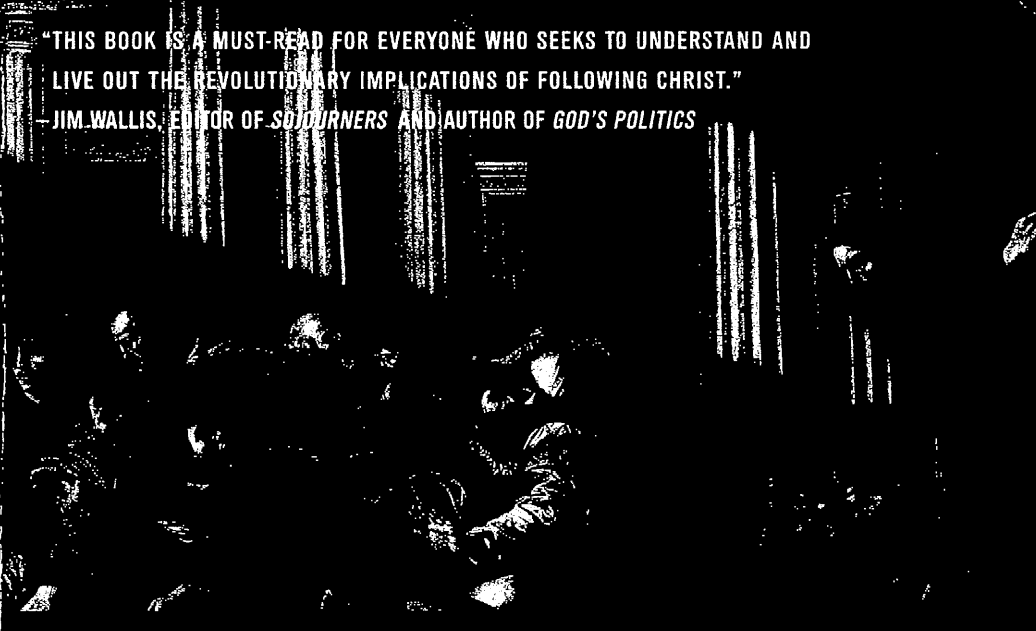


"THIS BOOK IS A MUST-READ FOR EVERYONE WHO SEEKS TO UNDERSTAND AND
LIVE OUT THE REVOLUTIONARY IMPLICATIONS OF FOLLOWING CHRIST."

—JIM WALLIS, EDITOR OF *SOJOURNERS* AND AUTHOR OF *GOD'S POLITICS*



THE REDISCOVERING THE TRUE REVOLUTIONARY
NATURE OF JESUS' TEACHINGS AND HOW
THEY HAVE BEEN CORRUPTED

POLITICS of JESUS

OBERY M. HENDRICKS, JR.

Messiah she carried in her womb would be filling the hungry "with good things" (Luke 1:53). The sad observation by a second-century rabbi that "the daughters of Israel are comely, but poverty makes them repulsive" could easily have been written with the Israel of Jesus' day in mind.

Although in first-century Israel there was profound poverty and destitution, most of the poor were working poor. The great majority were peasants engaged in subsistence farming, which means that after they paid Roman taxes, there was barely enough for survival, and certainly no surplus for long-term planning, or even enough to meet emergencies. As biblical scholar John Dominic Crossan observes, "Peasants . . . were structured inferiors."

Most peasant farmers had land holdings of less than 6 acres, with, on average, only 1.5 acres available for cultivation, hardly enough to support a family. That is, if they were fortunate enough to have saved their farms from outright seizure by the Romans, or from dispossession for tax default, or from the machinations of the Herodians and their cronies who, it is estimated, owned one-half to two-thirds of the land in Galilee. To make ends meet, many farmers either had to hire themselves out for wages to supplement their meager crops, or go into debt, which was usually a worse alternative. Tenant farmers and sharecroppers often fared even worse, ending up in prison for defaulting on their debts or enslaved by their creditors.

The Significance of Poverty in Israel for the Ministry of Jesus

The presence of poverty in Israel pervades the Gospels and is reflected in narratives as diverse as Judas' complaint that the cost of the expensive perfume used to anoint Jesus' feet should have been "given to the poor" (John 12:4-5) and Luke's account of "a poor man named Lazarus, covered with sores, who longed to satisfy his hunger with what fell from the rich man's table" (Luke 16:19-31).

So deep and so debilitating was the effect of impoverishment on the psycho-emotional health of his people that Jesus found it necessary to explicitly affirm their worth with the validation "Blessed are you who are poor" (Luke 6:20). And when his disciples asked him how and what to pray

for, he told them to keep the poverty and hunger of the people of Israel in view by praying: "Give us this day our daily bread" (Matthew 6:11). And to give the people hope in the face of their profound poverty, Jesus himself modeled the largesse that God's kingdom of justice promised on the occasions when he fed the thousands who had gathered to hear him share his vision of God's kingdom.

TAXATION

A major cause of poverty in first-century Israel was the Roman tax structure. That taxation was a significant issue in Israel is indicated by the Pharisees' use of it in their confrontation with Jesus in Matthew 22:17: "Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar or not?" (RSV). The Jewish scholar Salo Baron notes that

even according to Caesar's most friendly decree, the Romans levied a tax as high as one-fourth of the crop . . . every other year . . . Especially after [Israel's] direct incorporation into the empire in 6 A.D. the multiple payments in kind and in personal services for the maintenance of Roman officials and soldiers, as well as such indirect payments as the numerous tolls and customs duties, must have made the life of a Palestinian farmer extremely arduous.

Typically, Roman provincial governors saw the territories to which they were assigned as cash cows to be milked in order to amass the greatest possible fortunes in the shortest possible time. So widespread was this practice that the Romans themselves joked about it. For example, it was punned about one provincial governor, Ventidius, that he "entered rich Syria poor and left poor Syria rich." During Jesus' lifetime, Israel fared no better under its imperial governors, especially Valerius Gratus (governed A.D. 15-26) and Pontius Pilate (governed A.D. 26-36), both of whom extracted every bit of tribute from the people of Israel that they could.

The impoverishing effect of secular taxation was compounded by the

large amounts of religious taxation that the Jewish people rendered to the Jerusalem priestly hierarchy. Prior to the return from the Babylonian exile, no tithes or offerings were required of Jews for the support of the priests. Priests received small portions of the sacrifices offered by pilgrims, but that was all. But after the exile, the offerings from which the priests derived their income increased until they made up some twelve different classes of tithes and offerings. Although the peasantry did not always fulfill these obligations, any significant effort to do so could only have deepened their poverty. It has been estimated that the combination of secular and religious taxes consumed up to 40 percent of the peasants' subsistence. The scholar E. P. Sanders observes that "every year farmers had officials of their religion knocking on the door and asking for tithes." Because there were far too many priests to officiate simultaneously at Temple services (Josephus places the number at twenty thousand), the forty-eight weeks of the Jewish calendar were divided among the priestly families and organized into twenty-four "courses." Each priest officiated at the Temple only during his assigned course, that is, just two weeks per year. Still, each was the recipient of more wealth than the average Israelite could ever dream of.

DEBT

Another factor contributing to the poverty in Israel was widespread indebtedness. Because with subsistence farming there is no surplus left after basic consumption, large numbers of peasants had to borrow funds from the wealthy in order to pay Roman taxes. Similar to the experiences of sharecroppers in America's southland, many farmers had no choice but to repeat this pattern of borrowing every year until their burden of debt became so great that they were no longer able to meet the payments and were forced into default.

The terrible consequences of debt default are reflected in Matthew 18:25-35, which describes two ways in which the lender could collect on a defaulted debt. The first was for the debtor himself to be sold into slavery. Some farmers with smaller defaults discharged them by making the pain-

ful choice of selling their eldest children (who commanded higher prices) into slavery so they themselves could stay to support the remaining family. Others committed suicide to avoid enslavement and the torture that often accompanied it. The practice of torturing enslaved debtors is reflected in Matthew 18:21-34, which, when correctly translated, matter-of-factly mentions that a lender seized his indebted worker and "delivered him to the torturers [*basanistais*] till he should pay all his debt."

In cases of extraordinary default, the lender could enslave the debtor's wife and children, then seize members of the extended family and all their possessions, down to the most distant relations. If the sale of those already seized still did not satisfy the debt, the lender could even enslave the debtor's neighbors. In at least one case a whole village was emptied in this way because everyone was either sold into slavery or escaped into the surrounding hills. Debt slavery was such a bitter issue in Israel that one of the first acts of the rebels in the Jewish War was to seize and burn the records of debts that were stored in the Temple.

The Significance of Taxes and Debt for the Ministry of Jesus

A significant indicator of the degree to which the effects of taxation and indebtedness pervaded the lives of the people of Israel is present in the words of Jesus himself. In Matthew's Gospel, Jesus clearly mentions debt (default as if it were a reality with which everyone was familiar: he says of a slave who owes a large sum to a king, "as he could not pay, his lord ordered him to be sold, together with his wife and children and all his possessions" (Matthew 18:23-35). When asked by the disciples how to pray and what they should pray for, Jesus told them to ask, "[F]orgive us our debts" (Matthew 6:12). The Greek word signifying "debts" in Jesus' prayer is *aphileimata*, which does not occur often in the New Testament, but when it does appear in any of its forms, it refers to debt or other legal obligations, not "trespasses," as the King James Version translates it.

Furthermore, *aphiemi*, from which "forgive" is translated, also has "release" as a primary meaning, which would mean that Jesus' instruction to his disciples is that their prayer should be "release us [from] our debts."