POVERTY AND WEALTH IN JESUS AND THE JESUS TRADITION

Heinz Giesen

The kingdom of God, understood as an intimate fellowship between Jesus and his Father in which Jesus gives his adherents a share, is not just one central theme of his message: it is the theological center of his thinking, speaking, and acting.¹ This is why it is also the criterion which allows us to evaluate Jesus’ position on poverty and wealth.² In the present essay, I shall study in detail five examples (Mark 10:17–22 parr.; Mark 10:23–27 parr.; Mark 12:41–44 par.; Luke 6:20 par.; and Luke 16:13 par.) which show us how Jesus and the Jesus tradition saw poverty and wealth, and then offer a general evaluation. Since it is important to come as close as possible to the message of the earthly Jesus himself, the first, third, and fourth examples begin with a synoptic comparison, I also discuss the question of historicity.


1.1. Synoptic Comparison

When a man asks Jesus what he must do in order to inherit eternal life (Mark 10:17), Jesus refers him to the commandments in the second table of the decalogue. As a pious Jew, the man proclaims that he has observed this from his youth. However, he still lacks one thing, before he can become an immediate follower of Jesus: he must get rid of his possessions and give the proceeds to the poor. In return, he is promised a treasure in heaven (Mark 10:21; Matt 19:21; Luke 18:22). These words of Jesus horrify him, and he departs sadly. Since he possesses a

great deal of property (Mark 10:22), he decides against becoming an immediate follower of Jesus.

Matthew and Luke do not tell us that the man was horrified; they say only that “he went away sorrowful” (Matt 19:22) or that “he became sad” (Luke 18:23). Matthew too explains the sadness of the man in terms of his great wealth, while Luke 18:23 emphasizes the extent of this wealth: “for he was very rich.” According to Mark 10:17 and Matt 19:16, the one who puts this question is simply “a man,” while Luke 18:18 tells us that he was a member of the Jewish ruling elite. Unlike Mark and Luke, Matt 19:21 introduces the demand that he sell everything with the redactional words: “If you would be perfect” (cf. Matt 5:48).³ In Mark 10:17 and Luke 18:18, the man addresses Jesus as “Good teacher”; at Matt 19:16, he calls him “Teacher” and asks: “Teacher, what good deed must I do to have eternal life?” In all three versions, Jesus rejects this question, since God alone is “good” (Mark 10:18; Matt 19:17; Luke 18:19).

With the addition, probably redactional, of εἰς ὁδόν Mark 10:17 inserts the dialogue, which goes beyond a merely academic debate,⁴ into the path that Jesus takes towards Jerusalem, thereby defining the following of Jesus as the following of his passion.⁵ The act of falling to one’s knees, which is not customary before a teacher, and the address of Jesus as “Good teacher” (Mark 10:17) belong together.

As the synoptic comparison shows, the historical reconstruction must begin with Mark.

1.2. Jesus’ Attitude to Poverty and Wealth

1.2.1. On the historicity of the encounter between Jesus and the rich man

Although the evangelists present this story in a stylized form which is adapted to their own situation, I see no reason to doubt that they are

---

⁵ This interpretation is discussed by Rudolf Pesch, Das Markusevangelium 2, HTK 2.2 (Freiburg: Herder, 1977), 137. However, the lack of an article means that we cannot ascribe this to a pre-Markan redaction, since the article can be omitted in prepositional phrases. Cf. Friedrich Blass and Albert Debrunner, Grammatik des neutestamentlichen Griechisch, rev. F. Rehkopf (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 14th edn, 1976), §255.