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## The Bible, the Economy, and the Poor

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### 7. “Prophet Margins” in the Economy of Salvation

#### Having, Being, and Doing in the Gospel of Luke

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#### Introduction

Biblical scholars and theologians are keenly aware of the significance of context for any interpretative project. This is as true for meaningful discourse in our contemporary context as it is for our interpretation of texts and discourses of earlier eras; for, like the people whose thought and praxis engage us, we think, teach, and write in a particular context. The subject of this volume – *The Bible, the Economy, and the Poor* – is timely indeed, given the challenging economic and cultural developments that constitute the contemporary context. My own choice of topic arises from a particular “reading” of that context, one informed by the work of scholars in various fields, most notably psychoanalyst Erich Fromm, political scientist

Benjamin Barber, political philosopher Michael Sandel, and others.<sup>1</sup> Because their analyses of our current cultural and economic situation have influenced, indeed compelled, the choice of topic for this essay, a brief explication of their insights will serve as preface to the examination of the Lukan economy of salvation that is this project's focus.

### The Contemporary Context: Advanced Consumer Capitalism

In his seminal *To Have or To Be?* after first recalling the Industrial Ages' Great Promise of Unlimited Progress, Fromm identifies as reason for its failure two psychological premises built into the industrial system: 1. "that the aim of life is . . . satisfaction of any desire or subjective need a person may feel"; and 2. "that egotism, selfishness, and greed, as the system needs to generate them in order to function, lead to harmony and peace" (3). In tracing the rise of this way of thinking in the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries, Fromm observes, "The theory that the aim of life is the fulfillment of every human desire . . . was a concept that would easily arise when 'profit' ceased to mean 'profit for the soul' (as it does in the Bible), but came to mean material, monetary profit" (4-5). The economic system that emerged was bolstered by the assertion that "the very qualities that the system required of human beings – egotism, selfishness, and greed – were innate in human nature" (7).

After discussing the historical roots of twentieth century capitalism, Fromm undertakes what he terms an "empirical and social analysis of two basic character orientations" or modes of existence of which human beings are capable: the having mode and the being mode (xxii). In the having mode of existence one's relationship to the world is one of possessing and owning, "one in which I want to make everybody and everything, including myself, my property" (24).<sup>2</sup> In a society that rests on private property, profit, and power, "to acquire, to own, and to make profit are the sacred and unalienable rights of the individual" (69). Thus, "in this mode of existence all that matters is my acquisition of property and my unlimited right to keep what I have acquired" (76-77). For people living in this mode, "I am what I have and what I can consume." Indeed, in an acquisitive society, the very essence of being is having, and so, we speak of someone as "being worth a million dollars"; likewise, if one has nothing, one is nothing. Moreover, due to its focus on property and profit, the having mode "necessarily produces the desire – indeed the need – for power," for "to maintain control over property we need to use power to protect it from those who would take it from us because they, like us, can never have enough" (81).

The other character orientation of which humans are capable is the mode of being. According to Fromm, "the mode of being has as its prerequisites independence, freedom, and the presence of critical reason. Its fundamental characteristic is that of being active, not

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<sup>1</sup> Others include Mara Einstein, Susan Linn, Juliet Schor, Mary M. Doyle Roche, Jeffrey Sachs, Richard Wilkinson and Kate Pickett, John de Graaf, David Wann, Thomas H. Naylor, David Horsey, Clive Hamilton with Richard Denniss, as well as the growing literature on the corporatization of higher education.

<sup>2</sup> Acknowledging that "human existence requires that we have, keep, take care of, and use certain things in order to survive," Fromm distinguishes between this necessary having, calling it "existential having," which is "a rationally directed impulse in the pursuit of staying alive," and what he terms "characterological having," which is "the passionate drive to retain and keep that is not innate, but that has developed as the result of the impact of social conditions on the human species" (85).

in the sense of outward activity, of busyness, but of inner activity, the productive use of our human powers. "To be active," Fromm clarifies, "means to give expression to one's faculties, talents, to the wealth of human gifts with which – in varying degrees – every human being is endowed. It means to renew oneself, to grow, to flow out, to love, to transcend the prison of one's isolated ego, to be interested, to give" (88). He further observes, "Only to the extent that we decrease the mode of having . . . i.e., stop finding security and identity by clinging to what we have . . . can the mode of being emerge" (89).

Although both tendencies – to have and to be – are present in human beings, because we live in a society devoted to acquisition and profit-making, "people see the having mode as the most natural mode of existence" (28) Such a society "produces a social character oriented around having, and once the dominant pattern is established, nobody wants to be an outsider, or indeed an outcast; in order to avoid this risk everybody adapts to the majority, who have in common only their mutual antagonism" (106). Thus, even the poor join in the mad scramble to have the symbols of status-identity.

In a more recent work Benjamin Barber presents a trenchant analysis of our current economic and cultural situation. Like Fromm, he analyzes the development of capitalism, with attention to the changes wrought by the consumerist capitalism that has replaced the productivist capitalism of an earlier period. According to Barber, due to the inequality it produces, capitalism is now in crisis: the overproducing capitalist market needs more buyers, and so,

. . . the market must either grow or expire. If the poor cannot be enriched enough to become consumers, then grown-ups in the First World who are currently responsible for 60 percent of the world's consumption, and with vast disposable income but few needs, will have to be enticed into shopping. Inducing them to remain childish and impetuous in their taste helps ensure that they will buy the global market goods designed for indolent and prosperous youth (10-11).

Thus Barber detects a powerful new cultural ethos at work in consumer capitalism, what he terms "the infantist ethos," which is "an ethos of induced childishness" that has produced a new species of perennial adolescents, variously termed kidults, rejuveniles, twixters, adulescents.

Those responsible for manufacturing and marketing goods for the global marketplace . . . are aiming both to sell to a younger demographic and to imbue older consumers with the taste of the young. . . These avatars of consumer capitalism are seeking to encourage adult regression, hoping to rekindle in grown-ups the tastes and habits of children so that they can sell globally the relatively useless cornucopia of games, gadgets, and myriad consumer goods for which there is no discernible "need market" other than the one created by capitalism's own frantic imperative to sell (7).

Based on his study of actual practices of the consumer marketplace, Barber contends that "many of our primary business, educational, and governmental institutions are consciously and purposefully engaged in infantilization and as a consequence that we are

vulnerable to such associated practices as privatization and branding. For this is how we maintain a system of consumerist capitalism no longer supported by the traditional market forces of supply and demand” (12). Having recognized that “the demand for adult goods and services has proven not to be endless,” marketers and merchandisers have embarked on the “consumerization of the young.” Citing the work of merchandizing advocate Gene Del Vecchio, Barber observes, “The new capitalism must spark a ‘kidquake of kid-directed goods and services aimed at children old enough to articulate their preferences – hence, children ages four and older’”(12). This strategic targeting of children by marketers has been dubbed by child-development psychologist Susan Linn as “the hostile takeover of childhood,” while Juliet Schor, observing that “kids and teens are now the epicenter of American consumer culture” (2004: 9), laments, “we have become a nation that places a lower priority on teaching its children how to thrive socially, intellectually, even spiritually, than it does on training them to consume” (2004: 13).

To Fromm’s and Barber’s analyses of our context may be added that of political philosopher Michael Sandel. According to Sandel, without quite realizing it or deciding to do so, we have drifted from *having* a market economy, which is a valuable and effective tool for organizing productive activity, to *being* a market society, “a way of life in which market values seep into every aspect of human endeavor” and “social relations are made over in the image of the market” (10-11). Thus, “markets – and market values – have come to govern our lives as never before” (5), and so, the logic of buying and selling no longer applies only to material goods but increasingly governs the whole of life. Distinct from thirty years ago, markets now allocate health, education, public safety, criminal justice, environmental protection, recreation, procreation, national security, and other social goods, treating them as commodities, and so, above all instruments of profit (8). Arguing that in turning these goods into commodities we have corrupted and degraded them, Sandel suggests that it is time to ask whether we want to live this way.

### The Biblical Tradition and Our Contemporary Context

What can the biblical tradition contribute to the theological reflection and praxis of believing communities seeking to bring what we might call “biblical wisdom” to the contemporary context, with the hyper-consumerism that the current stage of capitalism compels? Within the New Testament, matters of wealth, poverty, and possessions – thus, human having and not having – feature most prominently in the Gospel of Luke (see Johnson 1977, 1981; Karris; Mealand; Pilgrim; Moxnes; Schottroff and Stegemann; and Gillman). Thus, it is the Third Gospel that requires our consideration. The present examination of the Lukan material focuses above all on its narrative theology, that is, the understanding of God, Christ, the human condition, salvation, etc. as expressed not in systematic propositions but in a narrative, in this case, the Lukan narrative. As the opening chapters of the infancy narrative (Luke 1-2) make abundantly clear, Luke intends to tell the story of salvation;<sup>3</sup> and it is within the context of that larger story that passages dealing with the economic matters of concern to us must be understood.

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<sup>3</sup> Luke uses the language of salvation more than any other New Testament writer and is the only canonical Gospel to use the nouns “savior” (*sōtēr*) and “salvation” (*sōtēria*). For discussion of the evidence in the Greek

The approach taken in this project was suggested to me in part by Fromm's work on having and being, which affords a lens through which to view and conceptualize aspects of Luke's narrative theology. It is also prompted by the question both a lawyer and a rich ruler ask of Jesus within Luke's narrative, "Good teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?" (10:25; 18:18). Significantly, use of the noun "eternal life" suggests its status as something one can have or possess, i.e., a spiritual good or possession, as does use of the verb "inherit." That same question, minus the words "to inherit eternal life," is asked elsewhere in Luke, with three groups (crowds, tax collectors, soldiers) asking John the Baptist, "What must we do?" (3:10, 12, 14). Coming on the heels of John's proclamation that "all flesh shall see the salvation of God" (3:6) and his call to "bear fruits worthy of repentance" (3:8), their questions express the same concern as that of the lawyer and the rich ruler: to know what must be done to experience salvation and have eternal life.<sup>4</sup> The repetition of the question in the narrative suggests its significance for, and so, too, its usefulness as an entree to Luke's narrative theology.

Given the exigencies of our contemporary context, then, and given my conviction that the Bible, despite its historically and culturally-conditioned limitations, is indeed a classic whose surplus of meaning can speak meaningfully beyond its original context, this essay examines the Lukan narrative to discern its claims regarding the relationship between rich, poor, possessions, and salvation. In doing so, it intends to illumine the relationship between having, being, and doing in the Lukan theology that ought to inform Christian reflection and praxis in the contemporary context. Our examination will unfold in two parts: first, an overview of material on rich, poor, and possessions in Luke, with particular attention to three parables that convey major emphases of the Lukan understanding of these matters; then an examination of Luke 15:11-32 which, on my reading, clarifies the relation between having, being, and doing in the divine economy of salvation.

Before proceeding, it is necessary to clarify the ancient meaning of the term "economy" that informs its usage here. Our English word "economy" derives from the Greek *oikonomia*, which is a compound of *oikos/oikia*, house, and *nomos*, law or management. In the first century Mediterranean world of Jesus and the evangelists, "house" was not so much a building but the household, which in the ancient world was the primary unit of production, and so, the site of human livelihood. Thus "economy" means literally "the law or the management of the household," and refers to the ordering of relationships and resources for the livelihood of the persons of the household. In the ancient context, that ordering was hierarchical and patriarchal, with the father acting as *oikonomos*, "one who managed a

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text, see Green 1995: 94, n. 27; Navone 141-45. The theme of salvation is introduced immediately in the infancy narrative (Luke 1-2): Mary rejoices "in God my Savior" (1:47); Zechariah proclaims that God has "raised up a mighty savior for us" (1:69) through whom the people of God will be saved from their enemies (1:71) and be given "knowledge of salvation" (1:77); the angels proclaim to shepherds "to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior" (2:11).

<sup>4</sup> It is worth noting that the Baptist's answer to each group involves actions that have an economic impact: (to the crowds) "Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none; and whoever has food must do likewise" (3:11); (to the tax collectors) "Collect no more than the amount prescribed for you" (3:13); (to the soldiers) "Do not extort money from anyone by threats of false accusation, and be satisfied with your wages" (3:14).

household.” As we will see, this understanding of “economy” is foundational to the thought world expressed in the Gospel of Luke.

### Rich, Poor, and Possessions in Luke: An Overview

Luke’s intense interest in economic matters is evident in its more frequent use of the vocabulary for wealth and poverty, for rich and poor,<sup>5</sup> as well as its use of and additions to its sources. Luke includes all of the Markan texts on rich and poor, with a significant exception: the anointing scene with its oft-abused remark, “for you always have the poor with you” (Mark 13:3-9).<sup>6</sup> Similarly, Luke uses all the Q texts on possessions.<sup>7</sup> Most striking, however, are the many additional traditions on wealth and poverty and on possessions that are unique to Luke’s Gospel.<sup>8</sup> Notable among them are: 1. Mary’s Song (1:46-55), which proclaims “He has thrown down the mighty from their thrones and lifted up the lowly; the hungry he has filled with good things; the rich he has sent away empty” (1:52-53); 2. The first beatitude, “Blessed are you who are poor” (6:20) with its corresponding woe, “But woe to you who are rich, for you have received your consolation” (6:24);<sup>9</sup> 3. Additional instructions on giving and receiving in the Sermon on the Plain (6:27-36); 4. The dispute between two brothers over inheritance in Luke 12:13-15 which occasions Jesus’ telling the parable of the rich fool (12:16-21); 5. The parable of the rich man and Lazarus (16:19-26); 6. Jesus’ parable of the Great Banquet with its instruction to invite the poor (14:13, 21); and 7. The encounter between Jesus and the wealthy tax collector Zaccheus (19:1-10). As a result of these additions, Luke’s telling of the Jesus story includes more characters who are explicitly identified as rich or as poor and far more material about having possessions, material and spiritual, than any other Gospel.

Moreover, Luke 4:16-30, widely regarded as programmatic for Luke’s narrative, clarifies both Jesus’ identity – he is God’s messianic prophet (4:18, 24) who will be rejected by his people (4:28-29) – and his prophetic mission in fulfillment of Isaiah 61:1-2 – “to bring good news to the poor . . . to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor” (4:18-19). Christian

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<sup>5</sup> The terminology of poverty is especially prominent in Luke-Acts: *penichros* (Luke 21:2; otherwise absent in the NT); *endeēs* (Acts 4:34; otherwise absent in the NT); and *ptōchos* (Luke 4:18; 6:20; 7:22; 14:13, 21; 16:20, 22; 18:22; 19:18; 21:3; compared to 5x in Matthew, 5x in Mark, 4x in John, 4x in Paul, 4x in James, 2x in Revelation). See also Green 1995: 112, n. 9.

<sup>6</sup> Mark 4:19/Luke 8:14; Mark 7:22/Luke 11:39; Mark 10:17-31/Luke 18:18-30; Mark 12:40/Luke 20:47; Mark 12:41-44/Luke 21:1-4; Mark 21:12-13/Luke 19:45-46.

<sup>7</sup> Q material on possessions includes the following: Matthew 5:3-12/Luke 6:12-23; Matthew 6:19-21, 24/Luke 12:21, 31, 33-34; Matthew 6:25-33/Luke 12:22-31; Matthew 7:2/Luke 6:37-38; Matthew 22:1-10/Luke 14:16-24; Matthew 23:23-24/Luke 11:42.

<sup>8</sup> The unique Lukan (L) texts on wealth, poverty, and possessions include: 1:52-53; 3:10-14; 6:23-26; 7:10-43; 10:25-37; 11:41; 12:13-21, 33; 14:12-14, 33; 16:1-13, 19-31; 19:1-10; 21:34 (on Luke’s use of his sources, see Pilgrim: 14-16).

<sup>9</sup> Christian “haves” take comfort in preaching about spiritual poverty, often citing the Matthean beatitude “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven” (Matthew 5:3). The Lukan version of that beatitude, however, does not include the words “in spirit,” and so, is generally thought to mean the materially poor and powerless.

interpretation of this pericope has shown a tendency to spiritualize the references to the poor, the captive, the blind, the oppressed, taking them to mean, for example, the spiritually poor, those sick with sin, and so on. Although this spiritualization is an understandable attempt on the part of Christian “haves” to appropriate the text meaningfully for their own lives, it bypasses its original meaning, thereby evading its challenges for Christian life with respect to economic realities. It is the consensus of critical scholarship that the text has in view social and material conditions, thus, people who suffer from material want and deprivation, captives to heavy debt, the physically sick, those vulnerable to exploitation and oppression. In Luke, as elsewhere in the Bible, the poor are those who, lacking land, power, and social status, are vulnerable to exploitation; thus, they live on the margins (see Hoppe: 15; Pleins: 402-14; Hanks: 414-24). It is precisely those on the margins who count and are included in the divine economy of salvation, and it is to the margins of the economy that Jesus the prophet turns his attention throughout the remainder of the Lukan narrative. Thus, “to bring good news to the poor” is widely acknowledged as a short-hand summary of Jesus’ mission in Luke.<sup>10</sup>

Luke 4:16-30 also clarifies the nature of the salvation announced in the infancy narrative. After reading the Isaianic prophecy of the coming of a Spirit-filled messiah (4:18-19), Jesus declares, “Today this Scripture is fulfilled in your hearing” (4:21), in effect announcing that God’s promise of salvation is at hand.<sup>11</sup> Thus, according to Luke, salvation occurs not simply on the cross but *now* in the ministry of Jesus: “the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, the poor have good news brought to them” (7:22).<sup>12</sup> Salvation, then, is the coming of God’s reign or kingdom of justice that brings relief to those on the margins (the poor, captive, sick, oppressed), who lack a share in the well-being (*shalom*) willed by God.<sup>13</sup> As passages elsewhere in Luke make clear, the coming of that kingdom entails a reversal of fortunes that occurs in the socio-

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<sup>10</sup> Further evidence of the centrality and concrete meaning of this “good news to the poor” theme in the Lukan narrative is found in Luke 1-2, where it is the poor/*anawim*, represented by the peasant woman Mary, Elizabeth and Zechariah, the shepherds, Anna and Simeon, who await the good news of salvation; Luke 6:20, “blessed are you poor”; Luke 7:22, “the poor have good news brought to them”; Luke 14:13, 21, the instruction to invite the poor to table.

<sup>11</sup> The arrival of the salvation-time is indicated by the “today” (*sēmerion*) of v. 21, which marks the beginning of eschatological time (2:11; 3:22; 4:21; 12:52; 19:5; 19:9; 23:43). Similarly, Jesus proclaims to Zaccheus, “Today salvation has come to this house . . .” (19:9), and to the Pharisees he claims that if he casts out demons by the “finger” of God, “then the kingdom of God has come to you” (11:20). Elsewhere he declares, “The kingdom of God is among you” (17:21). See Navone: 94-95.

<sup>12</sup> That the time of salvation has begun with the birth and public work of Jesus is indicated by the frequency with which Luke uses the adverbs “now” (*nun*) and “today” (*sēmerion*): “now” occurs 14 times in Luke and 25 times in Acts, whereas in Matthew and Mark it occurs only 3 times. “Today” occurs 11 times in Luke and 8 times in Acts; it occurs 8 times in Matthew and once in Mark. See Navone: 182.

<sup>13</sup> Biblical traditions frequently describe God as a “God of justice” (Isaiah 30:18) who loves justice (Isaiah 61:8; Psalm. 11:7; 33:5; 37:28; 99:4) and demands it of the whole people. Distinct from later philosophical definitions of justice, biblical justice is concerned not simply with a strict definition of rights and duties but more broadly with right relations with God and within the human condition, thus, with relations that facilitate quality of life or well-being (*shalom*). Because Luke draws upon the understanding of justice in the prophetic tradition, see Mays: 144-58.

economic circumstances of this life (1:51-53; 6:20-26) and then continues in the afterlife (16:19-21).<sup>14</sup>

In the subsequent narrative of Jesus' prophetic mission, teachings about rich, poor, and possessions bulk especially large. However, the teachings of the Lukan Jesus about these matters present some difficulties. As Johnson rightly observes, "Although Luke consistently speaks about possessions, he does not speak about possessions consistently" (1981: 13). Indeed, Luke's Gospel presents mixed messages on the subject. For example, Jesus demands complete renunciation of possessions among his disciples, instructing the Twelve and the Seventy-Two to travel without possessions, instead trusting in others' hospitality (Luke 9:1-6; 10:4-9) and in God's care (12:22-34; 18:28-30). Later in the narrative, however, Jesus appears to reverse that instruction at the Last Supper, advising that one who has a bag should take it and likewise a sack (Luke 22:35-36). Elsewhere disciples are instructed to give alms to help the poor and to provide hospitality (11:41; 12:33; 19:8; Acts 10:2, 4, 31; 24:17); but how can disciples give alms if they have renounced all possessions? Further complicating the matter, according to Acts, the Lukan sequel, Christians ought to hold all their possessions in common (Acts 2:42-47; 4:32-35).<sup>15</sup>

Based on their analyses of this material, Pilgrim and Johnson sort the materials into three broad categories: passages calling for the surrender of possessions; passages warning of the dangers of wealth; and passages regarding the right use of possessions (Pilgrim: 86). Although the multiple messages do not permit a single straightforward lesson for Christian interpreters, the amount of material devoted to the matter of possessions confirms its central significance for Luke's narrative theology and its ethic of discipleship.

#### *The Parable of the Rich Fool (Luke 12:16-21)*

That significance is amply evidenced in Luke's central travel narrative (9:51-19:27), which includes three complexes of L traditions that deal with the subject of possessions: 12:13-34; 14:12-33; 16:1-31. Within these sections, three of the parables are illustrative of both the dangers of wealth and the right use of possessions (see Donahue; Scott; Crossan). The first, the parable of the rich fool (12:16-21), is occasioned by a familial dispute over inheritance that is not the only such squabble between brothers in this Gospel, as we will see (15:11-32). Commentaries shed light on the Jewish laws of inheritance that illumine the

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<sup>14</sup> In Luke, salvation consists in the eschatological reality of entering into the kingdom of God (13:23; 18:24, 25) and of receiving eternal life (18:26, 30); see Navone: 148. Observing that salvation is pre-eminently status reversal in connection with the coming of the reign of God, Green clarifies further, that it is "the coming of God's reign of justice, to deconstruct the worldly systems and values at odds with the purpose of God. Salvation also entails membership in the new community God is drawing together around Jesus, a community into which all – specially the previously excluded for reasons of sin, and its corollary, despised status – are invited to participate in the blessings of the kingdom as well as to share in its service" (1995: 94-95).

<sup>15</sup> The absence of references to the poor in Luke's second volume, Acts of the Apostles, seems odd, even problematic for claiming the significance of the theme for the third evangelist and his ethic of discipleship. Careful attention to the narrative in Acts, however, reveals that in his second volume the evangelist shows how the ideals of Jesus were implemented in the first Christian community: the members of that community shared their goods, with the result that "there was not a needy person among them" (Acts 2:44-45; 4:32, 34-35; see Hoppe: 155-56; Berquist: 18-27).



dispute in its ancient cultural context (see Bovan; Green 1995; Malina and Rohrbaugh; Johnson 1991; Fitzmeyer; Marshall). For our purposes it is Jesus' response to the brothers that requires examination for its theological implications. Rather than attempt to settle the brothers' dispute by recourse to laws of inheritance, Jesus refuses to arbitrate. Why he does so is suggested by the material that follows, which may be read as a three-part response that lays bare the deeper, interior roots of economic matters and disputes. First, typical of the radicalism of a prophet, rather than mediate this situation as a singular legal case, Jesus targets the root (Latin, *radix*) of what is a persistent human problem: greed or covetousness (Greek, *pleonexia*), a vice scorned by moralists in the ancient Hellenistic world. Hence, the first element of Jesus' response to the brothers' squabble is the admonition: "Take care! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; for one's life does not consist in the abundance of possessions" (12:15). The Greek word, *pleonexia*, translated "greed," means literally "the desire for more," and in the Greek "the abundance of possessions" (*en tō perisseuein*) suggests "more than is enough." Thus, it is not merely having possessions that Jesus critiques here, but the desire for more than is sufficient for one's needs. Also, the particular Greek word rendered "life" (*zōē*) is the same word used in the story of the rich ruler (Luke 18:18, 30; also 10:25; Acts 13:46, 48; see also Acts 3:15) where it refers to eternal life (see Kittel et al: 863-64). Jesus' admonition, then, has in view that true or eternal life that is constituted by relationship with God and that is jeopardized by the greed that Jesus targets here. Thus, as subsequent verses make clear, one ought not set one's heart on acquisition of material possessions as one's "treasure" but on being "rich toward God" (12:21) and securing a "treasure in heaven" (12:33).<sup>16</sup>

The vice of greed that Jesus targets is embodied by the rich fool of the subsequent parable (12:16-21) that comprises the second stage of Jesus' response to the inheritance squabble. The parable envisions a wealthy landowner whose land produces a bumper crop, which in biblical tradition would be considered a blessing from God. Although apparently his barns are full, he decides to tear them down and build bigger ones in which to store his new surplus, thinking to himself, "I will say to my soul, 'Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry'" (12:19).<sup>17</sup> The man evidently assumes that he can secure his life for years to come by stock-piling surplus goods. As the words of God at the climax of the parable (12:20) suggest ("This very night your life is being demanded of you"), the landowner has not reckoned with the fact that his "soul" or "self" (Greek, *psychē*) is not a property over which he has ultimate control; for it belongs to God, is simply on loan, and can be "demanded" back at any moment.<sup>18</sup> Not all the material goods that he stores up alter

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<sup>16</sup> Lukan thought permits no convenient separation of material and spiritual, or of interior and exterior; rather, there is a vital connection between them. Thus, in Luke's ethic of discipleship the use and disposition of material possessions is part of what may be termed the "body language" of faith.

<sup>17</sup> Due to the "eat, drink, and be merry" reference, it is tempting to conclude that the parable targets the man as guilty of crass hedonism. That this is a misreading of the passage is indicated by subsequent verses which confront the man – and the parable's audience – with the transitoriness of earthly life (12:20), then instruct on the trust in God (12:22-30) that the man, in his excessive desire to stock-pile more goods in order to secure his life, evidently lacked.

<sup>18</sup> Donahue notes that the Greek word, *apaitousin*, here translated "being demanded," is commonly used for collecting a loan (178).

the fact of his creaturely dependence and mortality. Thus, he is dubbed a “fool,” which in biblical tradition is one who acts without regard for the Creator God, source of all that is. The rich man of the parable, insofar as he thinks and acts as if he is unaccountable to God, the source of the blessing of land and its produce, source, too, of his own life, is fool indeed.

The dangers of the wealth that the man enjoys and intends to increase are evident in the lengthy soliloquy that immediately follows the question that the land’s ample produce raises for him: “What should I do, for I have no place to store my crops? . . . I will do this: I will pull down my barns . . . I will store all my grain and goods . . . I will say to my soul . . . (12:17-19). With its “I” refrain and the astounding absence of any reference to other human beings, his speech betrays a striking self-centeredness and social isolation. Indeed, God’s question to him, “the things you have prepared, whose will they be?” (12:20), suggests he has not given thought to the kin who are his heirs, so all-consuming is his pre-occupation with material acquisitions. He has, as the concluding verse affirms, “So it is with those who store up treasures for themselves but are not rich toward God” (12:21), foolishly stored up treasures for no one but himself. *Having* has taken priority over and separated him from *being* in right relation to God and neighbor, even kin. The isolation that his greed for wealth has caused recalls the prophetic warning, “Woe to you who join house to house, who add field to field, until there is no more room, and you are made to dwell alone in the midst of the land” (Isaiah 5:8).

This parabolic judgment on the dangers of wealth sets the stage for Jesus’ instruction to the disciples on the proper attitude toward possessions (12:22-34), which clarifies what it means to be “rich toward God.” The instruction consists of two units (vv. 22-28; vv. 29-32), each consisting of counsel not to worry or fear, followed by an explanation for such counsel. In the first, Jesus’ counsel “do not worry about your life, what you will eat, or about your body, what you will wear” (12:22) is followed by an explanatory *gar* clause, “For life is more than food, and the body more than clothing,” then two calls to consider God’s providential care for birds (12:24) and lilies (12:27), each including an affirmation of the greater value of humans to God (“Of how much more value are you than the birds!” 12:24; “But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which is alive today and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, how much more will he clothe you – you of little faith!” 12:28).

Similarly, the second unit first advises, “And do not keep striving for what you are to eat and what you are to drink, and do not keep worrying” (12:29), then sets forth the explanation, “For it is the nations of the world that strive after all these things, and your Father knows that you need them” (12:30), which is the basis for the subsequent instruction, “Instead, strive for his kingdom, and these things will be given to you as well. Do not be afraid, little flock, for it is your Father’s good pleasure to give you the kingdom” (12:31-32). Thus, the providential divine care affirmed in the preceding verses is experienced by entering into God’s kingdom, for where God reigns, justice will prevail, including a just distribution of goods for the sake of the livelihood of all. The two references to “your Father” point to the foundational conviction upon which Jesus’ counsel and Lukan theology rests: God is the

generous and gracious Father who, as source of all lives and the goods that sustain them, is pleased and can be trusted to give what is needed.<sup>19</sup>

The call to trust in the Father's gracious providential care expressed in the two units is then followed by the climactic instruction to disciples, which clarifies how to be "rich toward God": "Sell your possessions, and give alms. Make purses for yourselves that do not wear out, an unfailing treasure in heaven, where no thief comes near and no moth destroys. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also" (12:33-34). To be "rich toward God" is to have a heart that trusts in the providential care of God, and so, is spiritually free with regard to the use and disposition of material goods in this life. Rather than cling to one's material goods, disciples are able to share them as others have need.

The narrative theology that is our concern attends to the entire block of material, of which this first parable is a part (12:13-34). The dispute between the brothers that precipitates Jesus' teaching indicates that the matter of having easily becomes divisive in human relations. *Having* in and of itself is, or the material possessions themselves are not, what is critiqued here. Indeed, that the specifics of the brothers' squabble over inheritance are not enumerated is telling. It is rather Jesus' admonition about greed that points up the real and deeper problem in human *having*, and it is a matter of the interior, "the heart": the seductive greed for more for oneself, in utter disregard of one's *being* in relation to God, kin, community, in the case of the rich fool, *having*, indeed hoarding, for himself alone. As the parable of the rich fool suggests, being in right relation to the Creator-God and Father, giver of every life and of the blessings that sustain life, including the land that produces food, is the fundamental given that it is foolish to deny or ignore. The third part of Jesus' response, directed specifically to the disciples, clarifies the still deeper root of the problem in human having: the greed that is preoccupied with acquiring more than enough is symptomatic of a lack of trust in the graciousness of God whose reign is now present in Jesus. In its entirety, Jesus' response to the inheritance dispute between the brothers sets forth a pointed contrast, between a rich fool, storing up treasure for himself in foolish disregard of his creaturely dependence on God and of his relationship to kin and community, and disciples whose trust in God frees them to dispose of their possessions for the good of others, by almsgiving to the needy.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> In the ancient Roman context, the household (*oikos/oikia*) was the basic unit of the city (*polis*), which in turn was the basic unit of the empire (*basileia*). Therefore, when Jesus establishes a new household or family comprised of his disciples as kin of their common father (God) and proclaims the reign (*basileia*) of God, he is envisioning and inaugurating a new social order. This is reflected in Lukan thought, where entering into the reign/kingdom of God as disciples entails entering into a new kinship group (fictive kinship), the household of God, and its economy (*oikonomia*), managed by the Father-God in accord with God's purposes.

<sup>20</sup> The spiritual unity and freedom that reflects trust in God and God's reign (12:22-34) and that is expressed by generous disposition of possessions in relation to others is embodied by the early Christian community in Acts: "All who believed were together and had all things in common; they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need" (2:44-45), with the result that "there was not a needy person among them" (4:34). In this voluntary community of goods that represents the Lukan ideal, "as many as owned lands or houses sold them and brought the proceeds of what was sold. They laid it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to each as any had need" (4:34-35).

*The Parable of the Great Banquet (Luke 14:15-24)*

A second parable in Luke's travel narrative, the parable of the great banquet (14:15-24), further illumines the dangers of wealth. Significantly, Jesus tells this parable while at table in response to the statement of a table-mate, "Blessed is anyone who will eat bread in the kingdom of God!" (14:15), and the parable itself involves an invitation to table. The reference to the kingdom or reign of God alerts us that the subsequent parable is intended to shed light on the eschatological reign of God that Jesus' mission inaugurates and into which people are invited. In a society of limited good, where food could be scarce due to the vagaries of climate and the heavy toll exacted from the peasants by the imperial system, the boundaries of who counts as "us," and so, is welcome to come to table and shares in the food provided there, and who does not, would be a vital concern.<sup>21</sup> Table scenes in Luke image matters of inclusion and exclusion relative to the goods of life, both earthly and eternal.

Our interests are the excuses that the original invitees give for not attending and the revised guest list that require consideration. The point of the Lukan parable emerges by comparison to the similar parable of the wedding feast in Matthew 22:1-10. In the Matthean version, those invited "made light of it and went away, one to his farm, another to his business, while the rest seized his slaves, mistreated them, and killed them" (Matthew 22:5-6). Luke, however, elaborates these excuses as follows: "The first said to him, 'I have bought a piece of land, and I must go out and see it; please accept my regrets.' Another said, 'I have bought five yoke of oxen, and I am going to try them out; please accept my regrets.' Another said, 'I have just been married, and therefore I cannot come.'" As standard commentaries note, these more specific excuses in Luke are modeled on the causes for exemption from war (Deuteronomy 20:5-7). This is not their only meaning, however, as comparison to the Matthean version reveals. Whereas in Matthew the excuses for not attending the banquet are preoccupation with the cares of life, Luke specifies the excuses as having to do with personal property, reflective of his characteristic concern for economic matters. Thus, the Lukan treatment of the excuses, consistent with the larger narrative, serves as prophetic warning about the hazards of having: due to their preoccupation with material possessions, the "haves" are in danger of failing to respond to the invitation to God's kingdom and eschatological banquet, and so, being excluded ("For I tell you, none of those who were invited will taste my dinner," 14:24).

Also distinct from the Matthean version, the Lukan parable climaxes with a revised guest list that makes a pointed contrast between "haves" and "have nots." Only in Luke, after the original invitees decline the invitation, does the host command his servant, "Go out at once into the streets and lanes of the town and bring in the poor, the crippled, the blind, and the lame. . . Go out into the roads and lanes, and compel people to come in, so that my

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<sup>21</sup> New Testament texts reflect an agrarian society, a pre-industrial society in which the rapid increase in agricultural production created a substantial economic surplus, and so, too, wide disparities between rich and poor. A common assumption of people living in pre-industrial societies is that all goods, material and immaterial, exist in limited supply. In such a society, greed, the desire to take more than enough, and wastefulness, squandering the limited resources, would be considered especially grievous transgressions (see Malina and Rohrbaugh: 1-9, 48-49; Horsley: 81-97).

house may be filled” (14:21, 23). The point is not that the poor, maimed, blind, and lame are simply an after-thought or second-class guests, but rather that they are the people who have the proper disposition for entrance into the reign of God, with its festive banquet. This second parable thus clarifies the Lukan Jesus’ earlier declarations, “Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God” (6:20), with its counterpoint woe, “But woe to you who are rich, for you have received your consolation” (6:24). The poor are “blessed” not because they are morally superior to the rich or because they have done something to deserve the blessing but because their material poverty permits them to recognize their dependence on the graciousness of God. Indeed, it is those living on the margins – the poor, maimed, blind, and lame – who are open to the invitation to enter the reign of God and capable of receiving its blessings. In short, they know their very being depends on God.

*The Parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus (Luke 16:19-31)*

A third Lukan parable, the parable of the rich man and Lazarus (16:19-31), likewise combines prophetic warning regarding the dangers of wealth with instruction regarding the proper use of possessions. The parable opens with a vivid contrast between its main characters that affords an image of extreme inequities in access to livelihood in this life: one man is rich (Greek, *plousios*), dressed in purple and fine linen, the equivalent of today’s designer clothing, and dining sumptuously (16:19), while the other, Lazarus, is a destitute beggar (Greek, *ptōchos*), covered not by fine linen but sores, and scrounging, with the dogs, for scraps from the rich man’s table (16:20-21). That the rich man is not given a particular personal identity by naming permits the parable to make a point about rich people in general.

The contrasting images of the main characters are followed by a stunning reversal of fortunes that not even the original audience would necessarily have anticipated or expected: after death the rich man is in torment in the netherworld, whereas Lazarus is carried by angels to “the bosom of Abraham” (16:22), a Jewish figure of speech that pictures the messianic banquet where Lazarus reclines next to Abraham in a place of honor where presumably he now shares in the goods of table (cf. John 13:23; Matthew 8:11).<sup>22</sup> Ironically, the barrier that had separated the two in earthly life, to the advantage of the rich man, also exists in eternity, but now to his disadvantage and to Lazarus’s benefit (the reversal).

Why the rich man is condemned and his five brothers risk sharing the same fate is illumined by vv. 25 and 29. In 16:25, Abraham’s response to the rich man’s pleas for comfort, “Child, remember that during your lifetime you received your good things, and Lazarus in like manner evil things; but now he is comforted here, and you are in agony” is a

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<sup>22</sup> Because those who committed the ancient traditions to writing did not all come from the same social and economic group, the biblical canon reflects the conflicting ideologies of the groups that made up ancient Israel. Thus, the Bible includes different perspectives on social and economic questions, including poverty and wealth. For example, while the Deuteronomic tradition considers poverty to be the result of Israel’s disobedience, and the prophets see it as the result of the greed of the wealthy who oppress the poor, Wisdom literature presents poverty as a consequence of laziness and an undisciplined life (Proverbs 10:4; 20:13; 21:17; see Hoppe: 14, 106). As a result of these diverse perspectives, the ancient audience would not necessarily see the rich man as evil and Lazarus as virtuous. Abundant possessions could be viewed as gifts from God (Genesis. 24:35; Job 42:10-17; Ecclesiastes. 3:10-13; 1 Timothy 4:4-5), while Lazarus’ dire condition could be seen as a sign of divine disfavor as in the book of Job (see Donahue: 170).

straightforward, matter-of-fact affirmation of a reversal willed by God's justice, which turns everything upside down. The reversal recalls Mary's proclamation, that God "has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts. He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty" (1:51b-53). Then, when the rich man, now in torment, requests that Lazarus be sent to warn his brothers lest they share his fate (16:27-28), Abraham replies, "They have Moses and the prophets; they should listen to them" (16:29). In other words, they have the guidance of the Mosaic and prophetic texts, with their numerous teachings about obligations to the poor, the widow, the orphan, and the stranger.<sup>23</sup> In failing to see and respond with compassion to destitute Lazarus lying at his door, the rich man has failed to heed the Word of God expressed in the books of Moses and the prophets.<sup>24</sup> Indeed, the first time the rich man sees Lazarus is across the eternal chasm (16:26) that now separates them as firmly as did the man's gate in their earthly lives; and by the time he does so, the opportunity for repentance has passed and his fate is sealed. Thus, for Jesus' audience the parable's message – that God will make things right – is good news indeed for the poor but a sobering wake-up call to the rich, for whom it is not yet too late to repent, as wealthy Zaccheus does later in the narrative (19:8). This particular prophetic warning regarding the danger of wealth – that it can make people blind to the dire needs of others<sup>25</sup> – also implies the proper use and disposition of possessions: to live one's obligations to God and the needy as articulated in the laws of Moses and the prophets.

In the three parables examined here, neither material possessions themselves nor *having* is considered evil. Rather, what can be morally problematic is what possessions come to mean and their impact on *being*, namely, on *being* in right relationship with God and all those in relationship to God. In the Lukan perspective *being* in right relation with God, which

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<sup>23</sup> See Exodus 22:21-27; 23:6-12; Leviticus 19:9-10, 13-14, 32-36; Deuteronomy 15:1-11; 24:6-15, 17-22. On legal codes bearing upon the obligations of the rich to the poor, see Hoppe: 17-41. In support of his claim that the poor are a central concern in "the books of Moses," Hoppe observes, "First, the narratives of the Torah include stories of how people of means often use their status as an advantage in their dealings with those whose economic situation is precarious. The effect of these stories is to demonstrate that poverty and oppression do not just happen. They are the result of deliberate decisions that the people of means make. Poverty and oppression, then, are not impersonal forces that are endemic to economic structures. They are human creations. Second, the legal traditions not only serve to delineate the rights of the poor, but they also regulate how the more successful Israelites are to deal with those on the margins of the ancient Israelite economy. The laws attempt to prevent a permanent economic and social underclass in ancient Israelite society" (17).

<sup>24</sup> Donahue, noting the significance of the juxtaposition of seeing and compassion in the Lukan Jesus' words and deeds, e.g., in the parable of the Good Samaritan (10:30-37), observes, "Compassion is the bridge between simply looking on injured and half-dead fellow human beings and entering their world with saving care." He continues, "Compassion is that divine quality which, when present in human beings, enables them to share deeply in the sufferings and needs of others and enables them to move from one world to the other: from the world of helper to the one needing help; from the world of the innocent to that of the sinner" (131-32, 155).

<sup>25</sup> In response to the unprecedented income equality in America today, a new generation of social scientists, economists, neurobiologists, and marketing professors are studying the impact of wealth on compassion and giving (see Miller).

brings obligations to others,<sup>26</sup> precedes *having* and morally shapes that *having* in accord with God's will for the well-being of all. With respect to the right use and disposition of possessions within an economy (*oikonomia*), the Lukan narrative presents an additional parable relevant for our interest, albeit one often overlooked. The episode traditionally known as the Parable of the Prodigal Son in Luke 15, long considered the *Evangelium in Evangelio*, "gospel within the gospel," figures for us the divine or kingdom *oikonomia* that is the theological foundation of the good news that the Lukan gospel narrates. As we will see, with respect to the distribution of material resources among persons, the father of the parable stands in marked contrast to both the barn-building fool (12:16-21) and the rich man whose blinding indulgence in the face of another's destitution is met with a startling reversal (16:19-31).

### Having, Being, and Doing in the Lukan Economy of Salvation

Numerous elements of Luke 15 justify reading its content as expressive of the Lukan understanding of the divine economy of salvation. First and most obvious are Jesus' words in the finale of the first two parables: "there will be *more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents*" (15:7) and "there is *joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents*" (15:10), which explicitly identify the lost sheep and coin with the repentant sinner. Second, the references to responses "in heaven" (15:7) and "in the presence of the angels of God" (15:10) make clear that these parables are about God and God's intention to save the lost. This is confirmed by the third and climactic parable in which the central character is a father (15:11:1-13), a primary image of God in the Lukan narrative. Indeed, as observed above, Jesus speaks of God as father both of himself and of his disciples (12:30, 32). Thus, the parable expects readers to think about how God acts in comparison with the father in the parable. Third, the three parables are told in what is a theologically significant narrative setting, Jesus' table fellowship, the boundaries of which are contested by the religious professionals (15:1-3). In Luke, the boundaries of table are metaphor for the boundaries of salvation, of who counts as "in" and who is "out" on access to the goods of salvation and eternal life (see Douglas: 249-75). Thus, for centuries Christians have read the content of Luke 15 as the great parables of mercy that afford insight into the economy of salvation.

Commentators, however, rarely draw attention to the way in which having and material possessions "figure" in that economy. In this regard and given what we have observed above, the following elements of Luke 15 justify our attention to this additional material in Luke's travel narrative. The language of having (Greek, *echō*) occurs in all three parables (15:4, 7, 8, 11) where it refers to a shepherd's, a woman's, and a father's "having." All three parables deal with the loss of a precious possession or what would be a limited good in the ancient cultural context; and the third parable includes the matter of two sons' inheritance (15:12) and their father's disposition of a number of valuable material possessions: the family's finest robe, a ring, sandals, and a fattened calf (15:22-23, 30). The prominence of possessions in these parables thus links them with the previously discussed materials that surround them in chapters 12, 14, and 16. Moreover, in the enumeration of what the

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<sup>26</sup> Green rightly observes, "Luke knows nothing of a relationship with God that does not immediately work itself out in relationship to others" (1995: 109).

shepherd, the woman, and the father have and lose (1 out of 100 sheep, 1 out of 10 coins, 1 out of 2 sons), all three parables figure an “accounting” in the divine economy (*oikonomia*), thereby making a point about who counts. Indeed, as we will see, it is kinship status, that is, who “counts” as son, and so, can share in the family goods, material and spiritual, that is at stake in Jesus’ parable. The third parable (15:11-32) will be our focus because, in moving from the loss of an animal and a coin to loss of a son, it presents the human interactions that “figure” for the divine-human relations, and in so doing, serves as model for Jesus’ intended audience, the disgruntled religious professionals who, as guardians of the tradition, are preoccupied with calculating who “counts” as worthy of inclusion in table fellowship.

*The Parable of the Father and Sons (Luke 15:11-32)*

The parable presents a landed household (*oikos*) consisting of a father and his two sons (15:11), plus hired hands who “have bread enough and to spare” (15:17), thus a relatively prosperous household. Reflective of the cultural patterns of first century Palestine, the household is patriarchal and hierarchical, with the father head of the household and manager (*oikonomos*) of its economy. The story of his management (*oikonomia*) begins with an economic transaction precipitated by the younger son’s request for his share of the inheritance coming to him, a request which the father grants without question or hesitation, dividing the estate between them (15:12).<sup>27</sup>

The remainder of the story recounts the impact of the economic transaction on kinship relations. In so doing, it constructs a stark distinction between the two heirs’ use and disposition of their inheritance, thereby setting-up a “good son/bad son” dichotomy that the parable subsequently subverts. The first of the three sub-scenes of the parable focuses on the actions of the younger son, whose conduct elicits the contrasting responses of both father and elder son in the two subsequent sub-scenes.<sup>28</sup> After receiving his inheritance, the younger son converts his share into “cash” and departs the father’s household, squandering the family resources on dissolute living (15:13). In cultural context, with its perception of limited good, the younger son’s wasteful disposition of resources constituted a grievous transgression. Not only was it a waste of the family’s precious limited goods; it violated the obligations that attend inheritance, rendering him “dead” and “lost” to the kinship group (15:24).<sup>29</sup> The younger son’s irresponsibility results in a predicament that involves deep

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<sup>27</sup> There is disagreement among commentators regarding whether and to what degree the son’s request for his share of the inheritance would have been considered inappropriate and offensive in cultural context, some claiming that the son treats the father as if he were already dead. On my reading, that the father shows no reluctance or hesitation in granting the request suggests that whether the son is out-of-line in making the request is not the point here. It is, rather, what he subsequently does with his inheritance that is problematic and sets up for the major point regarding the father’s immense generosity and graciousness.

<sup>28</sup> The narrative consists of three sub-scenes: the departure and economic downfall of the younger son (15:11-19); his return to and welcome by his father (15:20-24); the father’s conversation with the elder son (15:25-32).

<sup>29</sup> Although not regular practice, the division of an estate during a father’s lifetime was permissible (Tobit 8:21). However, because ancient societies lacked public assistance programs for the aged, heirs were obliged to retain the assets within the family circle in order to care for elderly parents. By squandering his inheritance, the younger son severs the bond with his father and kinship group; hence, the judgment that he is “dead” and “lost” to the family, no longer “son.”



material want: he is “dying of hunger” (15:17). His near physical death is a function of his “death” to his kinship group and household, outside of which “no one gave him anything” (15:16). In striking contrast to the younger son’s irresponsible economic conduct, the elder son’s was exemplary: remaining with the father, he dutifully works the fields and obeys his father’s commands (15:25, 29). However, the parable soon subverts this simplistic good son/bad son dichotomy by exposing the interior dispositions of both and, in the actions and words of the father, overturning its conventional moral calculus based solely on merits.

The calculus on which this household economy operates is discerned by attention to the judgments of all three characters regarding the appropriate consequences of the younger son’s transgression for his familial status. The younger son himself concludes that he is no longer worthy to be treated as son (15:18, 21). That the elder son concurs with this judgment is indicated by his words and actions upon learning of the younger son’s return to the household and the celebration that the father has initiated: he refuses to enter the house to join the celebration, and when his father comes out to him, he complains bitterly, referring to the younger not as “my brother” but contemptuously as “this son of yours” (15:30). Moreover, when stating his complaint, in striking contrast to the younger son, who even while far off repeatedly refers to and addresses the man to whom he returns as “My Father” (15:17, 18, 21), the elder son fails to do so.

Thus both heirs operate on the same assumption: they must and can *earn* and deserve the status of sonship that brings a share in the material goods of the household economy. The younger son, recalling that his father’s hired hands “have bread enough and to spare” (15:17), thinks and twice states, “I am no longer worthy to be called your son” (15:19, 21), proposing instead to return to the father’s house simply as a hired hand, thereby *earning* bread by his labor. The elder dutiful son hurls in his father’s face the claim, “For all these years I have been working like a slave for you, and I have never disobeyed your command; yet you have never given me even a young goat so that I might celebrate with my friends” (15:29). In other words, I *earned* and deserved the fatted calf (or at least a lousy goat!) to enjoy with my friends. With this challenge by the elder son to his father’s authority and decision, the bad son/good son dichotomy and the “earnings” calculus on which it is based breaks down. Indeed both men fail to acknowledge the “gift” quality of their status as sons – they have been made sons and brothers by the father – and so, too, the gift quality of the inheritance that signifies their belonging to and with the father and each other as kin.

In addition, both sons consider the material possessions that are their inheritance as their own, to dispose of as each *individually* pleases, without regard for the relations to which they belong: the younger son on the pleasures of the far country (15:13-14, 30), thereby dissipating the resources that could be needed for care of the elderly father; the elder in a party with his own friends (15:29) rather than with his brother who has nearly starved to death. Indeed, the elder son’s “beef” with his brother reveals his interior disposition: *having* the fatted calf (or even a lousy goat) to party with his own friends means more to him than *being* in kinship with his father and brother. Given the reality of limited good, the elder son’s resentment of the brother’s return and the father’s action reflects a familiar calculus involving the claims of justice: the more that the father expends on the younger, the less for him, and *he*, after all, is the one who has *earned* it!

The father judges the situation differently. Like both sons, he recognizes that the younger son's actions had rendered him "dead" and "lost" to the household (15:24, 32). Yet when the younger returns and begins to deliver his speech ("Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son," 15:21), the father interrupts him, ordering the servant, "Quickly, bring out a robe – the best one – and put it on him; put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. And get the fatted calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate; for this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found!" (15:22-23). For the father, then, the younger remains "this son of mine," and, significantly, his kinship status does not depend on anything the son *does*. That it is *not* his confession that *earns* him back into the father's graces is indicated by the narrative sequence: the father's actions ("But while he was still far off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion; he ran and put his arms around him and kissed him," 15:20) *precede* the son's words of confession (15:21). The implication is that the father had been watching for the son, longing for his return. As soon as the father sees him, he is filled with compassion, and with no questions asked of him, no reprimand, no conditions laid down for his reincorporation into the household and its shared livelihood, the son is welcomed home with joy, not as hired hand but as son.

The father's compassion contrasts sharply with the angry resentment of the elder son who begrudges such generosity toward one whom he judges to be undeserving. The father responds to that resentment by coming out and explaining his decision, "we had to celebrate and rejoice, because this brother of yours was dead and has come to life; he was lost and has been found" (15:32), in effect, pleading with him to acknowledge the younger as still his "brother," which he is in the eyes of the father, and to join the household's celebration. The father's words to the son recall Jesus' earlier instruction, "But love your enemies, do good, and lend, expecting nothing in return. Your reward will be great, and you will be sons of the Most High; for he is kind to the ungrateful and the wicked. Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful" (6:35-36). As the God-figure in the parable, the father embodies the characteristics of "the Most High" and, by his plea to the elder son, in effect urges him to "be merciful just as your Father is merciful." It is by extending mercy to "this brother of yours" (15:32) just as he, the aggrieved father, is prepared to do, that the elder can be truly his father's son (a "son of the Most High"). Thus, in the father's response, a mercy that sustains the bonds of kinship is accorded pre-eminence over the strict justice that for the elder son severs those bonds.

The father's relationship to and disposition of material possessions is also markedly different from that of his sons. Parallel to the two preceding parables about a shepherd and a woman, the parable begins by identifying him as a character who "has": "There was a man who had two sons" (15:11). Only subsequently do we learn that the father also has material possessions: property to divide between his heirs, a fine robe, ring, sandals, and a fatted calf (15:22-23). The sequence is telling, for as the interactions in the remainder of the episode make clear, it is his sons that are the truly treasured "possessions" of the father, taking priority over the material goods he owns. Unlike the rich fool (12:16-21), whose heart is set upon his own security and comforts, this father shares with his heirs, dividing his property (literally, his "life"/*bion*) between them (15:12). Then, on "this son of mine" who was "dead" and "lost," the father, as manager of the household, authorizes expenditure of still more of

the family resources, including the precious fatted calf. He does so because the younger still “counts” as son, and he counts more than the material goods that the son foolishly squandered. Likewise, in response to the elder son’s bitter objection to the father’s expenditure, he assures him, “Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours” (15:31). Noteworthy in this is the sequence: his observation “you are always with me” precedes the affirmation “all that is mine is yours.” Thus, distinct from his sons’ attitude – “What’s mine is mine . . . to do with what I please” – for the father *being* in relation as kin precedes and is the ground for *having*, which for the father is a matter of sharing. The father’s faithful kinship is manifested in his generous disposition of material goods in relation to both sons, and in this case, to save the son who, apart from his father’s house, would have starved to death, for “no one gave him anything” (15:16).

Obviously, Luke’s parable of the father and sons is not a straightforward instruction about possessions, as are the three parables examined above. It is rather, as Christian interpreters have long recognized, a lesson about the dynamics of salvation, i.e., who can know the joy of salvation (sinners and tax collectors figured by the younger son) and who is in danger of not knowing that joy due to self-righteousness (the grumbling Pharisees figured by the elder son). But the fact that the dynamics of salvation are figured here in terms of kinship, a household economy, and the use and disposition of material goods is, I suggest, significant for our interests. In the context of the larger Lukan narrative, with its numerous characters struggling with having and not having, the parable sets forth the foundation of Lukan theology and its understanding of salvation, which has everything to do with economy, and so, with the distribution of goods, material and immaterial, temporal and eternal. Indeed, the parable figures for us the nexus of economy and salvation, which are too often thought to have little or nothing to do with one another.<sup>30</sup>

For many, “economy” or “economics” concerns the material conditions of *this life*, which are assumed to be inevitably determined by economic forces and laws that have very little to do with God; whereas “salvation” has to do with an individual’s spiritual state in the *next life*, in short, “getting into heaven” after death. For Lukan theology, however, the two are inextricably connected. As noted above, salvation is the coming of God’s reign of justice that brings a reversal of the material and social conditions of life, and so, relief for those on the margins, who lack a share in the well-being that God wills for humankind and creation (the poor, captive, sick, oppressed; Luke 4:18-19; 7:22). In this regard it is well to recall that the Latin root of the word “salvation,” *salus*, means “safe” or “sound.” To be *salus*, i.e., safe and sound, or more theologically, “saved,” requires, according to the Lukan thought world, access to the livelihood that sustains life. Indeed, as the father’s merciful response to the younger son – “we had to celebrate and rejoice, because this brother of yours was *dead* and has come to life; he was *lost* and has been found” (15:32) – suggests, to be “saved” is to be saved from death by the livelihood that kinship provides, i.e., by the livelihood that is assured by virtue of one’s belonging to and with the father (God) who intends well-being for

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<sup>30</sup> In figuring the divine and heavenly reality of salvation in terms of the disposition of earthly and material goods among a father and his kin, the parable expresses a foundational assumption of Lukan theology, namely, that there is no dichotomy but rather a vital connection between material and spiritual, exterior and interior, earthly and heavenly, temporal and eternal.

all his kin. Indeed, salvation requires a household economy (*oikonomia*) in which kin secure their collective well-being together, having “inherited” ample resources from a generous father for whom “all I have is yours” (15:31) and for whom every member of the family “counts” as son and heir. Thus, according to Luke’s narrative theology, *being* in relation to father and brothers, i.e., being kin, precedes and grounds *having* the goods, material and spiritual, temporal and eternal, that originate with the father-God and are to be had and used, first and foremost, for communal well-being.

## Conclusion

Economy is a central concern within the diverse traditions that comprise the Bible, including the Gospel of Luke. Given the enormous differences between the biblical world and our own, however, it is well to ask, can the Gospel of Luke speak to our contemporary context, including its economy, in any meaningful way? Some think not, claiming that the Bible, as product of a pre-industrial age, cannot address the pressing problems and complexities of a post-modern global economy. Granted, the Gospel of Luke offers no technical solutions to the complex problems we now face; nor does it prescribe any particular economic system – e.g., monetarist, structuralist, socialist, capitalist – as the biblically justified system that Christians ought to adopt. However, as the critical analyses with which this essay began suggests, there is urgent need for not simply technical solutions to the problems that the current economic system has produced, but a profound re-thinking of the purpose of human economy and the motive and principles on which it ought operate. Indeed, as Sandel observes, “The era of market triumphalism has coincided with a time when public discourse has been largely empty of moral and spiritual substance,” hence, the need for serious deliberations “about the meaning of goods, and the values that should govern them” (202).

An economic system is, after all, a way of ordering the exchange of goods and services among persons in accordance with a particular theory regarding the proper goal and purpose (*telos*) of such exchanges as well as a particular understanding of the human nature that engages in them. The advanced consumer capitalist system has as its goal the maximization of profit and accumulation of wealth. That goal reflects an understanding of human nature as inevitably self-aggrandizing, even selfish. The successful operation of the system requires, as Barber’s work suggests, the shaping of human persons to be not public citizens concerned for the common good, but private consumers whose primary concern is having more of what is marketed for oneself and perhaps for a narrowly defined group of those who count as “us.” Given the grave and troubling consequences of this system, for which there is mounting evidence, a public discourse of moral and spiritual substance is urgently needed, and it is this need that faith communities, particularly those with prophetic traditions that envision alternatives (e.g., Judaism, Christianity, Islam), can and should address at the table of public discourse. Indeed, religious traditions can bring to that table visions of how to shape the moral foundations of an economy.

For Christians, the Gospel of Luke, consistent with the prophetic tradition upon which it draws, affords an alternative understanding of human economy, one accountable to and reflective of divine intents and purposes. Its narrative sets forth a vision of what may be termed a “kingdom economy”, i.e., management of persons and resources in accord with the

reign (or kingdom) of God, thus, in accord with who God is (the generous and gracious source of creation), who God made humans to be (sons and daughters, brothers and sisters), and what God wills for creation (a well-being [*shalom*] rooted in justice or right relation). The goal or *telos* of the kingdom economy is not the accumulation and amassing of wealth for some but first and foremost access to livelihood for all. Whereas the basis of livelihood in ancient Israel was the land and its produce, in today's post-industrial society, access to livelihood depends on a job that pays a living and just wage by which to purchase the necessities that sustain life: housing, food, clothing, education, job training, transportation, and basic health care. Thus, the Lukan vision compels Christians to engage in critical reflection on how the structures, mechanisms, and policies of the current (or any alternative) economic system undermine or enhance people's access to livelihood. Moreover, it challenges the *individualistic* understanding of salvation that has been widely preached and embraced by Christians.<sup>31</sup> It also challenges any narrow or self-serving understanding of kinship, of who counts as our brothers and sisters, and so, ought to share in the livelihood of the divine economy and its goods, material and spiritual, temporal and eternal, earthly and heavenly.<sup>32</sup>

Distinct from the capitalist economy, with its profit motive and calculation of profit margins for the maximization of individual wealth, the kingdom economy operates on what we might call the prophet principle and the calculation of "prophet" margins of a very different sort. It is not that the Bible, or Luke in particular, condemns profit or wealth, for as Mays rightly observes, "Wealth, the pursuit of it and the possession of it, is a subject that appears repeatedly in prophetic indictments," but, he adds, "there is not the slightest hint of an ideological rejection of prosperity in one's livelihood or of the pleasure that comes with well-being and well-doing. They saw no virtue in the poor or in being poor; quite the contrary. . . ." He continues,

But there was a kind and degree of wealth which they held to be incompatible with justice . . . . If its acquisition and possession cost the economic freedom and welfare of others, they called it violence and

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<sup>31</sup> Green observes, "Traditional understandings of Christian faith . . . have generated a series of fissures – between the horizontal and vertical, the spiritual and the secular, social witness and evangelism, the personal and the public, individual sin and systemic sin, and the like. These have made problematic our understanding of 'salvation' . . . Saved *from* what? Saved *to* what? Traditional styles of evangelism concomitant with rifts of this nature have emphasized proclamation to individuals and the initiation of individuals into the heavenly reign of God. 'Salvation' in this Christian subculture has generally been defined along narrow lines, in subjective, individualistic terms" (134). Similarly, Cavanaugh comments, "Much of what passes for Christianity in our culture today is addressed to fulfilling the spiritual needs of individual consumers of religion. Many kinds of religion – or more commonly, 'spirituality' – are largely about self-help, using God to cope with the stresses of modern life" (54).

<sup>32</sup> Cavanaugh rightly contends, "In the Christian tradition, the use of material things is meant to be a common use, for the sake of a larger body of people. We do not help each other as individuals but as members of one another. . . The reason that we do not cling to material things is precisely because of our attachment to others. We must constantly be ready to relinquish our claim to ownership, and to use our goods for the common good of the whole body. . . There is no question about whether or not to be a consumer. Everyone must consume to live. The question concerns what kinds of practices of consumption are conducive to an abundant life for all" (53).

oppression. If it fostered conspicuous consumption at a level of luxury that was enjoyed in heedless unconcern for the needs of others, it was wrong. If it was gained by violation of the rules of righteousness which set the values of personal relations above profit, it was iniquitous. If wealth became the dominant motivation of those responsible for social well-being because they held power, that was sin (153-54).

Thus, biblical tradition, including Luke, is wise to the ways and means by which profit and wealth are often gained, i.e., by exploitation of others in a system designed to benefit some to the detriment of others; and so, it condemns the “differentiating wealth” that allows some to live in luxury while others lack the basic necessities that sustain life and dignity. Therefore, in accord with the goal of the kingdom economy – access to the livelihood necessary for well-being – Christian communities turn a prophetic eye to the margins of the social body and advocate for use of what we might call “the prophet principle” – seeking to create systems and policies that establish justice and well-being – to calculate the economic redistributions and reforms necessary to save those living on the margins of the public household that is “the household of God.” For as Luke’s narrative theology makes clear, in the kingdom economy, acknowledgement of our shared status as creature-kin precedes and grounds *having* – what we have (necessities for all before luxuries for some), how much we have (a sustainable sufficiency), how one has (with spiritual freedom/detachment or stinginess) – as well as *doing*.

Luke’s understanding of the kingdom economy, it should be noted, exhibits a sobering realism about human proclivities with respect to having and not having. His cast of characters, after all – brothers squabbling over inheritance, the rich fool, the rich man blind to the desperate need of Lazarus, the two sons of the father – reflect the familiar human tendency to be self-interested and selfish with respect to material goods. Distinct from the Hobbesian understanding of the human person characteristic of the neo-classical economics that undergirds capitalist ideology, however, the Gospel of Luke clearly affirms the power of God to affect human transformation by means of a change of heart and what it “treasures.”<sup>33</sup> The story of the wealthy tax collector Zaccheus, who repents of his greed and extortion, promising to make four-fold restitution to those whom he cheated (Luke 19:1-10), attests to the transformative power afforded by encounter with Jesus, God’s Spirit-filled prophet, and subsequently by the gift of the Spirit (Acts 2:1-13), which affected in the early community, a unity and solidarity that resulted in a sharing of goods that freed poorer members from need (Acts 2:44-45; 4:32, 34-35).<sup>34</sup> It is the Spirit of God that the Lukan narrative posits as the basis for a hopeful vision of the coming of the kingdom economy in our world.

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<sup>33</sup> Both spirituality and economy fundamentally involve directing human desire to a particular end or purpose (*telos*). On desire and consumption, see Cavanaugh; O’ Murchu.

<sup>34</sup> Lukan scholarship generally agrees that the “community of goods” depicted in Acts 2:44-45 and 4:32, 34-35 is an *idealized* representation of the life of the Jerusalem community. Even if the community did not fully live-out this ideal in reality, it remains the gospel ideal with which Christian communities of every generation must wrestle in their discipleship.

The kingdom economy, which is to say, the economy of God, is, as the parable of the father and sons suggests, a “resurrection economy” in which the “dead” and “lost,” i.e., those dying outside or on the margins of the public household, are found and raised to life at the table to which the Father-God longs to welcome all who belong to the human family. The words of theologian M. Douglas Meeks provide an apt summary of the Lukan theological vision that ought inform Christian reflection on the moral foundations of human economy, “The fundamental logic of the economy of God is that Jesus Christ is the *charis* (which means both gift and grace), the unexcelled generosity by which God has gifted us with God’s own life in order to redeem us from the nothingness of death, and that this gift is what obligates, moves, and empowers our lives for serving life against death in the world” (119).

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