UNJUST STEWARD

Wealth, Poverty, and the Church Today

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Forward Movement
inspire disciples. empower evangelists.

For my family

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Foreword

It is impossible to live an authentic Christian life without wrestling deeply with issues of wealth and poverty. As the biblical scholar Walter Brueggemann has noted, it is "unmistakably clear that economics is a *core preoccupation* of the biblical tradition."[1] Similarly, the church historian Justo González has observed that questions of economic and social order were "*central*" to the "life of the early church."[2]

And yet most of us are blissfully unaware of this fact. Many Christians in twenty-first-century North America suffer from a collective amnesia about the centrality of issues of wealth and poverty in the Christian tradition. We forget that we minister to Jesus Christ whenever we feed the hungry, give drink to the thirsty, and clothe the naked. And we forget that we will be called to account for our actions—or inaction—at the Last Judgment.[3]

This is precisely why *The Unjust Steward* by Miguel Escobar is such an important work for our time. Escobar helps us to reclaim our theological heritage with respect to issues of wealth and poverty. Like the eucharist, this book is a reminiscence, or *anamnesis*, of a past that continues to have deep relevance to our lives today.

Within the pages of this volume, you will discover many treasures about the issues of wealth and poverty in the Bible and in the early church. You will encounter reflections on the Lord's Prayer, Saint Luke's Gospel, and the Pauline epistles. You will also hear the voices of ancient teachers such as Justin Martyr, Antony of Egypt, John Chrysostom, Gregory of Nyssa, and Augustine of Hippo.

But this book is not just an excellent teaching resource about the Bible and the early church theologians. It will also help you to draw important connections between your life and these ancient texts. Escobar's powerful reflection upon his own social location and life journey serves as a model for our own theological reflection. And the

discussion questions and "A Next Step" suggestions at the end of each chapter are a great way to move from reflection to action.

To that end, this book also addresses the important intersections between wealth and poverty and contemporary issues such as gender inequality, the COVID-19 pandemic, anti-Blackness, sexual racism, predatory lending, and modern-day slavery. As such, this volume will be a useful resource to those who are interested in intersections of economic justice with liberationist, postcolonial, and queer theologies.

Finally, this book is a wonderful resource for Episcopal parishes and seminaries that wish to engage more deeply with the theological and ethical dimensions of wealth and poverty. Miguel Escobar is a faithful Episcopalian who has served in a variety of contexts in the Episcopal Church, ranging from the Office of the Presiding Bishop to Episcopal Divinity School at Union Theological Seminary. As such, Escobar's work reflects the deep commitment of the Episcopal Church to issues of economic justice.[4]

To paraphrase Augustine of Hippo, pick up this book and read it. You are sure to find many riches within.[5]

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Endnotes

1 Walter Brueggemann, *Money and Possessions* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2016), xix (emphasis added).

2 Justo L. González, *Faith and Wealth: A History of Early Christian Ideas on the Origin, Significance, and Use of Money* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 1990), xii (emphasis added).

3 See Matthew 25:31-46 (the Parable of the Sheep and the Goats).

4 See, for example, General Convention Resolution 2018-B026, which embraces the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals, which begin with "End poverty in all its forms everywhere" as the basis for the Episcopal Church's policy and action on development.

5 Augustine of Hippo, *Confessions* XIII.xii ("t*olle lege, tolle lege*").

Introduction

In summer 2010, I presented a short workshop on Christian stewardship practices in Hendersonville, North Carolina. This presentation took place during a conference for Latino Episcopalians, an event conducted almost entirely in Spanish. The twelve or so attendees who gathered in the conference room that day were clergy and lay leaders of Spanish-speaking congregations.

As was often the case, my presentation began with a discussion of "stewardship" and the "stewardship of God's abundance" as the theological framework for congregational fundraising. For those who may not be immediately familiar with this term, Christian stewardship refers to the idea that all of us are called to be faithful and prudent managers of the abundance that God has entrusted to our care. This sense is then applied to everything from annual fundraising campaigns (frequently called stewardship campaigns) to the responsible management of a congregation's savings and endowment. In short, stewardship means leaders of congregations and other church institutions are called upon to be the faithful managers of God's abundant resources.

With all this in mind, I dutifully arrived that day with slides outlining the tenets and practices of how most mainline congregations do their annual fundraising, practices undergirded by this theology of stewardship—*mayordomía* in Spanish—in which all Christians are called upon to be stewards—*mayordomos*—of all that God has given us. Just a few slides in, however, I noticed that a couple of those gathered around the room appeared both skeptical and perplexed. Eventually, one of the attendees explained to me that the Spanish word I was using for steward, *mayordomo*, had profoundly negative associations where he was from, so much so that he would never want to be considered a *mayordomo*. *Mayordomos* were the people who had exploited people like him and his family, the property/business manager-in-charge who squeezed out every cent they could from the blood and sweat of their workers. There were nods around the room as people recognized that "stewardship" was a very strange term for me to use as it was so closely associated with exploitation and injustice.

Failing to grasp the gravity of his statement, I thought that the point he was raising was simply a matter of translation, and so we began to discuss other words that would work instead. In the years since, though, I've come to see the responses I met that day less as a matter of translation and more as a faithful memory of the kinds of characters stewards actually are. Who is the steward in Jesus's time? What is stewardship?

This gulf in perspective became especially clear as I began learning more about the history of *mayordomos* in Latin America. Across many parts of Latin America, on the vast colonial estates called haciendas, the *mayordomo* was the head administrator in charge of making the plantations, mines, and factories profitable. Whereas the owners of haciendas typically lived off-site in major urban areas, the *mayordomo* lived on-site, and it was their job to roughly rend and report profits back to the *patrón*. On the haciendas, *mayordomos* regularly used physical punishment, violence, and debt bondage to attain their profits. Even in twentieth-century Bolivia, for instance, in studies on the labor practices of the hacienda system prior to 1952, there are examples of *mayordomos* whipping workers and threatening expulsion from the estate.[1] The means by which this profit was made and the disconnection of the owner from the lives of the people who were impacted by the decisions of "good stewardship" are central to issues of wealth and poverty in the church today.

As I began to dig deeper into this issue of stewardship, I soon discovered many others who have questioned the wisdom of this doctrine and where it came from. Writing in the 1930s, the American theologian Reinhold Niebuhr strongly criticized mainline Christianity's adulation of the steward and stewardship. Niebuhr traced the origins of this doctrine to the influence of business leaders in mainline Protestantism during the industrial buildup between the two World Wars.[2] In "Is Stewardship Ethical?", a short article he wrote for the *Christian Century* in 1930, he critiques stewardship as an exasperatingly naïve framework that allows the church to avoid asking the more difficult questions about sources of wealth, including the exploitative practices through which such wealth was made. Instead, he argues, stewardship does little more than "sanctify power and privilege as it exists in the modern world by certain concessions to the ethical principal."[3]

Niebuhr gives the example of "the pious businessman" who is both honest and generous to his church, two virtues that "give him the satisfaction of being a Christian."[4] Yet this pious businessman "regards his power in his factory much as kings of old regarded their prerogatives. Any attempt on the part of the workers to gain a share in the determining of policy, particularly the policy which affects their own livelihood, hours, and wages, is regarded by him as an attempt to destroy the divine order of things."[5]

Niebuhr contends that stewardship is an inadequate theological framework for how the church talks and thinks about money, asserting that the call to be a good steward does nothing to challenge the pious businessman to fulfill his broader moral obligations to his employees: "There is not one church in a thousand where the moral problems of our industrial civilization are discussed with sufficient realism from the pulpit to prompt the owner to think of his stewardship in terms of these legitimate rights of the workers."[6] Niebuhr challenges the church to find a better approach for thinking about wealth and poverty, a theological vision that not only asks critical questions about sources of wealth but also recognizes "how necessary and ultimately ethical are the restraints of an ethical society upon man's (sic) will to power and his lust for gain."[7]

What would it mean, then, to begin to look beyond stewardship as a way of thinking about wealth and poverty? To start, I believe we should first return to what is considered to be one of Jesus's most perplexing teachings, that of the parable of the unjust steward found in Luke 16:1-13. The situation described in this parable matches almost exactly the exploitative arrangement of the Latin American haciendas described above, and it once again raises the larger question of how mainline Christianity came to embrace the role and character of the steward.

Luke's parable of the unjust steward describes a steward that would have been familiar to the dozen Latinos gathered in the workshop on that day as well as Reinhold Niebuhr writing in the 1930s. The story Jesus tells takes place on a vast agricultural estate, one in which a landowner and his property/business manager, an effective steward,

have pressed workers into significant debt and debt bondage. Biblical scholars note that the steward in this story is likely a "first slave," or a man who has been freed from slavery for the sole purpose of serving as a manager and overseer of the slaves, day laborers, and tenant farmers who were made to work the land.[8]

One day, the rich landowner suspects his first slave—the steward—of squandering his wealth. Before any proof or defense can be offered, the landowner fires this steward, at which point the steward panics and must come up with a plan for his survival.

His plan is a curious one. Whereas previously the good steward had extracted wealth from those he had overseen, the steward now begins to send his master's wealth flowing in reverse. He does this by using his master's wealth to remit the debts of the slaves, day laborers, and tenant farmers who were indebted to the master. Biblical scholars note these debts were so large that they were likely the debts of entire villages.[9] We learn the steward does this in the hope of later being welcomed into these laborers' homes after news of his dismissal becomes widely known.

Surprisingly, the steward's decision to use the landowner's wealth to remit debts ends up being praised by both the master and Jesus. Jesus concludes this parable by appearing to praise fiscal imprudence and immorality, a shocking fact that has perplexed interpreters for millennia: "And I tell you, make friends for yourselves by means of dishonest wealth so that when it is gone, they may welcome you into the eternal homes" (Luke 16:9). Jesus goes on to say that like the steward, his followers must ultimately choose who their master is in life: "No slave can serve two masters; for a slave will either hate the one and love the other, or be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and wealth" (Luke 16:13).

Who is the steward, and what is the injustice being described, then? At the outset of the parable, the steward's actions are fundamentally exploitative. His expected role is to extract wealth from the land and those working it in order to maximize returns and profit. It is telling that the steward finds his safety and salvation only when the money begins to flow in reverse, in an act of economic jubilee. "Following the money" in this parable is key here as the steward finds his salvation by acting in the opposite way he is expected to, an act of anti-stewardship.

All of this may seem like quibbling over terminology yet I am convinced it goes deeper than that. It is striking to me that even as secular cultural institutions such as the Metropolitan Museum of Art return major gifts from the Sackler family (justly condemned for their pharmaceutical company's leading role in America's opioid crisis) and colleges and universities across the nation are divesting their endowments from fossil fuels, the church's idolization of "the steward" and "stewardship" prevents it from having serious conversations about where its wealth is coming from and at what great cost.[10] The exploitative character of the steward and the rapacious logic of stewardship prevails. I've now personally observed multiple instances in which the principle of "sound stewardship" has served as the rationale for church organizations *not divesting* their endowments from fossil fuels. In each instance, the argument was eerily reminiscent to the actions of the unjust steward at the outset of the parable, wherein effective stewardship meant extracting the maximum returns on behalf of the organizational masters, never mind the exploitation of the land and the poor involved in this decision.

This suggests to me there is something fundamentally unjust about stewardship. I've come to believe this idea of stewardship—derived from the Roman *latifundia*, carried through to the Latin American hacienda, forged in the stealing of indigenous people's lands and the institution of slavery, and later championed by wealthy industrialists—is far too limited a framework for engaging the broader moral obligations that Christians have on issues of wealth and poverty.

My friend and colleague, the Very Rev. Dr. Kelly Brown Douglas, dean of Episcopal Divinity School at Union, speaks and writes regularly about theology's role in broadening the moral imagination. This book is an attempt to do just that: to broaden and deepen the conversations taking place about wealth and poverty in the church today.

In order to do this, I question "stewardship" as one of the main ways mainline Christianity talks and thinks about wealth and poverty. Though I am not a New Testament scholar, I have been struck by how often the gospels describe the steward as a dubious character. In

addition to the parable of the unjust steward, a steward again appears at the wedding at Cana (John 2:1-12). There, the chief steward is baffled by the bridegroom's choice to serve the good wine last: "Everyone serves the good wine first, and then the inferior wine after the guests have become drunk. But you have kept the good wine until now" (John 2:10). As the chief steward is considering cost savings, Jesus is transforming water into wine. Whereas the unjust steward exploits the land and people, Jesus is praising the one who remits debts, an act of economic jubilee. The steward is repeatedly presented, then, as a foil to the way of Jesus.

Second, in keeping with this notion of broadening the moral imagination, this book highlights some of the other ways Christianity has wrestled with issues of wealth and poverty in its past. I have done this is by looking at 24 instances in which Christian thinkers dealt directly with issues of wealth and poverty over the first five centuries. The result is a series of snapshots that begin to tell the dramatic and conflicted story of how the church transitioned from the radical message of Jesus toward theological doctrines that served to justify the building up of vast institutional wealth. It is a stark transformation. On one end of this story, we have Jesus instructing a rich man to sell his possessions and give all his wealth to the poor (Matthew 19:16-30; March 10:17-31; Luke 18:18-30), and on the other, we have Augustine urging the wealthy to direct their donations to him, as opposed to the poor, as he embarks on a vast church building campaign: "Your bishop may not lack for clothes or need of a roof above his head. But perhaps he is building a church. You cannot see into the empty coffers of your leader; but you certainly can see the empty shell of his building as it goes up… May God grant that I do not say this in vain."[11]

I should add here that this is not an entirely tragic story. Between Jesus and Augustine, there are many encouraging and inspiring moments along the way. For even as the church moved on from the witness of its founder, there were leaders and movements who sought to reconnect the church back to its Jesus's radical vision. Their voices and practical advice—frequently offering a *via media* between Jesus's teachings and the value of the church as an institution—are deep wells from which to draw strength and encouragement for ministry today.

Acknowledgments

While the idea of this book has been germinating since I led that workshop in 2010, the research and writing of this book truly began in the first months of the COVID-19 pandemic. Indeed, this book was begun in the first weeks of isolation in April 2020 and concluded during another ten-day isolation period at the beginning of January 2022, the latter the result of finally contracting the virus. The chaos of the pandemic, the vast poverty and inequality that it exacerbated and exposed, as well as the racial reckoning caused by the murder of George Floyd in late May 2020, all infuse the chapters of this book.

As I set about gathering my notes in April 2020, I did so in the hope that it would be able to be well-used by congregational leaders. My goal was to write 24 accessibly written reflections, any of which could be read and discussed in congregational settings. As you will see, I've included discussion questions and a practical next step as aids to foster group conversation. A four-week discussion series could easily be organized by selecting four chapters that are particularly relevant to one's community. My hope is that chapters help lead to robust discussion in community by offering new insights and images with which to think about wealth and poverty.

Finally, I want to say thank you to several people who were key in the writing of this book. First to Ben, my husband, who steadfastly encouraged and supported me as I immersed myself each day on this project, even as this often meant taking over the living room of our one-bedroom apartment during the pandemic. I lean on Ben's love and support daily. Secondly, I am grateful to the many friends and colleagues who encouraged me in this project and who were willing to read and offer their feedback on early drafts. These include Mark Beckwith, Thomas Cannell, Patrick Cheng, Gary Commins, Kelly Brown Douglas, Mary Foulke, Bill Franklin, Scott Gunn, Jeffrey Lee, Sandra Montes, Steven Paulikas, Richelle Thompson, and Joseph Wolyniak. This circle also included several students and recent graduates of Episcopal Divinity School at Union including Carl Adair, Mary Barber, Nicole Hanley and Maryann Philbrook. It is oftentimes

said that writing is lonely work, and this felt especially true while writing in a pandemic, yet the thoughtful feedback, insights, and words of encouragement I received from this group meant that this book was written in community. To say "thanks" doesn't quite suffice for the depth of gratitude I have for their friendship and support.

Endnotes

1 Stephen M. Smith, "Labor Exploitation on Pre-1952 Haciendas in the Lower Valley of Cochabamba, Bolivia," *The Journal of Developing Areas,* Vol. 11, No. 2 (1977): 227–244.

2 David King, "Beyond Abundance: Is Stewardship Ethical?" *Word & World*, Vol. 38, No. 3 (Summer 2018).

3 Reinhold Niebuhr, "Is Stewardship Ethical?", *The Christian Century*, April 30, 1930, 555.

4 Niebuhr, "Is Stewardship Ethical?", 555.

5 Niebuhr, "Is Stewardship Ethical?", 555.

6 Niebuhr, "Is Stewardship Ethical?", 556.

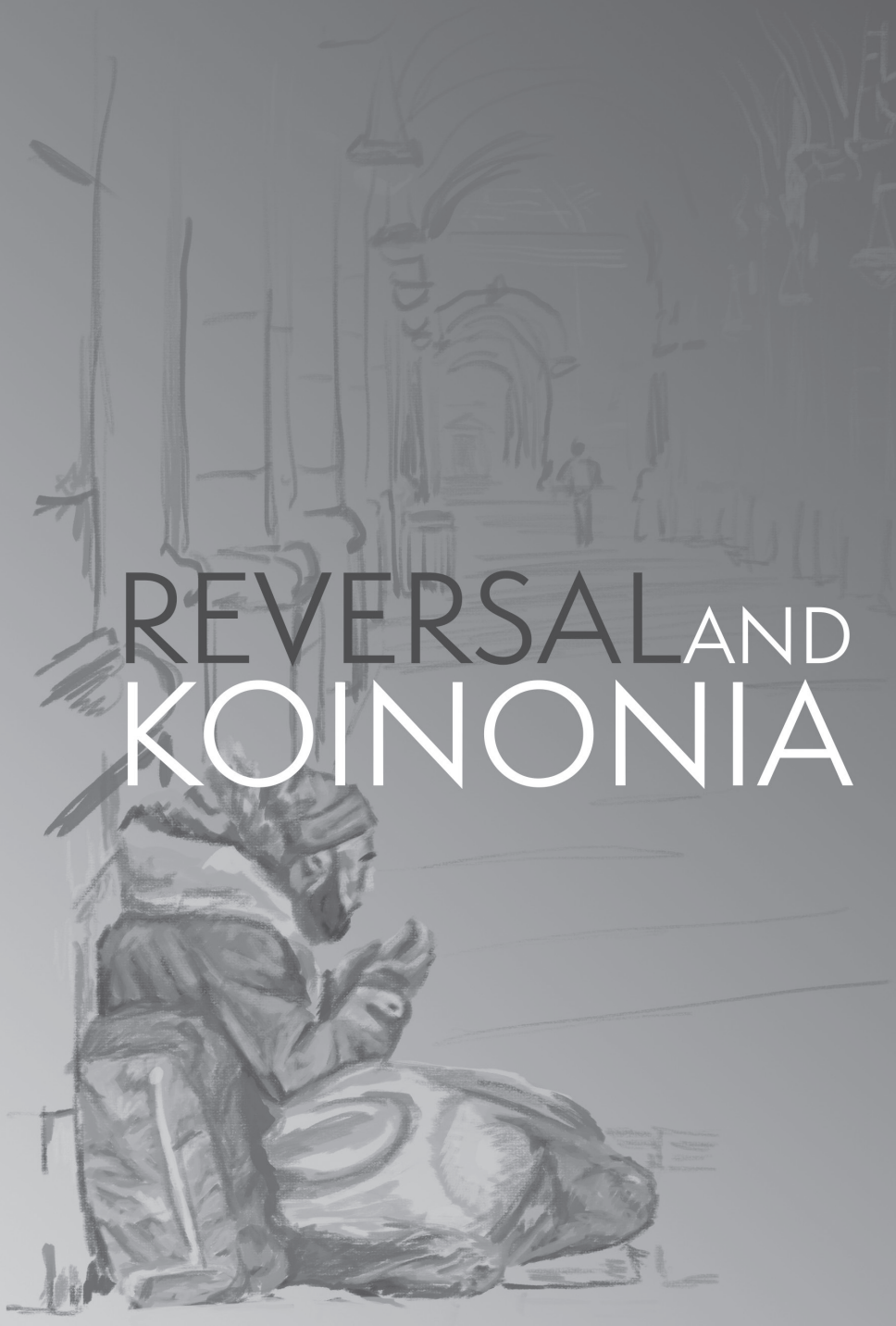
7 Niebuhr, "Is Stewardship Ethical?", 557.

8 Bruce J. Malina and Richard L. Rohrbaugh, *Social-Science Commentary on the Synoptic Gospels* (Minneapolis, Minnesota: Fortress Press, 2003, Second Edition), 292.

9 Malina and Rohrbaugh, *Social-Science Commentary*, 292.

10 A charming profile of America's thirtieth wealthiest family, the Sacklers, *Forbes* magazine notes that "Nearly all 50 states have filed lawsuits against Purdue and Sackler family members for their alleged roles in the opioid crisis." forbes.com/profile/sackler/?sh=615973da5d63

11 Peter Brown, *Through the Eye of a Needle: Wealth, the Fall of Rome, and the Making of Christianity in the West, 350-550 AD* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2012), 355.



REVERSAL AND KOINONIA

No slave can serve two masters;
for a slave will either hate the one
and love the other,
or be devoted to the one
and despise the other.
You cannot serve God and wealth.

—Luke 16:13

1 Dreams of Reversal

In 1996, my grandfather, Eusebio Castilleja, lay dying of skin cancer in his bedroom. I was fourteen years old and seated with my siblings at my grandparents' kitchen table, trying in my own teenage way to grasp the meaning of what was taking place and watching as my parents, aunts, uncles, and cousins took turns saying their goodbyes.

On the one hand, death by cancer was nothing new. Like so many migrant farm laborer families, varieties of cancers seemed to bloom undetected and unchecked until it was far too late. Some of my fondest memories from childhood are the result of long car rides from our home outside San Antonio, Texas, to the tiny East Texas town of Rosebud—population less than 2,000—where I played wildly with my siblings and cousins outside as my parents, aunts, and uncles mourned relatives indoors. In my memory, those trips mostly involved climbing trees, running from cows, tasting honeysuckle, and steeling myself for the eventual moment when I'd have to kneel and kiss my deceased relative on the forehead. My grandfather's death, however, was the first time that death-by-cancer had touched someone I had known well, a person I loved and admired deeply.

My maternal grandparents, Eusebio and Cruz Castilleja, immigrated from Monterrey, Mexico, in 1954 and settled in San Antonio's West Side in a small home on Delgado Street. Each summer, they'd pack up their six children, including my mother, for a long drive from San Antonio to family farms outside of Krakow, Wisconsin, to work as migrant farm laborers. My father's family had a similar pattern, although he remembers

spending summers picking cotton near Houston, Texas. Decades later while on a road trip to Galveston beach, I remember my dad pulling the car over by the side of a cotton field so his children could see what it felt like to extract the pillowy fibers from the razor-like leaves. I remember the sharpness of the thorns, and my siblings and I held on to our cotton through the rest of the trip.

The experiences and humiliations of those fields ended up as the seeds of the stories I'd grow up hearing around family dinner tables. Long after my parents, aunts, and uncles had moved on to office jobs and professional careers, family gatherings included unbearably long story-telling sessions—usually led by an uncle—about what had taken place during those years. My family was lucky in that we were able to leave the fields behind within a generation. And though there were family members who didn't wish to dwell on that past, the stories would flood out whenever there was a funeral, and there was an unending stream of funerals.

On one of the long car trips back from a funeral in Rosebud, I remember my parents talking about why so many people in our family were dying from cancer. They had just overheard other family members—perhaps distant cousins or an aunt twice removed—talking about the connection between the cancers and the pesticides they were exposed to in the fields. My father recalled crop dusters dropping pesticides directly on them as they worked below. Like poisonous snow, I remember thinking. Part of why I remember that conversation so distinctly is that it led me to worry about whether that poison could be transmitted from generation to generation, from skin to skin. Was the poison eating away at me already?

In 1996, the same year of my grandfather's death, a study on the prevalence and cultural attitudes toward cancer among migrant farmworkers affirmed much of what my parents were describing on that car ride back from Rosebud. After confirming that seasonal and migrant workers are at elevated risk for lymphomas and prostate, brain, leukemia, cervix, and stomach cancers, the study describes the way cancers are understood and described among impacted families: "In regard to cancer, an intense fear of the disease coupled with fatalism regarding its treatment and course were found to be pervasive among the migrant workers who participated in the focus groups. Cancer was nearly synonymous with death, an association that likely reflected the experience that migrant workers have had

with cancer." The economic drivers behind this exposure to pesticides were also explored. When asked why a participant continued to work in the fields when he knew full well the risks of exposure to pesticides, he responded: "If I refuse to go into the field, there are many others who would be happy to do it so their families could eat."[1]

As I sat in my grandparents' home and my grandfather lay dying, different strands that I had intuited about the way the world worked were coming together. His cancer was a striking lesson in the intertwined nature of poverty and vulnerability to disease. Poisonous snow had fallen from the sky onto the skin of my grandfather and closest relatives. Who flew the plane and what were they thinking? Did they know what would eventually happen to the people below? Did they even see us as human beings? An understanding of the universe as an ultimately cold and cruel place closed in. But then, my depressed daydreaming was interrupted by the sudden presence of a priest.

What I recall is a knock, a hubbub among my aunts, and then suddenly, the presence of a Roman Catholic priest in my grandparents' house, a holy outsider in my family's deepest moment of mourning. He was quickly escorted from the front door to my grandfather's bedroom, where he performed the Last Rites.

Being something of a veteran of Roman Catholic funerals, I'd certainly seen priests and understood at a basic level why one had just knocked on the door. But at fourteen, I found myself asking a deeper set of questions that I'm still reflecting on today. Why, really, had a priest suddenly appeared? What did my Mexican grandparents' faith have to say about what was happening? And why was it that the church was one of the only institutions that showed up when so many others failed to?

A year or so later, I was riding my bike through the quiet country roads surrounding my family's home in the Texas Hill Country. As a result of seeing the priest walk through the doorway of my grandparents' home, I'd begun a slow, careful reading of the gospels of Matthew and Luke, one that involved copying out by hand significant chunks of

the gospels per day to absorb the text more fully. I had recently come across the *Magnificat* in the Gospel of Luke and, strange teenager that I was, decided to commit it to memory. As a result, particular lines kept floating to mind as I rode my bike up and down the gentle slopes that early evening. "My soul magnifies the Lord…He has brought down the mighty from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly…He has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty" (Luke 1:46-55).

These lines were unlike any version of Christianity that I had experienced up to that point. The small Texas town I grew up in was thoroughly controlled by an aggressively white, Christian fundamentalism that was somehow both ridiculous and terrifying at the same time. A politicized version of Christian fundamentalism was growing in strength and force across the country throughout the 1990s, something I experienced firsthand as I watched friends disappear into homeschooling or become transformed from decent and funny kids into radical evangelists who joined their parents in trying to ban books from the school library.

By the time I graduated from the local, public high school, Christian students had staged walkouts of Biology II when evolution was taught; an English teacher was fired for teaching the novel *Snow Falling on Cedars* because it had a scene of interracial sex and discussed Japanese internment camps; our principal led the school in the Lord's Prayer before football games with impunity; and motivational speakers had been regularly brought in to exhort us to follow Jesus lest we burn in hell.[2] In middle and high school, bleached blond teenagers participated in Young Life rallies, held hands in a circle each morning for prayer around the flagpole, and casually dropped comments regarding the immorality of interracial relationships because "God forbids man from laying with animals."[3]

What I didn't realize then but am painfully aware of now is that I was witnessing what the journalist Katherine Stewart has described as the rise of radical Christian nationalism, a highly organized movement centered on the fabrication that the American republic was founded as a Christian nation. This radical movement asserts that legitimate government rests on adherence to the doctrines of a specific religious, ethnic, and cultural heritage, a white nationalist Christianity whose defining fear is that the nation has strayed from the truths that once made it great.[4] Stewart intentionally uses the term "radical" because

this version of white Christian nationalism pretends to work toward the revival of "traditional values" while contradicting and undermining the long-established principles and norms of democracy.[5]

Thankfully, I was mostly excluded from much of this on account of being Latino, a nerd, and very gay. Yet I watched closely as this version of Christianity created holy cover for cruelty toward those on the margins, and it is impossible to describe how much work it has taken to undo the fear, shame, and self-hatred that I internalized from those years. My primary experience of Christianity, therefore, had been this soul-crushing expression of white, fundamentalist conservatism, with cruel, so-called Christians mocking anyone who deviated from this norm.

Because of this, it felt—in fact, it oftentimes still feels—like a betrayal to open the Bible, a text that is thoroughly owned by those who are committed to terrorizing the lives of LGBTQ+ communities and people of color. And yet my curiosity ultimately got the better of me. What did the text actually say? How did this same text galvanize both the white Christian nationalist movement that I actively feared as well as lead a Roman Catholic priest to show up to honor the dignity of my grandfather at his deathbed? I was—and remain—fascinated by such contradictions.

What I discovered in my careful reading of the gospels was a world of agricultural images and miraculous stories that was a great deal more like the world described around my immigrant grandparents' kitchen table than the bleached blond Christianity that gathered around the flagpole for prayer. The Bible held stories about day laborers and outcasts, people who were desperately sick seeking a miraculous cure; there were stories of people who were persistently hungry, had been robbed and left to die, or were begging on the side of the road, as well as stories of people who had been humiliated and then lifted up.

While it wasn't clear to me at the time, I now realize that I was responding to one of the peculiarities of the gospels themselves. In *Christianity: The First Three Thousand Years*, historian Diarmaid MacCulloch writes, "Biographies were not rare in the ancient world and the Gospels do have many features in common with non-Christian examples. Yet these Christian books are an unusually 'down-market' variety of biography, in which ordinary people reflect on their experience of Jesus, where the powerful and the beautiful generally

stay on the sidelines of the story, and where it is often the poor, the ill-educated and the disreputable whose encounters with God are most vividly described."[6] The gospels are about the lives of *gente humilde*, as my family might say.[7]

Further, in addition to these stories being about "the poor, the ill-educated, and the disreputable", the gospels also expressed a longing for the world to be turned upside down. In Luke's version of the Beatitudes, for example, not only does Jesus say that it is the poor, the hungry, those who are weeping, and those who are hated who are blessed in God's kingdom, but also Jesus proceeds to pronounce woes on the rich, the well-fed, those who are laughing now, and the currently adulated. Jesus hopes for a great reversal.

Reading those words, my teenage soul joined generations of people who have found strength and courage in both halves of Luke's Beatitudes, both the positive affirmations of the poor as blessed as well as the less frequently cited pronouncement of woes on the "powerful and beautiful people" who make the lives of the poor miserable. As I delved more deeply into the Old and New Testament, I discovered that God's anger frequently flashes like lightning bolts on a hot Texas summer afternoon, and very often this anger is directed at the way the poor are being humiliated and mistreated. God angrily asks, "What do you mean by crushing my people, by grinding the face of the poor?"[8] What do we mean by this, indeed? It was a life-changing revelation to realize that my sorrow, and yes, profound anger, at the way the world was ordered might also be connected to God's dream of justice, and that many of the biblical stories were pointing toward a great reversal.

The stories and images of God's impending reversal are one of Christianity's gifts, a balm and source of hope to all those who are living with a boot on their neck. There are two halves to this gift, both an affirmation of the dignity of the poor as well as warnings to the rich, those who are well-fed, those who are laughing now, and those who are well-praised. Even so, in an effort to be welcoming to all, mainline Christianity has often tended to only focus on the positive affirmations found in the gospels while ignoring Jesus's harsh warnings

toward the powerful and wealthy. Truthfully, I've heard more than a few sermons reduce the gospels to the message of "follow your joy." Yet these exclusively positive takes are forever running up against the starker vision of the gospels, including Jesus's encounter with the rich young ruler—a story that appears in Matthew, Mark, and Luke—in which Jesus states that it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven.

In the 24 years since I began my furtive reading of the gospels, I've learned a great deal more about what drove this vision of reversal. I've realized that pressure speaks to pressure, including across millennia.

In *Loving the Poor, Saving the Rich*, early church historian Helen Rhee describes the intense socioeconomic pressures of the period just prior to and inclusive of Jesus's ministry. Called the Second Temple Period in Jewish history, this period is typically bracketed as taking place between 516 BCE and 70 CE during the time when the Second Temple in Jerusalem existed before it was destroyed by the Romans in retaliation for ongoing revolts. Rhee notes that this time in Jewish history was one of intense pressures, the result of foreign domination from the Persians, Greeks, and Romans, as well as a time of harsh living conditions for the masses.[9]

Rhee writes, "In first-century Palestine, the social scene betrayed the concentration of wealth in the hands of a small elite group (the landed aristocracy) and the general impoverishment of the majority of the population (the landless peasants). The tension between the wealthy landed minority and the peasant landless majority goes back to the late monarchical period, but throughout the Second Temple period and especially during Herod's rule, the situation grew increasingly worse through the continuing economic oppression and confiscation of the land by the rich and powerful. Creation of huge estates through the exploitation of the land and through mortgage interest produced a growing number of landless tenants or hired laborers in the very land they had once owned. And the coalition between the great landowners and the mercantile groups over the monopoly of the agricultural goods made the peasant workers' lot more difficult to endure."

Rhee goes on to describe this period as having "the firm imprint of feudalism" wherein the pressures on the lives of the poor were immense. Other compounding factors such as overpopulation and over-cultivation of the land, natural disasters, and increasing

tributes and tithes all combined to force "the already poor majority into the arduous struggle for unfortunate survival in a highly stratified society."[10]

In addition to setting the stage for social upheaval and rebellion, the pressures of the Second Temple Period also resulted in a particular vision, tone, and framework about what God's justice would one day look like. The visions of God's justice in literature from this period, including 1 Enoch and the Psalms of Solomon, echo throughout the New Testament, especially in the gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke, the Book of Revelation, and the Letter of James. Over and over again, one finds poor people looking toward a final, apocalyptic struggle between the righteous and the wicked, one in which the righteous are the victimized poor and the wicked identified as the powerful rich.

Rhee concludes that "this eschatological conflict between the righteous poor and the wicked rich involved the 'great reversal' of their earthly fortunes on the last day," and that "in this political and socioeconomic climate, the early followers of Jesus believed that, with the coming of Jesus, the eschatological new age had indeed dawned."[11]

While these themes of the "pious poor and oppressive rich" and "great reversal" are interwoven throughout all four gospels, they are especially present within the Gospel of Luke.

In addition to the *Magnificat* (Luke 1:46-55), Jesus announces his mission as proclaiming good news to the poor (Luke 4:18-19) and tells followers to invite "the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind" to banquets (Luke 14:13, 21). Luke's version of the Beatitudes includes a series of woes to the rich (Luke 6:20-26) and mocks the rich fool who stores up his wealth in barns (Luke 12:16-21). There is also, of course, the story of the rich young ruler, told in Matthew, Mark, and Luke, and how it's easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter heaven. Indeed, the rich who are to be praised are people like Zacchaeus the tax collector who gives half his wealth away and promises to repay four times the amount he has defrauded of others (Luke 19:1-10). We also encounter the "unjust steward" who halves the debts of his master's servants, a small sign of God's Jubilee and, perhaps, the closest thing Luke has in terms of a constructive pathway forward for making use of "dishonest wealth" (Luke 16:9).

In addition to these examples, perhaps the most vivid depiction of God's reversal in the Gospel of Luke is the one that takes place between Lazarus and the rich man. Theologian M. Douglas Meeks describes this parable as a vivid illustration of the coming reversal and the need for repentance among the rich and powerful for their treatment of the poor.[12]

Luke 16:19-31 tells the contrasting lives and fates of the beggar Lazarus and a rich man. Characteristic of the way that the gospels view society from the bottom up, this story names the beggar (Lazarus) while the rich man remains a generalized figure. We are told the rich man "was dressed in purple and fine linen" and "feasted sumptuously every day" while Lazarus lay at the rich man's gate "covered with sores," hoping to "satisfy his hunger with what fell from the rich man's table." Jesus tells his listeners that such was Lazarus's poverty that even the dogs would come to lick Lazarus's sores.

Death comes for both Lazarus and the rich man, but even in death, social distinction prevails. Whereas the rich man is properly buried, Lazarus dies at the rich man's gates. The first hearers of this story would likely have known that beggars like Lazarus often ended up being buried in mass graves. It is only in the eternal life that their fortunes are finally reversed. Meeks states, "But, though not even decently buried, Lazarus ('God helps') now sits at the table with Abraham in God's eschatological household. In contrast, the rich man, properly interred, experiences that hell that the poor Lazarus had known in his lifetime."[13]

In a passage that is as frightening to the rich as it would have been soothing to the first listeners of this parable, Jesus continues by telling how the rich man who is now in hell calls out to Abraham: "Father Abraham, have mercy on me, and send Lazarus to dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue; for I am in agony in these flames." But Abraham responds, "Child, remember that during your lifetime you received your good things, and Lazarus in like manner evil things; but now he is comforted here, and you are in agony." God's justice is revealed in this reversal; a great chasm has been set between the rich man in hell and Lazarus in paradise, and the worldly order has been turned upside down.

In the ancient heart of Christianity is a deep longing for God's reversal of rich and poor. Its depiction of "the righteous poor and oppressive rich" and God's preferential option for "the least of these" continues to represent something new, countercultural, and strange, both in ancient Rome and today. The historian (and my former professor) John Anthony McGuckin writes, "It was a widespread belief in Hellenistic society that the (often wretched) disparity of lot was simply how things were in the greater cosmic order. Imbalances were not injustices. The attitude (still prevalent today, of course, as an often-unvoiced supposition in many venues) was at the core of pagan Roman ideas on wealth and status."[14] In contrast, "the gospel's very different approach to entitlement (based on what was a ridiculous idea to wider Greco-Roman society—that all men and women were equals as the consecrated images of God on earth) was a veritable clash of civilizations."[15]

As I will describe over and over again in this book, the United States's cultural attitudes toward the poor are not so different from the ancient Roman views. Indeed, in our recurring depictions of "the unworthy poor"—think Ronald Reagan's "welfare queen" of the 1980s—we oftentimes even outdo the ancient Romans in disparaging the character of the poor. In my work with activists such as the Rev. Dr. Liz Theoharis of the Poor People's Campaign and David Giffen of New York's Coalition for the Homeless, I'm frequently reminded of how countercultural it still is to say that society should have compassion for people struggling at the bottom of the socioeconomic ladder. When meeting with Dr. Theoharis, for instance, I've often noticed that she has a large poster behind her that reads simply, "Fight Poverty. Not the Poor." And in meeting with David Giffen, I have heard him speak many times about the important role faith leaders can play at neighborhood community meetings by simply reminding those gathered that the 60,000-plus people who live in the New York City shelter system, including 21,000 children, are people too, not trash that can be discarded. Both of these activists are forever pushing up against a culture, one that was alive and well in ancient Rome and continues to thrive today, that justifies inequality by dehumanizing the poor. Horrifically, people who claim Christianity are frequently

leading the way in this regard. Yet the ancient heart of Christianity is a different story altogether.

To insist that society should have compassion for its most vulnerable members remains a surprisingly countercultural statement, particularly in a highly stratified society like the United States. Part of my hope in this book is to encourage Christians to embrace this understanding and not be ashamed of the Bible's central message of reversal. This "clash of civilizations" will turn up over and over again as we explore how Christianity wrestled with issues of poverty and wealth over its first five hundred years. One of the most remarkable features of early Christianity—and a powerful witness to us today—was the belief that wealth represented a dangerous form of spiritual temptation and injustice, that the poor are in fact blessed by God, that God still comes to us in "the least of these."

In the 25 years since my grandfather's death, I've completed an undergraduate degree in religious studies, traveled to Mexico and lived with nuns, completed my Master of Divinity at Union Theological Seminary, and have worked for the Episcopal Church for 14 years. Nevertheless, those origin stories remain foundational to who I am and how I've come to understand the promise and challenge of what it means to be a person of faith today. These seeds were planted early, and it has only recently occurred to me just how early this began. Long before my grandfather's death, long before I began my furtive reading of the gospels, I was already being shaped by the Gospel of Luke's focus on the reversal of the rich and poor, insiders and outsiders, and one in which God shows up in surprising ways. I simply didn't realize it at the time.

The Christmas traditions many of us are familiar with come from the gospels of Luke and Matthew, but it is Luke especially that plays with the themes of power and powerlessness at every turn. It is in Luke, for instance, that we learn of Mary giving birth to Jesus in a manger, wrapping him in bands of cloth, and laying him down "because there was no place for them in the inn."[16]

For many, these stories have become so familiar that the shocking nature of this message—that God's only Son was born into destitution, a member of one of the lowest castes in his society—is lost. And yet, as a child, it wasn't lost on me. This is not because of any particular insight on my part but because of the shared insights of a family that heard these stories through the lens of immigration and migrant field labor.

When my maternal grandparents were alive, Christmas meant celebrating Mexican-American traditions like *Las Posadas*, a sung tradition that dramatizes Mary and Joseph's exhausting search for refuge and a place to give birth to Jesus. Led by my maternal grandparents, we would divide our family into two parts: half the family would sing the role of Mary and Joseph, and the other half would sing that of the reluctant innkeeper.

At the outset, a weary Joseph says, "In the name of heaven, we ask you for shelter, as my beloved wife can no longer walk." The innkeeper, who voices society's response to the poor at every turn, responds, "There is no room for you here. Keep on going ahead. I will not be opening my doors, for you are likely scoundrels and thieves." It is only slowly, and very reluctantly, that the innkeeper becomes aware of who Mary and Joseph truly are, a lengthy push and pull that finally gives way to the innkeeper opening his heart and home.[17]

Year after year, we sang this. Year after year, I absorbed, perhaps unconsciously, how the words intersected with my family's search for a place in this country. Since then, I've learned that all of us—including the wider church—have the capacity to play both parts: sometimes we align ourselves with those seeking safety and refuge; other times, we are the stubborn innkeepers with stony hearts. At the end of singing *Las Posadas*, my family would line up to kiss the foot of the baby Jesus who was nestled amidst straw in a large nativity scene. I now know that something remained with me in seeing my venerable grandparents, parents, aunts, and uncles bending down to kiss the foot of a child king born into utter poverty.

Discussion Questions

How is the theme of God's reversal of the rich and poor, powerful and powerless a part of your own faith? Is this something you identify with and long for? Is it something to be feared?

What does a Christianity that embraces this vision of God's reversal look like? What sort of actions and ministries would this entail? What would this feel like for the most vulnerable? How would it feel for those who hold positions of power?

How was wealth and poverty, the rich and the poor, spoken of in your family? How do you see "the poor" being depicted in US culture, including immigrants, the homeless, people on welfare?

Does it surprise you that in the parable of the rich man and Lazarus, only Lazarus is named in scripture while "the rich man" remains a generalized figure? What would it mean for the church to advocate for the dignity and humanity of those who society regularly and broadly dismisses as "the poor"?

A Next Step

Learn more about the Mexican tradition of *Las Posadas*, a sung liturgy that dramatizes Mary and Joseph's search for refuge and a stony-hearted innkeeper's refusal to offer a place for them in the inn. The innkeeper initially gives voice to society's fear and revulsion toward the poor, accusing Mary and Joseph of being thieves and scoundrels. Only slowly does he realize their true identity. Reflect on how you see these dynamics playing out in society today. Where is God in this story?

Endnotes

1 Paula M. Lantz, Laurence Dupuis, Douglas Reding, Michelle Krauska, and Karen Lappe, "Peer Discussions of Cancer Among Hispanic Migrant Farm Workers," *Public Health Reports,* Vol. 109, No. 4 (July-August, 1994): 512-520.

2 Associated Press, "*Snow Falling on Cedars* booted from Port Orchard schools," *The Lewiston Tribute*, May 3, 2000.

3 Presumably referencing Leviticus 18:23.

4 Katherine Stewart, *The Power Worshippers: Inside the Dangerous Rise of Religious Nationalism* (New York: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2000), 4.

5 Stewart, *The Power Worshippers,* 6.

6 Diarmaid MacCulloch, *Christianity: The First Three Thousand Years* (New York: Penguin, 2011), 77.

7 This roughly translates to "humble, poor folks."

8 Isaiah 3:15.

9 Helen Rhee, *Loving the Poor, Saving the Rich: Wealth, Poverty, and Early Christian Formation* (Michigan: Baker Publishing Group), loc. 1001 (Kindle).

10 Rhee, *Loving the Poor*, *Saving the Rich*, loc. 1001 (Kindle).

11 Rhee, *Loving the Poor*, *Saving the Rich*, loc. 1001 (Kindle).

12 M. Douglas Meeks, "Economics in the Church Scriptures," in *The Oxford Handbook of Christianity and Economics*, ed. Paul Oslington (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 9.

13 Meeks, "Economics in the Church Scriptures," 9.

14 John Anthony McGuckin, *The Path of Christianity: The First Thousand Years* (Westmont, Illinois: IVP Academic, 2017), 1026.

15 McGuckin, *The Path of Christianity*, 1026.

16 Luke 2:7.

17 Ironically, the innkeeper in *Las Posadas* does the opposite of what the Gospel of Luke describes and eventually offers a room at the inn. "Enter now you holy pilgrims, holy pilgrims! Please receive this little place. Although this inn is so poor, I offer it with my heart." This is a surprising turn as it contradicts the story of the gospel. It is almost as if *Las Posadas* cannot bear the harshness of Luke's description.

2 The Lord's Prayer as Song for a Hungry People

A song by the Dominican singer Juan Luis Guerra can teach us a lot about reading the Old and New Testaments. On one level, the song "Ojalá que llueva café" is joyful and upbeat; it could even be mistaken for a charming tour of Dominican food. In it, Guerra sings "May it rain coffee in the countryside...a whole torrent of yucca and tea…May autumn bring, instead of dry leaves, salted pork and a newly planted field of sweet potatoes and strawberries."[1]

With his soft yet insistent voice, Guerra sings of a vision of miraculous abundance: downpours of cheese, honey, and hills of wheat—images of such abundance that they are almost biblical in nature. This song also serves as a kind of prayer. While the first word of the song, *ojalá*, is often translated as "may it be," this doesn't quite convey the depth of this Spanish word. *Ojalá* is one of those many Spanish words that reflect Arabic's 700-plus years of influence on the language, as *ojalá* is derived from "O Allah." To begin a song with *ojalá*, then, is to call out to God: "O God, may it rain down coffee in the countryside."

Yet for all the miraculous food pouring down, if you listen closely, the song is actually about hunger. In the award-winning music video for "Ojalá," Guerra's descriptions of freshly planted fields of sweet potatoes and strawberries play over occasionally graphic images of Dominican children and gaunt elderly fieldworkers turning beautiful black eyes toward the sky in the hopes of a downpour of food. His song is a prayer for God to

rain down coffee "so that the people in the countryside don't have to suffer so much," longing for a day that "the children may sing."

The first time I heard "Ojalá que llueva café," I was struck by how similar Guerra's vision of this downpour of coffee, yucca, plantains, and grain sounded to many of the ways the Bible speaks about food. When the Bible describes manna falling from heaven (Exodus 16:1-36; Numbers 11:1-9) or the specificity of the wandering Israelites' longing for the fish, cucumbers, melons, leeks, and garlic of their Egyptian enslavers (Numbers 11:5), or of Jesus's feeding of the five thousand with just a few loaves and fishes (Matthew 14:13-21; Mark 6:31-44; Luke 9:12-17; John 6:1-14), I now hear Guerra's prayer for the Dominican countryside in the background. These biblical images are miraculous songs of abundance, yes, but the underlying beat is that of hunger.

It is easy to forget or dismiss the reality of hunger, especially for those who have never experienced food scarcity and the way it shapes the stories of the Bible. As a result, we may be missing some of the deepest meanings of the recurring, miraculous images of food and meals in the Old and New Testaments. How would we read the scriptures differently if we took into account that these texts spring forth from a hungry people?

A frequently overlooked example of this is right in the Lord's Prayer. Embedded within this most familiar of prayers is Jesus's request for God to "give us this day our daily bread," a petition so well-known and repeated so regularly that many are surprised to learn this familiar phrase contains a linguistic mystery.

The difficulty occurs in the seemingly untranslatable Greek word *epiousios*, a word rendered as "daily" but which isn't exactly that. In fact, *epiousios* doesn't appear anywhere else in Greek literature outside the gospels of Matthew and Luke. It is likely a Greek neologism for a word first uttered by Jesus in Aramaic. Like a copy of a copy, the English translation of *epiousios* to daily is a fuzzy translation of a Greek word that was itself trying to approximate a word or idea that may have been new or unusual in Aramaic.

There are many different translations of the word *epiousios*, with particular schools of thought and theology backing each one. One unwieldy attempt is from the Latin Vulgate in the late sixteenth century,

which translated *epiousios* as "supersubstantial." This interpretation is still preferred by a few who insist that Jesus was clearly referring to the "extra substance" found in the sacrament of the eucharist. Nevertheless, "give us this day our supersubstantial bread" has never quite caught on.[2]

So what might an accessible rendering of *epiousios* be? While scholars continue to debate this, two plausible renderings are "Give us this day an extra portion of bread" or "Give us bread for today and for tomorrow."[3] Since I am neither a linguist nor a biblical scholar, I will avoid weighing in on which of these I think is exactly right. I am, however, interested in trying to grasp the deeper meaning of these two interpretations, the spirit of the words. I believe this requires thinking along the same lines of "Ojalá que llueva café" and recalling how these words were first spoken in a landscape marked by hunger, with the threat of famine looming on the horizon.

I've heard the Lord's prayer said at banquets and reception dinner tables where it seemed that no one attending had ever worried about their next meal. I've also said this same petition in homeless shelters and at a house for undocumented refugees, where the people holding hands around the table had experienced and survived persistent hunger. The very same words—and particularly this petition for "daily bread"—landed differently, depending on the stomachs of the people in the room. How could it not?

Therefore, when trying to grasp what these translations mean, it's worth remembering the interpretive power of a hungry stomach. Some basic questions come to mind for consideration. Were the first hearers' stomachs full or were they empty? Were most getting enough to eat on a regular basis or were the people listening to Jesus consistently worried about their next meal? I have found that reflecting on such questions adds a new dimension to this petition for bread, to the Lord's Prayer, and to the many stories of meals and miraculous abundances of food that occur so regularly within the Bible.

Significant historical evidence shows that Jesus, the writers of the gospels of Matthew and Luke, and many in the first Christian assemblies were teetering at the edge of subsistence and were, in fact, survivors of regular and persistent hunger. While farmers had strategies for mitigating food shortages caused by bad weather and political calamity, the region of Galilee experienced regular famines—

periods of extreme scarcity of food—approximately every 20 years. The cultural memory of a season of severe hunger was never too far away, then. It is likely that many who would have first heard Jesus's petition for "an extra portion of bread" or "enough bread for today and tomorrow" were themselves struggling with food insecurity, shortages, and that they carried the generational memories of times when hunger had become devastating starvation. The question is: how might this have influenced their hearing of this petition?

What follows is a meditation, then, about this familiar petition for bread embedded in the Lord's Prayer. As it turns out, Jesus wasn't just praying for "daily bread" but quite literally for something more.

As already discussed in chapter one, the gospels are rare examples in Greek literature in which it is "the poor, the ill-educated, and the disreputable whose encounters with God are most vividly described"; they are texts about *gente humilde*, stories that speak about encounters with God from the underside of history.[4] Therefore, to understand how Jesus speaks about food, we have to dig into the broader landscape of wealth, poverty, and hunger that characterized this time period.

Roman society was marked by stark inequality with an imperial and aristocratic elite (1-3 percent), a middle group with moderate surplus resources (7-15 percent), and a vast group of "the poor" who were either stable near subsistence (22-27 percent), at subsistence (30-40 percent), or below subsistence and therefore lacking necessary food, shelter, and clothing (25-28 percent).[5] It is therefore estimated that 75-90 percent of the Roman world lived close to subsistence level—near, at, or below—and were struggling for survival and sustenance on a daily basis.[6] For this group, "life expectancy was low (life expectancy at birth was somewhere between twenty and thirty and probably closer to twenty). Nutritional deficiencies were widespread."[7] This vast group of "the poor" was also particularly vulnerable to natural disasters, including droughts resulting in periodic food shortages and disease.

These figures apply to the Roman Empire generally. When looking at the particular region where and when Jesus's ministry took place,

scholars such as Helen Rhee and Bruce Longenecker describe a geographical region groaning under the weight of increasing socioeconomic pressures. During Jesus's time and in the period just leading up to it, overpopulation and over-cultivation of the land, natural disasters, and increasing tributes and tithes combined to force "the already poor majority into the arduous struggle for unfortunate survival in a highly stratified society."[8]

Survival for this poor majority frequently hinged on whether or not one had access to land. While some would have been fortunate enough to own small farms, a significant number would have been tenant farmers renting their land "from 'absentee landlords' (often at exorbitant cost and for short periods of time), or were slave-tenants tasked with the responsibility of extracting the yields of the land for the landowner."[9] Just prior to the first century, a growing number of tenant farmers faced the bitter task of working the very land their families had once owned, having been forced by increasing tithes, taxes, and other socioeconomic pressures into selling their ancestral lands and now sending surpluses to the absentee landowner.[10] The day laborers who Jesus spoke about regularly faced an even harsher lot, for "when workers were 'a dime a dozen', there was little to prevent the urban elite from maximizing the percentage of their 'top-slice' by exploiting their rural workers, through the assistance of a business manager, and to the point of leaving them with nothing more than the bare resources needed for the most basic form of living—a case of 'living just enough for the city.'"[11]

Droughts, political instability, and warfare made this landscape ripe for famine, a dangerous threat that forever loomed on the horizon. "In the biblical traditions, famine is placed among the most well-known ills together with pestilence and sword in a kind of negative triad," writes Morten H. Jensen, in a fascinating study on the climate, agricultural, and political conditions of first-century Galilee.[12] He describes the delicate balance of the right types and levels of precipitation needed to yield crops in this region, how severe hunger was caused by a confluence of drought and political instability, as well as the indelible impression made by recurring famines on the biblical tradition:

> The Hebrew Bible is replete with references to famines—at the time of Abraham, Isaac, and Joseph (Genesis 12:10; 26:1; 41:54; 43:1), under David and Solomon (2 Samuel 21:1;

> 1 Kings 8:35-40), in the days of Elijah and Elisha (1 Kings 17:1-24; 2 Kings 4:38; 8:1-3), and others. Often God is described as the protector against famine (Psalm 37:19; Ezekiel 34:29) or as the one inflicting famine as punishment (Leviticus 26:26; Deuteronomy 28:22-24; 32:24; 2 Samuel 21:1; 1 Kings 17:1; Psalm 105:16; Isaiah 14:30; 51:19; Jeremiah 11:22; 14:11-18; 24:10; 42:13-17; Amos 4:6-8; 8:11-14; Sirach 39:29 and others). Nehemiah 5:1-5 is especially interesting, describing the people's complaints about being forced to mortgage fields, vineyards, and houses in order to acquire grain during the famine (5:3).[13]

While the New Testament refers to famine less frequently, it remains a threatening image in apocalyptic material (Mark 13:8; Revelation 6:8; 18:8), in references to famines in the Hebrew Bible (Luke 4:25; Acts 7:11), in the story of the prodigal son (Luke 15:14), and the hunger that led to Barnabas and Paul's famine relief visit and Jerusalem Collection (Acts 11:27-30).[14] Beyond the biblical texts, there is external historical evidence of four or five famines just before and during the first century in Galilee. "The known famines of 25/24 BCE, 38/39 CE, 45/46 CE (besides the local famine in Jerusalem in 69 CE) cohere well with modern data, which indicate that famine occurs as regularly as every twentieth year."[15]

The impact of famine on these communities is hard to overstate. Margaret Atkins and Robin Osborne write in *Poverty in the Roman World* that "times of dearth divided communities between those who had and those who had not managed to fill their storehouses" and that urban dwellers fared especially poorly. The price of food soared during times of scarcity as landowners refused to release grain from their storehouses into the urban markets. Such was the desperation that "individuals were no doubt tempted to sell themselves or their children into slavery—a practice legislated against by Solon in Athens but still encountered by Augustine."[16]

Given this historical account, it is likely that Jesus himself, the writers of the gospels of Matthew and Luke, and many in the first Christian assemblies struggled with getting enough to eat on a recurring basis and that many in the first Christian communities had a direct experience—and shared cultural memory—of a period of prolonged hunger in their lives. Jesus's ministry took place among the poor who were struggling on a day-to-day basis for survival. Jesus and

his disciples (Matthew 8:20), the Jerusalem Church (Romans 15:26; Galatians 2:10), and the Pauline communities (1 Corinthians 1:26-27; 2 Corinthians 8:1-2) belonged to the "lower socioeconomic stratum and 'the poor' in varying degrees; and they regularly described experiencing oppression and maltreatment by the rich and powerful in one way or another (cf. Luke 12:11-12; Acts 4:1-3; 8:1-3; 12:1-4; 2 Corinthians 11:23-27; Hebrews 10:32-34)."[17]

Of course, it is one thing to say that many in the first Christian assemblies had a direct experience of prolonged hunger in their lives, and it is another to begin to unpack what that means. To do this, I want to leap across centuries and look at one of the first scientific studies about what semi-starvation does to people.

In the 1940s, a groundbreaking study called the Minnesota Starvation Experiment examined the physiological and psychological effects of semi-starvation. Led by Ancel Keys, this study provided insights on how to feed and rehabilitate the emaciated civilians of previously German-occupied Europe.[18] Basic facts about hunger were unknown at this point, including how many calories a starved person needed to recover. This made the planning and logistics of the rehabilitation efforts challenging.

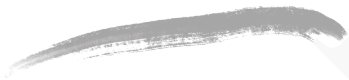
To find the answers to these questions, 36 male conscientious objectors, primarily from Peace churches, volunteered to participate in this grueling study. Over the course of the study, through regular food reductions, participants lost approximately 2.5 pounds per week until most had lost fully 25 percent of their original body weight. Reductions and additions in calories were made using single slices of bread. As bread slices decreased, participants rapidly developed "sunken faces and bellies, protruding ribs, and edema-swollen legs, ankles, and faces" and other problems such as anemia, neurological deficits, and skin changes.[19]

Significantly, food became a ritualized obsession and came to occupy the center of participants' lives. One study participant, Richard Willoughby, was interviewed many decades later when he was in his eighties and still recalled how "eating became highly ritualized" and

another, Harold Blickenstaff, described how "food became the one central and only thing really in one's life."[20]

One finding from the three-month rehabilitation period proved especially important for the post-war relief plan and also has special resonance with that strange term *epiousios* in the Lord's Prayer. Keys and his colleagues discovered that the semi-starved participants continued to physically deteriorate even when they had been returned to their previously normal levels of caloric intake. They found "no appreciable rehabilitation can take place on a diet of 2,000 calories a day. The proper level is more like 4,000 daily for some months." In other words, the starved needed at least two days' worth of bread in order to begin to recover the destroyed tissues—bread enough for both today and tomorrow.

Knowing this ultimately influenced how much food was distributed in post-war relief efforts. It also brings me back to some of the rooms where people who have experienced prolonged hunger have been gathered for a meal. It makes me wonder whether there wasn't some profound wisdom borne of the experience of hunger embedded in Jesus's request for an extra portion—or for today and tomorrow's portion, right now.



In late March 2020, as the infection and mortality rates of COVID-19 steadily increased and the situation in my home city of New York became dire, I found myself hoping the COVID-19 pandemic would somehow "pass over" my friends and family. This prayer for a "pass over" came spontaneously to me as the deadliness of the pandemic became clear. It occurred to me then that as a result of COVID-19, I knew at a much deeper level what Passover meant than I had just a few weeks prior. This was not an intellectual understanding but a bodily one, a knowing rooted in the experience of having watched the fog of death settle on my city and hoping against hope the angel of death would pass over the households of my loved ones.

Similarly, I'm wondering if part of the difficulty of interpreting *epiousios* is that its meaning is tied to the experience and fear of hunger and is one of the many instances in which the wealth of full

stomachs prevents many first-world interpreters from grasping the deepest meaning of the gospel text.

This petition for daily bread—or rather, for enough bread to last a family for today and tomorrow—is especially important for faith leaders to bear in mind given that the number of people living in extreme poverty in the world has increased for the first time in 25 years. The sharp rise in people living on less than $1.90 a day was caused in 2020 by a combination of factors, including the COVID-19 pandemic, climate change, and conflict. In a report on the devastating year of 2020, the World Bank writes that "poverty reduction has suffered its worst setback in decades," and it now estimates that between 88 and 115 million people will be pushed into poverty, with the hardest hit regions being South Asia and Sub-Saharan Africa.[21] Against this new global landscape, it matters greatly, then, that Jesus's words were spoken, heard, and first repeated by people in similar situations, people who experienced persistent hunger and for whom the memory and threat of famine loomed large. To hope, work, and pray for people to have enough bread for today and tomorrow is still the work of Christianity.

Discussion Questions

Does it matter to you that the word "daily" is likely not an accurate translation of the unique Greek term *epiousios*? Why or why not?

How might hunger—or an empty stomach—be a factor in understanding what references to meals and bread mean in the Old and New Testament?

Many people across the country and world experience periods of food insecurity and hunger. Have you had this experience? What is your reaction to the possibility—indeed, likelihood—that Jesus and many of his earliest followers shared in this experience?

Hunger is often treated as a spiritual metaphor, but we should also reflect on it as a bodily reality. What would it mean to reread the many instances of food and meals in the gospels as stories told by and for a hungry people?

Can you imagine including a creative translation of the Lord's Prayer into your own faith practice? How would you render this line? Here's my own creative version: *Give us this day so much we have leftovers. Give us so much that we have to put foil on full plates.*

A Next Step

Take time to learn about the prevalence of hunger in your area (town, city, diocese). Learn the geographical areas and populations where hunger is concentrated and explore some of the major systemic causes. In my home of New York City, the systemic causes of hunger include low wages, unemployment, the location of grocery stores, lack of affordable housing, and expensive healthcare cutting into families' food budgets, as well as a weakened safety net and nutritional assistance program. Partner with organizations addressing both immediate hunger and the systemic causes of hunger in your community.

Endnotes

1 Watch the video at: youtube.com/watch?v=uJimpth-yNs.

2 MacCulloch, *Christianity*, 89.

3 MacCulloch, *Christianity*, 89.

4 MacCulloch, *Christianity*, 77.

5 Rhee, *Loving the Poor, Saving the Rich*, loc. 80 (Kindle).

6 Rhee, *Loving the Poor, Saving the Rich*, 5, 11.

7 Margaret Atkins and Robin Osborne, *Poverty in the Roman World* (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 4.

8 Rhee, *Loving the Poor, Saving the Rich*, loc. 1001 (Kindle).

9 Bruce W. Longenecker, *Remember the Poor: Paul, Poverty, and the Greco-Roman World* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2010), 23.

10 Longenecker, *Remember the Poor*, 24-25.

11 Longenecker, *Remember the Poor*, 24-25.

12 Morton H. Jensen, "Climate, Droughts, Wars, and Famines in Galilee as a Background for Understanding the Historical Jesus," *Journal of Biblical Literature*, Vol. 131, No. 2 (2012): 320.

13 Jensen, "Climate, Droughts, Wars, and Famines in Galilee," 320.

14 Jensen, "Climate, Droughts, Wars, and Famines in Galilee," 320.

15 Jensen, "Climate, Droughts, Wars, and Famines in Galilee," 323.

16 Atkins and Osborne, *Poverty in the Roman World*, 5.

17 Rhee, *Loving the Poor, Saving the Rich*, 35.

18 Leah M. Kalm and Richard D. Semba, "They Starved So That Others Be Better Fed: Remembering Ancel Keys and the Minnesota Experiment," *The Journal of Nutrition,* Vol. 135, Issue 6 (June 2005): 1347-1352.

19 Kalm and Semba, "They Starved So That Others Be Better Fed," 1347-1352.

20 Kalm and Semba, "They Starved So That Others Be Better Fed," 1347-1352.

21 "Poverty and Shared Prosperity 2020: Reversals of Fortune," (Washington, D.C.: World Bank, 2020), 5.