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Dream Better Dreams: Response to Katie Harrison

Lynn H. Cohick

'Dream some dreams and put them into practice.' Thus Katie Harrison sums up her well-argued position on the way out of poverty in the modern world. She rightly perceives that poverty is both absolute (no food or water) and relative, a matter of lacking what others have. With this encompassing description of poverty, she addresses the social and emotional barriers to eliminating poverty, alongside highlighting the structural impediments that keep individuals and communities in destitution. Harrison points to the failures of government and private sector business as contributing to community impoverishment. Lack of infrastructure, such as decent roads and reliable electricity and sanitation, weakens families' earning potential. Lack of healthcare and education limit potential. Businesses that deny workers fair pay trap their employees in poverty. War and natural disasters such as floods and fires cause great destruction and refugees plunge into poverty.

Fixing these structural problems, however, is only half the battle, according to Harrison. A key strategic piece in the war against poverty is addressing the fatalism that permeates the poor communities. This lack of hope results in passivity. A good anti-poverty programme, therefore, must also address the social needs of people in poverty. Harrison suggests building relationships and encouraging creativity as ways to boost productivity as both the individual and community work their way out of poverty. She advocates for more decision-making opportunities for poor people. Harrison's multipronged approach addresses the numerous contributing causes of poverty, including individual, familial, communal, corporate and governmental causes.

When it comes to studying the causes of poverty in the ancient world, what counts as poverty is not always comparable with our modern context. For example, the social component of poverty is difficult to study, as we lack access to the voice of the poor themselves. Additionally, discriminators between rich and poor are different, as both suffered from poor healthcare and lack of clean water and sanitation. Money could not buy health, although it could support pilgrimages to healing shrines. Wealth did not prevent infant mortality, as it can today, because the accepted practices for childbirth and childcare were faulty, even dangerous, to the mother and child. Nor was education necessarily the way out of poverty as it is so often today. Land ownership counted for much, as did an able body that could do manual labour.

There are also differences in cultural values that suggest that poverty might be differently described. The ancient world did not value innovation, or individualism (and the creativity associated with it) as we do today. For example, Harrison rightly notes the importance today of poor people's voice in decision-making. The ancient world would not have articulated the situation this way. Rather, people in poverty asked for justice, for courts to uphold contracts and property rights. Further, they might riot against a corrupt king. Nevertheless, the idea that the individual had a vote in matters of government is a modern one rooted in democracy. Again, Harrison decries modern sex trafficking. In the ancient world, such practices were institutionalized in the slave industry; many men and women slaves were prostitutes. In my paper, I do not address the institution of slavery and its impact on the Roman economy, as the topic is too vast. Yet, Harrison's keen observation on the impact of modern sex trafficking provides the opportunity to expose the ancient world's reliance on slave labour within its overall economy.

Christians in the ancient world dreamed new dreams, of life eternal in peace with Christ in the new heavens and new earth. They dreamed of unity as citizens of heaven. This meant that their small communities strove to reduce social hierarchy within their group and re-evaluate who received honour and why. The new community neither valued the biological family as highly as did the Romans nor put the state above all. Instead, the church valued 'family' with its new, fictive kinship relationships and cherished the kingdom of God as its proper allegiance.