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Poverty and Its Causes in the Early Church

Lynn H. Cohick

Introduction

The title of this essay, 'Poverty and Its Causes in the Early Church', is wonderfully provocative, for it demands not only a definition of poverty but also an explanation for why such a situation exists. Then, as now, 'poverty' is a relative term, and defining it entails a reflection on the economic, moral, social, gender and political aspects of the poor person. The ancient Roman world rarely reflected on the causes of poverty. Instead, the elite focused on such topics as the moral questions surrounding wealth, the civic responsibilities of the wealthy and the moral failings of those who laboured for a living. The New Testament (NT), likewise, does not weigh in on this specific debate about the causes of poverty per se.¹ Instead, it focuses on the needs of the poor person, including physical care and justice, and the requirements of those with means to provide aid. This book is dedicated to exploring these needs and requirements, and I am especially eager to hear the work of those who engage in poverty issues today. This essay will hopefully provide a historical backdrop for these discussions and highlight the primary evidence used by theorists in determining the economic profile of the earliest Christians.

When I began this exploration into the questions surrounding ancient poverty and wealth, I created a list of possible causes of poverty present in the age of the early church. I reckoned my three years living in rural Kenya had alerted me to systemic issues of poverty, to which I could add my knowledge of the Hellenistic and early Roman Imperial periods. My research affirmed that, in some cases, my list was accurate. For example, natural disasters such as drought or flooding can wreak havoc on food supplies.² Poor sanitary conditions and lack of medical knowledge, coupled

¹ Steven J. Friesen, 'Injustice or God's Will? Early Christian Explanations of Poverty', in *Wealth and Poverty in Early Church and Society*, ed. Susan R. Holman (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2008), 17–36, here 18, observes that he could not find 'a single study on early Christian analyses of the causes of poverty'.

² Peter Garnsey, *Cities, Peasants and Food in Classical Antiquity: Essays in Social and Economic History*, ed. with addenda by Walter Scheiden (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 275, who concludes that 'famines, thus defined, are, and always have been, rare: they are genuine catastrophes'. Garnsey concludes that famine is linked to the 'collapse of the social, political and moral order'.

with rather routine epidemics, took many able-bodied labourers from the work force and brought families to ruin.³ These factors fall under the categories of human ignorance and ‘acts of God’, and generally are not the focus of research on the ancient economy or concepts of wealth and poverty. Instead, government policies, taxes and laws, the Roman military and cultural values informing ‘the good life’ all play roles in creating wealth and causing poverty in the period of the early church.

Scholars analyse poverty in this period using at least three different approaches: social scientific models, economic analysis and archaeological research. The results can be roughly divided into two rather distinct pictures. On the one hand, classicists using theories from economics conclude that between roughly 200 BCE and 200 CE, the Roman economy flourished at levels not again reached until the early Industrial Era. Archaeological evidence, at the very least, does not contradict this conclusion and often seems to strengthen it. On the other hand, those drawing on social science models emphasize conflict between elite and peasant, with its attending injustice and displacement of the landless subsistence farmer. This approach rightly warns readers today to avoid imposing their own economic biases and assumptions onto the ancient world; however, in some cases, the social scientific models’ expectations of class conflict and oppression may posit such activity in the absence of any solid evidence.

This paper argues that the late Republic and early Roman Imperial period (first century BCE to second century CE) was a time of economic upturn that included widespread trade and developing ceramic and textile industries offering employment and livelihood to many. I am persuaded that the majority of households were not at the brink of starvation and ruin by debt, although populations suffered widespread hunger at times due to epidemics or war. For example, Josephus tells us that Queen Helena from Adiabene, a recent convert to Judaism, helped those in Jerusalem during a crisis. Josephus states that ‘many people died for want to money to procure food. Queen Helena sent some of her servants to Alexandria with money to buy a great quantity of grain, and others of them to Cyprus to bring back a cargo of dried figs . . . which she immediately distributed to those that need’ (*Ant.* 20.2.5).⁴ Individuals faced poverty for several reasons, including from (1) forces that weakened the body, such as disease and malnutrition, and (2) lack of opportunity to find work or benefit from one’s labour, often related to both (3) government policy or injustice that benefited only those in power and (4) the clash of ideologies as Rome imposed its cultural, social and political will on subject ethnicities who held opposing fundamental views. I will focus primarily on the latter two causes. The essays from Fiona Gregson and Christopher Hays will go much more into depth in this area.

(280). See also Peter Garnsey, *Famine and Food Supply in the Graeco-Roman World: Responses to Risk and Crisis* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988).

³ Galen, *De Rebus Boni Malique Suci* 1.1–3, notes that the countryside could face a food shortage even as the city had stored food to sustain them. Eating unwholesome foods, such as roots, twigs and grasses, led to skin diseases, tumors, fevers, dysentery and abscesses. Garnsey notes that the ‘effect of famine is largely indirect’ and that ‘infection [is] the real killer’ (*Cities*, 283–84).

⁴ This famine was probably 46–48 CE, although it may have started in Fadus’s time, 44 CE. Claudius ruled 41–54 CE.

Additionally, the institution of slavery played a key role in the Roman economy, and its economic impact is so vast that it properly requires a separate treatment.⁵ The slave is quite often the face of the poor; however, most studies reserve the categories of poverty and 'the poor' to free men and women, and to freedmen and freedwomen (i.e. those who had been freed from slavery). This is due perhaps in part to the connection we make today between poverty/wealth and labour choices and conditions. Thus, while we cannot treat its impact in this short essay, we must keep in mind slavery's pervasive impact on wages and labourers' opportunity to work their land and freedom to innovate.

Definitions of poverty

Our study focuses on the causes of poverty, a topic embedded within a larger conversation. To look at poverty, one must determine what counts as wealth; both are relative terms that reflect opposite poles of a given group of people. Poverty often implies deprivation, as Peter Oakes recognizes when he defines poverty as 'the economically enforced inability to participate in the normal activities of society'.⁶ Oakes concludes that researching economy involves 'the study of the allocation of scarce resources'.⁷ He rightly notes that social position does not easily map onto the economic situation of the individual; for example, in rather rare cases, one finds a wealthy slave. He warns, 'Any attempt to isolate economics from other social factors such as politics would be doomed'.⁸ Mik Larsen follows Oakes, citing Adam Smith's characterization that the poor lack the ability 'to participate fully in society'.⁹ Larsen discusses the complexity of defining poverty from the literature of the day. Some ancient authors argued that poverty in the abstract could be a virtuous and noble state, but actual poverty in the present could be a threat to social order and stability. Additionally, one reads much about 'wellborn poverty', which befalls the upper classes, and 'voluntary poverty' chosen by the wealthy whose morality is thereby exemplified by their frugality.¹⁰ Urban poor lacked land and, thus, were derided as failing to be self-sufficient.¹¹ As Harris laments, 'While it is possible to write the *cultural* history of

⁵ Moses I. Finley, *The Ancient Economy*, updated edn (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1999), 95–122, includes a lengthy chapter devoted to the complexity of the ancient system of slavery and its impact on Roman economy. See also Daron Acemoglu and James A. Robinson, *Why Nations Fail: The Origins of Power, Prosperity, and Poverty* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2012), who note that Rome's reliance on slave labour contributed to the 'extractive' nature of its economy and thus its downfall.

⁶ Peter Oakes, 'Methodological Issues in Using Economic Evidence in Interpretation of Early Christian Texts', in *Engaging Economics: New Testament Scenarios and Early Christian Reception*, ed. Bruce W. Longenecker and Kelly D. Liebengood (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2009), 9–34, here 30.

⁷ Oakes, 'Methodological Issues', 12.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 11.

⁹ Mik Larsen, 'The Representation of Poverty in the Roman Empire' (PhD diss., University of California Los Angeles, 2015), 5.

¹⁰ Larsen, 'Representation', 8, 154.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 21.

poverty – to put it telegraphically, what people thought about poverty and the poor – its *economic* history is too slippery to grasp.¹² Nevertheless, I shall try to apprehend it by looking at an ancient Roman's life.

Economic models and theories of the ancient Roman economy

Eumachia's business and trade

In first-century CE Pompeii, the guild of fullers celebrated the generous gifts of their patron, the wealthy Eumachia, by erecting a statue dedicated to her. Eumachia did not come from a senatorial or equestrian family. Elizabeth Will notes, 'The family estate included a pottery factory large enough to produce bricks, shipping jars and dishes for international export.'¹³ Eumachia appears to be the only heir of her father's wealth and business, and she used it in part to build a finely crafted edifice, whose Corinthian column capitals have been judged 'as the purest and most elegant found in Pompeii'.¹⁴ Eumachia represents the category of women Suetonius speaks of in his *Life of Claudius*. Suetonius notes that to keep Rome fed, Claudius promised profit to merchants who shipped grain to the city by assuming the risk should the boat be lost in a storm. Moreover, he promised ship builders key legal exemptions: 'to a citizen exemption from the *lex Papia Poppaea*; to a Latin the rights of Roman citizenship; to women the privileges allowed the mothers of four children. And all these provisions are in force today' (*Claud.* 18–19). Eumachia's inscriptions, building projects and family businesses invite further exploration.¹⁵ We turn now to examine this period from the economist's categories of production, distribution and consumption.¹⁶

Production, distribution and consumption

Production in the ancient world looked quite different (not surprisingly) than what the term conjures up today.¹⁷ In general, businesses were not looking to cut labour costs by investing in technology, as several stories reveal. In one case, Emperor Tiberius is shown a sample of flexible or unbreakable glass. The maker assumes he will get a

¹² W. V. Harris, *Rome's Imperial Economy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 30.

¹³ Elizabeth Lyding Will, 'Women in Pompeii', *Archaeology* 32 (1979): 34–43, here 38.

¹⁴ Will, 'Women', 38.

¹⁵ For helpful reviews of the major scholars and theories, see Helen Rhee, *Loving the Poor, Saving the Rich: Wealth, Poverty, and Early Christian Formation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2012); and Michael J. Sandford, *Poverty, Wealth, and Empire: Jesus and Postcolonial Criticism*, NTM 35 (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix, 2014).

¹⁶ Keith Hopkins, 'Taxes and Trade in the Roman Empire (200 B.C.–A.D. 400)', *JRS* 70 (1980): 101–25, here 102, argues for a more mutually beneficial relationship between city and surrounding countryside. 'This simple model implies a whole series of small-scale changes in production, distribution and consumption, whose cumulative impact over time was important.'

¹⁷ Dennis P. Kehoe, 'The Early Roman Empire: Production', in *The Cambridge Economic History of the Graeco-Roman World*, ed. Walter Scheidel, Ian Morris and Richard Saller (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 543–69, esp. 543–47, offers a useful summary.

reward, but Tiberius hands him his head, literally, for Tiberius worries that with this innovation, gold will be reduced to the value of mud (Petronius, *Satyricon* 51). In another case, Suetonius notes that Vespasian declined to reward a mechanical engineer who devised a way to transport heavy columns at little expense, saying, ‘You must let me feed my poor commons’ (*Vesp.* 18). Thus, technological advances that boosted production tended to be modest and rare. Moreover, as Eumachia’s building project indicates, surplus was often spent on conspicuous consumption or lavish public edifices.

Cities grew as the economy expanded, for the population overall grew about 33 per cent in the period from Augustus to the Antonines.¹⁸ Economic growth involved both population increase and per capita increase, which was quite rare until the Industrial Revolution. Instead, what we usually see is Malthus’s theory played out, which postulates that as a population grows, standards of living and food supplies dwindle. This leads to a decrease in population, which drives up standard of living – to start the cycle all over again.¹⁹ Morley, Jongman, Alcock and others, however, suggest that for this brief period in history, Malthus’s theory does not hold. Instead, the economy grew and many benefited.²⁰ This growth, generating the need for building supplies and food, water and clothing, occurred as the Roman government mined great quantities of silver, especially in Spain. These amounts would not be matched until the beginning of the Industrial Revolution. Moreover, Romans quarried more marble during this period than any other culture has done.²¹

Merchants and builders oversaw the constructing of the numerous public building in city centres or aqueducts or infrastructure projects. These people might have been freedmen or women working on behalf of their former owner, or enterprising individuals. For example, Eumachia’s family likely owned the land from which they dug the clay to make bricks or jars. It is possible that they handed over the manufacturing of the bricks to another. Slaves might have worked Eumachia’s vineyards, as was common in Italian estates along the coast at this time. However, by the second century, competition from vineyards in other parts of the empire caused the large estates in Italy to diversify into livestock and cereal production, which required less slave labour.²²

¹⁸ The plague that swept through the empire during Marcus Aurelius’s rule (161–180 CE) is often named as the reason for the decrease in production and the overall malaise of the economy.

¹⁹ Robert Thomas Malthus (1766–1834), wrote in 1798 ‘An Essay on the Principle of Population as It Affects the Future Improvement of Society, with Remarks on the Speculations of Mr. Godwin, M. Condorcet, and Other Writers’ (<http://www.esp.org/books/malthus/population/malthus.pdf>, accessed March 2017). He argued that human population growth would always exceed humans’ ability to grow enough food, hence famine would be a permanent experience for some or many. His ideas continue to be debated, as seen in David Rieff, *The Reproach of Hunger: Food, Justice, and Money in the Twenty-First Century* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2015).

²⁰ Susan Alcock, ‘The Eastern Mediterranean’, in *The Cambridge Economic History of the Graeco-Roman World*, ed. Walter Scheidel, Ian Morris and Richard Saller (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 671–98, here 686, notes that the evidence points ‘for an overall increase in productive activity in the early imperial east, as well as continuing the reassessment and deconstruction of the “consumer city” model for classical antiquity’.

²¹ Willem M. Jongman, ‘The Early Roman Empire: Consumption’, in *The Cambridge Economic History of the Graeco-Roman World*, ed. Walter Scheidel, Ian Morris and Richard Saller (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 592–618, here 592.

²² Kehoe, ‘Early Roman Empire: Production’, 555.

The fullers who honoured Eumachia were part of the clothing production process. It could be that Eumachia owned sheep, but if so, she likely did not oversee the production of wool and cloth. Indeed, she may have leased the land to a herdsman or a merchant who took all the risks of caring for sheep and producing the cloth. Looms were inexpensive and could be set up in homes, where the initial spinning of wool was done. Those involved in the process of taking the sheared wool and working it into cloth, including weavers and artisans, organized into guilds (*collegia* or *synodoi*).²³ Alcock notes that in the Eastern Empire, over one hundred occupations are listed on tombstones, leading her to conclude the existence of *collegia* as a 'dense network of manufacturing activities at work'.²⁴ These artisans would not have enjoyed a high wage or high status, but they would also not have lived at or below subsistence levels.

In the late Republic and early Imperial periods, wine was shipped extensively across the Mediterranean. Eumachia's business participated in this expansion, for after producing wine and amphoras in which to store it, her business shipped the wine across the Empire. Shipwrecks recently excavated in the south coast of France and Spain reveal extensive economic activity between 200 BCE and 200 CE, at a level not reached again until the sixteenth century. Hopkins notes, 'There was more sea-borne trade in the Mediterranean than ever before, and more than there was for the next thousand years'.²⁵ Broadly speaking, archaeology indicates the distribution of foodstuffs and pottery on a large scale to the general population within and between regions of the Roman Empire. Previously these materials had been produced and consumed locally, or had not been consumed by the majority of people.

The wine, food and pottery often followed the distribution paths of the Roman military, which might be thought of as a centre of demand that required more goods than could be supplied locally. Morley estimates that the military used about one half of the total imperial budget in the mid-first century CE, with many of the troops stationed at the empire's frontiers.²⁶ Additionally, one could think of Rome as a centre of demand, and even more, Morley suggests that cities in the provinces sought to imitate Rome and, thus, created broad distribution patterns.²⁷ About 10–12 per cent of the population lived in cities, but it was in the cities that the elite competed with each other to emulate Rome.

When the product arrived at the market, who was able to purchase it? Jongman argues that the empire at this time experienced a per capita income level that was 'remarkably high for a pre-industrial economy' and that this income level was enjoyed by 'relatively large segments of the population'.²⁸ Jongman presents an interesting

²³ Kehoe, 'Early Roman Empire: Production', 566.

²⁴ Alcock, 'Eastern Mediterranean', 685.

²⁵ Hopkins, 'Taxes and Trade', 106, referring to the study by A. J. Parker, *Ancient Shipwrecks of the Mediterranean and the Roman Provinces*, British Archaeological Reports International series 580 (Oxford: Hadrian, 1992).

²⁶ Neville Morley, 'The Early Roman Empire: Distribution', in *The Cambridge Economic History of the Graeco-Roman World*, ed. Walter Scheidel, Ian Morris and Richard Saller (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 570–91, here 575.

²⁷ Morley, 'The Early Roman Empire: Distribution', 574.

²⁸ Jongman, 'Early Roman Empire: Consumption', 596–7.

case for his theory of broad and modest to moderate prosperity by looking at meat consumption, which ‘rose dramatically during the late Republic, to reach a peak in the early empire.’²⁹ Jongman argues that the elite cannot be responsible for the large increase in meat consumption because they could not possibly consume that much – and the very poor would not have the surplus money to purchase meat. Jongman concludes that it is those numerous ordinary people who had enough surplus income to purchase meat in significant quantities.

Using a different approach than Jongman, Scheidel and Friesen attempt to quantify the Roman GDP and connect that with income level groups, from elite to impoverished. They note that ‘the Roman economic performance approached the ceiling of what was feasible for ancient and medieval economies and their more recent counterparts in the Third World but failed to anticipate even the early stages of the path toward modern economic development.’³⁰ Scheidel and Friesen postulate a vibrant middling group of about 10 per cent of the population. This group, as well as the elite 3 per cent of the population, controlled about 50 per cent of the income, with the remaining roughly 85–90 per cent of the population at various levels of subsistence.

Yet, as Bruce Longenecker rightly notes, a weakness in this theory is the decision to treat the urban and rural ‘middling’ group as a single unit. Longenecker suggests, ‘It seems unrealistic to imagine complete parity between urban and rural population percentages.’³¹ Additionally, Longenecker reminds us that at least some individuals who might qualify as very poor are nevertheless part of households ‘and consequently were not exposed to the harsh realities of poverty to the same extent as those . . . who lived beyond household structures.’³²

Social scientific models’ critique of an economic model

Peter Oakes, moreover, rightly points out that a focus on resources might fail to account for much of the data we have in the sources, including the NT. Instead, we need to use the messier but more representative category of behaviour. As an example, Oakes states that we might know that a person has no cloak, that is, he or she lacks a resource, and thus, we might label this person at subsistence level. However, that person might have sold the cloak to fulfil religious vows deemed more important than owning a cloak. Thus, behaviour and resource must be considered together to ascertain an adequate picture of the relative economic level of the person.³³ John Barclay also urges consideration of the social configuration of society and, thus, Paul’s churches, because ‘wealth is only *one* factor in determining who “counted for

²⁹ Jongman, ‘Early Roman Empire: Consumption’, 614.

³⁰ Walter Scheidel and Steven J. Friesen, ‘The Size of the Economy and the Distribution of Income in the Roman Empire’, *JRS* 99 (2009): 61–91, here 74.

³¹ Bruce W. Longenecker, *Remember the Poor: Paul, Poverty, and the Graeco-Roman World* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2010), 51.

³² Longenecker, *Remember*, 54. See also his detailed critique of Freisen’s 2004 Poverty Scale (317–32).

³³ Peter Oakes, ‘Constructing Poverty Scales for Graeco-Roman Society: A Response to Steven Friesen’s “Poverty in Pauline Studies”’, *JSNT* 26 (2004): 367–71, 368.

something” in the churches.’³⁴ Barclay is concerned not only with wealth or lack of it, but also with power within the churches, a social capital issue, if you will.

Barclay laments briefly the lack of comparative data from contemporary ‘third-world’ urban churches in these studies.³⁵ I will use his comment as an invitation to recount a conversation with my Kenyan friend Jane that haunts my study of poverty in the early church. My friend is married but separated, with four children, and holds a good job as a dental technician in a local clinic. We knew each other for three years, and in those last two the skies withheld most of their rain. The dust was an inch or two thick and the family gardens or *shambas* had nothing but withered vegetables. I asked her how people were doing in the village. She answered with no trace of irony, ‘God is so good; no one has starved to death.’ I had no response; nothing seemed suitable. But given the perimeters of this essay, I realize that I am a long way from being able to discern subsistence level. By my view, Jane was really poor; she lived in a mud and stick hut with tin roof, no electricity, no running water, no tarmac roads. Yet I think in her environment, she would neither be considered dirt poor, nor below subsistence level, nor even at subsistence level. She might be considered slightly above subsistence because she had work and owned some things, and could send her kids to school. Jane puts a face on the complexity of determining levels of poverty in the early church. Jane lived in a rural village, not in urban Nairobi. Her village life provides a transition for us to look at first-century Galilee.

Economy in Judaea and Galilee in the first century CE

The issues faced by the explorer of the first-century CE Galilean and Judaeian economy are closely aligned with the questions and perspectives noted above to analyse the Roman economy.³⁶ Yet we also encounter two new concerns. First, specific changes in pottery remains suggest a demographic shift from the Hasmonean period to the Herodian period (mid-second century BCE to mid-first century CE), and these changes can be usefully mapped onto the increasing concern for purity codes discussed in the Jewish literature of this period (including the NT). Second, we find a keen interest in peasant economies. Douglas Oakman, a strong proponent of the peasant economy view, stresses the precarious subsistence existence of most of the (Jewish) residents of Galilee and Judaea. Taking issue with Oakman’s views are a number of archaeologists and historians who suggest that robust trade characterizes first-century Galilee and Judaea and, even more, that the goods traded were enjoyed by most of the villagers.

The balance of evidence, as I hope to show below, favours the view that first-century Jews in Galilee, until the years immediately prior to the First Revolt (60–66 CE), enjoyed a standard of living above subsistence level, high enough to allow purchases

³⁴ John Barclay, ‘Poverty in Pauline Studies: A Response to Steven Friesen’, *JSNT* 26 (2004): 363–6, here 366.

³⁵ Barclay, ‘Poverty’, 365.

³⁶ Philip A. Harland, ‘The Economy of First-Century Palestine: State of the Scholarly Discussion’, in *The Handbook of Early Christianity: Social Science Approaches*, ed. Anthony J. Blasi, Jean Duhaime and Paul-André Turcotte (Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira Press, 2002), 511–27, here 511.

of imported pottery and wine and oil – and that the interest in purchasing specific products was tightly tied to religious purity concerns. This modestly prosperous environment grows unstable for at least two reasons: Rome's rapacious and unjust governors, and nationalistic ideology that swept across much of the Roman Empire's frontiers. These two conditions eventually lead to much poverty and displacement of Jews with the failure of the First Revolt.

Archaeological evidence from Galilee in the first century CE

Galilee in Jesus's day was populated mainly by Jews but included cities with sizable gentile populations, such as Tiberius and Sepphoris. Looking at the archaeological evidence in specific cities, Sharon Mattila focuses on the small town of great biblical fame, Capernaum.³⁷ In Jesus's day, perhaps 1,000 lived here along Lake Gennesaret's shores, compared to 7,500 to 8,000 in Sepphoris to the west. She points to the two excavated homes in Capernaum, dating to the third or fourth century CE, and notes that the Triple Courtyard House in Capernaum is about 50 per cent larger than the roughly contemporaneous Patrician House from Meiron which is often viewed as the home of a moderately well-to-do family.³⁸ Rhodian jar fragments from the second century BCE and free-blown glassware from the late first century CE in domestic spaces prompt Mattila's contention that 'at least some of the villagers in Jesus's Capernaum probably lived at a level significantly above subsistence'.³⁹ Additionally, she notes the high number of stone jars (approximately 150) found in this small town. A few of these jars were quite large and, thus, quite expensive.

Moreover, the evidence points to a local economy shaped by religious convictions. Capernaum bought wine and oil based on purity concerns that mandated Jewish kosher laws superintended the harvest, production and distribution containers of the liquids.⁴⁰ Additionally, stone containers were produced in great numbers to hold the ritually pure wine and oil. Mattila concludes that as the concern for purity and halakah rose, the 'introverted trade patterns' grew stronger.⁴¹

The archaeological evidence supports Josephus's claims about large quantities of olive oil produced in Galilee and exported to Jewish communities in Syrian Antioch. Josephus rails against his political rival, John of Gischala, who has a stranglehold on olive oil production in upper Galilee and charges high prices to Jews in Antioch (*J.W.* 2.21.2). Josephus's rant reveals a perennial problem, namely suppliers taking advantage of a crisis.⁴² As I noted above, a drought developed during our three years in Kenya.

³⁷ Sharon Lea Mattila, 'Revisiting Jesus' Capernaum: A Village of Only Subsistence-Level Fishers and Farmers?', in *The Galilean Economy in the Time of Jesus*, ed. David A. Fiensy and Ralph K. Hawkins (Atlanta: Scholars, 2013), 75–138, here 75–78.

³⁸ Meiron is in the far north of Galilee; see Eric M. Meyers, James F. Strange and Carol L. Meyers, *Excavations at Ancient Meiron, Upper Galilee, Israel, 1971–72, 1974–75, 1977*, Meiron Excavation Project 3 (Cambridge, MA: American Schools of Oriental Research, 1981). Mattila, 'Revisiting', 120.

³⁹ Mattila, 'Revisiting', 95.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 98, notes that because Capernaum was on the shores of 'living water' there was no need to construct *miqwāôt*.

⁴¹ Mattila, 'Revisiting', 105.

⁴² Lk. 12.16–21 speaks of a rich man hoarding grain (see Josephus, *Life* 13).

A Kenyan friend spoke of having a large quantity of maize (corn) harvested and stored. As the food shortages grew, he was unwilling to release the maize for sale, waiting for the prices to rise even more. I confess I was stunned. This Christian businessman stated his intentions without any sense of discomfort or confliction.

Analysis of archaeological evidence

Challenging the view presented above, Douglas Oakman and Richard Horsley argue that the archaeological data can reflect villages under the power of the wealthy elite in the cities (Oakman)⁴³ or the presence of high taxation that burdened the villages (Horsley).⁴⁴ In his work, Oakman points to Josephus's report that in 66 CE, insurgents burned the Jerusalem Archives, which included debt records (*J. W.* 2.17.6), and did the same in Sepphoris. These debts grew from 'taxes, tributes, tithes and religious dues, land rents, as well as "borrowed money"'.⁴⁵ Oakman suggests that 'ancient peasants preferred barter in kind'.⁴⁶ He concludes that Rome's monetary policy reserved silver for paying taxes and debts and left the copper tokens in use for buying and selling. This effectively kept the silver out of the peasants' pockets, following Gresham's Law ('bad money drives out good').⁴⁷ Oakman explains that the Gospels speak only indirectly about the damage done by extensive debt, because the Roman occupation would come down hard on dissenters. Jesus used parables, then, to address critical issues indirectly.⁴⁸

I remain unconvinced by Oakman's analysis. A second look at Josephus's information provides an alternative reading. Insurgents burned the debt archives in Jerusalem *after* attacking the palaces of the high priest and Agrippa I and Berenice, indicating the overarching intent of the insurgents – namely the overthrow of the Jewish 'collaborators' and Rome's rule (*J. W.* 2.17.6). A secondary, albeit important goal, was to gain the support of Jerusalem's populace, and removing debt records would help achieve that. However, in Sepphoris, Josephus speaks of the Galilean insurgents burning and looting. He makes no mention of actions against an archive holding debts; instead, he stresses the desire to destroy those who side with the Romans (*Life* 67). Fiensy correctly observes that 'the problem with the application of many of these models for the social-science critics is that the model has become the evidence'.⁴⁹

⁴³ Douglas E. Oakman, *Jesus, Debt, and the Lord's Prayer: First-Century Debt and Jesus' Intentions* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2015).

⁴⁴ Richard A. Horsley, 'Jesus and Galilee: The Contingencies of a Renewal Movement', in *Galilee through the Centuries: Confluence of Cultures*, ed. Eric M. Meyers (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1999), 57–74.

⁴⁵ Oakman, *Jesus, Debt*, 18.

⁴⁶ Douglas E. Oakman, 'Execrating? Or Execrable Peasants!', in *The Galilean Economy in the Time of Jesus*, ed. David A. Fiensy and Ralph K. Hawkins (Atlanta: Scholars, 2013), 139–64, here 156.

⁴⁷ Sir Thomas Gresham, in 1558, argued that if coins made of metals of differing values are given the same value as legal tender, the cheaper metal coins will be used for buying and selling, and the coins made of more expensive metal will be stockpiled or sent abroad – effectively removed from circulation (<https://www.britannica.com/topic/Greshams-law>, accessed March 2017).

⁴⁸ Oakman, *Jesus, Debt*, 33, notes that 'public speech in an oppressive and conflicted political situation – like that of Jesus in Roman Palestine – cannot address any serious problem in material, social, or power relations without a certain indirection or obfuscation'.

⁴⁹ Fiensy, *Christian Origins*, 84.

Religious nationalism foments revolt against Rome

James Bloom suggests the rampant Jewish nationalism fomenting unrest played a larger role than taxes or debt in bringing on the First Revolt.⁵⁰ He pays close attention to the apocalyptic fervour, which went hand in glove with the antagonism against pagan shrines and temples located in Galilee and especially Judaea. To push this a bit further, I suggest that the uprising in Galilee and Judaea in the late 60s CE was of a piece with similar revolts on the frontiers of the empire, such as that in Britain led by Boudicca, queen of the Iceni in the early 60s. These uprisings took the Romans by surprise, perhaps in part because they occurred after the initial conquest had been made. Further, the rebels' native religion seems to have played a key part in the events; at the very least, Rome saw the cult sites as the epicentre of the revolt or a main reason for the insurrection.

Why did Rome allow certain cults and destroy others? Martin Goodman notices that the native people in authority were not always the wealthiest in that society. Goodman argues, 'In essence, when faced by societies in Judaea, Gaul and Britain where high status was accorded to many who were not rich, the Romans could explain such societies to themselves only by assuming that their "unnatural" attitudes were the result of religious fanaticism.'⁵¹ Goodman's perceptive analysis recognizes the tight connection between economic wealth and high social status expected by elite Romans. The Romans explained the strong nationalistic fervour in both Britain and Judaea, which resisted Romanization of their culture, as the result of the 'stubborn and vicious religious instincts of the inhabitants'.⁵²

Moreover, it appears that the insurgents viewed Roman culture and political manoeuvring with increasing distaste. Stephen Dyson notes that Boudicca's forces devastated three cities and destroyed the imperial cult temple in Camulodunum (Tacitus, *Ann.* 14.31.6–7).⁵³ This occurred after her husband's death and the refusal by Rome to honour his will. The king left half his estate to his two daughters and the other half to the Emperor. Rome rejected the terms of the will and the possibility of female rule, and made clear their position by publicly raping the daughters in front of their mother. Additionally, a financial panic of some sort ran through the land, and loans were called. Seneca was involved, although it is unclear whether the loans were personal or imperial (Dio Cassius, *Roman History*, 62.2.1).⁵⁴ Religious tensions, nationalistic fervour, Romanization and financial mismanagement of personal or imperial loans boiled over in revolt.

⁵⁰ James L. Bloom, *The Jewish Revolts against Rome, A.D. 66–135: A Military Analysis* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2010), 17.

⁵¹ Martin Goodman, *The Ruling Class of Judaea: The Origins of the Jewish Revolt against Rome A.D. 66–70* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 240.

⁵² Goodman, *Ruling Class*, 244.

⁵³ Stephen L. Dyson, 'Native Revolts in the Roman Empire', *Historia* 20 (1971): 239–74, here 260, does not believe that the destruction of the sanctuary was key in fomenting revolt.

⁵⁴ Dyson, 'Native Revolts', 259.

Conclusion

The human-made causes of poverty in the early church reveal themselves to be problems endemic to human culture, namely, misguided governmental policies, human greed and corruption and human ideological commitments that breed conflict and war.⁵⁵ The early Pauline churches were urban communities that participated in the relative prosperity of the early Roman Empire. Jesus's Galilee boasted villages and small cities of about 1,000–8,000 inhabitants that enjoyed lively exchange of goods, often made by and for Jews who valued purity customs. Here, one finds families with modest incomes and enough surplus money to buy luxury tableware or stone jars and very few living at the edge of subsistence.

How does this information help us understand the early Christian communities? At minimum, it affirms that within the early Christian communities, one would expect to find a range of modest income levels that were above subsistence level. And this analysis opens the door more widely to appreciate the possible differences between churches in their specific cities. For example, Paul expresses no compunction in asking the Corinthians to share with those believers who are facing hardship in Judaea. He makes it clear that his churches have 'plenty' at the moment and, thus, should respond with generosity to those overcome in Judaea (2 Cor. 8.13–15).⁵⁶ John Barclay's essay in this book focuses on Paul and the gift.

Paul connects his mainly gentile churches to the Jewish believers in Judaea with his call for almsgiving. Other essays explore this, as Bruce Longenecker speaks to benefaction and Steve Walton looks at patronage. On the whole, the Jews in Judaea and Galilee from Herod the Great's time (king of Judaea 37–4 BCE) until the First Revolt (66–70 CE) seemed to live above subsistence level, enough to maintain purity habits that required specific production and distribution networks. Jesus's Galilee was not overrun with destitute peasants; instead, many of Jesus's fellow Jews had modest means and even a bit of surplus. The debate between Jesus and other religious leaders revolved around how to spend this money. For Jesus knew, 'where your treasure is, there your heart will be also' (Mt. 6.21).

⁵⁵ Willem M. Jongman, "'Gibbon Was Right': The Decline and Fall of the Roman Economy", in *Crises and the Roman Empire*, ed. Olivier Hekster, Gerda de Kleijn and Daniëlle Slootjes (Leiden: Brill, 2007), 183–200, here 198, suggests that in the late second century, the decrease of population (perhaps because of the plague in the 160s) did not lead to more peasants having their own land but 'the emergence of a new social, political and legal regime, where oppression replaces the entitlements of citizenship'.

⁵⁶ Paul speaks of the Macedonians' 'extreme poverty' (2 Cor. 8.2). For an excellent discussion of the social and economic situation in Philippi, see Peter Oakes, *Philippians: From People to Letter*, SNTSMS 110 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001).