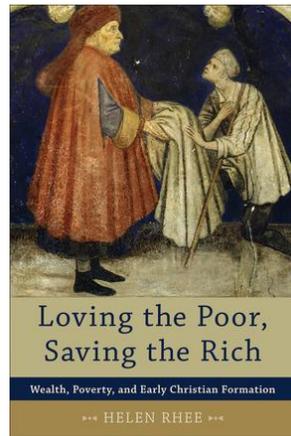


BOOK REVIEWS

Helen Rhee. *Loving the Poor, Saving the Rich: Wealth, Poverty, and Early Christian Formation.* Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2012. Pp. xx + 279. ISBN 978-0801048241. Paperback \$30.00.

In her recent study *Loving the Poor, Saving the Rich*, Helen Rhee addresses the attitudes of early Christians toward “wealth/the wealthy and poverty/the poor” in their Greco-Roman and Jewish religious, socioeconomic, and cultural contexts, and she argues that the development and manifestation of these attitudes was intimately tied to Christian identity formation (p. xiii). Focusing on the second and third centuries, up through the “Constantinian revolution” of the early fourth



century, she embarks on a work of social and theological history. She draws from an extensive bibliography of primary and secondary sources, drawing heavily from Clement of Alexandria, Origen, Tertullian, and Cyprian of Carthage, as well as Eusebius's *Church History*, the *Didache*, the *Didascalica*, and the *Apostolic Tradition*.

In the first chapter, Rhee presents the Greco-Roman and Jewish socioeconomic, cultural, and theological contexts with respect to attitudes toward wealth and poverty. She observes the differences between the socioeconomic contexts of Greco-Roman society and that of contemporary, developed nations. Especially important for this study is the sociopolitical stratification and the importance of honor and social status – as well as a reciprocal, symbiotic relationship – in Roman imperial patronage. Drawing primarily from the Hebrew Bible, she describes the

Jewish theological attitudes toward wealth and poverty in sharp contrast to Greco-Roman values: it is here we find references to the "wicked rich" and the "pious poor." It is from this fusion of and tension between Greco-Roman and Jewish attitudes toward wealth and poverty that early Christians developed their own cultural and theological positions on the matter.

In Chapter 2, she relates the issues of wealth and poverty to early Christian eschatology. She highlights how early Christian apocalyptic imagery regularly reiterated the *topos* of the eschatological "great reversal" of fortunes for the wicked rich and the pious poor. At the same time, however, as the ranks of Christians increasingly swelled with members of the elite class, rhetoric against the wicked rich was replaced with language that spiritualized and relativized wealth (with respect to its uses) and exhorted the rich to use their wealth to care for the poor in their midst. Thus the rich were able to safeguard their salvation through "redemptive almsgiving" in a symbiotic relationship with the poor. In return, the poor would intercede on their behalf in a form of Christianized patronage.

In the third chapter, the author demonstrates the continuation of the spiritualization of wealth and poverty and the attendant theme of redemptive almsgiving in relation to Christian soteriology. Drawing largely from Clement of Alexandria and Origen, she argues that wealth was viewed as essentially neutral but that its proper use was seen as critical for salvation. The poor, who were expected to intercede for their rich benefactors, were considered instrumental in the salvation of the rich. Citing Cyprian of Carthage, she highlights the use of redemptive almsgiving as an antidote to postbaptismal sin for the wealthy, including the sin of apostasy, as well as a means of reconciling the rich for the purpose of collecting alms to provide for the poor.

In Chapter 4, Rhee situates wealth and poverty in relationship to Christian *koinonia* (fellowship/communion) specifically by focusing on the tangible expressions of charity in community. These manifestations of mercy and justice took multiple forms: the common fund, the *agapē* meal,

gifts of food (often made possible through fasting), and hospitality which included "entertaining missionaries and strangers, burying the dead, caring for confessors, ransoming captives, and caring for the sick" (p. xix). She highlights in particular the prominent role of women in performing these acts of mercy which, because they were "obligatory and binding by virtue of the very Christian understanding of the Great Commandment," also constituted acts of justice (p. 135).

In Chapter 5, the author delves into the institutionalization of charity that occurred alongside the centralization of clerical and episcopal authority during the third century. This development, she argues, reflected the Christianization of patronage as charity fell under clerical administration and clerical salaries came under episcopal control. In this form of Christianized patronage, the bishops and clergy appropriated the status of patrons with the recipients of charity as their clients, who in turn offered up intercession for their benefactors. It was during this time that the church also evolved into an economic institution as it acquired and managed properties and engaged in other various economic activities.

In Chapter 6, the author focuses explicitly on the concepts of wealth and poverty with respect to Christian identity. Here, she discusses the early Christians' disapproval of business and commercial activities, as such dealings were perceived to be driven primarily by greed and distracted from Christian responsibilities. Nevertheless, she provides evidence that instructions to avoid acquiring wealth were likely disregarded by those who were able to be socially mobile. The "Constantinian revolution" saw the emergence of Christian ascetics as another group of "the poor," whose poverty "was modeled after the classical, but Christianized, ideal of self-sufficiency (simplicity) and generosity" (p. 189). She emphasizes that "Common use of resources and properties as God's intent of creation did not mean renunciation of private properties, practice of communism, or erasure of socioeconomic distinctions, but meant generous almsgiving and sharing of one's God-

given possessions with those in need, primarily fellow Christians (though not limited to them)" (p. 188).

In Chapter 7, the author concludes her study by evaluating the ways in which our understanding of early Christian attitudes toward wealth and poverty might offer insight as to how we ought to approach these issues today. She compares the socioeconomic framework of early Christians with contemporary free-market economics and argues that (wealthy) Christians need to acknowledge their own materialism and consumerism and adopt a lifestyle characterized by simplicity and generous giving. She highlights Catholic Social Teaching and the Pentecostal "prosperity gospel" of the Global South as examples of how "free-market economics" can be "redeemed" (p. 209).

This book is excellently researched and is a valuable study of the economic and ideological contexts in which early Christianity developed its identity alongside its own attitudes and responses to wealth and poverty. There are, however, several weaknesses in her analysis in Chapter 7, which seem to derive from a general lack of understanding of free-market capitalism and the nature of government. She acknowledges the fact that "free-market capitalism" is responsible for wealth-creation and lifting much of the world out of poverty, but argues that "this relative and fluid sense of sufficiency, necessities, and material enjoyment blurs and softens what used to be thought of as avarice and materialism" (p. 195). She suggests that even acts such as "working multiple jobs to own a home" or "moving to a 'better' or 'safer' neighborhood in suburbia for kids' schools and education" are possibly symptomatic of a hidden preoccupation with wealth and a "distrust in God's provision for the future" (p. 196). A few pages later, she lauds the prosperity gospel in the Global South for its role in motivating the poor to make personal and financial choices that have the potential to transform them from "the pious poor" into "the pious rich" (p. 219).

It is unclear why she believes those she has identified as "the rich" are guilty of avarice while "the poor" are justified in seeking to become rich,

or why “the rich” should trust God to provide for them apart from their own economic decisions while “the poor” should practice financial planning and capitalize on the opportunities available to them. It is puzzling that she only expresses an adequate understanding of free-market principles when discussing the means by which the poor are finding entry to the market in the Global South, such as forming community networks which provide apprenticeships, encourage entrepreneurship, and utilize voluntary giving to provide for the needs of those within the community (p. 217).

Rhee accurately contends that the Christian exercise of generosity requires “creativity, planning, and a thoughtful strategy for giving of our material possession” (p. 201). She also recognizes the importance of working toward “long-term, structural, and institutional changes and policies for the betterment of the poor and the underprivileged” (p. 201). It should follow, then, that our approach to providing relief for the poor ought to reflect the development of modern economic science and our improved understanding of the mechanisms of free-market economics. Unfortunately, the means by which the author suggests these goals be realized are deeply misguided, as they are characterized largely by an expansion of government welfare programs.

While she states in her introduction to Chapter 7 that she “will not engage in various theories or analyses of free-market economics and global economy or theories of ethics,” as it is not her area of expertise, she fails to recognize her own implicit assumptions that (1) our economy is actually primarily a free-market economy, (2) the problems she identifies in our economy are due to free-market principles, and (3) the government can solve these problems better than the free market. The primary problem she identifies with what she believes to be “free-market capitalism” is that “it does not address or respond to the basic needs of those who lack the ‘initial endowments’ to begin with,” that is, those whose poverty precludes them from participation in the market (p. 206). She fails to recognize that the ills she observes are due not to free-market

principles, but to government intervention (regulation and cronyism), and that the means by which government provides services is through the form of theft known as taxation. It is government regulation that bars entry to the market for the poor, and the only way to provide them access is by limiting the role of government.

Minimum wage laws, for example, mean that only those who possess skills that are worth more than the minimum wage will be able to find employment. An employer who would be willing to pay someone what one's labor is worth is not legally allowed to do so if its value is less than the minimum wage. The entrepreneurial poor who have goods and services for which others would happily pay them are handicapped by regulations and fees, such as occupational licensing, that they cannot afford. Government education and child labor laws prevent children from helping to support their families and learning trades through apprenticeships. Instead they are institutionalized until adulthood, which they enter having acquired no marketable skills, no work ethic, and no sense of dignity. Subsidies, price-fixing, and food regulations keep perfectly good, affordable food from the mouths of the poor while the government dictates that it be thrown in the trash. Mandated minimum coverage and coverage for pre-existing conditions dramatically increase the cost of health insurance, while government regulations of medical practice and collusion with the pharmaceutical industry keep healthcare itself unaffordable.

Rhee is correct in stating, "It is part of Christian responsibility to discern, support, engage in, and advocate the kinds of domestic and international policies that could make a positive difference in the lives of billions of people" (p. 208). However, it is absolutely incorrect to argue that it is a Christian responsibility to support government programs. To place such trust in the government is a prime example of the "distrust in God's provision" she associated with acquisitiveness, and is itself a type of idolatry no less than the love of money. It too reveals greed and envy:

the desire to take from others to acquire for oneself by means of government and its threats of violence.

Despite the critiques of the final chapter, this book is an excellent resource for those interested in learning about early Christian interpretations of wealth and poverty and their relationship to Christian identity. It is an important and needed reminder for affluent Christians of their responsibility to care for the poor, and Rhee's broad conclusions about Christian responsibility are appropriate. Her analyses are, more often than not, measured and nuanced, and she displays a refreshing degree of appreciation for free-market capitalism, if not always accurately defined, that is all too uncommon in academia's contemporary political climate.

Ruth Ryder¹

Indiana

¹ Ruth Ryder (MTS History of Christianity, University of Notre Dame; MA Intercultural Studies, Trinity Evangelical Divinity School) is Assistant Editor of *The Christian Libertarian Review*.