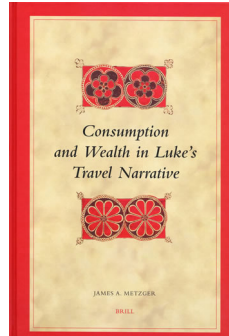


○ REVIEW OF JAMES A. METZGER, *CONSUMPTION AND WEALTH IN LUKE'S TRAVEL NARRATIVE*

(BIBLICAL INTERPRETATION SERIES 88. LEIDEN: E. J. BRILL, 2007)

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This is a beautifully produced and detailed analysis of some key texts concerning money and wealth from Luke's Gospel. Originally written under the direction of Fernando Segovia at Vanderbilt as a PhD thesis, it was also supported by a United Church of Christ (USA) fellowship. I note these matters, since the book has a clear agenda to find in some of the stories of Luke a distinct impetus for social and economic change.

I will come back to that question, but first a few comments about the way the book is put together. It seeks to challenge some of the conclusions concerning wealth in Luke, namely that wealthy readers may also be saved but they don't have to embrace the ascetic and itinerant lifestyle of Jesus and his immediate followers, and that wealthy readers are encouraged to be generous and give alms either for the benefit of the poor or their own salvation. What follows is a consistent challenge to this rather complacent view of Luke (which might well read as, 'I'm comfortable as a professor and really don't want to give up my cushy job, so Luke is a good text for me'). Metzger does so with a mix of methods, drawing on reader-response criticism, narratology and intertextuality. There is actually a rather good introduction to these approaches (pp. 30–56) which is clear and indicates how the methods will be used. Most of the attention is given over to reader-response, especially since it has quite a vibrant life in New Testament studies. In this discussion all of the right names turn up such as Iser and Fish for reader-response, Bal for narratology and Kristeva for intertextuality, along with most of the biblical critics who have made use of these methods. The section is as good an introduction as one will find for such approaches. But perhaps the best summary is the statement on pp. 22–23: 'For this reader, however, Jesus' parables often elude, frustrate, tease, and intrigue. They overflow with possibility; gaps and ellipses abound; they are replete with moments of 'undecidability'; attempts to pin them down fail. Their interpretive frames and settings may offer guidance but never exhaust their polyvalence' (these observations are repeated on p. 183).

The focus of the study is on four parables in the so-called travel narrative of Luke. There are: the parable of the wealthy landowner (12:13–21); the parable of the father and his two sons (15:11–32); the parable of the unjust steward (16:1–13); the parable of the rich man and Lazarus (16:19–31). Added to this are discussions of Jesus' encounters with the anonymous Jewish ruler (18:18–25) and Zacchaeus the tax collector (19:1–10). Each parable and encounter is read in painstaking detail. I really had the impression that not even the tiniest pebble was left in its original state.

The conclusion: the characters who choose to spend their windfalls on themselves rather than redistribute them come in for condemnation. Over-consumption is a no-go zone. 'Personal wealth, the mere presence of which testifies to an unequal and unjust distribution of land and resources, is totally incompatible with service to God ... and has no place in Jesus' vision of the kingdom' (186). Even more, as the two encounters with the ruler and tax collector indicate, the elimination of personal wealth through redistribution of land and resources to the poor is a pre-requisite for the new community. Needless to say, this is a stronger message than the majority of interpretations of the rather civil and urbane Luke.

But what does Metzger make of all this? As a minister with the United Church of Christ, he situates his study within the context of massive US over-consumption, at least by those in a country with staggering differentials in wealth (see pp. 56–60). My own experience of working in the USA is of islands of privilege in a sea of poverty, which made me think of the comment that US is really a Third World country that 'worked' – i.e. some became fabulously wealthy while maintaining punitive conditions for most workers. Metzger links this situation with a comparable one in 1st century Palestine, even though the economic system was vastly different (pp. 190–193). The solution: radical redistribution, reduction in consumption, research and development for quality of life, forgiveness of Third World debt and a global development organisation run by the global south that uses the wealth of the north to deal with the poverty of the south. In short, he proposes a collective agenda with a planned economy rather than a focus on personal gain at the expense of everyone else. Although his suggestions sound all too much like socialism, Metzger shies away from that path due to its historic 'failures'.

It is a shame Metzger didn't engage with some of the early critiques of his position, especially Rosa Luxemburg's *Socialism and the Churches* (1905) and Karl Kautsky's *Foundations of Christianity* (1908). They paint a picture of the myth (my term) of early Christian communism, but it is their criticism that is pertinent. That communism appears as one of consumption, i.e. it required redistribution from the wealthy to the poor members of the community. The catch is that such a system continually requires the wealthy to keep giving to the poor. What happens when the wealth is consumed and runs out? The wealthy need to produce more wealth so as to redistribute it once again. The proposal for redistribution does not change the economic system one bit; in fact, it requires the system to keep operating in its unequal ways. The result is a system of alms-giving – precisely the one that Metzger argues is no longer sufficient. Luxemburg and Kautsky argue that you need to change the system at its core rather than attempting band-aid measures of redistributing wealth.

There is one other feature of Metzger's study that shows up between the lines. He makes a persuasive argument for a radical tradition in the Gospels. Such a radical political and economic agenda shows its head elsewhere as well, and it really points to a basic political ambivalence in

the Bible – and indeed the Christian tradition as a whole – between radical/revolutionary and reactionary tendencies. If various pieces of the Christian Church have all too often carried on a dirty little relationship with the odd Roman Emperor from the time of Constantine onwards, or with the lords and kings of the Middle Ages, or indeed the political Right wing in our own day (and here there is little difference between conservative popes or evangelical Protestant Christians), then other elements have tapped into a deep revolutionary current, such as Gerrard Winstanley and the Diggers in 17th century England, or Thomas Müntzer and the Peasants' Revolt in 16th century Germany, or the guerrilla priests of liberation theology like Camillo Torres in the 20th century. This ambivalence may also be found in the Bible, where the murmuring and rebellious Israelites in the myth of the wilderness wanderings challenge Moses time and time again, or some of the prophets call for an end to exploitation, or the rebel Jesus who is put to death by the Romans as an agitator, or the perpetual theme of revolutionary chaos that threatens the order the ruling class desperately tries to assert, or indeed that curious message of grace in the letters of Paul, something that irrupts unexpectedly and undeservedly into the everyday run of life to change all the coordinates of our existence. My point here is not that one take on the Bible or Christianity is closer to the truth and another a misinterpretation; rather, both are perfectly valid: the Bible may very well be read as a friend of the rich and powerful, but it may equally well be an inspiration for revolutionary groups seeking to overthrow their rich and powerful oppressors. To Metzger's credit he has recovered a more radical side in these stories from Luke. How then do we deal with the reactionary elements?

Finally, and on a slightly different note: the press that published the book, Brill, has made a name for itself as a publisher that does not compromise on quality. This is simply a beautiful book which is a pleasure to touch and handle. The paper quality is second to none, the production is virtually flawless (one struggles to find a typo in a Brill book) and they last forever. Add to that the status Brill has in Europe as the premier publisher in the area of biblical studies, the Ancient Near East and now more recently the social sciences. No one dares argue Brill down on any deal, for it is prestigious enough to have a book published by Brill – except of course for some friends of mine in Taiwan who managed to out-negotiate Brill. The problem with all of this is that the price of a Brill book puts it out of reach of people like me. I can only get hold of one if it is a review book like Metzger's.