the greater contrast appears later, specifically with the advent of the Alexandrian Fathers, Clement and Origen. This new position is most visible in Clement of Alexandria's work, known by its Latin title, *Quis*

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<sup>140</sup> Rhee, *Loving the Poor, Saving the Rich*, 43 - 44.

<sup>141</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>142</sup> Annuities van den Hoek, "Widening the Eye of the Needle: Wealth and Poverty in the Works of Clement of Alexandria," in *Wealth and Poverty in Early Church and Society*, ed. Susan R. Holman (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2008), 69.

*Dives Salvetur* (“Which Rich Man Can Be Saved”), the first known extended piece of Christian literature devoted primarily to the topic of wealth and poverty.<sup>143</sup>

*Quis Dives Salvetur*, originally written in Greek, was likely written sometime around 190 - 200 CE, during Clement’s time teaching in Alexandria. The original language text was preserved with some *lacuna*, but a complete text of a Latin translation fills in the gaps. The document seems to be an example of Clement’s public teachings, as it takes the form of a sermon, though if this is the case, the written version we have today is likely an expansion of an originally shorter oral work.

In *Quis Dives Salvetur*, Clement lays out a problem within his community, namely, that many wealthy people do not see a place for themselves in the Christian Church. In Clement’s view, this is because the Church’s doctrine seems to suggest that the rich are not able to receive or earn salvation, or at least that it is more difficult for a wealthy person to be saved than a poor person. The result is, according to Clement, that wealthy people who are interested in Christianity simply abandon the Church and the Christian way of life, resulting in their damnation.<sup>144</sup> Clement sets out to change this and make room for the wealthy within the Christian community. He writes:

It is indeed right for those predisposed towards a love of truth and towards brotherly-love (being those who neither are remorselessly emboldened against the wealthy members (of the Church) nor are excessively fawning over them through a love of personal gain), firstly, through scripture, to remove this unfounded and empty despair from them, and then, through necessary explanations of the words of the Lord, to show that the inheritance of the Kingdom of Heaven is not totally cut off from them if they obey the Commandments; and finally, once they learn that the fears they fear are not to be feared and that the Savior will gladly receive them, if they are willing, then (it is right for those predisposed towards love) to point out and instruct them on how and through what kind

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<sup>143</sup> Hoek, “Widening the Eye of the Needle,” 71.

<sup>144</sup> Clement of Alexandria, *Quis Dives Salvetur*, 2.

of works and conditions they may reap the benefits of their hope, which is neither established as impossible for them, nor on the contrary overcome vainly.<sup>145</sup>

The passage above explicates not only the problem and Clement's proposed solution but also the basic structure of his argument. Clement lays out two steps for resolving the issue of wealth: first, to use Scripture to argue that rich people can, in fact, be saved; and then, to explain how rich people can achieve salvation if they follow God's commandments and live a Christian life. *Quis Dives Salvetur* can be divided into rough sections on this basis. Chapters 1 - 10 (inclusive) provide a general introduction to the problem, a discussion of a central gospel text (Mark 10), and Clement's hermeneutic for scriptural exegesis. Chapters 11 - 26 address Clement's first major point, that the rich can, in fact, be saved. These chapters also contain two important subdivisions. Chapters 6 - 17 are focused on whether or not rich people need to actually sell all their belongings in order to follow Christ, while chapters 18 - 26 address broader issues. Chapters 27 - 41 then outline the second of Clement's major points, by detailing the type of works that are necessary for the rich man to gain salvation. Once again, it is possible to subdivide these chapters into a first section which is narrowly focused on the idea of following God's commandments through redemptive almsgiving (chapters 27 - 36), followed by a larger section with a broader focus on the proper Christian life (chapters 37 - 41). The work ends with a myth about St. John that serves as a coda to the entire piece. After this story, there is a small lacuna, and then a brief conclusion (chapter 42).

To begin with, Clement's introduction makes his arguments clear and removes any ambiguity about his general point. It begins by decrying those who simply flatter the

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<sup>145</sup> Clement, *Dives*, 3.

wealthy in an effort to gain their favor.<sup>146</sup> This is important to understand. Of all the surviving documents composed by Christian authors before or during this time, Clement's is the first to focus solely on the issue of wealth and poverty. It is also the most sympathetic to the wealthy. Yet, Clement is adamant that Christians should not simply flatter the rich but instead be honest with them and correct their errors for their own benefit. If the rich are not corrected, their salvation will be at risk, and thus it is necessary for Christians not to be simply fatuous admirers.

Clement's argument rests on his understanding of the process of salvation itself. To him, there are two components: first, one must understand and know divine truth, and second, one must perform good works.<sup>147</sup> While a later part of the document goes into fuller detail on this matter, the introduction focuses on the fact that knowing both God and Christ are essential to beginning the Christian life.<sup>148</sup> Because of this, Clement argues that Christians should take pains to make sure that wealthy people do not dismiss Christianity out of hopelessness and a feeling of alienation, thus preventing them from learning about God through the scriptures..

Within this introductory section, Clement also lays out his general hermeneutic for biblical interpretation. As mentioned above, Clement has a clear preference for "spiritual" as opposed to "earthly" matters. He argues:

For as it is indeed clear to be seen that the Savior teaches to his people nothing in a human way, but all things by means of divine and mystical wisdom, we must not

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<sup>146</sup> Clement, *Dives*, 1.

<sup>147</sup> Clement, *Dives*, 1.

<sup>148</sup> Clement, *Dives*, 7 - 8.

understand his words carnally, but with worthy seeking and intelligence, we must search for their obscured meaning.<sup>149</sup>

Clement's understanding of the nature and purpose of scripture thus necessitates that he seek out metaphorical meanings where earlier authors adopted literal ones. Every recorded saying of Jesus must therefore conceal a "hidden" meaning, which is accessed through the application of a metaphor.<sup>150</sup> In this case, because Jesus must be concealing a meaning deeper than just the literal "sell all you have," Clement metaphorizes wealth to represent some spiritual quality inside of people instead of material wealth.

What is more, Clement insists that the revelation of Jesus is wholly unique in human history. Therefore, Clement rejects any meaning, metaphorical or literal, if it is too similar to something which had already been proposed in some established philosophical system.<sup>151</sup> So, for example, since the Cynics had a long tradition of selling off their possessions and entering into voluntary poverty, Jesus' true teaching, in Clement's view, cannot be simply to adopt voluntary poverty.<sup>152</sup> If so, Jesus would simply be teaching a different version of conclusions to which pagan philosophers had already come, and Christianity would be largely pointless.

With this in mind, Clement goes about analyzing the text of Mark using this hermeneutic of hidden meanings and radical originality. The first thing he does is to remove the biggest stumbling block for wealthy Christians and argue that it is *not*

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<sup>149</sup> Clement, *Dives*, 5.

<sup>150</sup> Clement, *Dives*, 5.

<sup>151</sup> Clement, *Dives*, 11.

<sup>152</sup> *Ibid.*

necessary, contrary to what the gospel text seems to say, to abandon all wealth in order to follow Jesus. Once Clement has dealt with this major issue, he is free to address its ramifications.

This line of argumentation begins in chapter 11, in which Clement describes how the rich man who came to Jesus runs away after Jesus tells him to sell all his belongings. Clement assures his audience, first, that the man simply did not understand that Jesus was speaking spiritually, and not materially.<sup>153</sup> Clement argues that one does not need to sell off one's possessions, but rather "... to banish from the soul its opinions about wealth, its attachment (*sympatheia*) to them..."<sup>154</sup> The problem is the attachment to wealth, not the riches themselves. Clement argues in favor of the commonsense attitude that poverty is bad. One should not desire to be destitute, but rather to be happy one has the means to survive. He continues:

Why, if this were so [that poverty is righteous], those men who have nothing at all, but are destitute and beg for their daily bread, who lie along the roads in abject poverty, would, though "ignorant" of God and "God's righteousness," be most blessed and beloved of God and the only possessors of eternal life, by the sole fact of their being utterly without ways and means of livelihood and in want of the smallest necessities.<sup>155</sup>

Clement's apparent disdain for the absolute poor is notable, especially in light of the writings of the Apostolic Fathers, Mark 10, and Luke's account of the "Beatitudes" in which Jesus says that the poor and the hungry are indeed blessed. Clement dismisses offhand, almost as if his conclusion were incontrovertible, any notion that the *ptochoi* as

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<sup>153</sup> Clement, *Dives*, 11.

<sup>154</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>155</sup> Clement, *Dives*, 11. Translated by G.W. Butterworth, adapted.



such (and the *penetes* as well) could be the principal people of God, an idea which earlier authors such as James took as a central Christian teaching.

In the next chapter, Clement goes on to explain why he views voluntary poverty as ineffective:

It is possible for a man, after having unburdened himself of his property, to be nonetheless continually absorbed and occupied in the desire and longing for it. He has given up the use of wealth, but now being in difficulties and at the same time yearning after what he threw away, he endures a double annoyance, the absence of means of support and the presence of regret. For when a man lacks the necessities of life he cannot possibly fail to be broken in spirit and to neglect the higher things, as he strives to procure these necessities by any means and from any source...<sup>156</sup>

At first, it may seem odd for Clement, who greatly values the spiritual over the corporeal, to be concerned first and foremost about having basic physical needs met, but the logic he espouses here is internally consistent. Because salvation is dependent upon studying and learning divine truth, and after that performing good works, Clement sees a need for Christians to have a certain amount of wealth just to follow the path to salvation with some reasonable measure of means and hope for survival.

In the next two chapters, he points out the costs which poverty imposes and extols some of the benefits of prosperity, including the ability both to take care of oneself and, more important, to perform acts of charity and service for others, as commanded by Jesus.

We must not then fling away the riches that are of benefit to our neighbors as well as ourselves. For they are called possessions because they are things possessed, and wealth because they are to be welcomed and because they have been prepared by God for the welfare of men. Indeed, they lie at hand and are put at our disposal as a sort of material and as instruments to be well used by those who know.<sup>157</sup>

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<sup>156</sup> Clement, *Dives*, 12. Translated by G.W. Butterworth, adapted.

<sup>157</sup> Clement of Alexandria, *Dives*, 14. Translated by G.W. Butterworth, adapted.

In other words, Clement does not view wealth as an evil necessary for living life, but as a tool which can actually provide benefits to others. Moreover, by providing aid to those in need, Christians store up for themselves good merit which leads them toward salvation. For Clement, this is a win-win situation.

So, in Clement's mind, wealthy Christians do not really need to adopt voluntary poverty, but instead to change their relationship to wealth in a more interior way, guided by means of a metaphorical reading of scripture, but what does this entail? In this exegesis, the real focus of Jesus' exhortations about the poor is the adoption of a "poverty of passions," meaning that Christians must empty themselves of attachments and strong desires for wealth.<sup>158</sup> In a dramatic *volte face* from the traditional Christian take on wealth and poverty, in which physical poverty and spiritual wealth were considered an integrated pair, Clement makes spiritual wealth, that is, a preponderance of passions and lusts, the real problem.<sup>159</sup>

In this passage, thus, a wealthy spirit is one that empties itself and becomes pure in order to follow Jesus. For that reason, it is those who are "poor in spirit" who are blessed. Clement explicitly quotes Matthew's version of the Beatitudes, emphasizing that it is an abject poverty of the spirit which marks a person as one of God's own.<sup>160</sup> As for someone who is actually poor, that person is, according to Clement, "miserable ... destitute of God ... and unattached to the righteousness of God."<sup>161</sup> It is true that

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<sup>158</sup> Clement, *Dives*, 15 - 16.

<sup>159</sup> Clement, *Dives*, 16.

<sup>160</sup> Clement, *Dives*, 17.

<sup>161</sup> *Ibid.*

Matthew's version of the metaphor of wealth – spiritual wealth as a negative and spiritual poverty as a positive – had been part of the Christian tradition almost since its beginning, but the majority of the authors before Clement preferred to focus on the opposite view, that spiritual wealth is good and spiritual poverty is bad. Clement, however, cements in place this alternate version of the metaphor from Matthew's version.

Having circumvented this major stumbling block to the admission of well-to-do would-be Christians, Clement goes on to explain that salvation is indeed possible for the rich. Arguing that salvation does not rely “on outward things” but “on the virtue of the soul,” Clement contends that the rich man is capable of developing virtue and thus can be saved.<sup>162</sup> Picking up where he left off in chapter sixteen, he continues the previous theme of a “poverty of passions” by arguing that, if a man is detached from but not necessarily denuded of material wealth, he can become rich in virtue.<sup>163</sup>

There is some irony in Clement's use of the metaphor “rich in virtue.” Just three chapters prior, Clement flipped the traditional metaphor of wealth on its head, to suggest that spiritual wealth is a negative, because a spirit wealthy in passion has no room for God. Here, though, the reader encounters another type of spiritual wealth, now a virtue. Clement pronounces this good sort of spiritual wealth a positive. These two genera of spiritual wealth are obviously different and, for Clement, opposites. What is interesting to note is that Clement is not consistent in his use of the metaphor of spiritual wealth: rather, to him, spiritual wealth can be a metaphor for either good or bad qualities, depending on how at any point he wishes to employ the term. Having argued that material wealth is a

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<sup>162</sup> Clement, *Dives*, 18.

<sup>163</sup> Clement, *Dives*, 19.

positive while spiritual wealth is a negative, Clement feels free to introduce another type of spiritual wealth which is in itself positive. This flies in the face of the thesis laid out by earlier authors that, if spiritual wealth is a positive, material wealth must be a negative. In this way, Clement dances on the verge of inconsistency even within his own work.

Yet as Rhee notes, what Clement is likely trying to do is break down the traditional divide between the “pious poor and wicked rich,” and instead demonstrate that both rich and poor can be either moral or immoral.<sup>164</sup> Clement therefore bends the metaphor almost past its breaking point, so as to allow for someone to be rich in both a good and a bad way in both the material and spiritual understandings as he defines them.

With that, he continues to reassure the well-off in his audience of the potential for salvation. Reminding readers of the conclusion of the Gospel passage, Clement comforts them with the detail that “the thing which is impossible among humans is possible for God.”<sup>165</sup> If any readers were still left in doubt about their ability to achieve a passion-less state (*apatheia*), the document consoles them by arguing that no person can actually achieve this. It is enough just to try, so long as they truly make a concerted effort.

Clement then describes what this effort should look like. Again, he states that it is not about surrendering one’s wealth and taking on voluntary poverty, but rather, rising above a love of money and an attachment to wealth.<sup>166</sup> The rich can have money, just as long as they do not love it in place of God. Clement also notes here, following Matthew 5:29 - 30, if a rich person is unable to become unattached to his wealth, that it may be

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<sup>164</sup> Rhee, *Loving the Poor, Saving the Rich*, 80.

<sup>165</sup> Clement, *Dives*, 21.

<sup>166</sup> Clement, *Dives*, 24.

necessary to give it up, citing a popular teaching of Jesus, “If your right eye causes you to stumble, quickly cut it out.”<sup>167</sup> But again, this is only if one is inappropriately attached to physical gains, and this does not seem to be the case for the majority of people in Clement’s mind. Rather, it reads like an off-hand remark, a minor qualification.

This section closes with several lines of comfort directed toward wealthy Christians and potential converts. He assures them again that the rich are not cut out from the possibility of salvation, and he rejects as ridiculous the idea that saving money by being frugal is bad, or that someone will be denied salvation simply by being born into a wealthy family.<sup>168</sup> Instead, salvation is possible for all believers, and so the wealthy should take great pains to live a life which leads in that direction.<sup>169</sup>

Chapter 27 marks the midway point in Clement’s work. Having established *why* it is possible for the rich to be saved, Clement goes on to describe *how* the rich, and for that matter, all Christians, can be saved. It all boils down to the fulfillment of the “Great Commandments,” also recorded in Mark and the other Synoptic Gospels. Clement argues that the rich man, having been assured that his salvation is possible, should set about living a life according to the principles of love of God and love of neighbor.<sup>170</sup>

The love of God, which Clement does not describe here in detail, is essential, as it brings a Christian closer to the divine, regardless of economic state. Clement states that, even though no one is able to love God as much as God deserves, by loving God to the

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<sup>167</sup> Clement, *Dives*, 24.

<sup>168</sup> Clement, *Dives*, 26.

<sup>169</sup> Clement, *Dives*, 27.

<sup>170</sup> Clement, *Dives*, 27 - 28.

greatest extent possible, believers are able to draw that much closer to God.<sup>171</sup>

Conversely, Clement describes what love of a neighbor looks like in greater detail. He illustrates this by an exegesis of the story of the Good Samaritan as recorded in Luke 10, which ends with Jesus' disciples stating that one's neighbor is anyone who performs good works for them. For Clement, love of neighbor means doing good works, for good works, he says, "are love bursting forth."<sup>172</sup> In other words, part of loving God is following the commandment to love others.<sup>173</sup>

Therefore, Clement calls for those who would seek salvation to focus on loving and serving the people of God, i.e., Christians. "For whatever someone does for a disciple, the Lord takes that to himself and makes it all his own," he writes.<sup>174</sup> Quoting from Matthew 10, Clement reminds his audience of the importance of doing good works for others. The rich man is not required to become poor himself, Clement reasserts; rather, he should go about doing good for the poor.

This then leads Clement to bring up a familiar topic, redemptive almsgiving. For Clement, one of the reasons that a person should not take on voluntary poverty is that being poor themselves prevents them from giving charity to those who are poor. Charity becomes an important vehicle of redemption in its own right, one that converts wealth into a positive quality. Clement reiterates a former point that having many possessions is a good thing when one then uses them to provide for those in need, but that wealth is

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<sup>171</sup> Clement, *Dives*, 27.

<sup>172</sup> Clement, *Dives*, 28.

<sup>173</sup> Clement, *Dives*, 29.

<sup>174</sup> Clement, *Dives*, 30.

unrighteous if one is selfishly attached to it.<sup>175</sup> So, one should focus on giving whenever possible.

Here, Clement's words resonate closely with the tradition that preceded him. In the previous section, the overt goal of comforting the rich is often at odds with the attitudes of the authors who came before him. Here, however, when talking about almsgiving, Clement follows the well-established tradition.

What beautiful trade, what divine market (*agora*)! Someone purchases incorruption with money, and giving the perishable things of the created world, he receives in return an abode in the heavens for all time. Sail! O rich man, for this marketplace, if you are wise...<sup>176</sup>

Adopting the language of business and trade, Clement repeats a similar notion to one presented in the oft-quoted Tobit 4:10, arguing that almsgiving provides a way out of death. Because they have such great resources, the rich should take great pains to provide for the needy, as this will demonstrate their love both of neighbor and of God through Christ. He adds further that a rich man should not attempt to distinguish between those who are “worthy” of charity, and those who are not; instead, he should give freely as he is able, acknowledging that he is unable to make perfect determinations of character and need.<sup>177</sup> By giving as freely as he can, the rich man is able to be best assured that he is living up to the commandments and earning his way toward salvation.

The precedents for redemptive almsgiving in the church, which has its basis in pre-Christian Jewish understandings of the practice, have long been laid out in Clement's

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<sup>175</sup> Clement, *Dives*, 31.

<sup>176</sup> Clement, *Dives*, 32.

<sup>177</sup> Clement, *Dives*, 33.

day, but his Roman audience likely saw this redemptive almsgiving as something akin to their tradition of patronage. In the patron-client system, the wealthiest members of society were pressured to give monetary favors to less well-off people in return for various forms of service and support.<sup>178</sup> In many ways, Clement presents almsgiving as a Christian analogue of this practice, as he explains in chapter 34 of the work:

Obtain with your wealth, as guards for your body and your soul, such men as these, whose commander is God. Through them, the sinking ship rises, steered by the prayers of saints alone; and sickness at its height is subdued, put to flight by the laying on of hands; the attack of robbers is made harmless, being stripped of its weapons through pious prayers; and the violence of daemons is shattered, reduced to impotence by confident commands.<sup>179</sup>

In other words, by becoming a patron of a local church, a wealthy person in effect gains the members of that church as clients, who then return spiritual benefits, and perhaps even corporal ones, if that is what Clement means by the “laying on of hands,” that they actually send away physical ailments. As Clement notes, this is not *just* a matter of giving money but of entering into a relationship with those to whom you give alms.<sup>180</sup>

In return, the Christians whom the rich man supports monetarily provide spiritual support in various ways. They may pray for the health and safety of their benefactor, provide comfort and sympathy in times of distress, and teach what is necessary to learn in order to gain salvation.<sup>181</sup> If a rich man supports good Christians, he nourishes those who are called the light of the world, God’s chosen people. Clement notes that among the

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<sup>178</sup> David Batson, *The Treasure Chest of the Early Christians: Faith, Care and Community from the Apostolic Age to Constantine the Great* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2001), 27.

<sup>179</sup> Clement, *Dives*, 34. Translated by G.W. Butterworth, adapted.

<sup>180</sup> Clement, *Dives*, 32.

<sup>181</sup> Clement, *Dives*, 35.



Church's members live those who are God's elect, whom he calls the "seed," an image also used by Justin Martyr. In both cases, the "seed" refers to the righteous people for whom God sustains the world.<sup>182</sup> Clement suggests that providing for these people is in itself a great honor, because good Christians are so noble and virtuous.

Within this discussion of redemptive almsgiving, Clement falls back on the more traditional understanding of wealth and poverty, in which the destitute are seen as spiritually rich, and the wealthy as spiritually poor. His understanding of this relationship is likely drawn straight from 1 Clement, where Clement of Rome deploys military metaphors to argue that the lowly and the great are codependent upon one another.<sup>183</sup> As Helen Rhee astutely notes, "What is noteworthy is the fact that contrary to his earlier effort to deconstruct the tradition of 'the pious poor and the wicked rich' in interiorizing and spiritualizing wealth and poverty, Clement presupposes and counts on that very tradition here in promoting redemptive almsgiving for the rich Christians."<sup>184</sup> This further demonstrates the divide between the two parts of Clement's work: the first half entails a radical departure from the tradition, and the second follows the same tradition closely.

This is especially clear in the text from chapter 37 onward which develops into a standard exhortation to lead a Christian life. Clement returns to the topic of love for a time, as a way of transitioning to the next major thing that the rich must do to be saved, namely, repentance. "Even though," Clement says, "a man be born in sins, and have done many of the deeds which are forbidden, if he but implant love in his soul he is able, by

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<sup>182</sup> Clement, *Dives*, 36; Justin, *Second Apology*, 7.

<sup>183</sup> 1 Clement 37:2-4.

<sup>184</sup> Rhee, *Loving the Poor, Saving the Rich*, 82.

increasing the love and by accepting pure repentance, to retrieve his failures.”<sup>185</sup> This is an important aspect of the duties of all Christians, and it is not unique to rich converts. A person who has committed sins at any point must seek forgiveness from God, or else even his good works will not matter in the reckoning of salvation.<sup>186</sup> In this, the rich are no different from the poor.

Here Clement returns to an earlier refrain, that, because salvation is indeed possible for anyone, the rich should strive to live a life that will end with their being saved. He states that it can be advantageous to find a spiritual helper or trainer.<sup>187</sup> This trainer would help counsel the wealthy person and guide them in proper spiritual matters, and comfort and guide the person toward salvation without any dishonesty or flattery.<sup>188</sup> Again, a sense of the patron-client system resonates in this advice. Through the help of such a person, a rich man may be guided down the path and indeed find salvation.

Having reached the end of his argument, Clement inserts a brief narrative to serve as a coda to the entire work. In the myth, John meets a young man, and commends him to the local bishop to be brought up in the Christian life. The youth is baptized, but with St. John gone, the bishop does not care for the man as closely as he should, and the young man ends up in a gang of violent bandits. When John returns one day, and asks after his charge, the bishop tells the apostle that the boy is a lost cause. This leads John to find the band of robbers, and upon speaking with him, the youth repents of his crimes and rejoins

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<sup>185</sup> Clement, *Dives*, 38. Translated by G.W. Butterworth, adapted.

<sup>186</sup> Clement, *Dives*, 40.

<sup>187</sup> Clement, *Dives*, 41.

<sup>188</sup> *Ibid.*

the Christian fellowship. The Myth of St. John and the Robber illustrates Clement's central, pastoral concern that, if someone believes that they are unable to be saved, or they do not have a clear path to it, they will as a result become a worse person. But if they can be convinced that they have the potential for salvation, as well as a spiritual guide leads them down the path of righteousness, they can become an honest and good individual who contributes to and benefits the Church.

With this, Clement concludes the first extant Christian work focused on the issues of wealth and poverty. At the risk of overstating its significance, *Quis Dives Salvetur* represents an important benchmark in the evolution of early Christian thought, a shift away from denouncing the rich and toward providing them with pastoral care. With this, the scale tips across a critical line and grounds a fundamental revision in Christian attitudes and later official doctrine as well.

To make this point clear, it is profitable to examine some of the authors who lived after Clement and adopted and disseminated his opinions on this matter. The influence of his argument about wealth is seen as early as the writings of Origen of Alexandria, who tradition holds was his successor in the Catechistic School of Alexandria. In his treatise *On Prayer*, c. 235 CE, Origen addresses poverty and the poor in two main *loci*. First in the eleventh chapter, Origen describes a poor man praying, and God sending a rich man to hear the poor man's prayer so that the rich man may give alms to the poor.<sup>189</sup> Once again, a mutual relationship between the poor and the rich within the Christian community is articulated. Then in chapter twenty-nine, Origen adopts Clement's negative

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<sup>189</sup> Origen, *On Prayer*, 11.4.

view of financial poverty, arguing that poverty creates a temptation for sin which results in the poor not being inherently blessed.

“Is someone poor? Let him take care lest he steal and profane the name of the Lord. Is someone rich? Let him not be disdainful, for he can become filled with a lie and lifted up to say “Who sees me?”... And since I have not said much about the poor man, if someone disdains the poor man’s temptation as no temptation at all, let him know that the Plotter plots to bring down the poor and the needy, especially since, according to Solomon, ‘The poor man does not stand up to threatening.’ And why must I say how many have taken their place in punishment [alongside] the rich man in the Gospel because they have not administered corporeal wealth rightly, and how many have fallen away from the heavenly hope by bearing their poverty basely and living more slavishly and more lowly than is fitting among saints? Nor are those between the two extremes of wealth and poverty freed entirely from sinning because of their moderate possessions.”<sup>190</sup>

From this it is clear Origen’s understanding closely resembles Clement’s. Both restrict the privileged position of the poor before God in an effort to reject the notion that salvation is tied to economic status.

Another example of the same, this one from the Latin West, comes from Jerome of Stridon (c. 342 - 420 CE). In arguing that poverty is a decidedly un-blessed state, his 79th letter maintains the same position Clement takes, that the poor are not intrinsically blessed and that poverty invites sin. Jerome writes, “For indeed each man is not judged on account of his person, but on the merits of his deeds. For neither does the wealth of the rich man stand in his way, if he uses it well, nor can poverty be made a commendation for the poor man, if he does not beware of sin in the midst of squalor and want.”<sup>191</sup> Clearly Clement’s deconstruction of the intrinsic notions of the righteous poor and the accursed rich met with broad success across the world. Indeed, for any Christian community which hoped to include wealthy benefactors, it was a *sine qua non*.

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<sup>190</sup> Origen, *On Prayer*, 29.5-6. Translated by Rowan A. Greer, adapted.

<sup>191</sup> Jerome, *Letters*, 79.1.

These two examples are hardly an exhaustive study of Clement's later influence; rather, they seek to demonstrate that, at least in the non-monastic parts of the Church, Clement's arguments about economic status and its relation to salvation prevailed on a grand scale. That poverty came to be seen as a lamentable, not spiritually privileged state became the standard teaching of the church in later years. Under Clement's tutelage, the dispossessed became literally that.

Whereas in the earliest days of the religion, the Christian community was largely composed of the relatively poor and ministry was directed toward their needs and situation, Clement's document shows how, as more and more people from the upper echelons of society joined the church, Christian doctrine was revised to make room for them. Drawing selectively on the past and clearing a new path forward, Clement laid down the rules for a new sort of church in which everyone, from the abjectly poor to the Roman Emperor himself, could participate. As a result of this, new doors opened and Christianity was able to expand as never before, even as the character of the movement was dramatically changed by Clement's influence.

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