

# An inquiry into socio-historical factors contributing to poverty within the Early Church in Palestine

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**Dates:**

Received: 02 June 2015

Accepted: 01 Sep. 2015

Published: 12 Nov. 2015

**How to cite this article:**

 Kakwata, F., 2015, 'An inquiry into socio-historical factors contributing to poverty within the Early Church in Palestine', *In die Skriflig* 49(1), Art. #1993, 10 pages. <http://dx.doi.org/10.4102/ids.v49i1.1993>
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This article seeks to investigate the root causes of poverty in the early Christian community. The view that is put forward and argued in this article is that poverty was widespread in early Christianity with particular reference to the converted Jews in Palestine. This was the result of socio-historical factors, namely the Israelites' contact with Canaanites during the conquest, and the implementation of the secular leadership paradigm derived from those pagan nations around Israel, which led to their subjugation under the oppressive and exploitative and economic structures of the Roman Empire. For that reason many believers, newly converted Jews, at that time were destitute and impoverished as they belonged to the lower classes in society. In spite of this state of affairs, the early Christians in Jerusalem seemed to have faced the challenges of poverty with a measure of success as can be attested by the statement 'for there was no needy person amongst them ...' (Ac 4:34).

**'n Ondersoek na sosio-historiese faktore wat tot armoede binne die vroeë Christelike kerk in Palestina bygedra het.** Die doel van hierdie artikel is om die grondoorake van armoede in die vroeë Christelike gemeenskap te ondersoek met spesifieke verwysing na die bekeerde Jode in Palestina. Die standpunt wat in hierdie artikel gestel en beredeneer word, is dat armoede algemeen in die vroeë Christendom voorgekom het. Dit was as gevolg van verskeie sosio-historiese faktore, waaronder die Israeliete se kontak met die Kanaäniete ná die inname, asook die instelling van die sekulêre paradigma oor leierskap wat Israel aan die naburige heidennasies ontleen het en wat op hulle verknegting onder die Romeinse Ryk se onderdrukkende en uitbuitende strukture uitgeloop het. 'n Groot aantal gelowiges, bekeerde Jode, was in daardie tyd behoeftig en armoedig omdat hulle deel van die laer klasse in die samelewing was. Tog, ten spyte van hierdie omstandighede, het die vroeë Christene in Jerusalem klaarblyklik die uitdaging van armoede met 'n mate van sukses gehanteer, soos die stelling getuig: 'Nie een van hulle het gebrek gely nie ...' (Hand 4:34).

## Introduction

Historians have not yet reached consensus on the question as to when and how the early Christian community came into being hence views are divided on this matter. According to Lössl (2010:43) some locate the beginning of the early Christian community with the start of Jesus' ministry, whereas others place it after Jesus' crucifixion; still others such as Ferguson (2003:1) views it as a movement that sprouted routes within Judaism in Jerusalem and spread across the Mediterranean to Rome. Conversely, Burkett (2002:15) points out that Palestine<sup>1</sup> was the cradle of Christianity. The reasons being that it was Jesus' homeland as well as the area from where most of the disciples came, and it was the place where Jesus began his public ministry (Mt 4:12–17). Longenecker (2010:36) also designates Palestine as the most possible area where the earliest roots of Jesus' movement sprouted, before this movement spread throughout the Mediterranean basin.

It is, however, certain that the early Christian community was born and evolved within the Greco-Roman society. From the beginning of the early Christian community, poverty was widespread and strategies were put into place to take care of the poor. Within this context the article aims to investigate some factors contributing to poverty in the early Christian community. The inquiry therefore intends to understand how the Israelites' behaviour and the existing socio-economic system contributed to the rise of poverty in the early Christian community in the 1st century. The methodological framework of this article comprises a literature review.

Beforehand, it should be noted that all quotations from the Bible are taken from the NASB (New American Standard Bible), except when stated otherwise.

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1. Palestine or the land of Canaan (Ac 13:19) refers to the territory that God promised to give to the descendants of Abraham, and which they occupied after having left Egypt. It is also called the Holy Land or the Promised Land (Gn 10:15–19).

## The Israelite and Jewish setting for the poor

The problem of poverty is not new; it is an ancient phenomenon from before the New Testament and for Jewish believers dates back to the period of the Hebrew Scriptures. To understand the situation of the poor and the underlining causes in early Christianity it is necessary to examine the background of this social factor in the Old Testament.

### The poor in the Old Testament

The Hebrew Old Testament uses the adjective *anî* (אֲנִי) which derives from the verb *anâ* (אָנָה) to designate the poor. Thus *anî* (אֲנִי) 'refers to those who are suffering, in a state of poverty, oppression, misery from various causes: from being poor, needy, unfortunate, in want' (Baker & Carpenter 2003:853). The adjective *anî* (אֲנִי) could also mean 'to have been humbled, afflicted by necessity or circumstances' (VanGemeran 1997:454). In this case, *anî* (אֲנִי) denotes a state of humility or distress, therefore someone in a state of reduced proficiency and lower value (Kittel & Friedrich 1968:888). Kittel and Friedrich specify that *anî* does not designate a merited poverty but an individual who is 'wrongfully impoverished or dispossessed'. This is why Yahweh refers to them as his people as attested in Exodus 22:24–25. VanGemeran (1997:455) confirms this view and states that the adjective *anî* is never linked to deserved poverty; it is always used to designate people who are exploited and impoverished due to being wronged.

In the same vein, Botterweck, Ringgren and Fabry (2001:234) describe *anî* (אֲנִי) as detrimental situations of human life such as affliction in its various forms (hardship, torment, pain, despair), which is the complete opposite of well-being. Botterweck *et al.* (2001:248) further emphasise that the history of poverty in Israel implies a sociological development that cannot be traced easily. Yet they outline different phases that show how poverty evolved in Israel. They indicate that the early family structure of Israel was free from individual poverty and misery; this is because during that time it was part of the community's function to produce and supply the necessities of life to its members.

In this light Kittel and Friedrich (1968:889) locate the beginning of the rise of the problem of poverty in Israel during the period of conquest. The mode of life of Israel's tribes before the conquest was nomadic and there is no indication of a rigid distinction between the rich and the poor. This is due to the fact that members of the tribe had more or less the same rights and status as community upholders. But it is during Israel's occupation of the Promised Land that the problem of poverty emerged because of the Israelites' contact with Canaanites who already had established class divisions in their cities. This constitutes the background for understanding the Israelites social orientation that led to the emergence of poverty in the early Christian community.

Furthermore Botterweck *et al.* (2001:248) indicate that poverty began during the early monarchical period,

as 1 Samuel 22:2 attests. They point out the emergence of a complex socio-economic system: urbanisation, the introduction of an economically based currency, and a centralised administration. Consequently, the rural farmer businesses and the social structure based on families were compromised, conditions which gave rise to widespread poverty. Additional factors were the monarchical economic development that created new classes and social distinctions, as well as the landowners who held civil rights as judges. All these factors accentuated the situation of poverty in Israel at that time (Kittel & Friedrich 1968:890).

This view is supported by Gatumu (2009:62) who provides valuable insight into the manner how the issue of land became an instrument of oppression in Israel. He stresses the important fact that, during the pre-monarchical period when the Israelites settled in Israel, land ownership was not an issue because the distribution, in adherence to the covenant (Jos 13; 18), was based on egalitarian principles. The institutionalisation of the year of Jubilee recorded in the book of Leviticus (25:8–54; 27:17–24) was meant to serve this purpose of assuring economic fairness. But the advent of the monarchy gradually disrupted the pre-established order of land occupation and made land distribution a tool of oppression and exploitation.

This development took place at some point after the Israelites had occupied the Promised Land. The inhabitants were no longer content with their leadership structure, which was constituted by the council of elders and the prophet Samuel as the sole judge (1 Sm 8:4–5). This transition came when Samuel grew old. His two sons whom he appointed as judges were misbehaving and could not perform their duties loyally and ethically. The Israelites were frustrated with this state of affairs and demanded a king to rule over them as was the case with the neighbouring nations. This confirms the view of Kittel and Friedrich (1968:889), noted above, that the Israelites' contact with pagan nations when they settled in the Promised Land, can be considered as the beginning of the situation of poverty in Israel. According to the biblical narrative, this act (of choosing a king) outraged the Lord and upset Samuel, seeing that it was considered as a manifest rejection of God's sovereignty (1 Sm 8:6–7). Samuel's rationale was: The Lord himself was leading the nation through Samuel himself as God's prophet. The narrative continues by describing how the Lord instructed Samuel to warn the people of the dire consequences should a king rule over them (1 Sm 8:11–17):

This will be the procedure of the king who will reign over you: he will take your sons and place them for himself in his chariots and among his horsemen and they will run before his chariots. And he will appoint for himself commanders of thousands and of fifties, and some to do his ploughing and reap his harvest and to make his weapons of war and equipment for his chariots. He will also take your daughters for perfumers and cooks and bakers ... He will take a tenth of your flocks, and you yourselves will become his servants. Then you will cry out in that day because of your king whom you have chosen for yourselves, but the Lord will not answer you in that day.

Samuel's speech intended to warn off the people from electing a usurper to lead them, seeing that such a ruler would oppress and exploit them (Longenecker 2010:30). However, according to the narrative, the people did not heed this advice. At this point it becomes possible to identify the origin of the oppressive and exploitative political, social and economic structures, as the root cause of poverty in Israel. It is documented that most of the kings who reigned in Palestine did portray the characteristics which Samuel underlined in his speech. Such digresses ultimately led to the loss of Israel's kingship. As a result, the nation as a whole was subjected to the domination of successive ancient superpowers, namely the Babylonians, Persians, Greeks and eventually the Romans.

The narrative depicts Saul as the first king who did not 'walk in the ways of God', and the Lord is reported to have regretted making Saul king (1 Sm 15:35). During the reign of king David (recorded as 'a man after God's heart') the kingdom of Israel did take shape but it did not last longer. The third king, Solomon, was famous for his superior wisdom, but was reported to oppress his own people through forced labour (1 Ki 4:29–31; 5:12; 9:15–22). After Solomon, king Rehoboam implemented a flawed policy and caused the kingdom of Israel to divide into two separate kingdoms over the issues of tax increase and forced labour. These became known as the kingdoms of the north and of the south (1 Ki 11–14).

It is evident from the documentation how the exploitation, oppression, and injustice had been strengthened and how it impacted the daily existence of the population by causing an increase in the levels of poverty. Various examples of the relationship between injustice and poverty are documented from this period. Amongst these is the classic example of king Ahab who exploited his power by confiscating the labourer Naboth's vineyard when the latter was put to death after a mock trial (1 Ki 21).

Furthermore, the problem of landownership in Israel in the post-exilic era resulted in a systematic exploitation of the people. Some lost their land and became tenant farmers and others worked for the elites for a meagre wage. There were also workers who were fortunate enough to own land but the majority rented properties – sometimes acquired from absentee landlords at high costs (Longenecker 2010:23). Those who did not own land were unfortunate in that they had no choice but to offer their labour to the elites, very often for minimal remuneration, as was pointed out. A passage in Nehemiah 5:1–5 clearly illustrates the issue of land in the post-exilic period:

Now there was a great outcry of the people and of their wives against their Jewish brothers. For there were those who said, we, our sons and our daughters, are many, therefore let us get grain that we may eat and live. And there were others who said, we are mortgaging our fields, our vineyards, and houses that we might get grain because of the famine. Also there were those who said, we have borrowed money for the king's tax on our fields and our vineyards. And now our flesh is like the flesh of our brothers, our children like their children. Yet behold, we are

forcing our sons and our daughters to be slaves, and some of our daughters are forced into bondage already, and we are helpless because our fields and vineyards belong to others.

It is the author's view that if Israel would not have rejected God's sovereignty and embraced the secular model of leadership, these socio-economic disasters would not have taken place. In other words, the biblical testimony shows that the leadership style, which the rulers of that period chose by imitating the neighbouring nations, was the cause of their misery and suffering. Thus, it becomes evident from the depiction in the biblical narratives that Israel's reported sin of rejecting God's sovereignty was to be considered as the fundamental cause of the people's poverty. As a result, Israel as a nation forfeited the kingship, and fell under the domination of the successive major powers that invaded the land, as indicated previously, from the Babylonians to the Romans. The political and economic system of these powers did leave traces of their reign and the conditions under which land was held in Israel and in the Mediterranean world.

The existing superpower in the 1st century was the Romans. Thus, the following is an overview of the Greco-Roman economy and social structure. This is crucial to understand the context in which the Early Church came to life, developed and expanded, and which factors contributed toward the worsening of poverty in this context.

## The Greco-Roman economy and social structure

The rise of Rome as an empire began in 27 BC when Augustus became the first emperor, and ended in approximately AD 476 when Romulus the last emperor was assassinated (Bauer 2007:433). Historians differ on the factors that caused the fall of such an imposing ancient power on earth. Yet it should be mentioned that the Roman Empire maintained its hegemony for an extended period afterwards, five centuries to be exact. This was seen as due to its 'judicial institutions, legislative system, property ownership, control of labour, brute force' (Holman 2008:19).

## Roman Empire's economic system

The Mediterranean world of the 1st century was driven by the Roman Empire's economic system. This system is often described as a *political economy* in the sense that the social goals in the empire were controlled by the powerful elites, and the economic choices of individuals or groups were limited by ecological and social forces (Evans & Porter 2000:303). In the same vein, Holman (2008:19) views the economy in the 1st century as a system based on multidimensional inequality. This was due to the fact that the Roman Empire deliberately developed mechanisms to maintain multifaceted inequality, which then became the normal way of life throughout the Empire. This was also the structure Rome imposed on the territories that it conquered and occupied, in this particular case, Israel. He emphasises three characteristics of the Roman Empire's economy, as will be expounded below.



**Pre-industrial:** The first characteristic was the Empire's economy that was pre-industrial and essentially agrarian (Holman 2008:19; Neufeld & DeMaris 2010:194; Oakman 1986:17; Scott 2006:242), whereas the technology was at a rudimentary level. There were no industries as are known today; the inhabitants depended on agriculture for their livelihood. This suggests that most people were peasants who resided in the rural areas. Production by means of farming was at a low level and intended mainly for domestic consumption. But Scheidel, Morris and Saller (2007:4) suggest that in this environment the occupation of the majority of the population of the farms, districts as well as region, was agrarian activity, which to some extent made them self-sufficient, and producing according to its needs. Thus, in the pre-industrial phase the commerce were driven by local enterprises – totally different from the 'mega' shopping centres of nowadays.

**Middling groups:** The second characteristic of the 1st century's economy is the absence of the middle class (tradesmen and shopkeepers) in the Roman Empire (Holman 2008:19). This view is also supported by Bell (1998:189) and Longenecker (2010:56). As Holman points out, the economy was based on agriculture. Therefore, wealth as such was measured by the ownership of land. Bell emphasises that this does not mean there were no tradesmen and shopkeepers in large cities; rather they were not afforded social respect due to their lowly position. In other words, their position was not recognised as worth of honour. However, Longenecker (2010:56) prefers to speak of 'middling groups' instead of the middle class for two reasons:

- There was a significant number of people who formed part of the average economic groups in the Greco-Roman urbanism.
- There also is a significant disparity between the strategies for survival and security of the middling groups at that time, and the stratified 'middle class' as it is known in modern society.

Scheidel *et al.* (2007:526) support this view, by recognising in the Roman Empire the existence of a group stratified between the wealthy and the propertyless poor people. This is similar to the 'middling groups' to which Longenecker is referring.

**Prevalent poverty:** The third characteristic of the Roman Empire's economy, as Holman (2008:19) emphasises, is that poverty was predominant both in rural and urban areas. Longenecker (2010:43) contends that only one per cent of the population in the Roman Empire was well-off, the rest was struggling to survive. He adds that poor and destitute were to be found throughout the Empire, and there was no way to avoid encountering such people. Scheidel *et al.* (2007:594) confirm this view and stress that throughout the Roman Empire the sign of poverty, misery, and destitution were obvious. They add that many people were struggling to live out of meagre earnings, which led to malnutrition and the prevalence of diseases. This social setting implied a deep-set disparity between the rich and the poor in the Greco-Roman

society. Bell (1998:190) highlights the gap between rich and poor and estimates that the income of an average wealthy man in that context was 700 times higher than of a poor one. These measures of inequality between the rich and the poor naturally became a source of indignation and dissatisfaction for the poor and destitute in that society.

The socio-economic structure mentioned above is an important framework to understand poverty in Israel during the 1st century AD. During the Roman Empire's occupation of Israel, the issue of land took on another dimension. In all the territories which the Roman Empire conquered, it also repossessed land. This situation caused the indigenous people to lose control incrementally over their land and the most fertile and farmable land was gradually integrated into royal domains or upper-class properties (Gatumu 2009:62; Oakman 1986:142; Scott 2006:245). Thus the emperor, the senators, the procurators, the traders, the land owners, and the provincial chiefs owned vast expanses of lands even though they made up only 1% of the population in the Empire (Gatumu 2009:62). Oakman (1986) points out the following results:

- intensive exploitation of farmers;
- concentration of land in the hands of a few;
- non-elites carrying the burden of rents and taxes. (p. 77)

Longenecker (2010:23) also confirms this view and accuses the legal system of the Greco-Roman society of being biased, by favouring the elites to the detriment of the non-elites. The Roman governing system placed the control of land into the hands of the wealthy, elite families (Holman 2008:19). Since the consideration of wealth was based on ownership of land, people losing their land caused an unfortunate situation that led to the exploitation and the impoverishing of many families. The process of expropriation of land was a deliberate act encouraged by the judiciary system, which favoured the interests of the elites. The process has been described as the plundering of land, an official confiscation condoned by the legal system (Longenecker 2010:23; Oakman 1986:66).

After a critical analysis of the Roman Empire's economic structure and how it affected Israel during the Roman occupation, the following subsection focuses on the circumstances of the poor in the New Testament.

## The poor in the New Testament

The situation of the poor in the New Testament entails a continuation of the Old Testament tradition. Before investigating the impact of this legacy from the Old Testament, a brief examination is needed of New Testament's conception of poverty.

From the outset it should be noted that the New Testament does not have a word for poverty but uses two Greek words *πένης* (*penes*) and *πτωχός* (*ptōchos*) when referring to the poor. The words *πένης* refers to 'the person who cannot live from one's property, but has to work with one's hands, a *πένης* therefore, is only relatively poor' (Verbrugge 2000:451).

Thus πένης is mostly used in the Septuagint but only once in the New Testament in 2 Corinthians 9:9. In this verse the apostle Paul is motivating the Corinthians to contribute to the collection<sup>2</sup> for the church in Jerusalem. Paul does this by quoting Psalm 112:9 to state clearly that a person who fears God and delights in his commandments, is one who gives freely to the poor and his justice endures forever (Minor 2009:176).

The most common term used in the New Testament to designate the poor is πτωχός. The word appears 31–35 times most commonly in the Gospels and ‘denotes the complete destitution which forces the poor to seek the help of others by begging’ (Kittel & Friedrich 1968:886). Thus πένης denotes a person who has limited resources (e.g. a small farm owner) but is hardly able to survive due to the tough condition of labour, whereas πτωχός describes a beggar as an individual without any resource (Longenecker 2010:37). The scripture gives evidence of the existence of beggars in the New Testament (Mk 10:46). It is clear that from a biblical perspective, poverty is a complex and a multifaceted phenomenon, implying ‘not only powerlessness and physical want but also public disgrace and shame’ (Evans & Porter 2000:303).

In the 1st-century society there were two main groups of people in Israel, the rich and the poor, called ‘the people of the land’ (Reid 2004:942). The wealthy class constituted the minority population but the poor were numerous and included peasants and the artisan class (Green & McKnight 1992:701). Rhee (2012:32) describes this situation as a betrayal in the sense that there was a concentration of wealth in the small elite group (aristocracy) but the majority of the people were impoverished, and left landless. As mentioned above, this situation created a permanent tension between the wealthy landowners and the landless peasants. This also was one of the factors that led to the Jewish revolt in AD 70.

## The wealthy social groups

The rich comprised the Herodian family, the wealthy high-priestly clans, the remnants of the older Jewish aristocracy, and the prosperous merchants who had not yet joined the land-owning aristocracy (Reid 2004:942).

Firstly, it is worth mentioning that the wealth of the Herodian family came from various sources. Welch (1997:77) specifies that Herod skilfully made use of all available sources of income in his day to bring wealth to his kingdoms, which include:

- The collection of taxes from his subjects; the collection of tributes other people paid to Rome, of which he was also in charge. At times Herod’s tax policies were oppressive, which is why, after his death, people reclaimed tax relief.

- Customs duties that he extracted from his control over important routes and maritime commerce.
- The rent from the vast expanses of land he owned and its agriculture production. According to Reid (2004:942), it has been estimated that Herod’s family owned more than half of the land in Israel. Thus, they accumulated an impressive wealth – reportedly for more than 150 years (Simmons 2008:204; Theissen 1978:41).

Secondly, as categorised by Reid (2004:942), there were the group of the wealthy high-priests gathering their wealth from two sources. Their permanent office in the temple permitted them to benefit from the sacrifices offered daily in the temple; they were also in control of commercial activities connected with the sacrifices and other religious rites in the temple as illustrated in Mark 11:15–19. Reid (2004:942–943) further indicates that the lower clergy who had the duty of offering sacrifices in the temple only for two weeks per year, were generally poor and often experienced oppression by high priests. Rhee (2012:32) echoes the same view and specifies that the lower priests were victims of the exploitation on the side of the avaricious landlords who were pro-Roman priestly aristocrats, and the Sanhedrin who were in control of the treasury of the temple.

Thirdly, another group of wealthy people in Israel were the remnant of old Jewish noblemen called aristocrats. Although most of their land was confiscated by Herod and his children, they accumulated their wealth through trade, farm taxes and similar levies (Reid 2004:942; Theissen 1978:41). Since ancient times, wealth was measured by the ownership of land; Reid notes that a person who purchased a piece of land became wealthy. He points out that in most cases such a person would not farm his own land but will rent it out to tenant farmers and devote his time to religious or other activities. This situation, as Reid indicates, culminated into a systematic exploitation of tenant farmers and the abuse of hired labourers. He insists that the wealthy considered these practices as legal, but the poor experienced it as totally unfair. The passage of James 5:1–6 censures this situation in the following terms:

Come now, you rich, weep and howl for your miseries which are coming upon you. Your riches have rotted and your garment moth-eaten. Your gold and your silver have rusted; and their rust will be a witness against you and you will consume your flesh like fire. It is in the last days that you have stored up your treasure. Behold, the pay of the labourers who mowed your fields, and which has been withheld by you, cries out against you; and the outcry of those who did the harvesting has reached the ears of the Lord of Sabaoth. You have lived luxuriously on the earth and led a life of wanton pleasure; you have fattened your hearts in a day of slaughter. You have condemned and put to death the righteous man; he does not resist you.

The last group of wealthy people in Israel were the prosperous merchants. This is in spite of the fact that they were not part of the land-owning aristocratic class, but still in control of the economy of the country (Reid 2004:942).

2. Collection was one of the strategies the early community utilised to alleviate poverty. This approach was mostly championed by Paul. The purpose was to make a contribution to the poor in the Jerusalem assembly and to back up Paul’s efforts of evangelisation with material support to the Gentiles (Rm 15:25–27; 2 Cor 8–9).

## The poor social groups

Reid does recognise the existence of a small middle class in Israel comprised by skilled artisans, land-owning medium-size farmers and merchants as well as the lower clergy – as was indicated previously. These were not considered part of the wealthier groups in society. Also, as a matter of interest: although tax collectors were financially better off, they were not considered amongst the higher classes (Reid 2004:943), perhaps because their wealth was ill-acquired.

For the most, the second main group constituting the majority of the population was the poor referred to as ‘the people of the land’. These can also be classified in various subgroups, suggesting different levels of poverty in the 1st century in Israel. A common denominator is that in some way all of these groups experienced oppression and maltreatment by the wealthy groups in Israel (Rhee 2012:36), various Scriptures attest to this situation (cf. Lk 12:11–12; Ac 4:1–3; 2 Cor 11:23–27). The poor or the ‘people of the land’ included the following:

- the small landowners
- the tenant farmers
- people without land or artisans skill, hired labourers and beggars – the real poor (Reid 2004:942–944).

The lowest class of the poor in the 1st century society were slaves. Reid indicates that there were not many slaves in Israel for various reasons. First of all, slaves had to be cared for, therefore, landowners preferred to hire labourers instead. Glass (2000:27) argues that the cost of maintaining a debt-slave exceeded the cost of acquiring free labour. Secondly, the Mosaic Law prescribes the release of slaves in the seventh year. Thirdly, gentile slaves who converted to Judaism benefited from the same rights as a Jewish slave. Fourthly, slaves tended to be household servants.

## The plight of the poor in Jesus’ time

Throughout the land a heavy burden was placed on the lower classes in Israel. In addition to working hard and producing food to supply their families, peasants for example, had the other obligation of paying taxes. Basically two types of taxes were imposed in the Roman Empire, namely direct and indirect taxes (Ferguson 2003:95; Oakman 1986:66). Direct taxes refer to those the governor and his team levied at provincial level (Ferguson 2003:95). These included agricultural tax (paid by land tenants), and head tax (paid by owners of large properties, cf. Mt 17:25; 22:19). The indirect taxes varied but the most important form of these taxes, as pointed out by Ferguson (2003:95), was the frontier dues (taxes for importing and exporting). Regarding other indirect taxes such as tolls on the trade routes, contractors in cities and districts were in charge to collect the payments (Burkett 2002:27). It is clear that the taxing system was oppressive.

In addition to paying land rent, the Jewish peasants were also obligated to pay tithes and tributes (Oakman 1986:69). Scott (2006:243) points out that farmers could face unpredictable

tax rises at any time. As an example, he mentioned Herod the Great who increased taxes mercilessly to fund his lavish lifestyle. From his side Quirinius, who was governor of Syria, imposed new taxes whilst census was being taken. This caused Judas the Galilean to initiate a revolt according to the narrative in Acts (Ac 5:37) in AD 6–7 (Bell 1998:264). The mentioned tax contributions were unaffordable for poor peasants who had very limited resources with which to cope.

Reid (2004:943) stresses that ‘the people of the land’ hated both the land-owning as well as the non-land-owning rich, because they sometimes used their power to oppress people of the lower classes. This could be the reason why, as noted by Reid (2004:943) and Theissen (1978:42), during the Jewish revolt of AD 66–70 the first action ‘the people of the land’ took was to advance on Jerusalem, in order to burn the debt records and to massacre as many aristocrats as they could come across.

To summarise this section it should be noted that four factors increased the socio-economic pressure in the 1st-century Palestine, namely natural disasters, overpopulation, the concentration of land ownership for the elites and oppressive tax systems.

## Jesus’ response to social inequality

Jesus Christ did not remain indifferent to the economic situation of his time. Although he did not speak out openly against the economic injustices, he did raise his concern through different parables that were recorded in the synoptic Gospels. For example the parable of the vine-growers (Mk 12:1–9) portrays the agrarian conflict prevailing in Palestine during Jesus’ time. This parable depicts the greedy and wicked tenant farmers who set out to confiscate the vineyard, and the landowners who utilise violence to collect the rent. Witherington (2001:321) agrees with many other scholars (e.g. Healy 2008:235; O’Day & Petersen 2009:221) that the parable also sketches the situation of absentee landlords who owned lands in Israel, a situation that had been the source of dissension for a long time.

According to Matthew 18:23–31, Jesus recounts another parable about a king who wanted to settle his account with his slaves. From this scenario it becomes evident that peasants in those days were in such debt that, in reality, they were unable to repay their taxes (Keener 1993:94). This may also be why, according to the New Testament testimony, the term *debt* has become the metaphor for sin (Mt 6:12). The situation of debt could force peasants and their families into slavery if the master was not forgiving. In such a situation Jesus was appealing to creditors to forgive their debtors.

Jesus’ response to the politics of oppression by the Roman Empire was not popular, nor spectacular. As corrective to the social order of the Roman rule he proclaimed the message of ‘liberation and compassion’ (Evans & Porter 2000:306). This implies the message of hope, and the announcement of the coming of the kingdom of God (Mt 4:17; Mk 1:15) that will



overturn the politics of oppression which the Roman rule established. In its stead, Jesus proclaimed the inauguration of an era characterised by a new humane economic order.

As mentioned previously, the documented digressions of oppression, exploitation and injustice emerged in Palestine when the Israelites sinned by rejecting God's sovereignty, and adopted the secular model of leadership. Thus in accordance, the way towards liberation from the economy of exploitation and injustice requires the reinstatement of the reign of God in the land (Mt 6:10; Lk 12:22–31). This is why Jesus urged his disciples to pray, 'let your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven' (NIV). In this sense, Jesus laid the foundation on which the early community of his followers forged a new economic order based on caring for others. To follow is the analysis of poverty in the early Christian community.

## Poverty in the early Christianity setting

### Poverty in early Christian community – Factors and strategy

It is worth mentioning that a lack of accurate data makes it difficult to evaluate the extent of poverty in early Christianity. Yet it should be recognised that the early Christian community did not isolate itself from the Roman society. It was born and developed within the political, social and economic structures of the Roman Empire. Therefore it could not 'be immune to the pressing realities of poverty that affected the majority in the imperial world' (Longenecker 2010:56). As noted above, there was a continuing tension between the minority wealthy landowners and the majority landless peasants, which reached back to the monarchical era (Rhee 2012:32). Rhee reports that during the reign of Herod, this situation worsened. He argues that the wealthy people continued to oppress 'the people of the land' economically, and confiscate land to peasants through mortgage interests. This situation he specifies caused large numbers of people to lose their land and even become hired labourers on the land they owned previously.

Beside the land policy that became an instrument of oppression leading to the impoverishment of many people, Rhee outlines other factors that contributed to the worsening of the socio-economic situation in Palestine. These include 'overpopulation and over-cultivation of the land, natural disasters such as famine, and earth quakes, and increase in taxes, tributes, and tithes'. One can also mention drought, hurricanes and epidemics (Theissen 1978:40). Rhee (2012:32) emphasises that these factors pushed the poor, who were already struggling to survive, deeper into poverty. In the same vein Scott (2006:243) affirms that it was generally possible for Israelite farmers to produce sufficient crops and make a good living. However, natural disasters such as drought, agricultural pests as well as human hazards such as war, and then mostly the political and social aspects of the Roman Empire made it difficult for them.

Martin and Davids (1997:1051) stress an important point: the search for material goods was not a major concern for 1st-century Christians. In the 1st century's agrarian society many people were preoccupied more with maintaining their heritage status than acquiring riches (Mathews 2013:30), because honour was highly valued in the Greco-Roman world. Those who lost their honour through different circumstances were also considered poor. This gave rise to patron-client relationships where people sought to maintain their honour by safeguarding their heritage or possessions such as land (Neufeld & DeMaris 2010:156). As Rhee (2012:36) indicates, Jesus and his disciples, the Jerusalem assembly or the Pauline communities all belonged to the lower socio-economic class, obviously in terms of different degrees of poverty. For that reason he insists that they were not spared from oppression during their ministry and were often ill-treated on the part of the wealthy.

This was particularly the case for the Jerusalem assembly that faced severe financial pressure, famine and impoverishment, as the Scriptures attest. For example Acts 11:28–30 records the great famine that struck worldwide, according to the prophecy of Agabus (Ac 11:28), during the reign of Claudius Emperor of Rome in AD 40 (Scott 2006:243). In 1 Corinthians 16:3 Paul undertakes to facilitate the sending of the gift to Jerusalem when arriving in Corinth (Ciampa & Rosner 2010:844). He also mentions how the Macedonians supported the poor in the Jerusalem church (Rm 15:26). Paul urges the community to remember the poor in Jerusalem (Gl 2:10). He refers to the saints, who in reality were materially impoverished (De Boer 2011:126). For this reason the Jerusalem assembly expressed much concern for the poor by instituting common property and distributing their possession to those in need (Ac 4:32–37). In doing so they succeeded to alleviate poverty as Acts 4:34 testifies by practising economic redistribution.<sup>3</sup> Rhee observes that the appointment of the seven deacons to deal with the daily distribution of food is an indication that although many were destitute, there still were people within the Jerusalem assembly with substantial means and property (e.g. Barnabas – Ac 4:36–37 and Ananias – Ac 5:1–2).

In his analysis of the Pauline Scriptures at the time when the church moved beyond Jerusalem, Rhee reveals that the majority of the members were labourers, artisans, slaves and recent immigrants. Longenecker (2010:235) insists that, although the literary remains of the ancient elite do not provide a nuanced discourse on poverty, it is a fact that the economic exploitation was the hallmark of the Greco-Roman agrarian structures. Furthermore, the majority of believers from the lower classes faced the same challenges common to the ancient society such as landlessness or debt (Meggett 1998:96). Marchal (2012:84) echoes the same view by stating that many of the non-elites in the 1st century experienced

3. Economic redistribution is the strategy for poverty alleviation used by the early community in the Jerusalem assembly. Believers shared their resources as common possessions, some even went as far as selling their possessions and shared it with everyone in need (Ac 2:42–45). Economic redistribution seemed to have been limited to the Jerusalem assembly. There is no evidence that this conduct was practised outside Jerusalem. The reason is unclear, yet it seemed to have alleviated poverty in the Jerusalem assembly, because the Scripture can testify that 'there was no one in need ...' (Ac 4:34).

economic limitation which compelled them to spend their available time working for a living such as craftwork. But the existence of a local upper class and notability in the early community cannot be ruled out. For example Paul's letter to the Romans (16:23) mentions Erastus, a city treasurer from a high status who might be considered a member of the earlier church.

## The investigation of early Christianity's explanations of poverty

### Early Christian explanations

It has been noted above that poverty was widespread in the 1st century Mediterranean world; many people were poor in the early Christian community. From this perspective Holman (2008:18) poses strategic questions, namely How did the early Christians analyse the problem of poverty?, and What did they view as the sources of poverty? To answer these questions Holman (2008:18) selects four primitive Christian texts, namely the Revelation of John; the letter of Jacob, Acts of the Apostles, and the *Shepherd of Hermas* that portray four different ways in which the early Christians understood the sources of poverty and inequality in Palestine.

### The Revelation of John

In this letter the narrator condemns the Roman imperialism as the cause of poverty and injustice. His critique can well be understood within the context of two passages of Revelation, namely chapters 13 and 17–18. The opinions vary the imagery language of John in the two visions described in these passages. Yet many scholars have associated the beast from the sea with the Roman Empire (Mt 13:193). Holman (2008:22) portrays the vision of the beast emerging from the sea according to Revelation 13, as the Roman rule being the final, most powerful and influential nation that opposes God. This Empire is depicted as overpowering and taking control of the world, triumphing over the saints, and as a result is worshipped by the whole world. In the second passage, Revelation 17–18, the narrator describes Babylon the Great, which also represents Rome with its unequal economic system that works for the benefit of the rich and oppressors to the detriment of the poor. The narrator advises the saints to break totally with such a system of exploitation (Rv 18:4) which according to Mathews (2013:199) implies a radical physical separation with the world system. Although these two visions are in an eschatological sense predicting the rise of Rome in the end-times, to some extent they also illustrate the reality of the 1st century Mediterranean world – Rome's oppressive and exploitative governing system impoverishing large numbers of people.

### The letter of Jacob

The second text under consideration that represents early Christianity's explanation of the factors contributing to poverty is the letter of Jacob, commonly called James. The

letter is believed to have been written by Jacob, Jesus' brother, in the 1st century. James was a prominent figure, an overseer of the Jerusalem assembly, as Acts 12:17 and Galatians 1:18–19 attest. Unlike John who condemns the Roman imperialism for its oppressive and exploitative system that is perpetuating poverty, James expresses a complete disapproval of the local economic system (e.g. Ja 5:1–6). Here James does not directly decry the Roman economic system, but he condemns the sin of oppression by criticising a fundamental feature of the Roman system of inequality, namely the exploitation of the peasant labourers by the wealthy landowners. As a corrective to such exploitation, James does not appeal to the Christian community to withdraw from the system; rather to resist the imperial exploitation (Holman 2008:26). This is evident as James 5:6 ends his discourse on the sin of oppression with the statement: 'You have condemned and put to death the righteous man; He does not resist you [as proof that what you are doing is unjust]?' (McKnight 2011:400).

### The Acts of the Apostles

The third text Holman examines in regard to the early Christianity understanding of the causes of poverty is the Acts of the Apostles. Luke's historical narrative remains completely silent on the question of economic injustice that prevailed in the 1st century; institutional causes of poverty are not part of his investigation (Holman 2008:26). As Holman indicates Luke's historical narrative does not condemn the Roman Empire's system of inequality and does not venture to give any explanation of the vast disparity between the wealthy imperial elites and the poor class. Beyond the Jerusalem assembly, however, Luke diagnoses some economic needs that can be remedied through hospitality and charity (Holman 2008:31).

### The Shepherd of Hermas: God-given wealth

The fourth selected text to explain the position of early Christianity on the factors leading to poverty and inequality is the *Shepherd of Hermas*.<sup>4</sup> The shepherd of Hermas does not attack the Roman imperialism as the source of poverty. He rather values wealth as a gift from God. On the other hand he warns about the danger of wealth and how it 'can bring difficulties, such as renunciation of the faith, distraction leading to spiritual weakness, and temptation to avoid persecution' (Holman 2008:33). For this reason, as Holman notes, the shepherd of Hermas advocates a proper use of wealth by practicing charity.

In summary, the four early Christian texts analysed above do not form a sequence of ideas on the sources and explanations of poverty; but rather provide 'four appraisals

4. The *shepherd of Hermas* might have been written a few decades later than the Revelation of John, the letter of Jacob and the Acts of the Apostles (Holman 2008:31). The *shepherd of Hermas* (ancient apocalypse), is the most popular non-canonical book that was widely read in early Christianity in the second and 3rd century. It is believed to have been written by a certain Hermas called the *Shepherd*, a Christian from early to mid-second century Rome (Ehrman 2003:162). Ehrman specifies that the book contains a series of revelations: five visions, twelve commandments, and ten parables. He indicates that the themes developed are such as sin and repentance and more specific issues of wealth and poverty, family relations, business dealings, and indecision towards God (double mindedness).



of economic inequality' (Holman 2008:35). The Revelation of John attributes poverty to the Roman imperialist system. As strategy against this condition, the saints are advised to break free of the Roman exploitative system. The letter of Jacob decries the local economy of exploitation as the source of poverty and inequality. One of the foci in this letter is the resistance to the wealth-based system by spiritually fostering a new attitude. The Acts of the Apostles does not criticise the Roman system for its inequality but considers wealth as something agreeable, and the narrator calls upon those who have the means to practice charity, in order to meet the needs of the poor. Finally, the *Shepherd of Hermas* is close to the Acts of the Apostles. He considers wealth as a gift from God, and therefore urges the people of God to practice charity to demonstrate a proper use of wealth.

It is evident that poverty is a subject of much concern in the biblical tradition. Throughout the commentators have understood causes and responses of poverty in the history of Israel and Palestine differently. For example Sakenfeld (2009:575) notes that, according to the Deuteronomist tradition, poverty existed in Israel because of the failure to observe God's commandments (Dt 15:4–5). Thus, in the biblical tradition material wealth is a sign of blessing in Israel whereas poverty and oppression indicate curse. Verbrugge (2000:4291) argues that 'poverty ultimately was created by unrighteousness'. Sakenfeld points out that in Proverbs poverty is attributed to the failure of the poor themselves, as a lack of diligence (Pr 10:4). He further indicates that some of the prophets understood the cause of poverty as the deliberate decisions of the wealthy to oppress other people 'through economic exploitation and the corruption of the legal system', as illustrated in Isaiah 1:21–26 and Amos 4:1–4. In the apocalyptic literature the poor is viewed as fortunate because the coming of the kingdom of God will intervene to solve their problems (Sakenfeld 2009:576).

In view of all this the question that arises is about the origin of poverty, the root cause of, or the circumstance that led up to poverty in the early Christian community in Palestine. As already mentioned the understanding of the causes out of which poverty arose greatly affected ideas and the nature of actions people took to address the problem. According to Abue (2006:212) the 'root cause is a social factor or a combination of factors that remotely generates other effects'. From this perspective and based on the discussion above, the question can be posed: Which historic social factors have generated so much poverty with dire consequences for the early church? Two social factors can be identified from the discussion above as impacting on poverty, namely the Israelites' contact with the Canaanites and their imitation of the governance model from their pagan neighbour.

The Israelites were sucked in by the lifestyle of the pagan nations they found best to implement in Israel. This situation led to the establishment of the monarchy in Israel, the monarchy in turn introduced oppression that culminated in the subjugation of the whole nation under successive foreign superpowers. These empires reinforced exploitation and

the condition of poverty worsened in Israel. In the biblical narratives these two social factors are depicted as the genesis of poverty and misery in Israel. In such an environment early Christianity within Palestine was born and underwent the same economic pressures as other societal groups in the ancient Mediterranean world.

## Conclusion

The aim of this article is to investigate socio-historical factors that contributed to poverty in the early Christian community amongst the newly converted Jews. Findings reveal that poverty was widespread in the ancient Mediterranean world, and early Christianity that was born and bred within that society did not escape its impact. Further evidence suggests that many believers in the 1st century were destitute. They came from the lower classes and were living at a subsistence level. Various other factors may have played a role in increasing the levels of poverty, such as war, drought or social issues. However, it was demonstrated that, for the most part, poverty in Israel should be considered as a structural issue with historical roots.

The situation of the poor in Palestine, finds its impact in two socio-historical factors: Israelites' contact with the pagan nations around them during its establishment in the Canaan land and the imitation and implementation of a secular leadership style in the Promised Land. This led to the advent of the monarchy in Israel when, according to the biblical narrative, the Israelites rejected God's sovereignty to adopt a secular model of leadership. This also resulted in the subjugation of Israel to the superpowers, and ultimately the Roman Empire, as indicated. During that period the situation of poverty in Israel worsened due to oppression and exploitation brought about by the Roman governance system. It is in such an environment of socio-economic inequality that early Christianity in Palestine came into being.

Therefore poverty in the early Christian community can be seen as the continuation of the legacy of the Old Testament era. Certain socio-historic factors did influence the situation of poverty in Palestine during that time and within the socio-economic framework of Greco-Roman political economy. In other words, certain factors structurally entrenched and socio-economically aggravated the already existing poverty. This impacted the Jews as followers in Jesus' time and also the early Jewish Christians, seeing that they were part of the lower classes and had to find strategies to cope within this socio-economic framework.

Jesus' social critique had a spiritual focus. It renewed hearts and compassion in contributing to realise God's new world. This new, spiritual dispensation were said to bring an end to the system of oppression, exploitation and injustice that prevailed in the Roman Empire and inaugurate a new era of God's reign on earth through believers. The early Christian community's response to poverty was based on the virtue of the kingdom of God Jesus proclaimed, namely compassion. Within this context the early community practised economic

redistribution, collection, hospitality and charity, in order to address the culture of poverty – and this way of life was successful.

The author believes that the subsistence farming with the family structures and city states with sectional leading figures (such as prophets and charismatic leaders) under a direct theocratic governance, would eradicate poverty automatically, since these are indicated as the causes for poverty in the 1st century – and even for the global poverty that we face.

## Acknowledgements

### Competing interests

The author declares that he has no financial or personal relationship(s) that may have inappropriately influenced him in writing this article.

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