

The Poor

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Wolfgang Stegemann once observed that ‘the movement within Judaism in Palestine associated with the name of Jesus was a movement *of the poor for the poor*.’¹ He continued: ‘Neither Jesus nor his first disciples were professed beggars, yet they shared the desperate situation of many of the fellow country folk—particularly in Galilee—barely avoiding utter poverty.’² What was this desperate situation experienced by Jesus and his compatriots? In this article, I outline both the institutional and extractive features of an agrarian economy and the general context of political and social upheaval in Palestine during the first century that left many rural populations facing economic hardship. I also consider in what sense we might speak of Jesus as ‘poor’. As it turns out, this is a rather thorny matter and one in which modern interpreters will often bring assumptions from an economic context fundamentally different to that of the agrarian social world of the Roman Empire during the first century.

Who Were ‘the Poor’ in First-century Galilee?

Given that references to ‘the poor’ and ‘poverty’ were just as slippery in the ancient world as in our own, we need to be careful with our definitions and usage of these terms.

¹ Emphasis original. Wolfgang Stegemann, *The Gospel and the Poor*, trans. D. Elliot (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984), 23.

² Stegemann, 24.

Whereas most texts from antiquity, including those that came to form the New Testament, come from a semi-privileged, literate, and city-based class, the overwhelming majority of people living in first-century rural Galilee lived at, slightly above, or slightly below subsistence level.

Subsistence means their household could generate enough income to provide the bare minimum necessary to sustain life.

We can speak of the poor in Galilee in two senses:

First, in a more general sense that highlights the lack of material wealth and modest living conditions of rural peasants, artisans, and slaves tied to the land. One Greek term for the poor, *πένης* (*pénēs*), typically refers to a person who does manual work in the fields, shops, and villages,³ in contrast to the *πλούσιος* (*plouísios*), a wealthy member of the landed elite.⁴ Those who were born poor, typically lived poor and died poor. Excavations of human skeletal remains from other parts of the Roman Empire reveal dietary deficiencies and illnesses that were significant amongst non-elite life and interaction.⁵ The inferior quality of health care, occupational hazards of manual labour, and under-developed and pre-industrial working conditions culminated in a harsh living environment for the majority of the population. We need to keep these factors in mind when reading gospel narratives about Jesus and his disciples, as it forms the economic backdrop to his ministry, devoid of modern, middle-class comforts and assumptions. Food security, social mobility, and access to stable employment, were not guaranteed for the vast majority of the population.

Second, it is useful to speak of ‘the poor’ in a more specific sense as referring to those suffering from material disadvantage and deprivation in relation to those living at subsistence

³ ‘πένης’, BDAG, 795.

⁴ ‘πλούσιος’, BDAG, 813.

⁵ Justin Meggitt, *Paul, Poverty and Survival* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1998), 38–39, 70.

level. In recent years, some scholars have objected that a ‘literary characterization of ninety-nine percent of the population’ as impoverished versus 1 percent as ‘rich’ relies on a cavalier distinction found only in the writings of elite authors, and may speak past a generally less restrictive definition that allows for gradations of social status among the non-elite.⁶ Just because the majority of the population were poor by today’s standards does not mean they all had the same economic profile or social privileges. The prevailing Greek word translated as ‘poor’ in the New Testament, *πτωχός* (*ptōchós*), for instance, generally refers to those ‘persons and groups lacking (totally or in some degree) the necessities of life: food, drink, clothing, shelter, health, land/employment, freedom, dignity and honor, etc’.⁷ The BDAG lexicon also conveys this relative definition of *πτωχός* (*ptōchós*) as pertaining ‘to being economically disadvantaged’, or living in destitution, and from the perspective of several early Christian authors, as oppressed and disillusioned people ‘in special need of God’s help’ (cf. Matt 11:5; Luke 4:18; 7:22; 1 Clem. 52:2).⁸ Beyond literary descriptions, however, it is difficult to grasp aspects of their daily life. Archaeological evidence tends to favour the ceramic and durable lives of the elite and relatively privileged non-elite over the makeshift and aceramic lives of those living at or near destitution.

How Did They Get Poor?

To understand how people in somewhere like rural Galilee might have ended up poor or destitute (*πτωχός/ptōchós*) we need to know something about the wider political and economic situation. I will here address first the institutionalized socio-economic system that often resulted

⁶ Christopher M. Hays, ‘Rich and Poor’, in *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels*, ed. Joel Green, Jeannine K. Brown, and Nicholas Perrin (Downers Grove: IVP, 2013), 801; See also: Bruce W. Longenecker, *Remember the Poor: Paul, Poverty, and the Greco-Roman World* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010), 44–53.

⁷ ‘Poor, Poverty’, *ABD* 5:415

⁸ ‘πτωχός’, *BDAG*, 896.

in peasant precariousness, before turning to the underlying political instability and social upheaval in the region in the decades leading up to the Roman-Jewish War of 66–73 CE.

The economic system in the Roman Empire is what we would now call an agrarian social formation. This means that farming constituted the bulk of economic activity, with land representing the primary source of wealth. According to the fundamental dynamics of an agrarian society, a small class of aristocratic city-based elite, controlling the means of production (that is the infrastructure required to produce the necessities of life), extracted surplus value from the work or labour power of the remaining peasant and slave populations. A sizeable proportion of the production of the rural population was rendered through taxes and rents to sustain the ‘parasitical’ lifestyles of the urban-based elite.⁹ A smaller subclass of artisans, often associated with urban contexts although they were more acquainted with peasants and village-life, produced goods and services. Artisans were also subject to wealth extraction mostly via taxes. Around the agricultural and other yields of this social formation grew an administrative and economic infrastructure that became imbalanced in terms of how those yields were distributed. Most resources were channelled upwards towards the elite minority.

Central to this upward flow of resources was an urban-rural relation between the πόλις (*pólis*) and the χώρα (*chôra*). The χώρα refers to the countryside with its villages, and the πόλις designates an urban environment.¹⁰ As Roland Boer and Christina Petterson note, in the colonial situation of the first century, ‘the *chôra* meant not the fields and villages in the vicinity of the *pólis*, but all the colonized territory outside the *pólis*, with peasant farming, village communities,

⁹ Robert J. Myles, ‘Class Struggle in the New Testament!’, in *Class Struggle in the New Testament*, ed. Robert J. Myles (Lanham: Lexington Books/Fortress Academic, 2019), 2–7.

¹⁰ G. E. M. de Ste. Croix, *The Class Struggle in the Ancient Greek World* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1981), 9–19.

as well as wider areas at the limits of human presence'.¹¹ Under Roman imperial rule, this regime was extractive in that the *chôra* produced the material foundations for the *pólis*. The classicist G.E.M. de Ste. Croix remarks that 'the fundamental relationship between city and countryside was always the same: it was essentially one of exploitation, with few benefits given in return'.¹² Bruce W. Longenecker has similarly observed that 'economic exploitation was inherent within the structures of Greco-Roman agrarianism, not least with regard to the potential for elite acquisitiveness'.¹³

Galilee was not a Roman province during the lifetime of Jesus, but rather a Roman 'client kingdom', and until 39 CE part of the tetrarchy of Herod Antipas, the son of Herod the Great.¹⁴ We sometimes find New Testament scholars speaking of the relative prosperity, stability, and insularity of Galilee in the 30s CE given the absence of explicit references to episodes of social and political conflict.¹⁵ While it is important not to overplay the levels of explicit social tension in the region, such musings may simply be echoing the wishful thinking of a disconnected elite, from whom our primary sources derive. E.P. Sanders, for instance, asserts that

the lack of uprisings [in the 30s] indicates that Antipas was not excessively oppressive and did not levy exorbitant taxes.... Moreover, like his father, he undertook large building projects that helped reduce unemployment. Galileans in Jesus' lifetime did not feel that the things

¹¹ Roland Boer and Christina Petterson, *Time of Troubles: A New Economic Framework for Early Christianity* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2017), 79.

¹² Ste. Croix, *Class Struggle*, 13.

¹³ Longenecker, *Remember the Poor*, 57.

¹⁴ As Ste. Croix suggests, however, Jesus was probably 'aware of the Roman imperial power that had already engulfed Judaea as a tributary province and could easily swallow up the remaining pretty client kingdoms of Palestine whenever it wanted to'. Ste. Croix, *Class Struggle*, 430.

¹⁵ See, for example, Helen K. Bond, *The Historical Jesus: A Guide for the Perplexed* (London: Bloomsbury, 2012), 77. Bond acknowledges occasional city-rural disputes and non-violent protests, but concludes 'the picture that emerges of Antipas's Galilee is of a reasonably prosperous, stable realm, relatively at ease with its Jewish ruler'. See also the example of Sanders below.

most dear to them were seriously threatened: their religion, their national traditions and their livelihoods.¹⁶

A focus on supposedly isolated cases of violence or disorder can all-too-easily overlook the systemic violence that is inherent to the ‘normal’ state of things, however.¹⁷ The ‘peace’ experienced under Antipas’s father, Herod the Great, for example, was, according to Sakari Hakklinen, ‘achieved and supported only by force and violence. The Galileans at the time of Herod the Great had a threefold taxation system: tribute to Rome, taxes to Herod and tithes and offerings to the Temple and priesthood’.¹⁸ While several major building projects in Galilee initiated by Antipas may have created more work for the likes of skilled artisans, such projects inevitably demanded higher taxes and forced labour. Indeed, such structures were usually paid for by the resident population.¹⁹ We might improve Sanders’s picture of 30s CE Galilee by incorporating other routine mechanisms of suppression that kept a lid on violent outbursts, whether the threat of imprisonment or execution (e.g., Mk 6:17-29; Josephus, *Ant.* 18.117), a hefty military presence (approximately 7,000 soldiers in pre-war Palestine),²⁰ or other preventative and strategic measures taken to deter unrest. Uprisings were, after all, always the end result of a long and complex struggle. When analyzed from below, the underlying precursors to widespread social upheaval can be seen everywhere in first-century Palestine, especially in the decades leading up to the Jewish revolt. The ancient Jewish historian Josephus, for instance, traces the revolt’s roots in 66 CE back six decades to the rebellion instigated by Judas the

¹⁶ E.P. Sanders, *The Historical Figure of Jesus* (London: Allen Lane, 1993), 21.

¹⁷ This is a fundamental argument of the philosopher Slavoj Žižek, *Violence* (London: Profile Books, 2008).

¹⁸ Sakari Hakklinen, ‘Poverty in the first-century Galilee’, *HTS* 72 (4), <http://dx.doi.org/10.4102/hts.v72i4.3398>, 2016.

¹⁹ Ekkehard W. Stegemann and Wolfgang Stegemann, *The Jesus Movement: A Social History of its First Century* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1999), 49

²⁰ Christopher B. Zeichmann, *The Roman Army and the New Testament* (Lanham: Lexington Books/Fortress Academic, 2018), 26.

Galilean and Zadok the Pharisee in 6 CE (*Ant.* 18.23), thereby situating such events squarely within the lifetime of Jesus. The broader landscape Josephus paints of first-century Palestine (see, for example, *Ant.* 17) is one of political turmoil and instability among the governing classes that would have likely filtered downward, disrupting patterns of peasant existence, and exacerbating already precarious situations of social and economic volatility.²¹

Within this fuller political landscape, there were several likely scenarios in which members of the rural population might fall beneath subsistence level (that is, become chronically poor). Given the agrarian economic imbalance outlined above, it was conceivable for peasant households to become indebted to wealthy landowners, especially if they struck a set of unfortunate circumstances—whether through war, famine, a bad harvest, or an untimely death in the household. Farmers could find themselves forced into abandoning their homes for fear of punishment over an unpaid debt. Remaining would likely entail ‘debt bondage’, whereby a debtor sold themselves into indentured servitude or slavery.

Boer and Petterson write that debt served an integral function of the ancient economy through reinforcing hierarchy and ensuring a steady flow of wealth between tenants (agricultural labourers) and landlords (those who did not labour).²² While Boer and Petterson also reason that debt ensured the compulsion of labour, given that labour was in short supply, agrarian societies actually tended to produce more people than the dominant classes found it profitable to employ, except perhaps for brief periods following wars or great disasters, or, theoretically, during major building projects. As a result, some people would find themselves surplus to the demands of

²¹ See, for example, Richard A. Horsley, *Jesus and the Spiral of Violence: Popular Jewish Resistance in Roman Palestine* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993).

²² Boer and Petterson, *Time of Troubles*, 100.

labour.²³ One imagines not only idle day-labourers such as those mentioned in the parable of workers in the vineyard (Matt 20:1–16), but also the sick and disabled, and especially those more likely to become estranged from the household such as widows and orphans. We must, as a consequence, be careful to avoid thinking in terms of mass individual employment, as is the pattern today. Most free ancient workers laboured in family units. An oversight to de Ste. Croix's otherwise valuable model of the ancient economy is his assumption of 'full employment' in which it appears one cannot exist outside the dominant labour system, except in the case of death. Gerhard E. Lenski, however, estimates that in agrarian societies up to 10 percent of the total population might be classed as 'expendables'. This grouping 'included a variety of types, ranging from petty criminals and outlaws to beggars and underemployed itinerant workers, and numbered all those forced to live solely by their wits or by charity'.²⁴

Was Jesus poor?

We are now ready to consider in what capacity we might speak of Jesus as 'poor'. In all likelihood, Jesus initially lived at a comparable level to other non-elite villagers in the Galilean countryside. So by the standards of most people living in so-called developed countries today, he was poor. But what about from the more specific form of material disadvantage and deprivation in relation to his compatriots living at or near subsistence level?

In 2 Corinthians 8:9, Paul writes 'For you know the generous act of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich [πλούσιος], yet for your sakes he became poor [ἐπτώχευσεν], so that by his poverty [πτωχεία] you might become rich [πλουτήσητε].'²⁵ Paul's claim is as

²³ Josephus notes in *Ant.* 20.219–21 that after the completion of the Temple construction, Agrippa II intentionally created work for the newly unemployed by having them pave Jerusalem streets by using the reserves in the Temple treasury.

²⁴ Gerhard E. Lenski, *Power and Privilege: A Theory of Social Stratification* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1966), 281.

²⁵ All Scripture citations are from the New Revised Standard Version.

interesting for its description of Jesus's earthly life as destitute as for its use of economic categories to make a broader theological point. Paul upholds Jesus's (material) poverty as bestowing (spiritual) riches upon the Corinthians. This accords with Paul's earlier championing of the foolishness of God; Paul proclaims a deity who against all conventional wisdom has chosen 'the lowly things of this world' to bring about 'justice, holiness, and redemption' (1 Cor 1:18-31).

Unlike Paul, the Gospels do not explicitly designate Jesus as πτωχός (*ptōchós*). In terms of class location, Mark 6:3 identifies Jesus's trade as a τέκτων (*téktōn*): 'Is not this the carpenter [τέκτων], the son of Mary and brother of James and Joseph and Judas and Simon, and are not his sisters here with us?' The Greek term τέκτων (*téktōn*) has as its broader meaning someone who constructs or builds, and it puts Jesus squarely within the artisan class.²⁶ In any case, de Ste. Croix observes that artisans 'who originate from and remain among the peasants may be considered as peasants themselves'.²⁷

Matthew's redaction of Mark to 'Is this not the carpenter's son...?' (Matt 13:55) adds further obtuseness and may indicate embarrassment at Jesus's lower-class status. Indeed, later opponents of Christianity sometimes thought fit to ridicule Christians on the basis of Jesus' occupation (e.g., Origen, *Contra Celsus* 6, 34). Raymond E. Brown infers from Matthew's alteration that Joseph, Mary's husband, had probably passed away prior to the episode.²⁸ If so, Jesus, as the eldest son, would be duty-bound to assume responsibility for the affairs of the household. Whereas Luke 4:14-30 removes the reference to Jesus's livelihood and shifts the emphasis of his 'offence' to his refusal to provide his hometown with deeds of power, Mark and

²⁶ "τέκτων", BDAG, 995.

²⁷ Ste. Croix, *Class Struggle*, 260.

²⁸ Raymond E. Brown, *The Birth of the Messiah: A Commentary on the Infancy Narratives in the Gospels of Matthew and Luke*, 2nd ed., vol. 1 (New York: Doubleday, 1993), 540.

Matthew's emphasis on the incessant questioning by the townsfolk with respect to Jesus' familial and occupational identity suggests that he is not meeting his social and economic responsibilities (Matt 13:54–57).²⁹ Abandoning one's household was not only shameful, but the family of a householder in arrears was open to punishment by the authorities. The first-century Jewish philosopher Philo, for instance, conveys a story about a tax-collector who leases out extreme and humiliating violence on the relatives of a man who had fled due to poverty (*Spec. Leg.* 3. 159-60).

In any case, the Synoptic Gospels, and Matthew in particular, presume that Jesus was not labouring by the time of his itinerant ministry. Luke advises that Jesus was sustained by some of his female followers such as Mary, Joanna, Susanna, and others (Luke 8:2–3). That Jesus's itinerancy entailed further social and economic consequences is underscored by Matt 8:20//Luke 9:58: 'And Jesus said to him, "Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests; but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head."' As an itinerant, Jesus increasingly resided outside of the dominant kinship structures and socio-economic system of the wider Roman world.³⁰

Some scholars have reasoned that Jesus' unemployment and itinerancy was a 'chosen lifestyle'—a curious descriptor that dovetails nicely with the neoliberal ethos of late capitalism that tends to stress the self-actualization of economic outcomes. John P. Meier, for instance, observes that

To a certain degree, Jesus first marginalized himself. At the age of roughly thirty, Jesus was an ordinary carpenter in an ordinary hill town of lower Galilee, enjoying at least the minimum of economic

²⁹ This is the interpretation of Matt 13:53–58 that I advance in: Robert J. Myles, *The Homeless Jesus in the Gospel of Matthew*, *Social World of Biblical Antiquity*, 2/10 (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix, 2014), 135–62.

³⁰ See: Halvor Moxnes, *Putting Jesus in His Place: A Radical Vision of Household and Kingdom* (Louisville: WJK, 2003).

necessities and social respectability required for a decent life. For whatever reason, he abandoned his livelihood and hometown, became ‘jobless’ and itinerant in order to undertake a prophetic ministry, and not surprisingly met with disbelief and rejection when he returned to his hometown to teach in the synagogue.³¹

Moreover, ‘Relying basically on the goodwill, support, and economic contributions of his followers, Jesus intentionally became marginal in the eyes of ordinary working Jews in Palestine’.³² Douglas E. Oakman, however, cautions against romanticizing the plight of rural artisans, citing Xenophon who suggests that ‘in small towns the same man makes couches, doors, ploughs, and tables, and often this same artisan builds houses, and still he is thankful if only he can find enough work to support himself’ (Xenophon, *Cyr.* 8.2.5).³³ Given the precariousness of rural, non-elite life, it would be premature to assume Jesus’ poverty was entirely intentional. Even if Jesus had been working prior to his public ministry, a comfortable leisured existence required the possession of land, of which Jesus had none. It thus makes better sense to think of his marginal predicament as a consequence of broader and possibly hostile social and economic forces.

It turns out the Gospels have a theological reason for obscuring some of the social and economic dynamics that may have pre-empted Jesus’s flight to the margins. Several scholars have argued that honour and shame were pivotal values in the ancient Mediterranean, including Jewish Palestine.³⁴ As proclamations, the Gospels exhibit an interest in demonstrating that,

³¹ John P. Meier, *A Marginal Jew: Rethinking the Historical Jesus*, vol. 1 (New York: Doubleday, 1991), 8.

³² Meier, 1:8.

³³ Douglas E. Oakman, *Jesus and the Economic Questions of His Day* (Lewiston: E. Mellon, 1986), 178.

³⁴ For an overview, see: Richard L. Rohrbaugh, ‘Honor: Core Value in the Biblical World’, in *Understanding the Social World of the New Testament*, ed. Dietmar Neufeld and Richard E. DeMaris (London: Routledge, 2010), 109–25.

because Jesus is so great—the apex of patriarchal masculinity in fact—he allows everything to happen to him, including especially the ‘bad stuff’ that might otherwise undermine claims to his unique greatness. The most obvious example of this is Jesus having suffered a humiliating death on a Roman cross. By theologizing Jesus’ death as a sacrifice, it becomes sublimated, that is, re-interpreted as a deliberate choice. In writing on John’s construction of Jesus’ masculinity, for instance, Colleen Conway remarks that Jesus has control of his life, and speaks confidently of his death, effectively ‘allowing’ it to take place.³⁵ Within the broader logic of antiquity, a sacrifice must generally be a willing one. Robin Lane Fox observes that the ancient Greeks, as part of their sacrificial ritual, would first sprinkle the nominated animal with water, causing it to shiver. This motion was taken as a gesture of its consent to its own slaughter.³⁶ For the ancient Romans, likewise, the more voluntary the more effective the sacrifice.³⁷

The Gospels authors’ sublimation of Jesus’s death also influenced their portrayal of his life. Poverty and itinerancy were interpreted by the early Jesus movement within the context of sacrifice—an integral component of Jesus’s mission to ‘save his people from their sins’ (Matt 1:21). We already saw above how Paul pointed to Jesus’ material poverty to make a broader theological point (2 Cor 8:9). By the late first century, the itinerancy and ‘life of poverty’ being lived out by some members of the community was becoming formalized (for example, Matt 10:5–15) and, in some cases, being abused (Did. 11). Somewhat later on, monasticism and the ascetic and solitary ideal arguably exerted a powerful influence on the way Jesus was collectively remembered and understood.

³⁵ Colleen M. Conway, *Behold the Man: Jesus and Greco-Roman Masculinity* (Oxford: OUP, 2008), 149.

³⁶ Robin Lane Fox, *Pagans and Christians* (Harmondsworth: Viking, 1986), 70.

³⁷ Carlin Barton, ‘Honor and Sacredness in the Roman and Christian Worlds’, in *Sacrificing the Self: Perspectives on Martyrdom and Religion*, ed. Margaret Cormack (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 30; cf. Terry Eagleton, *Radical Sacrifice* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2018), 51.

The extent to which the historical Jesus' itinerancy and poverty was generated by wider social and economic forces is therefore somewhat clouded by our extant sources. In any case, peasants—not just farmers but also artisans, fishers, and other village-based folk—generally do not take such drastic actions like abandoning their livelihoods unless conditions have become such that they can no longer pursue traditional patterns of life.

'The Poor' and the Early Jesus Movement

By the time of the writing of the Gospels, the Jesus movement had already begun to attract relatively wealthy and urban-based adherents of a fundamentally different social grouping than Jesus and his first followers who were primarily from the rural peasant and artisan classes. The Gospels are themselves products of a semi-elite scribal class and so, while they may concentrate on the lives of ordinary Galilean peasants, they ultimately reflect perspectives congruent with their own material and bureaucratic interests. Indeed, the New Testament 'does not weigh in on the specific causes of poverty per se. Instead, it focuses on the needs of the poor person, including physical care and justice, and the requirements of those to provide aid.'³⁸ Even so, the Synoptic tradition does have more to say about the poor beyond mild platitudes concerning charity and justice. The so-called 'Q' sayings (material common to Matthew's Gospel and Luke's Gospel but not found in Mark's Gospel), for instance, associate destitution with the social and economic consequences of an itinerant existence as experienced by Jesus and some of his followers: homelessness, estrangement from the household (Matt 8:19–20//Luke 9:57–58), and the absence of material wealth, possessions, property, and employment (Matt 6:9–14//Luke 11:2–4; Matt 6:20–21//Luke. 12:33–34; Matt 9:37–38, 10:7–16//Luke 10:2–12). Moreover, in the Gospel of Mark, Jesus' followers who have abandoned home, household, and

³⁸ Lynn H. Cohick, 'Poverty and Its Causes in the Early Church', in *Poverty in the Early Church and Today: A Conversation*, ed. Steve Walton and Hannah Swithinbank (London: T&T Clark, 2019), 16.

fields ‘for the sake of the good news’ are promised eternal reward (Mark 10:29–30). Mark also exhibits several indirect references to poverty, such as the clothing and diet of John the Baptist (Mark 1:6; 6:17, 27), the employment, hunger, and humiliation of Jesus (6:3; 11:12; 14:65; 15:15, 19), and the social and economic deprivations suffered by the disciples (1:18, 20; 2:23–25; 6:8–9, 36–37; 9:41; 10:28–31).

Poverty was thus a very gritty reality for at least some of those involved in and attracted to the early Jesus movement. While Jesus’ political program—drawing from the Hebrew prophetic tradition of God’s justice for the people of Israel—often expresses a partiality towards the poor (for example, Luke 4:14–22), it does not follow that the Jesus movement exerted an entirely consistent class solidarity with them. Whereas Jesus commands the rich man to sell everything he owns and ‘give to the poor’ (δὸς τοῖς πτωχοῖς) (Mark 10:21), when the disciples later point out that the costly ointment used to anoint Jesus could have been sold and the proceeds ‘given to the poor’ (δοθῆναι πτωχοῖς), Jesus retorts: ‘you always have the poor with you, but you will not always have me’ (Matt 26:11; cf. Mark 14:7//John 12:8). As the Marxist philosopher Ernst Bloch once quipped, there is something awfully ‘two-faced’ about the Bible, ‘something that is often a scandal to the poor and not always a folly to the rich’.³⁹

Was the early Jesus movement a movement *of the poor for the poor*? As we have seen, this depends on our definitions, frameworks, assumptions, and interpretations of mostly partial and fragmented data. In this article, I have introduced some common understandings of ‘the poor’ and ‘poverty’ in rural Galilee, discussed the overarching agrarian social formation and the processes by which someone might become poor, and, finally, addressed in what capacity we

³⁹ Ernst Bloch, *Atheism in Christianity: The Religion of the Exodus and the Kingdom*, trans. J.T. Swann (New York: Herder and Herder, 1972), 14; Cf. James G. Crossley, ‘Repent, for the Dictatorship of God is at Hand!’ in *The Bible, Zionism, and Palestine: The Bible’s Role in Conflict and Liberation in Israel-Palestine*, ed. Michael J. Sandford (Dunedin: Relegere Academic Press, 2017), 212–221.

might regard Jesus as poor. Whether we envisage Jesus as *one of the poor* or as one who *identified* with the poor, has significant ramifications for how we understand his mission, and, indeed, the formation of the movement that evolved in his name.