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The Bible, the Economy, and the Poor

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6. Centralization of Political-Economic Power and the Generation of Poverty

The Mission of Jesus

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Introduction

What we find in the Bible depends heavily on the format in which its contents are presented and on the way we bring questions. After the invention of the printing press, translations such as the King James Version presented each sentence printed separately by chapter and verse. From the vast array of statements coded into chapter and verse, Bible readers, including clergy and biblical scholars, then sought separate laws, lines of prophecy, and individual sayings of Jesus pertinent to particular issues about which they were concerned – often by using a concordance that indexed Bible verses by key words. When the issue of poverty was raised, often in connection with its opposite, wealth or possessions, the “go-to” sayings were a few taken from the Gospel of Luke. “Blessed are the poor . . . Woe to the rich.” “Sell your possessions and give alms.” “Lay up treasure in heaven.” “You

cannot be my disciple if you do not give up all your possessions.” “You cannot serve both God and Mammon.”

The Bible, however, is far more than a vast array of individual verses. Quoting a few verses as proof-texts ignores the much more complex treatment of issues such as poverty in the histories, prophecies, Gospels, and other texts in the Bible. In the book of Proverbs one can find individual admonitions to give alms to the poor. But the prophets did not just declare God’s concern for the poor and rail against the wealthy in moralistic one-liners. Amos, Micah, Isaiah, Jeremiah, and other prophets exhibit a critical political-economic analysis of the structure of power-relations in which the wealthy and powerful used their wealth and power to further impoverish the people, who were already barely eking out a subsistence living. They did this, moreover, in blatant violation of the commandments of the Mosaic Covenant that supposedly regulated social-economic relations so that people could have an adequate living and a modicum of justice. On the basis of their critical analysis, knowing also that the people had no recourse against the powerful, the prophets appealed to YHWH in the heavenly court. They boldly pronounced God’s condemnation of the rulers and their officers who deviously and systematically oppressed the peasants.

Because it is in their power,
they covet fields, and seize them,
houses, and take them away;
they oppress householder and house,
people and their inheritance (Micah 2:1-2; cf. Isaiah 5:8).

YHWH enters into judgment with the rulers and officers of his people:
It is you who have devoured the vineyard;
the spoil of the poor is in your houses.
What do you mean by crushing my people,
by grinding the face of the poor?
says YHWH, God of the heavenly armies (Isaiah 3:14-15).

That the wealthy wielded political power to exploit the people, moreover, is a theme that runs prominently through the historical narratives of the Bible as well. When the Israelites, having suffered repeated raids by the Philistine invaders, clamored for Samuel to give them a king (as a central military leader), like other peoples, the last charismatic “liberator” (*shophet*, usually translated “judge”) warns them that a king will tax and otherwise expropriate the goods and fields that comprised their subsistence living and even draft their children for his purposes (1 Samuel 8). Sure enough, after having conquered his own (non-Israelite) capital city with his mercenary troops (2 Samuel 5:6-10), David (who ironically became the prototype of the Messiah) consolidated his power, including by taking other men’s property and their wives and by conspiring to kill them (2 Samuel 11). When the Israelites erupted in two widespread rebellions, their “Messiah” conquered and reconquered them with his mercenary troops (2 Samuel 15-20).

The consolidation of wealth and power, impoverishing the people, escalated further under David’s son and successor, Solomon, who engaged in massive “development” programs (including the sacred Temple) by deploying the people in forced labor and amassing obscene amounts of wealth (1 Kings 3-10). Again, especially after their subjection

to forced labor, like their ancestors had experienced in their bondage in Egypt, the exploited Israelites (ten of the twelve tribes) mounted a widespread revolt (1 Kings 11-12). In the northern kingdom of Israel, the centralization of power and wealth was under the heavily oppressive Ahab and Jezebel, whose expropriation of the people's land was protested by the prophet Elijah (1 Kings 17-19, 21). According to the narratives of 2 Kings, the continuing expropriation of the people's resources by those who wielded power was a decisive factor in the decline and collapse of the political economy of Judah and Israel.

According to the books of Ezra and Nehemiah, centralization of power and wealth, with the same exploitation and impoverishment of the people, happened all over again after the Persian imperial regime set up the temple-state in Jerusalem headed by the high priestly aristocracy. But Nehemiah's measures to keep the aristocracy from making debt slaves of the people only further solidified the system of centralization of wealth in the second Temple and the imperial regime that maintained it.

The Bible repeatedly presents the increasing impoverishment of the poor as due to the predatory practices of their wealthy and powerful rulers. In order to "get" this, however, Bible readers must do far more than look for some pointed proof-texts. They must undergo the same kind of critical analysis of the texts that we bring to contemporary economic situations. For example, the shock of the national and global economic depression that began with the collapse of the mega-banks in 2008, and the subsequent "bail-out" of these banks that were "too big to fail," may have jolted many people into more critical discernment of political-economic power-relations in the contemporary world. The usually passive news media were suddenly asking questions about and discussing how the impoverishment of families who lost their homes and/or their jobs was the direct result of decades of unregulated predatory exploitation of people of the world by banks and other transnational corporations.

In the hope that wider public awareness of the direct connection between the escalating wealth of the few and the increasing impoverishment of people in the U.S., as well as in much of the rest of the world, will lead to a more comprehensive critical reading of similar connections presented in biblical narratives and prophecies, I am asking readers to take three steps with me. Each of these steps is complex, far more so than can be satisfactorily discussed in an article. But this approach is a way to appreciate what stands over against us once we read biblical books on their own terms and in their historical context, no longer just assuming that these are "our" books from which we can apply selected fragments of text to our own situations.

- First, a brief analysis of today's centralized global capitalist economy that generates wealth for the few and increasingly impoverishes the many.
- Second, a parallel analysis of the centralizing tributary political-economy of Judea and Galilee under the Roman Empire that generated wealth for the few and further impoverished the poor.
- Third, a sketch of how the Gospels, collectively, portray Jesus' mission as the renewal of covenantal community (the people of Israel) and active opposition to the rulers.

Centralization of Wealth and Impoverishment of People in the Empire of Global Capital

The ultimate cause of poverty today is the system of globalized consumer capitalism that controls nearly every facet of personal, social, and political life (for a critical analysis and overview, see Hardt and Negri). How could this not be evident after the economic crash in the fall of 2008, the bail-out of the mega-banks, and the continuing crisis of finance capital that keeps the world in continuing economic decline and depression? Transnational mega-corporations work overtime figuring out new devices by which to siphon off the resources that had previously been the basis of people's livelihood and to bring them under the centralized control of CEOs, CFOs, and the centralized ownership of stockholders. Most of these devices aim to get people and whole countries into various forms of debt that are then leveraged at high interest payment and penalties, foreclosures, and forced bankruptcies. Debt is the broad general mechanism by which both increasingly centralized wealth and relentless impoverishment are generated (Graeber). While this may be an oversimplification, it can be illuminating to look briefly at steps by which the increasing centralization of wealth in global capitalism has impoverished people in the U.S. and beyond.

First, at the Bretton Woods conference toward the end of World War II, the United States and other western powers, paranoid about the Soviet Union and communism, set up the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank to control the world economy so it would not spiral into another Depression. Preaching the gospel that capitalist "development" was the path to prosperity, the IMF, the World Bank, and the United States Agency for International Development forced the governments of "underdeveloped" countries to take loans at interest. When these governments were unable to repay the loans, due to an utterly unlevel international capitalist playing field, the powerful IMF and World Bank forced them to make "structural adjustments," to cut desperately needed services for their citizens, thus further impoverishing whole countries. The United States government, moreover, usually without informing the public, acted as the enforcer of this centralization of wealth that increasingly impoverished other countries (Hardt and Negri; Bacevich). The U.S. overthrew democratic governments, set up and/or supported military dictators, and insisted on "development," regardless of the tragic consequences for the people. The long list of victims includes Guatemala, Iran, South Vietnam, Chile, and Egypt.

Second, after a series of mergers, conglomerate mega-corporations devised ways to siphon off the peoples' resources into centralized wealth. Through increasingly sophisticated multimedia advertising, mega-corporations targeted the population's basic emotional needs. Marketing experts created highly desirable images of gratification, fun, status, and power that could be attained only by buying certain products. The trick was to get people to identify desirable states with certain products: quenching thirst with Coke or Pepsi; satisfaction of hunger with fast-foods; fun with beer; family coherence and happiness with a plethora of gift-giving; sex with cars; love with diamonds.

And how could people afford all of this escalating consumption on their limited incomes? No problem: credit cards, multiple cards sent to everyone, including teenagers, interest rates of 20%, plus penalties – which, incidentally, was against biblical commandments, church teaching, and the laws of many countries. To see how all of this

worked to siphon off people's livings, we need simply look at what happens during "the Holydays" in the United States, the climax of the annual cycle of consumer capitalism when fully 40% of retailing is done.¹ The key devices in this climax of consumer capitalism are advertising and credit cards. In my seminar at the University of Massachusetts on "Christmas and Consumer Capitalism," one of the working class students explained quite precisely how credit cards drove his family ever more deeply into poverty year after year by getting the family deeply in debt at Christmas. To buy the objects that advertising had induced the children to beg for at Christmastime, the parents used credit cards, building up charges plus interest that they could not pay off with their limited income.

The conglomerate megacorporations that devised means such as advertising and credit cards to siphon off people's income became transnational. Having acquired such great wealth and power they could make or break small countries whose net worth they dwarfed and could even dictate policies of the United States government (Korten 2001).

Third, the capstone of the centralization of wealth and ever widening debt and poverty was the consolidation of banking into today's monster banks (Phillips; Sachs; Korten 2009). For forty years of my life, from the 1960s to 2000, I used the local bank in Harvard Square, Harvard Trust Co, where I had my checking and savings accounts. My bank was merged into BayBanks, that operated in the ring of suburbs around Boston, then into BankBoston, the largest bank in the Metropolitan area, then into Fleet Bank, and finally into Bank of America. Meanwhile, the credit card set up for all unionized Massachusetts teachers and professors was bought out by bigger and bigger banks until that, too, was owned by Bank of America, and my mortgage from a local Jamaica Plain bank was bought up by one after another huge banks until it, too, was owned by Bank of America. By around 2000, much of my livelihood was owned, controlled, and manipulated by the Bank of America. Many of us have experienced the same process of consolidation and centralization of wealth and power.

Meanwhile, the Reagan administration in the U.S. and satellite governments in Europe and Asia deregulated the conglomerate megacorporations, and then the Clinton administration Congress repealed the Glass-Steagall Act, thus removing the fire-wall between investment banking and the finance "industry." Along with all sorts of legal loopholes, these steps of consolidation and centralization set up opportunities for these megacorporations, with their "best and brightest" officers and researchers, to devise new schemes by which to get people further into debt and drain off what little remained of their livelihood. They targeted even the very poor, whom they had not thought of before because they presumably had nothing left to spend after having already been lured into buying fast-food and low-cost processed food harmful to their health. The most obvious example, which led into the bubble that finally burst in September, 2008, is the utterly deceptive and manipulative sub-prime mortgages, which were actively offered to poor people, who, as mortgage brokers knew very well, could not repay and could easily be foreclosed upon. As we now know, the

¹ Contrary to what most Americans probably assume, Christmas in America never had anything to do with Christ. The celebration of Christmas was banned in the sixteenth century in New England. Eventually, it developed from a solstice and New Years festival exploited by local merchants into the extensive civil-religious and consumer-capitalist festival from Thanksgiving to New Years, and now from Halloween to "Super Sunday" (Nissenbaum; Horsley and Tracy, esp. chaps. 1, 5, 8).

mega-banks, knowing these assets were toxic, sliced and diced them into triple A securities and “derivatives.” They also hedged their bets, set up “credit-default swaps,” and took out insurance against losses so that they would make huge profits either way.

The widely devastating impoverishment that has resulted is well known, as millions of people lost not only the minimal assets they had, but their jobs as well. With abandoned houses and foreclosures, moreover, the housing values in whole neighborhoods, suburbs, and towns plummeted. Finally, if there had been any lingering doubt that the megacorporations and monster banks were firmly in control of the U.S. government, the bail-out of the banks and continuing manipulation of the Treasury Department by Wall Street has made it unavoidably evident. Internationally, what was a minor manipulation in banking or finance could undermine the relative value of a country’s currency, ruining even a medium-sized nation and its people in an instant. As is now abundantly evident, mega-banks can manipulate policy even of the nations of the European Union and the United States government.

The result of all this centralization of wealth and power we now discuss as globalization (while often leaving unmentioned that it is the globalization of consumer capitalism). Ironically, globalization was described ten years ago as de-centralization, the spread of economic power to centers beyond the United States, to London, Bonn, Paris, Amsterdam, Tokyo, and Beijing. But all was coordinated by superordinate agencies, such as the World Trade Organization, to maintain order in the globalized capitalist system. The economic crash of the last five years has made it evident to the world that wealth is centralized in many intricate ways, as the big European mega-banks had invested in the sliced and diced Wall Street securities based on the subprime mortgages. The banks of Iceland, for example, were ruined because they had invested so heavily in those securities. Finally, who pays (and thus move further into debt, collectively and individually) for the bail out of the monster banks/ international finance, who pays to make up for their mountains of debt based on those mortgages, those toxic assets? Taxpayers and small debtors down the line who lose everything, while CEOs retain their bonuses as well as exorbitant pay-packages.

Another great irony is that the economic centralization of global capitalism thrives on multiculturalism (which, in a further irony, is encouraged in university curricula as an antidote to parochialism). Globalized consumer capitalism touts and exploits multiculturalism, as it “divides and conquers,” as it targets particular cultures and consumer groups. This is true also of globalized information, which has been made into a commodity like everything else. As we now know, Google and other search engines provide the information that they have determined that particular subscribers want to learn, tailored to their biases. This keeps consumers politically and culturally divided among themselves while subjecting them to targeted advertising.

Finally, to make sure we include the religious dimension, we should ask what is sacred in this global system. The way we can tell what is sacred in a society is what is off-limits to criticism. Today we can call God into question, but we cannot criticize capital. And not only is capital above criticism, which is subject to severe social-cultural sanctions, but it is legally protected as private property and is accorded the rights of human persons (in the Supreme Court case, *Citizens United v. Federal Election Commission*). In an earlier era smaller corporations

might have been considered to have a responsibility to the wider communities in which they resided. In the reigning ideology of global capitalism, however, huge corporations are now considered responsible only to their stockholders, that is, those who own shares in the company and receive a profit on their investments. Those who borrow and are in debt to the owners of private property are legally bound to repay the property to its owners, with interest – which, of course, was against ancient biblical law and repeated biblical prophecy and teaching.

Centralization of Wealth and Impoverishment of the People under Roman Imperial Rule

Since the focus of this volume is “the Bible, the Economy, and the Poor,” I assume that we should be using the same analytical language of the ancient economy and the poor that we use for today’s economy and the poor. But this means that, in order to understand the Bible, and particularly the Gospels and Jesus in their own contexts, we must abandon some of the standard assumptions of modern biblical studies and stop thinking in terms of several synthetic constructs that have become standard.

First, contrary to a modern assumption, there was no separation of religion from political-economic life (Horsley 1987; 2003). In biblical books, God, the prophets, and Jesus are concerned with all of life; political and economic life are inseparable from religion. Second, in biblical times there was no such thing as “the Bible” as we refer to it today. Awkward as it may seem, we are dealing with biblical texts in their original historical contexts, that is, before they were included in the Hebrew Bible or the New Testament (Horsley 2007). Third, there were no such things yet as “(early) Judaism” or “(early) Christianity.” The historical context in which biblical texts and gospel stories originated was the temple-state in Jerusalem surrounded by hundreds of village communities in the hill country of Judea (and later village communities in Samaria and Galilee) and many popular movements led by prophets and messiahs among the villagers, all under imperial rule of the Romans and preceding empires (Horsley 2013).

Fourth, it is of particular importance to get out from under the whole tragic Christian tradition of misinterpretation and mistranslation of Gospel sources for Jesus and his movement(s), especially the Gospel of John (Horsley and Thatcher). In John, as in Josephus’ histories and other late second-temple Judean sources, *hoi Ioudaioi* is a regional reference to the people living in Judea in the south, parallel to references to “the Samaritans” in the middle hill country and “the Galileans” in the north, west of the Sea of Galilee. As in the later rabbinic texts, the people’s principal term of identity in all of these regions was “Israel.” The Gospels do not portray Jesus in opposition to “Judaism.” In Matthew, Mark, and John, there are no “Christians” since the people who follow Jesus form a movement within Israel.

Fifth, we must critically review sources for the temple-state in Jerusalem headed by the high priestly families. It was after the temple in Jerusalem was destroyed by the Romans that it became a highly positive symbol in rabbinic traditions, later codified in the Mishnah and especially in the Talmuds, both Bavli and Yerushalmi. In second-temple times, the Temple was a place of sacrifice, to be sure, presided over by the priestly aristocracy. But the temple

headed by the high priests was also the sacred institution of centralization of political-economy in ancient Judea (Horsley 2007).

In order to better understand the temple-state and its relations with the people under Roman imperial rule, it may help to review its origin and changes in previous centuries (Horsley 2007: chaps. 1-2). From its beginnings, according to the books of Ezra and Nehemiah, the rebuilt temple and its presiding priestly aristocracy were not just the ruling institutions of Judea, but the local representative of the Persian imperial order. The Temple was the sacred center to which Judeans could bring tithes and offerings to their God (Nehemiah 10:35-38; 12:44; 13:12), thus centralizing the political-economy of Judea. But it was also the institution responsible for the collection and transmission of revenues to the Persian imperial regime (Nehemiah 9:36-37; Schaper). The Temple was also the bank in which the surplus wealth of the temple-state accumulated, and where powerful figures could store their wealth (Tobias; Nehemiah 13:4-9). In addition to the tithes and taxes channeled to the Temple, moreover, this centralization of wealth became the basis for further exploitation of the Judean peasants. As described in Nehemiah 5:1-13, the priestly rulers and officers of the temple-state used their wealth and power to bring peasants further into debt, forcing them into debt-slavery and even into yielding up control of their land to the wealthy creditors. The “reforms” of Nehemiah may have temporarily stopped the worst abuses of the system, but it reinforced the sacred political-economic structure itself.

Also significant is the historical background and foreground of what is celebrated as Hanukkah, especially in the United States. Considerable wealth having accumulated in (the central bank of) the Temple under the Hellenistic empires, the leading faction of the priestly aristocracy took new opportunities of “growing their wealth” at the expense of the peasants. Ambitious greedy figures kept escalating how much they paid out of the temple-treasury to buy themselves the high priesthood. This evoked such stiff resistance that the emperor Antiochus Epiphanes intervened militarily to enforce the increasing centralization of wealth (which touched off the Maccabean Revolt). What we label “apocalyptic texts” were the response to this by the very scribal circles who served the temple-state as retainers (Horsley 2010). Their reviews of history and visions of the people’s restoration (in Daniel 7; 8; 10-12; and the Animal Vision in 1 Enoch 85-90) not only state adamant opposition to imperial rule but opposition to the high priestly incumbents as well. Indeed the “Enoch scribes” declared that the Temple itself was illegitimate, having polluted bread on its table; in their vision of restoration, they pointedly have no place for a “tower” (temple) on top of the “house” of the restored people. Indeed, it is difficult to find any late second-temple Judean texts that favor the temple and high priesthood, other than Ben Sira, the apologist for the last Oniad high priests, and perhaps the book of Jubilees (Horsley 2007: chap. 7; 2013: chap. 2).

Ironically the brothers who led the Maccabean insurgency obtained the high priesthood for themselves. Having consolidated their own power and wealth in the Temple, they greatly expanded the territory ruled by the Jerusalem temple-state by using mercenary troops. After conquering Samaria and Idumea, the Hasmoneans took over Galilee as well. They had vastly expanded the area from which they took taxes and presumably also tithes (Horsley 1995: chap. 2).

The Roman conquest seriously advanced the centralization of wealth and exacerbated the impoverishment of the people (Horsley 1995: chap. 3; 2013: chap. 2). Following their conquest, the Romans subjected the Judeans and Galileans to payment of tribute, 25% every second year (Josephus, *Antiquities* 14.202-203). They soon imposed the military strongman Herod to maintain tighter control. Herod massively rebuilt the Temple complex into one of the great “wonders of the (Roman) world,” and elevated a succession of his own clients to the high priesthood. Now the people were serving three layers of rulers, with obligations to pay tribute to Caesar, taxes to Herod, as well as tithes and offerings. The pile of grain left on the threshing floor of each family for its subsistence until the next harvest was diminished accordingly.

The siphoning off of families’ livings was increased after Herod’s death, that is, during the lifetime of Jesus. The situations in Galilee and Judea were different, but the effects were the same on the people. Herod Antipas, whom the Romans imposed as ruler over Galilee, proceeded to build two new capital cities, first Sepphoris, a few miles from Nazareth, and, within twenty years, Tiberias, above the Sea of Galilee. To support these grand development projects he would have needed to dramatically increase the rate or the “efficiency” of tax-collection from the villages. Galilee was no longer under the direct jurisdiction of the Temple and high priesthood in Jerusalem, but we simply do not know the extent to which they were still taking tithes and offerings from the Galileans. Jesus’ condemnation of the Pharisees for pushing the Galileans to “devote” (*korban*) the produce of their land to God, that is, the Temple, suggests that they devised some new ways to take revenue from Galileans (Horsley 1995: 130-47).

In Judea (6 CE) the Romans placed the four high priestly families that Herod had elevated in charge, under the direct oversight of the Roman governor. The high priests, rulers of Judea appointed by and responsible to the Romans, were charged with collection of the tribute to Caesar, and they continued to be the beneficiaries of the tithes and offerings and pilgrimage festival income of the Temple. Jewish historians have concluded that the powerful wealthy Jerusalem high priestly families used the surplus wealth under their control that was piling up in the Temple to make loans at high rates of interest (Broshi; Goodman). Their targets were the desperate villagers who could no longer feed their families after yielding up tribute, taxes, and tithes to their rulers. Scholars also find a direct correlation between the centralization of wealth in the Jerusalem aristocracy and the increase, just at this time, of large estates in the hill country north of Jerusalem. Archaeologists suggest that the ever more luxurious mansions of the high priestly families in Jerusalem are directly related to the centralization of wealth. The historian Josephus reports that the high priestly families had become blatantly predatory on the people. Each family kept a gang of toughs, a goon squad or thugs, whom they would send to the threshing floors to seize the tithes intended for the ordinary priests, with whatever violence was necessary to accomplish their mission (*Antiquities* 20.181, 205-207).

The increasing centralization of wealth in the imperial capital in Rome, in the Jerusalem Temple, and in the priestly aristocracy appointed by the Romans to head it was based on the exploitation of the people in their village communities. The result was the increasing impoverishment of the people. The ability of neighbors to come to the aid of struggling families was quickly exhausted as most families in village communities felt the ever-

tightening pinch of supporting themselves until the next harvest after rendering tribute to Caesar plus tithes, offerings, and taxes to their local rulers. Villagers were forced to take loans at high rates of interest from the people who controlled surplus resources, that is, mainly the officials and their officers who took their crops for tribute, tithes, and taxes. Unable to repay their ever mounting debts, the increasingly indebted peasants were forced to yield up family members to debt-slavery and control of their ancestral land to their wealthy creditors. As families disintegrated, so did the village communities.

Given the increasing impoverishment of the people it is not surprising that our sources give evidence of increasing social turmoil during the time of Jesus' mission and movement. Ironically leading New Testament scholars, focused narrowly on religion, ignore the many references to this social turmoil and instead construct a "common Judaism" that the people generally shared, supposedly in loyalty to the Temple and the high priests as their "leaders" (e.g., Sanders). Even later rabbinic texts include memories of the deep popular resentment of the high priestly families, as in the lament that survived in the Babylonian Talmud (*b. Pesahim* 57a):

Woe unto me because of the house of Baithos;
 woe unto me because of their lances.
Woe unto me because of the house of Hanin (Ananos in Josephus);
Woe unto me because of the house of Ishmael ben Phiabi
 woe unto me because of their fists.
For they are high priests and their sons are (Temple) treasurers,
 and their sons in law are Temple overseers,
 and their servants smite the people with sticks.

The Judean historian Josephus provides much of the evidence of popular turmoil and protest as it escalated in the decades prior to the great revolt of 66-70 CE and its direct link with the ruling elite's impoverishment of the people in their relentless centralization of wealth by getting the people into spiraling debt. It cannot be mere coincidence that when widespread revolt erupted in Jerusalem, as well as in the countryside, in the summer of 66, two of the first acts of the rebels were to attack the mansion of Ananias, the high priest most infamous for his collaboration with the Romans, and the archives building to burn the records of debts (*War* 2.426-27). Over a year later, when the Roman Legions advanced into northwest Judea, devastating villages and slaughtering people, the surviving villagers fled into Jerusalem (Horsley 1986) and attacked the high priests who had set up a junta to try to control the revolt, likely out of resentment over how the wealthy and powerful high priestly families had gained control of their land. We should add one further bit of evidence to the picture of the first century Judean economy: As the movement led by the popular messiah Simon bar Giora expanded from the central Judean hill country to the area south of Jerusalem, one of its principal practices was "land reform," that is restoring families' ancestral land to the rightful heirs (*War* 4.503-44).

Through these decades of intensifying political-economic turmoil in both Galilee and Judea, the form of disruption that the Judean historian Josephus mentions more often is outbreaks of social banditry (Horsley and Hanson), which again are directly related to the impoverishment of the people in an agrarian society. Cross-cultural studies have shown that

the legends of Robin Hood are good indicators of what banditry is all about. Peasants become utterly impoverished, unable to feed their families after yielding up their produce in taxes to the rulers. Desperate men head for the hills or other hideaways from which they may raid the rich, who are hoarding resources. Local villagers aid and protect them from the soldiers or death squads sent against them. The term used for the two crucified on either side of Jesus is “bandits,” not “thieves.”

Social banditry escalated from about the time of Jesus’ mission on. Banditry, especially escalating banditry, is a good barometer of economic decline among the peasantry. Moreover, as families became poor, hopelessly indebted and hungry, whole village communities began to disintegrate, as families, however willing, were no longer able to support one another. As cross-cultural studies have shown, it is when peasants are threatened with loss of their land (not when they have already become landless laborers), that they will tend to join or form movements. These are precisely the circumstances that Jesus addresses.

Mission of Jesus: Renewal of Local Covenantal Community and Opposition to Centralization

The Gospels portray Jesus’ mission as focused on the poor and opposed to the centralizing institutions that were exacerbating their poverty. It is often acknowledged that Jesus was especially concerned for the poor, that he offered the kingdom of God particularly to them, as in the first beatitude, “blessed are the poor, for theirs is the kingdom of God” (Luke 6:20). But Jesus did far more than offer a few one-liners that pertained to the poor. According to the Gospel stories, he generated a movement among the poor of Galilee and Judea and, in the Gospel of John, in Samaria and across the Jordan as well (that is, in all the areas of Israelite heritage). According to Gospel reports of Jesus’ dialogues and speeches, he insisted that the people who responded to his mission and participated in his government should come to one another’s aid economically and engage in a cooperative and collective pursuit of a common good. More than insist on the rebuilding of covenantal community through collective responsibility for one another, Jesus led his followers in direct opposition to the power-holders and institutions that had centralized wealth by exploiting the people. Indeed, it would not be going too far to state that, according to the Gospels, it was Jesus’ adamant opposition to the centralization of power and wealth that resulted in his execution by crucifixion.

Americans have found a number of ways to avoid this economic and community focus of Jesus’ mission and crucifixion. In the modern West we have classified Jesus as a religious figure unconcerned with political and economic affairs. And we have projected modern western individualism onto Jesus and his followers. Both the reduction of Jesus to a merely religious figure and the projection of western individualism have reinforced the standard scheme of Christian origins in which Jesus has been understood (merely) as a teacher-revealer who did not himself generate a movement. According to this scheme a movement

did not begin until after Jesus' crucifixion, when the disciples, inspired by his resurrection, finally formed a community in Jerusalem.²

From the 1960s to the 1980s standard textbooks presented Jesus as narrowly concerned with tax-collectors, prostitutes, and sinners, that is, the outcasts of his society. This was given "social-scientific" legitimation by a standardized model of agrarian societies that posited "degraded" and "expendable classes" (homeless, landless, beggars, vagabonds, etc.) at the bottom of the social stratification (Lenski; Crossan, 45-46).

Modern western individualism, including a methodological individualism, has dominated the recent resurgence of interpretation of "the historical Jesus," particularly in the United States. Scholarly interpreters focus mainly on the individual sayings of Jesus, as if he had been merely an individual teacher of individuals in individual "one-liners" or "sound-bites." Such individualistic interpretation was intensified in the enthusiastic reception in the 1980s of Gerd Theissen's literalistic reading of individual Jesus sayings taken out of context to mean that Jesus was calling his followers to abandon their homes, families, and land, and to hit the road as itinerant vagabonds who begged for a living. Prominent liberal interpreters, especially leaders of the Jesus Seminar, took this over quite uncritically. The most heavily-marketed and influential Jesus-book made Jesus himself into a Cynic sage who scoffed at social conventions and called his followers to an itinerant lifestyle. On the assumption that individual sayings have meaning in themselves (which scholars can determine from use of individual words in elite Greek texts), it was argued that in declaring "blessed are the poor" Jesus was addressing not the poor in general but the destitute (Crossan: 272-73).

Insofar as prominent recent American interpretation of Jesus has led into the dead end of modern individualism, it is important to pursue a more comprehensive and historically contextual approach to Jesus mission as portrayed in the Gospels.

The first responsibility of historians is to evaluate the sources. The sources for Jesus are the Gospels (not individual sayings). And since at least the 1980s it has been clear that the Gospels are not mere collections of sayings and vignettes, but are dynamic stories full of conflict (Horsley 2012: chap. 8; 2013: chap. 2). Moreover, as historians we want to get "the whole story," the full portrayal of Jesus' mission in the Gospel sources. And once we begin reading the Gospels as whole stories, we suddenly get a sense of a real world that Jesus and his contemporaries lived in (Horsley 2001). The combination of the new appreciation of the Gospels as stories and more comprehensive and precise knowledge of Jesus' historical context make it possible to move well beyond the ahistorical "talking head" Jesus uninvolved and unengaged with people in their concrete life context.

The earliest gospel, we think, is Mark, whose basic narrative is followed by Matthew and Luke. Contrary to previous assumptions, Mark is not about Jesus as the Messiah, nor is it primarily about discipleship run amuck. The key to the story is that Jesus was executed by crucifixion, a form of torturous death used by the Romans to execute leaders of resistance or

² This scheme may be influenced by the early chapters in the book of Acts, but it is contrary to the portrayal of Jesus' mission in the Gospels.

insurrection. In the Gospel of Mark Jesus opposed and was opposed by the rulers. In the first two-thirds of the story – in appointing the twelve as representatives of Israel in its twelve tribes and in healing a woman hemorrhaging for twelve years and a twelve year old woman and in doing sea crossings and wilderness feedings like Moses and healings like Elijah – he is clearly engaged in a renewal of the people of Israel. Read in its historical context, Mark is the story of Jesus as a prophet like Moses and Elijah generating a renewal of Israel in opposition to and by the rulers (Horsley 2001: chap. 5).

Matthew and Luke follow Mark's story but insert, almost verbatim and more or less in the same order, speeches of Jesus. This has led to the conclusion that they are following a common source, "Q" (short for the German *Quelle*). As can be seen particularly in Matthew's arrangement, however, this teaching of Jesus takes the form of short speeches on different issues of concern to communities of Jesus movements, such as a covenant renewal speech (Matthew 5-7; Luke 6:20-49), sending the disciples out two by two as Jesus' envoys (Luke 10:2-16); condemnation of the scribes and Pharisees (Luke 11:39-52; Matthew 23); and prophetic pronouncements against the ruling house in Jerusalem (Luke 11:51; Matthew 13:34-35). A survey of the whole series of speeches indicates that, like the Gospel of Mark, they are also about the renewal of the people of Israel in opposition to the rulers of the people (Horsley and Draper).

In regard to rulers, in both Mark's story and the Q speeches, Jesus opposed their centralization of wealth and power. What is not usually discerned is that Jesus directly addressed the people in general and their ever more impoverished situation. Mark portrays Jesus as preaching and working in village communities, even village assemblies. In both Mark and Q, Jesus sends his disciples to extend his work in villages and to stay and eat with families. How else could Jesus or anyone have worked in an agrarian society such as ancient Galilee and Judea, where the fundamental social forms in which everyone was embedded were villages and the families who comprised each village community?

Once we "see/hear" that his mission focuses on the village communities, it may not be a stretch to recognize that the center of Jesus' renewal of the people of Israel was the renewal of the Mosaic covenant, of covenantal community (Horsley 2011: chap. 6). Jesus' longest and most important speech in Matthew, "the Sermon on the Mount," paralleled in Luke 6:20-49, is a speech of renewal of the Mosaic Covenant (Horsley and Draper: chap. 9; Horsley 2009: chap. 7). This is evident both from the many references to traditional Mosaic covenantal laws and teachings and its adaptation of the basic three-step pattern of the Mosaic covenant: declaration of deliverance, commandments of just social-economic relations in the community, and blessings and curses if one obeys or disobeys those commandments.

The theme of covenant renewal also runs throughout Mark, climaxing in Jesus' transformation of the last supper Passover meal into a covenant renewal meal in the saying over the cup (14:22-25). Especially striking is the series of dialogues in Mark 10 which comprise a covenant renewal speech strikingly parallel to that in the Q speeches and Matthew and Luke (Horsley 2001: 186-95; 2009: chap. 8). In fact, Jesus quotes seven of the ten covenantal commandments in the dialogues that focus on local economic relations.

Although we often think of the ten commandments of the Mosaic covenant as merely about individual morality, they are primarily about economics (Horsley 2009: chaps. 2-3). Particular commandments are principles covering certain aspects of social-economic interaction in a traditional agrarian society. Most obvious are “You shall not steal” and “not covet,” that is make designs on other families’ members or resources, and “You shall not swear falsely,” that is, make devious economic deals. “Honor your father and mother” includes feeding them when they become non-productive. Even the first two commandments, that demand exclusive loyalty to YHWH, pertain to economic interaction in society. The second includes “you shall not bow down and serve them,” that is, with a portion of your crops yielded up to the god represented by the idol. So it should not be surprising that both Jesus’ covenant renewal speech parallel in Matthew 5-7 and Luke 6 and the covenant dialogues in Mark 10 focus on economic relations.

Jesus begins the covenant renewal speech in Q by transforming the old sanctions into a new declaration of deliverance (Horsley 2009: chap. 7). The covenantal blessings and curses had been used in a controlling religious ideology whereby the people came to believe that their poverty and hunger were God’s curses for having sinned, having violated the covenant laws, while rich people were blessed because they were good people. Jesus transforms the self-blaming despair into hope. “Blessed are you poor; for yours is the kingdom of God” (Luke 6:20).

Having delivered the promise and hope of God’s direct action for the poor, Jesus renews God’s covenantal demands on the people as their response. Following a general commandment to “Love your enemies” (Matthew 5:43-48), he gives a series of “focal instances,” addressing the people’s desperate circumstances with examples of what it would mean to love those with whom they were quarrelling. Note that the context indicated in most of these instances is not relations between the people and the Roman soldiers, as often assumed, but local social-economic relations among villagers who are all economically desperate. They are quarreling with one another because some have borrowed from others who have themselves become hungry and desperate for repayment. Jesus’ updated covenant commandments refer directly or indirectly to traditional covenantal laws or teachings. The most obvious: “If someone sues and seizes your cloak, yield up also your shift,” refers directly to the traditional covenantal law (in the Covenant Code of Exodus 21-23): “If you take your neighbor’s cloak as (symbolic collateral for a non-interest loan), you shall restore it before sundown, for it may be your neighbor’s only cover in which to sleep at night” (Exodus 22:26-27). In all of these commandments, Jesus is demanding that villagers renew their commitment to the traditional Mosaic covenantal laws and teachings that community members cooperate with and take care of one another even in desperate circumstances: sharing what little they have in loans and not insisting that hungry neighbors pay them back for previous loans. “Love your enemies, do good, and lend.” This renewal of commitment to the Mosaic covenantal principles and commandments of mutual aid and cooperation was the center of Jesus’ renewal of the people in the village communities, the fundamental social form in which the people lived and worked. This would also have strengthened the community resistance to outside pressure, enabling individual families to avoid loans at high interest from outside creditors that would further impoverish them

The series of covenantal dialogues in Mark 10 is parallel to the covenantal speech found in Q and Luke 6:20-49, with some of the same effects (Horsley 2001: 186-95). The overall speech in dialogues covers the key covenantal concerns of the integrity of marriage and family, of care for even the lowliest members of the community, such as children, of economic interaction, and of leadership that should serve the movement and not seek power over it. The longest section (Mark 10:17-31) focuses on the economic relations in the communities of the movement. The man who turns out to be wealthy serves as the foil, one who has been practicing the opposite of the covenantal justice that Jesus is demanding. First, he has the audacity to ask the “Good Teacher” what must have been an utterly unreal outlandish question in the midst of people who were wondering where their next meal was coming from. Jesus responds by reciting the covenantal commandments in more or less the same form familiar from the official texts we know in Exodus 20 and Deuteronomy 5, with exception of “you shall not defraud,” where we might have expected “you shall not covet.” Then the wealthy man responds, “I have kept all of these since my youth.” Knowing better, Jesus commands that he sell all he owns and give the money to the poor. But the man is too attached to his wealth.

The key to “getting it” in the same way that the audience in Mark would have is by noticing Mark’s wording “you shall not defraud,” which focuses “you shall not covet.” How did one “grow one’s wealth” in an agrarian society like that? By making loans at interest to those desperate to feed their families. And in Israelite covenantal law and teaching making loans at interest was fraud. It was the way one who coveted others’ resources proceeded to get a lien on their land and labor. This is was the situation addressed by the prophet Micah in 2:1-5 (see Chaney, in this volume).

To drive home the point made in the dialogue with the wealthy seeker after immortal life Jesus responds to the disciples’ puzzlement in the form of a (covenantal) law-like pronouncement: “it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a wealthy man to enter the kingdom of God” (Mark 10:25) Then in response to Peter’s question (Mark 10:28), Jesus indicates that the fulfilment he imagines is a very “down to earth” renewal of family in village community: the disciples who have left their families and fields to assist in the program of renewal will themselves be involved in the renewal of families with their fields, on their ancestral lands, “now in this age” but with persecutions (Mark 10:29-30). As in the covenantal speech in the Q series, so in the Markan covenantal dialogues, the renewal of family and village community is happening now, in this age, still under the Roman imperial order and its persecutions. And in typically wry peasant humor Mark adds, as a “throw-away line,” “and in the age to come eternal life,” what the rich man had been seeking on top of all his wealth.

To summarize the economic program indicated in Jesus’ renewal of covenant community in both Mark’s story and the Q series of speeches, Jesus insisted on cancellation of debts owed to each other and the cooperative use of remaining family resources to aid one another in the local community, which strengthened families’ ability to avoid getting further indebted and vulnerable to outside creditors.

The next step is to look more closely at Jesus’ condemnation of the scribes’ and Pharisees’ effects on the people. Taking Jesus’ controversies with the Pharisees in Mark and

his woes against the scribes and Pharisees in the Q speeches as Jesus' opposition to the Law has been a serious misunderstanding, exacerbated by Reformation theology. These texts do *not* present Jesus in opposition to "Judaism." In that long-standing Christian misunderstanding, the Pharisees were taken as the direct precursors of the rabbis, obsessed with purity codes and the casuistry of ritual law. The most influential treatment of the last generation noted that the Judean historian Josephus represented them as legal experts involved in the politics of the temple-state who had withdrawn from politics into pious eating clubs before the time of Jesus (Neusner). Critical review of the sources, informed by historical sociology, is showing that they were professional intellectuals and lawyers who worked for the temple-state as guardians of the sacred laws and traditions (Saldarini; Horsley 2013: chap. 6). They were thus in effect, "caught in the middle," between their high priestly bosses, who were appointed by the Romans, and their own loyalty to the sacred laws and traditions. At points of crisis some opted for loyalty to the covenant commandments and protested against Roman rule and against their high priestly bosses' collaboration in it. One group, "the fourth philosophy," led by some scribal teachers and Pharisees, even organized resistance to paying the tribute to Caesar, insisting that it was not allowed by the first two commandments (Josephus, *Antiquities* 18.2-3, 20-23). But insofar as the scribes and Pharisees were economically dependent on the temple-state, most of them were conservative, obedient to their bosses, and went about doing their job, which was to advise and represent the temple-state.

In the woes against the scribes and Pharisees in Q/Luke 11:39-52 Jesus does indeed mock them for their obsession with legal minutiae, as often noted. But the mockery is rhetorical, setting them up for more severe criticism of their economic effect on the people (Horsley with Draper: 285-91). These legal interpreters of the laws of the temple-state, who have the power to lighten the villagers' burden with a flick of their scribal pen, are instead guilty of extortion (Q/Luke 11:46). Jesus makes a similar charge in two episodes in Mark (Horsley 2001: 166-72). In the middle of the story, in Mark 7:1-13, he first mocks the scribes and Pharisees for their obsession with washing hands before meals and other such "traditions of the elders," that is new laws, not in the written laws of Moses, that they have promulgated for the people to keep. But suddenly Jesus changes the topic to economics. He charges that, in having designed and pushed the new practice of people "devoting" (*korban*) some of their land or its produce to God, but in effect to the Temple, the Pharisees are forcing the people to disobey the basic covenantal commandment of God, to "honor your father and mother." How so? They were insisting that poor people devote to the Temple the already meager family resources that they really need to support their families. The representatives of the Temple were siphoning off to the temple-state the local resources that were desperately needed to support people locally. Then at the end of Jesus' confrontation with the rulers and their representatives in the Temple, in Mark 12:38-44, he accuses the scribes of "devouring the households (the living, all the resources) of widows and other desperately poor people by insisting that they give their scarce resources to the already abundant Temple treasury.

In his uncompromising opposition to the centralization of wealth that was impoverishing the people, Jesus went far beyond condemning the role of the scribes and Pharisees in draining away the people's resources. What led to his arrest and crucifixion

ostensibly as a leader of insurrection was that he pronounced and demonstrated God's condemnation of the rulers and ruling institutions for their exploitation of the people.

While the sequence of speeches paralleled in Matthew and Luke have no episode in which Jesus directly confronts the rulers, it does have Jesus' pronouncement of God's judgment of the ruling house of Jerusalem in the classic prophetic form of a lament (Q and Luke 13:34-35; Horsley 1987: 300-304; 2011: 161-64). Jesus as a prophet like Amos or Isaiah, speaking for God, who already knows what is in store for the Jerusalem ruling house that has been oppressing the people, voices a plaintive lament over the ruling house that will soon be desolate. In the ancient world, a ruling city was thought of as a mother hen who supposedly nurtured and took care of her "chicks," the village communities surrounding the mother city. Jesus, speaking in the persona of God as a caring mother hen declares that she had tried to take care of her chicks. But the Jerusalem rulers block her attempts and even killed the prophets sent to warn them, like Jesus. The ruling house has thus condemned itself to becoming desolate.

The Gospel of Mark makes three references to Jesus' prophetic pronouncement that God had condemned the Temple, that it would be destroyed (13:1-2; 14:58; 15:29). This prophecy in Mark is paralleled in John 2, where it is explained as a reference to Jesus' body, and in the Gospel of Thomas 71, where it uses the metaphor of the "house" (of God). In Mark, Jesus is accused of threatening to destroy the Temple himself. But in the standard prophetic form the prophecy takes, the "I" would have been God. And if the prophecy is taken in the double form of destruction and rebuilding, then the best interpretation, given that "house," synonym of "temple" as God's house, also was a synonym for "people" of God, would be that the house of God (= the Temple) would be destroyed, but then the house of God (= the people of God) would be rebuilt (Horsley 1987: 292-97; 2011: 164-67). Jesus' prophecy of God's judgment of the temple combined with a promise of the rebuilding of God's house (= the people) is similar to the climax of the somewhat earlier Animal Vision in 1 Enoch 85-90. This scribal text anticipates that "the house" (= the people) will be gloriously rebuilt, but that "house" will not have a "tower," that is a temple, the earlier tower having had polluted bread on its table (altar).

There is nothing in the Gospels about a "cleansing" of the Temple. But the most dramatic action Jesus took in his confrontation with the centralizing institutions in Jerusalem was a blockade of the operations of the Temple, the mega-bank and seat of political control as well as the place of sacrifices, all protected by the Roman troops stationed atop the porticoes (Matthew 21:12-13; Mark 11:15-17; Luke 19:45-46; John 2:13-17). This is a bold political-economic-religious demonstration, in a long prophetic tradition that goes back through Jeremiah, Isaiah, and Ahijah. Jesus *acts out* what Jeremiah had prophesied centuries before: God was condemning the Temple and high priests because of their oppression of the people, in violation of the commandments in the Mosaic covenant, like brigands who rob the people and then flee into their stronghold for protection, in this case the sacred precincts of the Temple and their privileged role as high priests. Mark's story has Jesus *pronounce* the same condemnation of the Temple and high priests four times in the subsequent narrative: in the parable of the tenants (Mark 12:1-12) who are condemned because of their violence in the vineyard (the people of Israel) and in three references to Jesus' prophecy of the destruction of the Temple.

In prophetically pronouncing God's condemnation of the Temple and high priests, of course, Jesus was stirring up resistance to the Roman imperial order, leading to the attempted entrapment by the Pharisees' question about whether it was lawful, that is according to the Mosaic covenant, to pay tribute to Caesar, the son of God and Savior of the World (Mark 12:13-17). Of course, they knew very well that it was not. It was a violation of the first two commandments, precisely the basis on which the more activist scribal teachers and Pharisees had organized resistance twenty years earlier (whom Josephus calls "the fourth philosophy," *Antiquities* 18:4-5, 9-10, 23-24). In his carefully crafted reply Jesus did not actually say, "No, it is not lawful!" – which would have been cause for his immediate arrest. But everyone would have understood exactly what he meant with "Give to Caesar the things that are Caesar's and to God the things that are God's." What are "the things of God"? Everything. What are "the things of Caesar"? Nothing. He declared that the people do not owe tribute to Caesar.

In summary, once we attend to the whole gospel story and the speeches of Jesus included in Matthew and Luke, Jesus was no mere individual teacher of individuals and was not narrowly focused on the "destitute." The Gospels portray Jesus as concerned with the poor in general (the vast majority of people in his social setting), as catalyzing a covenant renewal in the village communities that were disintegrating because the wealthy rulers were draining away the people's livelihood. Firmly grounded in the Mosaic covenant and its commandments, mechanisms, and teachings designed to guide communities in ensuring that each constituent family have an adequate livelihood, he insisted upon mutual aid and cooperation in the village communities. He insisted upon the common good and on the collective social or community responsibility for its members. Jesus worked in village communities and commissioned his disciples to extend his mission by living and working in village communities. This working in and organizing in villages created a wider movement that expanded rapidly after his own martyrdom.

But Jesus went a bold and decisive step further. Besides catalyzing a community-based movement, and pursuing his own calling as a prophet of resistance as well as renewal, he led a forceful demonstration in the Temple, the seat of government and central bank as well as sacred center for sacrifices. Besides pronouncing God's condemnation of the Temple and high priesthood for oppressing the people, he acted out God's condemnation in his prophetic demonstration. This blatant protest against the institutions in which power and wealth had been centralized through exploitation of the poor is what led to his arrest by the high priests appointed by Rome and his execution as a political insurrectionary by the imperial governor and military.

The Gospel in the New World (Dis-)Order

Once we discern the broader gospel story of Jesus as focused on covenant renewal of the common good and cooperative community in opposition to the oppressive centralization of wealth and power, it would seem inappropriate, indeed unfaithful, to revert to the citation of one-liners about the poor or giving alms. The Empire of global capitalism that is systematically impoverishing the people who provide its labor and consumers is far more complex than the Roman imperial order in Galilee and Judea, where the local

aristocracy backed by the imperial governor and military dominated and exploited hundreds of village communities.

It is not difficult, however, to discern the values that Jesus embodied and insisted upon and the general strategy and tactics he pursued in his mission to and among the ever more impoverished people. In utter contrast and opposition to the privatization of wealth, Jesus insisted on the common good, collective responsibility for protection of individual (family) economic right to a livelihood, and adamant opposition to the wealthy “growing their wealth” by exploiting others (e.g., by taking tithes and tribute or charging interest on subsistence loans). All of this was the will of God, as known from Israelite (biblical) tradition. His overall strategy was a renewal of the society in its fundamental form of village communities while condemning and demonstrating against the dominant centralizing institutions. This too was the will of God, Jesus himself being the prophet called to declare God’s judgment. His tactics, in terms familiar today, were community organizing among the people, on the one hand, and public declaration and demonstration against the wealthy rulers and their representatives, on the other.

In the history of the Christian church that itself consolidated power and often reinforced the centralization of wealth and power at the expense of the people, the scope and depth of Jesus’ mission has been effectively blunted, while the values he advocated and embodied were often retained and rearticulated. After periodically persecuting the Jesus/Christ loyalists (*pistis/fides* meant political-religious loyalty), Roman imperial authorities were eventually happy to have their emphasis on collective responsibility and community solidarity operative in the Empire to supply social cohesion from below as the imperial order disintegrated from above, as the wealthy imperial and local elite, having utterly impoverished the people, no longer contributed much to the public good. And when Constantine finally established the church, many bishops were only too happy to enjoy imperial favor, design creeds as loyalty oaths, and collaborate in trying to maintain public order. Meanwhile, in late antiquity, Jesus’ covenantal teachings, focused on the renewal of collective responsibility and community cooperation, were taken increasingly as counsels of perfection that only some individuals could realistically pursue, by withdrawing from traditional social forms, relationships, and interaction.

The established church, however, specifically the Roman Catholic papacy and hierarchy, has consistently articulated the centrality of the common good, including the responsibility of the community, the state, and the political-economy generally, for the welfare of the members of society. The papacy and church hierarchy are consistently viewed, and consistently act, as a conservative bulwark in support of the established order. Nevertheless, as neoliberal economic ideology has come to dominate North American and western European discourse accompanying the rise of global capitalism, the Roman Catholic Church has continued to articulate the common good and collective economic responsibility for the poor, specifically in papal declarations and collective statements of bishops. As is often pointed out somewhat wryly, the conservative papal declarations are far to the “left” of just about any politician in the United States.

From medieval times until today, when people have been allowed to hear Jesus’ gospel message in the vernacular, they have taken collective action to renew community good and

protest their own exploitation and the centralization of wealth. This is true particularly of peasants in traditional agrarian societies similar to the villagers among whom Jesus and his disciples worked. Any number of popular movements in late medieval Europe emerged at least partly because the people were responding to the Gospel stories and the teaching of Jesus: the Waldensians, the Lollards, the Hussites, the peasants in S.W. Germany, the Levellers and Diggers. What happened in the 1970s and 1980s in Central America stands in a long tradition of people both renewing their own community cooperation and solidarity and acting in opposition to the wealthy holders of power. As a result of the work of pioneering figures such as Rutilio Grande, S.J., in El Salvador and the many “delegates of the word” there and elsewhere in Latin America, communities of campesinos renewed their commitment to the common good in response to hearing the Gospel (Kelly 2013 and in this volume).

It seems more difficult for people in political-economic situations less similar to those of Central American campesinos or ancient Galilean villagers/peasants to discern immediate parallels between the story of Jesus and their own circumstances. Thus for most of us whose lives are now being determined by the forces of global capitalism, it seems more appropriate to discern the values and broad program of Jesus as portrayed in the Gospels and then to discern what course of action might correspond in our very different political-economic system. The specific terms, discourse, and statements of the Gospels may not be immediately applicable. But any number of initiatives are being taken, movements emerging, and organizations catalyzed that correspond roughly to both the renewal of community cooperation and responsibility and the protest of centralization that Jesus pursued (Korten 2009; Alperowicz 2013). Some of these initiatives include closing bank accounts in the mega-banks that have systematically impoverished people (such as Bank of America, Citibank, Wells-Fargo) and support of locally based banks and credit-unions, and support of many local organizations and businesses, especially those that empower people and aid the poor in various ways. Some of these initiatives have been launched by church groups, while many church members provide leadership for others. While links with the Gospels may not be explicit, these would appear to correspond with the community renewal and prophetic protest of Jesus as portrayed in the Gospels.

A final implication of Jesus’ mission to the poor in opposition to imperial centralization suggests reclaiming a *biblical* theology for a world under the rule of global capitalism. God in modern Western culture has long since withdrawn to the safe citadel of the individual soul, having been banned from providential care of creation and history in all of its dimensions, particularly politics and economics (Asad: chap. 1). Indeed mainline Christian theology owes more to ancient Hellenistic philosophy than to the Bible. Theologians tout a monotheism of (only) One God. While Paul, and most texts in the Hebrew Bible insisted on loyalty to the transcendent God, they knew, in Paul’s phrase, that “there are many lords and many gods” (1 Corinthians 8:1-6). In the world of the texts that later became books of the Bible, that is, of Israel and the ancient Near East, the gods that people *served* with their tithes and offerings and loyalty were the forces or powers that determined their lives. Caesar was the most powerful of these forces that determined people’s lives in the Roman Empire; hence people honored, served, and were loyal to (*pistis/fides*) Caesar in imperial temples, shrines, tribute, and acquiescence in imperial rule. As noted above, however, Jesus declared that the people

did not owe tribute to Caesar. Rather they should be loyal to the transcendent Power who was now bringing the direct divine rule and renewal to the people. We may ask the corresponding “biblical” question for today’s world about what is the dominant power or force that controls our lives, the power that we serve with our resources and loyalty? But the good news from the Gospels that corresponds to Jesus’ declaration is that we do not owe loyalty and service to that god. We are free to engage in the renewal of the common good and community that would bring life and livelihood to people and to actively oppose the centralized power that is impoverishing people.

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