

Book Summary

Neither Poverty nor Riches: A Biblical Theology of Material Possessions

Craig L. Blomberg, InterVarsity Press, 1999, 300 pp. \$25.

Review by Dan Brent

Suppose that everyone in the world were assigned a ranking based on their wealth. The fact is that we Americans who consider ourselves to be just “middle class” people would, in fact, rank high in the 90th percentiles!

So what obligations, if any, fall on us in God’s sight? Or doesn’t God care? Or is it none of God’s business?

God, it seems, has made it his business from the beginning of recorded history. Author Craig Blomberg’s book explores what our scriptures have said about poverty and riches. It’s a sobering book to read.

“Ironically,” he begins in the preface, “this is a book by the rich for the rich.” (p.11) The 1999 copyright makes the poverty statistics ten years outdated. They’ve since likely gotten worse but they are disturbing. “Two million children die every year from easily preventable infectious diseases. The number of people who lack access to safe drinking water is estimated at 1.3 billion.” (p.17) There were, even in 1999, 387 billionaires who together have more wealth than all of the lower 45% of the world’s population.

So what does God think of this? “I set out,” Blomberg says, “to write a biblical theology of material possessions.” (p.28) He traces in chronological order what scripture says about poverty and wealth.

The creation stories of Genesis present the world’s resources as “good” and give dominion over them to humans. Abraham was given the blessing of wealth. In Exodus, God makes clear that the firstborn are his; so “we may not keep and do as we please with all the good gifts God has given us.” (p.38) God provides manna to the Israelites in their flight from Egypt. They are not to hoard it: it spoils after a day. They are to remain dependent on God.

Numbers (e.g. Ch.14) provides for land to each family. This contrasted with the other tribes of the area where wealth was concentrated with the few. Israelites were forbidden to charge interest—which would make the rich richer. The Old Testament acknowledges that there will always be poor people in Israel but orders (Deuteronomy 15) that Israel “be open-handed toward those of your people who are poor and needy in your land.” (p.44) There were also sabbatical year and jubilee year debt forgiveness provisions but, the author concedes, there is doubt that they were ever honored.

Harvests were not allowed to be completed so the gleanings were always available to the poor and the traveler. And God made clear that the land was his; so everyone was— theologically considered—a foreigner. “It would seem unconscionable that any Christian should ever support efforts to withhold basic human services from the neediest in any land, regardless of their country of origin.” (p.48)

The Book of Job tells about his wealth, his testing by God, and then his reward of still greater wealth. The Psalms speak of God who exults the poor who trust in him. Ecclesiastes speaks of the vanity of trusting riches. Proverbs counsels, “Honor the Lord with your wealth,” and “care about justice for the poor.” The prophets insist on justice for “the poor, oppressed, fatherless, widow, and alien in the land.” (p.77)

Violence is never endorsed in the bible as a redress for injustice. Instead, “mandatory taxes and tithes are instituted to prevent extremes of riches and poverty.” (p.83)

Now the New Testament is considered. The wealth in first century Palestine was mostly in the hands of the Romans and a small percentage of landowners. Some 80% of the population would be considered to be poor. Carpenters (Joseph, Jesus) were poor. Fishermen were poorer. Tax collectors (Matthew), Sadducees, and prostitutes were more wealthy. Poverty in general was an issue that had people’s attention.

The gospels tell several stories of Jesus at parties. Apparently at Cana a decently planned celebration ran out of the alcoholic beverage and Jesus provided a vast amount for backup! He had no quarrel with an occasional feast. He had wealthy women friends. But he was wary of wealth. His story has good seed being choked by wealth. He represents the kingdom of God as a pearl worth selling all else to get. He has the king in a story order jail and torture for the forgiven servant who fails to forgive a minor debt.

Jesus praises a fictitious foreigner who spends his resources providing care for a victim of robbers. He ridicules the rich man who builds new barns to hoard his wealth. He encourages hospitality toward those who are not in a position to reciprocate. His story of the laborers in the vineyard suggests that it is God’s generosity and not just our industry that accounts for our wealth.

In the later New Testament books, James and Paul agree that genuine faith inevitably begets good works, care for the poor included. Acts describes the emergence of deacons to serve the widows and explains Paul’s collection to help the poor Christians of Jerusalem. Compassion and helping the needy consistently appear as priorities of the early church. “Christians are committed to reducing the gap between the ‘haves’ and the ‘have-nots’ in their congregations.” (p.174)

“Jesus’ concern is not primarily to condemn the rich, but to warn against the self-centered lifestyles that they so frequently displayed.” (p.224)

“Luke [especially] calls for a break in conventional patron-client relationships [If I use my wealth to help you, what can you do for me], insisting that all believers give to others generously without expecting anything in return.” (p.227)

At the end of the book, Blomberg provides this summary: (pp.243-246)

1. Possessions are God’s gifts.
2. They risk turning hearts from God.
3. God expects stewardship sensitive to others’ needs.
4. Extremes of wealth and poverty are intolerable.
5. Poverty doesn’t excuse faithlessness.

Hebrews 13:5. “Put aside preoccupation with acquiring. Be satisfied with what you have. God has promised not to fail you.”

A postscript: I was astonished that Blomberg dismisses Matthew 25:31ff.—What you did for my least brothers, you did for me—as unrelated to the poor. He thinks it has to do with care for the apostles and preachers of the gospel. That makes Mother Teresa’s “seeing Jesus in the face of the poor”, in Blomberg’s words, “only a partial truth and at worst highly misleading.” (p.126)

Likewise he believes that James 2:1ff.—“It was the poor that God chose”—does not endorse the “preferential option for the poor” that we have tended to assign to it!