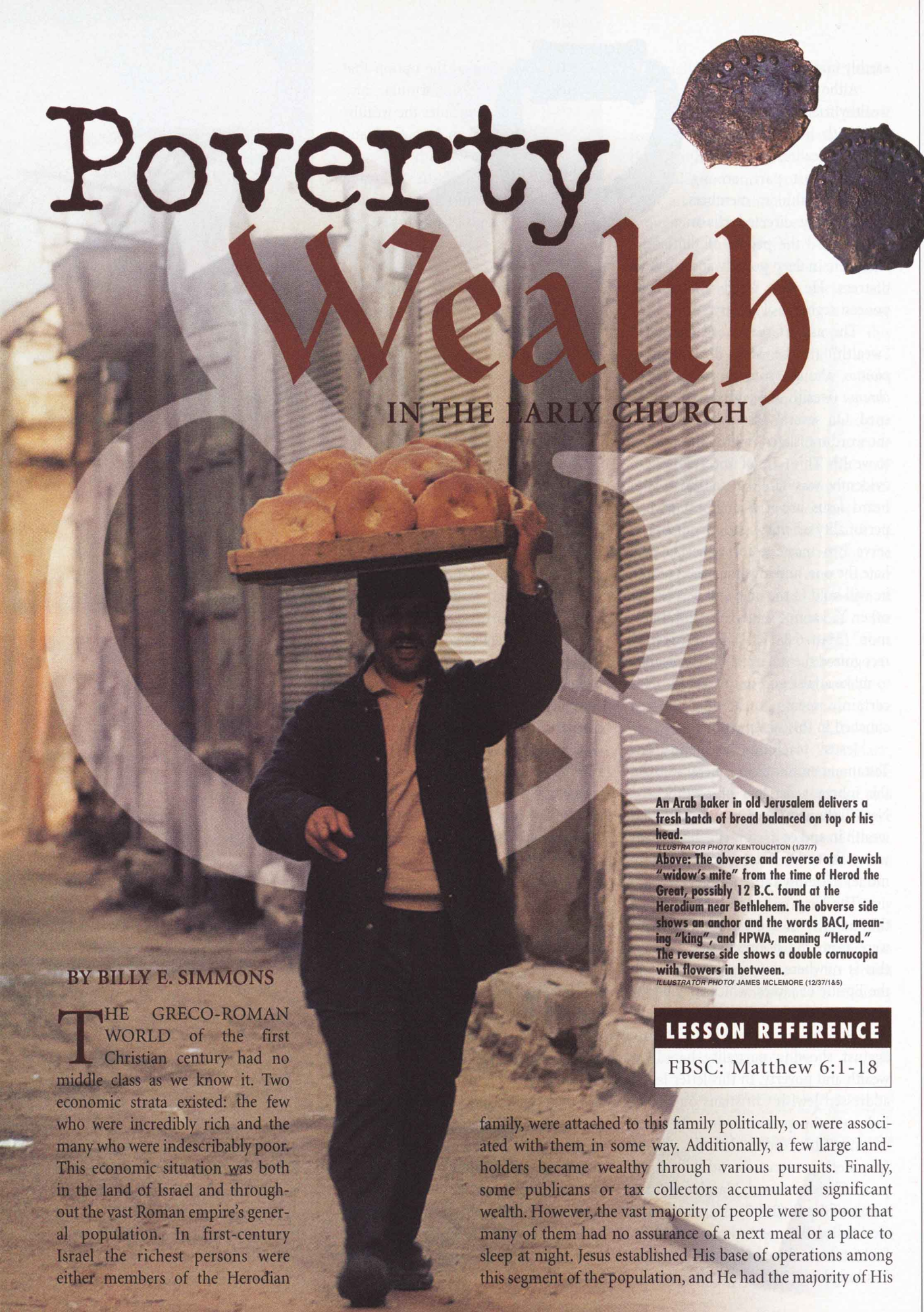
Poverty Wealth

IN THE EARLY CHURCH



An Arab baker in old Jerusalem delivers a fresh batch of bread balanced on top of his head.
ILLUSTRATOR PHOTO/ KENTOUCHTON (1/37/7)
Above: The obverse and reverse of a Jewish "widow's mite" from the time of Herod the Great, possibly 12 B.C. found at the Herodium near Bethlehem. The obverse side shows an anchor and the words BACI, meaning "king", and HPWA, meaning "Herod." The reverse side shows a double cornucopia with flowers in between.
ILLUSTRATOR PHOTO/ JAMES MCLEMORE (12/37/1&5)

LESSON REFERENCE

FBSC: Matthew 6:1-18

BY BILLY E. SIMMONS

THE GRECO-ROMAN WORLD of the first Christian century had no middle class as we know it. Two economic strata existed: the few who were incredibly rich and the many who were indescribably poor. This economic situation was both in the land of Israel and throughout the vast Roman empire's general population. In first-century Israel the richest persons were either members of the Herodian family, were attached to this family politically, or were associated with them in some way. Additionally, a few large landholders became wealthy through various pursuits. Finally, some publicans or tax collectors accumulated significant wealth. However, the vast majority of people were so poor that many of them had no assurance of a next meal or a place to sleep at night. Jesus established His base of operations among this segment of the population, and He had the majority of His

earthly ministry among them.

Although Jesus did have wealthy friends and had contact with government and religious leaders who were, for the most part, among society's wealthiest members, He primarily directed His ministry toward the people of the land who were in deep poverty and spiritual distress. He also lived among this poorest segment of society.

The usual Greek word translated "wealth" in the New Testament is *ploutos,* though sometimes the word *chrema* (wealth, money, or property) is used. On several occasions Jesus used the word translated "mammon" to refer to wealth. This term of uncertain origin evidently was familiar to those who heard Jesus use it. He almost gave it personality when He said, "No man can serve two masters: for either he will hate the one, and love the other; or else he will hold to the one, and despise the other. Ye cannot serve God and mammon" (Matt. 6:24, KJV). Jesus evidently recognized the potential for His hearers to make a false god out of wealth. This certainly seems to be the concern couched in this statement.

Jesus' teachings and the New Testament emphasis in general were on the inherent dangers of wealth. The New Testament does not suggest that wealth in and of itself is evil, but it does warn that the misuse or abuse of money certainly can lead to evil.

The New Testament indicates that the majority of the earliest Christians were from the poorest class. Perhaps this is nowhere more evident than in the Epistle of James, which may be the New Testament's earliest document. In chapter 2, James engaged in a discourse against showing partiality based on wealth and poverty. In this letter James addressed Jewish Christians outside of Judea. In this particular homily James reminded his readers that the wealthy (*plousioi)* persecuted and killed the poor Christians and blasphemed the name of Jesus (2:6-7). He stated that God called the poor who were rich in faith and who loved Him to be heirs of His kingdom (2:5). James' words leave open the option that this formula also includes the wealthy who love God and have faith.

Jesus delivered some hard sayings regarding the misuse and abuse of wealth. He was generally pessimistic about the ability of the wealthy to escape being devoted to their possessions. The story of the rich fool is a prime example (Luke 12:13-21). Jesus did not say the man was a fool because he was rich. Rather He declared that the man in question was a fool because he was wrongly related to his wealth, which led to his ruin.

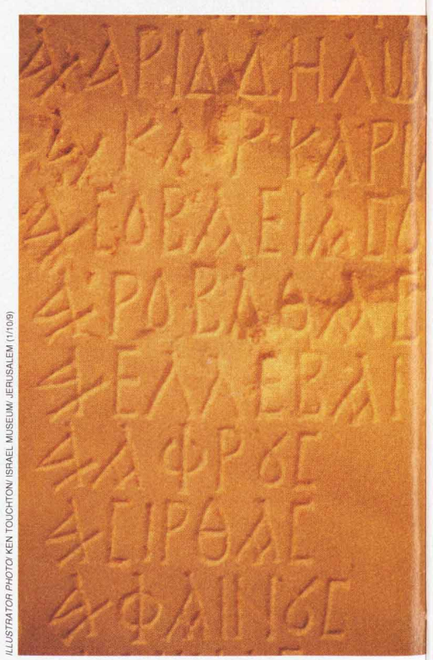
Once a rich young man came to Jesus seeking eternal life (Mark 10:17-23). Jesus' words quenched that desire by making the absolute demand on the young man to sell all he had and to give the proceeds to the poor. Since he could not bear to part with his wealth, he went away in sorrow, much to the consternation of the twelve.

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus congratulated those who were "poor in spirit" (Matt. 5:3) and yet drew a sharp line of distinction between service to God and devotion to riches (6:24). The two are incompatible. This does not mean that the rich cannot be humble servants of God. A person simply cannot give his first allegiance to his wealth and still be God's true servant.

On the other hand, Jesus did not commend poverty as the preferred state for a Christian. In the case of the poor widow who gave all she had, Jesus did not praise her for her poverty but for the freedom with which she gave her entire living to God. The amount she gave is incidental to her giving all she had in devotion to God.

Therefore, Jesus was not neutral, nor was He hostile, in His attitude about wealth. Concerning wealth and its effects on a person, Jesus generally was pessimistic about the spiritual development of the person who is devoted to wealth. Most of His sayings in this regard paint a rather bleak picture for that person who is wrongly related to wealth.

ILLUSTRATOR PHOTO BOB SCHATZ (6/98)V2



ILLUSTRATOR PHOTO KEN TOUCHTON; ISRAEL MUSEUM, JERUSALEM (1/10/9)

The early Christian community certainly reflected Jesus' attitude toward wealth. In the Book of Acts, the earliest Christians shared their possessions with each other (see 4:32-37). This was not an experiment in modern communism, but it was an experiment in the communal sharing of their worldly goods. Those who had an abundance shared with the church, which distributed the largess to the needy. This was a sincere display of their love and devotion to God and to each other as they awaited their risen Lord's imminent return. When it became evident that the Lord's return was not immediate, this experiment was abandoned. However, this spirit of sharing with others as needs arose continued.

Above: A Roman theater in ancient Bosra (now Busrat ash-Sham in Syria), built in the 1st-2nd century A.D. The lower seating sections were for the wealthiest spectators and the upper section, for the poorest.
Left: Imperial tax decrees etched on marble plaques during the reign of the Roman emperor Justinian (527-563 A.D.). The plaques were found at Beersheba.
Far upper left: Gold finger ring with blue glass cylinder bezel from 14th century B.C.
ILLUSTRATOR PHOTO/DAVID ROGERS/BRITISH MUSEUM (7/12/14)

The Book of Acts introduced Barnabas, one of the leaders in the world mission movement. Because of his generosity in caring for the needs of others, he sold land and gave the proceeds to the church for distribution (4:36-37).

In Acts 6, seven men were chosen to assist the apostles in distributing the food among the poor widows in the church. The practice of sharing thus continued for some time, though we cannot say for sure how long.

Paul's letters emphasize the temporal nature of material possessions as compared to the hope the believer has in heaven. Believers are to share with those who have less. This was Paul's admonition to the Gentile Christians in the churches he founded. He called on them to share with the poorer Jewish Christians in Judea (2 Cor. 8:13-15). Paul warned, though, in his pastoral letters that those who wish to be rich will fall into various temptations and will ultimately face a disastrous end.

To refer again to James' letter, in chapter 5, James had some harsh words for the rich who hoard their wealth and abuse the poor by withholding their wages. He warned the rich that their day of judgment was coming (v. 1-6).

The living Christ warned the wealthy church at Laodicea that their riches had brought them to a lukewarm state, which caused Him to be sick to His stomach (Rev. 3:14-17). They were materially wealthy but spiritually poverty stricken.

After the apostolic period ended, some in the church believed and taught that wealth was evil in and of itself. The monastic movement arose because of such an understanding. Certain men thought they could become holy by separating themselves from all worldly influences including material wealth. So they withdrew from society and lived an austere life, generally in remote mountainous areas.[1] Of course this attitude was a misunderstanding and a misappropriation of the New Testament teaching concerning wealth.

What, then, can one conclude from this brief review of Jesus' attitude toward wealth? Jesus and the early church leaders certainly were not neutral about worldly possessions. Nor were they hostile toward wealth as such, for there were, even among the earliest followers of Jesus, rather wealthy people. For instance, Joseph of Arimathea, who was a member of the Sanhedrin, was of the wealthy class (Matt. 27:57). Barnabas was also evidently a man of means as he was able to make a significant contribution to the needs of the early church (Acts 4:36-37). Finally, the mother of John Mark, Mary, who probably owned the house where the upper room was located, also likely had considerable wealth. These people were devoted followers of Jesus, and undoubtedly others followed Christ who were like them financially.

In spite of having some relatively affluent followers, Jesus maintained His warning that a wealthy person was always in danger of having his wealth ensnare him. Throughout His ministry Jesus seemingly was pessimistic that wealth would prove to be a positive influence in a person's life. **B**

[1] Many such ancient monasteries began in the Middle East as well as in Greece. In recent years, however, the monastic movement has fallen on hard times, and many of the monasteries are struggling with very few members even though once they numbered in the thousands.

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