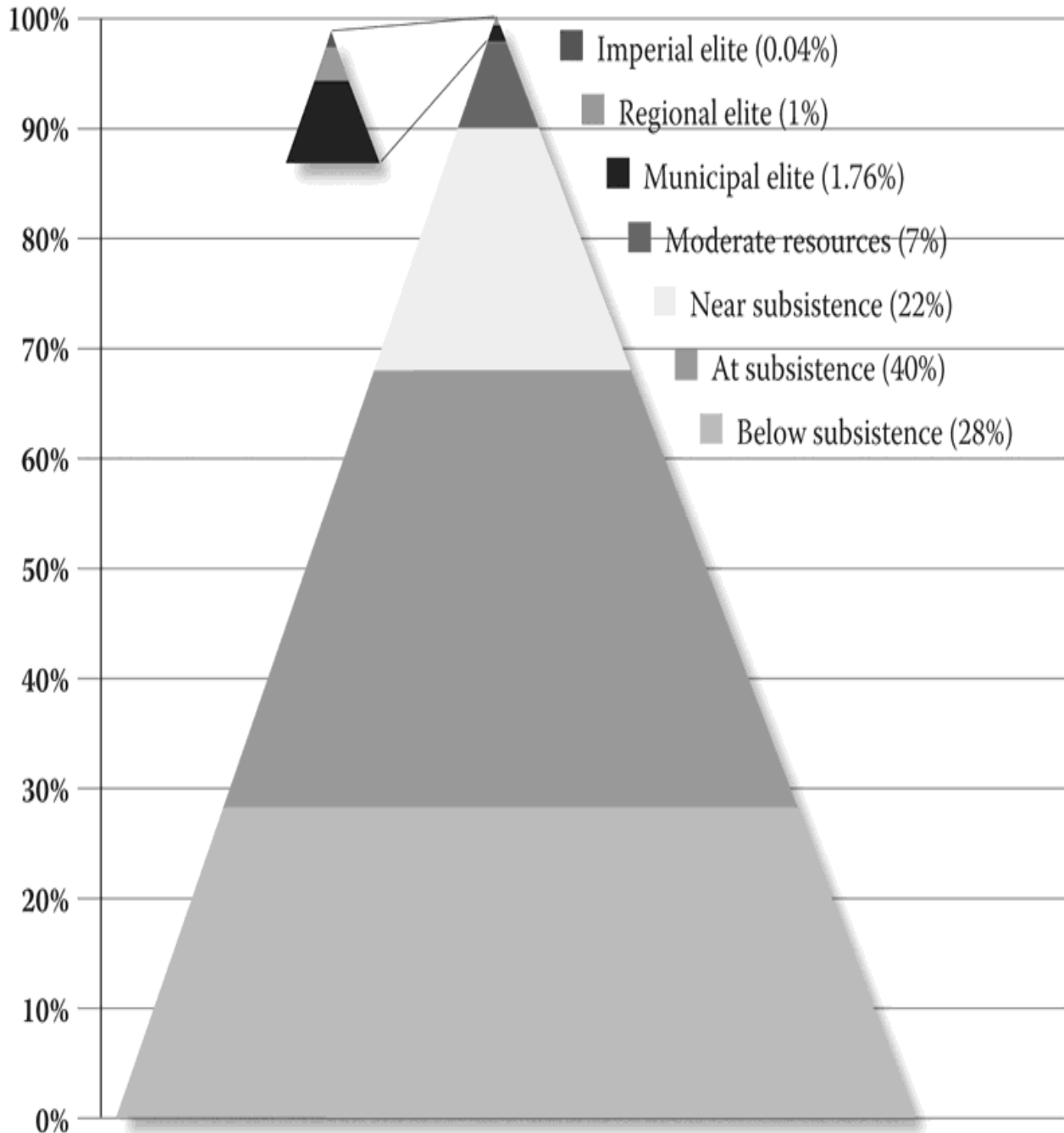


# The Biblical Theology of Poverty

by David Lee Burris

## The Ancient Poverty Standard



**Economic Inequality in the Early Roman Empire.** In their analysis of Roman imperial society, *Peter Garnsey and Richard Saller* employ the poignant phrase, “the Roman system of inequality.” With this phrase Garnsey and Saller call our attention to the fact that the Roman Empire maintained its domination of the Mediterranean world through judicial institutions, legislative systems, property ownership, control of labor, and brute force. Like all societies, the empire developed mechanisms for maintaining multifaceted inequality, and **like all so-called civilized societies the empire promoted justifications that made the inequity seem normal, or at least inevitable.**

There are three fundamental ideas to keep in mind. First, as economic historians point out, the Roman imperial economy was preindustrial. The vast majority of people lived in rural areas or in small towns, with only about 10 to 15 percent of the population in big cities of ten thousand people or more. This means that most of the population worked in agriculture (80 to 90 percent) and that large-scale commercial or manufacturing activity was rare.

Second, **there was no middle class in the Roman Empire.** Because the economy was primarily agricultural, wealth was based on the ownership of land. Most land was controlled by a small number of wealthy, elite families. These families earned rent and produce from the subsistence farmers or slaves who actually worked the land. **With their wealth and status, these families were able to control local and regional governance, which allowed them to profit also from taxation and from governmental policies. These same families also controlled public religion.**

Third, poverty was widespread both in rural and urban areas. Interpreters of early Christian literature tend to underestimate the overwhelming poverty that characterized the Roman Empire. And when we do mention the problem of poverty, we tend to use the undefined binary categories of “rich” and “poor” in our descriptions.

### ***Greco-Roman Understandings of Wealth and Poverty—Image and Reality***

Traditionally Greeks used the term “the poor” to describe the working poor (*penētes*) as opposed to the rich (*plōusioi*), but distinguished them from the destitute beggars (*ptōchoi*). According to Aristophanes’s play *Ploutos*, “it is the beggar’s life to live possessed of nothing, but the poor man’s life to live frugally and by applying himself to work, with nothing to spare indeed, but not really in want.” The key to understanding the poor is to see that they *had to* work for their living, and work represented subservience and dependence and was therefore contemptible. Again, they “were all those people who needed to work in shops or in the fields and were consequently *without the leisure*” and self-sufficiency, “characteristic of the rich gentry, who were free to give their time to politics, education, and war.” The poor man’s lot was measured in a relative, ever-sliding scale depending on his occupation, income, property, family situation, etc., whereas a wandering beggar was the one on the margins of a society, “who makes [one’s] livelihood by endless entreaties,” having “lost many or all of one’s family and social ties.”

Defining and understanding poverty in this way, the elite both normalized it as part of the natural order of things and perpetuated the binary category of the rich and the poor by collapsing the various grades of socioeconomic structure into just two. This blurred a vast social hierarchy and inequality and concealed substantial social distance not only between the rich and the poor but also between the relatively prosperous (“the middling group”), the less poor, the poorer mass, and the extreme poor. The elite’s conceptual tie between social status and poverty, which was a product of the old aristocratic contempt for manual labor and trade, naturally led them to ascribe negative and servile characteristics to “the poor,” befitting their social status, such as “*leves, inquinati, improbi, scelerati*, etc. terms implying dishonesty.” It was particularly “the urban poor and the conditions of urban living that always attract[ed] the attention of writers and the fears of the rich,”<sup>110</sup> as Cicero’s notorious description of them as *sordem urbis et faecem* (“the poverty-stricken scum of the city”) illustrates. Roman authors typically presented the urban poor as the idle mob whose grievances and moral defect (such as laziness) led them to crimes, riots, and sedition. They were seen as a threat to social harmony and stability, and could only be controlled by satisfying their insatiable cravings for “bread and circuses.”<sup>112</sup> These characterizations of the poor were certainly behind the reasons why the rich elite had no expressed concern, sympathy, or aid for the needs of the poor per se, as opposed to those of the *populus*.

While the Roman elite pathologized urban poverty with vices, violence, and disease in their political discourses, they idealized the rural poverty of a peasant farmer as that of “the virtuous hard-working citizen, who had no time for anything except earning his living on his farm and doing his civic duty.” It was a kind of poverty characterized by an idyllic simple life and “unwealth,” but not deprivation or destitution.<sup>115</sup> This poverty was praised as the paradigm of good and honest living with the virtues of frugality and self-sufficiency, far removed from the corruption, vulgarity, and ills of urban poverty, on the one hand, and opposed to avarice and abuse of wealth, on the other. Thus, poverty in the elite writings often features as a heuristic device in the context of proper use of wealth, having nothing to do with the actual experiences of the actual poor.<sup>117</sup> Construction of this kind of romantic image served to alleviate the elite’s disgust and fear about the (urban) poor and helped them to separate the good (deserving) from the bad (undeserving) poor in their civic benefaction and euergetism, such as food distributions.

There was no question that poverty was widespread and ubiquitous in the Roman Empire and that the social reality of the poor, whether in cities or countryside, was harsh without any public safety net. The rural poor suffered not only by frequent crop failures and debt but also by the influx of slave labor purchased by the landed rich; many poor farmers became day laborers and tenant farmers.

Since the elite did not generally associate moral excellence or virtue (*dignitas*) with poverty or the poor, and since patronal benefaction was a means of enhancing social control and submission among those who could reciprocate service, they carefully separated the deserving and worthy (i.e., respectable citizens) from the undeserving and unworthy poor in their euergetism. Aristotle had emphasized “giving rightly,” that is, a generous person “will give to the right people” (i.e., men of virtue); this spirit was captured by Cato’s maxim of *bono benefacito* (“do good to the good”). Cicero urged giving to those who are “worthy” (*idonei*). One should give to the “most deserving” (*dignissimi*), to “the good” or those “capable of being made good,” writes Seneca. If anyone deserved the pity (*eleēmosynē*; *miser cordia*) of the rich elite, it was to be “appropriately given on an exchange basis to men of like character, and not to those who are not going to show pity in return.” In this sense, “to give to a beggar is to do him an ill service.”<sup>125</sup> Indeed, “the true object of pity,” taught Plato, “is not the man who is hungry or in some similar needy case, but the man who has sobriety of soul or some other virtue, or share in such virtue, and misfortune to boot.” Hence, it was the “fallen” rich who experienced a sudden “reversal of fortune” and loss of status that deserved the pity and “good deeds” (euergetism) of their peers, not the poor, whether the working poor or the destitute. The interests of the rich “lay not in general poverty, which they regarded with indifference, but in marginalizing extreme poverty as a form of moral degeneration.”<sup>128</sup>

While the Greco-Roman rich and moralists disregarded the poor and poverty in general, they were concerned with wealth and the ethics of wealth. Both Plato and Aristotle conceived of a good man (a sage) as an aristocratic man who had wealth but also took wealth as a functional means—that is, not as an end in itself but as having a value and significance relative to achieving virtue. The value of wealth depends upon one’s attitude toward it and its proper use toward achieving virtue. Wealth liberates one’s life from manual labor, should lead to the pursuit of justice, and makes possible a life dedicated to virtue, not to further accumulation of wealth. However, wealth comes with its attendant “faults” and “temptations,” such as avarice, miserliness, prodigality, and ambition.

The Cynics radicalized this received thought by positing wealth not as a vehicle but as an impediment to virtue, which is necessary to the life of self-sufficiency (*autarkeia*) and freedom in all things; wealth and virtue are mutually exclusive. Hence, they despised wealth and luxury along with other social conventions (e.g., marriage) and extolled poverty by urging the complete renunciation of material possessions and voluntary adoption of the lifestyle of a beggar (*ptōchos*). This is exemplified by Diogenes of Sinope. According to Pseudo-Crates, true wealth is to be found only in poverty, which is necessary to virtue as such (*Ps.-Crates* 7). Nonetheless, we should remember that the “anti-wealth and pro-poverty” stance of Cynics was an affordable choice purely for their philosophical pursuit; it was certainly unconventional and “antisocial” but did not entail any special concern or care for the plight of the involuntary poor.

While sharing the Cynic view of self-sufficiency and independence from externals, the Stoics placed wealth in the realm of *adiaphora*, “things morally indifferent,” along with health, honor, fame, etc., but did not regard or avoid wealth as an obstruction to virtue. No external things, neither poverty nor wealth as such, determine human essence, moral worth, and destiny, and therefore none should affect the rational person’s goal of life, passionlessness (*apatheia*). **Virtue depends on what one makes of external (material) things such as wealth or poverty (their lack thereof) but can accommodate enjoyment of the very things the Stoics regarded as indifferent to virtue.**<sup>135</sup> **As long as wealth does not interfere with reason and thus virtue, the sage could opt for wealth over poverty and health over illness.** Therefore, Stoics could have two sides to living out their understanding of and attitude to wealth.

According to Aristotle, generosity (*eleutheriotēs*; *liberalitas*, a Latin equivalent) is a virtue worthy of and necessary to the good man and should be motivated not by a selfish cause but by the “nobility of giving.” **The donor is to give “cheerfully” and “gladly” without pain,**<sup>140</sup> and “the motive of the magnificent man in such giving will be the nobility of action.” **Stoics also emphasized “cheerful giving”; Seneca exhorted the donors to “give willingly, promptly, and without any hesitation” only for the recipients’ enrichment.**<sup>144</sup> Common to Aristotle, Cicero, and Seneca are emphases on **right motive** in giving—apparent absence of self-interest.

If generosity was the quintessential virtue of a good man, **love of wealth (*philargyria*, *philoploutia*; *avaritia*, a Latin equivalent) was the classic vice of Greco-Roman moral philosophy** across the spectrum. Not surprisingly, the Cynic **Diogenes condemned it as a primary source of all evils.**<sup>150</sup> In *On Love of Wealth (De cupiditate divitiarum)* the Middle Platonist with Cynic-Stoic influence Plutarch distinguishes natural (necessary) wealth and nonnatural (superfluous and useless) wealth and focuses on the irrational desire to possess great (nonnatural) wealth (*philargyria*, *philoploutia*, *pleonexia*). Building on the very classical theme of the inherent danger and limit of wealth, Plutarch sees the love of wealth as “mental poverty.”<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Rhee, H. (2012). [\*Loving the Poor, Saving the Rich: Wealth, Poverty, and Early Christian Formation\*](#) (pp. 1–49). Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic.

**It is a hermeneutically inept and fundamentally flawed biblical theology of poverty that conflates the gospel with socio-economic concerns, ignores overt statements by Jesus and the apostles, and misrepresents economic and political theory. In short, it manifests ignorance on multiple fronts.**

## **The Old Testament**

**The Old Testament makes certain elements of our topic pretty clear. Several biblical figures of high spiritual character have considerable wealth. The most obvious example is likely Abraham (Gen 24:34–35). Two of the Ten Commandments presuppose private property and criminalize its theft (Exod 20:15; Deut 5:21). Wealth is the fruit of labor (Prov 10:4; 13:4). Inherited wealth isn't condemned (Deut 21:16; Prov 19:14).**

**The biblical world knew poverty all too well. The Old Testament has a wide range of words describing poverty and the poor. But what do these terms indicate about the status of the poor? That is, what kinds of poverty does the Old Testament describe? Poverty had various causes in the Bible. The most common were warfare (foreign invasion), famine and drought, laziness, and being victimized by the unscrupulous. Does the Bible tell us that being wealthy is inherently unjust, automatically leads to injustice, or necessarily causes injustice? Anyone spending some serious time in the biblical text will learn that the answer to this question is no.**



**Wealth is not an inherent evil according to biblical theology. What God hates isn't wealth—it's the abuse of the poor by those who, for example, extort them, manipulate them, or withhold legal justice from them (Isa 3:14–15; 32:7; Amos 2:6–7; 5:12; Jer 5:28).**

**The question of context is also crucial. I would invite readers to read the short essay by Jon Levenson, “Poverty and the State in Biblical Thought.” Levenson is a Jewish biblical scholar. His article is important for helping us think about the relationship of the Israelite state to poverty as it's discussed in the Hebrew Bible. One of Levenson's insights is significant:**

*The laws which protect the poor, then, are addressed to the individual and the clan, the local, highly organic unit of social organization. These laws are, thus, religious commandments, rather than state policy. They are obligations established by God and owed directly to the poor and not to the government as a mediator between rich and poor.*

**The crucial point here is that the biblical call to care for the poor is not one that calls for that care to come from the authority of a state with coercive power. It is a call to individuals who seek to please God.**

## The New Testament

Jesus and the apostles got their theology about poverty from the Hebrew Bible. While, in Jesus' words, there will always be poor (John 12:8)—and so, unequal economic classes—God doesn't disdain the poor. Instead, he is displeased when they are oppressed by the wealthy (e.g., Deut 24:14; Prov 14:31; Zech 7:10; James 2:6).

Still, some careless thinkers believe the New Testament endorses Marxism. Acts 2:42–45 is often used as a proof text for people who presume the New Testament teaches this.

*<sup>42</sup> And they were devoting themselves to the teaching of the apostles and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayers.... <sup>44</sup> And all who believed were in the same place, and had everything in common. <sup>45</sup> And they began selling their possessions and property, and distributing these things to all, to the degree that anyone had need.*

One of Marxism's famous slogans—"From each according to his ability, to each according to his need"—seems to fit this passage in Acts 2. But that takes Marxism and Acts 2 out of context. Marxist interpreters of Acts 2 miss the obvious fact that everything we read in that passage was *voluntary*. There was no all-powerful state (or religious authority) demanding redistribution of income and wealth.



**In Acts 5 believers were voluntarily selling property and distributing the proceeds among the believers. Even when Ananias and his wife sinned by deceptively withholding part of a property sale, Peter scolded, “And after it was sold, was it not at your disposal?” There is no coercion in this picture.**

**Acts 2 is also no justification for Marxist theory as an “application” of the passage for another reason: it would contradict the teaching of Jesus. It was Jesus who called for the separation of the church and state, who spoke of the kingdom of heaven as distinct from the state (Matt 22:21).**

## **Food for Thought**

**Scripture is clear that wealth is not for hoarding or cultivating an aura of superiority. God wants wealth used to bless people. We as Christians violate Jesus’ teaching about the separation of church and state when we forsake the care of the poor in tangible ways, presuming that the state will act on our behalf. In biblical theology, care for others is a personal spiritual duty, not something to be handed off to a secular authority. But that is basically what we do. We presume the state will act as the church should—as *we* should. That theology is just as bad as pretending the Bible teaches Marxism.<sup>2</sup>**

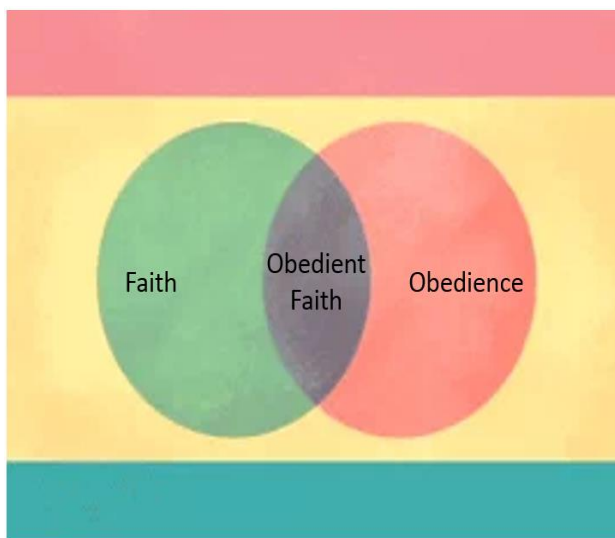
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<sup>2</sup> Heiser, M. S. (2017). [The Bible Unfiltered: Approaching Scripture on Its Own Terms](#) (pp. 39–43). Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press.

# AT THE NEXUS OF GRACE & GLORY

## Five Steps For Saving:

- HEARING:
- Romans 10: 17; Matthew 7: 24 - 27
- BELIEVING:
- Hebrews 11: 6; Mark 16: 15, 16
- REPENTING:
- Acts 2: 38; 17: 30; Luke 13: 3
- CONFESSING:
- Matthew 10: 32, 33; Acts 8: 36, 37
- BAPTISM:
- Romans 6: 3 – 5; Acts 8: 36 – 38



*O That Will Be Glory*

2. *Who that will be glory for me, e grace,*

*I an Glory for me, glory for me; ce,*

*When by His grace I shall look on His face, e*

*That will be glory, be glory for me. me.*

