corrupted the state, the former inciting crime and the latter sloth and luxury (*Laws*, 919b-c).[26] Aristotle, on the other hand, strongly defended private property against various forms of communalism but agreed that the middle class provided the real strength of a city (*Politics*, 1295b). The Stoics put forth an ideal of self-sufficiency but also contentment with that part of life that one could not control. Their founder, Zeno, believed that wealth could prove a hindrance to wisdom. Two centuries later, Cicero would exemplify the Stoic ideal in helping the needy: 'our obligation is not to take upon ourselves bitterness and pain for the sake of others; it is simply, where possible, to relieve others of their pain' (cited in Hands 1968: 82): In other words, the Stoics sought a rational rather than an emotional response. Against the Stoics, the Epicureans were best known for their slogan, 'Eat, drink and be merry, for tomorrow you may die', although this is often misrepresented as reflecting a hedonistic outlook. Epicurus himself, however, was somewhat sickly and more concerned to avoid pain, cultivate pleasure, develop friends, attend cultural activities, and the like. The Cynics preferred a more radical option as they promoted an extremely simple lifestyle, dependent on begging, and viewed the divestment of worldly goods as a virtue. These traits, combined with their itinerant wanderings, have led some scholars to find parallels in the careers of Jesus and his disciples, but the differences outweigh the parallels (see esp. Boyd 1995) and this was the one philosophy that made the fewest inroads into Palestine.

Neo-Pythagoreanism promoted a sectarian form of communalism, but it seems to have had little influence. The Platonic dualism that emerged so prominently in early Gnostic thought easily led to an attitude of either asceticism or indulgence with respect to bodily appetites, but neither approach would have laid great spiritual emphasis on caring for the physically needy. Only Cicero in the first-century BC and Seneca in the first-century AD emerge as well-known Romans who have significant elements in common with both the motives and contents of later Christian thought (Mullin 1983: 15–24).[27]

As far as Roman government was concerned, a policy that generally distinguished it from both Jewish and Greek thought was the absolute freedom of the aristocracy to own property and to use it however they liked, even if that involved what we would we call abuse. From the

[26] *Cf.* the historian Thucydides (3.45.4) who spoke of 'poverty which leads to sharing through necessity, and affluence which leads to greed through *hubris* and pride'.

[27] For additional information on most of these Greco-Roman developments, see esp. González (1990: 3–19).

days of Augustus onward, the emperors were known for increasing extravagance in their spending and did not always balance their budgets. Expenditures included laying on lavish banquets for the social elite, sustaining a vast army, remunerating urban employees, caring for the imperial household and providing a variety of gifts and monies for public works, foreign subsidies and debts (Duncan-Jones 1994: 33–45). But the Roman cities' revenue came not so much from taxes or manufacturing as from agricultural trade and rents collected from the farmlands (Jones 1974: 25–31). Free men usually despised the trades or manual labour, which included both carpentry and fishing.

Ironically, in the ancient Roman empire, as so often today in the Two-Thirds World, many villagers and farmers left the stability of rural poverty for the large cities in hopes of improving their lot, but only a handful managed to do so. In many instances they found their circumstances even more appalling, because jobs were unavailable and they had separated themselves from their support networks of family and friends who could care for them during difficult times. Meanwhile, the rich in Rome grew richer, as they bought up large tracts of land and imported vast quantities of luxury items from far-flung corners of the empire. Increasingly, too, the imperial treasury was replenished with larger and larger sums of tribute money from subjugated peoples (Jones 1974: 114–129). Unlike the Jews, the Greeks and Romans apparently never developed a graduated or progressive tax, but typically charged flat amounts or percentages, so that the rich never made the same sacrifice as the poor (Jones 1974: 172–175).

Conclusions

Comparing Jewish, Greek and Roman thought and practice increases the often bewildering diversity of perspectives on material possessions. Given the interpenetration of Hellenism and Judaism in Israel, and given the combination of Jews and Gentiles in most of the early Christian churches, especially in the diaspora, we will have to beware of assuming any one monolithic background in our interpretation of any given New Testament text. Nevertheless, certain elements will prove more prominent in some contexts than in others. In general, Christianity would share with Judaism a distinctive concern for the poor.

Information from the Gospels bearing on the socio-economic status of the main characters

There is a long tradition of viewing Jesus and his family as quite

poor (*cf.*, *e.g.*, Batey 1972:5–9; Stegemann 1984: 23–26). Luke 2:24 describes Mary and Joseph as having to offer the sacrifice in the temple of 'a pair of doves or two young pigeons', following the provision of Leviticus 12:8 for those who could not afford more expensive animals. The picture of the baby Jesus lying in a manger – a food trough (Luke 2:7) – and among animals has been viewed as proving Jesus' poverty. The statement about Christ becoming poor so that we might become rich in 2 Corinthians 8:9 has also been said to support this interpretation. Nevertheless, the latter verse is clearly a theological, rather than a sociological, statement (see below, p. 193), while the nature of the holy family's accommodations in Bethlehem can be attributed to the crowds present due to the census and do not necessarily reflect the family's normal living circumstances. The sacrifice, nevertheless, does suggest that at least at the time of Jesus' birth Mary and Joseph had very few financial resources.

As with many other people in the history of the world, however, this need not have remained their situation as the boy Jesus grew up. The key details for determining the family's later circumstances are the references to Jesus and Joseph as carpenters (Mark 6:3 and par.). The Greek word is *tektōn*, which could mean a woodworker or stonemason, and there is some evidence that such artisans could have arisen to at least the lower level of what today we would call 'blue-collar workers'. Of course, by any modern Western standards, work conditions would have seemed appalling, but by the standards of first-century Galilee, it may be appropriate to think of Jesus as part of the lower 'middle class'. At any rate, it seems that his family in later days was not subject to the 'grinding, degrading poverty of the day labourer or rural slave' (Meier 1991: 282).[28]

Some have tried to raise Jesus' level of income even higher by pointing to the construction boom in the mid-20s at nearby Sepphoris, an almost exclusively Gentile city that had originally been Herod Antipas's capital in Galilee. Granted that this city was only about five miles from the much smaller Nazareth, there is nevertheless no reference in the Gospels to Sepphoris. The same is true of Tiberias, the other even more prominent Gentile city in Galilee. This information is subject to two quite different interpretations, both of which involve arguments from silence. On the one hand, it could imply that Jesus would have had a good chance to work at Sepphoris and prosper above many of his contemporaries in other parts of the province (Batey 1991:

[28] On the problems of identifying Jesus with the poor and marginalized workers of the world, see Draper (1991).

65–82). On the other hand, the fact that he is never described as visiting there during his ministry could suggest the conventional Jewish avoidance of things Gentile and make it more likely that he would have avoided employment related to the construction industry there, even in earlier years (the traditional view). We simply do not have enough data to determine the probability of either thesis (J. Riches 1996: 391).

When we turn to Jesus' disciples, we again know rather little, but can make a few inferences. Fishermen at times were comparable in class to carpenters, though perhaps slightly less well off, inasmuch as their labour required less skill. Zebedee and his sons, John and James, were perhaps better off than many, given the reference to 'hired men' in the plural in Mark 1:20. The possession of one slave was extremely common, even for relatively poor Jewish families, but two or more probably indicated a higher level of prosperity.[29] Levi (or Matthew), as a converted tax collector, may also have been substantially better off, though we must be careful not to exaggerate the wealth that middlemen who were not 'publicans' (like Zacchaeus) would have accrued (recall above, p. 102, n. 23).[30] Levi does at least have the means to throw a party for his many associates, and indeed Jesus himself developed a reputation for enjoying such festivities (Matt. 11:19 and pars.). Matthew 11:19 (= Luke 7:34) also introduces us to the caricature of Jesus as a 'glutton and drunkard' and 'friend of tax collectors and sinners'. While the main point of the core truth behind this exaggeration is Jesus' welcome of the outcasts, Jesus' frequent practice of intimate table-fellowship with such riff-raff indirectly testifies to his anti-ascetic tendencies. He will endorse the expenditure of enough money to enjoy a good meal or party (*cf.* esp. Kee 1996).

It is a reasonable assumption that the remaining disciples were ordinary peasants, save perhaps Judas. If 'Iscariot' means 'man of Kerioth', a small town in Judea, Judas may have been the only non-Galilean disciple and therefore from a different social background as well. That he was responsible for the disciples' treasury (John 12:6) may indicate some prior experience in working with money. On the other hand, his willingness to betray Jesus for the sum of thirty pieces of silver (Matt. 26:15) may indicate that he was actually not that well off. Still, if these were shekels, the equivalent of four days' wages apiece, Judas would have received 120 days' worth of income, a

[29] *Cf.* Waetjen (1989: 79): 'James and John, who are in partnership with their father, probably enjoy a kind of middle-class prosperity and comfortability.'

[30] On the historical background and setting of tax collectors, see esp. Herrenbrück (1987), who also argues that only the Pharisees strongly stigmatized the tax collectors.

significant sum even to fairly prosperous folk.[31] Ultimately we must admit that we know nothing much at all about Judas' economic standing or his motives for betraying Jesus.[32]

As Jesus and the disciples travel together throughout most of his adult ministry, they clearly adopt an itinerant lifestyle. They depend on the gifts and provisions of others, but there is no indication that they have sold or permanently abandoned what material resources they had at home. In John 21:3, Peter can return to his fishing practice. Throughout the Gospels his family retains a house in Capernaum that becomes Jesus' home-base for later ministry (Mark 1:29–31 and pars.; *cf.* 2:1; 9:33; Matt. 4:13; 17:24). The group's itinerant lifestyle is temporary and freely chosen; Matthew 8:20 and parallel ('foxes have holes and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head') must be interpreted in this light. The same is all the more true for the short-term missions of the Twelve and the Seventy/Seventy-two (Mark 6:7–13 and pars.; Luke 10:1–24), in which Jesus sends his disciples out to replicate his ministry. Luke 22:35–38 explicitly rescinds many of the provisions for travelling simply, as Jesus anticipates rougher days ahead. Still, in 1 Corinthians 9:14 Paul will refer back to Luke 10:7 when stressing that the labourers are worthy of their wages. An even more explicit quotation of this verse appears in 1 Timothy 5:18. A cross-cultural principle apparently remains in force; one should depend for material support on those among whom one ministers (*cf.* further below, p. 186).[33]

The miracles of the feeding of the five thousand and four thousand obviously demonstrate Jesus' compassion and concern to feed the hungry masses. But it is interesting that Mark links Jesus' compassion for the five thousand more directly to the fact that the crowds were 'like sheep without a shepherd' (Mark 6:34). Only in the feeding of the four thousand is the danger from the crowd's hunger at all acute (Mark 8:2–3). The primary focus of both feeding miracles is clearly Christological, meant to recall Moses and the Israelites with their manna in the wilderness. John, by appending Jesus' 'Bread of Life' discourse (John 6:35–59), merely makes explicit what is already implicit in the Synoptics, that Jesus is the new and greater Moses (*cf.* Blomberg 1986).

[31] Reiner (1968: 186–190), however, suggests that 'thirty shekels' reflects an idiomatic Sumerian expression for 'a trifling amount'.

[32] For a succinct summary of Christian speculation, see Brown (1994: 1401–1404); and *cf.* further below, p. 142.

[33] The particulars, however, clearly vary in these and other New Testament and early Christian texts that may allude to Jesus' saying: see Harvey (1982).

The same may be said of Jesus' miracle-working ministry more generally. Again, Christ clearly concentrates on healing or exorcizing the physically needy. But this ministry always also occurs in a context of calling them to faith and discipleship, and he steers his audiences to the claims that in his miracle-working ministry the kingdom has arrived, and therefore the king, the Messiah, has come (see esp. Matt. 12:28 and pars.). The refrain that occurs four times in the Synoptic Gospels, 'your faith has saved you', might better be rendered 'your faith has made you whole'. In three out of the four passages in which this refrain occurs, the individuals addressed have been physically healed and have come to faith in Jesus (Mark 5:34 and pars.; 10:52 and par.; Luke 17:19). It is at least arguable that such holistic salvation is present in the fourth text as well (Luke 7:50; see further Blomberg 1994c: 76–83).

In Luke 7 – 8 one observes the interesting sequence of the story of Jesus anointed by the disreputable woman (7:36–50), followed immediately by a passing reference to women who travelled with Jesus along the road and 'were helping to support them out of their own means' (8:1–3; quotation from v. 3). Presumably, all of these women – Mary Magdalene, Joanna the wife of Chuza, Susanna and the unnamed others – were sufficiently well off to form the core of Jesus' 'support team'. At least Joanna, as the wife of a man identified as 'the manager of Herod's household' (8:3), would surely have fitted into this category.[34] At the end of Jesus' life, Joseph of Arimathea is described both as rich and as a closet disciple (Matt. 27:57; John 19:38; *cf.* the more nuanced parallels in Mark 15:43 and Luke 23:50–51). He volunteers a presumably costly unused tomb to give Jesus a decent burial following his extremely indecent execution.

Conclusions

Economic developments in Israel in the centuries leading up to the time of Jesus set the stage for greatly misguided enthusiasm if anyone plausibly claimed to be the Messiah. In the midst of all the diversity of first-century Israel, every Jew could plainly see that Rome governed them, which was not what God had promised in his Word as their

[34] On these three verses more generally, see esp. Witherington (1979). Sim (1989) denies that we can demonstrate that any of the other women were wealthy and doubts whether Joanna, married to a non-Christian, could have contributed much, but his study relies heavily on several arguments from silence and a certain circular reasoning that begins from what Jesus 'usually' does elsewhere.

ultimate destiny. With the arrival of the messianic age would come not only political freedom but social prosperity. Religious and economic issues were deeply intertwined. In ways largely uncharacteristic of the Greek and Roman worlds, Judaism had a God who cared passionately about the poor and marginalized and opposed both religious idolatry and social injustice. It is crucial to understand these dominant trends if we are to make sense of the emergence of the New Testament teaching on material possessions in its historical context.

Chapter Four

The teaching of Jesus in the Synoptic Gospels

At last we turn to the New Testament itself. In light of the background of Old Testament and intertestamental teaching thus far surveyed, it is clear that a broad spectrum of beliefs and expectations surrounded economic matters, including those related to the time of a coming Messiah. We cannot simply presuppose any one monolithic background when it comes to interpreting New Testament texts. The New Testament itself affords clues as to specific background in the immediate context of a number of its key passages, and we will note these as we proceed. We will follow as best as it can be reconstructed the historical sequence of the developments narrated in the New Testament beginning with the teaching of Jesus in the Synoptic Gospels. I have elsewhere defended on historical grounds the substantial trustworthiness of both the Gospels' record in general and Jesus' teaching on rich and poor more specifically (Blomberg 1987; Blomberg 1994c: 87–93).

This chapter subdivides into two main parts: information gleaned from Jesus' parables, followed by the remaining, non-parabolic teaching of Jesus. There is a certain degree of arbitrariness to this division, but given the distinctive rules necessary for interpreting the parables, and given the fact that even those who are more sceptical of the historicity of the synoptic tradition more generally tend to accept a significant portion of the parables as bedrock, core 'Jesus material' (*cf.* Blomberg 1990), the division is perhaps a logical one. If the themes that emerge from an investigation of the parables are repeated and elaborated in the teaching of Jesus elsewhere in the Synoptics, the criterion of 'coherence' should support the authenticity of that additional material as well. The issues surrounding the Gospel of John are sufficiently distinctive to merit treating the data of the Fourth Gospel separately (see below, pp. 233–236). In each main section of this chapter, we will present individual passages as they appear in the sequence of Aland's synopsis (1982). While we cannot know in detail the exact chronological location of every gospel