WILL ‘THE POOR BE WITH YOU ALWAYS’?:
TOWARDS A METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH OF READING THE BIBLE WITH THE POOR

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Submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy
at Union Theological Seminary in the City of New York
May 2014
Acknowledgements

I want to thank the many people who have contributed to this dissertation over the past ten years and the work on which this dissertation stands. Thank you to the teachers in the classrooms and streets who have insisted that poverty defiles our world and defies our God. Thank you to the students who have been committed to learning as we lead, walking as we talk, educating as we organize. Thank you to all the “Poverty Scholars” who have dedicated their time and talents to not just improving their lives but ending poverty for all. Thanks especially to the leaders and participants in Poverty Initiative activities, including the Poverty Scholars Leadership School, Potter’s Field Campaign of Picture the Homeless and Interfaith Friends of Potter’s Field, "Reading the Bible with the Poor", “The Gospel of Matthew”, and “The Gospel of Paul: Poverty and Spirituality” semester-long classes, Poverty Initiative immersion courses, Poverty Scholars Strategic Dialogues, Roman Empire and New Testament Convenings, and the many other undertakings referenced throughout that greatly contributed to this dissertation.

I appreciate the support of Union’s administration, faculty, staff and student body for this dissertation and the larger work of the Poverty Initiative. Thanks especially to my advisor Brigitte Kahl who has taught me the importance of both rigorous intellectual inquiry and social justice commitments and to my committee members Brigitte Kahl, Richard Horsley, Aliou Niang, and Hal Taussig and their contributions to the biblical and social justice fields. Thanks to Union professors Mary Boys, David Carr, James Cone, Alan Cooper, Roger Haight, Brigitte Kahl, Barbara Lundblad, Larry Rassmussen, Jan Rehmann, Hal Taussig, emily townes, Janet Walton, Edwina Wright, and others who guided my doctoral coursework. I thank Hal Taussig and Janet Walton who nudged me to do a Ph.D. back in 2003-2004 and have supported me all the way.

I deeply appreciate all the people who edited various drafts of this dissertation, especially over the past year including: Willie Baptist, Adam Barnes, Chris Caruso, Shailly Gupta Barnes, Dan Jones, Charon Hribar, Emily McNeil, Thia Reggio, Aaron Scott, Joe Strife, Jeanne Theoharis, Colleen Wessel-McCoy, Atticus Zavaletta. Thanks to everyone, especially my sister, Jeanne, for going section by section, idea by idea, helping me to find my voice as a biblical scholar and social theorist as well as activist. Many thanks to Kathleen Gallager Elkins and Aaron Scott for copy-editing the whole dissertation, dotting i’s and crossing t’s (and noting omicrons, etc).

I thank my family and community of friends who labor for justice beside me and who have supported me, prodded me to achieve more, and watched my kids so I could work (on the dissertation and building a movement to end poverty) including: my parents - Athan and Nancy Theoharis; my siblings - Jeanne and George Theoharis; my niece and nephew - Ella and Sam Theoharis; my in-laws - George

I particularly appreciate the love, support, and mentorship I have received from Willie Baptist over the past two decades, who embodies what it is to be a “Poverty Scholar”. I cannot thank Chris Caruso, my partner in struggle and life, enough; his clarity on what is wrong in our society, commitment/faith that another world is possible, competency in absolutely everything, and connection and deep love for humanity inspires me (and our whole network). Thanks Chris for everything! I love you so much! I want to include a special acknowledgment of our children, Sophia and Luke, who have taught me about justice, grace, mercy, and why ending poverty is so urgent and necessary.

This work is dedicated to the millions of God’s children known and unknown who are buried in Potter’s Fields, those on whose shoulders we stand, and those who will refuse to rest until all poverty is ended for everyone.
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Chapter One: Poverty Scholars Interpret

Introduction

One of the important things about the Bible is that it talks about poverty more than almost anything else. And one of the reasons that I identify with the story of Christ is not only that he came to preach good news to the poor, he was poor himself when he was on earth. He was a Jewish man living under Roman rule and living under a system of exploitation and oppression. So, he wasn’t someone who was over me, he was someone who was in my reality.¹

—Onleilove Alston (Poverty Initiative Poverty Scholar)

The poor will be with you always, but you will not always have me.

—Jesus Christ to his disciples (Matthew 26:11)

Alston’s assertions challenge the way many of us have been taught in our families, churches, and schools to think about poverty, the Bible, and Jesus Christ. Most of us did not grow up learning that poverty is a major focus of the Bible and came to believe that the separation of church and state means that there is nothing political about the Bible. The biblical question of poverty is too often cloistered in the walls of the academy as New Testament scholars debate the socio-economic position of Jesus and the early Christians, the validity of the assertion that Jesus was “poor and dispossessed”² and the role of the reign of the Roman Empire on Jesus of

¹ Alston made this observation at a Poverty Scholars Strategic Dialogue at Union Theological Seminary on September 19, 2008. The Poverty Scholars Program is the cornerstone of the Poverty Initiative focused on leadership development and networking low-income organizers. I will describe this more in this chapter and Chapter Three.

² I will explore the socio-economic position of Jesus in Chapters Four through Eight. I draw much from the work of John Dominic Crossan, Richard Horsley, and Justin Meggitt. I am also interested in the debates between Justin Meggitt, Dale Martin, Gerd Theissen, Steve Freisen and many others.
Nazareth. But when the subject of poverty does make it into broader discussion it typically is through Jesus’s words “the poor will always be with you” in Matt 26:11.

Matthew 26:11 has been interpreted either to establish that God condones poverty or that although God condemns poverty, it is an unfortunate but unalterable reality of the human condition. For many people the fact that Jesus is the one saying this statement about the “poor” and that he uses the word “always” makes the meaning clear and unequivocal—they may not know where this line falls in the biblical story or the context of the Gospel of Matthew but posit that this biblical statement establishes poverty as perpetual and inevitable. For those more versed in the Gospel of Matthew, the use of this passage still results in a similar conclusion. For some, Jesus and the poor are juxtaposed in Matthew 26 and attending to Jesus and the spiritual realm is rendered more important; for others, the discussion of the ointment and the invoking of Deut 15 suggest money and/or charity as the biblical solution to poverty, making the wealthy the ones with agency in this story.

However, a more robust contextual exegesis of Matt 26:1-16 with an emphasis on verses 6-13, in their intertextuality with Deut 15:1-11, reveals a critique of charity/euergetism and the Roman imperial economy, the promotion of the agency of the poor, and the primacy of material security and prosperity for all humanity. Jesus reacts strongly to the disciples in verse 11. Echoing Deut 15:4 (“there will be no one in need among you”), Matt 26:11 is to be read as a warning (not a statement) of the perils of disobedience to God’s commandments (resulting in

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1 I will explore empire-critical biblical scholarship in Chapter Three as it has had a profound influence on “Reading the Bible with the Poor” and the interpretations made throughout this dissertation.
poverty and inequality) and Jesus’s call to the disciples (to take up the struggle for justice for the poor even after his death). That the woman who anoints Jesus in this passage is not named and does not follow euergetistic patterns of benefaction, that Jesus’s reaction to the practice of buying and selling suggested by the disciples is so strong, and that the potter’s field donation of money for the poor (from Judas’s blood money that the temple elites make) in the passion narrative is treated negatively—all point to a strong critique of money, charity, and hegemonic Roman imperial economics.

Unpacking the context and implications of this passage, amidst an exegetical and political project of centering the interpretation of the poor themselves is where this dissertation begins and ends. Located at the intersection of poverty and the New Testament, it examines how the Bible has been used to justify and condemn poverty and how poor people are both coming up against and simultaneously using the Bible in their quest to end poverty. By gathering and analyzing the perspectives of Poverty Initiative Poverty Scholars—grassroots anti-poverty organizers and leaders—like Alston, who are working to build a social movement to end poverty, led by the poor, this work offers these interpretations as revealing, legitimate and important for scholars, religious leaders, and others in our communities to hear. Finally, this dissertation establishes that the messiah Jesus in the Gospel of Matthew is a leader of a social movement of the poor who works to reign in God’s Kingdom and end slavery, debts, and poverty on earth.
The Poverty Initiative: The Poor Organizing the Poor

It is as both as a trained interpreter of biblical texts and a committed activist in a growing effort to end poverty that I approach this dissertation. For the past twenty years I have been organizing, educating, and uniting the poor aimed at building a movement to end poverty. I got involved with the National Union of the Homeless and the Kensington Welfare Rights Union in the early 1990s, helping to weave a network of poor people’s organizations dedicated to using a human rights framework to confront poverty in the late 1990s and early 2000s. Through this organizing work, I returned to my religious roots, consulting for the National Council of Churches and other mainline Protestant denominations, who were struggling with new interpretations and questions about the Bible’s message on poverty. On nearly a weekly basis, I heard, “The poor will always be with you,” (Mark 14:7, parallels in Matt 26:11, John 12:8) used to explain the futility of doing anti-poverty work because many claim that poverty is inevitable and can never be ended. To take up this question through study and ministry, I enrolled in Union Theological Seminary in the City of New York as a Master of Divinity student and entered the ordination process with the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) in 2001, trying to explore the role of faith and organized religion in a global movement to end poverty, including the strengths and obstacles within religion.

I entered the M.Div. Program at Union because I saw the need to document poor people’s biblical and theological interpretations, as well as models of organized poor people partnering with religious communities to end poverty. As a Master of Divinity student, I helped congregations to engage in ministry which views poor
people as the experts of poverty and anti-poverty solutions and which works to eliminate rather than simply alleviate poverty. Helping to train thousands of leaders from hundreds of poor communities to build a movement to end poverty, I built bridges with thousands of leaders in churches, seminaries, and religious groups enthusiastically responding to this emerging social movement.

Entering the doctoral program in 2004, I sought further study in the biblical foundation for a growing anti-poverty movement in the United States, I chose the New Testament as my focus because the poor people with whom I work start there. I view the Bible as a text that gives guidance on how Christians should live their lives and documents a movement of poor people who gathered around the symbol and person of Jesus to right the wrongs of their society. I have therefore concentrated on poor people’s actions and theologies in the twenty-first century, inspired by Jesus, as part of the biblical canon and in concert with prominent theologians and biblical scholars. My work has sought to systematically document the stories, lessons, and interpretations of poor people organizing to end poverty in order to illuminate implications for our churches and to chart the development of a liberation theology for the United States for the twenty-first-century. I have given much attention to liberative interpretations of Matt 26:1-16 and other Bible stories on poverty. My academic work has been strengthened and challenged by my continued practical engagement with communities in struggle.

Alongside my doctoral study, as I was deciding to continue my biblical inquiry as a doctoral student, I helped found the Poverty Initiative at Union Theological Seminary. The genealogy of the Poverty Initiative traces back through
efforts of the poor to organize themselves across racial and other dividing lines into a broad social movement of the poor,\textsuperscript{4} including the National Union of the Homeless, the National Welfare Rights Organization, Martin Luther King’s Poor People’s Campaign, and the Southern Tenant Farmers Union.\textsuperscript{5} As I will describe in more detail in Chapter Three, we have exchanged lessons with social movements of the poor globally including the Landless Workers Movement of Brazil, the Assembly of the Poor in Thailand, the Indian Farmers Movement, and the South African Shackdwellers Movement.\textsuperscript{6} Since our founding in 2003-2004, the Poverty Initiative has been working to live into our mission of raising up generations of religious and community leaders dedicated to building a social movement to end poverty, led by the poor. Through three national poverty truth commissions, two leadership schools, eleven poverty immersion courses, ten faculty-sponsored semester-long courses, sixteen one-day seminars, four books and numerous religious and theological resources, nine strategic dialogues, six intensive study programs and numerous events, symposia, and exchanges with global grassroots and religious


\textsuperscript{5} These movements are the same ones used in the contextual Bible studies we have held within the Poverty Initiative as I will document more in Chapter Three.

\textsuperscript{6} For a list of key Poverty Initiative partners see: http://povertyinitiative.org/partners.
leaders, the Poverty Initiative has established a wide and deep network of community and religious leaders, spanning across thirty states and seventeen countries around the world.\(^7\) Since launching our *Pedagogy of the Poor* National Tour in 2011, based on a book written by Willie Baptist and Jan Rehmann, members of the Poverty Initiative have personally witnessed the breadth and depth of this network by connecting with the heroes and heroines fighting on the frontlines of the struggle to end poverty.\(^8\)

Along with my scholarly and political work, I am an ordained minister in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) with the Poverty Initiative as my validated ministry; I administer the sacraments, preach and teach the gospel, and comfort and prod leaders in the Poverty Initiative network. I am also a mother of two small children, raising them within a growing social movement of the poor and our interpretations of the Bible and religious tradition.

*The Curse of Poverty*

In 1967, the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. said:

The curse of poverty has no justification in our age. The time has come for us to civilize ourselves by the total, direct, and immediate abolition of poverty.\(^9\)

While King’s words are passionate and moving, poverty in the United States and across the world has deepened since they were preached more than forty-five years ago. Since the unfolding of the “Great Recession” in 2007, four in five Americans live

\(^7\) I discuss the work of the Poverty Initiative in more detail in Chapter Three.


\(^9\) Martin Luther King, *Where Do We Go From Here: Chaos or Community?* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2010), 175; repr. of *Where Do We Go From Here: Chaos or Community?* (New York: Harper & Row, 1967).
in danger of falling into poverty and/or joblessness, and recent reports have come out that say that one in two Americans are poor or low-income (living at less than 200% of the poverty line). Ten thousand homes are foreclosed every day in communities across the U.S. Nearly forty percent of Americans between the ages of twenty-five and sixty will experience at least one year below the official poverty line; half of all American children will at some point during their childhood reside in a household that uses food stamps for a period of time.

Poverty manifests itself in myriad ways in this country: the thousands of families displaced in New York, New Jersey, and Connecticut by Hurricane Sandy in 2012; the hundreds of thousands whose water has been shut off in Detroit since the year 2000 who are now having their children taken away because of their poverty; the thousands of people who have to share heart attack medicine in New Jersey, do not get chemotherapy in Vermont, or are denied Medicaid in Mississippi and North Carolina and thus cannot afford medicine, their health care deductibles, or health insurance premiums even after the Affordable Care Act of 2013; and native-born and immigrants who pick tomatoes in Florida for poverty wages and sometimes in slave rings, even in the twenty-first-century United States. Poverty is made visible when children die in fires in Philadelphia because of fire station brown outs; when families in West Virginia lose their homes and family burial grounds because of mountaintop removal; when homeless citizens are buried in unidentified mass

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graves in potter’s field in New York and many other states across the country; and when millions of workers are paid too little to be able to adequately feed, house, or clothe their families across the US.\textsuperscript{12}

\textit{The Power of the Word}

The issue of poverty appears throughout the Bible: the Old and New Testaments are full of references to how we are to respond to poverty and injustice.

Jim Wallis of \textit{Sojourners Magazine} surveyed key Biblical themes, noting in the Old Testament, the suffering of the poor was the second most prominent theme... in the NT we found that one out of every 16 verses was about the poor. In the Gospels, it was one out of every ten, in Luke, one of every seven, and in James, one of every five verses.\textsuperscript{13}

Common throughout the New and Old Testaments are texts addressing the redistribution of wealth and the abolition of poverty: “Is this not the fast I choose: to loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke? Is it not to share your bread with the hungry, and bring the homeless poor into your house; when you see the naked, to cover them,” (Isa 58:6-7); “[God has] lifted up the lowly; he has filled the hungry with good things,” (Luke 1:52-53); “For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and

\textsuperscript{12} These anecdotes come from my experience organizing and educating among the poor in the United States for the last twenty years. There are organizations addressing these issues including slavery and poverty wages for farm work in Florida and the American South with the Coalition of Immokalee Workers (ciw-online.org), universal health care and people’s budgeting in Vermont with the Vermont Worker’s Center (workerscenter.org), families fighting foreclosure, eviction and the privatization of water and other public utilities in Detroit with the Michigan Welfare Rights Organization (mwro.org), low-wage workers fighting for poverty’s end in Maryland with the United Workers (unitedworkers.org), poor and working people’s issues including cuts to public services, education, and wages with the Media Mobilizing Project in Philadelphia (mediamobilizing.org), and residents fighting against Mountaintop Removal and strip mining and its ecological impact in West Virginia with Stop Mountaintop Removal.

\textsuperscript{13} Jim Wallis, \textit{Faith Works: Lessons from the Life of an Activist Preacher} (New York: Random House, 2000), 71. Jim Wallis is the Founder of \textit{Sojourners Magazine} and community in Washington D.C. He is one of the most vocal evangelical voices on poverty in the United States.
you gave me something to drink… Truly I tell you just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me” (Matt 25:35, 40).

Yet, while passages like these are common, many people fixate on a small handful of passages: “The poor will always be with you” (John 12:8), “If you do not work, you shall not eat” (2 Thess 3:10), “For to all those who have, more will be given, and they will have an abundance; but from those who have nothing, even what they have will be taken away” (Matt 25:29). These verses above are regularly cited to assert that poverty cannot be ended and that if God wanted to end poverty, God would do so. They have been used to claim that the only “good news” that poor people will hear will be in heaven and interpreted to mean that while some lepers and hungry people in Jesus’s day deserved compassion, today’s poor people are at fault for their own poverty.14

At the same gathering where Alston noted the centrality of poverty in the Bible, another Poverty Scholar underscored the power of the biblical texts and impact of traditional interpretations:

Whether we like it or not, a lot of people use the Bible and what their pastors have told them about the Bible to determine what their spirituality really is. And unfortunately what that means is that the pastors tell them to deal with their oppression, to suck it up, and to look forward to some land out there, some heavenly thing, that they don’t know anything about. And so, we believe that fighting injustice is not the mandate of the Bible. [The biblical] text has been stripped of its power, its organizing power, its resistance power. We want to reclaim the text so that people can have another tool to use in their resistance towards social transformation.15

14 I will explore these and other assumptions about the genesis of poverty and “the moral failings” of the poor in Chapter Two on the Bible and poverty.
15 Charlene Sinclair at Poverty Scholars Strategic Dialogue, September 2008. Charlene Sinclair is a PhD student at Union Theological Seminary, a leader in the Poverty Initiative, and the Director of the Center for Race, Religion and Economic Democracy. Charlene has been a grassroots community organizer for decades and has experienced poverty firsthand.
With the power of the texts in mind (to constrain and inspire in social justice work), let us turn to biblical interpretation work done by leaders of poor people’s organizations.

**Poverty Scholars Interpret**

In August 2009, the Poverty Initiative at Union Theological Seminary held a weeklong Poverty Scholars Leadership School. The school brought over 160 low-income community and faith leaders, including twenty-five youth leaders, representing over forty organizations, fifteen states and four countries to Camp Virgil Tate in Charleston, West Virginia. In the optional Bible study track (that ran alongside tracks on “Human Rights”, “Multi-Media Production”, “Arts and Culture”, “New Labor Organizing”) grassroots, anti-poverty leaders representing and many organizations gathered for three hours a day, four days in a row, and studied the Bible together. The organizations gathered included:

The Philadelphia Student Union (PSU)— where one-quarter of kids in Philadelphia are poor and Philadelphia public high school students are more likely to go to jail than graduate from high school, since 1995 the Philadelphia Student Union has organized campaigns on issues ranging from textbooks to schools safety.

The Media Mobilizing Project (MMP), which uses media to tell stories of taxi workers who drive “sweatshops on wheels” transporting people for full days but ending up poorer than when they started working in the morning, multi-racial families whose homes have been destroyed and kids have been killed because of firehouse brownouts due to budget cuts, and public sector workers who find themselves too poor to afford health care, housing, and other basic necessities for their families.

The Direct Action Welfare Group (DAWG)—with 20% of West Virginians on Food Stamps, Wal-Mart as the number one employer in the state, and mountaintop removal thrusting more families into economic devastation, a statewide grassroots organization comprised of current and former public assistance recipients, low wage workers, and concerned individuals formed to share information and advocate for each other.
The Jesus People Against Pollution (JPAP), a grassroots environmental justice organization located in Columbia, Mississippi, a multi-racial poor community living in FHA- and HUD-subsidized housing built on a federal superfund toxic waste site. Created in response to an explosion at a local chemical plant that resulted in severe exposure of the community to toxic substances, JPAP has set out to educate and inform impacted communities about the availability of toxicology and environmental health information so that the community can better understand the relationship between environmental exposure, racism, poverty, and disease.

The Michigan Welfare Rights Organization (MWRO) based in Detroit, Michigan where the 1996 welfare reform eliminated the safety net for hundreds of thousands in Michigan; 20,000 homes have had their water shut off for lack of payment each year since 2000 and un-elected Emergency Managers control all public services including libraries, schools, sanitation, parks, etc.

The United Workers (UW), an organization of low-wage workers advocating for dignity, living wages, and health care for all. In Baltimore’s Inner Harbor, the United Workers have documented violations of the right to work with dignity and the right to health and have worked to overcome these violations including: systematic failure to pay workers a living wage (and even minimum wage in some cases); chronic wage theft; and working conditions offensive to human dignity, including verbal and sexual abuse and bribery by supervisors; widespread lack of health insurance; lack of sick days; and failure to respond adequately to workplace injuries, including pressure to work while ill or severely injured under threat of termination.

These realities informed the Leadership School in general and the Bible study track in particular.

On our last day we looked at the passage “the poor are with you always” from Matt 26:6-13 and John 12:1-10. The assembled group of Poverty Scholars re-analyzed this passage as supportive of a growing social movement to end poverty rather than justifying poverty’s existence and growth in this day and age. The Bible study was dynamic, as energy and camaraderie built among the participants. We audio recorded the session and when I listen to the recording, I am brought back to the circle of thirty in their chairs, hunched over their Bibles, in a makeshift, crowded room. The youngest participant was fourteen years old, the oldest in her sixties. People came from a variety of religious backgrounds, socio-economic backgrounds,
and theological and political beliefs. There were pious and non-pious, churched and un-churched, organizers and pastors. They included an evangelical Christian who was moved by God to research the environmental pollution in her community only to discover evidence of toxic waste and off-the-chart rates of cancer and disease; a lawyer who grew up in poverty and has dedicated many years to working for the human right to housing for all people; a seminarian who was raised in a conservative Christian community who found that empire-critical and other forms of critical biblical scholarship actually deepened her faith and piety; a low-wage worker who did not attend church on a regular basis but prayed daily and found inspiration from Jesus Christ and many others for the work she did. What the group had in common was a desire and urgent need to end poverty for everyone. There were three of us charged with leading the Bible study: Onleilove Alston, Rev. Jessica Chadwick Williams, and me.16

It is difficult to describe this Bible study, with its laughter and span of emotions running through it. I have modified some answers slightly and not included every single comment in order to try to communicate its meaning and energy better in the written word. This is always a problem where oral traditions meet written manuscripts. But what is contained in this text is testament to the fact that when we turn to scripture, especially collectively, leaders of poor people’s

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16 Both Onleilove Alston and Jessica Chadwick Williams are leaders in the Poverty Initiative and Poverty Scholars network. Both attended Union Theological Seminary and were student interns with the Poverty Initiative helping to plan Bible studies, organize immersion trips, network with community ministries and congregations, and lead Poverty Truth Commissions and other public events. Both Onleilove and Jessica experienced poverty growing up and still struggle with poverty and related issues. Both are also training ministers and social workers involved in anti-poverty organizing and movement building still today.
organizations with varied levels of familiarity and training in biblical studies are nonetheless interpreters of sacred texts.

In fact, starting with the assertion that Jesus was poor and living under Roman imperial rule, these poor leaders and Poverty Scholars were able to make a series of connections and important interpretational moves. For those gathered, Jesus became recognizable as a poor person and a popular social movement leader given the New Testament depictions of early Christian communities as a budding social movement. Poverty Scholars suggested that what happens to Jesus throughout the Bible and the anointing scene specifically is not completely special or unusual but shares similar characteristics with other poor people’s experiences (including being surrounded by and finding shelter among other poor people, being concerned about debt and resources, valuing at times dignity over money, critiquing charity) as well as the experiences of social movement leaders in particular (including holding these leaders to high standards, emphasizing political education among movement leaders and participants, evoking movement teachings and sacred traditions, suggesting non-participation in dominant economic systems, and assuming that controversy will arise). Similarities between early Christian communities and contemporary poor people are not surprising; as social theorist James C. Scott notes, “to the degree structures of domination can be demonstrated to operate in comparable ways, they will, other things equal, elicit reactions and patterns of resistance that are also broadly comparable.”17 Such connections suggest that a depiction of Jesus as a movement leader, popular messiah, and pedagogue of

the oppressed is historically possible and interpretations of biblical texts that presume this are potentially valid.\textsuperscript{18}

The social location of contemporary poor people who are engaged in the work of social transformation helps these Poverty Scholars participating in the Leadership School Bible study understand and draw meaning from the words and actions in the Gospel of Matthew. This Bible study also shows that diverse people can interpret together across their differences of experience, racial and gender composition, formal education levels, and theological persuasions.

We started our session together by reading the passage aloud in an effort to bring attention, reflection and meditation to the text. With heads bowed and minds turned to the Bible, one volunteer read Matt 26:1-13:

When Jesus had finished saying all these things, he said to his disciples, “As you know, the Passover is two days away—and the Son of Man will be handed over to be crucified.” Then the chief priests and the elders of the people assembled in the palace of the high priest, whose name was Caiaphas, and they schemed to arrest Jesus secretly and kill him. “But not during the festival,” they said, “or there may be a riot among the people.” While Jesus was in Bethany in the home of Simon the Leper, a woman came to him with an alabaster jar of very expensive perfume, which she poured on his head as he was reclining at the table. When the disciples saw this, they were indignant. “Why this waste?” they asked. “This perfume could have been sold at a high price and the money given to the poor.” Aware of this, Jesus said to them, “Why are you bothering this woman? She has done a beautiful thing to me. The poor you will always have with you, but you will not always have me. When she poured this perfume on my body, she did it to prepare me for burial. Truly I tell you, wherever this gospel is preached throughout the world, what she has done will also be told, in memory of her.”\textsuperscript{19}

\textsuperscript{18} This follows the work of Stevan Davies who relies on the presence of contemporary exorcisms in parts of Western Africa similar to the exorcisms found in the New Testament to demonstrate that Jesus’ exorcisms may be historically reliable. See Stevan L. Davies, \textit{Jesus the Healer: Possession, Trance, and the Origins of Christianity} (New York: Continuum International Publishing Group, 1995).

\textsuperscript{19} Although this translation is mine, the other biblical citations come from the NIV translation throughout the dissertation unless otherwise noted.
We sat in silence for a few minutes following this reading. We then read the passage a second time, this time asking participants what words or characters really stood out to them. These were some of the responses:

**Kym McNair (Antioch Baptist Church, Bedford Hills, NY):** There’s something I never heard before. Jesus is at Simon’s house. Simon the leper is an outcast; the woman is an outcast. The disciples are not necessarily the favorites in the community. You’ve got a couple of tax collectors mixed in there. Once they align themselves with Jesus they are outcasts. But they are also criticizing the woman. So it’s like when you get to a certain position in life you forget where you came from. Once you’re elevated you find the liberty to criticize people who are where you were just yesterday. So there’s a vicious cycle going on here.

**Veronica Dorsey (United Workers, Baltimore, MD):** The woman stuck out to me, because she could have made money off of the oil in this world. But instead of making money, she did not eat that worldly food. She made sure she was secure in her spiritual food. She knew once she anointed Jesus then he anointed her and blessed her back. The disciples questioned Jesus about her, but she didn’t have any doubt about what she had done. And what also struck me was that women rule. And I am so grateful to see that women play such an important part in the Bible because when I was coming up in religion, there were some churches that wouldn’t let women be pastors and I never understood why not. With all that women did in the Bible, you won’t let them stand up behind the pulpit to give testimony to it? So, it is wonderful to see all these lovely ladies here doing this work in ministry to see how far we came.

**Kobe Murphy (Philadelphia Student Union, Philadelphia, PA):** The first word that stood out to me was “disciple”. And the group of people that stood out to me that I could relate to were the disciples because they were not in their right mind to actually pay attention to what the woman was doing and the reasons behind her actions. And that’s how I feel as an organizer and just as a regular person. I’ll look at things and think why on earth would somebody do that? And by the time I want to retract my statement, it’s too late. It made me think of the whole idea of discipleship period. You think you have people around you who ought to know what needs to happen or what’s really going on, but then it turns out that sometimes it is the last person you would think of who actually is exactly in accord with you. And that’s what stood out to me, that the woman, she knew exactly what she was doing. While the disciples were following him in his every way, they still couldn’t understand how simple and important an act by that woman that was.

We then read the text again and asked what we noticed about the unnamed woman in this passage. We also asked how this Bible passage related to the purpose
of the Leadership School and their intentions of building a social movement to end poverty. There were a few responses:

Aaron Scott (Episcopal Diocese of Oregon, Portland, OR): This story made me think about the Poor People’s Campaign that we’re studying and talking about at this Leadership School and how much that movement suffered after the loss of one leader. Here Jesus is trying to point to what the woman is doing, showing the qualities of leadership the whole community needs in order to get on board with what Jesus is about. Jesus knows what he is about to go through so he’s working to develop other leaders in his disciples. But the group is resistant because they only want to have that one leader, him. They don’t want to hear him saying, “Look, she’s got it. She’s on point.”

Charlotte Keyes (Jesus People Against Pollution, Columbia, MS): Well, I will add something here. In the Bible, Jesus talks also about being poor in spirit, blessed are the poor in spirit [Matt 5:3]. I come that you may have life, and have it more abundantly [John 10:10]. Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven [Matt 6:10]. So why do we feel we have to wait to leave earth to enter heaven? Life is not about stacking money from floor to ceiling or filling barns like the man in the story [Luke 12:13-21]. The poor that God was talking about is the poor in spirit in this passage.

Jesus became poor so that people can become rich [2 Cor 8:9]... and once a person receives Jesus, we have become a royal heir [Rom 8:17]. Like with the economy, we say if people are lacking money they are poor. But I was just in Atlanta and I met a man on the street. We ministered to him with food and items. Then we came back again and that young man was there and he flagged us down and told us that we had helped him several years ago. I used to be homeless and you helped me and I want to bless you because you blessed me and now I am able to receive resources from someone.

From these introductory comments on the Bible and poverty, and participants’ initial impressions and connections of Matt 26 to their work, we turned to the text itself. We started with a discussion about the teachings of Jesus directly before this passage. Participants noticed that the transition, the first verse of Matt 26, was “when Jesus had said these things”. We looked at Matt 25:34-40, the passage about the “least of these” in the pericope about the final judgment, and read aloud:

Then the King will say to those on his right, “Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world. For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I
was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me.” Then the righteous will answer him, “Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you something to drink? When did we see you a stranger and invite you in, or needing clothes and clothe you? When did we see you sick or in prison and go to visit you?” The King will reply, “Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me.”

Participants had much to say about this teaching that connects Jesus with the impoverished and oppressed: the poor, the prisoner, the stranger, and the hungry were the people with whom Jesus associated himself. We noticed that poor and despised people are those who in the first century C.E. did not benefit from the Roman Empire and Caesar’s infrastructure developments. We examined Jesus’s teachings on the poor: the poor will inherit the kingdom of God; it will be difficult for the rich to make it to heaven; God will provide for the poor. Focusing on the “reign/empire of God” and how this empire actually contrasts with the Roman Empire of Caesar, we did a brief Greek word study: the Greek basileia means “empire” and that empire in Jesus’s day belonged to Caesar (who was considered God). We discussed how Jesus’s use of the phrase “empire of God” may have been polemic against Caesar’s Roman Empire.

Then, we turned our attention to the actual anointing of Jesus, starting with Jesus entering the house of Simon the Leper in Bethany in Matt 26:6 and ending

20 “Now when Jesus saw the crowds, he went up on a mountainside and sat down. His disciples came to him, and he began to teach them. He said: ‘Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven’” (Matt 5:1-3).
21 “Then Jesus said to his disciples, “Truly I tell you, it is hard for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of heaven” (Matt 19:23).
22 “So do not worry, saying, ‘What shall we eat?’ or ‘What shall we drink?’ or ‘What shall we wear?’ For the pagans run after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them. But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well” (Matt 6:31-33).
with Jesus's proclamation that we will remember the woman who anoints him in Matt 26:13. Here are more select parts of the workshop:

**Liz Theoharis (Poverty Initiative, New York, NY):** We have just discussed what it could mean when Matt 26:1 reads “After saying these things” and with whom Jesus identifies his kingdom. We’ve heard from Jesus that you can’t worship God and mammon; it’s either God or wealth. Jesus has established that poverty and the poor are central to his ministry before this passage. Turning to our passage, we need to think about the setting. Before this scene with the woman coming and anointing Jesus, Jesus has been in the Temple for the Passover holiday. And what are the elite’s reactions to Jesus when he’s in the Temple turning over the tables?

**Veronica Dorsey:** They want to hang him.

**Tiffany Gardner (Housing is a Human Rights Campaign, National Economic and Social Rights Initiative):** They want to kill him, but who are they afraid of?

**Group:** The people.

**Liz Theoharis:** Why?

**Veronica Dorsey:** Because there are too many of them.

**Liz Theoharis:** It’s divide and conquer; it’s crowd control. They have to isolate him so that they can get to him. This is the culmination of this gospel. He has come and turned over the tables and they are afraid of him. Then he moves to somewhere else. Does anybody know what Bethany means?

**Kym McNair:** House of the Poor.

**Liz Theoharis:** Now in our story, Jesus isn’t in the busy-ness of Jerusalem during a major festival or in the vast Temple anymore. Now he’s in the House of Simon the Leper in the small town of Bethany. So what does it mean to us that he is in a place called House of Poor?

**Veronica Dorsey:** He’s in the hood!

**Onleilove Alston (Federation of Protestant Welfare Agencies, New York, NY):** And he’s in the house of a leper where he wasn’t even supposed to be if you are Jewish. He wouldn’t be allowed in the Temple after being with a leper; he would be considered ceremonially unclean. This is a lesson about giving what God needs and receiving a blessing. Because Simon offered his house, now he is mentioned every time the woman is mentioned. It shows that God can use anybody and maybe a historic thing will happen in your midst.
Charlotte Keyes: Also God does things that don’t make sense. When you have it all figured out, God will come and show you something totally different. What He did with this story is break down traditions. Many traditions of man are terrible, because they don’t line up with God’s idea. He wants to bless humanity and sometimes humanity gets in the way.

Liz Theoharis: One of the things that doesn’t line up is this woman… how does she get in here? Where does she come from? Where did she get her alabaster jar? This is expensive ointment; does anyone know how much it is worth?

Veronica Dorsey: A whole year’s salary.

Liz Theoharis: So if we know that it is very expensive and cost one-year’s salary and this unnamed woman comes out of nowhere with this ointment, we should be thinking: what is going on? And if we know the word that Matthew uses for the ointment, this Greek-English Bible Interlinear translation says it’s myrrh. Where else have we heard about myrrh? What else does the mention of myrrh make us think about?

Tiffany Gardner: Jesus’s birth.

Liz Theoharis: And what does it remind us of?

Tiffany Gardner: Burial and Death. Herod killing babies at his birth.

Liz Theoharis: And what else?

Onleilove Alston: Kingship, the three kings. Anointing for kingship. We are reminded that Jesus is royalty bringing in a new reign.

Veronica Dorsey: Yes. Jesus is Kings of the Jews, the King of Kings.

Liz Theoharis: This is also the only place in the gospel of Matthew we hear of anointing. This woman uses the ointment to anoint Jesus. The Greek word for “an anointed one” is “Christ”.

Jessica Chadwick Williams (First Baptist Church, Des Moines, IA): So this is where Jesus becomes anointed as Christ! He is made Jesus Christ in the house of the poor by this woman out of nowhere with myrrh (usually associated with kings) that’s worth a whole year’s salary. And what is the reaction of the disciples?

Onleilove Alston: What are you doing!? What’s wrong with you!

Kobe Murphy: Wow!

Veronica Dorsey: I think the disciples were jealous. It’s like they’re thinking:
“We’ve been working with him all this time. We’re on a break and here you come and touch him like that. Who does she think she is?” She beat them to the punch.

Aaron Scott: Or she has been there the whole time but she was in the background doing the cooking and the work that keeps the community and movement going and now she comes into this different role.

Jessica Chadwick Williams: Having just heard Jesus preach this judgment in Matt 25, it could be that the disciples are trying really hard in this passage. They are trying to have the right answer to Jesus’s questions. They’re trying to take seriously how Jesus has said to care for the poor and now this woman is doing this wasteful thing. So, the disciples are pointing to this to say: “We just heard you, Jesus. We’re supposed to be caring for the poor, but she’s wasting this money that could care for the poor.”

Erica Almirón (Media Mobilizing Project, Philadelphia, PA): She was listening in the background and she comes forward and anoints him before he’s killed. She understands what’s going to happen and she better understands what he was saying. She gets it and they don’t!

Liz Theoharis: And what specifically are the disciples complaining about?

Veronica Dorsey: She’s wasting the oil. And imagine what could have happened if she hadn’t!

Charlotte Keyes: If you pay attention to things like Judas being in charge of the moneybags [John 12:6], it makes even more sense. Like today there are those in charge of God’s resources and they do foolish things and are intimidated by those who do the right thing. And here’s a lesson for us in this story. He didn’t specify a name; the passage just reads about the woman with the alabaster box. And when you really look at that, it could be any one of us. So we have a lot to think about from this lesson. There is no one of us who can fully interpret the message of the word. Over and over I’ve had messages preached to me, and each time you hear preaching on a text something different comes out. That is why we need one another to study the Bible together.

Jessica Chadwick Williams: I noticed that in verse 10, right after the disciples say this, it says that Jesus was aware of this. He knew this was going to be the disciples’ response. Jesus knew what their response would be and was ready to say this to them. He was prepared with his lesson.

Zakia Royster (Philadelphia Student Union, Philadelphia, PA): So what I want to know is, how can you think about wasting anything on Jesus? The disciples have been with him all this time and yet they don’t see Jesus as something more important than the oil. (Laughter)
**Veronica Dorsey:** I hear it, but we still hear this story, and feel the same way. How can that year’s salary be wasted? We have that reaction too.

**Liz Theoharis:** In John’s gospel, it has this extra line about Judas stealing from the treasury. John explains that Judas raises this question not because he cares about the poor but because he used to take the money donated to the poor. In our context today, we see this too. We might call Judas a “Poverty Pimp”, someone who makes money off of people being poor.

**Onleilove Alston:** Yeah, Judas is concerned about his salary. The other disciples could be the same.

**Liz Theoharis:** So if we remember what Jessica was saying, the disciples in this story were trying to do the right thing. But when we look at the disciples’ response here it sounds like charity. They are looking at this year’s worth of salary, which seems big, but really goes only so far to feed some people, clothe some people.

**Veronica Dorsey:** But Jesus is priceless.

**Liz Theoharis:** Yes, Jesus is priceless and Jesus represents a program that is a complete disruption of the economic order. In the program of Jesus, the poor will inherit this kingdom. Perhaps we should consider the quote we discussed earlier at this Leadership School from Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. that says that “True compassion is more than flinging a coin to a beggar but restructuring the system that produces beggars.”

**Vanessa Cardinale (CATA, Norris Square, PA):** In this passage, we might see the disciples as those flinging a coin to a beggar. But Jesus stands for restructuring the system that produces beggars.

**Liz Theoharis:** Let us now turn to the passage in question itself: “The poor you’ll have with you always, but you will not always have me.” Any thoughts?

**Charlotte Keyes:** I think it goes back to the poor in spirit. You have to look at things in reality. There is going to be good and evil. You have to examine—when you see the poor—what is the reason. Some people start out without, without the Lord or access to resources even when help is right in your midst. If you can’t access resources, you stay poor. Poverty exists.

**Rachel Barnhart (Riverside Church Youth Program, New York, NY):** I think Jesus, in his ministry, he wasn’t asking for us to always have poverty. You’ve got this woman who is investing a year’s worth of salary in him. She’s basically making it so that people can see that it is the systematic structure that is the problem, not just having or not having money. She’s not buying into the system of using the money to buy a few things for the poor. Instead she’s pouring it all out!
Vanessa Cardinale: When I hear this phrase, I think of Deut 15. As I study the Bible and how different passages are connected to each other in the Bible, I notice that our passage in Matthew is not the first time that "the poor are with you always" appears. Jesus as a rabbi, as a teacher, is teaching from the Torah in this setting. Deuteronomy 15 starts out saying poverty is not acceptable and we have to do something about it. Then it says because we don’t follow God’s commandments, we will always have poverty.

Kobe Murphy: Our world is not a perfect world, people have different circumstances. It has hurt all of us. So even the rich people in our world are hurt. They might be the poor in spirit that we already mentioned in our discussion. So Jesus isn’t saying that it’s okay that people are poor just that it’s the reality that this system is hurting us all and making many of us poor in spirit.

Phil Lindsay (Philadelphia Student Union, Philadelphia, PA): He is talking about what they have to do when he’s gone. They will all have to pour themselves out when he is gone. It reminded me of the Pharisees asking about fasting. They aren’t poor in faith while he’s there, but they may be when he’s gone.

Erica Almirón: I know that leadership development is crucial in the work that we do and he’s saying, “Dude, I’m going to be gone in a few days so get your act together.”

Mary Ellen Kris (Park Avenue United Methodist Church, New York, NY): My comment was very similar. I don’t think the passage is about giving to the poor or curing poverty by giving away money. He’s two days away from his death and the people who are going to be taking over the fight in his absence don’t even understand that he’s going to be dying. They won’t believe it, don’t get it. She comes in and anoints him, the double meaning of anointing for burial and kingship, and there is a bigger point here that they are totally missing. And she gets it.

Aaron Scott: I think about this as Jesus saying there are always going to be ways that people will suffer. I hear people trying to naturalize things like poverty, disease, war, saying they are like nature’s birth control. They try to naturalize things that are not natural. Poverty is not an accident; a tornado is an accident. Jesus is saying, “There is always going to be a chance to help the suffering and I am going to role model what you should do to those who suffer and this woman who is anointing me is going to model for you that we are all entitled to these things...we’re entitled to food, shelter, visits when we’re in jail AND a proper burial...all of it.”

Onleilove Alston: I read a book called The Last Week of Jesus that says this woman was the first minister or first evangelist through her actions. She is one of the first people to recognize and act.

Jessica Chadwick Williams: I was thinking about why Jesus would say this to the disciples. Maybe it is because that verse in Deut 15 about ending poverty will come into their heads. Then the reason you have the poor with you always is because the people haven’t done what it says in Deuteronomy; they haven’t followed God’s commandments including the Jubilee. The disciples would know that.

Zakia Royster: He may have known that we would not get it. That we might not be poor but that we would suffer from being poor in faith. People with good faith know that God is going to be there. Jesus is saying that there will always be people who don’t get it and don’t do what God says we should do, and that leads to there being people who are poor (in spirit or faith).

Charlotte Keyes: Can you elaborate, Mary, about what you were saying?

Mary Ellen Kris: I think one way to look at this is that he is himself struggling with the idea that he is going to be dying, and also frustrated that one of the things he’s been saying is that the Son of Man is to be going up to Jerusalem and die and rise on the third day, and they don’t get it. And this is his team, it’s like the lights are on but nobody’s home! This woman, maybe she’s been lingering at the back of the pack, she believes that he is going to be killed and she wants to anoint him as king before that happens. And she is right on the money (laughter) and they’re out of the loop.

Veronica Dorsey: When you said that a light came on and I am home—I get it! Jesus was probably nervous about dying but God sent this woman to reassure this human part of Jesus. To say, “It’s alright, your boys might not get it, but here is somebody who really gets it.” So here is someone to give Jesus peace in this moment of fear in the flesh as he was completely like us, even though his spirit saw beyond it.

Liz Theoharis: And that point goes back to caring for the least of these from Matt 25 that we discussed and that’s what this woman does. In this moment, Jesus is the least of these who needs care and attention. And the passage from Deut 15 says that there will be no poverty if you follow God’s commands, but because you are not following God’s commands you will always have the poor. It continues with a little more about what those commandments are: redistribute things, don’t hoard wealth, feed the poor, visit the prisoner, etc. So how this passage has been interpreted as Jesus giving up on the fight against poverty is actually the exact opposite. He is reiterating the lesson that God does not want poverty and if we follow God’s commandments we can end poverty.

When Jesus makes this strong statement about ending poverty, he says that what this woman has done will be remembered. But do we remember her? No! We don’t have her name, we don’t know where she comes from. So first this story is an indictment on the disciples for not getting it, and then it’s an indictment on us for still not getting it. In the communion formula taught in Matthew, Jesus does not say: “Do this in remembrance of me” but instead: “Truly I tell you, wherever this gospel
is preached throughout the world, what she has done will also be told, in memory of her.” But we have all forgotten her because we have forgotten the poor. And so it points to our failure. It’s indictment on us. Even when he’s dying, even when he’s being ministered to, Jesus remembers the poor. But we have all forgotten what Jesus is teaching, because we have forgotten this woman and we have forgotten the poor. Jesus is reminding us that first and foremost our job is to end poverty as his living and dying wish.

This is just a short excerpt of this reinterpretation of Matt 26. But even in this brief conversation, new ideas and exciting interpretations have been raised. Poverty Scholars asserted that Jesus himself was poor; that the unnamed woman was the only follower of Jesus who recognized his imminent death and what he stood for in his prophetic life; that the anointing was where Jesus was made Christ;\textsuperscript{24} that the anointing reminded us of Jesus’s birth, his kingship, and the struggle over power; that this woman valued relationships and prophetic witness over money; that the money mentioned in the story was less important than Jesus’s commitment and values; that Jesus may have been referring to Deut 15 when he asserted that we will always have the poor; and many other thoughts. As one participant commented during the Bible study, with so many different interpretations of this passage even from this one short engagement with the text, using this passage to normalize and accept poverty in Jesus’s time or today is problematic.

\textbf{New Interpretations of Matt 26}

A number of key interpretations of Matt 26:1-13 were raised in this session:

- issues over the understanding/teaching of the disciples and the definition of discipleship;

\textsuperscript{24} This is a central discussion of this dissertation that will be discussed especially Chapters 2, 3, 6, 7, and 8.
• how the tension and conflict in the scene is related to their lack of resources and what the disciples should do going forward

• a critique of money and charity programs for the poor;

• the importance of debt, the forgiveness of debt, and taxation

• the significance of the anointing of Jesus for his burial and as a social, political, and religious ruler;

• questioning participation in dominant social and economic practice

• the line “the poor are with you always” as social critique and analysis and not as condoning poverty;

• a call to practice Jubilee and economic redistribution in Jesus’s day;

• and the social position and humanity/vulnerability of Jesus.

One of the most important lines of argument among the Poverty Scholars on this passage was the position and understanding of the disciples. A number of different perspectives were given on the disciples. McNair thought they acted as sell-outs because they were complicit in the ostracization of the unnamed woman, although they too were social outcasts. Murphy was able to relate to their position and confusion, asserting that it is easy to be surprised by who catches on to the new ideas of a leader and how often it is not the people one would expect. Alston asserted that the unnamed woman was the true disciple in this example. Williams humanized the position of the disciples, asserting that they were trying to demonstrate that they were taking Jesus seriously and following his call to care for the poor, but they were too mechanical in their application of those teachings. Almirón drew out the significance of the disciples as the leaders carrying on the teachings and actions of Jesus. Scott asserted that these leaders struggled to move
away from a model of charismatic leadership to one where leaders must be teachers, and you need a core of leaders to push forward the work.

This idea of discipleship is a complex one. In this Bible study, Poverty Scholars identified with the disciples. Many people saw the organizing and educating work they are doing to in their communities in some ways similar to the work of the disciples alongside Jesus. This parallel is not often made; typically disciples are compared to elders or deacons in a church, evangelists of the gospel, or leaders trying to build a congregation from the ground up. But these Poverty Scholars asserted that the disciples’ spiritual work and commitment was focused on the social and economic needs of the people of Galilee and that Jesus’s ministry of spiritual renewal included social and economic uplift as well.

The Poverty Scholars emphasized the educational and practical aspects of the work of the disciples. As students of Jesus who studied his teachings, they worked to implement them, healing the sick, feeding the hungry, and ministering to the poor. The content of the teachings of Jesus is important in this comparison as well. Often we think that Jesus is focused on heaven and spiritual teachings, but the Poverty Scholars maintained that Jesus focused on the social and economic conditions of his followers and that Jesus’s pedagogical method was about waking people up and teaching critical thinking in the present. The Poverty Scholars’ analysis could pave a way for a new understanding of discipleship to be applied in religious congregations and community organizations.

Another observation on Jesus’s response to the disciples was that Jesus was actually critiquing the way the disciples wanted to care for the poor, challenging the
idea that the solution to poverty is charity not changing the structures that make people poor. Some of the Poverty Scholars, although poor and homeless themselves, asserted that larger social change that gets at the root causes of poverty is more important than servicing the needs of a smaller group of poor people for a limited time. These Poverty Scholars made a distinction between doing charity (simply meeting some material needs of a select group of people for some time) and practicing social justice (working to institute a larger program or platform that questions structures and works to end injustice). Royster and Almirón asserted that Jesus is priceless, rendering it impossible to put a monetary amount on his worth (or perhaps any human being, for that matter). Barnhart asserted that by pouring the ointment out, this woman did not buy into a system where money is more important than people, but anointed Jesus to uphold another system of values: people over money. According to Scott, the fact that this woman prepares and provides for Jesus’s burial demonstrates that all people should have the right to basic necessities, including burial. The whole group also struggled with the idea that what Jesus stood for was larger social transformation and questioned the position of the disciples in the story where they are depicted as wanting to raise money for the poor and perhaps protecting their personal livelihood, not ending poverty.

Cardinale referenced Martin Luther King Jr.’s quotation on the nature of true compassion versus charity in her comments. He preached:

A true revolution of values will soon cause us to question the fairness and justice of many of our past and present policies. On the one hand we are called to play the good [sic] Samaritan on life’s roadside; but that will be only an initial act. One day we must come to see that the whole Jericho road must be transformed so that men and women will not be constantly beaten and robbed as they make their journey on life’s highway. True compassion is
more than flinging a coin to a beggar... It comes to see that an edifice which produces beggars needs restructuring.²⁵

Noting Jesus’s critique of the disciples’ interest in selling the ointment, she asserted that giving the money to the poor is like “flinging a coin to a beggar.”

Another major line of argument surrounding this passage is that this is the moment where Jesus is anointed not just for his burial but as a “king”. It was pointed out that Jesus is made Christ in this passage and that “Christ” is a political, economic and social as well as religious title. The ointment/myrrh that the woman used was reminiscent of the three gifts at Jesus’s birth, Gardner observed, and reminded us of how Herod was threatened by a new “king” who would emerge to challenge Herod (which was why Herod ordered the killing of so many babies). Dorsey pointed out that if Jesus was anointed with the ointment for a king and anointed on his head (and not just his feet like in Luke 7:38 and John 12:3), that distinguished Jesus as an important political ruler. Chadwick Williams was excited to show that this act of becoming “Christ” happened in the House of the Poor (not in the Temple or Coliseum or Field of Mars, etc.), and this demonstrated that Jesus was about bringing in a new reign of peace and justice from the underside of history (as opposed to Caesar). Rather than simply hearing “Jesus Christ” as a religious title, the Poverty Scholars heard this title as signifying Jesus being anointed as messiah/king and therefore having not only spiritual significance but also social, economic, and political power. The group emphasized that this is the only place that Jesus becomes Christ in the New Testament; this conversation about Jesus as “king” and “Lord” had

further significance. Poverty Scholars pointed out that Jesus is savior, king, ruler, and this may be polemic against Caesar having these titles as emperor at the time. Anointing Jesus was viewed as a political act by the Poverty Scholars, just as the program and plan of Jesus was political to them as well.

Something special happened with the phrase “do this in remembrance” also. In Matthew’s gospel, the only place where the part of the communion formula: “do this in memory of...” is referenced is in relation to the woman. The line, in fact, reads “do this in memory of her” rather than “me”. Poverty Scholars pointed out the role of the unnamed woman in remembering and honoring of Jesus as a new kind of ruler who does not oppress, but instead liberates hearts, minds, bodies, and souls. The unnamed woman is a model to be emulated today but many have forgotten what she does for Jesus, and in doing so, have forgotten Jesus’s teachings on how to remember and honor the poor (by ending poverty).

Another major interpretive move in the Bible study was to see Jesus’s statement “the poor will be with you always” as a social critique of poverty rather than condoning the existence and prevalence of poverty. Keyes said that she understands this passage as explaining that some people are born poor or made poor, and so poverty exists in our society. Murphy suggested that this is what “poor in spirit” means when it is mentioned in Matthew’s Sermon on the Mount (5:3); social problems in our world affect rich and poor, and the suffering associated with them is what makes someone “poor in spirit” and in need of faith, blessing, and healing. The rich may be the ones who are spiritually poor in our society, Murphy asserted, as people’s complicity with oppressive systems is spiritually
impoverishing. These existing social problems are what Jesus is referring to when he says “the poor are with you always,” including a lack of faith that ending poverty is possible. Instead of a blanket and future-oriented statement that Jesus condones poverty, these Poverty Scholars asserted that Jesus was making the point that poverty and oppression exist because of the way that society is organized. This line can be read as a social critique rather than an acceptance of the status quo.26

Two more important interpretive points came up in our discussion. Cardinale told the group that Jesus’s assertion “the poor will be always with you” is a reference to the Jubilee codes in Deut 15, which states that there should be no poverty if everyone follows the commandments of God. God is explicit in the Jubilee codes about how to care for the widow and the foreigner, how to forgive debts, and how to let the land lay fallow. Poverty enters the picture in the disobedience of humanity to God’s will. So any reference to this passage in Matt 26 serves a reminder that God has told the people how to address poverty. Jesus is critiquing the disciples’ suggestion to sell the ointment and give the money to the poor as a solution to the problem of poverty. Jesus responds saying that God has already taught how we are to address the problem of poverty through the Jubilee codes, a plan that is more than giving money to the poor. Williams concluded that Jesus knew the response of the disciples, and so his statement that “the poor will be with you always” is a planned response or a teaching moment on the Jubilee. The fact that Poverty Scholars asserted that the New Testament was referring to and quoting the Old Testament shows a methodology of biblical interpretation where biblical stories

26 I explore common biblical obstacles and interpretations that justify or spiritualize poverty in Chapter Two.
speak and refer to each other (and not that the New Testament just corrects the Old Testament).

The last major interpretative move made in this Bible study revolved around the social position of Jesus in the passage. Kris reminded the group that the comment of Jesus about the poor perhaps has more to do with the approach of the poor Jesus’s death than about other poor people or even the issue of solving poverty through money itself in the moment. We discussed that Jesus of Nazareth was a poor person living under Roman rule. So Jesus is not dismissing the poor but actually is a poor person experiencing hardship himself. Also, Dorsey pointed out that as Jesus readies himself for his execution and burial, he is someone in need. While it may not be easy for us to recognize Jesus Christ ever in need, if we are to take his humanity seriously, and if we are to believe that in Jesus’s humanity he was able to experience poverty and oppression that many have faced throughout history, then it is important to see Jesus’s vulnerability in our story. The unnamed woman recognizes this need of Jesus and ministers to him. This reminded the group of Jesus’s teaching in Matt 25 on the Final Judgment. In this context, Jesus is the least of these in need of attention and caring, as he prepares for continued hardship and death.

**Poverty Scholars and Methodology**

In addition to raising some important ideas about the interpretation of this passage, the Poverty Scholars also suggested some methodological ideas for Bible study. A brief list of these include:

- insisting on understanding the textual context of the passage;
• having a desire to learn and connect with the historical context of the passage;

• listing and drawing connections with other references to the poor in the Bible;

• identifying instances of intertextuality between Testaments;

• drawing connections between the social conditions of the Bible and our contemporary social conditions;

• balancing a spiritual relationship with Jesus Christ with interest in learning about the social context of the historical Jesus;

• emphasizing the relevance and importance of the Bible in our contemporary world;

• and participating in a communal project of liberative Bible readings towards the goal of eliminating poverty that challenges traditional interpretations.

**Bible Study Methods – Exegesis and Hermeneutics**

Before I explore these methods and practices of Poverty Scholars in more detail and emphasize the key interpretations that these readers/interpreters can make—especially to texts that have a history of interpretation with negative consequences towards the poor—it is important to elaborate the combination of practices and the influence of varied methods of interpretation used in this Bible study more generally. As students of biblical criticism know, exegetical or biblical critical questions fall into two basic categories: content (what is said) and context (why it is said/what it means). The purpose of biblical criticism is to explore ways

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27 Gordon Fee, *New Testament Exegesis: A Handbook for Students and Pastors* (3d ed.; Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox, 2002). Fee describes some basics of exegesis in more detail: "The questions of content are basically of four kinds: textual criticism (the determination of the actual wording of the author), lexical data (the meaning of words), grammatical data (the relationship of words to one another), and historical-cultural background (the relationship of words
authors write, ways individuals and communities interpret, provide
scholars/interpreters common strategies and vocabulary, and help readers evaluate
“claims made in the world today about biblical truth.” This was true in the Bible
study at the Poverty Initiative Poverty Scholars Leadership School in West Virginia
as well.

The practices used throughout the study and the preparation of the Bible
study facilitators included attention to history (where we sought to reproduce and
analyze some aspects of the text’s production), text (where we employed various
techniques and methods to analyze and draw out meaning of the texts themselves),
and hermeneutics (where special attention was placed on contemporary meanings
and applications as well as the social location of the interpreters). We employed
practices from historical-critical and literary-critical methods in the Bible study
track at the Leadership School. This happened both in planned and in more
organic ways (as all three Bible study leaders had been trained both in seminary and
in churches and community organizations that took the Bible seriously). I will
explore some of the basic tenets of exegesis and biblical criticism here, so our
practice of this method is clearer.

28 Corrine L. Carvalho, Primer on Biblical Methods (Winona, Minn.: Anselm Academic, 2009), ix.
29 “Exegesis is the process of reading a text through the systematic application of a series of
methods of biblical interpretation, with the purpose of arriving at an overall conclusion regarding the
meaning of a text” (Carvalho, Primer on Biblical Methods, x).
30 Steven L. McKenzie and Stephen R. Haynes, ed., To Each Its Own Meaning: An Introduction
31 Since the 1970s, many biblical scholars have abandoned the idea that a text has only one
meaning, which historical criticism can uncover. The original intent or meaning of the text, however,
still holds some importance. Most contemporary Jewish and Christian communities affirm the
original meaning of the text is a necessary and important factor in the relationship of the text and the
Poverty Scholars Method and Practices

As I have shown in the transcript and description of the Bible study at the Poverty Initiative Poverty Scholars Leadership School earlier in this chapter, its general form and format was a community-based, liberation-oriented, critical Bible study of Matt 26:1-13, the story of the anointing of Jesus by the unnamed woman. We modeled our Poverty Scholars Leadership School Bible track after Bible studies in Christian Base Communities of Latin America in the spirit of Ernesto Cardenal’s Gospel of Solentiname, a significant model of liberative exegesis and community Bible study, which I will explore in more detail in Chapter Three.32

faith community. And even amongst the diverse group of participants in the Leadership School Bible track, the intent of both Jesus and the gospel writers was emphasized. In order to attempt to get a better understanding of this original meaning or intent, there are various historical critical methods used including: source criticism, form criticism, and reconstruction and study of the historical context. Scholars also use many literary methods to unpack what a text communicates to its reader. Textual communication involves an author creating a text that is read by a reader (author-text-reader). But literary analysis can focus on the text without reference to the author or historical setting. Textual criticism “consider[s] the different ancient witnesses to that text” (Carvalho, Primer on Biblical Methods, 45). It explores the best and oldest versions of the text as well as various translations. Narrative criticism looks at elements of the text including characters, setting, plot, pace of the narrative, discourse, point of view, and rhetoric. It also projects the implied audience of the text. Rhetorical criticism, as a significant literary critical method, can include both techniques the author uses to persuade the reader as well as the literary style of the author. It pays attention to the specific wording and structure of the text. Reader-response criticism, another literary critical method particularly applicable to Bible study with a diverse grouping of poor people, posits the meaning of a text is the result of a reader reading it. Reader-response helps avoid a trap where one reading of a text silences all others and acknowledges that a text will have different effects on different audiences. Reader response is judged by its ability to “actualize” or “reenact” a text. Ideological criticism tries to uncover the ideologies that lie behind a text. It began as an outgrowth of Marxist analysis and forefronts the perspective and analysis of women, people of color, the colonized, and others who have not benefited from the status quo. Much of this approach was inspired by liberation theology and its “preferential option for the poor” that privileged the location and perspective of the marginalized as hermeneutical paradigm. For more details on exegesis and both historical and literary-critical biblical criticism, see Carvalho, Primer on Biblical Methods; Fee, New Testament Exegesis; McKenzie and Haynes, To Each Its Own Meaning; Robert Fowler, Edith Blumhofer and Fernando Segovia, New Paradigms for Bible Study: The Bible in the Third Millenium (New York: T&T Clark International, 2004); Richard Soulen and R. Kendall Soulen, Handbook of Biblical Criticism: Now Includes Precritical and Postcritical Interpretation (3d ed.; Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox, 2001).

In addition to the Bible study format of Christian Base Communities and other models of liberation-centered Bible study, the Leadership School Bible study track included many methods and practices from historical and literary critical Bible study and scholarly criticism. As already stated above, this encompassed: (a) study of the text and context; (b) interest in the historical context; (c) study of poor and poverty in the Bible as well as other intertextual work; (d) a look at the parallels of historical and contemporary context; (e) interest in the Christ of faith and the Jesus of history; and (f) communal Bible study.

In this section, I will describe some steps and biblical critical questions and practices we employed in the Bible studies at the Poverty Initiative Poverty Scholars Leadership School. These steps, from Fee’s *New Testament Exegesis*, include:

1. Surveying the historical context
2. Choosing a limited passage or pericope
   a. Become acquainted with pericope
   b. List exegetical difficulties (things for special study)
   c. Explore the history of interpretation
   d. Read several translations
3. Analyzing structure and syntax
   a. Analyze grammar, significant words
4. Researching historical background
5. Looking at broader biblical and theological context
6. Exploring secondary literature

*Surveying the historical context*

Historical context was important in our Bible Study. Before diving into the Bible study itself, we reviewed some key historical concepts and themes. We defined the Greek word, *basileia* or “empire,” that during the 1st Century C.E. would have stood for the Roman Empire, and saw that the use of *basileia* in the New Testament, as God’s kingdom or empire, may have subverted the way the term was used in its
larger historical context. We explored the social standing of lepers, the value of the ointment, the religious and social practice of Passover and the Jerusalem Temple as well as the polarization of wealth and poverty in the Roman Empire and the social position of Jesus and his followers.

*Choosing a limited passage or pericope*

Our Bible study focused on the story of the unnamed woman anointing Jesus. Although we were interested in general themes of poverty and the Bible, we selected a passage that has a long history of negative interpretation with regard to these issues. We looked at Matt 26:1-13 with an emphasis on verses 6 through 13. By focusing on this particular story, we aimed to draw larger themes and lessons on ways the Bible has been interpreted to justify poverty and complacency to poverty.

*Become acquainted with pericope*

At the beginning of the Bible study we established our goal to explore Matt 26:1-13; we read these thirteen verses three times, and urged all participants to identify key words, characters and themes in the passage. By reading the passage multiple times, participants had the opportunity to familiarize themselves with the whole pericope. After getting some general themes and questions from the participants on the pericope as a whole, we then proceeded to explore the passage line-by-line.

*List exegetical difficulties (topics for special study)*

Even in the first reading of the passage, the Bible study facilitators asked the participants to raise any particular words, themes, and questions that occurred to
them. Some of the areas for special study included: the meaning of disciple and discipleship (as explored above), the role of the unnamed woman (as a prophetess, disciple, and subservient follower of Jesus), the word “poor” and attitude of this pericope to poverty and the poor, and the phrase “in memory of her”. We also emphasized the potential intertextuality of Matt 26:11 and Deut 15:4 and 11; the connection of the anointing of Jesus to his words and teachings that came before and after; the role the anointing in this passage played in Jesus’s crucifixion and burial; and the evangelizing nature of the Gospel of Matthew and its connection to the call of the disciples to take up the struggle where Jesus leaves off.

Explore the history of interpretation

The hermeneutical lens and history of interpretation were a starting point in this Bible study. The dominant interpretation is in line with the status quo, therefore Poverty Scholars reading from a different social location bring enormous critical potential. Facilitators and participants alike shared their experience with the pericope including the negative consequences of biblical scholars, pastors and preachers, and lay leaders interpreting this passage to condone poverty or at least charity or limited action in the face of poverty. During and even following the Leadership School Bible study, Poverty Scholars commented on the pervasive nature of interpretations of Matt 26 and John 12 that assert Jesus believes in the inevitability of poverty, that the best Christian response to poverty is charity, and that Jesus and the poor are set at odds in this pericope. Facilitators raised some of the central interpretations throughout the Bible study. And participants commented throughout the session about the importance of knowing the history of
interpretation in an effort to reinterpret and challenge traditional interpretations and paradigms.

_Read several translations_

The facilitators of the Bible study brought multiple translations of the text as well as some elementary exegesis and word study from the Greek Bible. Also, because participants brought their own Bible to the study, numerous translations were in play. In fact, in the first three readings of the pericope, two different translations were read: the New Revised Standard Version and the Jubilee Translation of the Bible. In a number of cases throughout the study, participants and facilitators referenced the Greek, the King James Version, and the NRSV translations of the text. Although there were no significant differences emphasized in our Bible study, participants did recognize the importance of studying the Greek, in particular.

_Analyzing structure and syntax_

The Bible study followed a systematic reading of the thirteen verses themselves. As previously described, after reading the text in its entirety three times, we turned to a line-by-line exegesis of it. As we would explore a verse or part of a verse of the biblical text, participants would pause to study the text and literary context itself.

_Analyze grammar, significant words_

Facilitators and participants alike selected particular words when proceeding through the text. Some of these words were: _Bêthania_ (meaning “House of the Poor” in Hebrew), _myron_ (meaning “ointment” or “myrrh” in Greek), _chrîo_ and
ho christos (meaning “to pour/anoint” and “an anointed one” in Greek), basileia (meaning “empire” or “the Roman Empire”). We also compared Matt 26:11 (“the poor you have with you always”) intertextually to Deut 15:11 (“the poor will not cease to be on the earth”). And we looked at the connection and potential contradiction of Jesus’s words “you will always have the poor with you” with “but you will not always have me”.

**Researching historical background**

Facilitators and participants brought their knowledge and study of historical background to the discussion. Whether is was a critique of Roman imperial patronage and philanthropy, the worth of the alabaster jar being equivalent to a year’s wages, the poverty and social position of Jesus, the practice of the rituals and festivals, including the economic and religious role of the Jerusalem Temple, it was important to situate the pericope in an accurate first-century historical context of poverty and dispossession for the majority and largesse for the few. Much of this historical knowledge came from participants who had attended seminary and had that type of formal biblical training. However, some of the most relevant assertions about the Bible and history, including the fact that the ointment was worth a year’s wages, the dire poverty of Jesus and his disciples, and the role of Herod in the killing of the babies, came from participants who had not attended seminary but had either learned about history through their religious congregation, community Bible studies, or self-study and interest.
**Looking at broader biblical and theological context**

Concerned with the Bible’s main teachings on poverty, we explored whether a traditional interpretation of “the poor are with you always” to mean that Jesus condones poverty and believes in its inevitability was consistent with other teachings on poverty in the New and Old Testaments. Participants questioned a biblical theology that justified poverty or seemed to side with the wealthy, supported by varied and multiple teachings on justice for the poor they knew from their reading of the Bible already: the Beatitudes and rest of the Sermon on the Mount, the healings and miracles of Jesus, the theological instruction of Paul on the collection and practices of/for the poor, and a general biblical “arc” of justice for the poor. Numerous specific references to poverty in the Bible were made, including the Lord’s Prayer, the woes against the Pharisees, the rich man and heaven, etc. Many of the Poverty Scholars pressed forth through key issues in biblical criticism considering the poor. Although many scholars do not know what to do with passages like “poor in spirit” and the overall spiritualization of poverty, the Poverty Scholars made successful interventions and interpretations of these texts that neither ignored the common traps of not acknowledging the spiritual and pietistic elements of the Bible nor succumbed to the spiritualization of poverty.

**Exploring secondary literature**

Participants and facilitators referenced secondary literature throughout the Bible study including Crossan and Borg’s *The Last Week*, Martin Luther King’s
Trumpet of Conscience, and various commentaries and articles about the anointing of Jesus from more traditional biblical studies sources. In fact, the more that new questions and interpretations emerged from the Bible study, the more participants wanted to know what others from secondary literature had to say about the issue. Indeed, an appreciation for study and scholarly engagement was present throughout the Bible study.

**Poverty Scholars Contributions**

While I will draw out methodological lessons of “Reading the Bible with the Poor” in more detail in a following chapter (Chapter Three), I wish to highlight briefly a number of significant methods employed by Poverty Scholars in this study. As is the case in more traditional exegesis, the Poverty Scholars were interested in connecting the “anointing at Bethany” with the stories that came before and after. This resistance to proof-texting or other forms of taking a text out of its literary context was motivated by a desire to see if the message about poverty, anointing, and burial was a major shift from the way those issues were discussed throughout the whole Gospel or consistent with a overall biblical framework of justice for the poor. One of the first questions in the Bible study concerned the content of Jesus’s teachings in Matt 1-25 that lead to the transition, “when Jesus had finished saying all these things...” (Matt 26:1). Instead of taking Matt 26 and reading it separately from the rest of the stories leading up to it, Poverty Scholars insisted that what came before (and after) informed our understanding of the passage.

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Consistent with biblical critical scholarly approaches, Poverty Scholars connected Old Testament and New Testament passages, finding “intertextuality” between Matt 26 and Deut 15. Also, during our discussion of the meaning of poor and poverty in our passage, the Poverty Scholars noted multiple other references to the poor from the New Testament including the Beatitudes in Matthew and the whole Sermon on the Mount, and some of Jesus’s teachings on rich and poor. Familiar with the famous texts about poverty, they had their own liberative interpretations of many of these texts that they brought to this Bible study. So while no one pulled out an actual concordance in the session, the concordance in people’s minds (and lives) was referenced throughout.

Another important aspect of the methodology used in this Bible study concerns historical and contemporary context, informed by mainstream historical-critical and literary-critical scholarship, especially reader-response methods. Poverty Scholars were quick to make connections to their contemporary context—the poverty, homelessness, and discrimination/ostracization that people have experienced in our society—and to parse out whether there were any similarities between history and the current day. These biblical readers insisted that they had special meanings and interpretations to bring to a text concerning poverty and the poor because of their own experiences of poverty and their role as the poor. What was particularly important was the urgency with which the Poverty Scholars approached both historical scholarship and contemporary application. The importance of poverty and poor people was not an abstract question to the Poverty
Scholars. Finding lessons and parallels between the biblical text and the text of people’s lives today was vital and held significant consequences.

Also important and potentially unique in a U.S. context, was the mixing and melding of personal spirituality and piety with social consciousness. A number of the Poverty Scholars are evangelical Christians who have a deep personal relationship with Jesus and believe that poverty and social change are central themes of the Bible. Rather than a divide between some people who think that Jesus is a personal savior and others who see Jesus as a community organizer and revolutionary working to bring another political and economic reign to the world, the Poverty Scholars at this Bible study melded these two perspectives. People appreciated both the Jesus of history and the Christ of faith and did not see a conflict between the two. In a society where people are assumed to be either politically conservative and personally pious or politically progressive and socially-minded, the fact that the Poverty Scholars did not fall into this dichotomy may be significant.

Central to biblical exegesis in “Reading the Bible with the Poor” was storytelling. Participants connected the stories of their lives with biblical stories and drew parallels. This principle of storytelling is fundamental to the social change worldview of the Poverty Scholars and the Poverty Initiative Leadership School. The tagline of the Media Mobilizing Project, an organization whose leaders participated in the Bible study, is: “Movements begin with the telling of untold stories.” This principal was a starting point and common thread in our Bible study method, both in how we read the Bible stories and how we approached the stories of the plight, fight, and insight of the poor organizing today.
Perhaps the most important and unique aspect of the methodology, applied in this Bible study, was the relationship of the group to each other and to larger social issues. While many settings of Bible studies are churches or religious groups, where the participants are interested in learning about the text itself, the Leadership School Bible study had another layer of meaning. In this case, participants were committed to the work of ending poverty as a united group and interested in Bible interpretations that were about ending poverty as well. This is a shift from many Bible studies where people have no shared dedication to the collective exploring the Bible together. In these cases, often the differences in each interpretation are emphasized and the urgency and relevancy of the Bible and biblical interpretations are deemphasized. In the case of the Poverty Scholars, because of the common endeavor to reclaim and reinterpret “the poor are with you always”, people built off each other’s interpretations, rather than putting out competitive interpretations or allowing the dominant and traditional interpretations to take precedence. Even when people’s ideas and interpretations differed, everyone emphasized their commitment to each other and common approaches and campaigns to explore the Bible and build social movement organizations and did not get diverted from this socially responsible agenda just to prove their personal interpretation was “right.” This model of working across differing theological perspectives could be potentially significant in our society today. Employing biblical study in an effort to empower the poor and transform society provides important learning and embodies core ideas of base
community/liberationist Bible study: the preferential option for the poor and social practice.

**Conclusion**

As we have already seen in this chapter and Bible study, the passage “the poor are with you always” is ripe for (re)interpretation in both methodology and meaning. This dissertation focuses on the interaction between contemporary context, Roman Imperial context, biblical text, and its interpretation. Through an evaluation of the biblical and theological obstacles to end poverty, and a reinterpretation of the passage “the poor are with you always” and the larger context of Matt 26 from which it comes, this dissertation aims to describe and further develop a biblical hermeneutic that we have termed, “Reading the Bible with the Poor.” This hermeneutic includes drawing parallels between New Testament stories and contemporary stories of poor people surviving and organizing, investigating important social issues, both historical and contemporary (including taxation, debt, infrastructure and development, charity and patronage, poverty, wealth, and political power) and engaging in historical reinterpretation using primary sources about the Roman Empire.

First I look at how prevalent the passage, “the poor will be with you always” is in terms of popular understandings and framings of poverty and the role of the Bible and people of faith in addressing poverty. The first section (Chapters One, Two and Three) is focused on methodology and includes the impact that “Reading the
Bible with the Poor” has on hermeneutics. 34 This methodology is born from other approaches including liberation theologians and contextual Bible scholars especially from South Africa and Latin America. I also include particular biblical study approaches and techniques, in Chapter Three, and describe the pedagogical model of the Poverty Initiative at Union Theological Seminary.

In the second section of the dissertation I explore historical and literary context. I engage Matt 26, its history of interpretation, the Gospel of Matthew, and the social and economic context of the Roman Empire and the life and ministry of Jesus Christ (Chapters Four and Five) because these are important steps in “Reading the Bible with the Poor”. In the third section (Chapters Six, Seven, and Eight), I engage in an exegesis of Matt 26:1-16 that draws heavily from many of the ideas raised by Poverty Scholars in the Poverty Initiative Leadership School Bible study documented above. These chapters all assert striking and controversial potential interpretations of Matt 26 that poverty is central to Jesus and any interpretation of the Bible.

34 Corrine Carvahlo writes, “The theory concerning how one bridges that interpretation gap is called hermeneutics. Hermeneutics is a complex area, involving issues of meaning and interpretation...Whenever you hear a claim that something is wrong because the Bible says so, that’s a hermeneutical claim, the claim of a contemporary reader, from a particular perspective, regarding the meaning and application of a specific biblical text” (Carvalho, Primer on Biblical Methods, 55).
Chapter Two: Poverty and the Bible

Introduction

As I introduced in Chapter One, this dissertation focuses on the ways the Bible—a text replete with references to economic justice and the scourge of indifference to the poor—has been politicized to suggest that poverty is a result of the moral failures of the poor sinning against God, that ending poverty is impossible, and that the poor themselves have no role in impacting their poverty. Biblical texts, especially “the poor will be with you always” are used to justify the inevitability of inequality, and provide religious sanction for the dispossession of the majority for the benefit of the few. Jim Wallis regularly does a short Bible quiz for American audiences he speaks to, asking the question: “What is the most famous biblical text about the poor?” Every time, he receives the same answer: “The poor you will always have with you.” People state “the poor are with you always” as a way to discredit anti-poverty organizing and justify the foreordination of poverty and the proliferation of charity responses to poverty. Such assertions are made by people who place a lot of authority in the Bible as well as people who describe themselves as atheists/agnostics. These assumptions are widespread, pervasive and damaging; they exist across various arenas including the mainstream media, popular culture, by pastors and preachers, and also by biblical scholars and academics. In these next

2 Gareth Stedman Jones, a self-identified agnostic historian, and author of An End to Poverty: A Historical Debate (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008) raised the question of whether ending poverty was possible as is stated in the Bible at a public presentation at Columbia University on November 9, 2005 in response to Jeffrey Sachs. Other panelists include Eric Foner, James Jordan, Emma Rothschild, Amartya Sen and Joseph Stiglitz.
sections, I aim to uncover and analyze the (dangerous) ideas, ideologies, and assumptions made about poverty and the poor through traditional interpretations of Matt 26:6-13.

Popular Treatments of “The Poor are with you Always”

Popular culture is teeming with the assumptions about poverty taken from this passage. These biblical citations serve ideological functions. As Corrine Carvahlo asserts: “This approach to biblical texts assumes that at least one factor behind a text’s composition serves some group’s purpose or interest. This ideological purpose is usually masked, and it is therefore more influential because it is not overt.” Hermeneutics are important, Carvahlo continues, because “first, a claim based on the Bible has a certain amount of authority for many people. This authority requires that we not treat such claims casually.”

The Bible is the most widely read, distributed, and translated book in the United States. Always on the top of the bestseller list, it is cited for many moral stances and consulted for the personal and social decisions many make. Regular Google searches of “the poor will be with you always” reveal the omnipresence of this biblical missive (728,000 mentions on one search) as well as a debate emerging

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3 There are various publications that argue that the Internet is becoming a site of research and public opinion setting. This is interesting to my argument and methodology that the Internet is a place to gather ideas about important assumptions about poverty and a gauge of stereotypes of the poor. For more information on this topic, see Angela Thomas-Jones, *The Host in the Machine: Examining The Digital In The Social* (Oxford: Chandos Publishing, 2010) and Mia Consalvo, et al, eds., *Internet Research Annual: Selected Papers from the Association of Internet Researchers Conferences 2000-2002* (vol. 1; New York: Peter Lang International Academic Publishers, 2004).
4 Carvalho, *Primer on Biblical Methods*, 51.
on the role of Jesus, the Bible, and faith communities in the eradication and amelioration of poverty. Typically, the entry is a personal assertion, reflection, blog post, or series of questions on whether this statement from Matt 26:11, John 12:11 and Mark 14:7 is saying: a) that we can never end poverty, b) that it is the role of Christians to try to care for the poor not the government, or c) that Jesus rather than the poor should be our concern, as well as other common interpretations of this passage. Following are some examples of these contemporary interpretations of Matt 26, Mark 14, and John 12. I have emphasized (in bold) key assumptions about poverty and poor in each. When explored together and in the context of hundreds of other similar Internet entries mirroring and amplifying the content and themes expressed in any one of these quotations, these statements make up some of the “common sense” in contemporary American society about the meaning of the biblical statement, “the poor will be with you always”.

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7 I will explore various statement and positions about “the poor will be with you always” in this section of the dissertation. This quote is one of many such interpretations:

There is an important lesson here for Christians who do relief and development work among the poor. Too many Christian activists are ruining their health and destroying their families while justifying the zeal because of their commitment to the poor. In the name of the poor, activist workaholics suffer from poor health and burnout, and they damage their spouses and children. This is not a gospel stance. This is not what Jesus asks us to do. Our devotion must be directed at Jesus, not the poor themselves. While we certainly are supposed to love our neighbor, especially our poor neighbor, we are to worship only Jesus. The woman understood this and the disciples did not. Getting your spirituality and worship right is key to sustaining one’s service to God and the poor (Bryant Myers, “Will the Poor Always be with Us?” n.p. [cited 31 January 2014] Online: http://www.evangelicalsforsocialaction.org/will-the-poor-always-be-with-us/).

8 I found the following quotations about “the poor will be with you always” doing a series of searches on Google. I have cited the varied sources and tried to give relevant information of the authors of such statements.

9 Antonio Gramsci uses the phrase “common sense” in his writings. To Gramsci, common sense was the popular consensus of how the world works: “Many elements in popular common sense contribute to people’s subordination by making situations of inequality and oppression appear to them as natural and unchangeable.” Antonio Gramsci, The Antonio Gramsci Reader: Selected Writings 1916-1935 (edited by David Forgacs, New York: NYU Press, 2000), 421.
Poverty will never be eradicated. As Jesus said, "The poor will be with you always..." There will always be people who are physically unable to work, and people who will never work because they simply will not, and people who are too stupid to work for very much money, and people who are criminally inclined to steal from stupid or helpless people, etc. And there will always be people who want to take money away from the higher paid, smart, energetic and enterprising people who are the backbone of this country, and give it to those who are not. Those are the people who refuse to believe what God has said. Poverty CANNOT be cured or eradicated, but there will always be people who try.”  

Though judgmental, this statement contains a number of the core assumptions and interpretations of this text from the Bible to which most people ascribe. The author posits that poverty will never be ended and insists that to try to eradicate poverty is to refuse to follow God’s intentions. Blaming poverty and economic hardship on poor people, the post does not acknowledge that poverty is a social, economic, and political problem nor that the poverty of many is the result of the wealth of a few. It connects the inevitability of poverty and the stupidity and laziness of the economic misfortunate with inattention to God’s message. It asserts that common responses to the poor, through either governmental services taken from taxes or individual charity and acts of benevolence, are not only ineffectual but counter to God’s will. The following quotation from another post further connects theology to pathologizing the poor:

From time to time I think that I should mount a defense of what could (incorrectly) be described as my anti-charitable political policies, in light of all the “love they neighbor” stuff in Christianity . . . I’ve spent weekends and one spring break helping to build houses for the poor . . . when they labored alongside. Given that we each also labored every year to pay taxes to support the poor, to educate the poor and—when both of those fail—to incarcerate some lower-tier fractionate of the poor, I think my job is pretty well done . . . and, really, the fact that all of us—by going to work each

day—support the capitalist underpinnings of our society, we could skip the taxes and still consider it a job well done.\textsuperscript{11}

In this quotation, the author critiques generosity, admits that he contradicts the Golden Rule, and blames poor people for their poverty, asserting that capitalism is the final act of civilized ourselves. Such a defense of capitalism—as the best Christian response to poverty—is touted by many in our society.\textsuperscript{12}

Rabbi Aryeh Spero, another booster for capitalism quoted in footnote 12, asserts that personal responsibility and self-sufficiency are the most widely described themes of the Bible.\textsuperscript{13} To back these claims up, while acknowledging that poverty may have been severe during Jesus’s time, defenders of capitalism argue that there was no capitalism in the ancient world to pull the worthy out of poverty.

\textsuperscript{11} Dispatches from TJICistan, n.p. [cited 16 May 2009]. Online: http://tjic.com/?p=1839
\textsuperscript{12} Aryeh Spero writes a defense of why capitalism is the best anti-poverty response in an editorial in the \textit{Wall Street Journal}: "More than any other nation, the United States was founded on broad themes of morality rooted in a specific religious perspective. We call this the Judeo-Christian ethos, and within it resides a ringing endorsement of capitalism as a moral endeavor. Regarding mankind, no theme is more salient in the Bible than the morality of personal responsibility, for it is through this that man cultivates the inner development leading to his own growth, good citizenship and happiness. The entitlement/welfare state is a paradigm that undermines that noble goal... The motive of capitalism’s detractors is a quest for their own power and an envy of those who have more money. But envy is a cardinal sin and something that ought not to be. God begins the Ten Commandments with ‘I am the Lord your God’ and concludes with ‘Thou shalt not envy your neighbor, nor for his wife, nor his house, nor for any of his holdings.’ Envy is corrosive to the individual and to those societies that embrace it. Nations that throw over capitalism for socialism have made an immoral choice" (Aryeh Spero, "What the Bible Teaches About Capitalism" \textit{Wall Street Journal}, Jan 30 2012), n.p. Cited 17 October 2013. Online: http://online.wsj.com/news/articles/SB10001424052970203806504577179303330474134).
\textsuperscript{13} The following statement made by New York City Mayor Michael Bloomberg is in response to a series of New York Times articles that critique his administration for their poor handling of the problem of homelessness and feature the trials and tribulations of a homeless girl living in a NYC shelter named Dasani. Mayor Bloomberg makes several excuses for the existence of the deplorable conditions in which this family lives that are exposed in this series (that are in line with some of the other stereotypes and assumptions around poverty as due to poor parenting, the lack of education, drug addiction, and laziness). This particular quotation, however, shows how deeply theological views about poverty and its inevitability are: "This kid was dealt a bad hand, I don't quite know why, but it's just the way God works. Sometimes some of us are lucky and some of us are not" (Azi Paybarah, "Bloomberg on Dasani: 'Sad' but 'Atypical,'" \textit{Capital New York} [December 17, 2013] n.p. [cited 18 December 2013]. Online: http://www.capitalnewyork.com/article/city-hall/2013/12/8537528/bloomberg-dasani-sad-atypical).
Others separate out the poor in Jesus’s day and insist that poor people today do not take advantage of the benefits and opportunities afforded to them.\(^{14}\) Some blame the economic crisis that started in 2007 on poor people rather than on anything more systemic to our economic system. In the case of the following quotation, the author actually asserts that this is what Jesus was trying to tell us when he said “the poor are with you always.”

We have hashed over and over the causes of the banking crisis. Basically, the democrats forced banks to make loans to people with BAD credit (because they were "underprivileged"—due to racial, gender, sexual, and other types of discrimination). We couldn't bring in illegal Mexicans to build all the new houses fast enough. There was a "feeding frenzy" in the lending world and even though the democrats created those opportunities, we had to hear "predatory lending, predatory lenders, predatory this, predatory that," \textit{ad nauseum}, attempting to make us feel sorry for the financially irresponsible, discriminated-against, underprivileged "groups" that "fell prey" to those "bad old" predatory lenders. \textbf{Naturally, the mortgage payments stopped coming in. That’s what financially irresponsible people do. They don't honor their contracts. As Jesus said, "the poor will be with you always."}

You can’t even get rid of them with a letter bomb, especially if it looks like a bill. \textbf{The rich keep getting richer and the poor keep getting poorer because the rich continue to do the things that got them rich, the poor keep doing the things that keep them poor} and the democrats—who wouldn’t have it any other way—keep being re-elected by the poor.\(^{15}\)

Prosperity gospel preachers and self-help gurus also believe in the inevitability of poverty and personal responsibility, proposing higher standards of personal responsibility for the poor than for those more fortunate. In the following

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\(^{14}\) "Today’s ‘poor’ enjoy luxuries that would have stunned the Sun King (ever count the satellite TV dishes at Regent Park?) often paid for by my hard earned tax dollars. The poor Jesus championed were destitute, without state sponsored education and health care—and more importantly, without the benefits of living in a capitalist society. Capitalism, not socialism, has lifted more people out of poverty than all of Cash & Co.’s hair-brained big government schemes" (Andrew Cash, \textit{Relapsed Catholic Blog}, n.p. [cited 5 May 2010], Online: http://relapsedcatholic.blogspot.com/2005/10/andrew-cashs-bumpersticker-theology.html).

\(^{15}\) Russ J. Alan, “Your home value is falling...refinance?” (February 8, 2009), n.p. [cited 22 October 2013]. Online: http://www.renewamerica.us/columns/alan/090208.
quotation, the author claims that he has a solution to the economic insecurity some face but does not claim that poverty can end:

Poor is a condition I find very sad. Sad, yet inevitable. Jesus said, "The poor will be with you always." And they will...I didn't write this book for the poor people of the world. I know it is going to take a lot more than a book to help truly poor people...Broke is NOT a condition like being poor. Broke is a situation you find yourself in because you are either under earning or overspending. I can't fix poor, though I would love to. I'm good, but I'm not that good. I can fix broke...I will show you how, step by step. I wrote this book for the average person who has a job, makes a living, and still can't seem to get ahead.16

While the quotations I have explicated so far embody a more conservative and partisan portrayal of attitudes towards poverty and in some cases demonize the poor, even people more sensitive to the plight of the poor follow a similar logic.17 Many “politically conscious” and self-identified “liberal” Christians come up to me after I present on poverty and complain about how they have seen poor people use their food stamps to buy shrimp and steak, rather than the hot dogs they can afford and should therefore buy. They claim that poor people lack the guidance to make informed, responsible financial decisions that result in continued poverty. This is shown in the following quotation:

Why does poverty exist? In the case of my family it was a number of factors. My father’s dad was born in 1876. He was also a coal miner. My dad was a child from a second marriage. And so far as I am able to learn, none of the family members were ever college educated. More importantly, we were never pushed or guided to want to go to college and thereby and hopefully, better our lives. This happened because of a lack of education to begin with. One cannot appreciate to the full extent what one has never experienced.

17 Russ J. Alan, the author of the quotation above, identifies as politically conservative. His articles have appeared on several websites such as USA Today, The Wall Street Journal, USNews and NPR online sites. He is also a journalist for DigitalJournal.com.
So...my answer to the question of why does poverty exist will be...a lack of guidance and understanding of what is required to escape from poverty. An education, opportunity, and the willingness to work and the discipline to keep working to get those keys to escape. Poverty will always be with us. As will the sick. As will be any unfortunate circumstance. It IS the human condition.”

In the above quotation, the existence of poverty is naturalized and ultimately attributed to the fault of the poor. Rather than accusing the poor of living off the largesse of others or acting irresponsibly with the limited resources they have, the author asserts that it is for the lack of guidance that so many people in our country and world are poor. Referring to the Bible, this statement and others like it assert that poverty is a human condition. Inadequate necessities are a given and individual human behavior, sometimes referred to as “sin”, is the cause of poverty and dispossession. Therefore, if poverty is a human condition, it can never be uprooted.

Unlike statements where poor people are directly blamed for their poverty and God is explicitly justifying poverty, this author ascribes to the value and necessity of individual charity:


19 In his book on pragmatism, Wells describes how John Dewey and other architects of American liberal political thought viewed religion in connection to social problems and injustices. Wells asserts that the pragmatists believe that economic crisis, war, insecurity, poverty, are not caused by exploitation or oppression by the capitalist class, they are due to “forces beyond human control”, to “fate and fortune” in the face of them, human being can only render submission, obedience, and reverence. (Harry K. Wells, Pragmatism: Philosophy of Imperialism (New York: International Publishers, 1954), 181)

20 Merriam Webster Dictionary defines sin as “an offense against religious or moral law” and “transgression of God’s law.” In many cases, sin is discussed in very individual terms where someone fails to adhere to moral law of God’s commandments. However, because God’s commandments as laid out in the Torah are communal, some theologians and biblical interpreters, especially liberation theologians, speak of the concept of structural sin. Oftentimes these theologians name racism, poverty, patriarchy, and other oppressive structures as structural sin.
Jesus said the poor will be with you always. It has been over two thousand years and this statement still holds true. We cannot eradicate poverty but if a neighbor comes to us and asks for a loaf of bread, we should care enough to share if we can meet that need. With that in mind I propose establishing a directory with a Website www.GalesburgCares.org containing all organizations offering various types of assistance. It would include churches, nonprofit organizations and government agencies to better connect the providers with recipients. The groups might be categorized by food, clothing, medical, child care, financial management, housing, etc. I would also like hard copies of the directory to be distributed to all participating organizations connecting the groups with one another for a unified approach to poverty in Galesburg.21

As can be seen here, invoking charity and social service provisions still assumes the deficiencies of the poor that, along with their unfortunate circumstances, leaves the poor with no role or agency to play in addressing poverty.22 The role of charity in sustaining a structure that creates poverty goes unexamined; 23 charity is thus posited as the best/only Christian response possible to growing suffering and misery, never larger social transformation.24

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22 About charity, William Sloane Coffin, sometimes called a “father” of the peace and justice movement in the church, former chaplain at Yale and senior pastor at the Riverside Church, writes, “Many of us are eager to respond to injustice, as long as we can do so without having to confront the causes of it. There’s the great pitfall of charity. Handouts to needy individuals are genuine, necessary responses to injustice, but they do not necessarily face the reason for injustice. And that is why so many business and governmental leaders today are promoting charity; it is desperately needed in an economy whose prosperity is based on growing inequality. First these leaders proclaim themselves experts on matters economic, and prove it by taking the most out of the economy! Then they promote charity as if it were the work of the church, finally telling us troubled clergy to shut up and bless the economy as once we blessed the battleships” (William Sloane Coffin, The Collected Sermons of William Sloane Coffin: The Riverside Years (vol. 2; Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox, 2008), 188).

23 Joan Roelofs focuses on the role foundations, especially liberal foundations like Ford and Carnegie, play in upholding the current economic system: Tax evasion and public relations have motivated most foundations (along with indeterminable amounts of guilt and benevolence.) However, [foundations] greatest threat to democracy lies in their translation of wealth into power. They can create and disseminate an ideology justifying vast inequalities of life chances and political power; they can deflect criticism and mask (and sometime mitigate) damaging aspects of the system; and they can hire the best brains, popular heroines, and even left-wing politicians to do their work (Joan
But such assumptions and statements are not from only people with little day-to-day experience among the poor or those seeking to justify their inaction in the face of growing poverty or to promote a self-help book or political platform. These assumptions are internalized by some of the very leaders involved in building a movement that purports to be about ending poverty.

Although a significant leader in the movement to end poverty and an organizer for over twenty years, Ron Casanova from Artists for a Better America in New York, New York, wrote in his book, *Each One, Teach One: Memoirs of a Street Activist* that we may not be able to end poverty. Although she believed that God has called her to work with other poor and formerly homeless people, Glenda Adams from Poor Voices United (PVU) in Atlantic City, New Jersey pulled back from her engagement with PVU because her pastor told her that Jesus said you cannot end poverty so she should focus her energy on building the church instead.

Social worker Bob Mason is skeptical that poverty can really be eliminated or even alleviated, even though he had seen hundreds of families gain housing, gainful employment and come together to win better policies and build a larger movement. Although her conscience and business ethics reminds her to care

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24 Teresa Funicello exposes the role of the “poverty industry” in making money off the poor. Her book has been influential to the Poverty Initiative network: Charities come and go, some lasting only long enough to promote the promoters, others enduring a century or more. Sooner or later they invest money, often vast sums of it, and multiple agendas. Some may have been started with truly beneficent intentions, but even these finally give way to pragmatism that shifts focus away from “helping the poor” and toward sustaining the institution. These dual objectives come increasingly to be at odds; the motivations behind them begin to diversify and encompass a host of additional interests (Teresa Funicello, *Tyranny of Kindness: Dismantling the Welfare System to End Poverty in America* [New York: Atlantic Monthly Press, 1994], 212).

for the poor, Deidre Clark, a supporter and donor to the Poverty Initiative, questioned whether she should donate to organizations dedicated to ending poverty because poverty can only be managed not ended. Although hired by a group of over four-hundred day laborers who have won unprecedented living wage increases in Baltimore, Maryland, one of their paid organizers quit his job saying he could not work for a group that believes in ending poverty, because Jesus says there will always be poverty.²⁶

In sum, popular invocations of Matt 26 are widespread, from across the political spectrum, and pose significant obstacles to coming up with an understanding of the real causes of poverty, the moral responsibility for combatting poverty, and an action plan for how people of conscience can really end poverty.

**Academic Treatments of “The Poor are with you Always”**

Similar assumptions and proposed actions in interpretations of Matt 26:1-13 characterize the writings of biblical scholars today. In her interpretation of Matt 26:6-13, Elizabeth Ford draws a connection between the “Last Judgment” in Matt 25 and the “Anointing of Jesus” in Matt 26 and connects both passages with Jesus identifying with the poor:

The disciples’ concern for the poor, while important, keeps them from being aware of the needs of the one in their midst. It is easy to love at a distance. Sometimes we miss the hungry one who stands before us (cf. Matt 25:31-46).²⁷

²⁶ These anecdotes come from my personal experiences organizing amongst the poor for the past twenty years.

While Ford’s association of Jesus and the poor is significant, she still individualizes the poverty of the unnamed poor and Jesus’s poverty and suffering and pits Jesus’s needs against the work against poverty. Renowned biblical scholar, Ulrich Luz, explains that putting concern for Jesus over concern for the poor has been a central interpretation throughout the ages; he writes that Theophylactus\(^{28}\) asserted that Jesus deserved better than the poor and that Calvin suggested that with the approach of Jesus’s death, concern for Jesus should take precedence.\(^{29}\) Biblical scholar, Craig Evans, insists that the poor are still a concern for Jesus and his followers: "Jesus is not indifferent to the needs of the poor—the disciples will have many opportunities to care for them—but they will not always have the opportunity to minister to Jesus."\(^{30}\) And Evangelical New Testament scholar, Grant Osborne writes, "The disciples were thinking of the external ministry of their apostolic band rather than the internal reality of Jesus as he faced destiny… for her thoughts were on Jesus while the disciples’ minds were on others. Hers was an act of love or piety rather than an act of almsgiving."\(^{31}\) Each of these interpreters separates Jesus and the poor: Osborne goes so far as to separate love and piety from care for the poor as well.

New Testament scholar Gail O’Day insists that Jesus’s reaction to the disciples is about connecting the extravagance of the woman in caring for him with a duty to care for the poor:

Judas protests the anointing ([John] 12:5-6), but his protest does not diminish Mary's act. Rather, it reaffirms the extravagance of her gesture—she has spent almost a year's wages for Jesus. Judas tries to establish a situation of either/or love: either you love Jesus or you love the poor. Jesus refutes Judas by affirming the kind of both/and love Mary has shown: one can love both Jesus and the poor (12:7-8).  

This interpretation lets poverty remain central in this passage and includes poverty as a concern and even condition of Jesus, a position with which I agree. Nonetheless, it keeps the conversation about the poor and Jesus on a personal level and still suggests individually ministering to the poor (poor Jesus or other poor) is the primary way to meet the poor's needs.

However, while these biblical scholars do not blame the poor for their poverty nor minimize the importance of poverty to God and the Bible, Jewish New Testament scholar, Amy-Jill Levine interprets this passage as contrary to the centrality of the poor and poverty in general. She emphasizes both the importance of people with wealth and the role they play in the gospel and she contrasts Jesus's heavenly mission and more material/earthly matters like helping the poor. About this, she writes:

The disciples' complaint that she has wasted the funds that might have been given to the poor contrasts the woman's true understanding of Jesus' fate with their focus on earthly—albeit important—matters.  

Levine sets up a dichotomy between heaven and earth, between Jesus and the poor. She also interprets this passage to say those who have a responsibility and ability to ameliorate poverty are the wealthy:

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Like the other evangelists, Matthew emphasizes the costliness of the ointment. The economic notice is consistent with the identification of Joseph of Arimathea as a “rich man” ([Matt] 27:57) and the beatitude about the “poor in spirit” ([Matt] 5:3) rather than simply the poor (cf. Luke 6:20b). The rich are welcome in the church, as long as their money is appropriately used (i.e. in service to others).  

In this commentary, Levine sets up an us/them dichotomy. She asserts that money is the solution to poverty at the same time as reducing the agency of the poor and Jesus’s association with the poor. She minimizes any structural critique of wealth or any special attention given to a relationship between the creation of poverty and the production of wealth.

Levine, however, is not alone in her interpretation that this passage foregrounds the responsible use of wealth and the instruction of believers to give to the poor. Many scholars argue the message from Matt 26 and its parallels, especially the connection of Deut 15:11 and Matt 26:11, is to inspire Jesus’s followers to give amply to those in need.  

Ordained minister and anti-poverty activist, Noelle Damico, writes about this passage,

‘You always have the poor with you’ is not meant to be an excuse for doing nothing to address the needs of the poor. On the contrary, the fact that the world will continue to create structures that demean, defraud, and destroy those who are most vulnerable, means that we who are people of God must defy the complacency of the rich, the healthy, and the socially secure and open our hands.

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34 Levine, "Matthew", 348.  
35 “The disciples concern for the poor is by no means incorrect…Jesus’ statement ‘you always have the poor among you’ (v 11) must not be taken to mean that as a consequence one need not worry about them or that all attempts to ameliorate the condition of the poor are ill-founded and futile. This cannot be made clearer than by citing the full text of Deuteronomy 15:11…The ongoing presence of the poor does not provide an excuse to ignore them and their plight, but, quite the contrary, it provides the ongoing opportunity and stimulus to help them.” (Donald Hagner, Matthew 14-28 (vol 33B of Word Biblical Commentary; Dallas, Tex.: Word Books, 1995), 759).  
Amidst this focus on giving to the poor, New Testament emeritus professor, Donald Hagner, insists that Deut 15 signals the inevitability of poverty and thus the necessity for charity: “The poor are a reality in every society of every age (cf. Deut 15:11a). Jesus, on the other hand, will not always be physically with the disciples . . . One cannot miss what is implied: there will be opportunity in the future to minister to the needs of the poor.”37 And New Testament professor and Jesuit priest, Daniel Harrington, insists that this overall concern with money in this passage is particular to the Gospel of Matthew: “the story had a particular message for the Matthean community, whose wealth made it unduly concerned with money.”38 However, as explored in detail in Chapters Five, Six, Seven, and Eight, Matt 26 is not only about the actions of the middle-class and wealthy, nor simply about distributing money. Interpretations that focus on those with resources using them responsibly and assert that giving to the poor is a major way to end poverty fail to fully grapple with the passage’s intertextuality or acknowledge a much more fulsome interpretation where economic justice is God’s will and the Jubilee prescriptions are set up to ensure that poverty is addressed.

Socio-historical biblical scholars Bruce Malina and Richard Rohrbaugh provide their own interpretation of Jesus’s quotation. They assert that this statement speaks of a ‘limited good’ society where every commodity/resource that can exist does exist and is already fully distributed. These scholars interpret Jesus’s statement as accepting or at least explaining the reality of economic distribution of

37 Hagner, Matthew 14-28 , 758.
the ancient world. While they do assert that for some to become wealthier, others must become poorer—a structural argument about the relationship of wealth and poverty—they do not suggest that Jesus opposes this economic structure. They also minimize any agency the impoverished have in addressing poverty. Instead, for the poor to have more, the wealthy have to give some of their riches away.

The final assumption that dominates the biblical commentaries on “the poor will be with you always” is the separation of religion and politics. Many scholars hesitate to see Jesus as political or advocating anything more than personal piety. As I will elaborate more fully in Chapter Seven, many scholars do not believe that Jesus is anointed as king and Christ in this scene. Ulrich Luz writes,

As attractive as the idea itself might be, at the very least the present narrative in no way suggests that the unknown woman anointed Jesus as the messianic king. It is a careless assumption that later narrators would have so completely obscured this original sense of the anointing.

Therefore it is assumed that Jesus's instruction about the poor is simply on a spiritual not a material level. Many biblical scholars thus cordon off the concepts of love, piety, and discipleship to Jesus from Jesus's concern to transform society, politically and economically. In general, just like the assumptions and quotations from popular culture and the Internet make claims about the relationship of Jesus to the poor, these biblical scholars fall back on similar themes in their interpretations: spiritualizing (heaven rather than earth), ritualizing (Jesus counts more than the poor), individualizing (individual charity or almsgiving is the only solution), and

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moralizing (we must help the poor because they cannot help themselves) about Jesus and the poor.

Theological Obstacles and “The Poor Are With You Always”

Given the ways this passage conditions popular and scholarly ideas about poverty, I have identified five main biblical obstacles, from Matt 26 and the New Testament in general, that contribute to naturalizing poverty and marginalizing the poor: 1. Poverty was not an issue in Jesus’s time; 2. Jesus believed in the inevitability of poverty; 3. Poverty is an individual and not a social problem; 4. Poverty is a result of individual sin not structural sin; and 5. Jesus is concerned with spiritual poverty and other spiritual matters rather than material poverty and problems. To break these down further:

1. Socio-historical: Poverty was not an issue in Jesus’s time.
   a. There was no significant poverty among Jesus or his followers;
   b. Jesus was not primarily concerned with poverty issues, nor did or does make major prophetic statements about poverty and injustice in his own words, compared to the Hebrew prophets;
   c. The Roman Empire improved the lives of the vast majority during Jesus’s time including the poor. The Pax Romana spread peace, infrastructure, and order, building roads and sewage systems, sponsoring banquets, and handing out the dole to the poor. These program did more to lift up the poor than ever before in history;
   d. Since Jesus’s statement was made during a plentiful supper and the unnamed woman shows up out of nowhere with ointment that costs a
year’s salary, clearly Jesus and his followers were not struggling economically.

2. Text-based: Jesus understood poverty to be inevitable.
   a. Poverty will never end and it is an affront to God to contradict the words of Jesus;
   b. Just like Jesus could not prevent his death, poverty cannot be prevented;
   c. If Jesus wanted to end poverty, he would have done so. The agency in ending poverty is only God’s;
   d. God blesses some people with prosperity; therefore the rich should be generous with their wealth, but not challenge the polarization of wealth and poverty;
   e. Jesus does not present an earthly alternative to poverty in his message or ministry;
   f. While justice for the poor is a main theme throughout the Bible, the fact that Jesus says that “the poor will be with you always” in Matt 26:11 is the key text for interpreting his other teachings on poverty.

3. Sociological: Poverty is shown as an individual problem not a social problem.
   a. The stories about poverty and healings in the Bible are about individuals not social groups; these people move up and out of poverty individually at the same time as others fall into poverty;
   b. The Bible is intended for individual reflection and practice, to treat it socially and sociologically is to miss the gift of it;
c. In Jesus’s anointing, Judas is the one who brings up poverty (or one of the disciples) and says that the money spent on the ointment could have helped a number of poor individuals;

d. Jesus is executed alongside petty criminals and robbers (27:38) where he clearly does not belong;

e. Jesus is about helping out individuals in need, not coming up with a larger social program;

f. The reference to Deut 15:11 in Matt 26:11 means that because people are disobedient to God’s commandments, individuals are implored to give to the poor even in the face of sustained poverty; giving money is the way to address poverty and therefore those with money/wealth are the ones with a solution to poverty.

4. Theological: Poverty is a result of individual sin not structural sin.

   a. Poverty occurs because of individual failure and sin;

   b. If anyone is poor, they lack sufficient faith;

   c. Personal piety and faith is the desire and aim of Jesus (and his ministry), not systemic analysis or solutions;

   d. When Jesus announces in 26:11-12 that he will die soon, it is the result of the individual betrayal of Judas (26:14-16) and the complicity of the Temple elites (26:57-67). These are individual behaviors and actions and not something plotted and planned to benefit the status quo.
5. Theological: Jesus’s central concern is spiritual poverty more than material poverty and problems.
   
a. The Kingdom of God is understood as something otherworldly and teachings in the Bible, including the Lord’s Prayer, are seen as metaphysical and ephemeral rather than concerned with survival and materiality. That is why there are statements about not to worry about what you will eat or wear and admonitions that humans should not live by bread alone;[41][42]

b. We can only end poverty in Heaven and at the end of time;

c. The role of Christians is to evangelize people. While meeting material needs might be necessary for followers of Jesus to assist people in finding God, it is secondary to the real mission of the church, which is to save souls;

d. In Matt 26, Jesus is impatient with the disciples talking about material things like ointment and helping the poor and reorients the conversation. Jesus is going to leave and go to Heaven, and that the disciples should be focused on preparing spiritually for his death.

**Conclusion**

As we have explored in this chapter, biblical teachings on poverty have a significant and often damaging impact on public debates in our day. Because of the importance and weight placed on the Bible, Jesus, and the Church in contemporary

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41 “Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or drink; or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothes?” (Matt 6:25).

U.S. culture, people concerned with economic justice have to revisit biblical teachings on the subject. This dissertation draws from a larger tradition of liberative biblical interpretation, both in terms of meaning making and makers. As this liberative exegesis is not new, we will explore the roots and practices of the methodology of “Reading the Bible with the Poor” in the next chapter.
Chapter Three: Reading the Bible with the Poor

Introduction

This chapter aims to further develop and describe a biblical hermeneutic that we have termed, “Reading the Bible with the Poor.” This method of contextual biblical study draws from the methods developed/developing in South Africa with the Academy of the Poor and Latin American liberation theology and Christian base communities. What is particularly distinctive about “Reading the Bible with the Poor” is its U.S. context: a large population of impoverished Christians who are already familiar with the Bible (and the damaging interpretations discussed in Chapters One and Two), a population already steeped in a rights-based framework, and a heterogeneous group of poor people that is growing everyday.

Although our “Reading the Bible with the Poor” has been influenced by a wide range of post-colonial, feminist, liberationist and other biblical scholars, this

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1 As I explore more throughout the chapter and have introduced in Chapter One, “Reading the Bible with the Poor” has developed within the context of the Poverty Initiative at Union Theological Seminary including professors like Dr. Brigitte Kahl and other empire-critical and liberationist scholars committed to freedom from poverty. Therefore I use the pronouns “we,” “our,” and “us” to describe the communities of practice and accountability to this method and a larger liberation project with the Bible.

chapter focuses on three exemplary Bible study models, from South Africa (from Gerald West and the Academy of the Poor), Latin America (from Ernesto Cardenal and The Gospel in Solentiname) and the United States border (with Bob Ekblad’s Reading the Bible with the Damned), and elaborates what is distinctive in such studies in the contemporary United States. The world of contextual Bible study is too vast to do it justice here, therefore, I have focused on these three practices that have been particularly influential on the methodological approach of “Reading the Bible with the Poor.”

In the second half of the chapter, I also look at the components of this methodology including the role of the leadership of the organized poor, the

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3 Gerald West, Academy of the Poor: Towards a Dialogical Reading of the Bible (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1999); Ernesto Cardenal, The Gospel in Solentiname (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 2010); Bob Ekblad, Reading the Bible with the Damned (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox, 2005).
necessity of education and consciousness-raising, and the importance of religion and biblical interpretation in the larger work of ending poverty. Key concepts considered in “Reading the Bible with the Poor” include a critique of charity, a rights-based framework, and larger liberation agenda. The chapter concludes by investigating the steps in the development of “Reading the Bible with the Poor,” including the relationship with empire-critical methods of biblical interpretation and lessons learned from semester-long courses and other activities developed in collaboration with the Poverty Initiative at Union Theological Seminary.

**Methodological Influences from South Africa, Latin America and the US Border**

Gerald West, biblical scholar and Director of the Umajaa Center at the University of KwaZulu Natal, explains how contextual Bible study has been used in South Africa: “As the South African context constantly reminds us, biblical interpretations have life and death consequences; they shape the type of response the state, the church, and ordinary people make to particular social realities. They have effects.”\(^4\) Because of these impacts, Gerald West and other South African biblical scholars took up a method of biblical interpretation with the organized poor in the late 1980s in apartheid-era South Africa that approaches the text critically and with emphasis on liberation.

Gerald West lays out the four main tenets of this contextual Bible study in *Academy of the Poor: Towards a Dialogical Reading of the Bible*\(^5\) and the website of

\(^4\) West, *Academy of the Poor*, 16.

\(^5\) “Socially engaged biblical scholars have always accepted the parameters of the contextual Bible study process; that the Bible must be read from the perspective of the organized poor and marginalized, that the Bible must be read together with the poor and marginalized, that Bible
the Umajaa Center that include the role of the organized poor, the practice of reading in community, the relationship of the Bible to a larger social transformation project, and a critical reading of biblical texts.  

Briefly, what has come to be called “contextual Bible study” in South Africa is a Bible reading process that takes place within the framework of liberation hermeneutics. The framework of commitments that encompass contextual Bible study include: first, a commitment to begin the reading process from the experienced reality of the organized poor and marginalized, including their language, categories, concepts, needs, questions, interests and resources; second, a commitment to read the Bible communally “with” each other, where power relations are acknowledged and equalized as far as possible; third, a commitment to read the Bible critically, using whatever critical resources are available, including local critical resources and the critical resources of biblical scholarship; and fourth, a commitment to social transformation through the Bible reading process.  

These commitments led the Umajaa Center to translate the Bible into many languages and dialects. They recognize the experience, knowledge, and intellectual rigor of those in struggle and find many opportunities to bring biblical scholars and organized poor people together. Critical interpretation facilitates both a hermeneutic of suspicion and one of trust: no text and interpretation is safe from being interpreted in potentially harmful ways and yet there is the possibility of liberative frameworks and interpretations. One particular issue they have encountered is the ways that some biblical scholars romanticize or minimize the contributions of the poor to the study. Thus, much of their work emphasizes the important role of the poor in such Bible studies. Their work also minimizes the reading is related to social transformation, and, significantly, that the Bible must be read critically” (West, Academy of the Poor, 46).

6 For more details on the contextual bible studies see the website for the Umajaa Center, which Gerald West directs, at: http://ujamaa.ukzn.ac.za/history.aspx.

7 West, Academy of the Poor, 5-6.

8 West, Academy of the Poor, 18.
differences between many critical Biblical scholars—finding them useful as all contributors to the larger contextual Bible study process:

While biblical scholars differ, because they have different interpretative interests, on the modes of critical reading to be used, some favouring socio-historical modes (e.g. Itumeleng Mosala and Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza), others literary and rhetorical modes (e.g. Phyllis Trible and Mieke Bal), and still others symbolic, thematic, and metaphoric modes (e.g. Sandra Schneiders and J. Severino Croatto), offer a critical reading of the Bible—they ask systematic and structured sets of questions of the Bible. 

This model of contextual Bible study and particularly the work and ministry of Abahlali baseMjondolo, the South African Shack Dwellers Movement, one of the participating organizations at the Umajaa Center, have had a profound impact on the approach of the Poverty Initiative. The Poverty Initiative has brought leaders from Abahlali baseMjondolo to the United States on four separate occasions, learning lessons on the agency of the organized poor and building mutual solidarity between the poor in the United States and South Africa. General Secretary of Abahlali, Bandile Mdlalose, emphasized the challenge that organized poor people pose to current inequality and oppression and the role of the Bible and religion in the movement:

I’m proud to be in an organization that fights for, protects, promotes and advances the dignity of the poor. Our struggle is a struggle for respect, which puts people first and is people driven. I’ve lately looked at how God plays a huge role in my struggle. If it wasn’t for God we wouldn’t be where we are today. It is true that God is always on the side of the poor. Today we have bruises and scars from our fight for Human Dignity. Our government does not believe that the poor people’s dignity needs to be respected. If the government recognised our dignity we would be living an equal life. The fact that there is a huge difference between how the poor and the rich live and are treated shows that the government does not recognise us because we don’t have money. But in front of God’s eyes we are all the same. God made humanity out of his own image, as a sign of that we are all the same. In fact Jesus was born into a poor family. He did not take his message to the rich and

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*West, Academy of the Poor, 46-47.*
hope that it would trickle down from there. He lived amongst the poor and he chased the money changers out of the Temple. Christianity began as a religion of the poor. So I ask myself why are the poor treated differently today?¹⁰

Ms. Mdlalose’s piece about the role of God, the Bible, and the poor in struggle has been influential to poor people organizing in the United States and used in “Reading the Bible with the Poor” sessions of the Poverty Initiative at Union Theological Seminary. This statement posits the inherent dignity of all human beings and that “God is always on the side of the poor.” It challenges the morality of inequality and questions any government that does not respect every person. Mdlalose claims biblical stories as her own.

Another key influence on “Reading the Bible with the Poor” from South Africa is the statement by Anglican Bishop Rubin Phillips against the repression of Abahlali baseMjondolo:¹¹

In the main, the repression of the struggles of the poor has been met with silence and indifference … We must repent. We must commit ourselves to taking a stand with the poor. We must commit ourselves to insisting that democracy is for everyone. Campaigns in defense of democracy that do not take the ongoing repression of grassroots activists seriously are deeply flawed. I wish to be clear that taking a stand with the poor is not a question of easy sloganeering and empty rhetoric … It is not a question of bussing poor people in to NGO meetings where they are exhibits rather than full and equal participants. It is not a question of experts speaking for the poor. Taking a stand with the poor is a matter of walking the path of suffering and struggle with the poor. It requires a presence within the struggles of the poor.¹²

¹¹ Bishop Desmond Tutu was predecessor to Bishop Rubin Phillips as Archbishop of the Anglican Church in South Africa. Both leaders exemplify the important and advanced role of religious leaders in the anti-apartheid and post-apartheid struggles for justice, dignity, and prosperity for all.
¹² Bishop Rubin Phillip, “Remembering Steve Biko: a Bright & Guiding Light in Dark Times,” n.p. [cited 7 December 2013]. Online: http://abahlali.org/node/9189. Here is more of Bishop Rubin Phillip’s statement delivered at St Philip’s Anglican Church, Fingo Village in Grahamstown on September 19, 2012:
This challenge to current institutions to actually side with the poor forms an important starting point for “Reading the Bible with the Poor” and was a foundational impulse for Latin American Liberation theology from the 1960s onwards.13

Turning our attention across the globe to the Americas, we find other examples of liberation-based and contextual Bible study relevant to this dissertation, especially The Gospel in Solentiname from Nicaragua and Christian Base Communities and Bob Ekblad’s Reading the Bible with the Damned, an account of Bible study with men in a jail on the U.S./Mexico border.14 These models place justice-oriented, marginalized people reading and interpreting the Bible together.

As we search for the strength to set ourselves on the path of justice, a path that always leads to conflict with worldly authority, a path that always exacts a toll, we do well to seek courage and inspiration in the great figures of the past. Here in Grahamstown the historical connection to a decisive moment in Biko’s political life brings us into a concrete sense of community with his spirit. There are other great figures that have passed through this town. We think, of course, of people like Makhanda Nxele and Neil Aggett. But we do no honour to the heroes of the past by misusing them to mask the injustices of the present. We do no honour to the heroes of the past by making them the private property of individuals or particular organisations. We honour the heroes of the past by bringing their courage and wisdom into communion with the struggles of the present. Here in Grahamstown unemployment is at an unconscionable level. People have been living without the dignity of something as basic as a toilet while millions go missing from the coffers of the local municipality. We have taken heart at the news that the unemployed have been organising themselves here in Grahamstown and that students, academics, and clergy have stood with them. We were not surprised to hear that Ayanda Kota from the Unemployed People’s Movement was arrested on a bogus charge early this year and assaulted in the police station in front of his young son. We were not surprised but we were angry, very angry. The days when the police behaved like this were supposed to have passed. We will not compromise in the face of a return to repression. We will not compromise with those, be they in the police, the unions, parliament or the universities, that offer succor to repression. We will cast repression from the temple of our democracy . . . The massacre in Marikana did not come out of nowhere. In 2007 we, together with a large group of Church Leaders, spoke out clearly when a peaceful Abahlali baseMjondolo march was savagely attacked by the police in Durban. In 2009 we spoke out, again in community with other Church Leaders, when Abahlali baseMjondolo were attacked in Kennedy Road in Durban. Activists were openly threatened with death, their homes were destroyed and some had to go underground for months. This moment marked the beginning of a precipitous descent into open authoritarianism and repression.

14 About the purpose of his work, Ekblad writes:
Ernesto Cardenal, a Nicaraguan Catholic priest, engaged in a contextual Bible study project with peasants on the islands of Solentiname from 1965-1977 (when Solentiname was burned to the ground). Much like the Bible study that opens up Chapter One of this dissertation, Cardenal’s model was to read a Bible passage and to ask members of the community to comment on the meaning and connection to daily life and struggle. This Bible study involved people from one community involved in a larger social project, some of them ultimately joining the Nicaraguan revolution. He documented their Bible study on a small island in Lake Nicaragua in the multi-volume work, *The Gospel in Solentiname*:\(^{15}\)

Not everyone who lived on these islands came to mass. Some didn’t come for lack of a boat. Others, because we didn’t have devotions to the saints as they were accustomed to doing. Others were influenced by anticommunist propaganda, and perhaps also by fear. Not everyone who came participated equally in the discussion. Some spoke up more often than others … They, and all the others who often spoke up and had important things to say, and those who spoke little but also said important things … are the authors of this book. More importantly, the true author is the Spirit who inspired these comments—the campesinos of Solentiname knew very well that it was the Spirit who made them speak—the same Spirit who inspired the gospels. The Holy Spirit, the spirit of God infused throughout the community.\(^{16}\)

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\(^{15}\) “These discussions took place during the Somoza dictatorship; the dictatorship was always a part of them, along with the hope that liberation would soon come” (Cardenal, *The Gospel in Solentiname*, xiii).

\(^{16}\) Cardenal continues to describe who was involved in their contextual Bible studies:
The Gospel in Solentiname has become the quintessential example of Latin American liberative exegesis. It documented for the world the power and possibility of poor people interpreting the Bible themselves, sending the message that liberation for the poor and oppressed were the true meaning and original intent of the Gospel writers. Although just one example of a larger project of liberation theology and the development of Christian Base Communities throughout Latin America, the experience from Nicaragua signals a key theological move: what has come to be known as the “Preferential Option for the Poor” and the insistence on God’s condemnation of poverty and the moral, political, and epistemological agency of the poor in their own liberation and the ending of poverty and oppression.

Written in pre-revolutionary Nicaragua, The Gospel in Solentiname was banned by the Somoza dictatorship because of the will it inspired for many poor people to take

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Marcelino was a mystic. Olivia was more theological. Rebeca, Marcelino’s wife, always talked about love. Laureano saw everything in terms of the revolution. Elvis was always thinking about the perfect society of the future. Felipe, another youth, was constantly aware of the proletarian struggle. His father, old Tomas Pena, couldn’t read but spoke out of a deep wisdom. Alejandro, Olivia’s son, was a youth leader; he had guidance to offer everyone, especially other young people. Pancho was a conservative, but later took a different position. Julio Mairaena was a staunch defender of equality. His brother Oscar always talked about unity... Oscar called it the spirit of unity. Alejandro called it the spirit of service to others. Elvis called it the spirit of the future society. Felipe called it the spirit of equality and community sharing, Laureano called it the spirit of the revolution, and Rebeca called it the spirit of love. (Cardenal, The Gospel in Solentiname, xiii)


18 In 1962, Pope John XXIII called the Second Vatican Council (Vatican II) to try to adapt the Christian message to a modern world and called for the church to become involved with the struggles of the poor. This was in response to discussions and activities taking place in Latin America and across the world of the scourge of poverty and the role of the Church in addressing such problems. See Arthur F. McGovern, Liberation Theology and Its Critics (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1989), 5; Christian Smith, The Emergence of Liberation Theology (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1991), 94-96; Berryman, Liberation Theology, 7. In the late summer of 1968, the Latin American Episcopal Conference (CELAM) met in Medellin, Colombia, with the purpose of applying the concepts of Vatican II to Latin America. The outcome was a document that would ultimately be the basis for liberation theology (Smith, The Emergence of Liberation Theology, 18). Another outcome and point of discussion was the creation of Christian Base Communities (Berryman, Liberation Theology, 23).
up a struggle against the concentration of power and wealth. Given the revolutionary action it provoked, *The Gospel in Solentiname* illustrates the potential power of liberative interpretations of the Bible:

All of us in the community were radicalized by these discussions of the gospel. Little by little we came to identify with the revolutionary movement in Nicaragua, until at some point we became a part of it. Some of the young people wanted to leave the community and become guerrilla fighters. I was having a hard time holding them back. They didn’t go then, in part because of a message from a legendary guerrilla leader . . . saying that we had to hold the Solentiname community together; it was important to the revolution in social, political and military, tactical and strategic terms.

The fact that this small Christian Base Community in Nicaragua came to play such an important role spiritually, politically, and militarily in the Nicaraguan Civil War demonstrates the potential political implications of the Bible. The Solentiname model has been shared worldwide, inspiring many other Christian Base Communities and growing social movements everywhere. In fact, many of the leaders of the Poverty Initiative have built connections with liberation theologians and contextual Bible scholars in Latin America over the past decades. The Poverty Initiative has sent delegates to the National Congress of the Brazilian Landless Worker’s Movement, hosted religious and community leaders from Nicaragua, El

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21 The development of liberation theology in Latin America in the 1960s and 1970s were significant. Outbreaks of politics and theology were occurring elsewhere as well: Politically and theologically, the 1960s in Europe were a decade of exciting events and developments. With the Second Vatican Council, the emergence of liberation theologies, the World Conference on Church and Society in Geneva in 1966, and the decision of the World Council of Churches to initiate its Programme to Combat Racism in 1969, along with the utopian outburst of social hopes and passions in the student rebellions in Prague, something had changed. The issue of social injustice and economic, political, and racial oppression had been put on the theological agenda of the churches. It was in this context that new ways of reading the Bible came to the fore in many countries of Western Europe (Brigitte Kahl, “Towards a Materialist-Feminist Reading,” in *A Feminist Introduction* [vol. 1 of *Searching the Scriptures*; ed. Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza; New York: Crossroad, 1993], 223).
Salvador, Brazil, Mexico, and many other countries, and built what we have termed “globalization from below” between base communities and revolutionary struggles in Latin America with the poor organizing in North America.22

Pope Francis notes the influence of Latin American Liberation Theology on his own worldview. At Thanksgiving 2013, Pope Francis wrote a 50,000 word apostolic exhortation about the moral challenge of poverty and the great idolatry of economic disparity:

Just as the commandment “Thou shalt not kill” sets a clear limit in order to safeguard the value of human life, today we also have to say “thou shalt not” to an economy of exclusion and inequality. Such an economy kills. How can it be that it is not a news item when an elderly homeless person dies of exposure, but it is news when the stock market loses two points? This is a case of exclusion. Can we continue to stand by when food is thrown away while people are starving? This is a case of inequality . . . The excluded are not the “exploited” but the outcast, the “leftovers.” In this context, some people continue to defend trickle-down theories which assume that economic growth, encouraged by a free market, will inevitably succeed in bringing about greater justice and inclusiveness in the world. This opinion, which has never been confirmed by the facts, expresses a crude and naïve trust in the good news of those wielding economic power and in the sacralized workings of the prevailing economic system.23

22 I was the lead organizer of the March of the Americas in 1999 where leaders from over twenty Latin American social movements including Brazil, Columbia, Peru, El Salvador, Bolivia, Venezuela, and Mexico marched from Washington, D.C. to the United Nations calling out the U.S. government for economic human rights abuses; I participated in the 20th anniversary of the MST (the Brazilian Landless Workers’ Movement) in the summer 2004 and have hosted leaders from El Salvador, Mexico, and Brazil at Union Theological Seminary.


Human beings are themselves considered consumer goods to be used and then discarded. We have created a “throw away” culture which is now spreading. It is no longer simply about exploitation and oppression, but something new. Exclusion ultimately has to do with what it means to be a part of the society in which we live; those excluded are no longer society’s underside or its fringes or its disenfranchised—they are no longer even a part of it . . . The current financial crisis can make us overlook the fact that it originated in a profound human crisis: the denial of the primacy of the human person! We have created new idols. The worship of the ancient golden calf (cf. Ex 32:1-35) has returned in a new and ruthless guise in the idolatry of money and the dictatorship of an impersonal economy lacking a truly
This instruction demonstrates the continuing leadership role that Latin America has played in liberative exegesis.

Yet another influence on “Reading the Bible with the Poor” comes from Bob Ekblad and his project of *Reading the Bible with the Damned*. Ekblad critiques mainstream Christianity for its silence on theological inclusion and acceptance of the poor and marginalized. He asserts that the Scripture has been domesticated human purpose. The worldwide crisis affecting finance and the economy lays bare their imbalances and, above all, their lack of real concern for human beings.

Ekblad lists the major influences on him and his work:

My own approach to participatory reading at the margins has been deeply influenced by the grassroots Bible-reading movement pioneered in Brazil and elsewhere in Latin America commonly known as *lectura popular de la biblia* (grassroots or people’s reading of the Bible). Carlos Mesters’s many writings and important work in the Brazilian base community movement (CEBI) and Ernesto Cardenal’s seminal example of *lecturas popular* in Nicaragua published as *The Gospel in Solentiname* are the best-known representatives of this approach to popular reading. The return to Scripture after Vatican II and the rise of liberation theology led to an outpouring of reflections. (Ekblad, *Reading the Bible with the Damned*, 3-4)

Ekblad suggests a number of important methodological assumptions in his Bible study practice, including that the purpose of his book and larger project of leading and documenting Bible studies with those in jail, on the streets, and struggling with other problems, is to equip mainstream Christians to really serve the poor and marginalized:

Mainstream Christians often support valuable programs that aim at helping the underclass “catch up” with the mainstream. However, most Christians are ill-prepared for any kind of ministry of the Word with those outside the institutional church. Those with a message of forgiveness and love, or at least with access to helpful theologies, often keep this “good word” among themselves, leaving the underclass to fundamentalist groups, Jehovah’s Witnesses, sectarian evangelicals, and the Mormons—or to whoever is willing to go out into the streets and meet people where they are, often door-to-door. This must change! The survival of the church is dependent on ordinary Christians rediscovering good news in the Scriptures with and for others and for themselves. (Ekblad, *Reading the Bible with the Damned*, 5)

“One of the greatest barriers between mainstream Christians and people on the margins is that mainstream Christians often represent the dominant culture and do little to nothing to distinguish themselves from it. It is not only that many churches include in their membership judges, prosecutors, police officers, probation officers, welfare case workers, landlords, employers, and other active promoters of the system—though this reality alone may keep many of society’s ‘offenders’ far from these churches. Few Christians would deny the importance of communicating grace, unconditional love, and forgiveness of sin in Jesus Christ. Yet the church is often silent about issues that directly affect the poor (harsh sentences by the courts, racial targeting by law-enforcement agencies, harsh immigration policies, mistreatment of the poor by landlords and employers, etc.)” (Ekblad, *Reading the Bible with the Damned*, xvi).
from its radical message; God has been portrayed as strict and punishing and
decidedly not on the side of the prisoner or the dispossessed: 27

Domestication of God and the Scriptures resulting from isolationism is the
most destructive pitfall inhibiting liberating reading of the Bible. Biblical
interpretation is never neutral. The Bible is locked up by theologies we
absorb from our subcultures, whether we grow up in the church or not.
Hidden or consciously embraced theological assumptions and other
presuppositions influence our interpretation, causing us to automatically
interpret along traditional lines. Left unchallenged, these assumptions will
cause us to consciously or unconsciously look for evidence in the Bible to
support our ideas. 28

Therefore the first and most important step in his Bible study is to help
marginalized people identify contemporary parallels between the Bible stories and
their lives. 29 “While a primary objective of Scripture study is to hear God’s voice,
another critical objective is for people to discover their own, so they can
communicate.” 30 Many of Ekblad’s lessons are aimed at mainstream Christians
changing their allegiance from the status quo towards the poor and marginalized. 31

The agency and organization of the poor, however, is not emphasized as much by

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27 “As I continued to lead Bible studies with people on the margins I ran repeatedly into what
are probably the most debilitating images of God and self. God is seen as a strict, easily angered,
punishing judge best kept at a distance to avoid more trouble” (Ekblad, Reading the Bible with the
Damned, 25).
28 Ekblad, Reading the Bible with the Damned, 2.
29 “The chosen Scripture must be introduced in a way that gives people a place of entry into
the foreign world of the Bible. Barriers between reader and story must be addressed through
introductory remarks and questions that invite the people to ponder and discuss the biblical story.
Simultaneously I do all I can to help people identify contemporary equivalents to the biblical
narrative (location, characters, verbs, and other details) in their own lives and world. I strive to bring
people to understand the deeper meaning of the biblical story as these stories illuminate their own
lives and surrounding world” (Ekblad, Reading the Bible with the Damned, 5).
30 Ekblad, Reading the Bible with the Damned, 6.
31 “This good news is no one other than Jesus Christ himself, who meets us through the
words of Scripture and the sacraments, and through the flesh of his beloved family of buen coyote
followers. My own attempt to follow Jesus through accompanying today’s Samaritans, lepers, tax
collectors, and sinners has shown me the necessity of switching sides and changing allegiances.
Pledging allegiance to Jesus above all other authorities and powers comes about as a result of
repentance, understood as having another mind, or after-mind” (Ekblad, Reading the Bible with the
Damned, 196).
Ekblad as in the Academy of the Poor, Latin American Christian Base Communities, or the U.S. based “Reading the Bible with the Poor”, as we will soon explore.

West’s Academy of the Poor, Cardenal’s Gospel in Solentiname, and Ekblad’s Reading the Bible with the Damned are seminal examples of liberation theology and liberative biblical interpretation. These and other feminist, womanist, liberation, and non-violent theologians and theologies construct a theology from the standpoint of our most pressing concerns. Just as Gustavo Gutierrez points out in his book On Job: God-Talk and the Suffering of the Innocent, contemporary liberation theologians and practitioners of contextual Bible study talk about and to God; this direct relationship between the poor and God is a defining feature of liberation theology. For Gutierrez, this is best summed up: “Solidarity with the poor, commitment to the liberation of the exploited classes, and renewed involvement in politics [leads] to a rereading of the gospel message.”

**Contemporary US Contextual Bible Study**

“Reading the Bible with the Poor” grows out of these global examples and has developed within the framework of the Poverty Initiative at Union Theological Seminary and particularly its U.S. context. The theological and biblical battles of the anti-slavery movement have been a core area of study and influence on “Reading the Bible with the Poor.” Abolitionists used the Bible to argue that God condemned

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32 Gutierrez, On Job, 1.
33 Gutierrez, A Theology of Liberation, 13. Gutierrez continues, “If I go out to meet other people on streetcorners and byways, in factories and mines, in decaying inner cities and slums. That is precisely what is entailed in ‘opting for the poor’, because the gospel tells us that the poor are the supreme embodiment of our neighbor” (A Theology of Liberation, 8). He also writes, “We will get a new and distinctive theological perspective only when our starting point is the social praxis of the real population of Latin America, of those whose roots are buried deep in the geographical, historical, and cultural soil of our region but who now stand mute” (A Theology of Liberation, 25).
slavery and that all Christians and people of conscience should follow. Indeed, these religious interpretations provided a crucial moral force for the abolitionist movement because the biblical legitimacy of slavery was widely assumed and thus a key prop to the institution of chattel slavery in the U.S.\textsuperscript{34}

“Reading the Bible with the Poor” also draws inspiration especially from the words and work of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and his launching of the Poor People’s Campaign in 1967-1968.\textsuperscript{35} The strategic concept introduced by this historic campaign aimed “to lift the load of poverty” through uniting the poor across color lines into “a new and unsettling force.”\textsuperscript{36} Other influential U.S. social movements that take up the Bible in their push for social justice include Paul Rauschenbusch and the Social Gospel Movement and the revivals and spirituals of the Southern Tenant Farmers Union. These influences and movements are integrated into our Bible studies.


\textsuperscript{36} From Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King’s “Nonviolence and Social Change” in the Massey Lectures for the Canadian Broadcast Service:

The dispossessed of this nation—the poor, both white and Negro—live in a cruelly unjust society. They must organize a revolution against . . . the structures through which the society is refusing to take means . . . which are at hand, to lift the load of poverty. There are millions of poor people in this country who have very little, or even nothing, to lose. If they can be helped to take action together, they will do so with a freedom and power that will be a new and unsettling force in our complacent national life (King, \textit{The Trumpet of Conscience} [Boston: Beacon, 1968; repr. 2010], 53-66).
Turning from the influences to the methodology of “Reading the Bible with the Poor” itself, there are a set of theoretical assumptions that inform the study and use of biblical texts. First, successful social change has most often been led by those most affected by the problems they are working to resolve. Second, committed, competent, connected, and clear leaders of a social movement need to be developed and conscientized. Third, faith/religion play a critical role in these struggles and movements, therefore the content and impact of Bible study and religious practice matter. I will explore these tenets that inform the contextual Bible study method here.

**Building a Social Movement Led by the Poor**

The Great Recession that started in 2007-2008 continues to impoverish increasingly more families years later. Community leaders and their organizations wage innovative campaigns to demand access to affordable housing, living wage jobs, healthcare, immigrant rights, workers’ rights, and education reform, but even as these grassroots organizations win unprecedented victories including labor protections, higher wages, universal health care, and so on, conditions are

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37 About rising inequality and the need to develop new models of organizing, Ann Robertson and Bill Leumer write:

Thanks to Occupy, most working people are well aware of the growing inequalities in wealth . . . In other words, not only are the rich getting richer, the rest of us are getting poorer. Many factors have converged to produce these trends. Good-paying manufacturing jobs have migrated overseas. Technology has replaced many other good-paying jobs. More importantly, across the country many unions have demonstrated an overwhelming willingness to accept concessions without waging a struggle, thereby contributing to the growing inequalities. This willingness to give up hard won gains in turn has resulted in the continuing decline of union membership, which now stands at 8 percent (Ann Robertson and Bill Leumer, "Rising Poverty and Social Inequality in America," n.p. [cited 7 December 2013]. Online: http://www.globalresearch.ca/rising-poverty-and-social-inequality-in-america).

38 Domestic Workers United won a Domestic Workers Bill of Rights in 2011 where, for the first time in history, domestic workers are guaranteed limited benefits, worker protections, and
worsening and the victories are small compared to the erosion of rights, lowering of wages, widening of inequality, and dispossession. To those engaged in community struggles, the conditions demonstrate the need for a broader social movement.

better pay under New York State law. In the fall of 2013, the National Domestic Workers Association was able to win a more universal law where domestic workers are included in the National Labor Relations Act for the first time in history. For more information on the Domestic Workers Bill of Rights, see both Domestic Workers United and the National Domestic Workers Alliance. For more information on federal labor law see http://www.dol.gov/whd/homecare/finalrule.htm.

In 1999, the Coalition of Immokalee Workers launched their Taco Bell Campaign where they started pressuring companies for which Florida farmworkers picked tomatoes. Their demands were simple: pay one penny more per pound for the tomatoes (and ensure that the penny is passed on to the workers) that would double the wages of farmworkers, offer training and monitoring of the growing associations by the CIW, and broker agreements between the growers, farmworkers, and fast food and supermarket industries. To date, Taco Bell, YUM! Brands, McDonalds, Burger King, Whole Foods, Wal-Mart, and Chipotle have all signed on. For more information on the Coalition of Immokalee Workers and the Campaign for Fair Food, see http://ciw-online.org.

In 2012, the Vermont Workers Center won universal health care for all Vermont residents after a five-year long campaign across the state. For more information on this bill and the bigger Health Care as a Human Right Campaign that has grown to Maryland, Maine, and Pennsylvania, see http://workerscenter.org.

"Nationwide," the count of America’s poor remains stuck at a record number: 46.2 million, or 15 percent of the population, due in part to lingering high unemployment following the recession. . . The risks of poverty also have been increasing in recent decades, particularly among people ages 35-55, coinciding with widening income inequality. For instance, people ages 35-45 had a 17 percent risk of encountering poverty during the 1969-1989 period; that risk increased to 23 percent during the 1989-2009 period. For those ages 45-55, the risk of poverty jumped from 11.8 percent to 17.7 percent. Higher recent rates of unemployment mean the lifetime risk of experiencing economic insecurity now runs even higher: 79 percent, or 4 in 5 adults, by the time they turn 60 . . . By 2030, based on the current trend of widening income inequality, close to 85 percent of all working-age adults in the U.S. will experience bouts of economic insecurity. "Poverty is no longer an issue of “them,” it’s an issue of “us,”" says Mark Rank, a professor at Washington University in St. Louis who calculated the numbers" (Associated Press, “4 in 5 Americans live in danger of falling into poverty, joblessness,” July 13, 2013. [cited 7 December 2013]. Online: http://usnews.nbcnews.com/_news/2013/07/28/19738595-ap-4-in-5-americans-live-in-danger-of-falling-into-poverty-joblessness).

Learning lessons from the Southern Christian Leadership Conference and its key role in the U.S. Civil Rights Movement, a modern movement requires a sophisticated core of leaders, versed in the Bible and liberative theology, capable of analyzing and developing solutions that address the complexity of poverty and injustice today.\textsuperscript{43} Inspired by Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.’s conclusions about the need for the poor in the United States to unite across color lines and issues, my work over the past two decades has focused on developing a core of highly skilled leaders in order to build a powerful multi-racial, multi-faith, multi-issue network of grassroots low-income, community and religious leaders.\textsuperscript{44} Such leaders are not just born—they rely on systematic education and training. In fact, decades of organizing experience have shown that organizations with a comprehensive education and leadership development program are more able to sustain their efforts.\textsuperscript{45}


\textsuperscript{44} Many authors, scholars and social justice leaders suggest that Martin Luther King Jr. left a void when he was assassinated. Books on this topic include: Michael Eric Dyson, \textit{I May Not Get There with You: The True Martin Luther King, Jr} (New York: Free Press, 2001); Vincent Harding, \textit{Martin Luther King: The Inconvenient Hero} (New York: Orbis Books, 2008); William F. Pepper, \textit{An Act of State: The Execution of Martin Luther King} (New York: Verso, 2008); William F. Pepper, \textit{Orders to Kill: The Truth Behind the Murder of Martin Luther King} (New York: Carroll & Graf, 1995).

\textsuperscript{45} It has been my experience that grassroots organizations that do not have a focus on leadership development and education are not able to sustain the people who get involved in their organization. The National Union of the Homeless went into demise in the mid-1990s for lack of education and training of its leaders. Other examples from non-profits, NGOs, and other community organizations also tell the same story.
Historically, successful social movements have been led by those most affected by the problems they are working to resolve. Slaves and ex-slaves led the anti-slavery movement; people of color led the Civil Rights Movement; women led the women’s suffrage movement.\textsuperscript{46} In their own time, those very people struggled for recognition that the problem they were facing was immoral, that their struggle was legitimate, and that they were fit to lead it.\textsuperscript{47} Yet today, we recognize the moral evil of slavery, and the right—and necessity—of slaves and ex-slaves to lead the struggle to end it.

Given the images of the poor as lazy, crazy, addicted, ineffective, violent, or pathetic that dominate in U.S. culture, the concept of the leadership of the poor seems remote.\textsuperscript{48} Everyone but the poor is looked to for solutions to end poverty, whether it is social workers, church members, lawyers, or legislators. But as Frederick Douglass had to argue to others in the Abolitionist Movement: the leadership and unity of the slaves was the first step in ending slavery. He insisted on the moral, political, and epistemological agency of enslaved people.\textsuperscript{49}

\textsuperscript{46}This understanding of the history of social movements and social change as well as an emphasis on political education and leadership development is emphasized in Willie Baptist and Jan Rehman, Pedagogy of the Poor (New York: Teachers College Press, 2011).

\textsuperscript{47}For more information about the Abolitionist movement and the struggles many slaves and ex-slaves had to establish their agency and legitimacy, see especially the biographies of many of the most influential (religious) leaders: Frederick Douglass, Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass: An American Slave, Written by Himself (London: St. Martin’s Press, 2002); W. E. B. DuBois, Black Reconstruction in America 1860-1880 (New York, Free Press, 1999); Kate Clifford Larson, Bound for the Promised Land: Harriet Tubman: Portrait of an American Hero (New York: Ballantine Press, 2004); Stephen Oates, To Purge This Land of Blood: A Biography of John Brown (Amherst, Mass.: University of Massachusetts Press, 1984).


\textsuperscript{49}In his powerful speech about West Indian Emancipation, Frederick Douglass critiques those, even within the anti-slavery movement, who diminish the role and political agency and aptitude of the slaves and former slaves. This speech has been influential in the work of the Poverty
Poverty Initiative network, we believe the first step in building a movement is uniting those most affected by the problem. While rooted in the unity of the poor, this movement has to involve a broad cross section of people.

*Defining the Leadership of the Poor*

There are two strategic aspects of the leadership of the poor that inform the method of “Reading the Bible with the Poor”: leadership of the poor as a social group and leadership of individuals from the ranks of the poor as well as from other ranks/sectors. Leadership of the poor as a social group means putting emphasis on Initiative where poor people have gotten inspiration knowing that slaves and ex-slaves had to struggle to assert their agency and dignity:

*I know, my friends, that in some quarters the efforts of colored people meet with very little encouragement . . . This class of Abolitionists don't like colored celebrations, they don't like colored conventions, they don't like colored Anti-Slavery fairs for the support of colored newspapers. They don't like any demonstrations whatever in which colored men take a leading part. They talk of the proud Anglo-Saxon blood, as flippantly as those who profess to believe in the natural inferiority of races. Your humble speaker has been branded as an ingrate, because he has ventured to stand up on his own right, and to plead our common cause as a colored man, rather than as a Garrisonian. I hold it to be no part of gratitude to allow our white friends to do all the work, while we merely hold their coats. Opposition of the sort now referred to, is partisan opposition, and we need not mind it. The white people at large will not largely be influenced by it. They will see and appreciate all honest efforts on our part to improve our condition as a people. Let me give you a word of the philosophy of reform. The whole history of the progress of human liberty shows that all concessions yet made to her august claims, have been born of earnest struggle. The conflict has been exciting, agitating, all-absorbing, and for the time being, putting all other tumults to silence. It must do this or it does nothing. If there is no struggle there is no progress. Those who profess to favor freedom and yet deprecate agitation, are men who want crops without plowing up the ground, they want rain without thunder and lightning. They want the ocean without the awful roar of its many waters. This struggle may be a moral one, or it may be a physical one, and it may be both moral and physical, but it must be a struggle. Power concedes nothing without a demand. It never did and it never will. Find out just what any people will quietly submit to and you have found out the exact measure of injustice and wrong which will be imposed upon them, and these will continue till they are resisted with either words or blows, or with both. The limits of tyrants are prescribed by the endurance of those whom they oppress. In the light of these ideas, Negroes will be hunted at the North, and held and flogged at the South so long as they submit to those devilish outrages, and make no resistance, either moral or physical. Men may not get all they pay for in this world, but they must certainly pay for all they get. If we ever get free from the oppressions and wrongs heaped upon us, we must pay for their removal. We must do this by labor, by suffering, by sacrifice, and if needs be, by our lives and the lives of others." (Frederick Douglass, "West India Emancipation: Speech delivered at Canandaigua, New York, August 3, 1857" [cited 9 December 2013] Online: http://www.lib.rochester.edu/index.cfm?PAGE=4398).
social networks and organizations of the poor as important for social change, rather than having the poor solely come together for mass mobilizations or as mascots for particular issues.

The leadership of the poor as an organized force is a disputed concept in contemporary U.S. politics where many social theorists and politicians emphasize the power of the poor to disrupt and agitate rather than to organize, build power and influence, and theorize. To these theorists and politicians, the poor are a largely passive mass—bodies to be “mobilized” to temporarily disrupt society in order to gain concessions. In *Poor People’s Movements*, social theorists Frances Fox Piven and Richard Cloward argue that the spontaneous uprisings of the poor are more likely to win concessions than building organization among the poor. They critique membership-based organizations of the poor, as well as resources spent on political education for the poor, as misguided because in their view organization will only blunt the spontaneous outbursts of the poor and be more likely coopted by parliamentary types of approaches. Our experience differs from that of Piven and Cloward and other scholars and activists who see the role of the poor as disruption.50

50 Some of the most famous social theorists who claim the power of the poor is in their ability to mobilize and disrupt are Frances Fox Piven and Richard Cloward, especially in their book *Poor People’s Movements*. Piven and Cloward offer a normative view of what type of organization social movements of the poor should form and what types of activities they should engage in. They criticize the National Welfare Rights Organization (NWRO) for deviating from their strategy paper *Mobilizing the Poor: How it Can be Done* that they circulated in 1965. In that paper, Piven and Cloward called for focusing all activity towards flooding the welfare rolls, which would create a budget crisis and then “mayors and governors would call upon the federal government with increasing insistency to establish a federally financed minimum income.” (Frances Fox Piven and Richard Cloward, *Poor People’s Movements: Why They Succeed, How They Fail* [New York: Vintage Books, 1978], 321). The NWRO stands accused of spending too much of their time fighting for their own members and not enough carrying out Piven and Cloward’s strategy of flooding the welfare rolls with new recipients: “NWRO, however, has generally considered it more important to build up its
Also distinctive is the large social claims that biblical readers and interpreters of “Reading the Bible with the Poor” make; the organized poor have not just a resistance but transformational agenda. James C. Scott, a popular scholar particularly influential on biblical scholars, asserts that the poor use “hidden transcripts” and resistant behaviors in the face of power and repression. For Scott, there seems to be no possibility of the subaltern—the poor and marginalized—escaping their condition: the possibility of transformational change is “all but foreclosed.”

Since acts of micro-resistance are not precursors to a more organized, overt struggle for power, they take on a new significance; because there is nothing else to do but deploy “ridicule . . . truculence . . . irony . . . petty acts of noncompliance . . . foot dragging . . . dissimulation,” these acts are to be “celebrate[d]” as ends in themselves. They are elevated because any attempt to form organization to fight for rights is dismissed.

For Scott, all the subaltern requires is to struggle on a local and immediate level: he argues for this position by crafting a hypothetical protest: “Can one imagine a rural protest movement with banners proclaiming ‘stop agrarian capitalism’ or ‘down with the cash nexus’? Of course not. Such undeniable facts are far too abstract and remote; they fail completely to capture the texture of local membership rolls than to build up the welfare rolls (on the dubious premise that poor people can develop political power through permanent membership organizations)” (Piven and Cloward, Poor People’s Movements, 327).

I will explore the important contribution of James C. Scott and his studies of peasant resistance and subaltern studies more in Chapter Four. See James C. Scott, Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1985); and Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1990).

Scott, Weapons of the Weak, 350.

Scott, Weapons of the Weak, 304

Scott, Weapons of the Weak, 350.
experience.” The power of Scott’s argument about the seeming absurdity of such banners is based on Scott conflating the political slogans one might use to mobilize people with the political analysis that might inform such an action. It is unclear why the subaltern are necessarily unable to distinguish between the two. Nor is it clear why it would be absurd to think that the subaltern could produce a more thorough understanding of their situation. Emphasizing the theological and political agency of the poor distinguishes “Reading the Bible with the Poor” from other efforts to meld poverty, the Bible, and social change.

In order to develop such leaders who aspire to build organization/movement and transform society, education and consciousness-raising is the central activity needed to build a social movement to end poverty. Antonio Gramsci discusses the role of leaders or, as he calls them “organic intellectuals,” in his seminal work, The Prison Notebooks. Organic intellectuals are not external to the subaltern but produced by the subaltern and its struggles: “Every social group . . . creates together with itself, organically, one or more strata of intellectuals which give it homogeneity and an awareness of its own function not only in the economic but also in the social and political fields.” Organic intellectuals do not import ideas that are external to the subaltern to educate them. Instead, “it is the intellectuals who transform the incoherent and fragmentary ‘feelings’ of those who live a particular class position into a coherent and reasoned account of the world as it appears from that

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55 Scott, Weapons of the Weak, 348
position.” Intellectuels express the collective will of the class of poor and dispossessed, reflecting their ideas back to them a more systematic form, in a way that can help to advance collective action. Thus for Gramsci, intellectuals are both products of the class and producers of the class, existing in dialectical relationship with one another.

This concept of intellectuals and leadership development from Gramsci has much to contribute to leadership development processes used in “Reading the Bible with the Poor.” Just as other sectors of society rely on universities and leadership training programs to hone technical skills, capacity for analysis, and making systematic connections, and develop human capital, the development of individual leaders from the ranks of the poor and other sectors therefore is secured primarily through political education, joint study, and intellectual exchange and training. This practice of study groups has long historical roots at places like Highlander Folk School and organizers like Myles Horton, Ella Baker, and Septima Clark as well as the Black Panther Party. These study groups also help to cultivate grassroots leadership training.

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Because popular conceptions about poverty are in most cases inaccurate, incomplete, and biased, education is central for people to build new information and understandings about poverty. These popular values and views are held intact by myths and stereotypes, as well as by traditional biblical interpretations and other values shaped by religious thought and tradition. So simply having more accurate information and social analysis on poverty is insufficient for consciousness-raising.

Rather new, liberative interpretations of the Bible can play a key role in consciousness-raising. “Reading the Bible with the Poor” therefore is aimed at capturing people at various levels of consciousness and education—from basic textual studies on poverty in the Bible to more advanced grappling with some of the most difficult biblical texts that require years of study to really tackle.

**Melding Piety and Politics**

Just as rigorous educational processes are important in this social transformation work, attention to spirituality and religious practice is important for leadership for a social movement as well. This does not mean instrumentalizing religion; rather we have found that leaders in social movements find in their religious traditions an inspiration and deep legitimacy for their demands and a source of sustaining strength for the hard fight to realize them. Engaging and organizing the poor shows the need to develop a new morality and social practice that posits that ending poverty is possible and transforms religious beliefs and practitioners into transformational values and change agents. This morality promotes justice over charity and asserts that poverty, rather than the poor person, is immoral.

“Reading the Bible with the Poor” takes place in contexts connected to organized religion as well as in poor communities and other movement spaces that

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Even just a brief survey of important social change efforts in the United States brings forth the view that religious leaders play an important role. Many of the leaders in the South and North during the Civil Rights Movement were pastors and lay leaders in churches. Most of the key Abolitionists were religious in their own right. Globally, this is the case as well.
become “spiritual” as organized religion has been unwelcoming to poor people. They involve people who are deeply religious or pious but not engaged in organized religion; pastors and lay leaders from churches; and human rights activists who see the strategic importance of religion but do not adhere to a particular one. Although not insisting that the Bible is revolutionary as a starting point, participants cannot get too far into “Reading the Bible with the Poor” without exploring the political message in the Bible and the idea that a social and political movement of the poor is religious. The method, therefore, is aimed at re-interpreting individual texts but also re-interpreting the Bible as a whole to focus on liberation of the poor. Rather

63 The following excerpt from Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King’s “Drum Major Instinct” speech connects the political and economic issues of the contemporary period with religion. This melding of politics, economics and religion is a key component of liberative exegesis:

I know a man—and I just want to talk about him a minute, and maybe you will discover who I’m talking about as I go down the way because he was a great one. And he just went about serving. He was born in an obscure village, the child of a poor peasant woman. And then he grew up in still another obscure village, where he worked as a carpenter until he was thirty years old. Then for three years, he just got on his feet, and he was an itinerant preacher. And he went about doing some things. He didn't have much. He never wrote a book. He never held an office. He never had a family. He never owned a house. He never went to college. He never visited a big city. He never went two hundred miles from where he was born. He did none of the usual things that the world would associate with greatness. He had no credentials but himself. He was only thirty-three when the tide of public opinion turned against him. They called him a rabble-rouser. They called him a troublemaker. They said he was an agitator. He practiced civil disobedience; he broke injunctions. And so he was turned over to his enemies and went through the mockery of a trial. And the irony of it all is that his friends turned him over to them. One of his closest friends denied him. Another of his friends turned him over to his enemies. And while he was dying, the people who killed him gambled for his clothing, the only possession that he had in the world. When he was dead he was buried in a borrowed tomb, through the pity of a friend. Nineteen centuries have come and gone and today he stands as the most influential figure that ever entered human history. All of the armies that ever marched, all the navies that ever sailed, all the parliaments that ever sat, and all the kings that ever reigned put together have not affected the life of man on this earth as much as that one solitary life. His name may be a familiar one. But today I can hear them talking about him. Every now and then somebody says, “He's King of Kings.” And again I can hear somebody saying, “He's Lord of Lords.” Somewhere else I can hear somebody saying, “In Christ there is no East nor West.” And then they go on and talk about, “In Him there's no North and South, but one great Fellowship of Love throughout the whole wide world.” He didn't have anything. He just went around serving and doing good. (Martin Luther King, Jr., “Drum Major Instinct,” in A Testament of Hope: The Essential Writings and Speeches of Martin Luther King, Jr. [ed. James M. Washington; San Francisco: HarperOne, 2003], 259-267).
than locating biblical interpretation only among biblical scholars, the importance of the impact of biblical interpretations on church and larger society is emphasized.

**The Methodology of “Reading the Bible with the Poor”**

Now turning to methods of “Reading the Bible with the Poor” itself, it is important to emphasize critical textual interpretation and engagement of and with the organized poor. There are five methodological strategies employed in “Reading the Bible with the Poor” that I wish to highlight here: critical reading of the text and context (historically and contemporarily); critical engagement with communities in struggle, especially the organized poor; the approach to the Bible as a whole text concerned with poverty; a focus on two key concepts of human rights and a critique of charity; and a liberative ethics of interpretation. These methodological assertions are a larger frame to some of the conclusions drawn from the contextual Bible study at the West Virginia Leadership School that included: (a) study of the text and context; (b) interest in the historical context; (c) study of poor and poverty in the Bible as well as other intertextual work; (d) a look at the parallels of historical and contemporary context; (e) interest in the Christ of Faith and the Jesus of History; and (f) communal Bible study. As I have already explored the practice of these methodological steps in the case of one particular Bible study at a Poverty Initiative Poverty Scholars Leadership School, I will detail some of these larger theoretical and methodological issues of “Reading the Bible with the Poor” now.
Critical “Reading” of the Text and Context

In the Bible studies themselves, we study both text and context. These texts include canonical and extra-canonical sources (with particular attention to the New Testament Gospels and Letters of Paul), primary and secondary literature and images from first century Palestine, poetry, prose, videos, photos, and other forms of texts documenting the poor organizing in twenty-first century America, and books and articles analyzing the growth and spread of poverty and movements of the poor forming to counter poverty. Special attention is placed on the problems of poverty in both as well as proximity to the poor historically and contemporarily. In addition to drawing on participants’ experiences and opinions in the Bible study as individuals and leaders of social organizations of the poor, we integrate scholarly sources in the Bible studies, including historical-critical, liberationist, and other forms of biblical interpretation. In many cases, the drive to explore the biblical text and context in more depth comes directly from poor people engaged in struggle who are coming up against serious issues and interpretations that impede their social change work. This praxis produces a rigorous engagement with the issues at hand, marrying academic study and scholarship with a clarity and urgency on the real problems of the day.

Critical Engagement with Communities in Struggle

One of the main purposes of contextual biblical interpretation is to allow poor people the opportunity to make their own interpretations of and draw parallels to biblical texts, thereby affecting popular conceptions of poverty, religiosity, and modes of social transformation. Since biblical interpretation has
been in the hands of scholars and preachers predominantly trained in institutions of higher education, offering the space for poor people to interpret biblical stories and apply these interpretations to their life situations constitutes a considerable contribution to the field of New Testament Studies.\footnote{Following is an example again from South Africa of the type of interpretation of biblical texts on the part of the organized poor. As I wrote in the first section of this chapter, the Poverty Initiative has used this speech and other writings by leaders in the South African Shackdwellers in our Poverty Scholars program and contextual Bible studies. What has been particularly influential about this quotation is the way that biblical texts are interpreted alongside the life experiences of today’s poor. Rather than accepting the “interpretations” of scholars, clergy and others, poor leaders such as Mdlalose apply the stories from the Bible to their situation finding many resonances and parallels between life in the shacks of South Africa and the slums of Galilee:}

As young leaders, our elders don’t forget to advise us about the 10 commandments of God which are in Exodus 20. I full engaged with this chapter, looked deeply in to it and started to compare it with the way that we are living today. I look into verse 12 which says “Respect your father and your mother, so that you may live a long time in the land that I am giving you.” I don’t stop asking myself if the leaders like Nigel Gumede, have even thought of reading the Bible. They don’t respect elders in our presence. I fail to understand why old people are still living in shacks. How does one feel when one’s elders are living in such state, while the politicians are all living in fancy houses? And our elders are treated like naughty children when they want to discuss matters with the politicians. Building houses does take some time. But engaging people in a respectful way takes no time. All it takes is to recognise them as human beings. Verse 15 says, “Do not steal.” I wonder if all the councilors who are running the communities’ and government’s resources as if they are running their own spaza shop where they take and give whenever they wish to—with the result that today there are lots of people who are being left homeless while according to the computers they are seen as if they have homes—have had time to read this chapter thoroughly. Verse 16 says, “Do not accuse anyone falsely.” There are people from Kennedy Road who today still don’t have homes after they were falsely accused and chased out. 12 members of Kennedy served a year of imprisonment for a crime that they did not commit. Even though the police used torture to try and manufacture a case against the 12 their case was thrown out of the court. The judge found that witnesses were lying and that the police had written witnesses statements. I wonder what Nigel Gumede and Willies Mchunu will say to God for all the tears and stress and frustration they caused to people made in the images of God. Today Gumede and Mchunu are living in their homes while there are leaders from Kennedy who are still in Exile. God will answer one day. No stone will be left unturned, no tear will drop on the flow. God has a dish where all the tears are flowing to and surely he shall answer them. Soon we will be worshipping with Psalm 6:8: “Away from me, all you who do evil, for the LORD has heard my weeping. The LORD has heard my cry for mercy; the LORD accepts my prayer. All my enemies will be ashamed and dismayed; they will turn back in sudden disgrace.” God made all people, rich and poor, and any oppression of any people is a sin in the eyes of God. All oppressors will have to account for their oppression. God is on the side of all struggles for justice. His spirit moves in our struggles and keeps us strong. As we struggle we are bringing his spirit into the world. Amandla! The Struggle of the poor going alongside God shall continue. Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I will dwell in the house of the LORD forever. I am blessed to be Umlali waseMjondolo. (Bandile Mdlalose, “God in My Struggle,” n.p. [cited 7 December 2013]. Online: http://abahlali.org/node/8911)}
gather to do Bible study, it is typically in the context of a Sunday school class, oftentimes under the direction and leadership of a pastor or other established leader, and often only addressing texts those established leaders deem relevant. “Reading the Bible with the Poor” provides a more far-ranging approach by putting poor people’s agency and analysis at the center of the discussion. This includes a broad range of texts, including difficult biblical texts on poverty, along with insisting that leaders of the Bible study be organized poor people themselves.

Some assert that the theological condoning of poverty is because many American churches have lost a connection to the poor. But mere awareness of poverty issues does not transform interpretations of “the poor are with you always” or other biblical justifications of poverty. Many poor people believe the same things about who is to blame for poverty as middle-income or wealthy people do. This is why we have found it important to base new interpretations of the text not just among the poor, but amongst the organized poor and to return to and reinterpret religious texts that have been used to justify poverty and define obedience to God in individualistic terms between a human on earth and God in heaven. Just as not having a connection to the poor can justify middle-class ideas on why people are poor, not having a connection to organized poor people can justify a charity approach that what the fortunate, especially Christians, need to do is save the poor. So, this experience can often be transformative for poor people themselves intellectually and spiritually.

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66 Throughout my two decades of anti-poverty organizing, I have found that most poor people blame themselves for their poverty and are therefore ashamed of being poor.
The form of leadership development and consciousness-raising employed in our method of “Reading the Bible with the Poor” combines rigorous study and applied practice. Therefore, churches and classrooms, anti-poverty campaigns and organized protests, all become locations of contextual Bible study and general political education. This variety has been effective in helping promote a transformation of values, including new theoretical interpretations and new leadership practices alongside the organized poor.

*Approach to the Bible as a Whole Text Concerned with Poverty*

The approach to choosing particular biblical texts themselves for “Reading the Bible with the Poor” merits some attention here as well. Rather than isolating a particular biblical text especially focused on poverty, which potentially leads to proof-texting, we use an arc of biblical texts woven from Genesis to Revelation that is more representative of a biblical theology that focuses on poverty and liberation. Indeed we are interested in larger biblical themes of justice and connections/incongruities between texts. In many cases, biblical interpretation focuses on individual and isolated texts rather than bringing disparate texts together and seeing the connections and intertextualities. This does not mean that we find liberation in every text or biblical book. Instead we acknowledge the various and competing strands in the Bible and offer reflection on how they are influenced by power, inequality, and domination.67

Overall, we use a poverty lens to look at the Bible. With any biblical text, beginning with the creation story, we ask the question: “Are the texts relevant to situations of low-wage work, hunger, homelessness, and the work of social and economic transformation?” Beginning with the hypothesis that many of our biblical texts record stories of poor people with God’s support coming together to make meaning of their lives and improve their living conditions is important here as well, we can find numerous parallels in the biblical stories to poor people organizing today.

**Two Key Concepts: Human Rights and a Critique of Charity**

There are two key content areas that both compliment and serve as a focus for the biblical text in “Reading the Bible with the Poor”: a critique of charity, which helps maintain poverty, and the strategic use of a human rights or justice framework. As I mentioned in Chapter One, explored in Chapter Two, and will revisit in Chapter Six, a nuanced, clear critique of charity/philanthropy/euergetism/patronage runs throughout the Bible, especially the New Testament. Parallel to these Bible studies is the life experience of poor people who have been at the receiving end of charity, in many cases not receiving adequate resources to meet the need, experiencing how charity assuages the compassion of those with more resources into complacency and seeing how some institutions benefit from the poverty of others. “Reading the Bible with the Poor”
puts these experiences and a critique of charity at the center of biblical interpretation.68

“Reading the Bible with the Poor” also puts priority on the social transformation agenda of the Jesus movement. Many biblical scholars and preachers tend to spiritualize the socio-economic context of Jesus’s actions and sayings which in turn make the Kingdom of God ethereal and exclusive rather than a social movement to achieve equality and dignity for all on earth in the present.69 As liberationist biblical scholar, Brigitte Kahl explains, “non-idealist” forms of liberationist contextual Bible study privilege the living experiences of people who are struggling and insist that the Bible and interpretations of it are to affect the

68 With the breadth and depth of poverty in the U.S. and globally, many people have been immobilized by the extent of poverty and their inability to imagine a way to address it; others have conceded that poverty simply cannot be ended; many continue with band-aid solutions because they are concrete actions that seem like they are addressing the problem: when someone is hungry you give them some food. But statistics in metropolitan areas across the United States show that homelessness is widespread and constantly growing. The severity of this problem means that the tremendous effort put into building a house (where one religious congregation mobilizes enormous resources to build a single house for a homeless family over six to eight months) will never be enough to meet the ever-growing need. Charity programs also often maintain a relationship where there are “helpers” and “those who need help” and in fact set up institutions and agencies where people’s jobs rest on the continuation of poverty. For this kind of effort to promote justice, our social services and band-aid programs need to really meet the needs of poor people (rather than giving canned goods to a person with no place to open and cook them); they need to be available all the time in a holistic manner where people’s housing, health care, food, and educational needs can be met (or at least in a network of other services where people can get what they need when they need it rather than limiting such programs to once a month or every three months), and they need to be viewed as a means rather than an ends (where at the same time as receiving housing or food, legislation that will improve housing or health care options for poor people is being advocated for and community organizing and education to develop leadership for a social movement is taking place).

69 In this a speech Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. challenges a separation of the spiritual and material, of heaven and earth. Claims that bring justice and dignity to earth at the present moment have been an important assertion of liberative theologies:

It's all right to talk about "long white robes over yonder," in all of its symbolism. But ultimately people want some suits and dresses and shoes to wear down here! It's all right to talk about "streets flowing with milk and honey," but God has commanded us to be concerned about the slums down here, and his children who can't eat three square meals a day. It's all right to talk about the new Jerusalem, but one day, God's preacher must talk about the new New York, the new Atlanta, the new Philadelphia, the new Los Angeles, the new Memphis, Tennessee. This is what we have to do. (Martin Luther King, Jr., “A Time to Break the Silence”, in A Testament of Hope, 231-244).
material present. Feminist New Testament scholar, Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza elaborates that the Jesus or basileia movement proposed an alternative structure, a non-hierarchal one that blamed the Roman hierarchy and subjugation for the problems in society, not the subjugated themselves. This historical movement was not simply anti-imperial, but stood for a transformative mutual community that was a viable alternative to empire. The egalitarian society modeled by the early Christians serves to inspire the poor who are organizing in the U.S. today and thus is an important content piece for contextual Bible studies.

A second key theoretical framework of “Reading the Bible with the Poor” is the concept of rights, especially human rights. The paradigm of human rights has a long application in U.S social movements. This has been a resonant concern in the US-based freedom struggles; activists starting with W.E.B DuBois in 1945 who brought the situation of the violation of human rights of African-Americans to the

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70 “Nonidealist interpretations of the Bible thus challenged the established historical-critical methods of exegesis to become more critical: first with regard to analysis of the social contexts of biblical texts; second with regard to the social position and economic-political interests of the original author/addressees as well as those of the present reader/interpreter of the text; third with regard to the necessity of turning away from the practice and perspective of the privileged, inasmuch as their position is irreconcilable with the cross” (Brigitte Kahl, “Toward a Materialist-Feminist Reading”, in Searching the Scriptures, Vol 1: A Feminist Introduction (ed. Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza; New York: Crossroad, 1993) 226).

71 Schüssler Fiorenza challenges her readers to move beyond looking at simply the socio-economic context in Galilee two thousand years ago and look at the political context and power dynamics as well. She asks people to move past traditional understandings of the pre-Christian Jesus movement and see the roots of Christianity in the basileia movement that included the poor, women, the marginalized, and others in its leadership alongside Jesus. And she proposes that God’s realm, kingdom, or empire is in opposition and conflict with the kyriarchal system of the Roman Empire. She also asks her readers to look at our modern and postmodern interpretations of the historical Jesus in light of our own socio-political context (including a growing social movement to end poverty and an ever-expanding global empire) and to see common beliefs and understandings being influenced by “[w]ell-financed, right-wing think tanks . . . supported by reactionary political and financial institutions that seem to defend patriarchal capitalism” (Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, Jesus and the Politics of Interpretation [New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2001], 4).

72 Although human rights are a secular concept, many people believe there are deep religious values undergirding human rights. The simplest way this is understood is through the concept of God-given rights or the concept that there are basic political, economic, social, and civil rights inherent to all human beings.
United Nations, raising the injustice of inequality and poverty to the international community. In July 1964, Malcolm X attempted to get African leaders through the Organization of African Unity (OAU) to bring the situation of African-Americans before the UN. From Montgomery to Chicago to Riverside Church in New York City, Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. took up the call for human rights, “to raise certain basic questions about the whole society.” In the 1980s and 1990s, poor people took up the mantle of human rights donning slogans including “housing is a human right” and petitioning international bodies, including the Inter-American Commission of the Organization of American States, to indict the United States for economic human rights violations caused by welfare reform and NAFTA. Thus, Economic Human Rights offer a framework to read the Bible together and to unite poor and working people across color lines into a common struggle.

In contemporary U.S. contextual Bible study today, therefore, we use lessons from

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75 In underscoring two of the most important historical influences on the thinking of the American people, the poor white abolitionist John Brown once stated, “The two most sacred documents in the world are the Bible and the Declaration of the Independence.” See Ken Chowder, "John Brown's Holy War," PBS Documentary transcript. n.p. [cited 7 December 2013]. Online: http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/brown/filmmore/transcript/transcript1.html. Brown insisted that all Americans adhere to especially the teachings of the Sermon on the Mount as well as the Declaration of Independence. See Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Remarks at a Meeting for the Relief of the Family of John Brown, At Tremont Temple, Boston November 18, 1859," [cited 7 December 2013]. Online: http://www.rwe.org/complete/complete-works/xi-miscellanies/i-xv/x-john-brown-speech-at-boston.html. In the Poverty Initiative, we assert that the U.S. Declaration of Independence anticipated and influenced the formulation of the UN’s Universal Declaration of Human Rights, a collection of 30 articles that define the political, civil, economic, social, and cultural rights afforded to all human beings. The Declaration of Independence states, “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all [human beings] are created equal, that they are endowed by their creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness” (The Declaration of Independence: A Transcription, July 4, 1776. [cited 7 December 2013]. Online: http://www.archives.gov/exhibits/charters/declaration_transcript.html).
social movements appeal to human rights in American history as well as from the Bible.

_Ethics of Interpretation: Liberative Exegesis_

As evidenced throughout this chapter, “Reading the Bible with the Poor” has an emancipatory agenda and therefore posits that liberation and the agency of the poor and dispossessed are the focus of biblical texts. This framework is stated explicitly in each Bible study. Putting liberation and the agency of the poor at the center of biblical interpretation produces a cohesive, directed way of doing biblical interpretation. This is not to say that Bible study participants are being coerced, but having a liberationist agenda on the biblical end and an organizing agenda on the interpreter’s end leads to a coherent program of Bible study of the poor. It also reflects the framework of the poor people’s groups who participate in the studies.

In such Bible studies, we raise questions of freedom and empowerment around each Bible passage; we urge the participants to make connections to the liberation theme and to the other biblical passages; we discuss the historical context around each biblical passage in order to understand the manifestations of poverty and wealth in each story; we try to keep our biblical interpretation closely linked to the biblical texts. Thus these contextual Bible studies do not forsake biblical exegesis just to make a liberation point.

We often open with contemporary struggles for justice, thus asserting that the genesis for biblical interpretation is our contemporary context. Starting with the contemporary context and asserting that our current day struggles have parallels in our biblical stories also interrupts traditional and doctrinal interpretations. The
Bible is replete with references to releasing slaves, proclaiming good news to the poor, resisting imperial rule, covenant economics, and God’s commandments to love and care for your neighbor. Indeed, over the course of leading such bible studies, the canon is reimagined and the value of the contemporary stories rises.\textsuperscript{76}

\textit{The Development of the Model}

Over the past twenty-five years, a paradigm shift in biblical studies has taken place at the same time as poor people have been compelled to mobilize, organize and theorize in new ways. The development of empire-critical biblical studies has brought to the forefront a view of early “Christianity” as a transformative and counter-imperial movement. Scholars describe the early Christian movement—called the Jesus Movement, the \textit{basileia} movement, or Christ Cults by different writers—as a social movement seeking to transform the violent and impoverishing empire into an egalitarian society. Although they differ in their approach and findings, together they illuminate early Christianity as a social movement developing from the subjected nations and people of the Roman Empire. This scholarship not only proposes new insights about the historical Jesus or Paul, but also offers a new paradigm in reading and interpreting the New Testament that

\textsuperscript{76} Rev. Dr. Hal Taussig has done groundbreaking work on early Christian writings, claiming that what we know as the biblical canon, especially in respect to the New Testament, is not as firm as many have suggested over millennia. Since the discovery of the Nag Hammadi codices, many scholars have studied these lost works but lay people have only learned about these books as “gnostic” and greatly different from the writings included in the canon. Taussig writes that there may be as many differences between canonical gospels as with writings that were not selected for the canon. He suggests that the decision to keep these lost books out of the biblical canon was political and connected to protecting the Roman Empire. He calls for the inclusion of these “lost” books in the study of the New Testament. Through this process of including more sources from early “Christian” communities in the study of the Bible and sacred texts, Taussig asserts the canon loosens. For more information on this loosening of canon see Hal Taussig, \textit{A New New Testament: A Bible for the 21st Century Combining Traditional and Newly Discovered Texts} (New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2013).
intersected with ideas and activism developing out of poor communities responding to growing poverty and homeless in the United States.

At the same time as empire-critical scholarship was developing, various movements of the poor in the United States, including the National Union of the Homeless, the Kensington Welfare Rights Union from Philadelphia, the Coalition of Immokalee Workers from Southwest Florida, the Atlanta Labor Pool Workers Union, Arise for Social Justice in Springfield, Massachusetts, the Women’s Economic Agenda Project in Oakland, California, the Human Rights Coalition in Detroit, Michigan, the Big Creek in Action from Welch, West Virginia and many others were coming together. In October 1999, this rich movement of the poor and dispossessed in the U.S. intersected with Union Theological Seminary’s 175-year legacy of social justice ministries when Union opened its doors to the March of the Americas. Union administration, faculty, and staff welcomed hundreds of poor and homeless families from the United States, Latin America, Europe, and Canada who were marching 400 miles from Washington, D.C. to the United Nations in New York City, calling attention to the deepening inequality of the Western hemisphere. Leaders from that March had been inspired by the theologies and philosophies of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Myles Horton, and other Union alums whose pulpits, professorships, and

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77 The March of the Americas was organized by the Poor People’s Economic Human Rights Campaign. Hundreds of leaders from poor people’s organizations and movements from the United States as well as Europe, Canada, Central and South America participated in this 400 mile march. The march started in Washington, D.C. at the headquarters of the Inter-American Commission of the Organization of American States where marchers filed a petition indicting the U.S. government for human rights violations because of poverty and social service cuts. The march culminated at the Church Center at the United Nations, but before this celebration, we held 2 days of meetings and exchanges at Union Theological Seminary. I served as one of the lead organizers of this march and have vivid memories of being in James Chapel at Union translating a public event where 13 languages including American Sign Language were all being spoken.
organizations have launched and sustained the major U.S. social movements of our time. Union hosted other major events of this growing movement of the poor following the March of the Americas, including the “Poor People’s World Summit to End Poverty” in 2000, the second “New Freedom Bus Tour” in 2001 and a “Strategy Meeting on Poverty, Welfare, and Marriage Promotion” with leaders from poor people’s organizations, ethicists and denominational leaders in 2002.

In 2003-2004, with the support of Union’s administration, trustees, faculty, and staff, the Poverty Initiative was instituted at Union the formalize the relationship between this growing movement of the poor with the historic legacy of progressive religion. As stated in Chapter One, the Poverty Initiative’s mission is to raise up generations of religious and community leaders dedicated to building a social movement to end poverty led by the poor.

In 2004, Brigitte Kahl and Hal Taussig launched a series of New Testament and Roman Empire conferences and gatherings held at Union Theological Seminary, with the participation of Richard Horsley, Neil Elliot, Sze-kar Wan, John Dominic Crossan, Michael Hardt, and many others including the founders of the Poverty Initiative. Willie Baptist, Rev. Noelle Damico and I led a workshop on “Responses of the Poor to Empire: Then and Now” at that first conference, entitled “New Paradigms in Biblical Interpretation” in November 2004 that addressed how poor and homeless people in the twenty first century, inspired by Jesus and the early Christians, were continuing the struggle for economic justice.78

78 Proceedings from the conference were published in “New Testament and Roman Empire” edited by Brigitte Kahl, Davina Lopez, and Hal Taussig, Union Seminary Quarterly Review 59 no 3-4 2005.
These crosscurrents are where the seeds of “Reading the Bible with the Poor” began. The Poverty Initiative collaborated with each of the following convenings of scholars exploring the New Testament and Roman Empire including a panel discussion with Michael Hardt about the poor “multitude” (Fall 2005), a working group and second-groundbreaking conference exploring the counter-imperial and transformative social movement of the poor ignited by the Apostle Paul in (April 2008), a day-long seminar with Neil Elliot on responses of the poor to empire (September 2008), and a two-day workshop with Richard Horsley on rethinking Christmas (November 2008).

What became apparent in these gatherings were the uncanny parallels between the social (religious), political, and economic order of the Roman Empire that empire-critical scholars were laying out with the growing economic disparities, proliferating wars, and concentrated power of the American system today. Richard Horsley’s work on socio-economic and socio-political contexts of the New Testament within the broad framework of the Roman Empire, including patronage and benefaction in the ancient Mediterranean, shows how these practices and institutions bear resemblance to philanthropy and the social service system currently.\textsuperscript{79} John Dominic Crossan’s and other biblical scholars’ anthropological

\textsuperscript{79} Richard Horsley was Distinguished Professor of Liberal Arts and the Study of Religion at the University of Massachusetts, Boston until his retirement in 2013. He is the author and coauthor of numerous books, including Jesus and Empire, The Message and the Kingdom, and Whoever Hears You Hears Me (New York: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 1999), Christmas Unwrapped: Consumerism, Christ, and Culture (New York: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2001), and many more. Richard Horsley’s groundbreaking work from the Jesus and the Spiral of Violence (Facets; Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1993) to Paul and Empire and Covenant Economics have served as major building blocks in empire-critical biblical scholarship and in the development of “Reading the Bible with the Poor.” Very few scholars and authors have so profusely and effectively contributed more to collaborative rethinking.
work on the social setting of the ancient Mediterranean and the inclusion of Jesus in that poverty and misery is a powerful counter to contemporary society’s attempt to blame poverty on poor people. This work challenges the notion of the culture of poverty and the underclass, where poor people are understood to have no moral agency and where people are assumed to be poor because they are sinners and have no relationship with God. Work on the historical Jesus asserts that the poor and excluded have a special relationship with God because of Jesus’s life situation. Therefore there is an important and productive synergy between the scholarship of Horsley, Crossan, and Kahl as well as other New Testament critics of the Roman Empire and a developing movement to end poverty today that intersects in “Reading the Bible with the Poor.” Horsley has pointed out a methodology of critiquing the power structure of the Roman Empire and drawing parallels with injustice and exclusion in a twenty-first century U.S. context. Crossan has put Jesus of biblical studies in relation to the organizing poor. Richard Horsley is a co-convener of the “Poverty in the Biblical World” program unit of the Society of Biblical Literature.

80 John Dominic Crossan, Jesus: A Revolutionary Biography (San Francisco: HarperOne, 2009), 25.


82 In their book, Say to This Mountain: Stories of Mark’s Discipleship, Ched Myers, Marie Dennis, Joseph Nangle, Cynthia Moe-Lobeda and Stuart Taylor write, Repudiating both the Judean ruling class and the Roman imperial system of his time . . . Jesus envisioned social reconstruction from the bottom up. His practice of inclusiveness and equality questioned all forms of political and personal domination. This Jesus called for a revolution of means as well as ends, enjoining his followers to embrace nonviolence and to risk its consequences (Myers, et al., “Say to This Mountain”: Stories of Mark’s Discipleship [New York: Orbis Books, 1996], xv).

83 For more on this topic see the following books by Richard Horsley: Paul and Empire: Religion and Power in Roman Imperial Society (New York: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 1997) Jesus and the
and Paul in their historical context, demonstrating the moral agency of those most affected by imperialism and poverty.\textsuperscript{84} Kahl has recast Paul’s “justification by faith” into a theology of resistance and transformation.\textsuperscript{85} Schüssler Fiorenza has demonstrated that the communities established by the early “Christians” were egalitarian and challenged the dangerous model of the charismatic leader of historic and contemporary social movements.\textsuperscript{86} Each of these are key components and teachings in “Reading the Bible with the Poor”. This critical scholarship offers useful parallels between these two time periods as well as a framework for analyzing systems of power and dominance that is greatly needed by those engaged in poor people’s movements today.

Following three Bible studies the Poverty Initiative led in our January Immersion courses in 2004, 2005 and 2006, the methodology of “Reading the Bible with the Poor” was brought into being in a semester-long course entitled “Reading the Bible with the Poor” at Union Theological Seminary, co-taught by Rev. Dr. Brigitte Kahl\textsuperscript{87} and myself (Spring 2006), and subsequent courses including “The

\textit{Powers: Conflict, Covenant, and the Hope of the Poor} (Minneapolis, Minn.: Fortress Press, 2010); \textit{Jesus and the Politics of Roman Palestine} (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2013); \textit{The Prophet Jesus and the Renewal of Israel: Moving beyond a Diversionary Debate} (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2012); \textit{Jesus and Spiral of Violence} (Minneapolis, Minn.: Augsburg Fortress, 1993); and, with John Hanson, \textit{Bandits, Prophets, and Messiahs: Popular Movements at the Time of Jesus} (Harrisburg, Penn.: Trinity Press International, 1985).

\textsuperscript{84} Three of the more influential books by John Dominic Crossan include: with Jonathan Reed, \textit{In Search of Paul: How Jesus’s Apostle Opposed Rome’s Empire with God’s Kingdom} (San Francisco: HarpersSanFrancisco, 2004); \textit{Jesus} (2009); and \textit{The Historical Jesus: The Life of a Mediterranean Jewish Peasant} (San Francisco: HarperOne, 1993).

\textsuperscript{85} Brigitte Kahl, \textit{Galatians Re-Imagined: Reading with the Eyes of the Vanquished} (Paul in Critical Contexts Series; Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2010).


\textsuperscript{87} Rev. Dr. Brigitte Kahl has been one of the major influences on this model of biblical interpretation/hermeneutics, “Reading the Bible with the Poor.” Her work in East Germany where she wrote a book about Luke/Acts and the “Gospel for the poor” applies liberation hermeneutics.
Gospel of Matthew” (Spring 2009) and “The Gospel of Paul: Poverty and Spirituality” (Spring 2010). In these courses we drew from many liberationist perspectives and used books including Bob Ekblad’s *Reading the Bible with the Damned* and Ernesto Cardenal’s *The Gospel in Solentiname*. We included empire-critical scholars and sources in the historical context part of the Bible studies; material from King’s Poor People’s Campaign and U.S. abolitionists, and contemporary critiques of charity. We brought organized poor people into these classes who presented their plight, fight, and insight in the struggle to end poverty in conversation with the Bible, historical context, and theological interpretations.88 We balanced scholarly tools and approaches to reading the Bible and the lived experience of the poor taking up the Bible in their social movement organizing today. We matched videos of poor people organizing with specific Bible passages; we rewrote Bible stories with settings and

(see: Brigitte Kahl, *Armenevangelium und Heidenevangelium: “Sola Scriptura” und die ökumenische Traditionsproblematik im Lichte von Väterkonflikt und Väterkonsens bei Lukas* (Berlin: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 1987). She also wrote an article on the passage “the poor are with you always” (see: Brigitte Kahl, “Arme wird es immer geben? Zu Markus 14:3-9”, in: *Neue Stimme: Oekumenische Monatsschrift zu Fragen in Kirche, Gesellschaft und Politik*, 2 - 1986 , 21-25) and brought liberation theology and Christian Base Community Bible studies into the development of courses, presentations, and other spaces of this model within and outside of Union Theological Seminary. Kahl has also been influenced by Latin American Liberation Theology and is a major interpreter of feminist theology and hermeneutics. Her groundbreaking work on Paul’s “justification by faith” suggest that Paul helped lead a heterogeneous movement to unite “Jew and Gentile” and puts social transformation at the center of Paul’s theology. This work has been applied to the criminalization of the poor and the production of “poverty outlaws”.

88 As I have outlined throughout, we decided to focus on organized poor people and connect with poor people’s organizations because we believed that these folks would demonstrate more agency in biblical interpretation. This may have been the biggest methodological move that we made with the course. In fact, the course title and the title of this dissertation for that matter may have been misleading; we were not attempting to invite random poor people off the street and into our class. Instead we were reading the Bible with the organized and socially conscious poor. We were interested in the effect of putting organized poor people and the stories of their organizing struggles into the center of biblical interpretation. From my part, this decision was informed by my work organizing poor people across the United States for the past twenty years. By choosing leaders of these organizations, we were giving priority to the analysis that low-income leaders come up with in order to develop organization and plan campaigns for living wages, health care, housing, dignity, respect, and so on. I believed that these poor leaders had a deeper political and theoretical analysis than our students in the class did, for the most part.
characters from our contemporary context of the poor; we drew pictures of Bible stories and stories of the struggle of the dispossessed together.  

“Reading the Bible with the Poor” was expanded and its applications widened through further activities of the Poverty Initiative as we started incorporating Bible study into all the major organizing and organizational work we were doing. This involved developing biblical studies (like the Bible study in Chapter One) with themes including: “Poverty and Economic Crisis” (James 5; Isaiah 5; Micah 2), “The Bible’s Anti-Poverty Programs” (the Jubilee; Manna; Paul’s collection; the community of goods), “The ‘Genesis’ of Poverty” (Joseph and the storehouses), “Parables as Pedagogy” (the tenants in the vineyard; the persistent widow), “The Virgin Mary, Mary Magdalene, and the Welfare Queen” (a study of poor women in the Bible and contemporary society), and “Religious Leaders Committed to End Poverty” (a study of the parallels of Jesus, the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., and Archbishop Oscar Romero with plans to integrate Mahatma Gandhi) as part of the Poverty Initiative Poverty Scholars Program.

The Poverty Initiative has refined and implemented “Reading the Bible with the Poor” as we organize preaching, adult education, Bible study programs (including “Lenten Bible Study” series), mission trips, worship services, youth

89 For more information on “Reading the Bible with the Poor” including the course description and annotated syllabus, please see Appendix 1.

90 Through the Poverty Scholars Program, the Poverty Initiative has trained over a thousand multi-racial, inter-generational, and multi-faith low-income leaders from more than three-hundred community organizations and religious congregations to participate in a yearlong series of high-level leadership development and training opportunities. The Poverty Scholars Program identifies and develops organizers with proven local-level successes on issues of unemployment, community revitalization, housing and homelessness, immigration, water privatization, ecological devastation, eviction and foreclosure, health care, hunger, low-wage workers’ rights, organizing poor youth, public education reform, grassroots media production, and living wages. The Poverty Initiative has also provided technical assistance, leadership training, and strategic support to successful campaigns of our partners via our Poverty Scholars gatherings, seminars, on-site trainings, and consultations.
programs, conferences, and events to bring the issue of poverty to the forefront at congregations throughout New York City and around the country as well as further on the campus of Union Theological Seminary, working closely with Union faculty and seminarians to design curriculum for day- and semester-long courses, seminarian Fellows training, and immersion experiences. Including “Reading the Bible with the Poor” and other courses mentioned above, the Poverty Initiative has sponsored over sixteen one-day seminars, ten semester-long courses (e.g. “A Political Reading of the Bible,”91 “World Religions and Poverty,”92 “Preaching for Social Transformation,”93 “Women’s Experience as a Resource for Worship,”94 “Social Theories and Social Movements”95) and eleven immersion courses. Our immersion courses take students, faculty, religious leaders, and community leaders to the epicenters of U.S. poverty to study and meet with local religious and community leaders. Past immersions have traveled to the Mississippi Delta, the post-Katrina Gulf Coast, Appalachia, the Mid-Atlantic States, and our own New York City and State. Internationally, we have journeyed to Haiti96 and Scotland97 for global immersions and Poverty Initiative leaders have participated in immersions in Central America and other global locations of social movement building. Each immersion includes a contextual Bible study component where we have explored

91 Co-taught by Dr. Samuel Cruz and Rev. Liz Theoharis
92 Co-taught by Dr. Paul Knitter and Willie Baptist.
93 Taught by Professor Barbara Lundblad with special guests from the Restaurant Opportunities Center-New York and other Poverty Scholars organizations.
94 Taught by Dr. Janet Walton with the assistance of Charon Hribar and grassroots community organizing women.
95 Co-taught by Dr. Jan Rehmann and Willie Baptist.
96 Professors Hal Taussig and Troy Messenger as well as Susan Cole led classes and discussions at the Episcopal Seminary of Haiti for two weeks.
97 Union President Serene Jones and Su Yon Pak from the Office of Field Based and Integrative Education participated in this trip.
Isaiah and exile, the entire Book of Ruth, the story of Joseph and the storehouses, Paul the apostle and organizer, slavery and abolition in the Bible, and many other texts focused on poverty and justice.

Launched in 2010, the Poverty Initiative Fellows Program strengthens the leadership capacity, skills, and community partnerships of emerging religious leaders interested in moving beyond charity toward social justice. The program involves a cohort of Masters-level students in a yearlong intensive Fellows Program that provides training, theological reflection, and practical community organizing experience. Graduates from our Fellows Program have successfully moved into leadership roles in nonprofits, social service agencies, denominations and congregations, drawing extensively from their experience at Union and time with the Poverty Initiative. Fellows hold Bible studies in their congregations, denominations, and communities that draw from and further refine “Reading the Bible with the Poor.”

The Poverty Initiative also serves as an online and offline resource center for community and religious leaders by collecting and distributing printed and online materials, training curricula and modules, films, and images from our community partners. We have published four books and many other Bible studies and theological materials that are used in community organizations, university and seminary courses, and congregations. This dissertation is thus part of the emerging corpus of Poverty Initiative scholarship and social analysis.98

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98 We know, however, that this is not enough. The deepening injustices of the world today demand a forum that can bring leaders together from communities experiencing all forms of social ills to build a common vision of the world we know we all deserve. We launched a Center for
Conclusion

As I have laid out in this chapter, the organized poor in the United States are engaged in contextual Bible study alongside their brothers and sisters in the global community through a methodology of “Reading the Bible with the Poor.” “Reading the Bible with the Poor” has an epistemological framework that posits that ending poverty is possible and that organized poor people are makers and interpreters of this good news from the poor. The methodology draws from a long liberationist heritage including feminist, empire-critical, and post-colonial theories of interpretation. The Bible studies combine social movement organization and action (people being compelled to organize to change their conditions and those around them), intellectual analysis (including an appreciation for academic scholarship), and a theological and spiritual approach. The model describes not simply a theory but an on-going practice of foregrounding the polarization of wealth and poverty as the defining issue of our day.

“Reading the Bible with the Poor” is not a biblical hermeneutic for the poor. Rather it is a summary of a biblical hermeneutic developed out of struggle, living politics, and a deep spirituality that represents the program of the poor and dispossessed. The methodology itself is interested in uniting people across difference (in race, geography, religion, gender, ability, and so on) rather than

Religions, Rights, and Social Justice at Union in the fall of 2013. With the Poverty Initiative as its cornerstone program, “Kairos” will afford us the opportunity to connect poverty with all forms of social injustice that humankind are experiencing. Through this Center, we will not only amplify the work of our first ten years, but also carry forward Union’s legacy and King’s vision on a global scale. “Reading the Bible with the Poor” and contextual Bible study will play a central role within “Kairos.” “Kairos” will focus on training and disseminating the model of Bible study in an effort to develop leaders and social movement organizations towards God’s reign of justice on earth. See kairoscenter.org.
having those differences used by those in power to divide and isolate. It argues that the poor are the epistemological, political, and moral agents of change in our society and when the organized poor appropriate the Bible, a biblical program of political, economic, and social justice is brought into clear view.
Chapter Four: Roman Peace and Poverty

Introduction

It should not come as a surprise that practitioners of “Reading the Bible with the Poor” posit that the poor make history—driving needed social, economic, and political transformations in their societies and eras—but that history is often documented on behalf of and from the perspective of the wealthy and powerful. This reality has posed a question for how then to do histories of subaltern or dispossessed peoples who left few records and whose lives were deemed less important and more problematic than the powerful. In the past decades with further developments in social history and historiography, scholars have asserted that dominant sources can be used to tell subaltern histories—both by understanding the political/class/national interests driving the text and also that the actions and experiences of poor and marginalized peoples nonetheless appear in the text in ways that must be excavated, collected, and analyzed. One aspect of this excavation is the recognition that ruling is a continuous and dynamic process of incorporation, co-optation, and coercion of the un-powerful. Those managing strategies are important lenses for understanding the practices of the poor and powerless and a constant process of contestation. Because history is written predominantly by elites, revolutionary stories are much harder to find and appear
in tangents and fragments; they require reading between the lines, reimagining, and collecting pieces.¹

While biblical scholars took some time to incorporate social history approaches into the toolbox of biblical interpretation, the insights and interpretations that can be drawn are substantial. It is not a new assertion that empires co-opt and incorporate aspects of the politics, culture, religion of their subjects. This was surely the case with the Roman Empire that used the cultural, religious, and political foundations of Hellenism to deepen and expand its hegemony and control.² In his book, Law, Power and Justice in Ancient Israel, Hebrew Bible professor, Douglas Knight, argues that the laws and political structures of the ancient Near East and the codes found throughout the Bible are therefore products of the elites coopting popular movements and practices of the

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¹ James C. Scott describes the production and use of hidden transcripts stating that, "the dialectical relationship between the public and hidden transcripts is obvious. By definition, the hidden transcript represents discourse—gesture, speech, practices—that is ordinarily excluded from the public transcript of subordinates by the exercise of power. The practice of domination, then, creates the hidden transcript. If the domination is particularly severe, it is likely to produce a hidden transcript of corresponding richness. The hidden transcript of subordinate groups, in turn, reacts back on the public transcript by engendering a subculture and by opposing its own variant form of social domination against that of the dominant elite. Both are realms of power and interests." (James C. Scott, Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts [New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1990], 27).

² Hellenism usually denotes the period from Alexander’s death (323 BCE) to Cleopatra’s death (30 BCE) but can also refer to Alexander’s conquests (ca. 332 BCE) through annexation of Egypt by Rome until the death of Cleopatra (30 BCE). However, Hellenism remains in the New Testament period (1 century CE) as a cultural layer in a larger Roman political structure/society. There are several levels to meaning: 1. Cultural: spreading of Greek language and culture across the east. 2. Material: education and philosophical movements, introduction into slavery of the non-Greeks, architecture, eating practices, etc. were brought to new kingdoms/territories. However, the encounter never produces purely Greek societies, but largely syncretistic ones (best preservation/evidence: Egypt). 3. Political: institutionalization of Greek city-states and political power across Alexander’s lands; characterized by kingdoms (Macedon in Greece, Seleucid and Antiochid in Syria/Palestine, Ptolemaic in Egypt, Attalid in Pergamon). Also Imperial: cultural shifts as result of colonization process, making of the “other”/barbarians into “Greeks.” It became popular to promote Greek culture and society as being better than non-Greeks, or to consider the Near-eastern people as in need of civilization.
poor, that these laws serve to maintain order and control the people in the
interests of the wealthy, and that the common people then come up with their own
norms, values and practices to subvert the status quo. He writes, “If today we can
be suspicious of the motives of our own politicians and power centers, it is
appropriate for us to be equally suspicious of the motives of comparable behind-
the-scenes interests and practices during ancient Israel’s history as well.”

When applying this perspective from social history to New Testament
studies, scholars have claimed there were multiple messiahs and prophets in first
century C.E. who proclaimed they had come to bring good news to the poor. Some
of these prophets evoked Israelite history and teachings. In his groundbreaking
work on this topic, Bandits, Prophets, and Messiahs, New Testament scholar and
social historian, Richard Horsley describes these revolutionary prophets and
rabble-rousers:

Judging from several reports by Josephus, there were a number of prophetic
figures that appeared among the people around the time of Jesus. Indeed,
Jesus was understood as a prophet (see Mk 6:15-16) . . . The classical
oracular prophets and others like them whose memory is preserved in
prophetic traditions, can thus be discerned as spokespersons for the
peasantry and the covenantal social-economic policy that served to protect
their interests. Because of the blatant exploitation of the peasantry, these
prophets felt compelled to oppose the ruling class, which was failing to
observe the covenantal order. Rather than heed the prophetic warnings, the
ruling groups appear to have responded with repression and persecution.

To reconstruct profiles of these revolutionaries, Horsley and other social historians
read between the lines of primary sources. In fact, one of the main sources of

3 Douglas A. Knight, Law, Power and Justice in Ancient Israel (Louisville, Westminster John
4 Richard Horsley and John Hanson, Bandits Prophets and Messiahs: Popular Movements at
5 Horsley and Hanson, Bandits, Prophets, and Messiahs, 135-145.
information about first-century prophets, bandits, and rabble-rousers, is Flavius Josephus, who documented *Jewish Histories* and *Jewish Antiquities* on behalf of the elites. Much like James C. Scott argues “that dominant elites attempt to portray social action in the public transcript as, metaphorically, a parade, thus denying, by omission, the possibility of autonomous social action by insubordinates. Inferiors who actually assemble at their own initiative are typically described as mobs or rabble”, much of Josephus’ attention to such popular leaders warns of their demagoguery and radicalism. This should resonate with the Passion Narrative in Matthew and the other gospels where Jesus is portrayed as a popular leader whom the elites fear will move the mob to riot and revolution, thereby making it necessary for the elites to control and eventually execute him.

As this social history approach to the Jesus movement has gained ascendancy, some have questioned it on historical grounds, because other sources of the period do not seem to document anti-empire figures or movements. But this should not come as a surprise, given a more critical approach to historical preservation, as revolutionary stories do not tend to be recorded as such (either left out, coopted, or rendered as disruptions). William Herzog in his book *Prophet and Teacher* suggests key characteristics of popular movement leaders and demagogues of the poor and connects Jesus to this description:

Reputational leaders emerge because they embody the values of the group they represent. Jesus, for instance, emerges out of the village life of Galilee, a peasant artisan steeped in the prophetic traditions of Israel and the little tradition of peasant villages like Nazareth. In his teaching and through his actions, he challenged the higher-order norms and institutions represented by the Torah as it came from Jerusalem and the Temple system, controlled

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6 Knight, *Law, Power and Justice in Ancient Israel*, 45-46.
as it was by the high priestly houses serving their Roman masters. Not surprisingly, scribal Pharisees and Pharisees challenged his role as reputational leader and broker of God’s power, which was centered in Temple and Torah.\(^7\)

Through searching for such hidden transcripts, especially based on the reaction of the elites to Jesus, an analysis of his teachings, and his ultimate crucifixion, a profile of Jesus as a revolutionary social movement leader emerges. Although the Bible may be the product of the powerful trying to acculturate lessons, traditions, practices of the poor, the fact that societies erupt when they read it and those in power try to control access to it for the oppressed sheds light that it is also a revolutionary document. Within it, we can glean from the fragments/sources collected to form the gospels and epistles that Jesus was a radical leader and teacher responding to fundamental social, economic and political problems. Because of the hermeneutic of the organized poor thereby “Reading the Bible with the Poor” gathers the pieces of revolutionary history and fills in the historical gaps using contemporary experiences of poverty, oppression, and dispossession. Taking key lessons from social history, the social, political and economic context of the Bible (and the fragments that are contained within) therefore is central to the message.

**The Gospel of Matthew in its Historical Context**

The Gospel of Matthew includes some elements of the birth, life, death, and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth who was born between 4 B.C.E. and 6 C.E. and

crucified circa 30-33 C.E. Most of Jesus’s ministry takes place in Galilee, one of the poorest areas of the Roman Empire, at the time when Herod Antipas is client king of Galilee, and Caesar Tiberius is emperor of the entire Roman Empire. The Passion Narrative takes place in Judea, which was under the direct rule of Rome since 6 C.E. (although the Roman occupation of Palestine reaches back to 63 B.C.E. with Pompey), especially in and around the Jerusalem Temple, the central religious, economic, and political site for the Jews of Palestine as well as Jews from other nations across the empire. At that time, Pontius Pilate was procurator of Judea and Samaria, a role with military, tax collecting, and judicial duties, and Caiaphas was high priest of the Jerusalem Temple, an office that was occupied with Roman consent. The Gospel of Matthew was written after the destruction of the Temple circa 80 or 90 C.E. most likely in Antioch. Antioch was the capital of the Roman province of Syria and the military headquarters of Rome in the east. Antioch-on-the-Orontes was a city that was shaped by and propagated the Pax Romana of the

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9 Herzog, Prophet and Teacher, 1-2.


11 Andrew Overman, Matthew’s Gospel and Formative Judaism: The Social World of the Matthean Community (Minneapolis, Minn.: Fortress, 1990), 159.
larger Roman Empire. Like many of the Roman provinces, it contained a sizable Jewish population.

The Roman Empire and the Polarization of Wealth and Poverty

During the lifetimes of Jesus, his followers, and the “authors”/audience of the Gospel of Matthew, the growth and consolidation of the Roman Empire was an engine for both the accumulation of wealth and increasing impoverishment. As social historian and biblical scholar, Richard Horsley, explains:

The fundamental conflict evident in ancient Jewish literature, such as Josephus’s histories, was not between Judaism and Hellenism, the Jews and the Romans, or Judaism and Christianity. Rather, the fundamental conflict was between the Roman, Herodian, and high priestly rulers, on the one hand, and the Judean and Galilean villagers, whose produce supplied tribute for Caesar, taxes for Herod, and tithes and offerings for the priests and temple apparatus, on the other.”

12 Literally meaning “Roman Peace”, it refers to the period of relative non-expansion and the ease of internal and external conflict within the empire that was ushered in by Augustus. Although this Roman peace meant more war and conquest in many parts, it also worked to set up an infrastructure across the empire, on land and water, and especially for the urban areas. This infrastructure included roads, water systems, arenas, and other building projects. This infrastructure development was to ensure commerce, food supplies, and other needed economic goods and services flowed throughout the Roman empire: “Bulk goods, like grain, were moved by water routes whenever possible. In the first century, Rome had organized the regular movement of grain along the Nile in Egypt to Rome via the Mediterranean. Egypt supplied one-third of Rome’s annual grain consumption” (Hanson and Oakman, Palestine in the Time of Jesus, 111). This infrastructure contributed to the Roman Empire becoming global in orientation and trade. Roman infrastructure, especially the Roman roads, was also built for the motion of the army. The Pax Romana was financed by taxes of the subject nations and the peace was kept by the stationing of Roman legions in many places. So although considered a time of relative peace and prosperity, this was experienced by the elites on the backs of the poor and subjugated; see Hanson and Oakman, Palestine in the Time of Jesus, 111. For more information on the Pax Romana, see Klaus Wengst, Pax Romana: and the Peace of Jesus Christ (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1987) and Paul Petit, Pax Romana, (trans. J. Willis; London: Batsford, 1976).

13 For a comprehensive social history of the earliest churches and communities within the Roman provinces, including social stratification, group composition, gender division, ancient economics, and urban/rural distinctions, see Ekkehard W. Stegemann and Wolfgang Stegemann, The Jesus Movement: a Social History of its First Century (trans O.C. Dean, Jr.; Minneapolis, Minn.: Fortress, 1999).

14 Horsley and Hanson, Bandits Prophets and Messiahs, xi-xii.
A major part of growth and consolidation of the Roman Empire (and thereby Herodian Dynasty and Jerusalem Temple elites) was bringing new lands and nations into its control through military conquest, forcibly taking natural resources including timber and minerals, as well as gold, jewelry, and other luxury items of the conquered people. Military conquest also resulted in the appropriation of slaves and other forms of human resources. The new people and nations brought into the empire were taxed. Relatedly, a central feature of the Roman Empire was the Pax Romana, where the “known world” was unified through a developed transportation and communication infrastructure that required human and material resources for their construction, notably through heightened taxes, accumulated surplus, and ready labor. In general, both extensive and intensive appropriation of resources played their role in this process.

Political power and governance contributed to the inequality of the empire: “The distribution of what little income was available in the Mediterranean world was entirely dependent upon political power: those devoid of political power, the

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15 K. C. Hanson, and Douglas Oakman, Palestine in the Time of Jesus: Social Structures and Social Conflicts (Minneapolis, Minn.: Augsburg Fortress, 2002), 5.
non-elite, over 99% of the Empire’s population, could expect little more from life than abject poverty.”\(^{18}\) Without political power, most of the population did not benefit from the governance system of the empire. As Hanson and Oakman explain, “The Palestinians did not elect their rulers. . . . Taxes, tolls, and tribute were not open to referendum, but imposed from above; and they were not collected to benefit the populace, but only the elites.”\(^{19}\)

The nature of the economy, a primarily agricultural economy with 80-90% of the populace of Galilee (the base of Jesus’s ministry) and the larger Roman Empire participating in agricultural work, further indicates the great economic divide.\(^{20}\) An elite class of slaveholders and landowners financed and controlled the vast majority of land, people, and wealth in Galilee, Judea, Syria, and the greater Roman Empire.\(^{21}\) And while not all scholars agree with Justin Meggitt that 99% of the population were living in dire poverty, the scholarly consensus is that at least seventy, eighty, or ninety percent of the population were peasants and lived at a subsistence level, just barely surviving.\(^{22}\) Around the Sea of Galilee and the harbor

\(^{18}\) Meggitt, Paul, Poverty and Survival, 50.
\(^{19}\) Hanson and Oakman, Palestine in the Time of Jesus, 66.
\(^{21}\) Herzog, Prophet and Teacher, 50.
\(^{22}\) There is a debate about the economic conditions of Ancient Israel and in particular on the early Christian communities fueled in response to the work of Justin Meggitt. This debate occurred in the Journal of New Testament Studies and included reviews of Meggitt’s book, Paul, Poverty and Survival, by Gerd Theissen, Dale Martin and others. For more information on this debate and the poverty of the early Christian communities, see: Justin Meggitt, Paul, Poverty and Survival
region of Antioch, fishing, in addition to farming, was central to the economy.  

Similar to the way that the elites controlled agricultural production, there was also a select few that controlled the organization of and profits from fishing.

In order to maximize profits from both the ownership of land (which was (re)distributed through inheritance, conquest, or debt) and labor in fishing, building, and other areas of the economy, as well as dispossess and coerce peasants to work the land controlled by the wealthy, “elites impose[d] tribute, extract[ed] agricultural goods, and remove[d] them for ends other than peasant want.”

Coercion was an important feature to appropriate resources and further the polarization of wealth and poverty across the Roman Empire. Indeed, in the Roman agricultural economy, peasants did not voluntarily supply labor nor work for wages. Instead, peasants had to be dispossessed from their land and other means of subsistence in order to earn money and wealth for the elites. As many small
farmers defaulted on loans, elite landowners acquired their land and wealth.26

Horsley and Silberman explain some of the ways coercion functioned to polarize wealth and poverty within the empire:

Antipas was granted the right to collect taxes from his subjects in Galilee and Perea, a privilege that, according to Josephus, yielded an annual equivalent of two hundred talents (or about nine tons) of gold. Of course there was no real gold to be found in the hills and valleys of the tetrarchy—just wheat, barley, grapes, olives, vegetables, and livestock. Antipas therefore had to dispatch a veritable army of auditors, tax collectors, and soldiers to the groves, vineyards, and threshing floors of every village at harvest time to ensure that his share of the harvest (estimated by modern scholars to have amounted to as much as a third of the total crops and other agricultural products) was duly handed over to the Herodian authorities.27

Trade and commerce grew wealth for the elites as well.28 Although those who made their wealth through trade and commerce were not as respected or called for political office as the landed gentry were, it is clear from the archaeological evidence in Syria and from the numerous references to trade, money, and wealth in Matthew that both commerce and the money economy were prominent and expanding in the empire.29 Elites traded luxury items (like those

26 “The rich had got possession of the greater part of the undivided land. They trusted in the conditions of the time, that these possessions would not be again taken from them, and bought, therefore, some of the pieces of land lying near theirs, and belonging to the poor, with the acquiescence of their owners, and took some by force, so that they now were cultivating widely extended domains, instead of isolated fields. Then they employed slaves in agriculture and cattle-breeding, because freemen would have been taken from labor for military service. The possession of slaves brought them great gain, inasmuch as these, on account of their immunity from military service, could freely multiply and have a multitude of children. Thus the powerful men drew all wealth to themselves, and all the land swarmed with slaves. The Italians, on the other hand, were always decreasing in number, destroyed as they were by poverty, taxes, and military service. Even when times of peace came, they were doomed to complete inactivity, because the rich were in possession of the soil, and used slaves instead of freemen in the tilling of it” (Appian, Bell. civ. I.7 [White, LCL]).

27 Horsley and Silberman, Message and the Kingdom, 26.
28 Ze’ev Safrai asserts that the economy of Palestine was based on trade and commerce. For more information on this ancient economy as "open market economy" see Ze’ev Safrai, The Economy of Roman Palestine (New York: Routledge, 1994).
listed in Rev 18:12-13) and other goods that had the potential to make high profits.\(^{30}\) Indeed, the growth and consolidation of the empire, including the spread of trade and commerce and the transition to a money economy, resulted in an economic and productive shift in the Roman economy around the time of Jesus and his movement.\(^{31}\) Horsley and Silberman describe this transition:

Just as smaller family farms were consolidated into large agribusiness with tenant farmers working the land of mainly absentee landowners, the fishing industry was shifting in a similar direction. Fishing, farming and other modes of the economy were starting to be produced on an “industrial” level rather than simply for subsistence. This led to a growth of low-wage work for the population of the rural areas of the empire and a migration into urban areas as the poor got pushed off their land and needed to find paid work elsewhere to survive. With this subsistence economy, the economic changes from small farms to agribusiness that developed as the Roman Empire expanded and consolidated brought about greater inequality and misery. While most people were poor in a subsistence economy, the shift to production on an “industrial” level for distribution across the whole Roman Empire resulted in more families losing their ancestral lands and being forced into low wage work and expendability.\(^{32}\)

**Poverty, Debt, and Dispossession**

The imposition of taxes and the transition to an economic and monetary system characterized by mass scale development and urbanization produced hardship and suffering amongst the empire’s inhabitants.\(^{33}\) This system led to displacement from ancestral land and tax burdens that caused debt, suffering, and,

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\(^{30}\) The resources traded in Rev 18:12-13 include gold, silver, pearls, fine linen, silk, ivory, costly wood, bronze, iron and marble, spices, myrrh, frankincense, wine, cattle, sheep, horses, carriages, and slaves.

\(^{31}\) Horsley and Silberman, *The Message and the Kingdom*, 5-45.

\(^{32}\) Horsley and Silberman, *The Message and the Kingdom*, 5.

\(^{33}\) Taxation was central and important to the impoverishment of the population of the Roman Empire. There were two forms of taxation imposed on the Jewish people living in the Roman Empire: Jewish Temple taxes/tithing (that were paid as the *fiscus judaicus* to the Temple of Julius Capitolinus after the destruction of the Jerusalem Temple) and the numerous taxes of the Roman Empire (Sean Freyne, *Galilee from Alexander the Great to Hadrian: A Study of Second Temple Judaism* [Wilmington, Del.: Michael Glazier, 1980], 183).
in many cases, slavery and debt bondage.\textsuperscript{34} Debt grew as people needed to borrow money, especially after poor harvests.\textsuperscript{35} Residents took loans from local elites, including those who sat in the very same courts that enforced their payment of taxes.\textsuperscript{36} Oftentimes, debtors would become tenants to the elites as well as submit themselves as clients to these patrons in an effort to avoid the court (which favored and were controlled by the wealthy) and debt prison (as well as a special police force to enforce payment).\textsuperscript{37} At the time of Jesus and the writing of the Gospel of Matthew, all of these debt records were written in denarii (Roman silver coins), rather than bushels of grains and fish. About coins:

When tribute was collected in Roman coinage, it was part and parcel of Roman political propaganda. The denarius was the most stable and extensively circulated coin of Tiberius’s reign, a coin that doubled as currency and propaganda. The obverse of the coin contained a profile of Tiberius’s head ‘adorned with the laurel wreath, the sign of divinity,’ and was inscribed with an epigram that claimed divinity for both Augustus and Tiberius.\textsuperscript{38}

Therefore money played both an economic and ideological role in perpetuating Roman rule.

The move from debt to dispossession—losing one’s land and livelihood—did not happen silently or without protest.\textsuperscript{39} Resistance was displayed in the attitude toward tax and toll collectors throughout the Roman Empire. It was also

\textsuperscript{34} Freyne, \textit{Galilee from Alexander the Great to Hadrian}, 181 and Horsley and Silberman, \textit{Message and the Kingdom}, 28.
\textsuperscript{35} Freyne, \textit{Galilee from Alexander the Great to Hadrian}, 182.
\textsuperscript{36} Freyne, \textit{Galilee from Alexander the Great to Hadrian}, 181.
\textsuperscript{38} Herzog, \textit{Prophet and Teacher}, 185.
\textsuperscript{39} "In Judea, under the direct rule of Rome since the ouster of Archelaus more than two decades earlier, the issue of imperial taxation had led to widespread agitation and public resistance" (Horsley and Silberman, \textit{Message and the Kingdom}, 83). This type of resistance occurred throughout the empire.
seen in the crowd control issues at festivals and other public events in provinces all over Rome. Indeed, a bureaucracy of courts and judges was set up to address peasant resistance to tax collection.40 Richard Horsley explains the rise of banditry and other revolutionary groups around the time of Jesus: “Banditry, prophetic movements, and messianic movements (and oracular prophecy) occurred primarily among the peasantry—that is, were primarily popular social forms, different from the tax resistance and terrorist resistance that occurred among scribal circles.” Because slavery, taxation, and debt were major institutions within the Roman Empire, they remained central concerns of Jesus and his followers, who developed and propagated critiques of indebtedness and slavery. As “peasant concerns for debt-forgiveness and redistribution of labor are well-represented in the legal traditions of the Old Testament,”41 Jewish prophets (and other messiahs) preached about debt release and slave manumission (e.g. Jesus himself proclaimed that he had come to forgive debts, set the slaves free, and preach good news to the poor in his inaugural speech in Luke 4:16-30).42

The Roman economic system nevertheless started influencing the values of the population: “Under the pressure of debt and taxation, Roman legal standards,  

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40 Horsley and Silberman, Message and the Kingdom, 83.
41 Hanson and Oakman, Palestine in the Time of Jesus: Social Structures and Social Conflicts, 119.
42 Throughout the ancient Near East and especially around the time of Jesus and before the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem, there were many other prophets and messiahs. Martin Hengel, citing Josephus, writes, “There was apparently a Samaritan prophet or pseudo-Messiah who caused unrest under Pilate. A second pseudo-Messiah appeared at the time of Cuspius Fadus (who ruled from 44 AD onwards)—one Theudas, ‘who claimed that he was a prophet’, but who was, in Josephus’ opinion, no more than an ordinary deceiver” (Martin Hengel, The Zealots: Investigations into the Jewish Freedom Movement in the Period from Herod I until A.D. 70 [trans. John Bowdon, Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1989], 229; trans. of Die Zeloten [Tuebingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1976]).
not the Torah, began to take precedence.”  

People moved away from the community-oriented ethics of the Torah, especially the Sabbath and jubilee prescriptions.

Response to Poverty in the Roman Empire

Although poverty was widespread in the Roman Empire, if one was destitute and in need, there was little recourse. Some were able to receive alms or other forms of philanthropy from wealthy patrons and benefactors, but the alms were insufficient compared to the needs of the poor. Benefactions were focused on raising up the wealth and status of the benefactor rather than the recipient.

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43 Horsley and Silberman, Message and the Kingdom, 55. Also discussed in Hanson and Oakman, Palestine in the Time of Jesus, 152.

44 “Patrons are elite persons (male or female) who can provide benefits to others on a personal basis, due to a combination of superior power, influence, reputation, position, and wealth. In return for these benefits, patrons (who both men and women in the ancient Mediterranean world) could expect to receive honor, information, and political support from clients” (Hanson and Oakman, Palestine in the Time of Jesus, 71). Hanson and Oakman continue, “In Roman society patronage took on a very ritualized form. The clients of a Roman patron (especially his or her freedmen and freedwomen) were expected to appear every morning at the patron’s home to salute the patron, pay deference, and find out if there was anything they could do for the patron” (Hanson and Oakman, Palestine in the Time of Jesus, 73). In fact, Roman historian Suetonius notes that, in the last twenty years of his reign, Emperor Augustus (the ultimate Roman patron) received 1.4 billion sesterces from his clients in wills (Hanson and Oakman, Palestine in the Time of Jesus, 74). There were other downsides to the patronage system, in addition to those listed above. “Quite simply, a client had to have something to offer, and as is made clear again and again in Roman literature, the poor had nothing the rich wanted” (Meggitt, Paul, Poverty and Survival, 168). For more information on patronage see Hanson and Oakman, Palestine in the Time of Jesus; Meggitt, Paul, Poverty and Survival; and Richard Horsley, Paul and Empire: Religion and Power in Roman Imperial Society (Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 1997).

45 Cicero argues some of the negative impacts of acquiring wealth and higher status: For not only is Fortune blind herself, but as a rule she even blinds those whom she has embraced; and thus they are generally transported beyond themselves by wanton pride and obstinacy—nor can anything in the world be more insufferable than one of Fortune’s fools. Indeed we may observe that men, formerly affable in their manners, become changed by military rank, by power, and by prosperity, spurn their old-time friends and revel in the new. But what is more foolish, when men are in the plenitude of resources, opportunities, and wealth, than to procure the other things which money provides—horses, slaves, splendid raiment, and costly plate—and not procure friends, who are, if I may say so, life’s best and fairest furniture? And really while they are procuring those material things, they know not for whom they do it, nor for whose benefit they toil; for such things are the prey of the strongest; but to every man the tenure of his friendships ever remains settled and
fact, there seems to be some debate on the role of almsgiving for the poor of the empire.  

As we will explore in Chapter Five, Jesus critiques those who call attention to their giving in the Sermon on the Mount (Matt 5:7). He insists if people do give alms to the poor, they must not announce it or get credit for it (Matt 6:1-4), therefore challenging the system of patronage/euergetism and perhaps even admitting that almsgiving although necessary is no solution to poverty.

The patronage system permeated through and functioned on all levels of society, from within families and villages to helping to organize the whole empire. The Roman emperor himself was the most powerful patron and used his position to appoint political and religious office, free slaves, raise individual status, grant citizenship, endow buildings, sponsor competitions, grant exemptions from taxes, and give preference in legal cases. This hierarchal structure—with the emperor on top and the poor on the bottom—undermined any attempts at mutuality or solidarity forged by the poor subjects of the Roman Empire. Those in power used

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[^46]: A ritualized habit focused around the wide spread of poverty in the first and second centuries was almsgiving. Meggitt lays out the places in early Christian literature where almsgiving is a central tenet. “Almsgiving is a significant element in the ethical paraenesis of the early church. For example, Mark 10:21; Matt. 5:42, 19:21; Luke 6:30, 38, 18:22; Acts 10:4, 20:35, James 1:27; Heb. 13:16; 1 John 3:17; 2 Clem. 6:9; 16:4; Didache 4.5-6; Barnabas 19.10; Hermas, Sin. 1 and 2; Sententiae Sexti (S2); Tertullian, De Patientia 7.13; Justin, Apologia 13.” At the same time that almsgiving was a value gaining strength within the early Christian communities, there was an attempt by those in power to moralize about why some people did not deserve to receive alms or any form of support. The emperors often encouraged this notion of the undeserving poor. They helped create a story (that should sound familiar still today) that said that there are some people who have made mistakes and therefore are responsible for the straits they are in; see Meggitt, *Paul, Poverty and Survival*, 156.

patronage as an instrument of social control: they had both the power to refuse help and the ability to deliver this same help.\textsuperscript{48}

There was a public service side to the patronage of the emperor: “Augustus saw to the material needs of the masses by tending to their supply of food, water and housing, by providing public shows and by occasional distributions of considerable sums of money to all male citizens of the city.”\textsuperscript{49} He sponsored regular banquets for the masses and meals for elites. He brought treasures to Rome thereby giving himself the economic power to give out loans, etc.\textsuperscript{50} Augustus also “burned the records of old debts to the treasury, which were by far the most frequent source of blackmail.”\textsuperscript{51} This act of burning the records of old debts did much to consolidate his popularity among the people. Although feigning care for the masses of people, much of what he did was for the benefit of the elites. He strongly limited the number of Roman citizens by increasing the property and wealth requirements and made it more difficult for slaves to become citizens eventually.

\textsuperscript{48} Horsley, \textit{Paul and Empire}, 90.
\textsuperscript{49} Horsley, \textit{Paul and Empire}, 98.
\textsuperscript{50} “To the Roman plebs I paid out three hundred sesterces per man in accordance with the will of my father, and in my own name in my fifth consulship I gave four hundred sesterces apiece from the spoils of war; a second time, moreover, in my tenth consulship I paid out of my own patrimony four hundred sesterces per man by way of bounty, and in my eleventh consulship I made twelve distributions of food from grain bought at my own expense, and in the twelfth year of my tribunician power I gave for the third time four hundred sesterces to each man. These largesses of mine reached a number of persons never less than two hundred and fifty thousand. In the eighteenth year of my tribunician power, as consul for the twelfth time, I gave to three hundred and twenty thousand of the city plebs sixty denarii apiece. In the colonies of my soldiers, as consul for the fifth time, I gave one thousand sesterces to each man from the spoils of war; about one hundred and twenty thousand men in the colonies received this triumphal largesse. When consul for the thirteenth time I gave sixty denarii apiece to the plebs who were then receiving public grain; these were a little more than two hundred thousand persons” (\textit{Res gest. divi Aug.} 3.15).
\textsuperscript{51} Suetonius, \textit{Aug.} XXXII (Wolfe, LCL).
Ideologically, patronage relationships divided the people of the empire in a way that helped to subdue and vanquish them.\(^5^2\) Citing Tacitus\(^5^3\), Horsley writes, “As Tacitus put it, the ‘good’ people of the city were included in established social order, while the ‘bad’ either wished to avoid the humiliation of dependence or were

\(^{52}\) Augustus understood how to rule politically and economically and as the ultimate patron, Augustus used patronage and euergetism to maintain his power. As the following quotation points out, Augustus employed slaves and freedmen as soldiers in order to control scarcity riots. He mentions that he had to use the carrot and the stick in various cases: paying slaves and freedman to coerce the mutinous as well as providing necessities to the masses when possible and available. He also maintained the distinctions between the social classes especially among the military. This form of social control was important for the order of the empire; he worked to prevent the mingling of people from different backgrounds and status. Augustus was a master of using divide and conquer, even among those loyal to him. He did this to keep the military and other social and political groups united through him but divided by themselves. He attempted to pay off his soldiers, including pleasing the common soldiers. In fact, this quotation emphasizes that he readily gave out prizes and recognition to the soldiers because even if Augustus did not want to share his wealth and power with many, he could keep the people who coerced and controlled the masses. Suetonius writes:

> Except as a fire-brigade at Rome, and when there was fear of riots in times of scarcity, he employed freedmen as soldiers only twice: once as a guard for the colonies in the vicinity of Illyricum, and again to defend the bank of the river Rhine; even these he levied, when they were slaves, from men and women of means and at once gave them freedom; and he kept them under their original standard [i.e., he kept them apart from the rest in the companies in which they were first enrolled], not mingling them with the soldiers of free birth or arming them in the same fashion. As military prizes he was somewhat more ready to give trappings [the phalerae were discs or plates of metal attached to a belt or to the harness of horses] or collars, valuable for their gold and silver, than crowns for scaling ramparts or walls, which conferred high honour; the latter he gave as sparingly as possible and without favouritism, often even to the common soldiers (Suetonius, Aug. XXV Wolfe, LCL)].

\(^{53}\) Following is the quotation from Tacitus:

> [Augustus] also increased the incomes of some of the Senators. Hence it was the more surprising that he listened somewhat disdainfully to the request of Marcus Hortensius, a youth of noble rank in conspicuous poverty. He was the grandson of the orator Hortensius, and had been induced by Augustus, on the strength of a gift of a million sesterces, to marry and rear children, that one of our most illustrious families might not become extinct. Accordingly, with his four sons standing at the doors of the Senate House, the Senate then sitting in the palace, when it was his turn to speak he began to address them as follows, his eyes fixed now on the statue of Hortensius which stood among those of the orators, now on that of Augustus: ‘Senators, these whose numbers and boyish years you behold I have reared, not by my own choice, but because the emperor advised me. At the same time, my ancestors deserved to have descendants. For myself, not having been able in these altered times to receive or acquire wealth or popular favour, or that eloquence which has been the hereditary possession of our house, I was satisfied if my narrow means were neither a disgrace to myself nor burden to others. At the emperor’s bidding I married. Behold the offspring and progeny of a succession of consuls and dictators. Not to excite odium do I recall such facts, but to win compassion? While you prosper, Caesar, they will attain such promotion, as you shall bestow. Meanwhile save from penury the great-grandsons of Quintus Hortensius, the foster-children of Augustus. (Tacitus, Ann. 2.37 [Moore and Jackson, LCL]).
thought to have nothing to offer in return for the favors of aspiring would-be patrons.”

Further, the wealth of those that depended upon the largesse of the emperor, although somewhat substantial, was always precarious. To keep the common people from erupting, Augustus understood the need to put limits on the luxury and excess of the rich at the same time as enforcing legislation that helped protect the wealth and heredity of the wealthy. He also maintained an image that he lived simply and did not flaunt his wealth. For it is not simply poverty that causes social unrest but inequality and the public perception that some are living in

54 Horsley, Paul and Empire, 91.
55 Horsley and Silberman, Message and the Kingdom, 83.
56 Because of the role that marriage plays in passing down property and therefore keeping property in limited and controlled hands, Augustus enacted marriage legislation:
He revised existing laws and enacted some new ones, for example, on extravagance, on adultery and chastity, on bribery, and on the encouragement of marriage among the various classes of citizens. Having made somewhat more stringent changes in the last of these than in the others, he was unable to carry it out because of an open revolt against its provisions, until he had abolished or mitigated a part of the penalties, besides increasing the rewards and allowing a three years’ exemption from the obligation to marry after the death of a husband or wife. When the knights even then persistently called for its repeal at a public show, he sent for the children of Germanicus and exhibited them, some in his own lap and some in their father’s, intimating by his gestures and expression that they should not refuse to follow that young man’s example. And on finding that the spirit of the law was, being evaded by betrothal with immature girls and by frequent changes of wives, he shortened the duration of betrothals and set a limit on divorce (Suetonius, Aug. XXXIV [Wolfe, LCL]).

Suetonius continues on the topic of ways Augustus used his wealth (and legislation about wealth) to his benefit but also the benefit of more people:
He often showed generosity to all classes when occasion offered. For example, by bringing the royal treasures to Rome in his Alexandrian triumph he made ready money so abundant, that the rate of interest fell, and the value of real estate rose greatly; and after that, whenever there was an excess of funds from the property of those who had been condemned, he loaned it without interest for fixed periods to any who could give security for double the amount. He increased the property qualification for Senators, requiring one million two hundred thousand sesterces, instead of eight hundred thousand, and making up the amount for those who did not possess it (Suetonius, Aug. XLI [Wolfe, LCL]).

57 “The simplicity of his furniture and household goods may be seen from couches and tables still in existence, many of which are scarcely fine enough for a private citizen. They say that he always slept on a low and plainly furnished bed. Except on special occasions he wore common clothes for the house, made by his sister, wife, daughter or granddaughters; his togas were neither close nor full, his purple stripe neither narrow nor broad, and his shoes somewhat high-soled, to make him look taller than he really was. But he always kept shoes and clothing to wear in public ready in his room for sudden and unexpected occasions” (Suetonius, Aug. LXXIII [Wolfe, LCL]).
extreme luxury while others are dying from extreme poverty. This legislation served to protect the overall wealth and power of the empire rather than undermining it.

*Poverty and Wealth Polarization in Galilee*

Although poverty was severe throughout the empire, we have particular information about the dire impoverishment of Galilee around the time of Jesus. This extreme poverty seems to have been situated close to great wealth in Galilee. Sean Freyne asserts that the Roman Empire catapulted the economy of Galilee into development and into the possibility of social consciousness and social change. This is seen in both urban and more rural areas across Galilee.

One of the clearest ways to see the tight control the Roman Empire had over the ruling of Galilee and surrounding areas can be seen in the close patron-client relationship between Augustus and the Herodian Dynasty. Herod the Great, a ruler of Palestine, served as a functionary beholden to the Roman Empire and predecessor to Herod Antipas, who ruled during the time of Jesus. Herod instituted

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58 Tacitus describes how Augustus used his wealth and political power to relieve poverty of those who were hard working and “virtuous” but still expelling the corrupt and wasteful people in the Senate: "While, however, he relieved the honourable poverty of the virtuous, he expelled from the Senate or suffered voluntarily to retire spendthrifts whose vices had brought them to penury, like Vibidius Varro, Marius Nepos, Appius Appianus, Cornelius Sulla, and Quintus Vitellius" (Tacitus, *Ann. 2.48* [Moore and Jackson, LCL]). At the same time that Tacitus simply reports about the legislation and control of wealth and poverty among Roman Senators and other residents, Tacitus is critical of Augustus’s marriage legislation and Augustus’s hypocrisy in regards to his own morality surrounding marriage and sexuality. Tacitus writes:

Though the Divine Augustus in his public life enjoyed unshaken prosperity, he was unfortunate at home from the profligacy of his daughter and granddaughter, both of whom he banished from Rome, and punished their paramours with death or exile. Calling, as he did, a vice so habitual among men and women by the awful name of sacrilege and treason, he went far beyond the indulgent spirit of our ancestors, beyond indeed his own legislation (Tacitus, *Ann. 3.24* [Moore and Jackson, LCL]).


60 Freyne, *Galilee from Alexander the Great to Hadrian*, 197.
economic policies and building projects that were consistent with the larger plan of Augustus and the further development of the empire, but severely hurt the residents of Galilee. Although Jewish, he supported the imperial cult practices of Augustus and the Roman Empire: “Herod the Great not only expanded the Jerusalem Temple mount with tax monies, but built Temples in honor of Roman emperors and gods,”\(^\text{61}\) most notably Caesarea Maritima. In return, Herod benefited greatly from his allegiance to and involvement in the growth, consolidation, and wealth creation strategies of the Roman Empire: “Herod the Great claimed 25-33 percent of Palestinian grain within his realm and 50 percent of the fruit from trees.”\(^\text{62}\) Herod even left Augustus and his wife a significant inheritance in his will.\(^\text{63}\)

Although the Roman imperial and local building and other imperial cult practices imposed heavy tax burdens on the residents of Galilee, including those enforced by Herod the Great and his Galilean successor Herod Antipas, many also became dependent on the jobs produced through these infrastructure projects. As Justin Meggitt points out, “Josephus’ account of the completion of Herod’s rebuilding of the Temple also indicates something of the significance of large scale construction projects for urban employment: \(^\text{64}\) it led to 18,000 men being made unemployed in Jerusalem and forced Herod to concoct another project almost

\(^{61}\) Hanson and Oakman, *Palestine in the Time of Jesus*, 5.

\(^{62}\) Hanson and Oakman, *Palestine in the Time of Jesus*, 114.

\(^{63}\) Hanson and Oakman, *Palestine in the Time of Jesus*, 48.

\(^{64}\) “And now it was that the temple was finished. So when the people saw that the workmen were unemployed, who were above eighteen thousand and that they, receiving no wages, were in want because they had earned their bread by their labors about the temple; and while they were unwilling to keep by them the treasures that were there deposited, out of fear of [their being carried away by] the Romans; and while they had a regard to the making provision for the workmen; they had a mind to expend these treasures upon them; for if any one of them did but labor for a single hour, he received his pay immediately; so they persuaded him to rebuild the eastern cloisters” (Josephus, *Ant* 20.219-222 [Feldman, LCL]).
immediately (they were put to work paving the city)."\textsuperscript{65} Herod the Great’s successors followed the same line of building, urban development, taxation, and further impoverishment of the citizenry.\textsuperscript{66} He was succeeded by Archelaus in Judea (who was deposed in 6 C.E.), and Herod Antipas (who ruled Galilea and Perea until 39 C.E.), and eventually Agrippa (who was named king from 41-44 C.E.). The fact that Herod could not pass on his rule to whom he chose (which was documented in his will but not followed by the imperial elite) is further evidence that supreme power over Palestine was in Roman hands.\textsuperscript{67}

It is important to note that one of the locations where the imperial cult practice was present among the Jewish people was through the Jerusalem Temple, rebuilt by Herod the Great, as mentioned above. The Temple was the community bank and the center of economic activity and religious ritual for Jerusalem, Judea, Galilee, and the diaspora.\textsuperscript{68} Although Jews were generally given an exemption from imperial cult worship per se, a daily sacrifice for the health and well-being of the Roman emperor was made at the Temple. Jews across the empire were required to send in a Temple tax to pay for these sacrifices and overall taxes to the Roman Empire until its destruction in 70 C.E. Therefore, Herod and others, while responsible for rebuilding the Temple in the first place with the money gathered from the population, were able to raid the Temple treasury to use the money collected there for furthering the economic and political aspirations of the

\textsuperscript{65} Meggitt, \textit{Paul, Poverty and Survival}, 57.
\textsuperscript{66} Horsley and Silberman, \textit{The Message and the Kingdom}, 24.
\textsuperscript{67} Herzog, \textit{Prophet and Teacher}, 44.
\textsuperscript{68} Hanson and Oakman, \textit{Palestine in the Time of Jesus}, 16.
empire.⁶⁹ There is evidence of complicity between the Jerusalem Temple and the Roman Imperial system and some assert that debt and economics play a role in the destruction of the Temple during the Jewish Wars in 66-70 C.E.⁷⁰ In fact, reports document that the factors that led up to war were, for the Jewish people in 66 C.E., firmly rooted in the economic pressures facing them. The first act that eventually led to Rome burning the Temple was Jewish leaders entering the Temple to burn the debt records.⁷¹

*Poverty and Wealth in Antioch*

The Gospel of Matthew was most likely written in Antioch, Syria, however, rather than in Galilee or elsewhere in Judea, where the story of Jesus takes place.⁷² Antioch was a point of convergence for north-south and east-west trade routes and was located on the Orontes River, 14 miles from the Mediterranean Sea.⁷³ By the first century, it may have been the third largest city (after Rome and Alexandria) in the Empire.⁷⁴ It had a population of about 150,000-200,000 at the end of the first century, yet because it was so small—half the land was taken up by public buildings, gymnasium, baths, and so on—the population density was most likely higher than Mumbai or Kolkata, or six times that of New York City today. People

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⁶⁹ Hanson and Oakman, *Palestine in the Time of Jesus*, 150.
⁷⁰ “The major portion of Palestine’s wealth was channeled through the Temple, whose priests collected taxes for themselves and for the Romans. The Jews of Palestine hated the Romans because they saw their wealth going to the empire, though the intensity of the opposition to Rome varied. The priests were coopted by the Romans and were the least likely to support a revolution” (Hoppe, *There Shall Be No Poor Among You*, 13).
⁷² Andrew Overman describes in his book that scholars historically have placed Matthew’s community in Sepphoris or Tiberias in Galilee, Jerusalem or Palestine, or Caesarea Maritima in addition to Antioch (Overman, *Matthew’s Gospel and Formative Judaism*, 159).
were packed in tightly, leading to a lack of privacy and great potential for conflict, especially among the lower strata.  

Warren Carter asserts there were two social groups who lived in Antioch: the elites (making up 5-10%) and the rest, who were poor and dispossessed or made their living serving the elite (the remaining 90-95%). The elites acquired resources from taxes, interest on loans, inheritance, and rents (often paid in kind) and from land ownership, trade, military conquest, and the exploitation of slave work. The elites also had access to two types of retainers: priests who were appointed and elected to various Temples, often based on their beneficence to the city, and who were supported and in some cases even salaried; and tax collectors, bureaucrats, soldiers, judges, and so on who derived their power and authority from the elites and therefore served to keep the system intact and the elites wealthy and in power. The non-elites included workers of all types: artisans, construction workers, sailors, longshoremen, dyers, weavers, tailors, tanners, metal-smiths, dancers, food vendors, and many other specialists. At the bottom of this group were day laborers, slaves, and other expendables.  

Slavery was a central institution within the Roman Empire; people became slaves through debt, conquest/war, being sold or selling themselves into slavery, or being born into slavery. Because of the military might of the Roman Empire, many

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75 Carter, *Matthew and the Margins*, 18. Carter goes on to explain that these percentages of elites may be too high.
77 Warren Carter includes a more complete list that he draws from R. MacMullen that includes pilots, divers, cabinetmakers, millhands, fresco-painters, ragpickers, bag-makers, comedians, tragedians, choristers, harpists and many more (Carter, *Matthew and the Margins*, 19-20).
slaves were taken from the conquered nations. Because of the variety of paths towards enslavement, slaves spanned a number of professions, educational levels, and social and religious backgrounds. In fact, many slaves were doctors and other professionals who were central for the running of society. The majority of slaves, however, were unskilled, and did much of the most difficult and degrading work available. A large number of slaves served as domestic workers as well.

A main distinction between the jobs that slaves were placed in and that of free people was that slaves could be punished. Luise Schottroff insists that, for this reason, slaves were put in situations where they handled money and other economic relations. Because there were repercussions for the slaves if they squandered money, some slaves were put in charge of household financial management. Slaves were also allowed to serve prison terms for their masters in certain cases. As has been seen, slaves were in the purview of the elite in the empire. Largely, it was people with means who were able to afford slaves. But there was a section of non-elite people who acquired slaves to keep their households running as well. Small-scale domestic slave ownership did not necessarily mean wealth, however. For instance, it did not cost a family much to raise a child who was abandoned as a slave.

As with other urban centers of the Roman Empire, living conditions were cramped and dire in Antioch, leading to a poor standard of living for the majority of

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79 This fact comes from the lecture notes of a class on parables taught by Luise Schottroff at Union Theological Seminary in the City of New York, February 17, 2005.

the residents (*plebs urbana*), who were listed above. The most serious problem for the residents of Antioch was securing enough food and sustenance. Starvation was prevalent. The poor of these urban centers were also wanting in clothes, housing, health care, and any form of an adequate standard of living. There were serious health and well-being concerns for the majority of the population living in the Roman Empire. They suffered from a poor diet, the lack of medical attention, injuries at work, and regular violence. Indeed, old age was not common because of these harsh conditions of life.

As home to the poor listed above and also to slaveholders and landowners who financed and controlled much of the land and slaves, Antioch played an important economic role in the empire. Both the grains produced and the fish caught in any imperial locale were sold along trade routes across the empire, including those that ran through Antioch. Despite the prevalent peace propaganda (*Pax Romana*), this social order (based on agricultural production, trade and commerce, and infrastructure development as well as the impoverishment associated with all these) was firmly based on military power. Antioch, for instance, was a staging ground for Roman legions of 15,000-20,000 soldiers for the Jewish War (66-70 C.E.). The economic support for the entire military apparatus came from taxes and levies. In fact, Josephus records that Syria

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supplied corn and other necessities for Titus's army.\textsuperscript{86} As we can see from the living conditions described above, the wealth of the slaveholders and landowners in Antioch and elsewhere was made on the backs of the poor majority. Although many poor Syrian residents starved, the corn and other supplies they harvested and produced supported the maintenance of the empire.

\textit{Antioch, Judaism, and the Jesus Movement}

In addition to the important role it played for the Roman Empire, Antioch had great significance to Judaism and the Jesus movement.\textsuperscript{87} Citing Josephus, Warren Carter states that Jews were some of the first settlers of Antioch as mercenaries in the army of Alexander the Great. Carter affirms that, according to Josephus, the circumstances for the Jews in Antioch declined significantly in 40 C.E., when their Judean compatriots refused a statue of Gaius Caligula in the Jerusalem Temple, and between 66-70 C.E., when there were Jewish protests against the treatment of Jews in Galilee and Judea.\textsuperscript{88} There is also evidence of high levels of poverty in Syria, potentially disproportionally impacting the Jews, because of Roman taxation dating back to the time of Jesus's birth. In fact, Varus Quintilius, the Roman governor of Syria from 7 B.C.E. to 4 B.C.E. was known for extracting high taxes and impoverishing the people of Syria. Velleius Paterculus writes about him:

Varus Quintilius, descended from a famous rather than a high-born family, was a man of mild character and of a quiet disposition, somewhat slow in mind as he was in body, and more accustomed to the leisure of the camp

\textsuperscript{86} Josephus, \textit{Ant} 2.186 (Feldman, LCL).
\textsuperscript{87} For information on the day-to-day lives of Jews in the land of Israel in Roman times, including domestic architecture, clothing, food, meals, work, and trade see Catherine Hezser, ed., \textit{The Oxford Handbook of Jewish Daily Life in Roman Palestine} (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010).
\textsuperscript{88} Carter, \textit{Matthew and the Margins}, 30.
than to actual service in war. That he was no despiser of money is demonstrated by his governorship of Syria: he entered the rich province a poor man, but left it a rich man and the province poor.\textsuperscript{89}

Varus Quintilius was also responsible for quelling a messianic revolt in Judea after Herod the Great’s death in 4 B.C.E., where Josephus asserts he crucified thousands.\textsuperscript{90} But Varus Quintilius was not the only governor of Syria who used the polarization of wealth and poverty to support his rule. Luke 2:2 mentions Publius Sulpicius Quirinius who became the legate of Syria in 6 C.E.; he climbed to power by starving out his opponents and instituted the census as a way to organize the collection of taxes in the empire.\textsuperscript{91}

According to Acts 11:26, Antioch was the first place where Jesus’s followers were called Christians. The church welcomed Paul and Barnabas in Antioch. As it is narrated in Acts 11:19-30, the same church cared for the needs of the poor in Jerusalem during a famine.\textsuperscript{92} In fact, a defining event in the life of Paul, according to

\textsuperscript{89} Velleius Paterculus, \textit{History of Rome} 2.117.

\textsuperscript{90} “Upon this, Varus sent a part of his army into the country, to seek out those that had been the authors of the revolt; and when they were discovered, he punished some of them that were most guilty, and some he dismissed: now the number of those that were crucified on this account were two thousand. After which he disbanded his army, which he found no way useful to him in the affairs he came about; for they behaved themselves very disorderly, and disobeyed his orders, and what Varus desired them to do, and this out of regard to that gain which they made by the mischief they did. As for himself, when he was informed that ten thousand Jews had gotten together, he made haste to catch them; but they did not proceed so far as to fight him, but, by the advice of Achiabus, they came together, and delivered themselves up to him: hereupon Varus forgave the crime of revolting to the multitude, but sent their several commanders to Caesar, many of whom Caesar dismissed; but for the several relations of Herod who had been among these men in this war, they were the only persons whom he punished, who, without the least regard to justice, fought against their own kindred” (Josephus, \textit{Ant} 17.295-298 [Marcus, LCL]).


\textsuperscript{92} In the report of Acts 11:19-30, the disciples gathering resources for the famine victims in Judea is the closest thing to the collection for the poor that Paul discusses in Gal 2:1-10, 2 Corinthians 8-9, portions of 1 Corinthians including chapter 15:58 and 16:1-4, Philippians 4:10-23, and Romans 15:1:4-33 according to Dieter Georgi (Dieter Georgi, \textit{Remembering the Poor: The History of Paul’s Collection for Jerusalem} [Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1992], 178). The collection is a key
his own report in Gal 2:11-14, happens in Antioch. Peter refuses to continue eating with the uncircumcised Jesus believers once James and other disciples show up, going against the agreement between Paul and the Jerusalem “pillars” made in Gal 2:1-10 that included fellowship with the uncircumcised in exchange for the collection for the poor. Because of this “hypocrisy”, Paul is estranged from the other Jewish disciples at Antioch, including his close companion Barnabas (Gal 2:11). This division is not emphasized in Acts, although Antioch is still central there.

**Conclusion**

As we can see from the deep and vast poverty and the wealth (from agriculture, fishing, military conquest, slavery, trade, and commerce) that helped to create and spread this impoverishment, Jesus, his followers, and the community that passed down the stories and produced the Gospel of Matthew were living in the midst of specific economic structures that were fundamentally different than what preceded them. To ignore this context of the Gospel of Matthew and Jesus’s movement would mean to miss major motivating factors for the development and institutionalization of Jesus’s mission and movement and for exploring ways that

93 At the Jerusalem Council, according to Gal 2:1-10, the Jerusalem pillars agree that Titus, a Greek/Gentile, did not need to be circumcised, that Paul was to be the apostle to the Gentiles and does not need to circumcise Gentiles but only encourage them to participate in the collection for the poor, and that Peter will continue as an apostle to the circumcised Jews. This however differs from the report in Acts 15. At Antioch, this agreement breaks apart.
the poor make history. As Richard Horsley aptly writes in his book, *Jesus and Empire: The Kingdom of God and the New World Disorder*, “Trying to understand Jesus’ speech and action without knowing how Roman imperialism determined the conditions of life in Galilee and Jerusalem would be like trying to understand Martin Luther King without knowing how slavery, reconstruction, and segregation determined the lives of African Americans in the United States.” With this context in mind, let us now turn to Jesus’s speech and action in the Gospel of Matthew to explore how they responded to Roman poverty and wealth and whether it suggests that Jesus was a popular leader who challenged empire and promoted a movement for justice and economic rights.

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94 Richard Horsley, *Jesus and Empire: The Kingdom of God and the New World Disorder* (Minneapolis, Minn.: Fortress, 2003), 15.
Chapter Five: Matthew and the Gospel of the Poor

Introduction

Recalling the social and economic conditions in Galilee, Antioch, and the larger Roman Empire and the role of Antioch in relationship to the production and polarization of wealth and poverty in the early Jesus movement described in Chapter Four, it should come as no surprise that economic rights and justice are key themes in the Gospel of Matthew. Indeed, although all four gospels focus on poverty and subsistence, Matthew's Gospel adapts the stories of Jesus to fit the economic and social concerns of the Matthean community. Thus, Richard Horsley asserts:

The Gospel of Matthew, composed fifty years after Jesus’ mission in Galilee, has made more explicit his renewal of covenant community and his emphasis on economic rights and justice . . . The counterpart of economic justice in the covenantal communities of an alternative society in the coming kingdom of heaven is God’s condemnation of oppressive rulers and ruling institutions that consolidate their power and privilege by expropriating the produce and resources of the people.

Exploring Jesus’s practices and teachings of ministry in the Gospel of Matthew, their condemnation of the Roman Empire and promotion of communities of resistance and renewal across the Mediterranean comes into clear view. Similar to the assertion in Chapter One that Jesus is a recognizable leader of a social movement in first-century Palestine, Poverty Scholars posit that Jesus and his community of followers in Matthew dealt with the politics of food and healthcare,

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1 Thomas Schmidt claims that hostility to money and wealth are central religious tenets in all of the Synoptic Gospels. See Thomas Schmidt, *Hostility to Wealth in the Synoptic Gospels* (Sheffield, England: JSOT Press, 1987), 118, 161-164.
spoke in stories that the crowds could hear and share, practiced a new form of
counter-imperial community, and developed a mission that has lasted two
millennia. Following from developments in social history that posit that social
transformation is fueled by the poor and dispossessed as argued in Chapter Four,
Jesus’s teachings and actions around poverty, wealth, and power, especially in
Matthew’s Gospel, lend further support to a portrait of Jesus as a social movement
leader. In fact, exploring the teachings and actions of Jesus in Matthew, Poverty
Scholars propose six “M’s” to highlight the focus on justice and movement building
in the gospel: message, martyrdom, miracles, media, mentoring, and missionary
work.

Message: Jesus proclaimed the “good news” that everyone was created in the
image of God and has worth. Jesus and his disciples demonstrated this “good news”
through shared meals, conversation, and healing. He taught stories and metaphors
wherein the “least and the last” become the “greatest and the first” (Matt 25:40, Matt
18:1-4, Matt 23:11); and the poor are proclaimed “blessed” (Matt 5:1).

Martyrdom: Jesus and the disciples revealed the inequities of Roman society,
which excluded the sick and the poor (Matt 11:5). Through the turning over of the
tables in the Temple, Jesus disrupted commerce and drew attention to the system of
economic and ritual exchange that impoverished and excluded so many poor people
(Matt 21:12). Jesus was accused of sedition and crucified by Rome as an enemy of
the state and alternative “King of the Jews” (Matt 26:63-68, Matt 27:24-44).

Miracles: As a poor man working among the poor of his society, it follows
that Jesus's miracles were about providing the survival needs of the people—care
and healthcare (Matt 8:1-34 Matt 9:1-14, Matt 14:34-36, Matt 20:28-34) and other things that were denied them by the society and economic system of that time.

Faced with a hungry crowd of more than five thousand (Matt 14:13-21, Matt 16:9) that was eager but too hungry to learn, Jesus turned to his disciples and said, “you give them something to eat”.

Media: Jesus and his disciples used various means of communication. He preached sermons and handed down instruction as in the Sermon on the Mount (Matt 5-7). He traveled throughout the area connecting up with more communities and people. Indeed theirs was a peripatetic movement; the Roman roads served as a medium through which they carried their message.

Mentoring: Political education and leadership development were at the heart of the early Christian movement. Throughout his ministry—in his responsiveness to lepers (Matt 8:2, Matt 10:8, Matt 26:6), through his exposure of the Temple system’s regularized defrauding of the poor (Matt 21:12), in his teachings in parables (Matt 13:1-53, Matt 18:10-14, 23-34, Matt 22:1-14, Matt 25:1-30)—Jesus exposed the disciples to the conditions under which people were suffering and unveiled the ways in which the Roman Empire produced this misery. Further, Jesus promoted leadership development by entrusting his followers to carry out healing and preaching and then to return back together to reflect on their experiences. When Jesus was doing miracles himself, he was developing other leaders. Jesus also focused on self-doubt and self-hatred, exorcising spirits and demons (Matt 4:24, Matt 8:23-28, Matt 5:16)—a major hurdle that poor people must confront and conquer if they are to be successful leaders.
Missionary Work: In his own life and ministry, Jesus represented the coming together of the other five “M’s” of movement-building. Each of these things inseparably raised the consciousness of and built a movement among the people who were called the “least of these” (Matt 25:40). Matthew 28:16-20, called the “Great Commission” and the finale of the Gospel of Matthew, is about charging Jesus’ disciples to follow him in carrying forward their seditious mission. Focusing on this mission reminds every person that each person is a crucial contributor to the movement’s success or failure; that it is about them and their own choices, not solely focused on Jesus and his charismatic personality.

This Poverty Scholars’ profile of Matthew’s Jesus as teacher and social movement leader with a program of covenant economics connects with ideas from empire-critical and historical-critical biblical scholars. Marcus Borg asserts that Jesus was one of four characters – a prophet, a sage, a revitalization movement founder, or a spiritual leader. John Dominic Crossan proposes that Jesus was a cynic philosopher, a visionary teacher, and a peasant protestor. Richard Horsley depicts Jesus as a social revolutionary. E. P. Sanders suggests that Jesus is a teacher of “Jewish restoration eschatology.” N. T. Wright asserts that Jesus was a messianic prophet. Geza Vermes argues that Jesus was a Galilean holy man. William Herzog

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6 E.P. Sanders, *The Historical Figure of Jesus* (New York: Penguin Books, 1996).
writes that Jesus is a prophet in the tradition of Israel’s prophetic figures, a
subversive pedagogue of the oppressed, a shamanistic figure, and a reputational
leader who brokers the justice of Yahweh’s covenant and coming reign. \(^9\) Others
including Stevan Davies, Jurgen Becker, Joachim Gnilka, Dale Allison suggest he was
seen as a healer or prophet or apocalyptic figure for the Kingdom of God. \(^10\)

Based on close exegetical work of Matthew, historical-critical scholarship of
Galilee, Antioch, and the larger Roman Empire, and my contextual Bible study
commitments as experienced through “Reading the Bible with the Poor,” I agree
with the profile developed by Poverty Scholars and argue that Jesus was a teacher,
leader, prophet, and ruler of a budding revolutionary social movement of the poor
that practiced and preached about God’s coming reign of abundance, dignity, and
prosperity for all. This religious and political movement was accurately understood
by the ruling elite of the Roman Empire to be in stark opposition to Rome, especially
with respect to its economic, political, and religious structure. In this chapter, I look
at the literary context of Matthew and how the Gospel of Matthew presents issues of
money, taxation, economic rights, and debt. I examine how Matthew portrays Jesus
and assert that revolutionary teaching/learning, resistance to Roman power and
authority, and transformative economic practice are main concerns of Jesus in the
Gospel of Matthew. \(^11\) This focus on economic justice and covenantal community in

\(^9\) Herzog, *Prophet and Teacher: An Introduction to the Historical Jesus* (Louisville:

\(^10\) Herzog, *Prophet and Teacher*, 7-12.

\(^11\) This view of the Gospel of Matthew echoes the work of Richard Horsley in his book
*Covenant Economics:*
Simply the perpetuation of Jesus’ prophetic declarations of God’s condemnation of
oppressive central control and expropriation of resources produced and needed by the
people would have been a strong restatement of the whole covenantal and prophetic
the Gospel of Matthew is the starting point for any re-reading of the passage “the poor will be with you always” in Matt 26:11 and for understanding Jesus’s condemnation of practices and people who exploit and exclude the common people.

**Matthew’s (Literary) Context**

Given the centrality of trade, banking, and commerce—most likely because of the proximity of trade routes and distribution centers in Matthew’s Antioch—it is no coincidence that there are twenty-eight references to money (gold, silver, talent) in Matthew, as opposed to Mark and Luke, where silver is only mentioned once (Mark) or four times (Luke). In general, Matthew’s audience has some familiarity with wealth, much more than the one reflected in the Gospel of Mark or Q, upon which Matthew’s Gospel is based, and even more than we see in Luke who is also concerned with wealth and poverty. Whereas Mark’s disciples are not to take

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message of God’s insistence that the people have economic rights (Richard Horsley, *Covenant Economics*, 159).


“copper coins” on their journey (Mark 6:8), Matthew’s disciples are not to take “gold, silver, or copper coins” (Matt 10:9). Whereas Luke’s Jesus talks about “minas” (Luke 19:11-27), Matthew’s Jesus speaks about “talents” (Matt 25:14-30) that are worth 50 times as much—although in both stories banking and trading are presupposed. Whereas Joseph of Arimathaea is a member of the council in Mark 15:43 and Luke 23:50-51, he is a rich man in Matt 27:57. These references clearly indicate a particular knowledge of the Matthean community of wealth, trade, and commerce.

In order to explore the familiarity with money, wealth, and commerce as well as debt, taxation, and impoverishment, we must turn to Matthew’s literary context. Certain terms for debt, tax payments, talents, and coins as well as a verb connoting material need occur only in Matthew and are absent from other gospels.

Further, Matthew’s language for money is both more varied and refers to money of higher value than in Luke or Mark. As we can see in Figure 1, argryron (“silver”) occurs in Matthew nine of the twenty-seven mentions in the entire New Testament.

Words that appear only in Matthew:

| Nouns - talanton (talents), didrachmon (two drachmas), statēr (a silver coin), nomisma (coin), and daneion (loan). Verbs - crēzō (to have need). |

14 Carter, Matthew and the Margins, 25.
15 Carter, Matthew and the Margins, 21.
16 Talents (talanton) meaning a measure of weight of coinage are mentioned in 14 places in Matthew in 18:24, 25:15, 25:16, 25:20 (4x), 25:22 (3x), 25:24, 25:25, 25:28 (2x)) but nowhere else in the New Testament. Also to didrachmon, meaning two drachmas for the Temple tax is only in Matthew (in 17:24 (2x)) as is stater (a silver coin) 17:27, nomisma (coin) 22:19, daneion (loan) 18:27, and crēzō (to have need) 6:32.

The only mention of chrysos ("gold") in the Gospels is in Matthew, where it appears five times as shown in Figure 1; the five other occurrences are in some of the New Testament writings that are most concerned with money and economics—Acts, Paul, James and Revelation. In contrast, chalkos ("copper," "bronze," "brass"), the monetary value with the lowest worth, is only mentioned once in Matthew.

The fact that wealth and money were familiar to the residents of Antioch does not necessarily mean that Matthew’s community was based among the wealthy (or anyone with any means for that matter). Rather, these terms in Matthew suggest that the polarization of wealth and poverty was a major defining issue in the lives of the Jesus followers who compiled the Gospel of Matthew, especially as Matthew’s community was based in Antioch, a financial and economic center of both the wealth and poverty of the empire. Trade, money, commerce, and luxury items were close at hand but so were taxes, debt, famine, slavery, and social and political conflict over resources. Moreover, the presence of words like daneion ("loan"), didrachmon ("two drachma Temple tax"), and crēzō ("to have need") that only occur in Matthew indicate this economic polarization.

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20 In Matt 10:9 (and Mark 6:8, 12:41, 1 Cor 13:1, Rev 18:12).

21 Warren Carter asserts that Matthew’s community is based among the non-elites but not necessarily the destitute and day laborers. The common interpretation has been that Matthew’s community was even wealthier than that. I would argue that the vast majority of inhabitants of the Roman Empire were poor or on the verge of poverty. Here, I am subscribing to the work of Justin Meggitt in particular. The prevalence of poverty does not mean only the destitute. Instead the community could have been made up of the dispossessed by the farming and fishing industries or taxation, artisans, and even retainers for the Roman Empire. The use of the terms for poverty, debt, slavery, etc. as seen in this section emphasizes this possibility for Matthew’s gospel. See Carter, *Matthew and the Margins*, 24-25; and Meggit, *Paul, Poverty and Survival*, 75-179.
As Figure 1 shows, *telones* ("tax collector" or "revenue officer") occurs in Matthew nine of the twenty times it is mentioned in the New Testament.  

Matthew has more mentions of debt(s) and debtors including *opheiletēs* ("debtor");*23* *opheiλē* ("debt");*24* *opheilō* ("debt");*25* and *opheilēma* ("debts")*26*, perhaps drawing the line between tax collection and indebtedness. Slavery is also connected to debt. One-quarter of all the mentions of *doulos* ("slave") in the New Testament occur in Matthew.*27* The frequency of the word *doulos* in Matthew may be further evidence of the prevalence of slaves in the Matthean community, emphasizing the presence of economic extremes in Matthew.*28* Other economic terms present throughout Matthew include: *trophē* ("provisions"); four of the fifteen occurrences, or one-third of the references in the NT, are in Matt);*29* *mamonas* ("mammon," "wealth" in Aramaic; one of four occurrences)*30*; *ploutos* ("riches," "wealth," "abundance"; Matt 13:22)*31*; and *timē*
(“value,” “honor,” “price”) that occurs in Matt 27:6, 27:9. This focus on money, commerce, and trade continues throughout Matthew. Other economic-related verbs used in Matthew include: *lambanō* (“to take,” “receive,” or “collect”; one-fifth of the occurrences, or fifty of two-hundred fifty-eight times, in the New Testament are in Matthew), *agorazō* (“to buy,” “acquire things or services in exchange for money”; one-fourth of the occurrences, or seven of the twenty-nine times, in the New Testament are in Matthew), *apodidōmi* (“to give back”; one-third of the occurrences, or sixteen of the forty-five times, in the New Testament are in Matthew), *aphiēmi* (“to forgive,” “free”; one-third of the occurrences, or forty-seven of the one-hundred forty-three times, in the New Testament are in Matthew), *opheilō* (“to be obligated”) and *ktaomai* (“to obtain,” “acquire”), and *kerdainō* (“to gain”).

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33 In Matt 5:40, 7:8, 8:17, 10:8, 38, 41 (2x), 12:14, 13:20, 31, 33, 14:19, 15:26, 36, 16:5, 7, 9, 10, 17:24, 25, 27, 19:29, 20:9, 10 (2x), 11, 21:22, 34, 35, 39, 22:15, 25:1, 3 (2x), 4, 16, 18, 20, 24, 26:26 (2x), 27, 52, 27:1, 6, 7, 9, 24, 30, 48, 59, 28:12, 15.


Key Economic Words in Matthew (Figure 1)
In this chapter so far, I have asserted that the renewal of covenant and economic rights are made more explicit in the Gospel of Matthew. Surveying the prevalence of the words and themes of money, slavery, debt, commerce, and other economic terms in the gospel, I have found a clear emphasis in Matthew, suggesting that these were central concerns to the gospel writers (and hearers). In the next chapter, I will examine buying and selling in Matthew, exploring the term *pipraskō* ("to sell"), which is found in Matthew three out of the nine times it occurs in the New Testament, including 13:46, 18:25, 26:9 (and Mark 14:5, John 12:5, Acts 2:45, 4:34, 5:4 and Rom 7:14). I will also examine the way that buying and selling, money and economic exchange occur in Matt 26:1-16. In this chapter, in order to further argue that Matthew’s Jesus was a revolutionary pedagogue, an educator and organizer who promoted a new economic practice, and an anointed—and yet poor—prophet and king, I will continue to look in closer detail on Jesus’s sayings and teachings on three central poverty and economics-related topics (and words found in Matthew): *mathētēs* ("learner," "disciple," connected to concepts of instruction, law, and hypocrisy), *telōnes* ("tax collector," connected to taxation, debt, and economic practice), and *christos* ("anointed one," "ruler," connected to judgment and kingship).

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Jesus: A Teacher/Social Movement Leader/(Popular) Ruler with a Revolutionary Economic Program

I have explored some of the pedagogy of the movement of the poor in the twenty-first-century and the current role of “Poverty Scholars” in contemporary society in Chapters One and Three. As argued there, the Poverty Initiative has dived into studying social movements in history and looking at the role that education, training, and organization-building have played in those movements themselves. Tired of hearing the story that Rosa Parks just got tired one day and would not get up from her seat on a Montgomery public bus, the Poverty Initiative situates Mrs. Parks in her historical context. Parks had recently returned from a human rights training at the Highlander Folk School where passive resistance and the problems of segregation were discussed when she refused to give up her seat; she was the secretary of the NAACP in Alabama, working with E.D. Nixon to turn it into a more activist branch; she was familiar with the driver who called the police when she refused to move, knowing that he was notorious for his staunch support of segregation; she was the daughter of a Garveyite, a follower of Marcus Garvey, her father was a social activist himself. More often, as is the case with the lore around Rosa Parks and her “personal” stand against bus segregation, our society and educational institutions separate education from action, mobilization from organization, individual and spontaneous actions from deep-rooted social commitments and values. People assume that resistance is only present and explicit when people are marching on the streets, protesting current policies and conditions,

41 For more information on the political life and commitments of Rosa Parks, see Jeanne Theoharis, The Rebellious Life of Mrs. Rosa Parks (New York: Beacon Press, 2013).
and covered by the mainstream media. Sometimes people say the only type of education that is relevant to poor people and all justice minded people are interested in are tactics to organize a more effective strike or rally or job training programs that will pull a poor family up by their bootstraps. However, from the perspective of an organizer and educator in a social movement to end poverty, each step in the development of that movement has to be focused on education, critical thinking, applied action, values and commitment, and leadership development. It is from this position that I (re)construct—gathering the fragments and excavating the hidden transcript of—a profile of Jesus Christ in the Gospel of Matthew—positing that Jesus was a teacher, movement leader, and popularly acclaimed ruler with a revolutionary economic program—with each of these roles of Jesus being connected and needed to struggle for dignity and justice and achieve social transformation.

*Jesus: the Teacher with a Revolutionary Economic Program*

Ireneus was the first to attribute the first gospel in the New Testament to Jesus’s disciple, Matthew.42 A Greek word resembling Matthew, *mathêtēs*, means “disciple” or “learner.” This emphasis on teaching and instruction runs throughout

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42 “We have learned from none others the plan of our salvation, than from those through whom the Gospel has come down to us, which they did at one time proclaim in public, and, at a later period, by the will of God, handed down to us in the Scriptures, to be the ground and pillar of our faith. For it is unlawful to assert that they preached before they possessed perfect knowledge, as some do even venture to say, boasting themselves as improvers of the apostles. For, after our Lord rose from the dead, [the apostles] were invested with power from on high when the Holy Spirit came down [upon them], were filled from all, and had perfect knowledge: they departed to the ends of the earth, preaching the glad tidings of the good things from God to us, and proclaiming the peace of heaven to men, who indeed do all equally and individually possess the Gospel of God. Matthew also issued a written Gospel among the Hebrews in their own dialect, while Peter and Paul were preaching at Rome, and laying the foundations of the Church. After their departure, Mark, the disciple and interpreter of Peter, did also hand down to us in writing what had been preached by Peter. Luke also, the companion of Paul, recorded in a book the Gospel preached by him. Afterwards, John, the disciple of the Lord, who also had leaned upon His breast, did himself publish a Gospel during his residence at Ephesus in Asia” (Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, 3.1.1).
the gospel and establishes Jesus’s primary role as that of teacher. Richard Horsley proposes that Jesus was not a singular teacher, however, but rather a revolutionary pedagogue and movement leader throughout his historical life that then extends past his crucifixion and resurrection.\textsuperscript{43} This is in line with my understanding of the roles of Jesus and the profile of Jesus as pedagogue of the poor that Poverty Scholars describe (in the beginning of this chapter and more broadly) as portrayed in the Gospel of Matthew and throughout the New Testament.

Scholars, starting with Benjamin Bacon, assert that the Gospel of Matthew is organized into five distinct discursive or instructional units, each concluding with the phrase, “When Jesus had finished saying these things” (7:28, 11:1, 13:53, 19:1, 26:1)—the first and most important of those units being the Sermon on the Mount.\textsuperscript{44} Scholars following Bacon argue that the main themes of the Gospel emphasize such matters as the law, the five books of Moses, and Jesus’s relationship to Moses.\textsuperscript{45} Other scholars suggest that there are three sections of Matthew beyond the five units of his teachings: “Preparation for Jesus Messiah, Son of God,” “Proclamation of Jesus to Israel,” and “Passion and Resurrection of Jesus Messiah, Son of God.”\textsuperscript{46} I postulate these five units of Jesus’s teaching and three sections of the gospel overall, while being focused on law and Moses, messiah, and Son of God, in general, particularly emphasize instructions on poverty, money, and covenant economics.

These five teaching units further demonstrate Jesus’s concern for economic justice and community ethics. In fact, many of the stories, teachings, and sayings unique to Matthew specifically concern poverty, wealth, and justice, including the genealogy (Matt 1:1-17), passion narrative (Matt 21-28), Sermon on the Mount (Matt 5-7), teaching on the hypocrites (Matt 23:1-36), and select parables. Matthew emphasizes covenant economics and economic rights; Jesus’ roles through the Gospel of Matthew emphasize his focus on upturning the status quo:

Matthew highlights Jesus’ renewal of covenant community and covenantal economics, mainly by inserting long covenantal speeches by Jesus into the Gospel story. What Jesus had originally focused on Galilean villages, however, Matthew adapted for application to small minority communities in Syrian towns under the increasingly oppressive impact of centralized Roman imperial power.

Therefore, Jesus’s social and economic teachings as laid out in the Sermon on the Mount and his other instructional units suggest that he is a “New Moses” a liberator to Galilean villages and Syrian towns who brings a new understanding of teaching, law, and instruction to a people in need of dignity and freedom. Matthew’s Jesus interprets Torah (“law,” “commandment,” “instruction”) authoritatively to the people. In fact, the Hebrew Scriptures, especially Torah, are so important to Matthew that there are 50 allusions to the Septuagint (and the

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48 Horsley, *Covenant Economics*, 149.


popular stories passed down from Israelite tradition) in the Gospel, more than in any of the other gospels. Matthew frequently references the words of prophets of the Hebrew Bible coming to fruition in the so-called “fulfillment quotations” (1:22-23, 2:15, 4:14, 8:17, 12:14-17, 13:35, 21:4-5, 27:9-10). Specifically there are references to Deut 5:1-21 (the Ten Commandments), Deut 6:10-25 (Torah observance), Deut 15:1-18 (Jubilee and Sabbath), and Deut 17:14-20 (on the role of the king), as well as other parts of Deuteronomy where covenant economics is emphasized. Scholars assert that a contrast of adherence to neighbor-love over the practice of the Jerusalem elites is a major theme of the Gospel of Matthew and these fulfillment quotations. Moreover, Jesus’s disciples are learners and leaders of these lessons that include a strong economic justice component.

Special attention must be paid to the Sermon on the Mount, where there is truly a revolutionary set of teachings about poverty, debt, and other economic issues. The Sermon on the Mount (Matt 5-7) includes the Beatitudes (Matt 5:1-12), the Lord’s Prayer (Matt 6:9-15), the choice between honoring God and Mammon (Matt 6:24), and God’s provision for the material needs of the people (Matt 6:25-34). The first main teaching in the Sermon on the Mount is the Beatitudes. Similar

52 Each part of Jesus’s Infancy Narrative and Passion Narratives are said to fulfill what the prophets said about the Messiah: coming out of Egypt, being a Nazarene, etc.
55 In his article, The Poor/Rich Theme in the Beatitudes, Thomas Hoyt explores these themes in Matthew’s Sermon on the Mount and Luke’s Sermon on the Plain. When comparing the two versions, Hoyt emphasizes that Matthew is longer (109 verses total) than Luke (30 verses). Some of the sayings contained in the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew are elsewhere in the book of Luke. Both sermons begin with the Beatitudes, end with the parable of the builder, and have the same
to how the phrase “the poor are with you always” has been used to justify poverty, the presence of the “blessed are the poor in spirit” in the first Beatitude in Matthew has often been used to spiritualize the gospel and claim that Jesus is not concerned with material/economic issues. Jesus does begin the Beatitudes by talking about the “poor in spirit” in Matthew, whereas in Luke’s Sermon on the Plain, he speaks simply of the “poor.” Nevertheless, I agree with Warren Carter that this is not the spiritualization of poverty, but a further description of poverty and despair. The Greek word *pneuma* is often translated as “spirit,” but also means “breath.” These people, whom Jesus is referencing, are metaphorically poor in breath, on the verge of death; they are being denied life. Leland White concurs that the concept of “poor in spirit” does not mean immateriality, but rather refers to those who are down and out, the more marginalized. He insists that because the word “spirit” connotes breath and life, being poor in spirit actually intensifies and emphasizes the material poverty of Matthew’s community. White continues that the general term “poor” could have spoken to more than economic deprivation, but never excluded it, and

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Leland White argues that the body of the sermon contains a code for community life, whereas the first seventeen verses of chapter 5, which include the beatitudes (5:3-11), introduce this code. In Matthew, there are one hundred and ten verses of the sermon and forty-eight verses that either present or explain a norm or rule of community life both internally and externally. In many cases, Jesus interprets an ancient norm by intensifying its meaning. White describes the Gospel of Matthew as demonstrating a community of equals, where there is a “lack of a formal power structure and the prohibition against recognizing rank or achievement within the community. Only one type of leadership role appears to be recognized within this community, namely teaching and/or prophesying” (Leland White, “Grid and Group in Matthew’s Community: The Righteousness/Honor Code in the Sermon on the Mount”, *Semeia* 35 [1986]: 75). White asserts that the Beatitudes are the opening statement and greeting in the Sermon on the Mount. They are used to set the community values and to better understand the situation of Matthew’s community.

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that “blessed are the poor” could not mean “blessed is poverty”. Rather it indicates that the Kingdom would end their need and economic misfortune and that poverty exists as a result of not being responsive to the will of God.\footnote{White, “Grid and Group in Matthew's Community,” 61-88.}

As we can see from Matt 5:1, there is a focus on poverty and justice for the poor in the Beatitudes. Matthew’s Beatitudes include hunger and thirst for justice in 5:6. This addition of justice/righteousness is similar to the inclusion of “in spirit” in Matt 5:1:

The traditional translation (“righteousness”) has led to a pious individualist interpretation. The point rather is that with the coming of the kingdom of God to the poor, justice will be realized or effected for them, with sufficient food, clothing, shelter, and so on, for a basic livelihood. Jesus reaffirms the same basic point later in the speech in the paragraph concluding with ‘strive for the kingdom of God and its justice, and all these things will be give to you as well’ (Matt. 6:25-33).\footnote{Horsley, \textit{Covenant Economics}, 153.}

For Jesus’s followers, these beatitudes would be heard as emphasizing the context of injustice and impoverishment. There are five unique sayings in Matthew’s version of the Beatitudes not included in Luke, including “blessed are the meek” (Matt 5:5), “blessed are the merciful” (Matt 5:7), “blessed are the pure in heart” (Matt 5:8), “blessed are the peacemakers” (Matt 5:9), and “blessed are the persecuted” (Matt 5:10). These five sayings may be echoes from the Hebrew Scriptures and relevant to the concerns and context of Matthew’s community. For example, the pure in heart reflects Psalm 24:3-4, peacemakers reflects \textit{Avot} 1:2 and \textit{2 Enoch} 70:11.\footnote{White, “Grid and Group in Matthew's Community”, 61-88.} These blessings and teachings likely connect with the nuanced and complex concerns of
Matthew's community as they relate to the conditions that surround them: empire, conflict, justice, persecution, and the hypocrisy of religious leaders.

The Sermon on the Mount continues to address problems of inequality and mistreatment of community members. It encourages the leadership of the poor and oppressed especially in Matt 5:9-16 with the imperative to the peasant disciples to let “their light shine”. Matthew 6:1-8 emphasizes adherence to the law and resistance to hypocrisy with regard to three religious and social practices in particular: almsgiving, prayer, and fasting. Jesus critiques the “hypocrites” for sounding a trumpet in the synagogue and on the streets when they give to the needy (6:1-4), for praying in public so everyone notices (6:5-15), and for looking somber in order to get attention when they are fasting (6:16-18). In other words, the hypocrites give alms, pray, and fast to be glorified by others rather than to glorify God; such elevating of the self follows the hierarchal pattern of the empire and not the mutual solidarity and good news for the poor required in God's Kingdom (as is told in Matt 4:23, 9:31, 11:2-6, 19:16-26, 25:31-46).60 Although these three

60 In Matt 11:2-6, in an exchange between Jesus, John the Baptist, and John's followers, people marvel at the works of Jesus and say that the blind see, the lame walk, and the poor receive good news. This good news is a reference to the Jubilee from Isaiah 61:1-6, which reads,

The Spirit of the Sovereign Lord is on me, because the Lord has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim freedom for the captives and release from darkness for the prisoners, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor and the day of vengeance of our God, to comfort all who mourn, and provide for those who grieve in Zion—to bestow on them a crown of beauty instead of ashes, the oil of joy instead of mourning, and a garment of praise instead of a spirit of despair. They will be called oaks of righteousness, a planting of the Lord for the display of his splendor. They will rebuild the ancient ruins and restore the places long devastated; they will renew the ruined cities that have been devastated for generations. Strangers will shepherd your flocks; foreigners will work your fields and vineyards. And you will be calledpriests of the Lord, you will be named ministers of our God. You will feed on the wealth of nations, and in their riches you will boast. (Isa 61:1-6)

The quote from Matt 11:2-6 where Jesus is known to bring good news to the poor and sight to the blind connects with Jesus's mission and vision of economic justice. Also in Matt 4:23 and 9:31, Jesus goes throughout the land proclaiming good news, healing the sick, the blind, and the mute.
instructions (on giving to the poor, fasting as religious observance, and praying to God) are requirements for all Jesus-followers, the instruction of Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount is to recognize the potential dangers of propping oneself up (on the backs of others) and, by extension, of propping up the hegemonic system that impoverishes and exploits the many. Jesus’s instruction and warnings on the perils of these three practices are linked to his seven woes to the hypocrites in Matt 23.  

Jesus critiques those who oppress others, use people for their personal favor and benefit, forget the things that matter like justice and mercy, and look shiny on the outside but are shallow on the inside.

Combining words and actions, intention and actual good works is an important theme of Jesus’s teaching that starts here in the Sermon on the Mount and runs throughout Matthew. Jesus is concerned with doing justice, not with giving action-less lip service to it, or blatantly doing acts of injustice (as seen in Matt 21:28-61)

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61 Although traditionally the Pharisees have been associated with the Jews, I want to suggest that in general the Pharisees in Matthew are elite collaborators with the Roman Empire. There has been much attention paid to the critique of formative Judaism and in particular the way that Matthew groups the “scribes and Pharisees” together and critiques them. The climax of this critique is Matt 23 and the woes against the hypocrites/Pharisees. Although these woes exist in Q, Matthew has expanded them. J. Andrew Overman states that this general critique of Jewish authorities is based in a Jewish community post the destruction of the Jerusalem Temple in 70. He writes, Matthew seeks to legitimate the position of his community by associating and implicating the current leadership with the widely accepted sins and errors of past leaders...and with some of the villains of Israel’s history. The persecution of the apostles and the Matthean community at the hands of the Jewish leadership parallels the persecution and rejection of the prophets by the false leaders of Israel’s history [J. Andrew Overman, *Matthew’s Gospel and Formative Judaism: The Social World of the Matthean Community* (Minneapolis, Minn.: Augsburg Fortress, 1990), 143].

62 Brigitte Kahl identifies a link between hypocrisy and *ethnikoi* in Gal 2 and Matt 6. She argues that hypocrites are those whose social standing matters more than fulfillment of the law to them. She writes, “As in Matthew, the real alternative is not Torah or Torah-free, but proper or improper Torah observance before the backdrop of an all pervasive and multi-layered context of foreign domination that is both attractive as it lures subjects into conformity and threatening for those who are non-compliant” (Brigitte Kahl, “Peter’s Antiochene Apostasy: Re-Judaizing or Imperial Conformism? An Intertextual Exploration”, *Forum* 3.1 [2014], 34).

63 Stoics and cynics also encouraged such a lifestyle.
32, 25:31-46 and to be explored in Chapter Eight). This emphasis on praxis in Matthew, the combinations of words and actions, is a renewal of the teachings of ancient Israelites’ Mosaic covenant and prophetic traditions:

The move from the declaration of deliverance (the blessings) to the covenantal commandments and teachings in the Sermon on the Mount could not be more explicit. Far from an abolition or supersession of the traditional Mosaic covenantal Law and the Prophets, Jesus’ renewal of the Covenant is a fulfillment of them, the very foundation of his renewal of Israel... Jesus is delivering new covenantal teaching addressed to social-economic interaction in small communities in which families are the most basic social unit.64

The mechanism of this renewal movement in Matthew is the instructions of Jesus. Matthew’s teachings demonstrate the kind of teacher Jesus is and the kind of disciples/learners his followers ought to be.65 In Matt 7:15-20, also within the special Matthean material of the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus teaches about false prophets and good fruits. He pronounces judgment on wolves in sheep’s clothing—those who claim to be followers and believers but who actually sow discord and do injustice.66 This warning against false prophets and other stories about not storing up treasure and renewing Israel’s law in Matthew’s Gospel differ significantly from the versions of these stories in Luke and show Matthew’s emphasis on covenantal law and instruction. In Matt 5:17-20, Jesus asserts that he has not come to dissolve the law but to re-interpret it. He instructs his followers that the hypocrites and teachers of the law may not get to God’s kingdom but if they follow God’s

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64 Horsley, Covenant Economics, 153.
65 Overman, Matthew’s Gospel and Formative Judaism, 142.
66 Wolves were not portrayed positively in the Bible and were considered threatening and cruel to the people of ancient Israel. There are various biblical references to them including: that wolves are fierce (Gen 49:27; Ezek 22:27; Hab 1:8); prowling in the night (Jer 5:6; Zeph 3:3); devouring lambs and sheep (John 10:12); and going to associate peacefully with the lamb under Messiah’s reign (Isa 11:6, 65:25). In addition to Matt 7:15, wolves are in Matt 10:16 as well as Acts 20:29.
commandments of justice and inclusion they will.\textsuperscript{67} In Matt 6:19-21, Jesus instructs his followers not to store up treasures on earth. He suggests that treasure and wealth rust, corrode, and can be destroyed or stolen. Jesus says that where one’s treasure is where one’s heart is. If his followers aspire to live in solidarity and mutuality and follow God’s commandments of economic justice, they will be storing up treasures in God’s kingdom.

In addition to the Sermon on the Mount, there are a few parables unique to Matthew, another major form of Jesus’s revolutionary teaching, that also reaffirm this focus on instruction and economics, including the Parables of the Weeds (13:24-30, 13:36-43), Hidden Treasure and Pearl (13:44-46), Net (13:47-50), New and Old Treasures (13:51-52), Laborers in the Vineyard (20:1-16), Two Sons (21:28-32), and Ten Bridesmaids (25:1-13). The Parables of the Weeds, Net, New and Old Treasures, and Two Sons speak to the praxis of unity of words and deeds and the judgment of God for those who bear bad fruit and injustice.\textsuperscript{68} While I will explore the parable of the Hidden Treasure and Pearl in Chapter Six, what is particularly important to highlight in this section is the Parable of the Laborers in the Vineyard (Matt 20:1-16). For many, this parable is confusing. Workers go out to work and make an agreement with the farmer to receive one denarius, the standard rate for day laborers. When some workers start their work hours later, they are still paid the daily rate. These “undeserving” workers earn money for work they do not do. This


sounds similar to an economic logic where God provides and people do not have to worry about (or work for/deserve) their daily needs. This could be an echo of the manna story in the Exodus narrative (Exod 16:1-22) or the teaching on the lilies of the field from the Sermon on the Mount (Matt 6:25-34). Perhaps this parable shows the difference between the Roman greed-based money economy and God’s need-based economy as Jesus teaches to his followers and is told (perhaps even practiced) by the Matthean community. Also important to explore here is the Parable of the Talents/Pounds. Although contained in both Matt 25:14-30 and Luke 19:12-30, the versions of the stories differ (in Matthew the laborers are given talents to invest while in Luke they only receive pounds—worth much less as mentioned above). Activities such as banking, trading, investing, and making outrageous profit (usury) that may have violated Torah stipulations (Lev 25:35-38; Deut 15:7-11) pervade the language of these parables, however—contributing to any analysis that a critique of these economic practices occurs throughout the gospel. Throughout Matthew, there are economic turns and twists—places where Jesus teaches and/or demonstrates that the economy of God’s kingdom is not what one would expect. We will turn to this idea more now.

*Jesus: the Social Movement Leader with a Revolutionary Economic Program*

In both Matt 9:9-13, where Matthew is called to follow Jesus, and Matt 10:3, where he is listed as the eighth disciple, we learn that in addition to being a learner/disciple, Matthew is a tax collector (*telones*). This detail should not be overlooked, especially in a reading focused on wealth, poverty, and economic
justice. Tax collectors were retainers for the Roman Empire and the local provincial elites and many of them acquired wealth for themselves as well:

Rome took about 12 percent as a land tax, a denarius head tax on each member of the household, and a wave offering about 1/40th of the harvest, for a grand total of 15 percent. Add to this the 20 percent of the harvest set aside for sowing the next crop, and the peasant household is left with 65 percent of their subsistence crop, 55 percent if they tithe to the Temple and 45 percent if they pay a second tithe.\(^{69}\)

The taxes were collected through the Temple, so the high priest was also involved in this system of taxation.\(^{70}\) The fact that the namesake for the Gospel of Matthew is someone who gives up collecting taxes for himself and the empire to follow the teachings of Jesus could serve as further instruction on covenant economy and economic practice for Matthew’s community; Jesus’s follower, Matthew, transforms debt and taxation for Caesar into discipleship and justice for God. The controversial nature of Jesus’s critique of economic exploitation throughout Matthew is emphasized. In his book, *Covenant Economics*, Richard Horsley writes:

Matthew’s Gospel, moreover, expands Jesus’ condemnation of the rulers of Israel for their economic manipulation and exploitation or the people, all clearly on the basis of covenantal commandments and principles (17:24-27; 21-22; 23) . . . Matthew also indicates that the communities addressed understand themselves as a continuation of the renewal of Israel inaugurated by Jesus over against the rulers of Israel, the high priesthood in the Temple as well as the Romans.\(^{71}\)

It is important, therefore, to explore a few special teachings and actions in Matthew of Jesus the social movement leader with a revolutionary economic program.

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\(^{71}\) Horsley, *Covenant Economics*, 150-151.
First, in Matt 17:24-27, Jesus and Simon Peter discuss the Temple tax. As is mentioned earlier in this chapter, the two-drachma Temple tax that was suggested in Exodus 30:13-15 for all Temple visitors and continued until after the destruction of the Jerusalem Temple when it became the *Fiscus Judaicus*, does not appear in the rest of the New Testament, only here in Matthew. In this story, Jesus reminds Simon Peter that when collecting taxes, rulers usually tax others, not their children, and asserts that the children of God should therefore be free. He then instructs Simon Peter to catch a fish, take a coin out of its mouth, and to then use that coin to pay for both Jesus and Simon Peter. Since the taxes they pay end up coming from a fish in the sea, this instruction may show how taxes are taken from the hard work of the inhabitants of the empire, including especially fishermen in Galilee and the ports of Antioch. Also, their joint payment of the Temple tax could be seen as a public act of tax evasion and nonviolent direct action. Since the temple tax was a head tax, each person was required to pay individually. In front of others, Jesus is refusing to pay the Temple tax—or saying that Simon Peter’s payment should count for him, too—and asserting that the children should be free. He may be acting out a new reality (the elimination of Temple taxes after 70 C.E.) while critiquing the current reality and system, where only the poor pay taxes and the elites—through nepotism and their political and economic power—pay little compared to what they have, or in some cases, actually make money from other people’s taxes.

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Then, in Matt 22:15-22, the topic of taxes is raised again. The Pharisees try to trap Jesus by asking if they should resist paying the imperial tax. Throughout its history of interpretation, this passage has been used to justify subservience to Caesar, the empire, and therefore the state. Much like the role that “the poor will be with you always” has played in justifying poverty, this pericope has been used to keep religion and politics “separate” and allow those with political power little scrutiny and critique from the church. But rather than the separation of church and state or the moral condoning of dictatorship and state sponsored repression of the people (like in El Salvador and other parts of Latin America where this passage has been used), this passage may be actually critiquing those in power and claiming that God condemns this sort of violence and repression, especially by practitioners of contextual Bible study and forms of “Reading the Bible with the Poor.”

In this story, Jesus knows the Pharisees have set a trap and asks them to take out a denarius and look at it. He suggests that because the coin has Caesar’s head on it, they should give to Caesar what belongs to Caesar. He also says that they should give to God what belongs to God, thereby reminding everyone that God’s mark is on all creation and requires one’s whole heart, mind, and soul. Rather than justify dispossession and submission to authority, this statement on Jesus’s part potentially serves as a subtle but sweeping critique of Caesar as being less important and vast

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73 This information and analysis is based on a day-long seminar led by Neil Elliot at Union Theological Seminary on September 26, 2008. The seminar was titled “Reading Romans with the Poor.” It was a dialogic workshop between the Poverty Initiative, including Scholar-in-Residence Willie Baptist, and Coordinator, Liz Theoharis with Neil Elliott, and focused on approaching the Apostle Paul from the standpoint of the poor. The discussion included attention to issues of imperial law, lawlessness, civil disobedience, and morality. A key text used in the seminar was Neil Elliot, The Arrogance of Nations: Reading Romans in the Shadow of Empire (Paul in Critical Contexts; Minneapolis, Minn.: Fortress Press, 2008).
than the God of Israel. In this passage, Jesus may be limiting Caesar’s power and authority to money (by stating that since Caesar’s head is on the money, money is the realm of the emperor). He may also be suggesting that all the things that humans need to survive—air, water, food, shelter, etc.—are creations and gifts from God (and should therefore not be controlled by Caesar or any other human being who can lord it over others). Also, by asking the Pharisees to pull out a coin, Jesus purposely calls attention to the access to resources they have, as apologists for the Roman Empire, contrasting it with the poverty of Jesus’s followers.

In addition to special instruction on taxes, there are new economic practices present throughout Matthew that fit into the portrait of Matthew as a reformed tax collector and social transformer. The Sermon on the Mount includes pronouncements on not storing up treasures on earth and also not worrying about one’s basic needs because God will provide. In Matt 6:25-34, Jesus suggests that humans, including his disciples, should not worry about food, shelter, clothing, saying that worrying does not add time to one’s life. Jesus reminds his followers that God protects and looks over everything in nature. These teachings perhaps even remind the Matthean audience of God’s liberating action from slavery in the manna story in Exodus 16:1-36, where God’s people are to take what they need (Exod 16:16, potentially parallel to not storing up treasures in Matt 6:19) because they will ruin and be spoiled by maggots and worms (Exod 16:20, potentially parallel to treasures rusting, rotting, or being stolen in Matt 6:20-21), but instead trust in God

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75 Herzog, Teacher and Prophet, 182-185.
who will provide for your survival and thriving (not Pharaoh or other emperors who claim to be gods).

Matthew’s Sermon on the Mount also includes the Lord’s Prayer (Matt 6:9-15) and emphasizes material needs like having daily bread, debt forgiveness (the Greek term ofeilēmata, meaning “debts,” is used in Matthew where hamartia, meaning “sins,” is used in Luke 11:4), a new kingdom/empire coming, making earth to be like heaven (which only occurs in Matthew, not in Luke) and rescuing the supplicants from the evil one (which also only occurs in Matthew, not in Luke).

Indeed, the prayer that Jesus teaches all believers to practice focuses on forgiveness of debts, meeting material needs, resistance to oppressors, and economic justice on earth. It is a direct critique of earthly empire and rulers and how these powerful people indebted and dispossess the majority. The Sermon on the Mount states that you cannot serve both God and Mammon (Matt 6:24). This passage is central to Matthew’s Gospel and the overall message about money, wealth, and idolatry. The instruction is clear: Jesus’s followers must choose between God and money and to choose money is idolatry (cf. Exod 20:1-26). These passages of Matthew show us that a key focus of the Gospel is alternative economic practice and subversion of the economy of empire. Jesus’s followers are to forgive debts, be provided for even when undeserving, possibly even evade and protest taxes, and not worry about or give authority to a Lord who impoverishes, but worship the one Lord and God who provides for all, including the poor. Jesus will lead the way.
Jesus: the (Popular) Ruler with a Revolutionary Economic Program

But rather than simply a teacher and activist for economic justice, Jesus comes to these teachings and practice from his own earthly poverty and may likely be understood as a popularly acclaimed social movement leader and king/prophet in Matthew. John Dominic Crossan asserts that Jesus was a poor illiterate worker, further emphasizing the radical stance that Jesus takes in his teachings and practice on economics and politics under the Roman Empire. In the Introduction to Jesus: A Revolutionary Biography, John Dominic Crossan writes, “If, for example, we are tempted to describe Jesus as a literate middle-class carpenter, cross-cultural anthropology reminds us that there was no middle class in ancient societies and that peasants are usually illiterate, so how could Jesus become what never existed at his time?”

Instead, Crossan asserts:

If Jesus was a carpenter, therefore, he belonged to the Artisan class, that group pushed into the dangerous space between Peasants and Degrades or Expendables … Furthermore, since between 95 and 97 percent of the Jewish state was illiterate at the time of Jesus, it must be presumed that Jesus also was illiterate … like the vast majority of his contemporaries.

Stephen Patterson has proposed that Jesus fits into the category of those most exploited and oppressed by the empire: “In the gospels, canonical and noncanonical, and in Paul—in the broad memory and praxis of the early church—Jesus is recalled as living outside the system of brokered power and economy of Rome’s Empire.”

Patterson asserts that the company that Jesus kept was poor and expendable and, by association, he may fit into this category himself. He continues, “Jesus knew

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76 John Dominic Crossan, Jesus: A Revolutionary Biography (San Francisco: Harper Collins Publisher, 2009), xii.
77 Crossan, Jesus, 25.
expendability, he knew expendables, and he invited those who had not fallen out of the Roman system of brokerage and patronage to step out voluntarily and to become part of a new thing, the Empire of God.”⁷⁹ In Matt 8:20, Jesus says that he has nowhere to lay his head. This could be a statement that Jesus himself is homeless.⁸⁰ At his burial, Jesus is too poor to have his own tomb; instead, Joseph of Arimathea, a rich disciple of his, claims Jesus’s body for placement in his tomb (Matt 27:57-60). And William Herzog asserts Jesus’s poverty is established at his birth:

> The genealogies in Matthew and Luke may reflect the efforts of the early church to raise the honor level of Jesus by associating him with King David, or they may show that Jesus was profoundly related to the people of God known as Israel, but even these birth narratives depict Jesus as born into a peasant family.⁸¹

Jesus’s poverty has political, economic, and spiritual implications to it. As we will explore in this section, Jesus is a leader and ruler, a king and Christ/messiah. But if Jesus is truly poor, he is not a patron, benefactor, or wealthy king like Caesar, Pharaoh, or other ruling authority. In fact, as Patterson stated in the quote above, rather than insisting on adherence to the patronage system, Jesus suggested those with means step out of a system that dispossesses and disunites the poor. The poor Jesus is not in an economic or political position to benefit from the poverty of those around him. His ruling authority does not rest on an accumulation of wealth and the political power that assists appropriation and dispossession. Instead Jesus is a new kind of savior, Lord, and ruler: a savior of the poor who is poor himself.

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⁷⁹ Hoover, *Profiles of Jesus*, 205.
⁸⁰ Crossan, *Jesus*, 94.
⁸¹ Herzog, *Prophet and Teacher*, 81.
In the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus is recognized as king, messiah/Christ, Son of God and prophet, all the while being poor. This is well established from the beginning of the gospel. Jesus’s humility and poverty distinguish the type of ruler he will become from Matt 1 as well. In the genealogy (Matt 1:1-17), where Jesus is first titled “messiah”, he is compared and connected to King David where it notes that there were fourteen generations from Abraham to David, fourteen more generations from David to the deportation/exile and now fourteen generations later, Jesus “the one being called Christ/messiah” (1:16) is born to Mary. This implies that he is the next “King of the Jews” who will usher the people out of exile, poverty, and empire. The suggestion of a “New Exodus” is based on the structuring presence of the Greek word metoikesis meaning “exile” in the genealogy.82 Also present throughout the genealogy are other leaders from the underside of Israelite history, especially women like Rahab and Tamar who likewise show a critique of power and authority at the same time as claiming the need for popular tradition of rulers leading the people into freedom. Jesus may be a new King David, but one who will learn about the trials and tribulations of wealth, power, and authority. And Matthew’s genealogy parallels the creation story in Gen 1 and 2—bringing forth a new creation through Jesus, a messiah.83

At Jesus’s birth, in Matt 2:1-12, a star rises—a sign that was said to be present for the birth of Augustus—that signals to the wise men of the east that Jesus

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83 Davies, “The Jewish Sources of Matthew’s Messianism,” 496.
has been born.\textsuperscript{84} What is particularly interesting about this meteor shower is that Jesus is born in a humble manger and, although visited by three magi sent to scope out if he is a threat to Herod’s kingship, Jesus is of low birth himself. Herod the Great is so intimidated by the birth of this new king (2:3) that he instructs the wise men to kill Jesus, but when that fails, Jesus and his family run away into exile in Egypt because a messenger of God instructs them to flee (2:13-15)—perhaps a reference to the exile/\textit{metoikesis} of the genealogy itself and to the poverty and slavery of the Exodus again.\textsuperscript{85} About this passage to Egypt and the connection to the rest of his earthly life as a New Moses, a leader of an anti-slavery movement, Horsley writes:

As an infant [Jesus] descends to and then journeys out of Egypt, recapitulating Israel’s exodus from Egypt (Matt. 2:13-23). He is then tested in the wilderness, like Moses (4:1-17). Jesus is still in the role of the new Moses at the climax of Matthew’s Gospel when, at the Passover Festival celebrating Israel’s exodus, he presides over the Last Supper as a meal of covenant renewal (26:27-28).\textsuperscript{86}

At Jesus’ baptism in Matt 3, God claims Jesus as God’s son, yet another parallel with Augustus who actually deified his adopted father, Julius Caesar, in an effort to become God’s son.\textsuperscript{87} The fact that God identifies Jesus as his son and sets him apart in this story is important to him becoming Christ/messiah. In the Hebrew Bible, prophets and kings were selected and raised up by God (see Chapter Six). But this singling out of Jesus by God again happens in the wilderness, not the arena or

\textsuperscript{84} Discussion of Augustus as divine son and of the birth narrative in general runs throughout these two books: John Dominic Crossan and Jonathan Reed, \textit{In Search of Paul: How Jesus’s Apostle Opposed Rome’s Empire with God’s Kingdom} (San Francisco, Calif.: HarpersSanFrancisco, 2004), 160; and Paul Zanker, \textit{The Power of Images in the Age of Augustus} (Ann Arbor, Mich.: University of Michigan Press, 1990), 35.


\textsuperscript{86} Richard Horsley, \textit{Covenant Economics}, 149.

any location of political power, and while there are witnesses present, this adoption of Jesus by God is not a public performance or event for the wealthy and powerful.

In the temptation scene in Matt 4:1-11, Jesus demonstrates that he does not aspire/desire the things of other rulers; rather than wanting riches and power or promoting himself, Jesus is obedient to God. The temptation scene indicates that the devil is the real power figure behind earthly rule/empire and especially the concentration of wealth and power in 4:8-10, which is analogous to Rev 13:1-4 (where the dragon/devil gives his throne and power to the imperial “beast”).

Furthermore, the contentious and yet poor and humble nature of Jesus as king, prophet, and messiah is raised in his trial and crucifixion scene. Matthew 26:63-64 reads, “The high priest said to him, ‘I charge you under oath by the living God: Tell us if you are the Messiah, the Son of God.’ ‘You have said so,’ Jesus replied.”

Throughout the surrounding verses and chapters, Jesus the poor popular leader is accused of being a king/messiah. Although Jesus never accepts these titles himself, he does not deny them. These attributions may be an example of “if the shoe fits.”

Perhaps most relevant to any reading of Matthew on poverty and wealth is the Last Judgment in Matt 25:31-46 where Jesus (as king, because he sits on a glorious throne, is charged with judging) says feeding the hungry, clothing the ill-

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88 “The dragon stood on the shore of the sea. And I saw a beast coming out of the sea. It had ten horns and seven heads, with ten crowns on its horns, and on each head a blasphemous name. The beast I saw resembled a leopard, but had feet like those of a bear and a mouth like that of a lion. The dragon gave the beast his power and his throne and great authority. One of the heads of the beast seemed to have had a fatal wound, but the fatal wound had been healed. The whole world was filled with wonder and followed the beast. People worshiped the dragon because he had given authority to the beast, and they also worshiped the beast and asked, ‘Who is like the beast? Who can wage war against it?’” (Rev 13:1-4).

89 “When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, he will sit on his glorious throne. All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate the people one from
clothed, and welcoming the poor and outcast is caring for him (Matt 25:34-40),
and failure to care for the needy is a rejection of him (Matt 25:41-43). Even though
he is king, Jesus is the embodiment of the poor in this passage and he proclaims
judgment for those who neglect those in need.

Matthew 25:31-46 and the Last Judgment can be directly tied to the text
about Jesus’s crucifixion and his earthly poverty. Indirectly, this text echoes many of
the critiques that Jesus makes of the Pharisees and scribes and even other rulers of
the earth, especially in the “Warning against Hypocrisy” and “Woes to the Pharisees”
in Matt 23:1-26. He chides them for being hypocrites, for not following the

another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. He will put the sheep on his right and the
goats on his left. Then the King will say . . ." (Matt 25: 31-34).

90 “For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me
something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I
was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me.” Then the righteous will
answer him, ‘Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you something to
drink? When did we see you a stranger and invite you in, or needing clothes and clothe you? When
did we see you sick or in prison and go to visit you?” The King will reply, ‘I tell you the truth,
whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me’” (Matt 25:35-40).

91 “Then he will say to those on his left, ‘Depart from me, you who are cursed, into the eternal
fire prepared for the devil and his angels. For I was hungry and you gave me nothing to eat, I was
thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, I was a stranger and you did not invite me in, I needed
dresses and you did not clothe me, I was sick and in prison and you did not look after me’” (Matt
25:41-43).

92 “Then Jesus said to the crowds and to his disciples: ‘The teachers of the law and the
Pharisees sit in Moses’ seat. So you must be careful to do everything they tell you. But do not do what
they do, for they do not practice what they preach. They tie up heavy, cumbersome loads and put
them on other people’s shoulders, but they themselves are not willing to lift a finger to move them.
Everything they do is done for people to see: They make their phylacteries wide and the tassels on
their garments long; they love the place of honor at banquets and the most important seats in the
synagogues; they love to be greeted with respect in the marketplaces and to be called ‘Rabbi’ by
others. But you are not to be called ‘Rabbi,’ for you have one Teacher, and you are all brothers. And
do not call anyone on earth ‘father,’ for you have one Father, and he is in heaven. Nor are you to be
called instructors, for you have one Instructor, the Messiah. The greatest among you will be your
servant. For those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be
exalted. Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You shut the door of the
kingdom of heaven in people’s faces. You yourselves do not enter, nor will you let those enter who
are trying to. Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You travel over land and
sea to win a single convert, and when you have succeeded, you make them twice as much a child of
hell as you are. Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You give a tenth of
your spices—mint, dill and cumin. But you have neglected the more important matters of the law—
justice, mercy and faithfulness. You should have practiced the latter, without neglecting the former.
commandments to care for others, instead being interested in furthering their positions and ambitions. He demonstrates he is a different kind of king and in an alternative system of governance to Rome. Horsley asserts:

Far more boldly and unambiguously than Mark, Matthew presents Jesus as the Messiah/Christ – from his genealogy at the beginning, to his trial before Pilate and crucifixion at the end, and in Peter’s declaration in the middle. But Matthew also presents Jesus more clearly and dramatically as a new Moses.93

Therefore, in Matthew, Jesus, the “son” of David—the long awaited future ideal king, called the messiah/Christ (cf. 1:1-16)—is charged with leading the people on a new exodus, ruling God’s Kingdom, and protecting the poor as a poor person himself. Jesus as an anointed popular king or prophet is in line with other revolutionary popular leaders contemporary to him. Richard Horsley reminds readers of the hopeful promise and violent repression of other popular movement leaders at the time of Jesus:

Because of the special interest that attaches to Jesus and his movement, it is worth noting, finally, that there were several mass movements composed of Jewish peasants from villages or towns such as Emmaus, Bethlehem, Sepphoris—people rallying around the leadership of charismatic figures viewed as anointed kings of the Jews. These movements occurred in all three principal areas of Jewish settlement in Palestine (Galilee, Perea, Judea), and just at the time when Jesus was presumably born. It is perhaps also worth noting that the city of Sepphoris, which was burned and its inhabitants sold into slavery in 4 B.C.E, was just a few miles north of the village of Nazareth, Jesus’ home. Furthermore, the town of Emmaus, the location of one of the resurrection appearances according to the gospel tradition (Lk. 24:13-32), had been destroyed by the Romans in retaliation for another mass movement little more than a generation earlier. The memory of these popular messianic movements would no doubt have been fresh in the minds of most of the Jewish peasants who witnessed Jesus’ activities.94

You blind guides! You strain out a gnat but swallow a camel. Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You clean the outside of the cup and dish, but inside they are full of greed and self-indulgence. Blind Pharisee! First clean the inside of the cup and dish, and then the outside also will be clean” (Matt 23:1-26).

93 Horsley, Covenant Economics, 149.
94 Horsley and Hanson, Bandits, Prophets, Messiahs, 117.
It is in relation to the hopes and dangers of popular movements that references to Jesus’ kingship are multiple in Matthew; he is called the “King of the Jews” four times (in the infancy narrative where the wise men go to visit the newly born “King of the Jews” and bring myrrh and other luxury items [2:2] that are used in making myron [see Chapter Five]); at his crucifixion when Pilate, the Roman governor asks Jesus if he is the “King of the Jews” [27:11]; by the soldiers who mock Jesus [27:29]; and on the titulus when crucified [27:39]). He is called “King of Israel” in Matt 27:42. In fact, the word “king,” basileus, occurs twenty-two times in Matthew referencing King David once, King Herod twice, and in parables about kings and the Kingdom of God/Heaven numerous times, including in Matt 25:34 as the judge of/for the poor. Also, in Matthew there are thirty mentions of basileia for “Kingdom of Heaven” and one mention of “Kingdom of Earth” (king of the world in Matt 17:25). In addition to a king, messiah, and descendent of King David, Jesus is a “Son of God” who will “save his people”—a salvation that targets specifically poverty and oppression as I am trying to argue (1:21, 2:15, 3:17, 4:3-6, 8:29, 14:33, 16:16, and 26:63).

Jesus is also the quintessential prophet.95 The Greek word prophētēs ("prophet") occurs thirty-seven times in Matthew.96 Fourteen of these uses are about fulfilling what Hebrew Bible prophets have suggested. There are also references to both Jesus and John the Baptist as being prophets, including, "This is

95 “Like a prophet in the mold of the Deuteronomic tradition, Jesus continues the work of the prophet Moses, because he uses Torah to disclose the will of God and to define the justice of God. In addition, he warns those who abuse the Torah by turning it into an instrument of oppression. Jesus neither opposes the Torah nor obliterates it, but attacks a reading of the Torah promulgated by the Jerusalem elites to justify their oppression of "the people of the land" (Herzog, Prophet and Teacher, 113).

96 F. Schnider, “Prophets,” EDNT 3.
Jesus, the prophet from Nazareth in Galilee” (Matt 21:11). And Jesus has a number of teachings on prophets: prophets are not welcomed by their home towns (Matt 13:57), anyone who receives a prophet will receive a prophets reward (Matt 10:41), and Jesus has come to fulfill the law and the prophets (Matt 5:17).97

In general, the idea of Jesus being understood as messiah, popular king, and prophet is central to Matthew’s Gospel, because liberation, equality, and prosperity for all are central to Matthew and the followers of Jesus.98 Therefore this critique is best summed up by applying the title chrestos to Jesus, implying that he is the (poor) anointed, messiah, prophet, or king (see also Chapter Six).

Conclusion

Wealth and poverty are key issues in Matthew, the main characterization of Jesus in Matthew concerns poverty, wealth and power, and Matthew has a clear focus on poverty, wealth, debt, economic rights, and slavery. Indeed, Matthew characterizes Jesus as a poor king who ushers in a reign of prosperity for all through a critique of taxes, instructs on the deserving nature of all God’s children, does polemics with the rulers of his day, and judges anyone who does not care for the poor. I will further develop Jesus as teacher and popular ruler and the disciples as social and economic transformers through more detailed exegetical work on Matt

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97 As we will explore in the exegetical section [Chapters 6-8], Jesus is established as a prophet when he is anointed. Stuart Love portrays the unnamed woman as an "unwitting prophet" whose "singular prophetic act" prepares Jesus for burial and aligns him with the "little tradition" of Israel’s prophets. See Stuart L. Love, Jesus and Marginal Women (Cambridge: James Clarke, 2010), 84.

98 “Another presupposition for election as popular king is an organized following, indeed, a fighting force” (Horsley and Hanson, Bandits, Prophets, Messiahs, 95).
26 in the next chapters, first turning to a study of money, luxury items, buying and selling, which are elaborated in Matt 26:1-16.
Chapter Six: The Poor Are With You Always – An Exegesis

Introduction

The New Revised Standard Version of Matt 26:1-16 reads,

When Jesus had finished saying all these things, he said to his disciples, “As you know, the Passover is two days away—and the Son of Man will be handed over to be crucified.” Then the chief priests and the elders of the people assembled in the palace of the high priest, whose name was Caiaphas, and they schemed to arrest Jesus secretly and kill him. “But not during the festival,” they said, “or there may be a riot among the people.” While Jesus was in Bethany in the home of Simon the Leper, a woman came to him with an alabaster jar of very expensive perfume, which she poured on his head as he was reclining at the table. When the disciples saw this, they were indignant. “Why this waste?” they asked. “This perfume could have been sold at a high price and the money given to the poor.” Aware of this, Jesus said to them, “Why are you bothering this woman? She has done a beautiful thing to me. The poor you will always have with you, but you will not always have me. When she poured this perfume on my body, she did it to prepare me for burial. Truly I tell you, wherever this gospel is preached throughout the world, what she has done will also be told, in memory of her.” Then one of the Twelve—the one called Judas Iscariot—went to the chief priests and asked, “What are you willing to give me if I deliver him over to you?” So they counted out for him thirty pieces of silver. From then on Judas watched for an opportunity to hand him over.

As is stated above, Matt 26:11 (and the parallels in Mark 14:7 and John 12:8) read, “the poor you have with you always, but you have not always me.” And as discussed in Chapters 1-3, attributed to Jesus, this phrase is used to claim that Jesus (and God) believes that poverty is eternal and that concern for Jesus is more important than concern for the poor. Indeed, Matt 26:11 is applied as an interpretive lens to other passages throughout the Bible about poverty and justice and major theological concepts have been derived from it. Matthew 26:11 has also strongly conditioned the contemporary Christian understanding of what poverty is
and how one should faithfully respond to it in today’s world: most believe that the people of God are called to address poverty merely through giving/doing charity rather than build a spiritual, social and economic movement to overcome poverty—a dominant view that Poverty Scholars face and are attempting to surmount.¹

In the next three chapters, I argue that rather than interpreting this line to justify poverty’s existence, it should be read as a reminder that poverty is not God’s will, but the result of people’s disobedience to God’s commandments and Jesus’s teachings. It ought to be understood as saying that a plan to overcome poverty—with the Sabbath and Jubilee prescriptions at the core—is central to the gospel message and mission of Jesus and the realization of God’s kingdom. It can be interpreted to support the idea that Jesus was a social movement leader who urged his followers to commit themselves to movements for social transformation and highlighted the moral, political, and epistemological agency of the poor. In order to build this argument, in the following three chapters, I will undertake a thorough exegetical analysis of Matt 26:1-26 as well as explore the intertextuality between

¹ Biblical scholars, even some interested in economics and the Roman and “Christian” responses to poverty, deny the agency of the poor and the possibility of the ending of poverty and the realization of the Kingdom of God on earth. For example, Bruce Longenecker writes:

If evidence of structural reform in the ancient world were to be forthcoming from the material record, by the very nature of things that evidence would emerge from the efforts of the elite alone. Structural reform could not have emerged from the 97% of the ancient urban population that fell below ES3 [one of the three most wealthy and elite circles of people identified by Longenecker himself] simply because of the realities of ancient power... It is probably for this reason that Jesus makes his sobering statement that captures the realities of charity’s effectiveness: “the poor will be with you always.” If the elite were not going to change the structures, the sub-elite certainly could not. It was simply not feasible for those at lower economic structures to even contemplate anything more than a charitable posture towards the needy. But this in no way renders charitable acts of the Greco-Roman world as part of the problem of ancient economic injustice. Instead, charitable initiative must have been seen (and probably should still be seen) as laudable, honorable acts that were worthy of commendation” (Bruce Longenecker, Engaging Economics: New Testament Scenarios and Early Christian Reception. [Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2009],107).
Matt 26 and Deut 15. This will include a focus on both the depictions of Jesus being anointed as ruler of God’s kingdom and Jesus’s various critiques of the dominant economic system, including buying and selling, money, patronage, euergetism, as well as other purportedly anti-poverty efforts of the Roman Empire. Far from eliminating poverty, these efforts served to maintain and deepen it. At the core of my argument is that the anointing story itself is the turning point for the Gospel of Matthew and the crucifixion/resurrection narrative of Jesus as a whole; this contrasts with other interpretations, which see Matt 26:1-16 being a secondary and transitory story about Jesus, an unnamed woman, and his disciples at the beginning of the passion narrative, with the main emphasis belonging to the following events of the Last Supper. Far from God’s kingdom condoning poverty, exploitation, or dispossession, this story puts poverty and economic justice at the center of Jesus’s mission and further establishes these as major concerns of Matthew’s Jesus.

**A Riot Among the People**

*When Jesus had finished saying all these things, he said to his disciples, “As you know, the Passover is two days away—and the Son of Man will be handed over to be crucified.” Then the chief priests and the elders of the people assembled in the palace of the high priest, whose name was Caiaphas, and they schemed to arrest Jesus secretly and kill him. “But not during the festival,” they said, “or there may be a riot among the people.”*

Matthew 26 opens dramatically. Jesus announces to his disciples that he is about to be crucified. He has predicted his death in other places but as his execution approaches readers begin to ask, “why is he going to be killed?” Matthew 26:1-2 connects his crucifixion and the Passion Narrative leading up to his death, including the anointing that is about to happen, to Jesus’s teachings. Specifically the phrase
“when he had finished saying all these things” connects chapter 26 to chapter 25—where Jesus as king and judge identifies with the poor in “The Last Judgment”.

“These things” also harkens to the many instructions about poverty and wealth in the rest of the first twenty-five chapters of Jesus’s teachings (as explored in Chapter Five). At the same time that Jesus is gathered with his disciples in 26:1-2—reminding them of his teachings and God’s social vision, and announcing his own imminent death—another meeting of leaders is taking place.

Matthew 26:3-5 explains that Caiaphas, the high priest, has assembled the chief priests and elders of the people in his house. The topic on their agenda is how they must conspire to arrest and kill Jesus. They are fearful of the crowd who is assembled at Jerusalem and following Jesus during the Passover festival, because these types of holidays were events that could be turned into mass protests and spaces where social, political, and religious revolutionaries gained an audience and following.² Jesus was starting to look and move like one of these revolutionary leaders: he was greeted by the people in his “triumphal” procession into Jerusalem, where he may have even been viewed as mocking the empire through his use of a donkey, a lowly animal associated with common labor and the poor. He was also noticed because of his actions in the temple, where he disrupts the buying and selling taking place there.³

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² This concept of crowd control is described in John Dominic Crossan and Marcus Borg, _The Last Week: A Day-by-Day Account of Jesus’s Final Week in Jerusalem_ (San Francisco: Harper, 2006), 2-5, 19-20. I have also explained this concept as it relates to social history in Chapter Four.

Within a few short chapters, the high priest and religious leaders of Jerusalem will be able to turn the crowd against Jesus. In fact, although Jesus enters Jerusalem celebrated by the people, he is executed, with the people of Jerusalem being manipulated into calling for his crucifixion, in Matt 27:25. The chief priests and elders continue to plot against Jesus and organize against his potential followers even after his death, as seen in Matt 28:11-15. This plotting can be more clearly understood by taking seriously the act and significance of Jesus’s anointing and questions and critiques around money, power, and wealth that it raises.4

After they meet to plot out entrapping Jesus in 26:3-5, we do not hear about Caiaphas and the chief priests again until Matt 26:57-67 where Jesus is before the Sanhedrin and they are looking for a legal argument to have him executed.5 Caiaphas and the chief priests are able to capture Jesus and bring him before the

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4 “While the women were on their way, some of the guards went into the city and reported to the chief priests everything that had happened. When the chief priests had met with the elders and devised a plan, they gave the soldiers a large sum of money, telling them, 'You are to say, "His disciples came during the night and stole him away while we were asleep." If this report gets to the governor, we will satisfy him and keep you out of trouble.' So the soldiers took the money and did as they were instructed. And this story has been widely circulated among the Jews to this very day” (Matt 28:11-15).

5 “Those who had arrested Jesus took him to Caiaphas the high priest, where the teachers of the law and the elders had assembled. But Peter followed him at a distance, right up to the courtyard of the high priest. He entered and sat down with the guards to see the outcome. The chief priests and the whole Sanhedrin were looking for false evidence against Jesus so that they could put him to death. But they did not find any, though many false witnesses came forward. Finally two came forward and declared, 'This fellow said, "I am able to destroy the Temple of God and rebuild it in three days."' Then the high priest stood up and said to Jesus, 'Are you not going to answer? What is this testimony that these men are bringing against you?' But Jesus remained silent. The high priest said to him, 'I charge you under oath by the living God: Tell us if you are the Messiah, the Son of God.' 'You have said so,' Jesus replied. 'But I say to all of you: From now on you will see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of the Mighty One and coming on the clouds of heaven.' Then the high priest tore his clothes and said, 'He has spoken blasphemy! Why do we need any more witnesses? Look, now you have heard the blasphemy. What do you think?' 'He is worthy of death,' they answered. Then they spit in his face and struck him with their fists. Others slapped him and said, 'Prophesy to us, Messiah. Who hit you?" (Matt 26:57-67).
Sanhedrin only after the betrayal of Judas.⁶ And although they state that they do not want to arrest Jesus during the Passover in fear of a riot, they turn on him still and have him executed in public, perhaps deciding that it is necessary to instill fear in his followers even at the risk of public protest. The only thing that happens between the decision of Caiaphas and the chief priests to move on Jesus in Matt 26:4-5 and nine verses later, the betrayal of Judas in Matt 26:14-16, is the anointing scene in Matt 26:6-13. Therefore the same action that potentially instigates Judas to betray Jesus, may urge the chief priests and ruling elites to move publically on this popular movement leader. I will now turn to Matt 26:6-16 in order to explore how this act becomes so threatening to Judas, the High Priest, and to Rome.

**Eating in the House of the Poor**

*While Jesus was in Bethany in the home of Simon the Leper, a woman came to him with an alabaster jar of very expensive perfume, which she poured on his head as he was reclining at the table.*

The anointing of Jesus by a woman is present in some form in each canonical gospel but each has variances in the story (see Matt 26:6-13, Mark 14:3-9, John 12:1-8 and Luke 7:36-50). A major question in the history of interpretation of this text, dating back to Origen and his *Commentary on the Gospel of Matthew*, has been the sources and relationship between the versions from all four gospels. Donald

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⁶ Caiaphas plays a major role in the Gospel of Matthew but not in other Gospel stories of the anointing and passion. Caiaphas, the high priest, seems to be threatened by Jesus. What interests and angers Caiaphas in Jesus’s “trial” is that some people (falsely) accuse Jesus of saying that he can destroy and rebuild the temple in three days (Matt 26:59-65). Also, since Caiaphas serves as high priest of the Jerusalem temple, there is some tension between Jesus and Caiaphas. The theme of the complicity of the temple with the Roman Empire is present in Matthew’s Gospel. Although the critique of the temple occurs in the other gospels, there is additional critique in Matthew; this will be apparent when we explore the betrayal and repentance of Judas, which Matthew connects to the temple.
Hagner asserts that Matthew is most likely dependent on Mark, Luke is an independent story, and John’s Gospel tells the same story as Matthew and Mark but has some influences from other stories, including Luke’s version. Since the early Middle Ages these stories have been grouped together and conflated; the anointing woman was therefore understood as Mary Magdalene, based on her being mentioned in Luke immediately after the anointing pericope (Luke 8:2); she is also called “Mary” in John 12 (this time Mary, Lazarus’s sister), although left unnamed in Mark and Matthew.

In Matthew’s story of the anointing of Jesus, an unnamed woman appears at Simon the Leper’s house with a jar of very expensive ointment as Jesus and his disciples are gathered together. As we will see, this verse emphasizes the question of money and the context of impoverishment and marginalization with almost every word and detail: Bethania (“Bethany”), leprou (“with an infectious skin disease”), gyne (“woman”), alabastron (“alabaster”), barytimou (“expensive”), myron (“ointment”), just to name a few. Bethany means the “house of the poor” in Hebrew

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7 While many think that Luke’s story of anointing is different than the other three gospels, it is most likely linked. It seems that Luke’s rendition is true to themes of forgiveness and discipleship in Luke. What the other gospel writers do with the anointing of a king and the preparation for burial is made into a story about forgiveness in Luke. Luke’s version does not have the interaction about the poor between Jesus and his disciples. The frame of this story however still remains. See Donald Hagner, Matthew 14-28 (Word Biblical Commentary 33B; Dallas, Tex.: Word Books, 1995), 756.


9 The anointing is at Bethany for Matthew, Mark and John, but not Luke. In Matthew and Mark, the head is anointed; in Luke and John, it is Jesus’s feet. In John, Mary anoints; in Matthew and Mark the woman who anoints is unnamed; in Luke the woman is called “sinful.” In Matthew, the disciples are the ones who raise questions about the woman’s actions; in Mark it is some who were there; in John, it is Judas who raises the critique. In Matthew, the story has fewer historical details than Mark includes, making the emphasis the actions and discipleship of the anointing woman. See Ronald Thiemann, “The Unnamed Woman at Bethany,” Theology Today 44.2 (1987): 179-188.
(from bet meaning “house” and ‘ani meaning “poor”); it is not clear how much this literal sense was actually still “heard” in the name of this place, though this could establish a metaphorical connection to the poor and poverty. Jesus is staying in Bethany, only a few miles from Jerusalem, where he has come to observe the Passover holidays. While Jerusalem (and the temple in particular) may represent a place of wealth and power, Jesus and his followers are staying in a place of poverty and marginalization. This could be out of convenience and the fact that they do not have the resources to stay somewhere else. It could also be an indication of who Jesus is and with whom he associates. Jesus is staying with Simon, the leper, in the “house of the poor.” The fact that Simon has leprosy may also mean that he is poor, would be considered ritually unclean, and is certainly not the type of person hosting and holding dinners for the Jewish high priests and Roman authorities in Jerusalem.

In this scene in Matt 26, Jesus is reclining (anakeimenou) over a meal with his disciples. Jesus shares an open commensality; he socializes and eats with all kinds

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10 Hagner, Matthew 14-28, 756.
12 Brian Capper writes that because semantically and etymologically Bethany can mean “House of the Poor” and based on some archaeological evidence of a poor house being built east of Jerusalem that Bethany may have come to be known as a “House of the Poor.” (Brian Capper, "Essene Community Houses and Jesus’ Early Community" in Jesus and Archaeology (ed. James H. Charlesworth; Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2006), 472-502.
13 The fact that Simon has a house, however, means that although potentially poor or near poverty, he is not destitute.
14 Luzia Sutter Rehmann asserts that because of the poverty of Jesus and his followers, it is possible that they do not share food although they gather to recline and have fellowship. See Luzia Sutter Rehmann, “Olivenöl als Zündstoff: Die vier Salbungsgeschichten der Evangelien im Kontext des Judentums des Zweiten Tempels”, Lectio Difficilior 1, (2013): 1.
of people, including lepers and women with unknown backgrounds. Crossan states in his book, *The Historical Jesus*, that Jesus stood for a Kingdom/Empire/Realm of God that was challenging to the very foundations of the Roman Empire. Jesus practiced a “radical egalitarianism” that included people of all classes, status, abilities, and so on. For this, Crossan describes that Jesus was called ‘a glutton and a drunkard’ by his contemporaries. He asserts that God’s kingdom is made up of those completely expendable and excluded from society: “In any situation of oppression, especially in those oblique, indirect, and systemic ones where injustice wears a mask of normalcy or even of necessity, the only ones who are innocent or blessed are those squeezed out deliberately as human junk from the system’s own evil operations. A contemporary equivalent: only the homeless are innocent.”

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15 Lepers and women are brought together in three miracle stories of Jesus in Matt 8:1-15 where Jesus heals a man with leprosy, a slave of a Centurion, and Peter’s mother. These healings and other ministry among the poor and marginalized are connected to Jesus’s anointing in this scene in part because of the role of Simon the leper and the unnamed woman.

16 Crossan interprets Jesus’s healings and even the resurrection of Lazarus to apply to many in Galilee, beyond just the example of the healed leper or Lazarus himself:

The case of the Galilean leper shows us how an action performed on one single body reaches out to become an action performed on society at large . . . For John’s gospel, the process of general resurrection is incarnated in the event of Lazarus’s resuscitation. That is one such movement from process to event. But I can imagine peasants all over Lower Galilee who would have said with equal intensity that Jesus brought life out of death and would not have been thinking of the heavenly future but the earthly present (Crossan, *The Historical Jesus*, 94-95).

17 This open commensality and in-breaking of the Kingdom of God through welcoming and eating with the poor, diseased, and outcast is a both theological and political in nature. It connects to Kupp’s assertion of the presence of Jesus throughout the Gospel of Matthew:

What Matthew emphasizes, in his disciples’ practice of dikaiosune, is justice which is both social and economic...The poor in Matthew are part of that group of marginalized people which includes *oi mikroi* and *oi elachristoi*, an underclass which also ring in the *probate, paidia, tekna*, Gentiles, women and diseased untouchables. With these Jesus delights to identify himself and he promises to them the favour of divine blessing and Kingdom priority (David Kupp, *Matthew’s Emmanuël: Divine Presence and God’s People in the First Gospel* [Cambridge University Press, 1996], 230-231).

18 Crossan, *The Historical Jesus*, 62.
The scene in Bethany follows Jesus’s entrance into Jerusalem and his visit to the temple in chapter 21 and is a continuation of these actions and teachings. Some scholars assert that Bethany is a place of refuge or sanctuary for Jesus and his followers: he has caused a stir at the temple during the Passover festivities and he has fled to Bethany for protection or cover among the poor and marginalized. It is clear in the company that Jesus keeps that he is a popular movement leader and budding revolutionary. His teachings, feedings, and acts of protest are themselves thereby amplified and put in further contrast to Jesus’s opponents and the ruling class of his day by Jesus’s anointing in this story.

**Anointing a Christ to End Poverty**

The unnamed woman pours the ointment (myron) on Jesus’s head. By doing this, she “anoints” Jesus. The word for “anointing” or “the anointed one” in Greek is *ho christos* or “the Christ”; in Hebrew, the word is *mashiach* or “messiah.” There

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19 Elaine Wainwright asserts that Bethany is a place of refuge for Jesus who has come into conflict with the Jewish and Roman authorities in Jerusalem. If we come to think of Bethany, the house of the poor, as a place where unknown women and lepers and people who pose a threat to the political and religious authorities have refuge, it shifts from being a place of rest and relaxation to a place where the *basileia* of God is being realized (in opposition to the *basileia* of Rome). See Elaine Wainwright, *Towards a Feminist Critical Reading of the Gospel according to Matthew* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1991), 125.

20 If we are to assume that Bethany is a town outside of Jerusalem, where there are poor and marginalized people, there might be a more political reading of his stay there. Jesus may be staying in Bethany because the poor peasants of that town support him and his following and desire to welcome and protect Jesus who is coming up against the Temple elite and Roman authorities. Richard Horsley points out in his book, *Bandits, Prophets, Messiahs*: “The Jewish peasants not only supported bandits and viewed them as heroic victims of injustice, but also protected them and were willing to suffer the consequences” (Richard A. Horsley and John S. Hanson, *Bandits, Prophets, Messiahs: Popular Movements in the Time of Jesus* [Harrisburg, Penn.: Trinity Press International, 1985], 72).

21 Crossan, *The Historical Jesus*, 94-95.

are 38 or 39 occurrences of “messiah”\(^\text{23}\) in the Hebrew Bible “always with a reference to a person, usually in the singular, and usually as a substantive”\(^\text{24}\) from Leviticus, 1 and 2 Kings, 1 and 2 Chronicles, Psalms and the latter Prophets. In past decades, scholars have asserted that the presence of “messiah” in the Hebrew Scriptures does not suggest the expectation of a singular leader or series of leaders who would usher in a new era, as generations of earlier scholars, church leaders, and congregants had assumed.\(^\text{25}\)

The historical Jesus never claims himself to be a “messiah.” Nevertheless he is labeled a messiah by the Jesus movements, especially some of the communities involved in the compilation of the gospels, including the Gospel of Matthew.\(^\text{26}\) And in

\(^{23}\) There are scholarly debates about the meaning of “messiah.” In 19th and 20th century, there was a messianic idea, propagated by the likes of Emil Schuerer and Joseph Klausner that included a cluster of attributes pertinent to the messiah which, according to Klausner, were, “the signs of the Messiah, the ingathering of the exiles, the reception of proselytes, the war with Gog and Magog, the Days of the Messiah, the renovation of the world, the Day of Judgment, the resurrection of the dead, the World to Come” (Klausner, The Messianic Idea in Israel [trans. W F Stinespring; New York: MacMillan, 1955] 385). What the “minimalist school” including Van der Woude, Smith, de Jonge, Neusner, Charlesworth countered with is not that messianic language does not have meaning, but it does not manifest in a reified messianic idea, where you have one messiah or a series of messiahs who are to reign in a new era; see Matthew Novenson, Christ among the Messiahs: Christ Language in Paul and Messiah Language in Ancient Judaism (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 34-40.

\(^{24}\) Novenson, Christ among the Messiahs, 48.

\(^{25}\) J.J.M. Roberts asserts that not one of the 39 occurrences of messiah in the Hebrew Bible refers to an expected figure of the future whose coming will coincide with an era of salvation. The most common use of the term is the anointed of Yahweh . . . with one exception all these occurrences refer to the contemporary Israelite king, and the use of the term seems to underscore the very close relationship between Yahweh and the king whom he has chosen and installed (J.J.M. Roberts, “The Old Testament Contribution to Messianic Expectations” in The Messiah: Developments in Earliest Judaism and Christianity [ed. James Charlesworth, Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992], 39).

\(^{26}\) Many traditional scholars still connect Jesus the Messiah with eschatological expectation. As Douglas Hare, a Professor Emeritus of the New Testament, notes: “Echoes can be heard in Matthew not only of passages in the Hebrew Scriptures in which God promises to be with Israel or one of its representatives (e.g., Isa 41:10; 43:5) but also of the passage on Emmanuel (cited in Matt 1:23). In these passages Jesus is represented not merely as a human Messiah who now waits in heaven until he returns to reign, but rather as a superhuman being who shares with God the capability of being omnipresent” (Douglas R. A. Hare, “How Jewish Is the Gospel of Matthew?” Catholic Biblical Quarterly 62.2 [2000]: 275).
those gospels and the Passion Narrative and other stories that came to make up the
gospels, Jesus is understood as a threat, potentially an alternative “King of the Jews”
by the ruling authorities and elites. More than the stories passed down that make up
the gospels, Paul’s letters contain over half of the uses of christos in the New
Testament. Therefore it is in the first generations after the crucifixion and
resurrection of Jesus where Jesus is “made” messiah. Scholars figure that most likely
the establishing of the messianic status of Jesus takes place between 30 and 50.27

It is clear that the title “messiah” or “Christ” is attributed to Jesus in the
gospels and other New Testament writings as the movement developed, each with a
particular agenda. For example, in Matthew and Luke, the messianic status of Jesus
may be in response to the hopes and struggles of the Jesus movement after the
destruction of the Temple. In fact, after the defeat in the Jewish Wars, prophetic
movements intensified: “Jewish eschatological hopes seem now more exclusively
focused on expectations of a messianic king as the central eschatological agent.”28
It seems fitting that a more eschatological projection of messiah may have been
attributed to Jesus as the movement progressed, especially as disciples in that
movement tried to establish and understand the movement’s founder. This follows
the assertion of Merrill Miller who writes:

In the environs of Galilee, Jesus’ status as founder-teacher was enhanced by
comparison and analogy with figures of Israel’s past. In urban environs of
Syria, the anointed Jesus, or Jesus as an anointed one, eventually settled in as
the byname christos in order to lay claim to the perspective of the God of

27 Merrill Miller, “The Annointed Jesus” in Redescribing Christian Origins (Ron Cameron and
Merrill P. Miller, eds.; Society of Biblical Literature Symposium Series; Christopher Matthews, ed.;
28 Horsley and Hanson, Bandits, Prophets, Messiahs, 127.
Israel in thinking about the role of Jesus as founder. The focus would not have been on Jesus as savior—at least not at first—but on what might be claimed of the heritage of Israel for the followers of Jesus, the kingdom-of-God people, in conversation with and differentiation from the synagogue people; and what might be said about the boundaries they were crossing and redrawing in the interests of an ongoing transactional enterprise of collective identity formation and maintenance.29

Scholars propose various ways that Jesus became messiah/Christ, over the course of the development of the Jesus movement, despite the few references to and varied meaning of messiah in the Hebrew Scriptures. They suggest four common conceptions including that 1. Jesus sought to reinterpret Israel’s “Messiah” for his situation, 2. “Jesus the Messiah” is a persecuted prophet rather than a nationalist and royal ruler, 3. Jesus’s execution as “King of the Jews” deems him “Messiah”, or 4. his resurrection is what brings about messianic expectation.30 Burton Mack suggests that a social reason for using christos for Jesus is related to its appeal to mythmaking connected to the “epic of Israel”. He writes:

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30 “One has been to argue from evidence in the Gospel of Mark that Jesus viewed himself in the role of Israel’s Messiah but sought to reinterpret how that role would be fulfilled... A different direction has been taken by scholars who emphasize the fluidity of terminology and conceptions that express ideals and hopes in the contemporary forms of Judaism... Thus, it is argued that the designation was applied to Jesus during his ministry not as a royal and nationalist figure but as an anointed prophet and messenger of good news and wisdom who suffers the common fate of the prophet... A third direction moves away from the influence of antecedent Jewish traditions or the teaching and healing activities of Jesus in Galilee and stresses instead the event of Jesus’ execution in Jerusalem as ‘king of the Jews.’ On this view, had Jesus not been put to death as a messianic pretender, the designation christos would never have been closely associated with Jesus let alone become a second name... The most common solution to the problem associates Jesus’ messianic status with early Christian belief in his resurrection. Since the confession that God raised Jesus from the dead is generally thought to be the foundation of all early Christian groups, one is able to account for how christos comes to be closely associated with Jesus without having to argue that there must have been some sort of messianic claim by Jesus or his disciples during Jesus’ ministry" (Ron Cameron and Merrill P. Miller, ed., Redescribing Christian Origins [Society of Biblical Literature Symposium Series; Christopher Matthews, ed.; Leiden: Brill, 2004], 304-307).
As such, calling Jesus \textit{christos} would be a claim that he was ‘God’s choice’ for the social role of founder-figure of the Jesus movements and an implicit claim that the Jesus-movement formation should be thought of as a way of being “Israel” . . . the anointed Jesus should be taken as evidence of an intervention in the larger totality of Israel for the sake of a particular social program . . . What others would attribute to kings, priests, and prophets, past and future—and mostly for the sake of authenticating the current practices of particular social formations in contexts of debate and struggle over the institutions the writers imagined or sought to represent—was claimed by Jesus people.\footnote{Richard Horsley and John Hanson challenge the eschatological expectation of “messiah” in the Hebrew Scriptures yet suggest a more overtly political meaning to Jesus as “Christ/messiah”. They suggest there existed, contemporary to Jesus, popularly acclaimed kings who challenged the ruling literate elites.\footnote{It is questionable how connected to justice-making and popular movements the “anointed of Yahweh” were. Hanson and Horsley write that although they originated from popular traditions of kingship, those in power in ancient Israelite society coopted the concept and connected it to the Davidic king: In sharp contrast to popular kingship, there emerged an official royal ideology, probably during the regimes of David and Solomon. The understanding of the king as “the anointed of Yahweh” in all likelihood originated in popular traditions of kingship. However, in the royal psalms, liturgical expressions of the official royal ideology, “the anointed of Yahweh” became identical with the Davidic king. (Horsley and Hanson, Bandits, Prophets, Messiahs, 96-97.)}}

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Before and after Jesus of Nazareth...there were several popular Jewish leaders, almost all of them from the peasantry, who, in the words of Josephus ‘laid claim to the kingdom,’ ‘donned the diadem,’ or were ‘proclaimed king’ by their followers. It thus appears that one of the concrete forms which social unrest took in the late second temple period was that of a group of followers gathered around a leader they had acclaimed as king.\footnote{Horsley and Hanson, Bandits, Prophets, Messiahs, 88.}

As we saw in the economic analysis of the Roman Empire from Chapter Four and the focus on wealth and poverty in Matthew’s community from Chapter Five, there was great need for Jesus’s followers and the Matthean community after the defeat in the Jewish Wars, following another failed messianic movement, to locate...
leaders/messiahs who would intervene on behalf of the majority poor and dispossessed. As Horsley and Hanson continue: “Once we become aware of differences in social location, of course, it is not surprising that the literate elite who constituted part of the established order, were not interested in future figures who would spearhead alternatives to that order.” Therefore, reading the hidden transcripts of the gospels and the writings of Josephus, it is possible that Jesus was one such messiah—a popularly acclaimed king or prophet who appeared to address the social-economic crises of the late second-temple, was crucified by the ruling elite but still resurrected by the God of Israel, becoming the founder of such a social movement of the poor to right the wrongs of society. At least the gospel writers, especially Matthew, may have wanted to make him so.

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34 Richard Horsley asserts numerous messiahs arose to this challenge: “Although Judean ruling and literate circles had no interest in the messiah, it was clear from the accounts of the Judean historian Josephus and other sources that the Judean and Galilean peasants produced several concrete movements led by a popularly acclaimed king or prophet. These concrete movements that assumed social forms distinctive to Israelite tradition, moreover, proved to be the driving forces of Judean history during the crises of late second-temple times” (Horsley and Hanson, Bandits, Prophets, Messiahs, xiii).

35 Horsley and Hanson, Bandits, Prophets, Messiahs, xii-xiii.

36 Merrill Miller portrays Matthew’s Jesus as a more royal messiah than I wish to claim. While I agree that Matthew is sure to associate David with Jesus and the theme of doing “deeds” is prominent in Matthew, I think there is still room for Jesus to be an alternative and popular Davidic king. Miller writes:

Q’s rejected prophet and Mark’s martyred Messiah have become in Matthew the Messiah of deed, a royal figure in both his teachings and his healing. Jesus’ absolute right to the royal dignity in his birth, his ministry, and his entry into Jerusalem is a recasting of the byname christos in terms appropriate to a Jesus movement . . . By way of contrast to those who have failed in their rule, Jesus is the ideal earthly king of Davidic promise whose teaching retains its authority for the ‘disciplining’ of the Gentiles, as the expression and exercise of his transcendent power and presence to the end of the age (Cameron and Miller, Redescribing Christian Origins, 320-321).
Anointed Ones

Some of the Hebrew Bible and New Testament references to “anointed ones” are important to explore here, especially in light of economic justice, liberation, and the popular movements that arose around acclaimed kings contemporary to Jesus.

In Judaism and Their Messiahs at the Turn of the Christian Era, Jacob Neusner, an American academic scholar of Judaism, writes:

The noun mashiah (‘anointed’ or ‘anointed one’) occurs 38 times in the Hebrew Bible, where it applies twice to the patriarchs, six times to the high priest, once to Cyrus, and 29 times to the Israelite king, primarily Saul and secondarily David or an unnamed Davidic monarch. In these contexts the term denotes one invested, usually by God, with power and leadership, but never an eschatological figure. Ironically, in the apocalyptic book of Daniel (9:25f), where an eschatological messiah would be appropriate, the term refers to a murdered high priest.\(^{37}\)

Nevertheless, Ps 2:2 (where it is announced that God’s son is coming to straighten out the rulers of the earth), Ps 45:7 (where it asserts that God has anointed this leader with an oil of gladness and his robes are fragranced with myrrh) and Dan 9:25 (where it says that the anointed one will be persecuted and killed by the rulers of the earth) are texts—referenced in relation to Jesus (e.g., Acts 4:27, Heb 1:9)—that have come to have Christological significance. Other texts in the Hebrew Bible refer to the virtues and promise of messiahs, referenced in churches and popular culture contemporarily and cited in eschatological ways, including: evil and tyranny will not be able to stand before a messiah’s leadership (Isa 11:4); he will attract people from all nations (Isa 11:10); there will be no more hunger or illness, and death will cease (Isa 25:8 and quoted in 1 Cor 15:5 mentioned below); the dead will

rise again (Isa 26:19); he will be a messenger of peace (Isa 52:7); the ruined cities of Israel will be restored (Ezek 16:55); and weapons of war will be destroyed (Ezek 39:9).

References to messiah/Christ continues in the New Testament. The Greek verb, chriō, “to anoint,” is used in a variety of places in the New Testament: Jesus announces the Spirit of the Lord is upon him and has anointed (echrisen) him to bring good news to the poor (Luke 4:18); it mentions that Herod and Pontius Pilate conspired to have the anointed (echrisas) Jesus crucified with a verbatim quotation from Psalm 2:2 (Acts 4:27); Peter teaches about the anointed (echrisen) Jesus of Nazareth who healed and exorcised those under the control of the devil (Acts 10:38); Paul writes that God anointed (chrisas) those who follow Jesus Christ (2 Cor 1:21); and quoting Ps 45, Hebrews reads God’s son, Jesus, was anointed (echrisen) with oil of joy (Heb 1:9). This anointed messiah/Christ, as referenced in the Hebrew Bible and other parts of the New Testament, connects with messiah/Christ in the Gospel of Matthew as well.

Matthew has the clearest focus on messiah and the most references to an “anointed one” of all the gospels. There are 16 references to the Christ, ho christos,

Matthew seems to place particular importance on the line of Davidic kings. Through David, Jesus linked with healings and miracles for the poor and sick throughout society. See W. R. G. Loader, “Son of David, Blindness, Possession, and Duality in Matthew,” Catholic Biblical Quarterly 44.4 (1982): 570-585. Also, as is clear in the connection drawn between Jesus and David in the genealogy (1:1-17), the reign of Jesus is focused on exile and a new liberation movement for all (see Chapter Five). W.D. Davies writes:

Historically the term Son of David as a standard messianic title is attested in the Rabbis in b.Sanh 97a-98a and may already be present in the Psalms of Solomon, 17:21-35, cf. 18:5-9, in the first century B.C.E. It developed out of Old Testament passages such as Isa 11:10 (the root of Jesus), Jer 23:5, 33:15. By the first century it had become a major, if not dominant, Jewish expectation...The messianic king “who was to come” was conceived as a Son of David who would fulfill the promises of 2 Sam 7:16, where the prophet Nathan is commanded by

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“the anointed one,” in Matthew, four times in the genealogy and birth story (1:1,16,17,18 and 2:4) and eight times in the Passion Narrative (22:42, 23:10, 24:5, 24:23, 26:63, 26:68, 27:17 and 27:22). “Matthew, having shown how Jesus becomes the child of Joseph, son of David, virtually creates the Davidic Messiah in the image of Jesus.” Of the other four uses of “Christ” in Matthew, Peter says, “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God” in Matt 16:16; and Matt 12:18 proclaims that “here is the servant that God has chosen—God will put his Spirit upon him and he will proclaim justice to all the nations” (quoting Isa 41:9-10).

Merrill Miller writes about Jesus as the Davidic Messiah in Matthew, who is concerned with healing and individual and social transformation over paying taxes:

Since Matthew establishes Jesus’ credentials as the Davidic Messiah from birth, he can portray Jesus’ earthly activity in messianic terms ... Matthew has created his therapeutic Son of David not only by expanding his Markan

God to tell David: “Your family shall be established and your kingdom shall stand for all time in my sight, and your throne shall be established for ever” (2 Sam 7:16). Already, before Matthew wrote, Christian circles recognized the Davidic connections of Jesus (Rom 1:3-4; cf. Acts 2:29-36, 13:22-23; 2Tim 2:8; Rev 5:5, 22:16). But of all New Testament writers it is Matthew who most emphasizes that Jesus is of Davidic ancestry (W.D. Davies, “The Jewish Sources of Matthew’s Messianism” in The Messiah: Developments in Earliest Judaism and Christianity [ed. James Charlesworth, Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992], 500). Jesus is a descendant (more or less) of David (Matt 1:1) who is held up as an important figure in Jewish tradition as he united the kingdoms under his leadership and was said to be the ancestor of the coming messiah. See Lidija Novakovic, Messiah, the Healer of the Sick: A Study of Jesus as the Son of David in the Gospel of Matthew (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2003); Donald Juel, Messianic Exegesis: Christological Interpretation of the Old Testament in Early Christianity (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1988); Brown, The Birth of the Messiah, 67; and David Baker, The Coming of the Messiah (Philadelphia: The Spenba Company. 1961).

39 Cameron and Miller, Redescribing Christian Origins, 321.
40 “I took you from the ends of the earth, from its farthest corners I called you. I said, ‘You are my servant; I have chosen you and have not rejected you. So do not fear, for I am with you; do not be dismayed, for I am your God. I will strengthen you and help you; I will uphold you with my righteous right hand” (Isa 41:9-10).
41 There are three central texts that highlight three different messianic figures connected to a Davidic King that emphasize the abuse and exploitation that comes with kingship: Numb 24:15-17; Deut 18:18-19, and Deut 33:8-11 (within the Torah/ Pentateuch). These are often read with another set of texts such as Jer 23, Jer 33:14-18, and Zech 6. These three first passages appear to have been constructions of messianic figures that predate but in some ways relate to those in the first centuries before and after the common era (B.C.E. and C.E.).
source but by identifying Jesus’ healing activity as the deeds of the Christ (Matt 11:2-6) rather than the deeds of prophets such as Elijah and Elisha, as the summary of the deeds drawn from texts of Isaiah might suggest (Isa 61:1-2 LXX; 42:6-7; 35:5; 29:18-19). . . The sage-prophet of Q has become a royal figure. As such, he is addressed as Lord and Son of David (9:27-28; 15:22; 20:31). The man of authority in Mark has become the Davidic Messiah. As such, he does not exact taxes but heals.  

Anointed Kings and Prophets in the Hebrew Bible

Having established Jesus as a “messiah” in Matthew and the gospels more generally, the significance of anointing in the Hebrew Bible is particularly relevant in developing an understanding the unnamed woman’s actions and the response by Jesus and his disciples in Matt 26. Anointing in Israel was an act of consecration that bestowed divine authority on kings and prophets, introducing them into their office. Anointing was also used in care of the body, in preparation of the dead for burial, and in caring for and honoring the poor and rich; in each of these cases the person is only anointed once. The specific anointing of rulers in the Hebrew Bible that ground the anointing in Matt 26:7 that I wish to highlight in more detail come from Exod 30, 1 Sam 10, 1 Sam 16, 1 Kgs 19:16, Ps 105:15 and 1 Chr 16:22. I have chosen these references because they depict kings and prophets being anointed (perhaps following the popular traditions renditions of those anointings) and may have been familiar to the audience of Jesus’s anointing. Exodus 30, mentioned again below, focuses on the oil that Moses is instructed to prepare to be the holy anointing oil (myron) that includes myrrh (smyrna) and other luxury items, which should remind us that the wise men brought myrrh to Bethlehem because of its royal connotations.

42 Cameron and Miller, Redescribing Christian Origins, 319-320.
Also Moses hears from God in Exod 30 that he is to anoint Aaron and his sons as priests for God.

In 1 Sam 10:1, Samuel is asked by God to anoint Saul as king. To anoint, Samuel takes a vial of oil, pours it over Saul’s head, kisses him, and states: “The LORD has anointed you ruler over his people Israel. You shall reign over the people of the LORD and you will save them from the hand of their enemies all around. Now this shall be the sign to you that the LORD has anointed you ruler over his heritage.” This pericope is important in both discussing the process of anointing (taking a vial of oil and pouring it on the king’s head) as well as the significance of anointing (that anointing means God setting the king to rule over the people, protect them from their enemies, and to watch over God’s blessings). 1 Samuel 16 also shows how anointing takes place when Samuel anoints David, an unlikely candidate to be king, amongst his brethren with a horn of oil poured over David’s head. This passage reminds us that the anointing and an “anointed one” can come from unlikely places.

There are, in addition, three references to anointed prophets in the Hebrew Bible that are of note here. In 1 Kgs 19:16, God tells Elijah to anoint Jehu as king over Israel and Elisha as his successor prophet. And in both Ps 105:15 and 1 Chr 16:22, God rebukes kings to not harm God’s anointed prophets. Attention to both anointed

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43 There has been some recent discussion that Saul may have been anointed as a prince rather than king. Jonathan Kaplan writes about some of the Babylonian influences that may have influenced the anointing and influence of Saul in 1 Samuel: “Perhaps the most famous example of this group of texts and rituals is the Babylonian Fürstenspiegel, or “Mirror for Princes,” a “genre of discourse” that the author of 1 Samuel 8 drew on an existing catalogue of monarchical excess based on models of this genre of discourse circulating in the Judean court... These actions fall under the general rubric of the first line, “If a king does not heed justice, his people will be thrown into chaos, and his land will be devastated”” (Jonathan Kaplan, “1 Samuel 8:11-18 as “A Mirror for Princes,” Journal of Biblical Literature 131, no. 4 (2012), 630-631).
king and prophet brings the critique of earthly rulers and economic domination into the picture.

**Myron: an Ointment for Prophets and Kings**

The substance the unnamed woman uses to anoint Jesus’s head in Matt 26:7 is *myron*; 44 in the ancient Near East, *myron* was a special commodity that connotes empire/royalty, burial, and wealth. 45 Pliny the Elder discusses *myron* in *Natural Histories* where he calls it a royal unguent, made in Syria (where Antioch is located) and prepared for kings of Parthia. 46 Josephus also mentions *myron* in relation to kingship and a critique of luxury. In *Jewish Antiquities*, he recalls the “celebrations” at the death of King Agrippa where the people mockingly wore garlands, were anointed with unguents (*myron*), and were accused of being disrespectful to the benefactions and generosity of the king. 47 Elaine Wainwright points out that

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44 There are 16 uses of the Greek “*myron*” in the Septuagint: in Exodus 30:25 (where it is the name for the holy anointing oil and contains myrrh, cassia and other luxury spices), 1 Chronicles 9:30 (where it also refers to the special ointment made by priests for anointing), 2 Chronicles 16:14 (where it is the perfume with which Asa the king is buried), Judg 10:3 (where Abimelech is buried and succeeded by Jair), Ps 133:2 (where it refers to an ointment on Aaron’s head), Prov 27:9 (where it refers to the heart delighting in wine and nice ointments), Amos 6:6 (where it is an indictment against those who live luxuriously and drink strained wine and use the finest ointments), Isa 25:7 (a song about the justness of God who will make the ungodly fall and lift the poor up and anoint his people), Isa 39:2 (where it is included in a list of the finest spices and items including myrrh and gold), Jer 25:10 (where it refers to the Lord taking everything away from the people who did not follow him including the scent of perfume and other nice things), and Ezek 27:17 (where Judah and Israel are said to be merchants of ointment and corn).

45 A few of the specific Septuagint references to *myron*/anointing are of major interest to this study. The passage from Isa 25:7 where the poor are lifted up and anointed with *myron* perhaps parallels what is going on in Matt 26 with Jesus the poor person. This passage in Isaiah is about anointing the poor (rather than reserving this honor for only the rich) and Jesus associates with the poor in Matt 26. Also the fact that i. Isaiah 39:2 includes *myron* in the list of luxury items, ii. Proverbs 27:9 also lists it as something very expensive and special, and iii. Jeremiah 25:10 announces it is something that God will take away because of the disobedience of the people, could parallel the economic critique in Matt 26 that we will explore a little later in this chapter.


Josephus uses the Greek words *myron* and *katacheō* together in a symbolic reference to Plato’s treatment of Homer when he writes, “after crowning and anointing him with unguents.”⁴⁸ Luzia Sutter Rehmann discusses the oil used in the anointing scene as well and suggests that since olive oil,⁴⁹ a simple oil used for cooking and other daily practice, is the base of any ointment (*myron*) used to anoint Jesus (including in the other Gospel stories), it brings real-life issues, including food and hunger, wealth and money, and economy into the story.⁵⁰ In fact, Ze’ev Safrai documents that oil was one of the main crops and therefore main sources of income in Roman Palestine and central to agricultural production, trade, and commerce; oil is thereby another way to explore the economy in more detail.⁵¹

*Jesus the Christ in Matt 26*

I wish to argue that although the definition and singularity of “messiah” as it applies to Israelite traditions, second-temple popular movements, and Jesus as a popular movement leader may be in question, as well as the variances of how this anointing of Jesus takes place—in particular by a woman and with *myron*—there are three levels of the anointing in Matt 26:7 that can inform its significance: namely anointing as hospitality for rich and poor, for burial, and as a popularly acclaimed

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⁴⁹ Martin Goodman also discusses the economic significance of oil. Oil was one of three staples produced from the land; it was important for Jews and all those living in the Roman World. In fact, Josephus documents that there was controversy over Jews buying foreign/Gentile oil. See Martin Goodman, *Ancient Judaism and Early Christianity: Collected Essays* (Judaism in the Roman World 66; Boston, Mass.: Brill Academic Publishers, 2006), 187-200.
⁵⁰ The questions about tithing of perfumed oil can be taken as starting point for a new reading of the anointing accounts. Whether in the pharisaic household, or in the house of the sisters Martha and Mary, or in the house of Simon the Leper—the olive oil arouses questions of belonging and solidarity, which are found in some accounts of Josephus (*Vita, BJ*) as well as in debates of the rabbis (*Mishna*)” (Luzia Sutter Rehmann, “Olivenöl als Zündstoff, 1).
king/prophet/religious leader. On the most basic level, Jesus is anointed in Simon’s house in Bethany, as an act of care and love, as someone important, or as the poor since both the poor and rich/honored are anointed in the ancient Near East and particularly the Hebrew Bible. We know from Matthew, especially Matt 25:40 referenced earlier, that Jesus is poor himself. He is portrayed as vulnerable and cared for in three places in the Gospel of Matthew that alert the reader to the poverty and political repression of empire and the significance of the unnamed woman caring for Jesus in Matt 26. First, as a baby, Joseph takes him to Egypt so that he will escape the murderous wrath of Herod. Next, at the beginning of his ministry, he is baptized by John the Baptist; even Jesus had to be baptized and announced as the Son of God by forces other than himself. Then in this passage, this unnamed woman ministers to and anoints him. She is able to see that Jesus is in need, rather than someone who himself is always helping the needy. So, this act of anointing by the unnamed woman is an act of care and love for a poor person.

I want to suggest that this anointing of a poor person also connects with the eschatological feast from Isaiah 25:4-8, where Isaiah presents a song about the justness of God who will make the ungodly fall and lift the poor up; this song includes anointing God’s people with myron (25:6) and vanquishing death (25:8, which is referred to in 1 Cor 15:5 as well). As we have seen, Jesus associates with

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54 “You have been a refuge for the poor, a refuge for the needy in their distress, a shelter from the storm and a shade from the heat. For the breath of the ruthless is like a storm driving against a wall and like the heat of the desert. You silence the uproar of foreigners; as heat is reduced by the
the poor in Matthew. This low association echoes God’s banquet and refuge for the poor in Isaiah 25:4 where God is the stronghold of the poor. In this use of anointing with *myron*, the poor are anointed and honored; they are the special care of God. And this potentially connects with God’s messiah(s) being charged with caring for the poor. To organize society around the needs of the vulnerable is the responsibility of anointed ones—specifically to lead movements aimed at saving the people from poverty and oppression and to protect God’s creation from mistreatment, devastation and further exile.55

In addition to caring for and honoring the poor, the anointing by the unnamed woman follows the formula for anointing kings and prophets in the Hebrew Bible.56 The specific practice of anointing by pouring oil on the head was used as a symbolic act for officially designating and setting apart a person for a shadow of a cloud, so the song of the ruthless is stilled. On this mountain the Lord Almighty will prepare a feast of rich food for all peoples, a banquet of aged wine—the best of meats and the finest of wines. On this mountain he will destroy the shroud that enfolds all peoples, the sheet that covers all nations; he will swallow up death forever. The Sovereign Lord will wipe away the tears from all faces; he will remove his people’s disgrace from all the earth. The Lord has spoken” (Isa 25:4-8).

Raymond Brown argues that throughout the complex history of messianism, the focus on eschatological hopes of addressing injustice and resisting exile or the conditions that lead to exile in consistent:

> The history of Messianism is complex. In pre-exilic Israelite history when there was an anointed king of the House of David (and thus a messiah) reigning in Jerusalem, hope for deliverance from enemies or catastrophe were attached to that monarch. If he was bad, these hopes were attached to his successor, as we see eloquently in Isa 7 where the prophet despairs of King Ahaz and attaches his hopes to the royal child who will soon be born (King Hezekiah?). However, when the Babylonian Exile of 587-539 B.C. brought an end to the reigning Davidic monarchy, and when in the early post-exilic period the dreams centered around Zerubbabel and the Davidic descendance came to naught, the expectations surrounding the anointed kings of the House of David shifted to an anointed king of the indefinite future. And thus hope was born in the Messiah, the supreme anointed one who would deliver Israel (Raymond E. Brown, *The Birth of the Messiah* [updated ed.; New York: Doubleday, 1993], 67).

55 “*Myron*” is the word used for the ointment/oil that is used to anoint Jesus. *Myron* was used to anoint kings and priests, anoint for burial, and as a luxury perfume as I explored in more detail in footnote 44.
certain, public, leadership function in the community. Indeed, the only act needed for choosing and establishing a new king or prophet was for oil (usually with the Greek elaión) to be poured on the head of the person being anointed. Anointing priests followed a similar pattern; Exodus 30 suggests that Aaron and other priests should be anointed with myron and gives the recipe for the ointment that consecrates holy things. Kings and important people were anointed (with myron) for burial as well.

Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza writes about Jesus’s anointing: “Since the prophet in the Old Testament anointed the head of the Jewish king, the anointing of Jesus’ head must have been understood immediately as the prophetic recognition of Jesus, the Anointed, the Messiah, the Christ. According to the tradition it was a woman who named Jesus by and through her prophetic sign-action.” Elaine Wainwright acknowledges that Jesus’s anointing may not exactly follow the pattern of anointing kings in the Old Testament, pointing out that when kings are anointed in the Hebrew Scriptures it is usually the Greek word, elaion rather than myron being used. She asserts however,

As Jesus enters into his passion, a woman pours oil over his head, an action, which in itself, could be construed as further messianic acclaim, the language

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59 Schüssler Fiorenza, In Memory of Her, xiv.
which differs from expected language for sacred anointings being an indication that a different type of kingship is understood here. The use of language other than the typical language of messianic anointing may also result from an androcentric perspective which will not allow a woman to assume the role of anointing which was reserved for men.\footnote{Wainwright, Towards a Feminist Critical Reading of the Gospel According to Matthew, 129.}

As Wainwright asserts, the unnamed woman is demonstrating that Jesus is a special ruler and king, even prophet, a poor “messiah” chosen by God to protect the poor and bring instruction/judgment on wealth and money,\footnote{Frederick Danker relates the portrayal of Jesus in the Passion narrative to that of the righteous sufferer in the psalms of lament, and he points out that the righteous sufferer is identified as poor (ptochos, Ps, 21,25; 34.10; 68,30, 33; 108.22 LXX). See F.W. Danker, “The Literary Unity of Mark 14,1-25,” Journal of Biblical Literature 85 (1966): 468.} in line with other popularly acclaimed revolutionary prophets contemporary to Jesus.\footnote{There is little hope or expectation of a messiah during the period of Persian and Hellenistic domination – perhaps because of unfulfilled hopes focused on kingship after the exile, including surrounding Zerubbabel. In the reforms of Ezra and Nehemiah, Judean society centered on the temple and high priest. Also no evidence of royal messianic hope in Antiochean persecution and Maccabean revolt. However, during the time before and after Jesus, there are numerous prophetic movements that do claim eschatological aspirations. See Horsley and Hanson, Bandits, Prophets, Messiahs, 101.}

Nowhere else in the Gospel of Matthew is Jesus anointed, not even at his burial.\footnote{Mary Magdalene and the women do not bring spices to the tomb in Matt 28:1 because he has already been prepared for burial by the unnamed woman in Matt 26:7. In Mark’s Gospel, Mary Magdalene and the other women do bring spices to anoint Jesus for burial but as he is resurrected they do not anoint in this scene (Mark 16:1-3). Therefore, in Mark and Matthew, the unnamed woman performs the burial rite of anointing. In John’s Gospel, Joseph of Arimethea and Nicodemus prepare the dead body for a Jewish burial (John 19:39-40). It is possible that Mark and Matthew have the anointing before burial because there was not an anointing afterwards.}

Therefore, when the unnamed woman pours the myron of Jesus’s head, she anoints him “Christ” in Matt 26:7.\footnote{Ulrich Luz asserts that Jesus is not anointed as a king/messiah in this scene but Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza insists that he is (Schüssler Fiorenza, In Memory of Her: A Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins [New York: Crossroads, 1983], 152-153). Luz uses the Septuagint translation myron for the Hebrew word masal to point out that kings are not anointed with myron but actually elaion (Luz, Matthew 21-28: A Commentary, 334). However, the fact that King Asa is buried with myron and the general custom/practice for anointing a king as laid out in 1 Samuel 10 and 16 (where kings are anointed by pouring oil on their heads) still parallels the anointing in Matt 26:7. Also, there is clearly an emphasis on kingship and messiah in Matthew, and nowhere else in the entire gospel is Jesus anointed to actually become “Christ.”}

\footnote{Wainwright, Towards a Feminist Critical Reading of the Gospel According to Matthew, 129.}
evidence enough that Jesus is king and prophet; this word choice also brings into this passage both Jesus's death and a critique of wealth.65

Therefore, if we combine both the messianic anointing and prophetic critique in the Hebrew Scriptures with the social and economic contextualization of *myron* from Josephus and Pliny, the anointing scene could be understood as an alternative crowning of Jesus and a simultaneous critique of economic exploitation. It is possible that this economic critique harkens to the festivities at the death of Agrippa and/or the prophetic cry of Amos (e.g., Amos 6:66) and Jeremiah (e.g., Jer 25:167) against kings/rulers who economically exploit and exclude in favor of anointing the poor instead (and poor Jesus) as well as the messianic banquet of Isa 25. One can also imagine that as an act of ‘crowning’, it is in contradistinction to the mock crowning of the soldiers later in the passion narrative (Matt 27:28-31); the unnamed woman anoints him to become the ruler of God’s empire, for which he is crucified as king.

**Wasting their efforts: Jesus’s Economic Critique**

*When the disciples saw this, they were indignant. “Why this waste?” they asked. “This perfume could have been sold at a high price”*

After she anoints Jesus, instead of celebrating his kingship and prophet-hood, acknowledging his imminent death, or even recognizing and celebrating the social

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65 The third use of *myron*, by the prophets as a critique of wealth, is of importance to this biblical study. In other places of this dissertation, I have attempted to show that Jesus critiques wealth and especially the use of wealth to exploit and oppress the poor.

66 "You drink wine by the bowlful and use the finest lotions [*myron*], but you do not grieve over the ruin of Joseph" (Amos 6:6).

67 "I will banish from them the sounds of joy and gladness, the voices of bride and bridegroom, the sound of millstones and the light of the lamp" (Jer 25:10).
critique going on in anointing a poor person with a luxury item, the disciples chide the unnamed woman.\textsuperscript{68} They critique the woman for wasting (\textit{apōleia}) the ointment \textit{(myron)}. They suggest that instead of breaking the alabaster jar \textit{(alabaster)} and pouring out all the ointment, the woman should have kept it intact and sold \textit{(prathēnai)} the item. Before we are too critical of the disciples for their indignation and critique of the woman, it is important to recognize that access to large amounts of money was most likely infrequent or completely out of the question for Jesus's followers. Some accounts (\textit{e.g.}, John 12:5) say that this ointment used by the woman is worth 300 denarii, a whole year's wages.\textsuperscript{69} Although no price tag is attached in Matthew, the words used in this pericope—including \textit{alabaster}, \textit{barytimou}, and \textit{myron}—show that the ointment was very expensive.\textsuperscript{70} So if they had sold the

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  \item Another significant difference between Matthew and Mark is that Matthew credits the disciples with critiquing the woman and her actions. In Mark, the audience present is less defined. Instead it reads, "some were there." Also, later in the story, it states that these unnamed people scolded the woman provoking Jesus to respond. Matthew’s gospel just has Jesus's response without the provocation of Jesus to respond.
  \item In John’s Gospel, it states that the \textit{myron} was worth 300 denarii. Therefore, if the \textit{myron} was worth 300 denarii back then, we must wonder how much it would be worth in our day. I want to suggest that the price for the \textit{myron} could be anywhere from $500-$50,000. I am making this estimate (although very broad) based on what we know about the worth of the denarius and the wages of day laborers. We know that it was standard to pay day laborers one denarius a day and that day laborers were at the lower end of the social class structure in Ancient Israel. Perhaps a modern day comparison could be made with farmworkers or other labor pool or temporary workers. The average pay for a low-wage day laborer today in the United States is somewhere between $5,000 and $15,000 a year. The average pay for all workers in the United States is about $40,000. The average amount of money for those living in extreme poverty in the developing world is about $500. So any amount of money (either less than or equal to the lowest salary in the U.S. or more than or equal to the average paid worker in the U.S. or less than or equal to the money of many extremely poor people in this world) would be significant if we were in the position of the disciples. For however much money it would be worth today, it would be a lot of money. If it were on the lower end, it might even seem like more money because we have to question how much money the disciples really had access to themselves.
  \item The Greek words used to describe the ointment in the four Gospel anointing stories are: \textit{alabastron myrou nardou pistikes polytelous} (Mark 14:3); \textit{litran myrou nardou pistikes polytimou} (John 12:3); \textit{alabastron myrou barytimou} (Matt 26:7); and \textit{alabastron myrou} (Luke 7:37). Matthew emphasizes the fact that the ointment is very expensive and does not use the word \textit{nard} to describe it. This could demonstrate the main concern for Matthew—the ointment is costly but the amount it is
ointment as the disciples suggested, they could have had a large sum of money to give to the poor.\textsuperscript{71} At first the disciples seem to be the practical ones in this passage, the ones thinking about the needs of the poor. For anyone who is poor themselves or spends lots of time with poor people, saving what little resources people have is a logical reaction to exposure to luxury items. Rather than pouring out all of this luxury ointment, could not the woman have poured a little and sold the rest for a profit to help fund Jesus’s ministry?

Furthermore, the disciples do not simply assert that she has wasted the ointment by using it to anoint Jesus, they claim that in doing so she had destroyed it. The Greek word \textit{apōleia} is more accurately translated as “destruction” and is used in one other place in Matthew. This other reference to \textit{apōleia} is in 7:13: "for wide is the gate and broad is the road that leads to destruction." This phrase occurs immediately prior to a warning against false prophets in Matthew. The use of this word in Matt 26 may mean that the vial containing the ointment is broken (which is described in Mark and implied in Matthew even in the word choice of the alabaster jar that has to be broken to access the ointment).\textsuperscript{72} By breaking the jar, there is no chance of trading the \textit{myron} as a luxury commodity anymore. Another potential

\textsuperscript{71} The price tag on the \textit{myron} (though implicit in Matthew) should immediately raise questions including: where did the woman get this money? Do the disciples even know how to buy and sell on the luxury market? And why do the ointments for burial cost a whole year’s wages? This last question connects with the reference to Potter’s Field, a burial ground for those too poor to have a proper burial made in Chapter Eight and the Epilogue.

interpretation is that the unnamed woman destroys the ointment because Jesus and the disciples (even the woman herself) did not get anything out of the ointment, even on a social level. They received no gratitude, status, social stability, or conformity in the system of euergetism in exchange for such an expensive item. They did not get the maximum benefit for the poor—who could have received money or at least honor and status in exchange for the ointment—which were important to the functioning of the Roman Imperial patronage system. Therefore, in order to understand the woman’s actions and the disciples’ response in context, one needs to look in more detail at the concepts of buying and selling in their Scriptural and social context.

Selling

The disciples use the word *prathēnai* from the root verb *pipraskō*, for the word “to sell.” There are only two other references to selling in Matthew, namely, 13:46 and 18:25. These two references in Matthew are parables pertaining to buying and selling in the Kingdom of God that contrast with buying and selling like bankers and other ruling elite in the Kingdom/Empire of Caesar. Matthew 13:46 tells the story of a man who finds a pearl and then sells everything that he had in order to buy the pearl. In this story, the man is clearly not wealthy. If he needs to sell everything he has (perhaps we are to assume he sells his house and land if he

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73 I discuss the functioning of the patronage and euergetism system both in Chapter 4 and later in this chapter in “Giving the Money to the Poor: Justice or Charity.”
74 This verb appears in Matt 13:46, 18:25, 26:9; Mark 14:5; John 12:5; Acts 2:45, 4:34, 5:4, and Rom 7:14.
76 “Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant looking for fine pearls. When he found one of great value, he went away and sold everything he had and bought it” (Matt 13:45-46).
owned them in the first place) to buy the pearl, he is not a regular trader in luxury items. Also, he does not invest the pearl in the Roman economy and use it to make money as is to be expected with an item of great value in this social context. Instead he invests it in the Kingdom of God. The parable in Matt 13:46 shows that the economics of the Kingdom of God are not the same as the Roman Empire: things of great value are enjoyed by the poor, but not sold, and people living in the Kingdom of God do not worry about their basic necessities. The logic of this passage may be similar to the actions of the woman anointing Jesus. The woman takes the luxury ointment (perhaps she even had to sell everything she had to attain it) and uses it on Jesus (to anoint him as king for the Kingdom of God). In other words, she invests everything she has in Jesus and his kingdom. These stories tell us that the use of a luxury item, and its “investment” in the Kingdom of God, may be more important

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77 The social class and economic status of the unnamed woman are unknown to the reader. Many have asserted that she must be a woman of means (and often scholars argue that there seem to have been other wealthy woman followers/disciples/supporters of Jesus and the Jesus movement); see Luz, Matthew 21-28, 340. The fact that she has this alabaster jar of myron in her possession does raise the question of her economic status. I want to suggest although it is possible that this woman does have means and did buy this ointment to anoint Jesus in the first place, it is also possible that she is not wealthy. She may have sold everything she had to acquire this myron. In fact, she may have stolen the ointment (from a wealthy person or even employer) in order to anoint Jesus. This may even be the reason that she is willing to use/waste it all. The fact that we learn nothing about the origins of the woman (when Matthew does name tax collectors and other people of wealth), may demonstrate that this is not the primary concern of Matthew but instead the fact that there is a critique of luxury items and wealth throughout Matthew and that this ointment is necessary to anoint Jesus as Christ. There is some possibility that the unnamed woman is a prostitute/sex worker (esp. via traditional interpretations of the Luke version). Sex work pays better and more consistently than lots of other jobs available to poor women, and sometimes a lot of money (i.e. a year’s wages) all at once. It also adds a layer of meaning to the disciples’ sudden moral panic: she’s not just wasteful/destructive because of how she gives her gift, but also because of how she procured it. In the Matthean version, an anointing sex worker also fits with Jesus’ genealogy—he’s descended from Rahab and Tamar. Sex workers are who Jesus comes from and to whom he belongs. Likewise, Matthew likes to highlight the legal/social “impurities” of the people with whom Jesus lives (lepers, tax collectors) while having Jesus suggests that law is not about individual purity but collective purity where the new kingdom does not allow poverty to humiliate and murder; see Avaren Ipsen, Sex Working and the Bible (Sheffield: Equinox Publishing, 2009).
than how much money or honor you can get for exchanging it in the Empire of Rome. These stories emphasize “not to store up treasures on earth” (Matt 6:19), where the hoarding or even exchanging of a luxury item is discouraged and that “you cannot serve God and Mammon” (Matt 6:24), where the question of whether a luxury item is deemed more valuable than the Son of God is posed. The overall message is that God is to be glorified and all are to have enough in God’s Kingdom. It also suggests that the giving of everything to Jesus or the Kingdom is a symbolic act of commitment, a giving wholly of oneself to others.

Matthew 18:25 also speaks to selling in relation to both Rome and God’s empires. It tells the story of a man who has a debt with the king. The king demands that he pay back his debt by selling all that he has, including his wife and child, but then relents and shows compassion toward the man and forgives his entire debt. However, when the indebted man goes to collect from someone who owes him, he shows no compassion and sends him to prison until he pays his debt. So although the king forgives the first man’s debts, the king’s debtor does not do the same for his debtor. The logic of this passage may be similar to Matt 26 as well. Instead of debt

78 “Therefore, the kingdom of heaven is like a king who wanted to settle accounts with his servants. As he began the settlement, a man who owed him ten thousand bags of gold was brought to him. Since he was not able to pay, the master ordered that he and his wife and his children and all that he had be sold to repay the debt. At this the servant fell on his knees before him. ‘Be patient with me,’ he begged, ‘and I will pay back everything.’ The servant’s master took pity on him, canceled the debt and let him go. But when that servant went out, he found one of his fellow servants who owed him a hundred silver coins. He grabbed him and began to choke him. ‘Pay back what you owe me!’ he demanded. His fellow servant fell to his knees and begged him, ‘Be patient with me, and I will pay it back.’ But he refused. Instead, he went off and had the man thrown into prison until he could pay the debt. When the other servants saw what had happened, they were outraged and went and told their master everything that had happened. Then the master called the servant in. ‘You wicked servant,’ he said, ‘I canceled all that debt of yours because you begged me to. Shouldn’t you have had mercy on your fellow servant just as I had on you?’ In anger his master handed him over to the jailers to be tortured, until he should pay back all he owed. This is how my heavenly Father will treat each of you unless you forgive your brother or sister from your heart” (Matt 18:23-35).
leading to selling one’s family into slavery and being imprisoned as it was in the Roman Empire, this parable tells a story of forgiving debts and being obliged to forgive the debts of others (as Jesus says in the Lord’s Prayer in the Sermon on the Mount.) Jesus as anointed “king” in Matt 26 embodies a logic that entirely defies the valorization of money that produces poverty and enslavement and reduces human beings to merchandise (as is shown also in Rev 18:11-19). Instead, Jesus professes the forgiveness of debts and the elimination of poverty in the Kingdom of God.

In Matthew, the reference to selling connects with the list of luxury items in Revelation, where there is a critique of buying and selling associated with the powerful in the Roman Empire. The inclusion of the bodies and souls of human beings in a list of spices and dyes and luxury items (including myron) in Rev 18:13 raises questions about a system where human lives can be bought and sold publicly in the marketplace alongside other commodities. In fact, the act of buying and selling suggested by the disciples in Matt 26:9 may have been a small building block in maintaining the very structure that was excluding and exploiting the poor from the farming and fishing industries and confining the vast majority of inhabitants in

79 “The merchants of the earth will weep and mourn over her because no one buys their cargoes anymore—cargoes of gold, silver, precious stones and pearls; fine linen, purple, silk and scarlet cloth; every sort of citron wood, and articles of every kind made of ivory, costly wood, bronze, iron and marble; cargoes of cinnamon and spice, of incense, myrrh and frankincense, of wine and olive oil, of fine flour and wheat; cattle and sheep; horses and carriages; and human beings sold as slaves. They will say, ‘The fruit you longed for is gone from you. All your luxury and splendor have vanished, never to be recovered.’ The merchants who sold these things and gained their wealth from her will stand far off, terrified at her torment. They will weep and mourn and cry out: ‘Woe! Woe to you, great city, dressed in fine linen, purple and scarlet, and glittering with gold, precious stones and pearls! In one hour such great wealth has been brought to ruin!’ Every sea captain, and all who travel by ship, the sailors, and all who earn their living from the sea, will stand far off. When they see the smoke of her burning, they will exclaim, ‘Was there ever a city like this great city?’ They will throw dust on their heads, and with weeping and mourning cry out: ‘Woe! Woe to you, great city, where all who had ships on the sea became rich through her wealth! In one hour she has been brought to ruin!’” (Rev 18:11-19).
the empire to dispossession and misery. Through Matthew's many references to slaves and slavery, discussed in Chapter Five, it is clear that Matthew's Gospel connects slavery, poverty, and indebtedness. Matthew demonstrates the inclusion of slaves and the poor in Jesus's reign, in particular Matt 20:25-28. Matthew’s Gospel shows that conformity to the economic system of buying and selling impoverishes and enslaves (much like Revelation) and that Jesus’s followers are to come from the underside of history. Jesus himself has chosen sides; he has sided with the poor.

Giving the Money to the Poor: Justice or Charity

“and the money given to the poor.”

On the other side of wealth accumulation in this passage—selling the ointment for a high price—comes the suggestion to give the proceeds to the poor. The idea of giving money to the poor as suggested in Matt 26:9 is often considered to be almsgiving or basic survival work by biblical scholars and other interpreters of the passage. In fact, the Gospel of Mark includes the statement that Jesus’s

80 “You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be your slave—just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many” (Matt 20:25-28).

81 Many commentaries and interpretations of Matt 26:9 including Susan Miller, “The Woman Who Anoints Jesus (Mark 14:3-9),” Feminist Theology 14.2 (2006): 221-236; Ulrich Luz, Matthew 21-28: A Commentary (ed. Helmut Koester; trans. James E. Crouch; Hermeneia: A Critical & Historical Commentary on the Bible. ed. H. Koester; trans. J.E. Crouch; Philadelphia: Fortress, 2005), 339-340; Daniel Harrington, The Gospel of Matthew: Sacra Pagina Series. Vol 1. (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1991); Elaine Wainwright, Towards a Feminist Critical Reading of the Gospel according to Matthew (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1991) and others suggest that what is being referenced when the disciples say that they could have given the proceeds of the sale to the poor to be Jewish almsgiving (in particular as separate from Roman euergetism and benefactions). Many of these interpretations separate the selling of the myron and giving the money to the poor from the overall role that euergetism played in the overall Roman economic structure or suggest that Jesus is not talking about material poverty (but spiritual poverty) in the larger Matt 26 passage. I want to suggest that Matthew is actually critiquing Roman benefactions in this passage based on the fact that the money they would have to give to the poor comes from the sale of a luxury item. If there is mention of
followers will have other opportunities to care for the poor (perhaps even making a
direct connection to almsgiving or other ways to meet the basic needs of the poor)
that is not likewise stated in Matthew. Following Meggitt, who asserts that
almsgiving had a minor impact on alleviating poverty and was small in terms of
participation and reach in relation to the empire sponsored benefaction system, I
wish to connect the selling of the luxury item and giving the proceeds to the poor to
eugetism and patronage, the dominant way by which the poor were cared for in
the empire.\textsuperscript{82} Just as Caesar was called bearer of peace, king of kings, Son of God, the
Savior, he was also considered the ultimate benefactor and bearer of good tidings
and good works.\textsuperscript{83} Caesar and other political and religious leaders below him in the
Roman hierarchy sponsored banquets, handed out the dole and provided other
economic supports for their clients.\textsuperscript{84} Therefore the suggestion to give the proceeds
of the sale to the poor, especially in the Gospel of Matthew, may not only be about
almsgiving (as has been traditionally interpreted), but rather a suggestion to

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\textsuperscript{82} Meggitt, \textit{Paul, Poverty and Survival}, 156.
\textsuperscript{83} Discussion of the titles of Augustus Caesar and the roles the emperors played runs
throughout these two books: John Dominic Crossan and Jonathan Reed, \textit{In Search of Paul: How Jesus's
Apostle Opposed Rome's Empire with God's Kingdom} (San Francisco, Calif.: HarpersSanFrancisco,
2004), 160 and Paul Zanker, \textit{The Power of Images in the Age of Augustus} (Ann Arbor, Mich.: University
\textsuperscript{84} "We ought not, however, on this account to be niggardly as to the customary public
contributions, if we are in prosperous circumstances; since the masses are more hostile to a rich man
who does not give them a share of his private possessions than to a poor man who steals from the
public funds, for they think the former's conduct is due to arrogance and contempt of them, but the
latter's to necessity. First, then, let the gifts be made without bargaining for anything; for so they
surprise and overcome the recipients more completely; and secondly they should be given on some
occasion which offers a good and excellent pretext, one which is connected with the worship of a god
and leads the people to piety; for at the same time there springs up in the minds of the masses a
strong disposition to believe that the deity is great and majestic, when they see the men whom they
themselves honour and regard as great so liberally and zealously vying with each other in honouring
the divinity" (Plutarch, \textit{Mor.} 279-81 [De Lacy and Einarson, LCL]).
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participate in the larger patronage and euergetism systems which perpetuated the economic structure of Rome.\footnote{Meggitt explains the role of the patronage system: “The only form of patronage that had any impact on the life of the urban plebs was that of patronage by some members of the elite of collegia, and even here the upper-class largesse seems to have been limited to providing the funds for an occasional meal and little else” (Meggitt, \textit{Paul, Poverty and Survival}, 169).}

I wish to suggest four levels of a critique of euergetism from the teaching of the Scriptures and Jesus’s teachings on poverty and wealth that may be going on in this passage: ideological, political, spiritual/moral, and material. Ideologically, euergetism and benefaction functioned to demonstrate how much the rich cared about the poor. Inequality and verticality were inherent in the patronage and benefaction system. In the \textit{Res Gestae}, Augustus and the other Caesars sponsor banquets, hand out the dole, and organize athletic and gladiatorial games for the financial health and spiritual well-being of the people.\footnote{The public shows and games were an important part of the ideological battle for the hearts and minds of the people of the Roman Empire. In this, Augustus was supreme: He surpassed all his predecessors in the frequency, variety, and magnificence of his public shows. He says that he gave games four times in his own name and twenty-three times for other magistrates, who were either away from Rome or lacked means. He gave them sometimes in all the wards and on many stages with actors in all languages, and combats of gladiators not only in the Forum or the amphitheatre, but in the Circus and in the Saepta; sometimes, however, he gave nothing except a fight with wild beasts. He gave athletic contests too in the Campus Martius, erecting wooden seats; also a seafight, constructing an artificial lake near the Tiber, where the grove of the Caesars now stands (Suetonius, \textit{Aug. XLIII} [Rolfe, LCL]).} In the summary of the \textit{Res Gestae}, it says that Augustus contributed 600,000,000 denarii to the public treasury, the Roman plebs, or discharged soldiers.\footnote{Velleius Paterculus, \textit{Res gestae divi Augusti} summary (Shipley, LCL).} Therefore, rather than viewing the rich of the empire as responsible for the impoverishment of the poor, the rich are viewed as the saviors of the poor and common people in this eugertistic system.\footnote{Meggitt explains the role of the \textit{euergetai} in the system: Given the absence of any direct governmental (imperial or local) intervention in an individual’s welfare, outside the institution of the dole in Rome, the most significant form of
Politically, euergetism and patronage helped the wealthy to gain a political base and following as well. The clients and subjects of a patron or benefactor pledged loyalty to them and backed them for any political office or social campaign to which they aspired. Their wealth and political power were used to secure and attain more wealth and political power through this system of patronage.\(^89\) The wealthy and powerful used social stratification and the monopolizing of certain key social, political, and economic positions to make their clients both more dependent and poorer.

Spiritually, euergetism and patronage are directly tied to state religion, the imperial cult. It is the Roman gods who justify and apologize for the social and economic inequality in the empire.\(^90\) Richard Horsley argues, “Euergetism, established throughout the empire as the socially responsible use of wealth, proclaimed the necessity of social inequality, grounded in the divine world of the gods.”\(^91\) Therefore, there is a theological justification of inequality where the gods deem some people deserving and others undeserving and the high priest of the temples throughout the empire are major benefactors.

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\(^91\) Horsley, "Introduction," 95.
Materially, euergetism, benefaction, and patronage made more money for the wealthy and therefore did not meet the needs of the poor.\textsuperscript{92} Biblical scholars argue that patronage and euergetism during Roman imperial times did not really address the larger social problem of poverty, but instead undergirded the system of debt, taxation, and poverty creation of Rome.\textsuperscript{93} The priests and others appointed to serve the temples and other social and religious functions of the city, including other forms of retainers, were paid a salary or materially supported in some way. They were able to acquire those positions using their wealth and benefactions. Therefore, anyone who was in a position to donate money to the empire was better positioned to get the jobs that were connected to temples and benefactions in the first place. One had to have (and give) money in order to make money.\textsuperscript{94}

The wealthy were also actually able to enrich themselves off the poverty of the poor and in times of disaster. Benefactors would come to the aid of a city during famine and economic crisis, be recognized and honored for their benevolence, and still make money off the crisis. One such example shows that an elite from the Greek island of Amorgos lent other residents of the island money at a 20\% APR so that they could buy grain from him at ten times the regular price. The outcome was one

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\textsuperscript{92} “If one is a better man than the other, he thinks he has a right to more, for goodness deserves the larger share. And similarly when one is more useful than the other: if a man is of no use, they say, he ought not to have an equal share, for it becomes a charity and not a friendship at all, if what one gets out of it is not enough to repay one’s trouble. For men think that it ought to be in a friendship as it is in a business partnership, where those who contribute more capital take more of the profits. On the other hand the needy or inferior person takes the opposite view: he maintains that it is the part of a good friend to assist those in need; what is the use (he argues) of being friends with the good and great if one is to get nothing out of it?” (Aristotle, Eth. Nic. 1163a [Rackham, LCL]).
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\textsuperscript{93} Richard Horsley asserts “Among the Roman urban poor, for whom we have at minimal evidence of dependency on patronage, we should not imagine either that the poor were happy about their dependency or that patronage really alleviated poverty and hunger” (Horsley, “Introduction,” 90).
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\textsuperscript{94} Sorek, Remembered for Good, 24-30.
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in which Amorgos is perceived to help at the same time that he profits and causes people to go into severe debt (to him).\textsuperscript{95} Clearly, another important source of wealth and income of the rich was the debts of the poor.\textsuperscript{96}

Returning to our story and what we know about buying and selling, money exchange and luxury items, and Rome’s benefactions and charity for the poor, we can look back at the critique by the disciples of the woman’s destruction of the myron. The unnamed woman’s action subverts the whole system of buying and selling and especially the value and exchange of luxury items. It undermines the patronage and euergetism system rather than participating in it. It does metaphorically "destroy" something indeed by challenging the whole economic structure including euergetism that, on its flipside, leads to impoverishment of the poor.

\textit{Jesus the Pedagogue of the Poor}

\textit{Aware of this, Jesus said to them, “Why are you bothering this woman?}

\footnote{95}{Meggitt, Paul, Poverty and Survival, 167.}

\footnote{96}{A contemporary example of this material advantage of euergetism for the rich comes from South Africa where Citibank has opened up “schools” for poor South African children in the empty metal shipping containers. The President of the country attended the "opening" of one such school, praising and recognizing Citibank for their generosity, and never acknowledging that this school building would never actually serve as a proper facility (made of metal it would surely overheat) but instead was a good way to dispose of an otherwise useless piece of material. Other contemporary examples of the spiritual, material, ideological and political problems with euergetism and charity come from the challenge the HIV/AIDS crisis poses to intellectual property rights where Bill Gates and other philanthropists donate a fraction of the money needed to curb the deadly impact of AIDS on the poor of South Africa and other countries but provide donated medicines in an effort to keep governments from producing generic versions of the needed medicines. Therefore these philanthropists get public praise, tax breaks, even profits from the sale of their medicines in the name of helping the poor while they serve to protect intellectual property rights, not to mention the fact that people do not raise the question of why people are too poor to be able to afford medicine (or malaria nets, etc). This example comes from the experience of Chris Caruso who traveled to South Africa in 2003 with the International Network for Economic, Social and Cultural Rights.}
Matthew 26:10 opens up with the statement that Jesus was “aware” (gnous); Jesus “is aware” in a number of different situations in Matthew. In 12:15, Jesus “is aware” that the Pharisees are looking for a way to trap Jesus. Matthew 16:8 states that Jesus “is aware” that the disciples are confused by his teachings about the Pharisees and perhaps even their own economic situation. Jesus’s “awareness” is connected to his leadership and relationship with both his disciples and adversaries throughout the Gospel. As was discussed in Chapter Five, Jesus’s main roles in the Gospel of Matthew are that of a teacher, leader of a popular social movement, and potential popularly acclaimed ruler. He uses various methods of teaching and leading: he goes to the synagogue, he captures the attention of many through healings and exorcisms, he does polemics with other leaders of his day, and he uses familiar images and references, but constantly amazes his listeners and followers with his ideas. So it should not come as a surprise that Jesus has assessed the situation he is in and used it pedagogically: he knows that he is going to die and that his disciples, the people charged with carrying on the movement, do not understand what is going on (or are threatened by it). In fact, this statement suggests that Jesus may not just be aware of his impending death, but that he may be aware of the response of the disciples and their critique of the woman before they even make it.

Following the statement that Jesus was aware of this, he chides the disciples to stop bothering the woman. The phrase used in Matt 26:10 for “bothering” should be examined carefully. Kapous parechete (“to bother” or “make trouble for/with”) is used in this story in both Matthew and Mark. This phrase is also used in the parable of the persistent widow where the woman keeps “bothering” the judge to grant her
justice in Luke 18:5\(^9^7\) and in the story of the visitor at night and how the host needs to "bother" his neighbor so they have enough bread and resources to provide for guests and show hospitality in Luke 11:7.\(^9^8\) It is used in Galatians 6:17 when Paul writes that no one should make trouble for him from now on, as he already carries the marks of Jesus branded on his body.\(^9^9\) The phrase can therefore be associated with material need, advocating for justice, or even making someone look bad.

Perhaps Jesus is challenging the disciples in part because they are criticizing the unnamed woman, potentially making trouble for her (and Jesus as a newly anointed popular leader?), when they are the ones who do not understand the building blocks of the economic system, the significance of the anointing, or Jesus’s vision of justice in the first place.

Based on both Jesus’s strong reaction to the whole scene, as well as his

\(^{97}\) “Then Jesus told his disciples a parable to show them that they should always pray and not give up. He said: ‘In a certain town there was a judge who neither feared God nor cared what people thought. And there was a widow in that town who kept coming to him with the plea, “Grant me justice against my adversary.”’ For some time he refused. But finally he said to himself, “Even though I don’t fear God or care what people think, yet because this widow keeps bothering me, I will see that she gets justice, so that she won’t eventually come and attack me!”’ And the Lord said, ‘Listen to what the unjust judge says. And will not God bring about justice for his chosen ones, who cry out to him day and night? Will he keep putting them off? I tell you, he will see that they get justice, and quickly. However, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on the earth?’” (Luke 18:1-8).

\(^{98}\) “Then Jesus said to them, ‘Suppose you have a friend, and you go to him at midnight and say, “Friend, lend me three loaves of bread; a friend of mine on a journey has come to me, and I have no food to offer him.” And suppose the one inside answers, “Don’t bother me. The door is already locked, and my children and I are in bed. I can’t get up and give you anything.” I tell you, even though he will not get up and give you the bread because of friendship, yet because of your shameless audacity he will surely get up and give you as much as you need” (Luke 11:5-8).

\(^{99}\) “Those who want to impress people by means of the flesh are trying to compel you to be circumcised. The only reason they do this is to avoid being persecuted for the cross of Christ. Not even those who are circumcised keep the law, yet they want you to be circumcised that they may boast about your circumcision in the flesh. May I never boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, through which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world. Neither circumcision nor uncircumcision means anything; what counts is the new creation. Peace and mercy to all who follow this rule—to the Israel of God. From now on, let no one cause me trouble, for I bear on my body the marks of Jesus” (Gal 6:12-17).
earlier and frequent teachings on poverty, I want to suggest that in Matt 26:10 Jesus directly challenges the economic program suggested by the disciples. Through the phrase “Aware of this, Jesus said to them, ‘why are you bothering this woman?’” Jesus insists that they do not understand the implication of this woman’s actions or even that this woman herself is addressing poverty and the Roman Empire. Jesus may be critiquing the disciples for their desire to be recognized as caring for the poor (through their act of championing the poor via a critique of the woman’s alleged wastefulness), or for their solution to poverty that will not actually help the poor. He may be challenging the disciples for their denial of his imminent death and anointing as king and prophet, or even for their allegiance to the buying and selling, money and debt, patronage and euergetism of the Roman Empire that serves to impoverish even more. He may be trying to protect the unnamed woman from the disciples and the more powerful Roman and Jewish authorities and even covering up the significance—and overtly revolutionary nature—of Jesus’s anointing and social and economic critique of wealth.

Jesus’s social and economic critique in light of this may work on a number of levels. He critiques the Roman Economy at base for exploiting the poor and creating poverty in the first place; he critiques the process of monetization and the exchange of money for further dispossessing the already dispossessed; he critiques the religious and political authorities for their complicity and role in the impoverishment of the people.100 He also critiques the system of benefaction,

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patronage, and poverty relief for the role it plays in masking the problems of poverty and allowing for a further polarization of wealth and poverty.

Perhaps when Matt 26:10 reads “Aware of this” it is that Jesus realizes that the disciples propose selling a luxury item like this, in particular, and charity towards the poor, in general, as the solution: they have a vertical orientation modeled after the hierarchy of the Roman Empire. But the unnamed woman attends to Jesus’s need and has a horizontal orientation modeled after mutual need and solidarity.\footnote{101} Jesus is the woman’s brother. She does not use her gift to him to lift up herself; her luxury item does not help her produce more wealth (and therefore more poverty and debt). On the contrary, the function of her gift serves to comfort and acknowledge a humble but worthy poor person/messiah and her commitment to his way. Because of her understanding and actions, Jesus chides the disciples not to bother her or discredit her. Jesus’s critique of the disciples in Matt 26 may be so strong because they do not see the possibilities for a different world that the unnamed woman has demonstrated in their midst. Jesus wants the consciousness of his disciples to be where the woman’s is, but instead, they fall short.

*Good Works and Works of the Law*

*She has done a beautiful thing to me.*

\footnote{101} Just as those with property and wealth protect it by working together, Jesus’s followers are urged to share as well. Aristotle writes in *Nicomachean Ethics*:

> Again, the proverb says ‘Friends’ goods are common property,’ and this is correct, since community is the essence of friendship. Brothers have all things in common, and so do members of a comradeship; other friends hold special possessions in common, more or fewer in different cases, inasmuch as friendships vary in degree. The claims of justice also differ in different relationships (Aristotle, *Eth. Nic*. 1159b [Rackham, LCL]).
The flip side of Jesus’s critique of the disciples is his praise of what this woman has done for him. In Matt 26:10, he says that this woman has done a kalon ergon, a “beautiful thing” or a “good work,” by anointing him. Matthew has several mentions of good works and good fruits, including in the Sermon on the Mount where Jesus tells his followers to let their light shine and demonstrate their good works in an effort to glorify God in Heaven (5:16); where John the Baptist critiques the Pharisees and Sadducees reminding them that every tree that does not produce good fruit will be cut down (3:10); where Jesus warns about false prophets and says that good trees produce good fruit and all others will be chopped down (7:17-19); where Jesus announces good trees produce good fruit (12:33); and where Jesus tells the parable of the sower and how good seed produces good fruit (13:8). Clearly, in Matthew, good works are for glorifying God, actually benefiting others, and associated with judgment when bad works/deeds/seeds are produced. These teachings on good works are connected to other biblical references as well. James 2:26 asserts that faith without works are dead. Philippians 1:6 states that “he who began a good work must will see it to completion” rather than just promising to do something good to get the credit for it but not actually helping anyone in the end.

In Matt 26:10, Jesus praises the woman for her kalon ergon, thereby defining good works in the Kingdom of God as opposed to the euergetai and benefactions of Rome.102 She has anointed a poor person. She has prepared a poor, dying man for

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102 “Doing good related either to personal security and all the causes of existence; or to wealth; or to any other good things which are not easy to acquire, either in any conditions, or at such a place, or at such a time; for many obtain honour for things that appear trifle, but this depends upon place and time. The components of honor are sacrifices, memorials in verse and prose, privileges, grants of
his burial. She may have even conferred the popular leader to be king/messiah. She has affirmed that beautiful things belong in the Kingdom of God/Heaven for the betterment of everyone. Just like in the Sermon on the Mount, real good works are about glorifying God, not humans who lord their power over others. Like in the Last Judgment in Matthew 25, those who care for the poor are praised and those who neglect the hungry, the prisoner, and the other are judged. In the rabbinic tradition, good works include almsgiving, hosting strangers, visiting the sick. Those good works that are more connected to doing justice are more highly valued by rabbinic standards. These include performing good works that will not be recognized or paid back. In fact, there was a Jewish benefaction system that was differentiated and distinct from that of Rome. This system of euergetism, based on the Hebrew concept of *hesed*, was about glorifying God, taking care of each other, and adhering to Jewish law that promoted justice and equality.

A major question implicit in Jesus’s good news/works for the poor in

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land, front seats, public burial, State maintenance, and among the barbarians, prostration and giving place, and all gifts which are highly prized in each country. For a gift is at once a giving of a possession and a token of honour; wherefore gifts are desired by the ambitious and by those who are fond of money, since they are an acquisition for the latter and an honour for the former; so that they furnish both with what they want” (Aristotle, *Rhet. 1361a36-53* [Freese, LCL]).

103 There are various interpretations and attitudes towards the law in the Gospel of Matthew but clearly law is important and knowledge of law is assumed in Matthew. There are some who believe that Matthew is purely holding up the law of the Hebrew Scriptures to follow in all ways, there are some who say that Jesus and the New Testament supersede and replace the law of the Hebrew Scriptures; for example, see R. G. Hamerton-Kelly, “Attitudes to the Law in Matthew’s Gospel: a Discussion of Matthew 5:18”, *Biblica Research* (1972): 19-32. Others state that Jesus reinterpreted the law of the Hebrew Scripture in new and transformative ways that sets aside some laws and intensifies others; for example, see Richard S. McConnell, *Law and Prophecy in Matthew’s Gospel: The Authority and Use of the Old Testament in the Gospel of St. Matthew* (Basel: Friedrich Reinhardt Kommissionsverlag, 1969).

104 As David Daube points out, in rabbinic writings there is a distinction between almsgiving and good deeds such as the burial of the dead. Good deeds are regarded as more praiseworthy, since they demand immediate action, whereas almsgiving may be carried out at any time (t. *Pe’ah* 4.19; b. *Sukkah* 4) as described in Miller, “The Woman Who Anoints Jesus (Mark 14:3-9),” 221-236.


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Matthew is how to interpret God’s will and law. Matthew offers two options: hypocrisy or righteousness. Righteousness is following the will/law of God and emulating Jesus; it is another way of defining real “good works.” Hypocrisy is adhering to the law and norms of Rome, rather than the commandments of God, propping up oneself and the whole political economic system on the backs of others. Here, I argue that Jesus’s critique of the euergetai (benefactors and patrons of the Roman Empire), hypocrites (including teachers of the law who are conspiring with Rome), and “works of the law” is more of a polemic with Rome and empire, rather than simply an internal message to Judaism. The messiah Jesus insists that this

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106 There are four types of hypocrites in Matthew: those who do actions to be glorified by others rather than to glorify God (Jesus states that they get their reward here but there will be no reward for them in Heaven/from God); people whose inward appearance of righteousness are opposite of their outward appearance (they have anger and lust and could therefore murder or commit adultery); people who act morally in some situations but not others (and suggests that people should not take an oath but what is true in one situation may differ); and, lastly those who behave one way with God and another way with others (for instance loving God but not your neighbor). See David Rhoads, “The Gospel of Matthew. The Two Ways: Hypocrisy or Righteousness”, *Currents in Theology and Mission* 19.6(1992): 453-461.


108 Jesus’s statement about the poor in Matt 26 is similar to his critique of the Pharisees/hypocrites in Chapter 23, if we understand the critique of the hypocrites in 23 (and in Chapter 6 in the Sermon on the Mount) as a critique of Jewish authorities collaborating with Roman authorities and standing for injustice and subjugation. In Chapter 26, the unnamed woman does not just tithe to Jesus but pours out all of the myron (that is made of some of the spices referenced in Matt 23). Perhaps he is accusing the disciples of wanting recognition for caring for the poor but in reality not lifting a finger to help others (and instead suggesting that the unnamed woman has done the wrong thing). He may even have an implicit critique of the economic and political functioning of the Jerusalem temple and the religious leaders of his day in Chapter 26. Jesus’s actions at the temple during Passion Week (including his critique of the buying and selling in the temple in Matt 21) are in conversation with the larger Passion Narrative that the anointing is part of. About Matt 23, Herzog writes:

If these sayings in Matthew 23 trace to the time of Jesus, the rejection of the title tradition that did lay heavy burdens on peasant shoulders, especially in the area of tithes and offerings to the Temple. In order to surround the title with an aura of authority consonant with the increasingly important role of rabbis in propagating the great tradition, the title may have been associated with rituals (phylacteries and fringes), public recognition (places of honor at feasts, prominent seat in the synagogue service), and displays of honor and deference (salutations in the agora or market place). By contrast, the role of teacher was associated with the little tradition in which the teacher taught as a member of his kinship group (‘you are kin to one another’) (Herzog, *Prophet and Teacher*, 15).
interpretation of law and its relationship to justice/righteousness is important both as it relates to his critique of the hypocrites and/or euergetai, but also in relation to the Deuteronomic Code and instruction from the Hebrew Scriptures to do justice to be examined in Chapter Seven.

**Conclusion**

In this chapter I have argued that the anointing story itself is the turning point for the Gospel of Matthew and the crucifixion/resurrection narrative of Jesus as a whole. In Matt 26:1-10, Jesus is anointed as poor person and as a Christ/messiah who is prophet and popularly acclaimed king and responsible to bringing God’s reign of economic justice on earth. His anointing happens at the same time that the high priest and other Jerusalem elites are plotting to crucify Jesus as a threat to their own power that is linked to the power of the empire; his anointing makes him that much more of a threat and alternative to Caesar.

Although the references to the anointed one, or messiah, in the Hebrew Scriptures include the protection of the poor, the end of exploitation, death, war, and so on, there has been less emphasis on the economic dimensions of the messiah in traditional Christology. By focusing on the action of anointing Jesus and the use of the term “myron” in our pericope, as well as the general significance of anointed prophets and kings within the scriptural context, it is possible that Matthew (and the other gospel writers) were bringing in an economic critique. In Matthew, economics are closely tied to ritual practice and temple. The fact that myron has both priestly and economic connotations may be significant.

In addition to the economic critique that myron brings into this story, the
disciples’ suggestion that the woman has destroyed the *myron* by anointing Jesus with it when they should have sold it for a lot of money and given that to the poor, is critiqued by Jesus and the author of Matthew’s Gospel in this passage as well. Jesus responds to the disciples pointing out that their actions reflect the dominant economics of Rome, where the wealthy are rewarded and the poor are oppressed. Jesus establishes his role as teacher and leader of a social movement that prioritizes the poor and works to establish God’s law of prosperity and security for all in this part of Matthew. We will explore the content of the law and reign of this poor messiah in the next chapter. Deuteronomy may help us investigate the melding of good works and law from the position of the poor and God’s second giving of the law.
Chapter Seven: Ending Poverty and the Law of God

Introduction

The most difficult line in the Bible for Poverty Scholars is Matt 26:11 where Jesus actually says, “the poor you will always have with you but you will not always have me.” This line echoes Deut 15:4-11, one of the most liberating “Jubilee” passages in the Old Testament from the second giving of God’s law to the people. Deuteronomy 15 has long been understood as an intertextual reference for Matt 26: the editors of the Jewish Annotated New Testament connect Deut 15:4 with Matt

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1 “There will, however, be no one in need among you, because the Lord is sure to bless you in the land that the Lord your God is giving you as a possession to occupy, if only you will obey the Lord your God by diligently observing this entire commandment... If there is among you anyone in need, a member of your community in any of your towns within the land that the Lord your God is giving you, do not be hard-hearted or tight-fisted toward your needy neighbor. You should rather open your hand, willingly lending enough to meet the need, whatever it may be... Since there will never cease to be some in need on the earth, I therefore command you, ‘Open your hand to the poor and needy neighbor in your land’” (Deut 15:4 NRSV, adapted by the author).

2 In order to understand the potential relationship between Deuteronomy (especially Chapter 15) and Matt 26 (especially verse 11 about the poor), one must first explore the concept of intertextuality in general. Richard Hays proposes seven criteria to determine the potentiality of echoes in scripture in his book, “Echoes of Scripture in the Letters of Paul”. In the case of Hays, he is considering Paul’s letters but the same criteria can be applied to Matthew (or the other gospels for that matter). There’s a range of degrees in identifying and interpreting intertextual echoes; some are obvious and others are subtler. The seven tests or criteria include: availability, volume, recurrence, thematic coherence, historical plausibility, history of interpretation. (Availability – would the scripture have been available to the author and/or original readers?; Volume – how many of the words and syntactical patterns are the same in both?; Recurrence – how often is a same or similar reference made in the writing?; Thematic coherence – how well does it fit into the overall argument the author is making; Historical plausibility – could the author and original readers intended and understood the echo?; History of Interpretation – have other readers heard the same echoes?; Satisfaction – does the proposed reading make sense?). If considering the potential echoes of Deut 15 in Matt 26, we also can consider what Hays says about intertextuality itself. He explains five possibilities around echoes and intertextuality and where/how it happens. Echoes are potentially on all these levels in the case of Matt 26: 1. The hermeneutical event occurs in the author’s mind, 2. It occurs in the original readers of the gospel, 3. It occurs in the text itself – rhetorical and literary structure, 4. It occurs in our act of reading, 5. It occurs in a community of interpretation. Options 1 and 2 locate meaning in an historical act of communication; options 4 and 5 locate meaning in the act of reading in the present (Richard B. Hays, Echoes of Scripture in the Letters of Paul [New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993]).
26:11;³ the editors of the *Harper Collins Study Bible* suggest that Matt 26:11 refers to Deut 15:11.⁴ Deuteronomy 15:11 reads that since there will never cease to be poor on the earth, it is the duty of the people of God to open their hands to the poor and needy neighbor. This latter echo has helped justify the traditional interpretation of Matt 26: taking from it that poverty will exist forever and so people should give what they can/want to the poor. I wish to claim, however, the intertextual echo applies to the larger Deut 15 passage, in particular 15:4, which states there will be no needy people if the people of God follow the commandments that God has given them. Therefore, through his reference to Deut 15 in Matt 26:11, Jesus is demonstrating that poverty need not exist (and therefore the poor will not need loans or charity) if people follow God’s law/commandments (especially through living out the “Sabbatical Year” and “Jubilee”). Jesus is criticizing the disciples with this echo of Deut 15:11 where it is established that poverty is the result of disobedience or following the “works” of the Roman Empire. In fact, Jesus may be warning that if the disciples continue their euergetism-like dealing, they will indeed never abolish poverty.

**Deuteronomic Code and Sabbath/Jubilee**

This section will look at Deut 15 and the Book of Deuteronomy in more detail for the purposes of situating Matt 26 into a larger biblical theology of justice and reinterpreting Matt 26:11 specifically. Scripture, the Deuteronomic Code, and the stories and instructions that were contained within were important to the Jesus

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movement, especially the Gospel of Matthew, just as the concepts of messiah, king, and Kingdom of God/Heaven were, as has been previously discussed. In fact, the most referenced Old Testament book in the New Testament is the Book of Deuteronomy. Ulrich Duchrow writes:

We may say that Deuteronomy, with the help of the ancient Israelite traditions about a free(d) people, updated by the prophets, Hosea and Jeremiah in particular, succeeded in reforming the kingship system fundamentally. The monarchy was fully bound into the social system of solidarity and participation and lost its instruments of economic exploitation and political oppression.

In the Hebrew Scripture, the kings—specifically within the framework of a second giving of the law—are charged with establishing a set of regulations to eliminate poverty and to embed equality and the sacredness of life into the core structure of society. Richard Horsley elaborates on this, especially the bridge that

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5 The Deuteronomic Code (Deut 12-26) is the second collection of legal material in the Book of Deuteronomy. The change in king/leader in the Ancient Near East was accompanied by an oath of loyalty by the people. Therefore Deuteronomy is not a covenant between two parties but a loyalty oath imposed by the sovereign on the people. See David Noel Freedman, Deuteronomy (ABD 2; New York: Doubleday, 1992), 168-183.


7 Ulrich Duchrow, Alternatives to Global Capitalism: Drawn from Biblical History, Designed for Political Action (Heidelberg: Kairos Europa with International Books, 1995), 159.

8 Robert Wafawanaka suggests since Torah “legislated taking care of poor and needy members among the Israelites,” the persistence of poverty in ancient Israel, as witnessed by the many attempts to address poverty contained in other parts of the Bible, is evidence of the failure to follow Torah (Wafawanaka, Am I Still My Brother’s Keeper? Biblical Perspectives on Poverty [Lanham, Md.: University Press of America, 2012], 5). Wafawanaka states: “It was the particular duty of the good ruler or king to provide for the welfare of the poor and powerless by ensuring that justice prevailed in the land” (Wafawanaka, Am I Still My Brother’s Keeper?, 4). This combination of centralizing authority of a ruler to care for the poor and vulnerable in Israelite society is a good summary of the positive yet problematic relationship of Deuteronomy and the poor. Deuteronomy indeed establishes that it is the responsibility of the ruler to mitigate poverty but does not emphasize the agency of the poor. Biblical commentator Leslie Hoppe asserts a broader responsibility for promoting economic justice: “The legislation in the Torah reflects this concern for the poor, which was a value common to the ancient Near East. But in the biblical tradition, all people—not just kings—are responsible for the well-being of the poor. Exodus 22:21-22 is particularly harsh on those who mistreat widows, orphans, and aliens” (Leslie Hoppe, There Shall Be No Poor Among You: Poverty in the Bible (Nashville, Tenn.: Abingdon Press, 2004), 25).
Deuteronomy plays in connecting covenantal law and economic rights from the Torah through the New Testament:

At the center of the Pentateuch/Torah, both substantively and as the organizing structure, is the Mosaic Covenant. From Exodus 19 through the rest of Exodus, all of Leviticus, and up to Numbers 10, Israel is encamped at Mount Sinai receiving the Covenant and covenantal law. The whole book of Deuteronomy is then a ‘second (covenantal) law’ taught by Moses as the Israelites prepare to enter the land . . . The historical books include key passages that summarize and elaborate the political-economic structure of the monarchs, including how they replicate the structure of ancient Near Eastern empires. The earliest oracles of the classical prophets pronounce God’s indictment and punishment of kings and their officers for violating the principles of the Covenant and the economic rights of the people...That Jesus was every bit as concerned with economic issues as the Hebrew prophets has often gone unnoticed. The biblical tradition of covenantal principles and mechanisms continued into the time of Jesus. This can be seen particularly in the covenant renewal and extensive covenantal teachings evident in some of the Dead Sea Scrolls. The renewal of the Mosaic Covenant was also central to Jesus’ proclamation of the kingdom of God. This is most evident in the covenantal speech of Jesus that stands behind both the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew and the Sermon on the Plain in Luke.9

In Matt 26, Jesus may be anointed a popularly acclaimed king/messiah/prophet to renew the covenant and held lead a movement for economic justice. Therefore, the Gospel of Matthew, in particular Matt 26, may indeed establish Jesus as an important link to economic justice and God’s covenant from Deuteronomy, even Exodus and the prophets through to his contemporaries.

The citation of Deut 15 in Matt 26:11 refers to the Hebrew shabbat, meaning rest or day of rest and shemittah,10 meaning year of remission, remission of

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10 Shemittah relates to the concepts of time, tithe, and Sabbath. What comes before Deut 15, especially in chapter 14 are specifications about tithes. Tithes were a gift to God and an act of consecration. They also served to provide for the priests and the poor. The tithe served as a reminder to the people that produce, land, and all creation, were a blessing and gift from God. The focus of shemittah, like the tithe and other instructions in Deuteronomy, is to care for the poor. Ancient Israelite society was supposed to order its economy around the poor. The instructions in
commercial debts, remission of private slaves, freeing security deposits,\textsuperscript{11} or a letting drop of exactions, a (temporary) remitting.\textsuperscript{12} Also called “the Sabbath or Sabbatical Year,” \textit{shemittah} is mentioned several times in the Bible including: Exod 23:10-11,\textsuperscript{13} Lev 25:1-7,\textsuperscript{14} Deut 15:1-3,\textsuperscript{15} Jer 34:13-14,\textsuperscript{16} Neh 10:32, 2 Chr 36:20-21 and 2 Kings 19:20-30.

Deuteronomy also prove God’s sovereignty and shows that the land is God’s. Third, the law stresses community. See Brad Pruitt, “The Sabbatical Year of Release: the Social Location and Practice of Shemittah in Deuteronomy 15:1-18” Restoration Quarterly 52.2 (2010): 81-92. About \textit{shemittah}, Mark Hamilton writes, “Sabbatical Year is a practice by which the compilers of the Deuteronomic and Holiness Codes sought to regulate slavery and agricultural management practices for the benefit of the poor and the encouragement of piety” (Mark Hamilton, “Sabbatical Year” in The New Interpreter’s Dictionary of the Bible: S-Z [Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2009], 11). What begins as a system of land following and freeing slaves became a system to achieve total justice for Israel. It was about the elimination of injustice through the manipulation and ordering of common practices. It was the connection of economic practice and piety/worship that was central to Deuteronomy and the entire Hebrew Scriptures. Rainer Albertz describes the \textit{shemittah} as, “the deepest intervention in credit… in which all creditors renounced all their demands on their debtors, i.e. both paying back the money owed and also renouncing their right to seize property (pledges) and the person of the debtor (slavery for debt)” (Rainer Ibertz, From the Beginnings to the End of the Monarchy [vol. 1 of A History of Israelite Religion in the Old Testament Period, ed. R. Ibertz; Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1994], 217). “There are four subsections of the \textit{shemittah} law in Deut 15: the law itself (v. 1), an explanation of the law (vv. 2-3), a portrait of the ideal upon adherence to the law (vv. 4-6), and a detail of how to act in following the law (vv. 7-11). Verse 11 is almost a test case for the law: what you are supposed to do if someone needy is amongst you. Also, the passage starts and finishes with the poor—the focus of the passage” (Jeffries Hamilton, “Haares in the Shemittah Law”, Vetus Testamentum 42.2 (1992), 214-222).

\textsuperscript{11} According to the Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament.
\textsuperscript{12} According to the Brown, Driver, Briggs Lexicon.
\textsuperscript{13} “You may plant your land for six years and gather its crops. But during the seventh year, you must leave it alone and withdraw from it. The needy among you will then be able to eat just as you do, and whatever is left over can be eaten by wild animals. This also applies to your vineyard and your olive grove” (Exod 23:10-11).
\textsuperscript{14} “The Lord spoke to Moses on Mount Sinai, saying: ‘Speak to the people of Israel and say to them: ‘When you enter the land that I am giving you, the land shall observe a sabbath for the Lord. Six years you shall sow your field, and six years you shall prune your vineyard, and gather in their yield; but in the seventh year there shall be a sabbath of complete rest for the land, a sabbath for the Lord: you shall not sow your field or prune your vineyard. You shall not reap the aftergrowth of your harvest or gather the grapes of your unpruned vine: it shall be a year of complete rest for the land. You may eat what the land yields during its sabbath—you, your male and female slaves, your hired and your bound laborers who live with you; for your livestock also, and for the wild animals in your land all its yield shall be for food’” (Lev 25:1-7).
\textsuperscript{15} “Every seventh year you shall grant a remission of debts. And this is the manner of the remission: every creditor shall remit the claim that is held against a neighbor, not exacting it of a neighbor who is a member of the community, because the LORD’s remission has been proclaimed. Of a foreigner you may exact it, but you must remit your claim on whatever any member of your community owes you” (Deut 15:1-3).
The ending of exploitation and an affirmation toward caring for the poor is a major theme in the Deuteronomic Code, a code of law in the Book of Deuteronomy pertaining to civil and criminal law, conduct in war, and religious rituals and observances.\(^\text{17}\) About the Deuteronomic Code, Walter Brueggemann writes, “Deuteronomy has a peculiar and persistent propensity for the poor and marginal and continually urges generosity and attentiveness towards widows, orphans, and sojourners, those who are legally and economically disinherited.”\(^\text{18}\) Robert Wafawanaka understands the law codes, especially Deuteronomy, to exhibit “strong social concern”\(^\text{19}\) for the poor and marginalized including: legal provisions such as the mandating of sabbatical and Jubilee years, prohibitions on charging interests to Israelites, protection of pledges given as collateral for loans, just weights and measures, prompt payment of wages, equity in legal proceedings, as well as direct provisions for the poor via tithing and gleaning.\(^\text{20}\) Some of the individual regulations include elimination of state tribute, year of remission of debts (15:1-11), freeing of slaves (15:12-18), the poor and weak going on pilgrimage (16:11), forbidding interest and pledges from the weak (23:20, 24:17), and harvest left-overs being left in fields for hungry (24:19). These things are told reminding the people that God led them out of slavery in Egypt and with the highest commandment, the Shema Israel,

\(^{16}\) “Thus saith the LORD, the God of Israel: 'I made a covenant with your fathers in the day that I brought them forth out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage, saying: 'At the end of seven years ye shall let go every man his brother that is a Hebrew, that hath been sold unto thee, and hath served thee six years, thou shalt let him go free from thee'; but your fathers hearkened not unto Me, neither inclined their ear'” (Jer 34:13-14).


\(^{19}\) Wafawanaka, *Am I Still My Brother's Keeper?*, 11

The people bound themselves and all this in a covenant (26:16-19); keeping that covenant was viewed as a matter of life and death (30:15-20). The Sabbath—the rest required by God in order to worship God, protect life and ensure material wellbeing, and its purpose—is one of the earliest legislations in the Bible. The Covenant Code in Exodus, which contains Exod 20-23 and includes the Ten Commandments as well as other economic and civil laws to govern the ancient Near East, and the Deuteronomic Code in Deuteronomy emphasize the humanitarian side of sabbath: slaves, animals, and everybody get a rest. But the priests also insist that observing sabbath is about copying/emulating God. This combination of piety and economic practice are merged in the Deuteronomic Code: rather than choosing between helping the poor and worshipping God, the Deuteronomic Code demonstrates the way to worship God is to structure society around everyone’s needs.

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21 Duchrow, Alternatives to Global Capitalism, 156-159.
22 Coogan, A Brief Introduction to the Old Testament, 109-110.
24 “The debt codes begin with the liberation from slavery in Egypt and the gift of the land. The land belongs to Yahweh and is Yahweh’s to distribute as he sees fit . . . According to the debt codes, everyone is a debtor to Yahweh. The land was given to be a blessing to the people of the land, and that blessing was to be realized through the principle of extension, which means that the yield of the land was to be shared with all so that none would be in need. The more one gets, the more one gives. This vision of a society in which poverty had been eradicated was captured in Deut 15 . . . All of the people were debtors to Yahweh, and all were responsible to see that the yield of the land was distributed to all. This explains why the people tithe every third year “to the Levites, the aliens, the orphans and the widows, so that they may eat their fill within your towns” (Deut 26:12). The same impulse underlies the sabbatical year (Deut 15:12-18) and the jubilee year (Leviticus 25:23-55), provisions of the debt codes” (William R. Herzog, Prophet and Teacher: An Introduction to the Historical Jesus [Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox, 127-128]. “The provision of the Sabbath day was part of a larger picture in the Torah. The Sabbath provided for one day of rest in seven; the sabbatical year provided for cancellation of debts; and the year after the seventh sabbatical year, the jubilee, provided for the redemption of land, freeing of debt slaves, and forgiving debt (Deut 15:1-11; Leviticus 23:18-55)” (Herzog, Prophet and Teacher, 140).
The Deuteronomist connects debt forgiveness, land fallowing and slave manumission. These verses broaden the law to apply to the entire society (rather than just the practices of particular families or clans). The message is that freeing slaves and forgiving debts is a moral obligation to God. Rather than simply a suggestion to care for the poor, Jesus, his followers, and their contemporaries were looking for systemic solutions to poverty and dispossession and they found them in popular tradition, especially the covenant as documented in stories, instructions and the Scriptures.

The topic of Sabbath is taken up in the Gospel of Matthew. There, Jesus is considered the “Lord of the Sabbath” (Matt 12:8). Rest and remission from debts and slavery were important to Matthew so it is surely fitting that there is a strong echo of Deuteronomy in Matthew. But Jesus’s echo of Deuteronomy does not mean that he condones the problematic nature of Deuteronomy and the Deuteronomic Code. The authority of those in Jerusalem is centralized through the Deuteronomic Reforms; these reforms, therefore, connect caring for the poor and vulnerable with

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26 “Whatever else the Kingdom of God may be, it is plainly where the rich are not! . . . The Kingdom of God is simply that social condition in which there are no rich and poor. By definition, then, the rich cannot enter—not, that is, with their wealth intact” (Ched Myers, The Biblical Vision of Sabbath Economics, [Washington DC: Church of the Saviour Publishing, 2001], 32).
27 Old Testament theologian Walter Brueggemann has a book about the Sabbath that came out in 2014. In the preface, he writes: In our own contemporary context of the rat race of anxiety, the celebration of Sabbath is an act of both resistance and alternative. It is resistance because it is a visible insistence that our lives are not defined by the production and consumption of commodity goods . . . But Sabbath is not only resistance. It is alternative. It is an alternative to the demanding, chattering, pervasive presence of advertising and its great liturgical claim of professional sports that devours all of our ‘rest time.’ The alternative on offer is the awareness and practice of the claim that we are situated on the receiving end of the gifts of God (Walter Brueggemann, Sabbath as Resistance: Say No to a Culture of Now [Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox, 2014], 2).
the propagation of charity and hierarchal/centralized anti-poverty instructions even more. They attempt to control but not diminish the power of kings, priest, prophets and judges and establish clear lines of division and demarcation among these leaders of ancient Israelite society. Douglas Knight warns of the hegemonic role the biblical codes play; he suggests readers of these biblical texts should pay “particular attention not only to the use of law in establishing justice or in redressing injustice, but especially to structures in which the powerful employ laws to dominate people and the powerless are too often without recourse.”29 However, Jesus’s cooptation of Deuteronomy in Matthew in general, especially Matt 26:6-13, may highlight the liberative aspects of Deuteronomy, the facets of the Deuteronomic Code that spring from popular tradition—the freeing of slaves, the forgiveness of debts and other issues important to Jesus and the movements surrounding him. Matthew’s Jesus is focused on the renewing Israel’s covenant with God. It is fitting therefore that Jesus would echo aspects of the tradition in an attempt to critique the current practice and urge spiritual renewal needed in order to save the Israelites and especially the covenant with God that emphasizes economic rights. As discussed in Chapters Five and Six, Jesus has stepped in as a “New Moses”, a teacher of the law, a liberation movement leader, and potentially a popularly acclaimed king. In these roles, he harkens back to the stories from Israelite tradition that proclaim economic justice and rights. Jesus and his followers may be referencing some leadership roles in Deuteronomy in his echo of the Deuteronomic Code as well—challenging how these

roles might uphold the status quo at the same time as suggesting new ways to assume these roles and responsibilities for a renewal movement in his time.

**Leadership Roles in Deuteronomy**

Deuteronomy was written most likely during a time of social and religious crisis. Citing Veerkamp, Duchrow claims that Deuteronomy is written after the fall of kingship in 587 BC.\(^{30}\) Israel at this time had a capital-acquiring, land-owning economy where wealth and poverty were present. The legislation proposed by the Deuteronomists was about balancing things out and establishing a system that benefited the people as opposed to a system that benefitted a few at the expense of the many.\(^{31}\) Deuteronomy includes a call for the leaders charged with establishing and monitoring this system. In fact, the author of Deuteronomy was concerned about the meaning of exile and may have suggested neglect for the needy as one of the reasons for their exile through referencing Amos, Micah, Jeremiah and Isaiah.

Deuteronomy establishes a standard for the interpretation of the entire Hebrew Bible; especially relevant to the codes are its prescriptions with respect to leadership roles in society.\(^{32}\) About Deuteronomy, M. Weinfeld asserts, “Indeed the book of Deuteronomy is a kind of manual for the future kings of Israel (17:14-23).”\(^{33}\)

In addition to the role of kings, Deut 16:18-19:21 discusses the positions of leadership including judges, prophets,\(^{34}\) and priests who are responsible for

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\(^{30}\) Duchrow, *Alternatives to Global Capitalism*, 156-159.
\(^{33}\) Freedman, *Deuteronomy*, 169.
\(^{34}\) In Deuteronomy, the prophet is the most important and authoritative leader. See Jeffrey Tigay, *The JPS Torah Commentary: Deuteronomy: The Traditional Hebrew Text with the New JPS*
upholding the laws about sabbatical and festival occasions directly preceding.

Deuteronomy 16:18-17:13 discusses the role and responsibilities of judges and the judicial system. Directly following is the obedient king in Deut 17:14-20 who was to be chosen by God, an Israelite, without trust in military power, without a large harem, using his position not to acquire wealth, and a servant of God and his law.  

About such Deuteronomic kings, Patrick Miller writes,

He may not go the way of most kings, acquiring great wealth, many wives, and many horses (the last referring to a large professional army of horses and chariots [cf. I Samuel 8:11; 1 Kings 10:26]). His one positive responsibility as stated in the text is to have with him at all times a copy of ‘this law,’ the Deuteronomic law; he is to read and study it constantly and adhere diligently to all its instruction.  

The tension and ambivalence towards the role of king is presented here. The law of the king is like other Deuteronomic law against idolatry and apostasy (warnings against wealth and foreign wives and religion). Then Deut 18:1-8 describes the ministering priests who should serve as brothers, assigned by God, and the model Israelite. Deuteronomy 18:9-22 talks about the divine initiative of God in raising up

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Translation (New York: Jewish Publication Society, 2003), 172. Bruce Birch explains the important role that prophets played: “Prophets gave expression to a fundamentally different kind of authority from that of priests and kings precisely because it appeared as a spontaneous breaking-in of knowledge and truth from God alone” (Bruce Birch, et al., Numbers-Samuel [12 vols.; NIB; Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1998], 429). The prophet limits the power of the king and is considered the successor of Moses to Deuteronomy. The prophet is a legitimate channel to God; s/he is a messenger of God. Jeffrey Tigay comments about the anointed prophet, “His primary role is as God’s messenger and spokesman, communicating God’s will in all matters of national life, including religion and domestic and foreign affairs. He is, in essence, the envoy through whom God, the divine king, governs Israel . . . The prophets served, in sum, as the monitors of Israel’s fulfillment of its covenant obligations to God and as the primary bearer of Israel’s religious and moral ideology” (Tigay, The JPS Torah Commentary: Deuteronomy: The Traditional Hebrew Text with the New JPS Translation, 176). Prophets were to be from among your own people and like Moses. Also the prophet’s message should be proved true. See Birch, Numbers-Samuel, 425-432.  

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35 Dewi Hughes, Power and Poverty, 48-51.  

Deuteronomy 18:9-13 is concerned with false prophets who turn to a god other than Yahweh and attempt to use pagan practice to discern the future; Deuteronomy 18:14-22 is concerned with false prophecy of a different kind, made on behalf of Yahweh that is not the word of God. As we have explored in other sections, especially Chapters Five and Six, Jesus potentially fits one or more of these Deuteronomic leadership roles at the same time as he challenges these roles in Matthew. In the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus as a king is portrayed as an alternative to the Herodians and Augustus Caesar; Caiaphas is also threatened by Jesus’s prediction that the temple will be destroyed and then rebuilt in three days (potentially seeing Jesus contending with his role as high priest; see Matt 27:57-68). Jesus serves as a judge in Matt 25 and is deemed a new Moses when handing down the law in the Sermon on the Mount (chapters 5-7); and Jesus is a prophet and movement leader as described by Herzog and therefore chosen by God to critique the world as it is and to help reign in something new. About Jesus, the Deuteronomic prophet, William Herzog asserts,

37 Miller, Deuteronomy, 140-154.
39 “Those who had arrested Jesus took him to Caiaphas the high priest, where the teachers of the law and the elders had assembled. But Peter followed him at a distance, right up to the courtyard of the high priest. He entered and sat down with the guards to see the outcome. The chief priests and the whole Sanhedrin were looking for false evidence against Jesus so that they could put him to death. But they did not find any, though many false witnesses came forward. Finally two came forward and declared, ‘This fellow said, “I am able to destroy the temple of God and rebuild it in three days.”’ Then the high priest stood up and said to Jesus, ‘Are you not going to answer? What is this testimony that these men are bringing against you?’ But Jesus remained silent. The high priest said to him, ‘I charge you under oath by the living God: Tell us if you are the Messiah, the Son of God.’ ‘You have said so,’ Jesus replied. ‘But I say to all of you: From now on you will see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of the Mighty One and coming on the clouds of heaven.’ Then the high priest tore his clothes and said, ‘He has spoken blasphemy! Why do we need any more witnesses? Look, now you have heard the blasphemy. What do you think?’ ‘He is worthy of death,’ they answered. Then they spit in his face and struck him with their fists. Others slapped him and said, ‘Prophesy to us, Messiah. Who hit you?’” (Matt 26:57-68).
Jesus was perceived to be a prophet. Insofar as he was understood to be a prophet in the tradition of Israel this would mean that Jesus, like his great prophetic predecessor Moses, was called to interpret the Torah and mediate between Yahweh and the people (Exod. 20:18-21; Deut. 5:23-29; 18:15-19). A prophet in the Deuteronomic tradition was a prophet of Sinai covenant who made its meaning clear for the people and disclosed the consequences of disobeying or abandoning the covenant (Deut. 18:9-22).40

Just like Matthew is concerned with upholding Sabbath, Jesus has warnings against false prophets. He critiques the Pharisees for not doing God’s will as well as for participating in imperial cult practice of Rome. Taking from and yet critiquing Deuteronomy, in Matthew, Jesus’s role as king, prophet and messiah is to usher in this reign of peace, equality, and prosperity.

**Was Forgiveness of Debts Practiced?**

There are various interpretations of the remission of debts that have served to dampen the economic nature of *shemittah* and Deut 15, including: an assertion that only interest was forgiven not the loan itself (although this seems unlikely given the prohibition of usury in Exod 22:25 and Lev 25:36-37); the idea that people were required to pay back the loan if it happened before the seventh year (but an admission that remission did occur every seven years); and the question of whether creditors would have made loans if they never were going to be paid back.41

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40 Herzog, *Prophet and Teacher*, 12.
41 “The Jubilee is a socioeconomic mechanism to prevent latifundia (the loss of the debtors’ land to the creditor-rich) and the ever widening gap between the rich and the poor—which Israel’s prophets can only condemn, but which Israel’s priests attempt to rectify in law and practice in this chapter of Leviticus. Indeed, this is the problem that faced the outstanding spiritual authority of the first century CE, Rabbi Hillel. He found that loans were not being made because of their automatic cancellation at the Sabbatical Year (Deut 15:1-2). As a solution, he issued an edict of *Prosbul*, a Greek legal term meaning ‘before an assembly.’ It circumvented the Sabbatical by empowering the court, in place of the creditor, to collect the debt from the real property of the debtor if the bond were delivered to it in advance of the Sabbatical Year” (Jacob Milgrom, *Leviticus: A Book of Ritual and Ethics: A Continental Commentary* [Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2004], 302-303).
Deut 15 simply states that one should forgive debts on the seventh year, that people should continue to give out loans (even if they will not get paid back), and that the goal of this release is to solve the problem of poverty—a very clear economic statement.

Nonetheless, a major question in regards to shemittah was whether this type of Sabbath or remission was actually practiced historically or only existed as an ideal. First Maccabees 6:49-53, Tacitus (Histories 5.4), Josephus (Antiquities 12.378, 23.234, 14.202-206, 475)\(^\text{42}\) all talk about Jews observing the Sabbatical Year.\(^\text{43}\) In fact, Josephus’ writings contain eight references to shemittah and Jubilee.\(^\text{44}\) In the first century B.C.E., Hillel the Elder interpreted shemittah as only among Jews. After the destruction of the Temple in 70 C.E., people are exhorted to observe shemittah so that no more misfortune befalls the people.\(^\text{45}\) Also, scholars including Edward McLeod assert that debt cancellation by those in power was practiced more generally in the ancient Near East. This practice was usually at the whim of the people in power, rather than as the way that you show obedience and loyalty to God and king. But debt cancellation follows a rhythm in this Deuteronomistic passage. Economic restructuring is not left to bursts of good will or acts of selflessness, but rather structured into the society with the authority taken away from any one earthly ruler. Commentators assert that this law is to avoid the establishment of a

\(^{42}\) Josephus writes that both Alexander the Great and Julius Caesar remitted Judea’s taxes in the sabbatical year.


class of poor and indentured. It is structured so that a people who have been slaves do not create slavery in their own society.\textsuperscript{46}

In addition to the extra-biblical sources, evidence of debt remission also exists in the Hebrew Scriptures. Jeremiah 34:13-14 talks about the manumission of slaves; he offers disappointment with the lack of adherence to \textit{shemittah} law. Nehemiah 5:7-12 also talks about debt remission and not charging interest.\textsuperscript{47} \textit{First Maccabees} 6:49 (referenced also above) suggests that the king made peace with the people of Beth-zur because they had no provisions to withstand a siege because it was a sabbatical year. Even if the elimination of poverty did not happen in the ancient Near East, it does seem that during the Second Temple period (and around the time of Jesus) there were attempts to redistribute land and wealth among Jews following the commandments. Also, the introduction of the \textit{prozbul} should be evidence that there was a debate about the institution of debt release and \textit{shemittah}.\textsuperscript{48} Despite some evidence that \textit{shemittah} was practiced, poverty was widespread in Roman Imperial society (as discussed in Chapter Four.) Therefore, making new attempts to forgive debts and release slaves by Jesus and his contemporaries in more significant ways all the more necessary. This, therefore,


\textsuperscript{48} The introduction of the \textit{prozbul} would have meant both that debt would be perpetual, the elite could use debt to alienate peasants from their land, and that the pressure for loans must have been extreme to be willing to modify such important Jewish principles. Herzog writes: When the rabbis discovered that the rich refused to make loans to peasants in the year leading up to the sabbatical year, they introduced the \textit{prozbul}, an oath taken by the debtor vowing that he would repay the loan whenever the lender stipulated (sabbatical or no sabbatical). The effect of the provision was to annul the Torah provision for cancellation of debt, so that debt became perpetual. Just as Sabbath provided a physical respite from the endless toil of life, so the sabbatical provided debt relief from the endless cycle of poverty and misery. But it appears that both were undermined and eventually abrogated by the ruling class (Herzog, William, \textit{Prophet and Teacher}, 140).
should inform any understanding of Deut 15 (and potentially Jesus’s reference to it in Matt 26).

**Textual Analysis of Deuteronomy 15**

Exploring Deut 15:1-12 and its three provisions to alleviate the suffering of the poor, including remission when the poor cannot pay back their debts (15:1-6), generosity when they cannot obtain loans (15:7-11), and manumission when they face slavery or indentured servitude (15:12-18) is important to understand the mission and vision of Jesus, according to Matt 26.\(^49\) Walter Brueggemann asserts that this debt remission (particularly described in verses 15:1-2) is the most radical and astonishing call in the whole Bible. In the same passage, the people of God are promised blessing and prosperity and then asked to give it up to make sure that everyone has some level of economic security.\(^50\) Deuteronomy 15 reads,

> At the end of every seven years you must cancel debts. This is how it is to be done: Every creditor shall cancel any loan they have made to a fellow Israelite. They shall not require payment from anyone among their own people, because the LORD’s time for canceling debts has been proclaimed. You may require payment from a foreigner, but you must cancel any debt your fellow Israelite owes you. However, there need be no poor people among you, for in the land the LORD your God is giving you to possess as your inheritance, he will richly bless you, if only you fully obey the LORD your God and are careful to follow all these commands I am giving you today. For the LORD your God will bless you as he has promised, and you will lend to many nations but will borrow from none. You will rule over many nations but none will rule over you. If anyone is poor among your fellow Israelites in any of the towns of the land the LORD your God is giving you, do not be hardhearted or tightfisted toward them. Rather, be openhanded and freely lend them whatever they need. Be careful not to harbor this wicked thought: “The seventh year, the year for canceling debts, is near,” so that you do not show ill

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will toward the needy among your fellow Israelites and give them nothing. They may then appeal to the LORD against you, and you will be found guilty of sin. Give generously to them and do so without a grudging heart; then because of this the LORD your God will bless you in all your work and in everything you put your hand to. There will always be poor people in the land. Therefore I command you to be openhanded toward your fellow Israelites who are poor and needy in your land. (Deut 15:1-11)

Deuteronomy 15:1 starts off stating that the people of God must make a release or remittance (Hebrew) or forgiveness (Greek) on the seventh year. It proceeds to detail how to make this release (to God) by canceling every private debt of one's neighbor. It explains that one is permitted to collect loans from foreigners, but anyone within the community (and therefore considered a brother) must have loans forgiven. Deuteronomy 15:4 states there should be no one lacking or in need, because people receive a blessing through the land that God has given as an inheritance. People are to listen to God and follow the commandments God has given. If followed, the people of God will lend to nations, but not have to borrow; they will control other nations, but not be subjugated. In general, Deut 15:1-6 describes how the people of God should live and prosper. And importantly, these six verses suggest radical economic redistribution as central to worship and obedience to God.

Deuteronomy 15:7 continues by saying what to do if anyone is in need. The people are instructed to open their hands and lend to anyone who needs. Verse eight states that those who are able should lend whatever amount the person wants and lacks. Verse nine exhorts the people not to be tightfisted and not to hold anything back (in heart or deed) by thinking that, as the seventh year approaches anything they lend they might not be repaid. In fact, in the Greek Septuagint it is
called a sin (hamartia) against God if the brother seeking a loan must cry against the creditor to God because their need is unmet. Verse ten instructs the people to lend whatever the person wants; the promise is that the Lord will bless them for following these commandments and so they should not fear giving/lending. Deuteronomy 15:11 then states that the needy shall not fail from the land and therefore instructs the people to freely give/lend.

The structure of Deut 15:1-11 therefore emphasizes verse four as the focus of the law/legislation. The core message is the elimination of poverty and inequality and God's will that all have enough. This is the goal. Verse eleven demonstrates what happens in a society that makes such legislation and compassion, perhaps even good works, necessary and central to its functioning and logic. In general, Deut 15 emphasizes that there will be no one in need if the people follow the commandments of God; it explains how God commands the people to live (and to share); and it reminds the people that creation is God's and that humanity is supposed to take care of that creation including, especially, other human beings.

*Key Words in Deuteronomy* (Figure 2)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Masoretic Text (Hebrew)</th>
<th>English Translation</th>
<th>Septuagint (Greek)</th>
<th>English Translation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>shemittah</td>
<td>BDB: letting drop of exactions HALOT: year of remission</td>
<td><em>aphesis</em></td>
<td>BDAG: release, liberation, deliverance Louw-Nida: pardon</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rea</td>
<td>BDB: friend, companion, fellow HALOT: companion</td>
<td><em>plēsion</em></td>
<td>BDAG: marker of a person close to another person Louw-Nida: neighbor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>baal</td>
<td>BDB: owner, lord</td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>
Many of the words in Figure 2 are both pietistic and economic; they comprise commandment, blessing, God, brother, sin, inheritance, creditor, loan, needy, poor, possess, release/remission. The instructions include making a release of debts as a

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51 To further study the connection between economy, poverty and piety, we need to explore the three Hebrew words used to describe the poor in Deut 15: they are ebyon, mahsor, and ani. Ebyon, meaning “economically or legally distressed,” “destitute,” or “beggar,” occurs sixty-one times in the Hebrew Bible. Where the word ebyon occurs in the Pentateuch is in the legal materials of Exodus and Deuteronomy. In these texts the poor are depicted as landless wage laborers living on the edge of survival. Ani, meaning “economically oppressed,” occurs eighty times and is the most common use of the word “poor” in the Bible. It occurs twenty-five times in the prophets and is frequently paired with ebyon (as is true in our passage in Deut 15). It is in the Pentateuch seven times and the legal texts five times (Exodus 22, Deut 15, 24 and Leviticus) where it expresses the desire to care for the poor among God’s people and to give loans to the poor. Mahsor is used thirteen times in the Hebrew Bible mainly in Proverbs and therefore considered a wisdom term. It connotes the lazy poor; in Proverbs, this poverty is a result of laziness or careless living. It occurs once in the legal texts, in our passage in Deut 15:8 and is supposed to connote particularity of need.
way to honor and worship God. They assert that people having to cry out against their creditors is considered a sin against God (not just the mistreatment of another person). They explain that God commands people to give to their neighbors and to ensure that all needs are met. Also, an important concept is that God will bless those who give in verses 4, 6, 10, 14, 18. Piety and economics are melded in this passage. In fact, they are melded throughout the Bible, including Matt 26:6-13.

History of Interpretation of Deut 15:11

There are questions and issues over the relationship between Deut 15:4 and 15:11 throughout the history of interpretation that are of concern here. Some scholars claim that Deut 15:11 shows that those with wealth are asked to show compassion and follow the laws that are given. Some believe that Deut 15:4 is the ideal: that there be no poverty, but that 15:11 exists as instruction of what to do if poverty persists (especially given that Sabbath and Jubilee regulations may never have been put into practice). Others say that there should be no poverty within the

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52 Christensen, Deuteronomy 1:1-21:9, 300-314.
53 “It is most unfortunate that this law and its citation in the New Testament have been misinterpreted through the centuries as license for neglect of the poor. The sense of the passage in this view is that among an ideal people, obedient and blessed, there will be no poor, but should reality not attain the heights of the ideal, there is a specific attitude that one should have toward the poor (unbegrudging charity) and a certain act which one should do (freely give)” (Hamilton, “Haares in the Shemitta Law,” 222).
54 Patrick Miller writes about the relationship between verses 11 and 4: A word needs to be said about verse 11, a verse that appears on the lips of Jesus (Matt 6:11, Mark 14:7, John 12:8) and is sometimes taken as an excuse for ignoring the poor: that is, there is always going to be poverty. That, of course, is exactly opposite of what this text says. For one thing, verse 11a should be translated, ‘For the poor will never cease off the earth.’ As verse 4 has indicated, in a land enriched with God’s blessings and filled with those who obey the Lord’s instruction, there will be no poor. That word is to be taken seriously. Equally serious and realistic is the awareness that such conditions do not operate throughout the world. Deuteronomy shows the way it should be even as it acknowledges the human reality. The manual for life on the land that is Deuteronomy is precisely to prescribe a way of life in community that provides for all and gives security to the whole. If it is at all utopian, it is also the way things are meant to be in God’s intention (Miller, Deuteronomy, 137).
community of Jewish worshippers but that poverty may exist in other lands. This and many additional laws are meant to set up a contrast between Israel and other nations. One way to think about it is that the ideal is that no one will be in need and yet instructions on how to address the needy are included as well (for the process of getting to a time and place when all needs are met). Another interpretation asserts that poverty is a result of disobedience to God so that 15:11 is speaking to this continued disobedience. One can also interpret the tension between verses four and eleven to be not that poverty and poor people need always exist, but rather when a need arises (because of disaster, crisis, widowhood, famine), the people of God know how to address it. Deuteronomy 15 sets up a structure that addresses need and eliminates persistent and generational poverty. This contention and suggested resolution/interpretation of Deut 15:4 and 15:11 are similar to the debate on the meaning of Matt 26:11. It is therefore transposed to our re-interpretation of Matt 26 as well. Matthew 26:11 both refers to people's failure to follow God's law and commandments, i.e., the forgiveness of debts, the release of slaves, provisions for those in need without further benefiting only the wealthy as well as an instruction on how to establish a reign of prosperity and dignity for all—following the instructions of Jesus, the pedagogue, the prophet, and the popular king.

Intertextuality: Deut 15 and Matt 26

Matthew 26:11 reads, “for always the poor you have with you” and Deut 15:11 reads, “for the needy will not fail off the land.” While in translation they seem nearly the same, the words used differ. Instead of the Greek word for poor, *ptochous*, used in Matt 26:56, the Septuagint of Deut 15 uses *endeeis*, meaning “the poor,” “the needy ones,” which is also in Deut 15:4,7; 24:1657 The lexical definition of *ptochous* emphasizes being materially poor while *endeeis* simply claims to be needy or wanting. This, however, may not be significant. Both *ptochous* and *endeeis* are used as Greek equivalents to the Hebrew *ebyon* or *ani* (discussed in footnote 51 above) found in Deut 15 in the Masoretic Text in Hebrew. Concerning the duration of time, Matthew uses “always” while Deuteronomy states they “will not fail.”

Exploring the words and structure of Deut 15:4 in connection with Matt 26:11 (and Deut 15:11) demonstrates an emphasis on blessing that suggests that the land is God’s, not humanity’s, so people should follow God’s commandments to care and (re)distribute it. The root for blessing (*eulogon*) occurs twice in this passage, reminding the people of God that they are blessed by God to receive the land as an inheritance. As is noted above, the word for poor/needy used in Deut 15:4 is *endeeis*. Verse four has a simple structure similar to Matt 26:11. Deuteronomy 15:4 reads, “for there shall not be anyone needy among you” just as Matt 26:11 reads, “for the poor you have with you always.”

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56 See also Exod 23:11, Lev 19:10, 15; 23:22; Deut 24:21; Ruth 3:10; 1 Sam 2:8; 2 Sam 22:28; 2 Kgs 24:14; 25:12; Esth 1:30; 9:22; Job 22:8; 29:12; 34:28; 36:6 and many more.
**Conclusion**

Rather than just reminding his followers that they are called to give to the poor, the larger frame of “Sabbath” and “Jubilee” in Deuteronomy suggests that God’s law has provisions for ending poverty—the regular redistribution of land, debt, and slaves each generation. In Matthew, Jesus embodies both the popularly “anointed” king who continues the Mosaic Covenant through the Deuteronomic Code and God’s prophet who is raised to bring justice and God’s law to earth and critiques those who oppress the poor. Jesus both emphasizes the strong liberation provisions of the Deuteronomic Code at the same time as challenging the more reformistic and authoritative aspects of it. There is a connection between lending to the poor, releasing slaves, and redistributing land in Deuteronomy—*shemittah*—with Jesus’s anti-poverty messages as laid out in the Sermon on the Mount, the parables, and the Passion narrative. As we will see in Chapter Eight, the intertextual Deuteronomic reference in Matt 26 establishes a clear connection between debt remission and slave release and Jesus: Jesus is the fulfillment of an anointed one’s promise to build a movement to realize God’s kingdom and protect the poor.
Chapter Eight: The Passion of the Poor Christ

Introduction

As we have explored so far, Matt 26:11 and the whole story of the anointing at Bethany, is central for any teachings on the poor in the Bible. In this passage, an unnamed prophetess anoints Jesus to be ruler of God’s Kingdom. His charge is to care for all, especially the poor. The passage is a critique of empire, charity, and inequality; rather than stating that poverty is unavoidable and predetermined by God, this interpretation of Matt 26:11 proposes the exact opposite. Poverty is created by human beings—by their disobedience to God and neglect of their neighbor. Jesus shows another way—and that ending poverty is possible—through the practice of covenant economics, as seen in Deut 15, and the acceptance of the poor Jesus—anointed as a popularly acclaimed king or prophet in the line of Moses, a teacher of the law and social movement leader. In God’s Kingdom, there shall be no poor because poverty (or wealth, for that matter) will not exist. This is what Jesus is saying when he proclaims, “the poor you will have with you always but you will not always have me.” Let us look further at this verse and what follows Jesus’s statement about the poor in Matt 26.

The Persistence of Poverty

11 You always have the poor with you, but you will not always have me.

As we have explored in the previous chapters, especially Chapter Two, this verse has been used to justify poverty as a permanent feature of society. In fact, through their interpretation of this very verse, many scholars pit Jesus and the poor
against each other, deny the agency of the poor in ending poverty, and insist that even if a world without poverty is an ideal, it will never happen on earth.¹

Interpreters throughout history have used this line to contrast Judas with the other disciples and their relationship to money and luxury, saying that Judas was the greedy one but the others cared about the poor. Some insist that Jesus desired luxury in this case because he was so close to his death, even though he valued simplicity in other situations. Scholars assert that poverty was not a main concern of Jesus, but that other things mattered more to him like religious observance, separating these practices from the economic structure surrounding them.² Still others deny that Matt 26:11 is focused on the topic of poverty.³

¹ As I explored in Chapter Two, feminist scholars have paid significant attention to the message about poverty of this pericope but not always in liberative ways. Elizabeth Ford draws a connection between Matthew 25 and Matthew 26 and connects both passages with Jesus identifying with the poor (Elizabeth Ford, "Matthew 26:6-13," *Interpretation* 59.4 [2005]: 400-402). Gail O’Day has a similar interpretation of the same story in John’s gospel and insists that Jesus’s reaction to the disciples is about connecting the extravagance of the woman in caring for him with a duty to care for the poor (Gail O’Day "John" in *Women’s Bible Commentary* [eds. Carol A. Newsom and Sharon H. Ringe; Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox, 1998], 387-388). Amy-Jill Levine interprets this passage as contrary to the centrality of the poor. She emphasizes both the importance of people with wealth and the role they play in the gospel and she contrasts Jesus’s heavenly mission and more material/earthly matters like helping the poor. She also interprets this passage as saying that those who have a responsibility and ability to address poverty only as the wealthy (Levine, “Matthew” in *Women’s Bible Commentary*, [eds. Carol A. Newsom and Sharon H. Ringe; Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox, 1998], 348-349). Socio-historical biblical scholars, Malina and Rohrbaugh assert that this statement speaks of a “limited good” society where everything that can exist does exist and is already fully distributed, thereby concluding that poverty in Roman society is inevitable (Bruce Malina and Richard Rohrbaugh, *Social-Science Commentary on the Gospel of John* [Minneapolis, Minn.: Fortress Press, 1998], 206).

² “An overall accepted interpretation since Augustine and Jerome has been that Judas spoke for all of the disciples. The question remains however whether the motivations of Judas and the other disciples were the same or was Judas was greedy and stealing from the poor, while the other disciples were concerned about the poor. Another question posed about this interaction between the disciples and Jesus is about the validity of both Jesus and the disciples’ comments. John Chrysostom suggested that the disciples’ criticism was after-the-fact and therefore too late; it did not take into account the sensitivity of the giver. Theophylactus asserted that Christ was less concerned with the poor than with other matters and so luxury items were to be used in his case. A similar conversation took place during the Reformation as well. John Calvin emphasized that although Jesus appreciated the gesture by the woman in this very particular case immediately preceding his death, that in other cases Jesus valued more simplicity and generosity to the poor. Some of the Catholic authorities at this time responded to the critique by the Protestant Reformers of lavish worship with the fact that Jesus
But when Jesus says "the poor are with you always" not only does he remind his followers of the Deuteronomic Code and God's admonition to forgive debts, release slaves, and be generous with one's possessions, he reminds his followers that he is soon to be executed for his vision and practice of these very commandments, as demonstrated through Jesus's feedings, healings, teachings on what to do about wealth and taxes, and disruption of the Temple. In fact, William Herzog asserts that it is for his vision and action as a potential anointed king and prophet instituting the Deuteronomic Code that Jesus is understood as a threat to Rome and to some of the ruling elites who wish to protect their interests. Herzog writes:

"It is the final charge, his claim to be an anointed figure, that weighed most heavily against him . . . It is historically more likely that Jesus is being accused of assuming the role of popular kingship . . . A popular king was acclaimed by the people, not appointed by regnant political authorities like Caesar when he legitimated the house of Herod." 4

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3 C. H. Dodd, in his commentary on John's Gospel, asserts that biblical scholars engaged in source and redaction criticism of John 12, "seem to establish a certain probability that the aphorism about the poor is not part of the original text of John" (C. H. Dodd, Historical Tradition in the Fourth Gospel [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1963], 166). Bultmann agrees that the statement about the poor is not original and believes that the poor are not the foci of this story (Rudolph Bultmann, The Gospel of John: A Commentary [Oxford: Basil Blackwell Publishers, 1971], 414-415).

The Jesus Seminar proposes that, although contained in all of the gospels, the historical Jesus does not say "the poor will always be with you," using their criteria to determine the historicity of particular passages: "Matthew has simply copied Mark, so his version provides no additional information . . . the saying is perhaps based on Deut 15:11: 'The needy will never disappear from the country.' In any case, the saying seems to clash with the sage who said, 'Congratulations, you poor!' (Luke 6:20). The Fellows of the Jesus Seminar were of the opinion that the original form of the story is beyond recovery. As a consequence, they also doubted that any of the words preserved by the evangelists could be attributed to Jesus" (Robert W. Funk, Roy W. Hoover, and the Jesus Seminar, The Five Gospels: The Search for the Authentic Words of Jesus: New Translation and Commentary [San Francisco: HarperOne, 1996], 115-116).

Matthew 26:11, in addition to pointing out the important agency and leadership of Jesus in a popular movement to end poverty, portrays Jesus as passing many of the responsibilities of building that movement on to his disciples—other movement leaders—right before he is killed. In this reading of the Passion narrative, Jesus is a threat to Rome because of what he stood for and also his role in developing leaders committed to his same vision. As discussed earlier (in Chapters One, Three, Four, and Five), Jesus is himself poor; his disciples are also poor. His statement is not about pitting the poor against Jesus or even about pitting the poor Jesus against other poor. Instead, Jesus is trying to suggest his significant role and the role of the disciples in the ending of everyone’s poverty. He is reminding his disciples that with his impending death, they are charged with carrying on his legacy. This argument is backed up through the grammatical structure of his critique. There is no future prediction in his statement. The verbs used are not in the future tense. The disciples have (echete meaning “you have” in the present tense) the poor around—this is among whom the Jesus-movement is based—but time is running out for Jesus (ou pantōtē echētē meaning “you do not always have”). Therefore his disciples need to understand what needs to be done to end poverty and follow Jesus’s realization of the release of slaves, forgiveness of debts, and generosity in the face of economic hardship from Deut 15. They too must become popular movement leaders.

The Gospel of Mark includes more details of the anointing and entire scene than Matthew. This includes Mark making the point that because the poor will be surrounding the disciples for some time, they have many opportunities to care for
them. Matthew instead sets up the contrast, you always have the poor; you do not always have me. Therefore the emphasis of Matthew's version is to juxtapose having the poor and not having Jesus.\textsuperscript{5} Later in Matthew, in the Great Commission (28:16-20), Jesus tells the disciples that he will be with them to the ends of the age. When he contrasts the poor being with them, but the disciples not having him, in Matt 26:11, with his eternal presence with his followers at the Great Commission, it seems Jesus is contradicting himself. But in Matt 26:11, Jesus could be saying that the disciples will not have him in the way they want him to be: as their leader and anointed ruler. He is passing on his responsibilities as teacher, leader, and anointed king/messiah of the poor. He is demanding that his disciples step up.

At the same time he might also be reminding the disciples that the poor are a stand in for him (as he established in Matt 25:31-46, the Last Judgment); God's children and the foundation of a movement to materialize God's reign on earth, corresponding to the new logic of God's Kingdom in their community practices, are not the euergetai or the rich, not the usual philanthropists or change makers, but the poor. God is not only aligned with the poor, but, in fact, present in (and of) the poor. The movement-building disciples must understand this role of the poor and of themselves as the poor. They must both accept Jesus's untimely death, and also that as they are sent out to build this movement and recruit for this Kingdom of God, Jesus's memory and legacy will carry on. In the poor who are organizing to bring God's reign to earth, Jesus is forever present.

\textsuperscript{5} This anticipates that last phrase in Matthew: 'you always have me.' The anointing at Bethany therefore actually frames the whole crucifixion and resurrection story that culminates in the Mission to the world in that same section of Chapter 28 in Matthew; see Donald Hagner, \textit{Matthew 14-28} (Word Biblical Commentary 33B; Dallas, Tex.: Word Books, 1995), 756-757.
When she poured this perfume on my body, she did it to prepare me for burial.

After critiquing the Roman Imperial *euergetai*, but praising the good works of the unnamed woman, after connecting the existence of poverty to people’s disobedience of the Deuteronomic Code or, in this situation, Jesus is using an early critique of empire in his first century Roman imperial context, and after reminding his disciples that creating a world without poverty is their responsibility because “you will not always have me,” Jesus describes the purpose of the woman’s actions: “she has prepared my body for burial.” With this statement, Jesus announces his impending death. He also calls attention to how the unnamed woman is caring for his humble body while he is still alive.

It is important to say a few words about death, burial, and burial associations in the ancient world here. This woman has prepared Jesus’s body for burial. This both signals his death and indicates that preparing his body for burial was important for him. Burial was sacred (especially to Jews) at this time. In fact, part of what was so devastating about crucifixion was that usually the body was not recovered and buried. Instead, crucified bodies hung out for days and weeks and were left for wild animals to prey on as an example to others.6

Explanation of crucifixion helps to strengthen any argument about caring for the body of the crucified. Crucifixion was reserved for revolutionaries,

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6 Philosophers and writers from antiquity as well as others discuss the horror of crucifixion including, Seneca, *Dial.* 6.20.3, (Basore, LCL); see Michael Licona, *The Resurrection of Jesus: A New Historiographical Approach* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2010), 304; and Colleen Conway, *Behold the Man: Jesus and Greco-Roman Masculinity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 67.
insurrectionists, slaves, and provincials of the Roman Empire. Martin Hengel writes:

> For the men of the ancient world, Greeks, Romans, barbarians and Jews, the cross was not just a matter of indifference, just any kind of death. It was an utterly offensive affair, ‘obscene’ in the original sense of the word.

Therefore, the fact that the unnamed woman prepares Jesus's body for burial (as well as anoints him as Christ/messiah) in Matt 26 suggests that the individual act of care is also something collectively bigger. It may be an act of civil disobedience, much like Jesus's tax evasion and actions in the Temple; she anticipates the fact that Jesus's body may not be buried and comes up with an alternative. She associates herself with a revolutionary and prepares his body like that of a king. She anoints him for burial before he is dead in an effort to take the power to deny anointing at his burial away from the imperial elite.

Preparing for burial is also a responsibility that Christian and other associations bore on behalf of the poor of the Roman Empire. Throughout the Empire there existed all kinds of associations (ekklesia, koinon, synagōgē). These associations were organized around different cultic figures (like Isis or other Roman gods and goddesses), labor associations, and other aspects of life. A major role

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8 Hengel, *Crucifixion*, 22.

9 Aristotle discusses the relationship of associations to each other and to the state: All associations are parts as it were of the association of the State. Travellers for instance associate together for some advantage, namely to procure some of their necessary supplies. But the political association too, it is believed, was originally formed, and continues to be maintained, for the advantage of its members . . . Thus the other associations aim at some particular advantage; for example sailors combine to seek the profits of seafaring in the way of trade or the like, comrades in arms the gains of warfare, their aim being either plunder, or victory over the enemy or the capture of a city; and similarly the members of a tribe or parish . . . combine to perform sacrifices and hold festivals in connection with them, thereby both paying honor to the gods and providing pleasant holidays for themselves. For it may be
these associations played was to ensure the burial and memorializing of their members when they died, almost taking on the role of mutual aid societies or insurance policies for the poor."10 When someone in poverty or close to poverty died, members of their association would ensure that they would be buried, honored, and remembered by a toast in a regular association meal. This was made even more controversial in early Christian meals where Jesus was remembered. Hal Taussig asserts:

The . . . libational tradition11 concerning Jesus’ death and its implication for resistance to Rome is the (possibly pre-Pauline and Pauline) injunction to do the libation as a remembering of Jesus . . . this command stood as part of a larger associational obligation throughout the Hellenistic world to have a meal in honor/remembrance of all association members who died. That this mutual associational obligation came into being in large part because of the vulnerable and impoverished finances of association members certainly was related to Roman economic exploitation of its conquered peoples . . . In

noticed that the sacrifices and festivals of ancient origin take place after harvest, being in fact harvest-festivals; this is because that was the season of the year at which people had most leisure. All these associations then appear to be parts of the association of the State; and the limited friendships which we reviewed will correspond to the limited associations from which they spring (Aristotle, Eth. Nic 1160a [Rackham, LCL]).

10 Dio Chrysostom discusses who attends symposium and athletic contests and says that it is people who are struggling and looking for answers and direction. He emphasizes that the wealthy and stable do not look to associations and philosophers for solutions to their life problems. It therefore follows that the poor and vulnerable were the people who associated with such gatherings and groupings. Dio Chrysostom asserts:

To give an illustration: the prosperous man—I use the term in the sense in which the majority use it—for instance, a man who derives a large income from his loans, or has a good deal of land, and not only enjoys good health, but has children and a wife living, or a man who has some position of authority and a high office without war, or rebellion, or any open dangers—such a person you would not easily find approaching these philosophers, or caring to listen to the teachings of philosophy. But if some disaster should overtake any one touching his livelihood, and he should become either poor after having been wealthy, or weak and powerless after having been influential, or should meet with some other misfortune, then he becomes much more friendly disposed toward that craft, somehow manages to endure the words of the philosophers, and practically admits he needs comfort (Dio Chrysostom, Or. 27:8: [Cohoon, LCL]).

11 A libation is a ritual pouring of a liquid in offering to a god or spirit in honor of someone who has died. In this case, the libation tradition of Jesus surrounds the story of the Last Supper and the communion ritual practiced. Taussig asserts that although the practice of remembering and honoring Jesus through wine and a meal followed a similar pattern as other ancient Near East meals, the fact that instead of a toast to Caesar or one of the Greek or Roman gods, Jesus and the God of Israel were lifted up would have been particularly controversial to Rome.
addition, inasmuch as this libational injunction was a companion of the wine = Jesus’ blood words . . . the injunction to have a libation in Jesus’ memory made the words much more charged. The meaning of this libational combination would have been very strong in its anti-Roman character, both evoking the death of Jesus as a new sociopolitical bonding at the meal and promoting it as an ongoing practice. 

Furthermore, Jesus’s communion formula in Luke 22:18-20 and Paul’s in 1 Cor 11:24-25 follows the words said to memorialize the dead in these early Christian associations. Luke 22:19 and 1 Cor 11:24-25 use the Greek word, anamnēsin for “memory.” He does not say these same memorial words in the anointing scene in 26:13. When Jesus states that what the unnamed woman has done will be told in memory of her, he uses the Greek word mnēmosynon, meaning “memory” or “memorial offering.” The other use of mnēmosynon (from Matt 26:13 and Mark 14:9) is in Acts 10:4 where an angel of God tells Cornelius that his alms and generosity to the poor has ascended as a memorial offering to God. Therefore the importance in memorializing the poor is emphasized in the anointing scene. The scene may also appeal to Exod 12 and the manna scene of the Exodus. In fact the language of memory (including in the Passover celebrations) predates the Roman Empire. In Jesus and disciples’ setting, the Exodus and Egypt would be in the context with a focus on liberation.

Nevertheless, in the communion formula from 1 Cor 11 and Luke 22 as well as the commemorating that Jesus does of the unnamed woman in Matt 26:13, Jesus is popularizing and politicizing the words said at the dinners/memorials of the

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12 Hal Taussig, In the Beginning Was the Meal: Social Experimentation and Early Christian Identity (Minneapolis, Minn.: Fortress Press, 2009), 133-134.
13 For more information on associations and the poor in the ancient world see Taussig, In the Beginning Was the Meal, 87-144.
burial associations by placing his own death and burial alongside the death and burial of thousands of other poor subjects of the Roman Empire. In Matthew, he places the good work of the unnamed woman as the instruction on how to honor and remember him and other followers. Indeed, this burial ritual is another aspect of the different economic practices of Jesus and God’s Kingdom.

_In Memory of Her_

13 Truly I tell you, wherever this gospel is preached throughout the world, what she has done will also be told, in memory of her.

Jesus continues with more praise for what this woman has done for him. He says that wherever good news/the gospel is preached, what she has done will also be remembered. The unnamed woman appears in verse seven and then Jesus reminds the audience of her in verse thirteen; she is the opening and closing of this story. In fact, she is praised unconditionally by Jesus and potentially contrasted with the disciples, the priests and especially Judas, but in the history of

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14 “A variation of the funerary meal was the memorial meal, a form that is not widely attested but that this tradition certainly assumes. This seems to be the significance of the phrase ‘Do this in remembrance of me.’ . . . What is to be remembered is left somewhat vague. That is to say, presumably anyone’s version of ‘the Christ story’ could be substituted here. This is important to note since we too easily assume that the canonical gospel story was the universal story of Jesus” (Dennis Smith, _From Symposium to Eucharist: the Banquet in the Early Christian World_ [Minneapolis, Minn.: Fortress Press, 2003], 189).

15 Susan Miller asserts that the unnamed woman is a prophetess in this scene: “The anointing of Jesus’ head is thus a prophetic sign that points to his Kingship. The woman enters the room and chooses Jesus as the one to be anointed, but we are not told whether she is aware that Jesus is the Messiah. Her speech is not recorded, and Jesus is the one who interprets her action. The woman anoints Jesus’ head, whereas Jesus speaks of his body, which is prepared for his burial (14.8). Jesus refers to his body since it was customary to anoint bodies before burial (2 Chron. 6:14; Josephus, _Ant_ 17.199; m. Sabbath 23.5). He associates her action with his death because his Kingship will be revealed through his death” (Miller, “The Woman Who Anoints Jesus (Mark 14:3-9),” _Feminist Theology_ 14.2 (2006): 224).


17 “The woman’s insight about Jesus and her love for him stand in sharp contrast to the attitudes of the chief priests and elders in the preceding episode and to the attitude of Judas in what
interpretation of this text, she is unnamed and forgotten. Elisabeth Schüessler Fiorenza asserts that of the three most important followers of Jesus in the Passion Narrative, we are only given the names of Judas, his betrayer, and Peter, who denies him, but not this woman who serves as a model disciple and even prophetess. In light of the preceding reflections I would like to suggest that the reason we forget her (or at least her name) are in observance of Jesus’s teaching on good works: she is not to be lifted up for caring for the poor Jesus, her actions are how all of us are supposed to act. Perhaps the not-naming of the woman is a direct critique of euergetism. If her name had been given in association with her gift, her actions would have been closer to the way euergetism works, particularly in its recording and especially if she was wealthy. Perhaps she was not forgotten or overlooked because of misogyny, but intentionally unnamed, maybe even by her own choice. It is possible, in fact, that being unnamed is part of what makes her the model disciple/prophetess. This is yet another example of the critique of euergetism in the pericope in particular.

Jesus associates the unnamed woman with good news/gospel. The specific word euangelion is used only four times in Matthew: two of them specify “Gospel of the Kingdom,” another one aligns this “Gospel of the Kingdom” with Jesus’s worldwide mission. When euangelion is used, it is in combination with keeping God’s law, doing justice, and caring for the poor. In fact, Matt 4:23 and 9:35 detail follows” (Daniel Harrington, The Gospel of Matthew (Sacra Pagina 1, Collegeville, Minn.: The Liturgical Press, 2007), 364).


19 The three other uses of euangelion (“gospel”) are Matthew 4:23, Matthew 9:35, and Matthew 24:14: "Jesus went throughout Galilee, teaching in their synagogues, proclaiming the good
that Jesus proclaiming the good news of the Kingdom is connected to “healing
disease and sickness.” This coupling of proclamation and healing demonstrate the
material nature of the good news. Matthew’s use of euangelion in 26:13, therefore, is
in line with Matthew’s definition of “good works” and Deuteronomy’s concept of
“Jubilee/Sabbath.”

Also significant to understanding the “good news” of the anointing scene is
the context of Matt 24:14 and the “good news” of God’s worldwide mission. Matthew
24:14 follows the incident in the Jerusalem Temple where Jesus drives out the
money-changers in Matt 21:12-16, returns to Bethany to rest for the night (21:17),
and then comes back to teach in the Temple (21:23-23:39). In this set of teachings,
the Temple elites want to move on him but do not because the people recognize
Jesus as a prophet (21:46); the people are amazed by his questions and answers
(22:22) and eventually no longer dare pose questions to him (22:26). After Jesus has
left the Temple again and gone to the Mount of Olives (24:1-13), his disciples
approach him privately about a sign about his coming and the end of the age. It is in
this setting that Jesus replies, "And this gospel of the Kingdom will be preached in
the whole world as a testimony to all nations, and then the end will come" (24:14).

The combination of world mission and gospel in 24:14 therefore links to
28:16-20, mentioned earlier in this chapter. Matthew 28:19-20 reads, "And Jesus
came and said to them, 'All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me.
Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age." Matthew 24:14 is a stepping stone proclaiming gospel and materializing God’s Kingdom on earth. Matthew 26:13 is another step along the way; Jesus proclaims that what the unnamed woman has done is also “good news.” This time this “good news” of healing the sick and “release” for the poor is in memory of the unnamed woman. These stories harken back to the temptation scene in Matt 4 where material wealth and power are demonstrated to be the purview of the empire elites and not God and the poor. Even if we are not to remember the unnamed woman’s name, as discussed above, it is clear from Jesus’s statement that his followers are to emulate this woman’s actions: this is how she and others will be memorialized and this is how God’s mission to the world will be realized.

As we have seen, in Matt 28:16-20, Jesus shifts his mission/movement “throughout the world” to his disciples. The disciples are to take up Jesus’s mission to proclaim the good news and heal every disease. The disciples are charged with bringing God’s Kingdom to earth. But they fall short. They try to emulate Jesus and obey God’s law, but they have not internalized God’s justice. Perhaps because the unnamed woman’s actions fall outside of euergetism and honor/shame systems, the disciples do not follow Jesus’s explicit instructions and instead just try to reify poverty and oppression. They claim to follow Jesus, but right in the moment when Jesus is anointed as messiah—responsible for improving the lives of all and actually potentially in a position to end poverty—they are too narrowly focused on just the
poor people in their midst and on ameliorating poverty rather than ending it. They fall back on the hegemonic stance of the empire and they propose a “solution” to poverty that will just make it worse. They suggest selling and participating in the dominant oppressive economic system and assisting the poor through imperial euergetism. In sum, they do not stand up and commit themselves to ending poverty in the way that Jesus has and calls his followers to do.

**Judas and Money for the Poor**

Then one of the Twelve—the one called Judas Iscariot—went to the chief priests and asked, “What are you willing to give me if I deliver him over to you?” So they counted out for him thirty pieces of silver. From then on Judas watched for an opportunity to hand him over.

Directly following this passage in Matthew about the poor, Judas goes to the chief priests and offers to betray Jesus for thirty pieces of silver. This is probably less money than the ointment cost, but a significant exchange of resources nonetheless.\(^\text{20}\) In John's version of the story, it explicitly says that Judas raises the challenge to Jesus not because he was concerned about the poor but because he was the treasurer and used to take from the donations to the poor from the common purse.\(^\text{21}\) Subsequently in John, Judas is accused of using the poor as an excuse to raise money (and never passing those donations he collects onto the poor, thereby

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\(^\text{20}\) The value of both the thirty pieces of silver and the *myron* are in question, especially in the Gospel of Matthew. If we are to follow John’s assertion that the *myron* was worth 300 *denarii*, we must ask what the relationship between thirty pieces of silver and 300 *denarii* might be. R. F. Stoops suggests that denarius was a silver coin so it is possible that the money that Judas receives from the Temple elites for handing over Jesus is one-tenth of the value of the ointment. However, there were other silver coins in the ancient near east including those with the denominations shekel, half-shekel, and quarter-shekel. See R. F Stoops, “Jewish Coinage” in *Dictionary of New Testament Background* (ed. Daniel Reid; Downers Grove, Ill.: Intervarsity Press, 2000), 224.

\(^\text{21}\) “He said this not because he cared about the poor, but because he was a thief; he kept the common purse and used to steal what was put into it” (John 12:6).
stealing from the “least of these” as the poor are named in Matt 25:40). Even in our Matthean version, Judas’s relationship to the poor and money is significant. Judas and the other disciples are not able to get the money they wanted from selling the woman’s ointment and immediately Judas turns to the chief priests and sells Jesus out. Judas gets his money (for himself or the poor) and this results in the crucifixion of Jesus, another poor person. As was stated at the beginning of this chapter, perhaps Jesus’s anointing as Christ/king/prophet is threatening or confusing to Judas (as well as the Jewish and Roman authorities). Perhaps the unnamed woman’s disregard to the established practices and paradigms of buying and selling, euergetism, and benefaction that keep up the status quo of the empire is unsettling to Judas and the other disciples (and the Jewish and Roman authorities again). Perhaps Judas thinks he is the one focused on poverty amelioration through getting money (by whatever means) to give to the poor. Or perhaps Judas just does

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22 “But one of his disciples, Judas Iscariot, who was later to betray him, objected, “Why wasn’t this perfume sold and the money given to the poor? It was worth a year’s wages.” He did not say this because he cared about the poor but because he was a thief; as keeper of the money bag, he used to help himself to what was put into it” (John 12:4-6).

23 It is significant that in Mark’s version of Judas’s betrayal in Mark 14:10-11, Judas does not ask for money but the chief priests offer it. In Matthew, however, Judas asks what they will pay him for turning over Jesus. This has been interpreted as Judas’s greed by many. In any case, it surely emphasizes the money in Matthew; see Jesse Robertson, The Death of Judas: the Characterization of Judas Iscariot in Three Early Christian Accounts of his Death (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2012), 56.

24 It is important to explore the character of Judas in this gospel. Unlike in the Gospel of John where Judas’s bad intentions are made clear, it is possible in Matthew that Judas is not just being self-serving and that Judas really does want to help the poor (or at least disagrees with the unnamed woman and Jesus who seem to be forgetting the poor). He is surprised it seems when Jesus is condemned to death—this is what prompts his own suicide, so it does not seem necessarily that Judas wants Jesus dead. Something does happen in the anointing scene, however, that prompts him to turn Jesus in to the authorities. I want to assert it is because of the “waste/destruction” of money/myron; cf. the debate in Chapter Six above. William Klassen attempts to reconstruct the actions and intentions of Judas in his book, Judas: Betrayer or Friend of Jesus? (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996) suggesting that Judas is a more sympathetic character than he has been portrayed throughout history. Raymond Brown offers a critique of Klassen’s book, however, in a book review in the Journal of Biblical Literature 117.1 (Spring 1998).
not believe that ending poverty, as discussed in Deut 15 and affirmed by Jesus, is really possible.

If we follow Judas and the money issue further in Matthew, the situation becomes even more problematic. In Matt 27:3-8, Judas feels bad about his betrayal of Jesus when he sees that Jesus has been condemned by the political and religious elite. He returns the blood money to the chief priests and asks them to make it right. Robertson comments, “Judas’s course of action proves to be a truly fatal mistake, as the priests to whom he confesses also share in his sin and offer him neither aid nor hope.” The chief priests do not want the money to contaminate the Temple by putting it into the Treasury, so they give it away immediately. Their reaction shows the complicity of the religious authorities and system in the economics of the day. The chief priests do not have a way to absolve Judas of his sins (although the Temple is supposed to be set up for this). Because they will not free Jesus and save both Jesus’s and Judas’s lives, they cannot resolve Judas’s problem/debt/sin. He kills himself and the chief priests establish a “potter’s field”

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25 Jesse Robertson asserts that “betrayal” is the accurate word to describe the actions of Judas. “Betray” (paradidomi) defined in the BDAG and then the Oxford English Dictionary means to hand/give over, place in the hand of an enemy, etc. Robertson asserts that there are two-hundred fifty uses of paradidomi (betray) in the LXX, frequently referring to handing someone to an enemy; see Robertson, The Death of Judas, 54.

26 “Early in the morning, all the chief priests and the elders of the people made their plans how to have Jesus executed. So they bound him, led him away and handed him over to Pilate the governor. When Judas, who had betrayed him, saw that Jesus was condemned, he was seized with remorse and returned the thirty pieces of silver to the chief priests and the elders. ‘I have sinned,’ he said, ‘for I have betrayed innocent blood.’ ‘What is that to us?’ they replied. ‘That’s your responsibility.’ So Judas threw the money into the Temple and left. Then he went away and hanged himself. The chief priests picked up the coins and said, ‘It is against the law to put this into the treasury, since it is blood money.’ So they decided to use the money to buy the potter’s field as a burial place for foreigners. That is why it has been called the Field of Blood to this day. Then what was spoken by Jeremiah the prophet was fulfilled: ‘They took the thirty pieces of silver, the price set on him by the people of Israel, and they used them to buy the potter’s field, as the Lord commanded me’” (Matt 27:1-10).

27 Robertson, The Death of Judas, 74.
(27:7) for poor people and foreigners with money. 28 One might wonder whether their effort to prevent pollution of the Temple by the “blood money” is seen as misguided by Matthew because the Temple is already contaminated, as money is part of a system that exploits, excludes, deprives, and kills. 29 In the establishment of the potter’s field with the money from Judas, we have an example of money actually being given to the poor, as Judas and the disciples had originally suggested to Jesus with regard to the woman’s ointment. Yet the result is not liberative and does not resolve poverty, but instead establishes a horrible burial plot where the poor are buried in mass graves. 30

The fact that the story about Jesus’s anointment continues with Judas and the money he was trying to get on behalf of the poor is, therefore, very significant. It shows the reader what happens when charity and euergetism are the only anti-poverty solutions on offer. The vertical and hierarchical order of Rome, and even the Jerusalem Temple, result in more impoverishment and misery even when donations are made for the poor. 31 It shows that economic exchanges and debts are some of

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28 “In Matthew, Judas commits suicide by hanging himself. The only other biblical reference to someone hanging themselves is Ahithophel in 2 Samuel 17:23, a close counselor of King David’s who becomes a traitor and offers support to Absalom. Matthew’s audience most likely would have been familiar with this reference and would therefore make yet another connection between Jesus and King David” (Robertson, The Death of Judas, 69-71).

29 There is a strong critique of the Temple, the high priests, and their houses that is occurring during Jesus’s day and when the gospels were composed. One quote that shows this critique comes from b. Pesah. 57a; m. Menah. 13:21:

Woe is me because of the house of Boethus, woe is me because of their staves. Woe is me because of the house of [Annas], Woe is me because of their whisperings. Woe is me because of the house of Kathros, woe is me because of their pens. Woe is me because of the house of Ishmael ben Phiabi, Woe is me because of their fists. For they are high priests, and their sons are treasurers, and their sons-in-law are Temple overseers, and their servants beat the people with clubs (Herzog, Prophet and Teacher, 48.)

30 We will explore contemporary applications and implications of potter’s fields in the Epilogue.

31 Herzog, Prophet and Teacher, 48.
the very "sins" for which religion is supposed to atone but because of the complicity with power and wealth, the Temple serves to impoverish more rather than liberate. That is what was at stake for Jesus and why he insisted that another way of addressing poverty was—and must be—possible. He stepped in as a messiah of the poor, a popular king and prophet in the tradition of the Hebrew Scriptures, who was anointed to bring good news to the poor and release to the captives. He was to usher in the vision and law of Sabbath and Jubilee. And yet, Judas and the disciples chose money and simply ameliorating some poverty, when what was on offer was something much greater: a world where everything is abundant and all are loved and protected by God.

The “trail of money” in Mathew’s passion narrative continues even after this episode with Judas and potter’s field. In Matt 27:64-66, the Roman authorities post guards directly following the crucifixion scene and Joseph of Arimathea’s claiming of Jesus’s body for burial in his tomb. The charge of these guards is to watch the tomb because the Roman authorities fear—much like how they feared the mob following of Jesus at the beginning of Matt 26—the ramifications of Jesus’s predicted resurrection.32 In alliance with the local elites, Rome has just crucified this revolutionary, who was an anointed king and messiah, aiming to instill fear in his burgeoning following and to squash his vision of the Kingdom of God and a world without poverty. Now they worry the story will not end with his execution if his

32 “The chief priests and the Pharisees gathered before Pilate and said, ‘...So give the order for the tomb to be made secure until the third day. Otherwise, his disciples may come and steal the body and tell the people that he has been raised from the dead. This last deception will be worse than the first.’ ‘Take a guard,’ Pilate answered. ‘Go, make the tomb as secure as you know how.’ So they went and made the tomb secure by putting a seal on the stone and posting the guard” (Matt 27:64-66).
followers really assert that he is raised from the dead after three days. Pilate, the Roman governor, in fact, sends a guard to Jesus’s tomb to secure it. Then, in Matt 28:11-15, when the tomb breaks, the guards go to the chief priests and tell them what has happened. These guards are paid a large sum of money by the chief priests—recalling the money the disciples could have gotten by selling the myron and even like the payment that Judas got for betraying Jesus—to spread a false story that Jesus was not immortalized and resurrected but that Jesus’s followers stole his body.\(^33\) In fact, at the death and then resurrection of Jesus in Matt 27:51-53, the bodies of other saints that came before Jesus are also raised,\(^34\) thereby making it even more important to distract and divert the people from learning about and responding to this large scale resurrection and rebirth of leaders. The transaction of money is used, therefore, in the Passion Narrative (Judas betraying Jesus to the Temple elites as well as the payment of the guards to watch the tomb and spread false rumors) to try to quell the news of the resurrection of Jesus and the other saints and the good news for the poor that his resurrection and the resurrection of others who have died before brings: although seemingly all-powerful, the Roman Empire does not have the last word over death or life. Moreover, Ulrich Luz writes, “Money plays a role on the side of Jesus’ opponents in three prominent passages of

\(^{33}\) "While the women were on their way, some of the guards went into the city and reported to the chief priests everything that had happened. When the chief priests had met with the elders and devised a plan, they gave the soldiers a large sum of money, telling them, 'You are to say, 'His disciples came during the night and stole him away while we were asleep.' If this report gets to the governor, we will satisfy him and keep you out of trouble.' So the soldiers took the money and did as they were instructed. And this story has been widely circulated among the Jews to this very day" (Matt 28:11-15).

\(^{34}\) "At that moment the curtain of the Temple was torn in two from top to bottom. The earth shook, the rocks split and the tombs broke open. The bodies of many holy people who had died were raised to life. They came out of the tombs after Jesus’ resurrection and went into the holy city and appeared to many people” (Matt 27:51-53).
the passion and Easter story (26:15, 27:3-10, 28:12, 15). In every case it is part of the strategy of the enemies of Jesus.”35 The use of money in the Passion Narrative informs the reader of the Gospel of Matthew about the true purpose and use of money: money is for securing the political and economic power of the elites, not for the well-being of the poor. Thus the woman’s “destruction” of the myron may be seen as a kind of iconoclastic prophetic “sign-action,” signaling this real use of money in upholding the status quo.

**Conclusion**

Rather than taking on the position of the empire that poverty is inevitable and the poor are despised (and buried in a potter’s field only for the poor and outcast), in Matt 26:1-16, Jesus becomes the ruler of God’s empire and reigns in an era of justice and equality for everyone. The fact that Jesus is killed as an insurrectionist to the empire, betrayed by a close follower for thirty pieces of silver, is central to this passage. Also implicit in Matthew’s Passion Narrative is the idea that participating in the Roman imperial economy and the specific complicity of the Jerusalem Temple in the Roman imperial economy is not the way to address poverty. Instead, Matthew asserts that a poor man shall lead the way in ending poverty and spreading good news to all. Therefore, in this section, I have argued that “the poor are with you always” represents a disruption of imperial systems by recognizing Jesus as a ruler opposed to Caesar, calling out the disciples, Judas, and society for their greed and lack of vision, and praising a woman for knowing about his death and appreciating the significance of Jesus.

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My reading of this passage is backed up by the biblical interpretation of Willie Baptist and other leaders in the movement to end poverty who read Matt 26:1-13 side by side with a quote from Martin Luther King Jr. laid out in Chapter One of this dissertation:

A true revolution of values will soon cause us to question the fairness and justice of many of our past and present policies. On the one hand we are called to play the Good Samaritan on life’s roadside, but that will be only an initial act. One day we must come to see that the whole Jericho Road must be transformed so that men and women will not be constantly beaten and robbed as they make their journey on life’s highway. True compassion is more than flinging a coin to a beggar. It comes to see that an edifice which produces beggars needs restructuring.36

Willie Baptist, Poverty Initiative Scholar-in-Residence, asserts that Jesus critiques the disciples’ concern over selling the ointment and argues that giving the money to the poor is like “flinging a coin to a beggar.” Baptist continues that this woman’s act of anointing, recognizing, and honoring Jesus is a celebration of someone whose words and actions stand for the restructuring the “edifice which produces beggars.” He connects flinging a coin to a beggar with the establishment of potter’s field for the poor with the money discarded by the Temple elites when Judas returns Jesus’s blood money (which we will explore more in the Epilogue). It seems fitting to end the chapter with the above quote and assertion of Willie Baptist. His juxtaposition of the Matt 26 and Martin Luther King Jr. texts helps bring forth an anti-imperial, post-colonial, liberationist reading of this passage. Baptist’s interpretation as part of the larger method and hermeneutic of “Reading the Bible with the Poor” implodes the

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hegemonic and discriminatory interpretation of this passage; it insists that poverty should and could be ended with the organized poor leading the way.
Epilogue

Jean Valjean buried in potter’s field - Les Misérables

Mr. Potter told by his land agent that his slum-like housing will soon be a "potter's field" - Frank Capra’s film, It's a Wonderful Life;

Prisoner buried in "potter's field" - HBO drama, Oz

As evidenced above and in various other songs and movies, popular culture makes repeated reference to potter’s field, especially Hart Island in New York City, where the poor are dumped in anonymous, mass graves. The biblical potter’s field mentioned in Matt 27 is constructed with the money that Judas got for selling Jesus out to the chief priests (as described in Chapter Eight) on land useless for agricultural production and therefore only good as burial ground for the poor and foreigners (Matt 27:10). The potter’s field in Matthew is no great contribution or aid for the lack of dignity that the impoverished face, however. In Matt 27:6-10, the

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2 It's a Wonderful Life, directed by Frank Capra, (1946; Hollywood, CA: Paramount Studios, 2001), DVD.
4 The chief priests who establish the potter’s field make reference to Jer 19:1-13 (and Jer 32:6-9, and Zech 11:12-13): “This is what the Lord Almighty says: ‘I will smash this nation and this city just as this potter’s jar is smashed and cannot be repaired. They will bury the dead in Topheth until there is no more room’” (Jer 19:11). They also reference: “Jeremiah said, 'The word of the Lord came to me: “Hanamel son of Shallum your uncle is going to come to you and say, ‘Buy my field at Anathoth, because as nearest relative it is your right and duty to buy it.’’” Then, just as the Lord had said, my cousin Hanamel came to me in the courtyard of the guard and said, “Buy my field at Anathoth in the territory of Benjamin. Since it is your right to redeem it and possess it, buy it for yourself.” I knew that this was the word of the Lord; so I bought the field at Anathoth from my cousin Hanamel and weighed out for him seventeen shekels of silver” (Jer 32:6-9) and (“I told them, “If you think it best, give me my pay; but if not, keep it.” So they paid me thirty pieces of silver. And the Lord said to me, “Throw it to the potter”—the handsome price at which they valued me! So I took the thirty pieces of silver and threw them to the potter at the house of the Lord” (Zech 11:12-13).
donation of the money to buy land to bury foreigners and the poor by the Temple elite further isolates the poor from others in society—on a field of blood. Yet, as is clear from the popular culture references and continuing use of such burial sites, Matt 27:10 has been used to condition the establishments of potter’s fields across the U.S. and world. The gospel story in Matthew becomes one more pericope used to justify God and religion condoning the dispossession and discrimination faced by poor people. But similar to the work they have done with Matt 26, poor people are taking note of the negative impact of the history of interpretation and positing their own interpretations of such texts.

Picture the Homeless, an organization of poor and homeless people organizing for housing and dignity in New York City, wrote a memorial service liturgy for one of their co-founders who was buried in potter’s field. Louis Haggins died homeless on the subway six months before his friends or family were able to learn he was buried on Hart’s Island. In New York City alone, over 800,000 are buried in potter’s field on Hart Island. They are buried in unidentified mass graves with 100 adults or 1,000 children to a grave. Their families and friends have limited (if any) access to visit the island (and never the actual grave site) because potter’s field is run by the Department of Corrections. Prisoners bury the indigent dead; many do so with great care because they realize potter’s field may be where their bodies are left to rest. And no memorial services were allowed for those buried there.
In 2004, Picture the Homeless and the Poverty Initiative held Louis Haggins’s memorial service in James Chapel at Union Theological Seminary. They wrote their own interpretation of Matt 27 that compared their situation to the poor in the Bible:

Matthew 27:1-10
Leader/Amy: “When morning came, all the chief priests and the elders of the people conferred together against Jesus in order to bring about his death.
Voice 1/William: Who decided that we should die?
Voice 2/Dawn: Was it the shelter?
Voice 3/Bruce: Was it the HMO?
Voice 4/Torrey: Was it the government?

Amy: “They bound him, led him away and handed him over to Pilate the governor.
Rogers: We were found slumped in a subway car,
Mike: We were taken by MTA,
Jean: We were handed over to NYPD,
William: Who passed us onto the medical examiner,
Dawn: Who passed us onto the Dept. of Corrections,
Bruce: Who handed us over to Hart Island
Torrey: Where we were buried as anonymous units in potter’s field.

Amy: “When Judas, his betrayer, saw that Jesus was condemned, he repented and brought back the thirty pieces of silver to the chief priests and the elders.
Rogers: We’re handed over for a whole lot more than thirty pieces of silver;
Mike: 38,000 of us were handed over to the Dept. of Homeless Services for $700 million last year.
Jean: The Volunteers of America, Salvation Army, Help USA, Samaritan Village, and the Doe Fund receive these “pieces of silver” – the $700 million – from the Dept. of Homeless Services.

5 This liturgy was written by Rev. Amy Gopp, co-founder of the Poverty Initiative, and members of Picture the Homeless for the first memorial service at potter’s field in honor of Louis Haggins, co-founder of Picture the Homeless. The service was held in James Memorial Chapel at Union Theological Seminary but used in subsequent Interfaith Memorial Services on potter’s field on Hart’s Island. It was printed in Amy Gopp’s master’s thesis for Union Theological Seminary. Amy Gopp, “Ritualizing with the Poor: The Potter’s Field Memorial Service” (Master thesis, Union Theological Seminary, 2005).

6 As discussed in the previous chapter, a large part of the benefactions presented through the empire are burials and monuments to the dead that still survive today. Susan Sorek writes, demonstrating the strong connection between honoring the wealthy deceased and euergetism/charity, the euergetistic games, monument or other act, “would bear the benefactor’s name, meaning that a benefactor who wanted to guarantee a public service for ever and promote his values for the future would at the same time guarantee his memory would be perpetuated: euergetism could make him immortal” (Sorek, Remembered for Good: A Jewish Benefaction System in Ancient Palestine [Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix, 2010], 31). However, as we see in the case of the poor people who die in the subway and are buried in potter’s field, many poor people’s deaths go
Amy: “He said, ‘I have sinned by betraying innocent blood.’ But they said, ‘What is that to us? See to it yourself.’”
William: They handed us over – none of us were guilty, just poor.
Dawn: But what do they care why we became homeless?

Amy: “Throwing down the pieces of silver in the temple, he departed; and he went and hanged himself.
Bruce: But we have seen no remorse in the Judases of our day;
Torrey: They fling coins into their coffers and into our coffins and carry on.

Amy: “But the chief priests, taking the pieces of silver said, ‘It is not lawful to put them into the treasury, since they are blood money.
Rogers: But our temples,
Mike: Citibank,
Jean: Real Estate,
William: Wall Street,
Dawn: Multinational Corporations,
Bruce: Won’t refuse our blood money.

Amy: “After conferring together, they used them to buy the potter’s field as a place to bury foreigners.
Torrey: In 1868 New York City spent $75,000 to purchase Hart Island.
Rogers: This would become the final resting place for the nameless, indigent, and homeless poor.

Amy: “For this reason that field has been called the Field of Blood to this day.
Mike: That is why it is called the Field of Blood to this day.

Amy: “Then was fulfilled what had been spoken through the prophet Jeremiah, ‘And they took the thirty pieces of silver, the price of the one on whom a price had been set, on whom some of the people of Israel had set a price, and they gave them for the potter’s field, as the Lord commanded me.”
Jean: What’s the price paid for the dignity of the dead?
Together: What’s the price paid for the dignity of the living poor?

In this midrash of Matt 27, homeless leaders connect the Temple elites who confer to execute Jesus to the homeless shelters, HMOs, and other governmental

unnoticed and unrecognized or others make a profit from the poor’s poverty and death. This is where liberative readings of the Bible and organized poor people step in. Poor people assert that their lives are worth remembering; they assert that the poor Jesus’s life and crucifixion are worth remembering. Picture the Homeless stood up to assert that God is present with the hundreds of thousands of the poor buried in potter’s field. The unnamed woman stood up to assert that God is present in the poor Jesus who was to be crucified.
institutions who are complicit in the poverty and death of the poor today; they connect Pontius Pilate, the governor who oversees the crucifixion of Jesus, to the New York Police Department, the Metropolitan Transit Authority, the Department of Corrections who are responsible for depositing the bodies of the poor and indigent in potter’s field; they connect Jesus’s innocence with the innocence of poor people dying from poverty today; they critique the banks, real estate companies, multinational corporations and even charitable organizations for making their profits on the backs of the poor and dispossessed. The process of making and giving this liturgy was the beginning of Picture the Homeless’s Potter’s Field Campaign. In 2005, Picture the Homeless and Interfaith Friends of Potter’s Field, who held their first meeting at Union Theological Seminary, hosted by the Poverty Initiative, organized and won the right to hold bi-monthly observances.\(^7\) These services have continued bi-monthly until today, with Poverty Initiative leaders participating regularly.

This Potter’s Field Liturgy developed by leaders from Picture the Homeless and the Poverty Initiative is yet another important example of the innovative and significant impact of Poverty Scholars interpreting the Bible and then using these interpretations to forge transformative campaigns for economic rights. As I have shown in this dissertation, organized groupings of poor people in the United States and across the globe are producing liberative biblical studies that rethink traditional interpretations and demonstrate that movements for economic justice led by the

poor are willed by God. This study began with a Poverty Initiative Leadership School Bible study, where 150 leaders of poor people’s organizations examined the passage surrounding “the poor are with you always” as it appears in Matthew 26:6-13 and John 12:1-10. Chapters Two and Three posit that organized poor people are significant interpreters of the Bible and propose some major shifts in the purpose and methods used in biblical studies. The bulk of this dissertation is a (re)interpretation of Matt 26:1-16 where I argue that rather than a peripheral story where Jesus focuses on his impending death over the worldly issues of poverty, the anointing of Jesus at Bethany (and the interaction between Jesus, the unnamed woman and his disciples, especially Judas) is a core text that establishes that Jesus desires economic justice and is set apart to bring God’s reign of justice to the poor on earth. His followers are thus called to organize themselves and society around the elimination of poverty and the promotion of dignity and abundance for all.

In order to argue against the assumption that poverty is not a major issue in Jesus’s day or accepted as unfortunate but still inevitable by Jesus, I explore the breadth and depth of poverty in the Roman Empire and Jesus’s challenge to it. In Chapter Three, I explore poverty and dispossession under twenty-first-century neoliberal capitalism. I propose that capitalism, and the system of philanthropy and charity that upholds it, actually spreads and deepens poverty and inequality—and that a social movement of the poor in contemporary times challenges this polarization of wealth and poverty and posits that a new world without poverty, inequality, and economic insecurity is possible. Chapter Four demonstrates that the vast majority of the residents of the Roman Empire lived short and difficult lives,
experienced hardship and loss, and had no chance of achieving stability, let alone prosperity, under the *Pax Romana*. In Chapters Five and Six, I question the assumption of the economic stability and prosperity of Jesus, the unnamed woman and the disciples, as well as Matthew’s community, by showing that the setting and social location of the anointing at Bethany emphasizes poverty and oppression as life conditions for Jesus and his followers. Through an in-depth exegesis of Matt 26:11 and the larger biblical story in Chapters Six, and Seven, and Eight, I assert that poverty is counter to God’s will as laid out in the Sabbath and Jubilee prescriptions and that Jesus has a fundamental critique of poverty, the Roman economic system, as well as charity/patronage/euergetism.

My attention to historic and contemporary context, especially the demographics and causes of poverty, demonstrate that rather than an individual problem, poverty and dispossession are social problems affecting whole sections of the population and large groupings of people in Jesus’s time and today. I argue that Jesus was a leader of a social, economic, political, and spiritual movement led by those at the bottom of the Roman Empire who united across nationality and religion to promote dignity, prosperity, and justice for all people. Jesus’s words and actions, as documented in the story of the “Anointing at Bethany” and throughout the New Testament, can be seen as instructions for the poor to unite and organize today to transform society and end poverty for all. Therefore the hyper-spiritualization of poverty and the call to ending poverty only in heaven does not hold.

This dissertation grows out of the intensity of poverty and dispossession in contemporary America and the urgency of efforts of the poor to build a movement
to end poverty. Preacher, professor, and Poverty Initiative leader Barbara Lundblad suggests that faith is key to this endeavor: a belief that ending poverty is possible, an understanding that this is what God requires, and a conviction that this is how Christians must act out their commitment to Jesus.

Do we need more statistics? More courage? More time to volunteer? Perhaps most of all we need more faith. Jesus’ parable [on the rich man and Lazarus] ends with these ironic words: ‘Abraham said to the rich man, ‘If they do not listen to Moses and the prophets, neither will they be convinced even if someone rises from the dead.” Someone has risen from the dead. What more do we need?\(^8\)

But instead of developing the faith that ending poverty is possible, we ignore the controversial, revolutionary nature of a poor, resurrected Jesus as Lord and Savior, who challenges the wealthy, immortalized Caesar. We forget that Jesus’ Kingdom is about economic and social rights in the here and now and that the messiah Jesus came to usher in this reign. The good news of the Bible has been reduced to an individualized acceptance of Jesus Christ as a Lord and Savior, severed from his mission to the world. We deny that the poor are at the center of God’s concern, ignoring that Jesus was a leader of a revolutionary movement of the poor who rather than mitigating the unfortunate, inevitability of poverty, called for a movement to transform heaven and earth.

If Matt 26:1-16 continues to be interpreted as God willing poverty and the only solutions on offer continue to be charity, if our religious institutions offer Band-Aid help and superficial solace instead of social transformation with the poor at the helm, and if followers of Jesus Christ do not take up the call to follow Jesus and

observe God’s commandments, then Matt 26:11 (and Deut 15:11) will come true.

For this is what Matt 26:11 warns: if we don't recognize Jesus, a messiah of the poor
(and what Jesus asks his followers in carrying out his mission), poverty will exist
forever—in disobedience to and disregard for God.
Appendix:

“Reading the Bible with the Poor,” A Semester-Long Course

Following is more information on the “Reading the Bible with the Poor” course taught by Rev. Dr. Brigitte Kahl and myself in the Spring of 2007, including course description, course methodology, course structure, schedule and summaries, class feature, and lessons learned:

Course Description: An experimental course that consists of two elements: 1) participation in a weekly Bible Study that brought together students and leaders of poor people’s movements including Picture the Homeless (PTH), Broadway Community Incorporated (BCI), Restaurant Opportunities Center-New York (ROC-NY), Association of Community Organizations to Reform Now (ACORN), and others; and 2) participation in three half-day workshops where methods and core scriptural issues for doing Bible study with the poor were discussed. For the student participants, the three workshops carry the ordinary course load in terms of readings and written work. The course aims both at discovering the biblical voice from the margins as "good news" and exploring participatory approaches of re-reading the Bible for empowerment in contexts of poverty. Participants in this course gain literacy and familiarity with regard to the Bible as a whole and acquire basic skills of doing Bible study.

Course Methodology: There are a few areas of our Bible study methodology that are worth highlighting. They include: location and setting of the Bible study (Poverty Initiative Office rather than classroom setting), approach to the Bible and biblical texts chosen (arc of biblical texts woven from Genesis to Revelation focusing on justice for the poor), means and tools of Bible study (play-acting, group reading, artistic expressions), models of biblical interpretation from history (the Talmud, the Biblia Pauperum, Gospel in Soletiname), supplemental readings (Reading the Bible with the Damned), and the role of organized poor people in our Bible study. We decided to focus on organized poor people and connect with poor people’s organizations because we believe that these folks would demonstrate more agency in biblical interpretation. This may have been the biggest methodological move that we made with the course. We were interested in learning what impact putting organized poor people and the stories of their organizing struggles into the center of biblical interpretation would have.

Course Structure: Each course Bible study session was structured in two parts. For the first part, we gathered together to eat a light meal and hear from representatives from local poor people’s organizations for an hour. In the second hour, we engaged in a Bible study with the students, community organization representatives, and others present, drawing from the context and themes presented in the first hour.
Schedule and Summaries:

**Class 1** – Class Introductions and Overview and Introduction to poverty and the Poverty Initiative

*Bible Focus* - Genesis 1 and themes of creation, food, and abundance.

**Class 2** – Guests from Broadway Community Incorporated (BCI), especially the Local Flavor burrito shop where homeless and formerly homeless leaders sell homemade burritos in an effort to be trained in food preparation and make a living for themselves.

*Bible Focus* - Genesis 2-4 and the emphasis on work found in the Garden of Eden not as a punishment but as a way to live a content and productive life.

**Class 3** – Class visit to BCI at Broadway Presbyterian Church

*Bible Focus* - Genesis 41- Exodus 16, an elongated story of Joseph and the grain storehouses he proposed for the drought and famine that spread out across the Near East, and poverty and enslavement in Egypt that led to Moses, the Exodus, and Manna.

**Class 4** – Guests from the Restaurant Opportunities Center (ROC-NY), a worker-run restaurant spoke about their efforts to organize restaurant workers around discrimination, immigration, low wages, and workers cooperative.

*Bible Focus* - 1 Kings and the themes of hunger and drought and the rise and role of the prophet Elijah.

**Class 5** - Bible Study Methodology Workshop

**Class 6** – Class visit to City University of New York (CUNY) Graduate Center for a performance of the one-woman show ‘Capers. The play focuses on housing displacement and gentrification issues in Washington, D.C. and was put together by dramatist and activist Anu Yadav.

**Class 7** – Guests from ROC-NY.

*Bible Focus* - Luke 19, the parable of the Unjust Judge and the Persistent Widow and their use of this parable in weekly prayer vigils for workers’ rights that resulted in a successful trial against a local high-end restaurant chain that resulted in millions of dollars in back wages and discrimination payments for workers.

**Class 8** – Bible Methodology Workshop

**Class 9** - Guests from the ACORN/UFT Childcare Workers Organizing drive.

*Bible Focus* – Galatians and the distinction between Roman and Jewish law and the concept of having faith in a higher law of justice rather than the law of the land and its rulers.

**Class 10** - Bible Study Methodology Workshop
**Class 11** - Midterm Class - Poverty Initiative Truth Commission weekend featuring Larry Gibson from Stop Mountaintop Removal.  
*Bible Focus* - 1 Kings 21, the story of Naboth’s Vineyard.

**Class 13** – Introduction to Ernesto Cardenal’s *Gospel in Solentiname* and Christian Base Communities and the *Biblia Pauperum*, the Bible of the poor that dates back to the Middle Ages.

**Class 14** – Wrap Up and Final Presentations

**Class Feature:** We introduced Larry Gibson who told the story of fighting the Massey Coal Company to keep his family’s land in Sharon, West Virginia. Larry told the group about the 109 acts of violence perpetrated against his land, property, dog, and self as a result of refusing to give up his land for more mountaintop removal. We then worked to connect Larry’s story to the story of Naboth from 1 Kings 21. Our discussion pertained to violence, civil disobedience, land inheritance, power structures, coal mining, and ecology. We drew connections between Naboth who refused to give up his land to King Ahab and Queen Jezebel and Larry who has refused to give his land up to the mining companies. We also linked Larry and the prophet Elijah. We continued our conversation about Naboth and Larry in our next class session (class 12) where we reviewed the Naboth story including the roles of Ahab, Jezebel, and Elijah in some more detail. We asked the students to break up into small groups to review the Naboth story, which we divided into four parts. Each small group drew depictions of their section of text and presented them to the class. We then further applied the case of Larry Gibson and the issue of Mountaintop Removal.

**Lessons Learned:** Although we suspected that a new form/theory/methodology of biblical interpretation was possible by connecting contemporary stories of poor people organizing with biblical stories, it was surprising how quickly and naturally this new methodology developed over the course of the Spring 2007 semester. We had to work out the balance between presentation from the poor people’s organizations, Bible presentation, Bible study, and discussion, and get over some of the awkwardness of making new relationships, but in the end the students, teachers, and leaders of poor people’s organizations were deeply affected by this new course.
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Articles:


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**Electronic Resources:**


Websites:


Coalition of Immokalee Workers. http://ciw-online.org/


Vermont Workers Center. http://www.workerscenter.org/

Speeches:


Films/Documentaries:
