

Summary and conclusions

Hebrew wisdom/poetry and prophetic literature enrich our understanding of God's revelation concerning material possessions and build on the principles already articulated in the Torah and historical books. Job and Ecclesiastes remind us that the reasons some are poor or rich remain locked in the mysteries of God. The wisdom and poetic literature more generally holds in a certain tension the twin themes of material reward for righteous living and the oppression perpetuated by the unjust rich. The book of Psalms introduces the *"nāwōn* – the materially poor and religiously pious who reappear again in the Prophets, especially Isaiah. The dominant thrust of the Prophets, however, is that God will judge the exploitative rich as part of his eschatological plan to create a perfectly just society and redeemed material world. Zechariah 7:10 enshrines a recurring theme that aptly summarizes God's heart in the prophetic literature: 'Do not oppress the widow or the fatherless, the alien or the poor' (Schwantes 1977: 84).

Conclusions concerning the entire Old Testament and material possessions

'The Hebrew Bible does not automatically support one economic or liberation analysis of poverty' (Pleins 1994: 280). Neither the amassing of riches nor their lack is seen as a necessary good (or evil). The industriousness promoted by capitalism finds parallels, but the poor are by no means seen as generally lazy. The relative equality promoted by socialism appears, too, but via individual and familial titles to property, not via state ownership. The prophetic denunciation of social injustice central to liberation theology permeates the Old Testament, but not once is there a call for violent resistance to Israel's oppressors on these grounds.

Instead, the Old Testament cuts right across all modern systems and ideologies. It clearly presupposes both the right and the responsibility of those who are able to work to provide for their own well-being. But God does not promise that hard work automatically leads to material blessing. In the framework of the unique covenant he arranged with Israel, he commands obedience to the Torah, and it is within this covenantal framework that the vast majority of Old Testament promises of prosperity must be viewed. They are consistently tied to the Promised Land and to the temple cult and its sacrificial form of

worship. Land and worship in the New Testament are both clearly 'spiritualized', at least during the church age. However one resolves the debates about a possible, literal future for Jews in Israel during a millennium, the material blessings of the covenantal arrangement between God and Israel are consistently 'christified' in the present age (see esp. Davies 1974). That is to say they are fulfilled in Christ in such a way that believers may not claim these promises in a literal, materialistic sense during the Christian era. John 4:24 denies any role for a temple or piece of property that is different from or holier than any other. Jesus' followers will worship God 'in spirit and in truth' wherever they may be. Paul regularly refers to our bodies individually, and the church corporately, as living temples and sacrifices (e.g., 1 Cor. 3:16–17; 6:19; Rom. 12:1–2). The psalmist promised the meek in Israel an inheritance in the Promised Land (Ps. 37:11); Jesus quotes this verse in beatitude form to bless all of his followers with the gift of the whole earth (Matt. 5:5). Colossians 2:16–17 and Hebrews 4:1–11 explain that the Sabbath rest is a shadow of the substance that was to come, which is Christ, and that living as Christians in this age and the next spiritually fulfills the sabbatical laws (cf. esp. Carson 1982). Wealth as a sign of God's blessing and as the reward for one's labour, then, are the two major strands of Old Testament teaching that for the most part do *not* carry over into the New Testament (see esp. Wheeler 1995: 123–127).

Even within the Old Testament economy, however, material blessing was never viewed as an end in itself. An abundance of resources was to be shared with the nations and particularly with the needy. The emphasis on property rights clearly cuts in two different directions. Since all, in theory, should have the opportunity to own at least a modest plot of ground, none should ever be permitted to have too much. The 'haves' and the 'have-nots' are interdependent. Brueggemann (1975: 355) sums up the key words here as 'respect and restraint'. Numerous commands enjoin voluntary generosity, while mandatory taxes and tithes are instituted to prevent extremes of riches and poverty from remaining. The institutional norms of the Jubilee create a halfway house between creation and kingdom ethics based on the value of interpersonal relationships and local communities. They are concerned with the depersonalization of both market forces and staterun societies (see esp. Schluter & Clements 1990). Proverbs 30:7–9 offers an unusually worded expression of this 'golden mean'. We must seek neither poverty nor riches. Those who have already been blessed with wealth must be generous and compassionate in using it. Interestingly,

this mediating perspective will recur even more in the New Testament than it does in the Old.

The key to evaluating any individual church or nation in terms of its use of material possessions (personally, collectively or institutionally) is how well it takes care of the poor and powerless in its midst, that is, its cultural equivalents to the fatherless, widow and alien. This theme pervades the Law, the historical books, wisdom and poetry, and the prophetic literature. People always take priority over prosperity. Those in positions of power have no increased privilege, only increased responsibility (Gowan 1987: 353). The New Testament suggests that governments should promote justice, but it primarily emphasizes the responsibilities of the individual and the church.

Williamson (1985b) sums up the teaching of the Old Testament on the material world under three headings that closely resemble the points we have just made. First, the land and its produce are good. Dangers arise only when they are used for personal ends rather than for protection of those in trouble. Next only in importance to the promises to Abram in Genesis 12:1-3 is the Jubilee principle of Leviticus 25:23. Land may not be sold in perpetuity; it belongs to God, but he shares it with us and wants as many of us as possible to benefit from it. Second, the widow, orphan and immigrant are paradigms of the powerless. There is a partial alignment of poverty and piety but never any direct equation. Any system can and should be judged by what happens to the marginalized. Third, material blessings in the Old Testament confirm God's covenant to build a mighty nation out of Israel, who would then share its Law and its wealth with the world. This principle of generosity and compassion with one's material blessings pervades the Hebrew Scriptures and applies to everyone – from the grass-roots, rural-community level all the way up the social ladder to the king.⁴⁰

With the exception of the promise of material blessings for covenant obedience or diligent industry, all of the major themes of the Old Testament teaching on material possessions reappear in one form or another in the New Testament. Many are applied even within the Old Testament to individuals (e.g., Job) or to nations (esp. the enemies of

Israel surrounding her) in ways that make it clear that they are not limited to Israel. Christians should therefore take them very seriously and look for applications even in the changed cultures of modern society that permit those principles to be implemented.

⁴⁰ More succinctly cf. George (1977: 21) the Old Testament reactions to poverty vary: 'Human wisdom sees in it [nothing but] the consequences of laziness or disorder, faith sees in it, each in turn, a divine punishment, a scandal, a call to discover certain religious values.' Ellis (1995: 4-14) sums up Old Testament teaching on stewardship under the category of God's gifts – creation, land and offspring – to which human response should be to manage the gifts under the sovereignty of God as their owner and in gratitude for them without pride or self-determination.

that *allowed* the woman potentially to divest herself of any further resources, may not be too far wide of the mark.

Conclusions

The good news of the gospel is consistently holistic, according to the teaching of Jesus. Material sustenance without spiritual salvation proves meaningless, but the liberation that God in Christ grants regularly includes a physical or material dimension to it as well. The only way God's people can consistently obey all of his commands is as the entire Christian community worldwide, and any local expression of it, increasingly captures the vision of sharing its resources with the needy in its midst. When believers realize that others will care for them if they unexpectedly find themselves impoverished, they can then be freed to give more generously in times of plenty. A full range of socio-economic conditions emerges among Jesus and his disciples and the people with whom they mingle. Nevertheless, there is a clear emphasis in Jesus' ministry and teaching on meeting the needs of the outcasts and have-nots of his world. Jesus' opponents are not the rich *per se*, but key representatives of the Jewish leadership, many of whom happen to be somewhat more well-to-do than the masses. Jesus is not crucified for his teaching about material possessions, but the controversies with the Jewish leaders that become increasingly pointed include items of stewardship as one prime arena in which they do not please God.⁵⁸

It goes too far to say that one cannot be rich and be a disciple of Jesus, but what never appears in the Gospels are well-to-do followers of Jesus who are not simultaneously generous in almsgiving and in divesting themselves of surplus wealth for the sake of those in need. 'This free attitude to possessions may be expressed in a disposal of private property, though this is not mandatory. It will certainly find expression in an almost reckless generosity, motivated not by a dour sense of obligation but by a warm and unselfish compassion' (France 1979: 18). There is room for the periodic celebration of God's good, material gifts, even at times to a lavish extent. But these celebrations will be the exception, not the norm. The covenant model that assumes material reward for piety never reappears in Jesus' teaching, and is explicitly contradicted throughout. As in Proverbs 30:8-9, Jesus is concerned to moderate extremes. But the main focus of his ministry, the

road to the cross, and his call to disciples to imitate him in similar self-denying sacrifice rather than basking in glory, suggests the overarching paradigm of generous giving, rather than 'godly materialism', for the one who would faithfully follow Christ.

⁵⁸ Schmidt (1987) stresses that the 'hostility to wealth' in the synoptic tradition is independent of any narrowly defined historical circumstances.

Greek before 'root'. It would be difficult to demonstrate that the love of money is *the* most foundational cause of all kinds of evil, but it certainly is *an* important one. Second, no scripture ever declares *money* as the root of all kinds of evil, but rather the *love* of, allegiance to or attachment to money in the fashion that led Jesus to declare, 'You cannot serve both God and Money' (Matt. 6:24; Luke 16:13).⁶⁵

Finally we come to 1 Timothy 6:17–20. Verse 17 obviously envisions the possibility of a rich person being a Christian ('those who are rich in this present world' must put their hope 'in God'). Paul also readily acknowledges how wealth can be a blessing. God 'richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment' (6:17b). We may enjoy the fleeting pleasures that wealth can provide for a short time in this life, but we dare not put our trust in material possessions. Instead, we must lay up treasures in heaven (recall Matt. 6:19 and par.), 'as a firm foundation for the coming age'. In this way, Christians of all socio-economic circumstances 'may take hold of the life that is truly life', that is, the eternal state in the age to come. Again Paul is challenging the conventional Hellenistic system of patronage and reciprocity. He is telling those who have this world's goods not to count on being able to buy the favours of others in return. But one way in which he does draw on convention is to command rich people to be generous benefactors themselves (6:18). 'Paul's desire that the rich use their possessions this way can scarcely be stated more emphatically' (L. Johnson 1996: 207). There are four terms in verse 18 that all reinforce the same command: 'to do good', 'to be rich in good deeds', 'to be generous', and to be 'willing to share' their material possessions.

Summary and conclusions

Right from the outset of his letter-writing career, Paul is eager to remember the poor (Galatians). The Thessalonian Christians may have been more impoverished than many of the Pauline churches, but that gives them no right to be idle and depend solely on 'welfare' from others (1 and 2 Thessalonians). The church at Corinth is torn apart by wealthy house-church leaders who expect their riches to buy them all the privilege and influence it did when they were pagans

⁶⁵ On the indirect relationship of both 1 Tim. 6:6–10 and 17–19 to the Jesus tradition, see Dschulnigg (1993). In fact, he claims these passages are the purest reflections of Jesus' teaching on wealth and poverty anywhere in the New Testament (77). The similarities seem far too close to allow for theories of the development of a *christliche Bürgerlichkeit*, foreign to the original Jesus movement, in the Pastoral Epistles (69–71).

(1 Corinthians). Instead Paul calls on them to give as generously as less well-to-do believers have already done to meet the needs of the acutely poor in Jerusalem (2 Corinthians). It seems the Corinthians and others eventually agree and give generously (Romans). Christian freedom should produce liberating relationships and accountability structures (Philemon and Ephesians). Christian workers should be grateful for financial support from fellow believers but not depend on it (Philippians). And ultimately, the Christians with material possessions must recognize their seduction and avoid their snare by giving generous quantities of them away (the Pastorals).

Although Paul is not regularly thought of as devoting as much attention as James or Jesus to the works that flow from faith, particularly in the financial realm, the detailed survey of this chapter creates a quite different impression.⁶⁶ There is no tension on this topic between Paul and his predecessors. All the primary New Testament witnesses agree that grace through faith justifies but inevitably produces good deeds and works of compassion, particularly by means of financial stewardship, especially in the household of faith. We may perceive some increase in the numbers and influence of well-to-do Christians, especially those who may have related as patrons to their clients at one time, though many no doubt remained relatively poor, even in Paul's churches. But with whatever growing urbanization and standard of living may be detected with the shift from Jewish to Hellenistic Christianity, problems associated with wealth and the wealthy also emerge. Paul may not issue any of Jesus' wide-ranging or radical calls to abandon everything, although we have already argued that none of those calls was intended to be normative for all believers in the first place. But he does insist that Hellenistic Christians be equally counter-cultural in rejecting the systems of patronage and reciprocity so endemic in their culture. And he calls all believers to act as generous benefactors regardless of their net worth and with no thought of any material reward in this life. Should they fall into acute need, they should be able to count on their fellow believers to minister to them, even as they are expected to give from their surplus at the moment. In short, Paul commands generosity simply because it honours God; the only guaranteed reward awaits in the life to come. Paul as much as Jesus recognizes the danger of mammon as an idol and its potentially damning effects. Christ must be served rather than money.

⁶⁶ E.g., Paul uses the word 'poor' (*ptōchoi*) only four times and 'rich' (*plousioi*) only three times. But word-counts, of course, cannot determine the frequency of *themes*.