Was Jesus a Socialist?:

An Analysis of the Lucan Message Concerning Charity for the Poor

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ABSTRACT: The fractious culture wars between the political Left and Right occasionally delve into matters of Christian theology and New Testament insights concerning the proper structure of society. In particular, there has been contention surrounding Jesus's message and predisposal towards the economically and socially dispossessed. Some have argued that Jesus's association with the poor and downtrodden is indicative of his alignment with the fundamental ideas of democratic socialism. Meanwhile, some have argued the opposite claim - that Jesus embodied capitalist views and would be opposed to the central tenets of socialism. This paper attempts to transcend such problematic exegetical debates on the Scriptures, particularly the Lucan writings which contain some of the most crucial passages about Jesus's close association with the poor. More specifically, this paper argues that the central idea that undergirds Jesus's message concerning the underprivileged and oppressed is grounded in individual responsibility.

KEYWORDS: Charity for the poor, Christian theology, collectivism, Exegesis, individualism, New Testament interpretation, responsibility

The fractious culture wars between the political Left and Right occasionally delve into matters of Christian theology and New Testament insights concerning the proper structure of society. In particular, there has been contention surrounding Jesus's message and predisposal towards the economically and socially dispossessed. Some have argued that Jesus's association with the poor and downtrodden is indicative of his alignment with the fundamental ideas of democratic socialism. Meanwhile, some have argued the opposite claim - that Jesus embodied capitalist views and would be opposed to the central tenets of socialism. This paper attempts to transcend such problematic exegetical debates on the Scriptures, particularly the Lucan writings which contain some of the most crucial passages about Jesus's close association with the poor. More specifically, this paper argues that the central idea that undergirds Jesus's message concerning the underprivileged and oppressed is grounded in individual responsibility.

Introduction

The Lucan writings which consist of the Gospel of Luke and the Acts of the Apostles, collectively known as Luke-Acts, contain a "heightened concern for the poor and the underprivileged in society" (Lopez 2015). More importantly, they suggest that the obligation to care for the poor is intrinsically a Christian one (Frame and Tharpe 1996; Borg 1998; Dorn 1993). Based on this premise, some have presumed that the Lucan works provide a strong basis for a socialist mode of living and that Jesus pioneered the principles underlying socialism (Scotty 2009; Pitch and Malina 1998). Political science professor Peter Dreier (2017), for example, confidently claims that "Jesus was a socialist" because his "radical ideas have influenced many critics of capitalism." The research question that this paper will address is whether Jesus's message about charity in Luke-Acts points to the idea that Jesus espoused a socialist viewpoint. This paper will argue that because individual responsibility is held paramount in Luke-Acts, the socialist philosophy is not central to Jesus's message concerning charity for the poor.

On Economic Poverty: Collective Responsibility vs. Individual Responsibility

Socialism and collective responsibility

Socialism's prescription to tackle economic poverty is grounded mainly in collective responsibility. According to Dickerson et al. (2014) and Newman (2005), socialism takes various forms and types. For instance, the more extreme types include utopian socialism and state communism, while some more moderate ones often resemble democratic socialism and market communism. Regardless of their variations and internal nuances, they all share an emphasis on a group-based prescription for helping the economically underprivileged (Niemietz 2019; Pilch and Milina 1998). Socialism's collectivist philosophy is manifested in its call for wealth redistribution, a welfare state, and a progressive taxation system, all of which would theoretically benefit the collective good. As Heywood (2017) explains, socialism leans heavily on the idea of solidarity and the common good where people develop "bonds of sympathy, caring, and affection" (100) that is aimed at tackling economic dispossession primarily through collective action.

At face value, the fundamental values of socialism—the charity for and uplifting of the economically downtrodden—appear to resemble early Christians' actions and teachings depicted in the Lucan writings. Take the New Testament's depiction of Jesus as a social prophet who demonstrated an unyielding affinity to the poor. Ernest Van Eck (2016), a New Testament scholar, confirms that Jesus's sympathies "lay with the poor" (272) considering his close association with the "expendables of society" (270) and the "socially impure" (271). For instance, Van Eck cites Jesus's indiscriminate treatment of the socially and economically dispossessed when he dined with them and healed their sickness as indicative of his preference for the poor. In line with this view, Cort (2020) even suggests that Jesus is "consistently partial, even biased, toward the poor" (43) considering Jesus's proclamation that his primary mission is to "proclaim the good news to the poor…[and] to set the oppressed free" (Lk. 4:18).

Further, Cort also seizes on Jesus's beatitude that says, "blessed are the poor in spirit, for yours is the kingdom of heaven" (Lk 6:20). Sharing Cort's view that socialist values are seen in the Lucan writings, Jim Wallis, a prominent theologian known for his social justice advocacy, observes that one of every sixteen verses in the New Testament is about "the poor or the subject of money" (212). Wallis (2013) also contends that Jesus's message concerning the poor's liberation from poverty is at the "center of his mission" (Wallis 2013, 44)—he even referred to Jesus's proclamations in Luke 4 as the "Nazareth manifesto" (45). Clearly, the New Testament, particularly the Lucan works, recognizes the existence of economic poverty and suggests a Christian obligation to liberate the poor from it. In this sense, socialism's aim at charity and compassion seems to be in line with the Christian message concerning charity embedded in Luke's writings.

Some theologians and biblical scholars take it a step further to argue that the Judeo-Christian tradition itself is intrinsically socialist because of its emphasis on the universal fellowship under God's overarching fatherhood. For instance, Christian socialists believe that socialism is the "natural and rightful outworking of biblical Christianity" (Williams 2016, 32) because socialism is the "system whereby the people of the world, or a particular society, can live as brothers and sisters (32). As Samuel Keeble (1907) and Henry Holland (1911), two prominent figures of Christian socialism, claim, the New Testament repudiates the rugged individualism that characterizes the capitalist system while placing a premium on loving one's neighbour and the universal comradeship seen in socialist societies. The salient point behind those who contend that primitive Christianity and socialist principles intersect all converge at the idea that helping the poor and addressing economic poverty is a collective responsibility.

Individual Responsibility

Although collective responsibility appears to be at the centre of the Lucan writings concerning charity, a closer analysis of the texts reveals the primacy of individual responsibility and free will over collective responsibility. In Luke 3:11, John the Baptist notably proclaims that those who have two tunics and excess food should give those who have none. In the same vein, Jesus exhorts his listeners to "give to everyone who asks of you. And just as you want men to do to you, you also do to them likewise" (Lk 6:29-30). Here, individualist philosophy fundamentally underlies these passages—making them inconsistent with the group-centric idealism that socialism advances.

There is no question that caring for the economically dispossessed is at the core of the Lucan message, but to say that this is predominantly grounded in collective responsibility is problematic. A case in point that demonstrates this contention is the Parable of the Good Samaritan. The parable is particularly noteworthy as Jesus told it immediately after his Sermon on the Mount, where he equated the love of God with the love of one's neighbour. Jesus tells a story that implies the priest's and a Levite's indifference (Reed 2020, 25) to the hapless man left half-dead after getting robbed. More importantly, the parable highlights the Samaritan's heroism, who went out of his way to show kindness and charity to the man in need. Clearly, the Samaritan did not abdicate his personal responsibility to a "third party coercion" (Reed 2020, 27) like the collective or the state in assisting the hapless man. Instead, out of his free will, he took the personal initiative in responding to an immediate need of a fellow human being. The primacy of individual responsibility in the parable is further highlighted in the Samaritan's insistence on upholding his individual obligation to financially care for the man: "take care of him and whatever more you spend, when I come again, I will repay you" (Lk. 10:35), says the Samaritan to the innkeeper. He could have abdicated his individual responsibility after his initial display of compassion and charity, and yet the Samaritan insists that the obligation of continued care for the man principally remains on him.

As New Testament expert Dominic Crossan (1992) argues, "the story certainly leaves no doubt that what really matters is to act as the Samaritan did—in the same simplicity and governed completely by the need of the man who confronts us" (56). In line with Crossan's analysis, Andrew Fiala (2005) takes the view that although the parable signifies the idea of loving one's neighbour, it does not support the Christian socialist contention that Jesus's goal is to tinker with sociopolitical structures and policies to "alleviate poverty in the long run" (121). Rather, the Samaritan's initiative in taking action is a clear display of individual responsibility to "alleviate suffering here and now" (121) and to personally act with charity "within the immediate neighbourhood" (121). Lending support to Fiala's contention, Schatkin (2018) also takes the view that the parable exemplifies the necessity of showing love and compassion to a fellow human being "wherever that person may be found and whatever occasion or situation we are cast in with him" (76). Crossan's, Fiala's, and Schatkin's analysis gestures toward the idea that the Christian call for kindness and generosity is principally individual and voluntary—not collective and enforced—which is fundamental to the philosophy of socialism.

Some Potential Counterarguments?

Common ownership and wealth redistribution

Those who contend that collective responsibility is central to Jesus's message about charity in Luke-Acts may retort that there are irrefutable passages which show the alignment between the Christian message and socialist principles. Stewart Headlam, an Anglican priest known for pioneering Christian socialism, makes the case that Acts 2 and 4 contain passages which depict a Christian socialist way of life. In those passages, Luke suggests that the early Christians practiced common ownership and wealth redistribution: "now all who believed were together, and had all things in common, and sold their possessions and goods, and divided them among all, as anyone had need." For Headlam (1905), this is a clear illustration of how the first-century Christians were "in

1 All Bible citations come from the New King James Version

the simplest sense of the word 'communists' [because] they put all their goods into a common fund and distribution was made to every man according to his need" (29). Headlam's analysis is parallel to William Temple's (1944) and James Hardie's (1910), who are also self-proclaimed Christian socialists, who take the view that Acts 2 and 4 depict socialist Christians and that their practice of common ownership is significantly akin to "voluntary communism" (Temple 1944, 47).

More specifically, these Christian socialists often refer to the example of Barnabas, a Christian disciple in Jerusalem, who was portrayed in Acts 4 as a man of good deeds for selling his private property so that wealth could be redistributed to Christians who needed it most (Milligan 2012, 112). Although at face value, Headlam, Temple, and Hardie's exegesis of Acts 2 and 4 holds weight, it is flawed because such early Christian practice was voluntary. Nowhere in the New Testament, much less in Luke-Acts, did either Jesus or his apostles command their followers to pool financial resources for the purpose of establishing a regime of common ownership and wealth redistribution.

This observation is corroborated by Dr. Anthony Williams (2016), a New Testament expert, who holds that neither Jesus nor his apostles compelled "a socialist order of society" (40) considering how their practice of "generous giving and sharing of resources took place solely within the church rather than throughout society" (40). Echoing this stance, Reed (2020) contends that the early-Christians' apparent illustration of socialist living is merely "descriptive but not prescriptive" (4), meaning there was no indication that it was meant to be a universal command for future Christians to follow. Aside from the absence of a clear proof that the first-century church hierarchy mandated the depictions of the Christian way of life in those chapters, Arthur Lindsley (2012), a professor of biblical studies, takes a step further on why it is erroneous to hinge the Christian socialist argument on Acts 2 and 4:

> In [these] passages from Acts, there is no mention of the state at all. These early believers contributed their goods freely, without coercion, voluntarily. Elsewhere in Scripture we see that Christians are even instructed to give in just this manner, freely, for "God loves a cheerful giver" (Paul's remarks in II Corinthians 9:8). There is plenty of indication that private property rights were still in effect (remember Barnabas, Ananias, and Sapphira).

The telling point in Lindsley's analysis is the absence of any third-party coercion in those passages. To illustrate, the supposition that first-century Christians freely and voluntarily practiced common ownership and wealth redistribution is far from the government-mandated compulsion that is present in a socialist welfare state. Under a welfare state, the government plays a crucial role in upholding and promoting its citizens' economic and social well-being through "compulsory contributions" (Encyclopedia Britannica 2015) to the national treasury (Paul 2019; Moscovitch 2006; Katch 2015; Whitehorn and Young 2006). Such mandatory contributions take the form of obligatory high-income deductions and taxes, where noncompliance results in penalties at best and jail time at worst. One example of this is the Scandinavian countries, which many socialists point to as an example of a prosperous democratic socialist society (Paul 2019; McLennan 2009), where income taxes could be as high as 60% (Fouche 2008).

In Sweden, for instance, the penalty for reckless tax evasion can be particularly harsh, as one can be imprisoned for up to six years (Ceccato and Benson 2016). Hence, the argument that the practice of socialism is rooted in the apostolic times is faulty because the early Christians' tradition of common ownership and wealth redistribution was entirely voluntary. More importantly, the fact that free will and voluntarism were key in the early Christian practice of wealth sharing further reinforces the contention that the Lucan message concerning charity is centred on individual responsibility: it was individual Christians—not some collective society nor the government—who primarily bore the obligation of helping the needy. It just so happened that the personal decision they took to realize that obligation was to pool their resources so it could be "distributed to each as anyone had need" (Acts 4:35).

Jesus's condemnation of wealth and the rich

In addition to the passages in Acts that supposedly point to a Christian proclivity for principles that eventually formed socialist thinking, some also cite a few Lucan parables to support the Christian socialist claim. The most prominent among these has been the Parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus. In Luke 16:19-31, Jesus portrays a rich man clothed in "purple and fine linen" while at his gate lays a beggar "full of sores" named Lazarus only wishing to be fed with "what fell from the rich man's table but only dogs came and licked his sores." According to Van Eck (2016) this contrasting portrayal of the rich man and Lazarus from the parable's outset is a clear embodiment of Jesus's disdain towards the economic disparity caused by the class who control "all the wealth, power, and privilege" (270).

For Christian socialists, such economic cleavage, represented by the gate that separates the rich man from Lazarus, is a clear indication of Jesus's denunciation of wealth accumulation and thereby shows Jesus's inclination to socialist principles. However, the main thrust of the Christian socialists' argument stems from verses 23-31's portrayal of a situational reversal between the two characters in the afterlife: the rich man begs Abraham for mercy as he suffers hellish torment while Lazarus is rewarded in heaven. For John Wheatley (1973), the founder of the Catholic Socialist Society, this depiction of the characters' situational reversal is akin to a trial of capitalists and anyone who prizes wealth accumulation. More specifically, Wheatley (1973) does not believe that the parable is about the dangers associated with the "mismanagement of wealth" (17) or its improper usage. Instead, he believes the possession of wealth per se is the one to blame.

Such an interpretation is problematic as it fails to consider instances in Luke where Jesus could have outrightly condemned money but did not because he saw its capacity for good when used properly. For instance, in Luke 8:1-3, the Gospel recalls Jesus's ministry where he travelled across "every city and village, preaching and bringing the glad tidings of the kingdom of God." The crucial piece of his ministry includes disciples and followers, like Joanna and Sussa who funded Jesus's ministerial expenditures "from their own substance" (Lk. 8:3) or financial resources. Additionally, Luke 19:1-10 tells that Jesus even invited himself to the house of Zaccheaus, a wealthy tax collector, and proclaims that "today, salvation has come to this house" (v.9). Clearly, Jesus and his ministry benefited from money's proper usage which casts doubt on the idea that he denounces wealth accumulation per se as some Christian socialists think to be the message of the Parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus.

For Jewish studies professor Amy-Jill Levine (2014), the Christian socialists' "communistic" (249) reading of the parable is untenable because it suggests that the poor are somehow incapable of sinning just as much as the rich man. Also, Levine adds that to say the possession of wealth is intrinsically evil is almost akin to "romanticizing poverty" (248) which is surely not the Christian message. In line with her view, biblical scholar William Herzog (1994) contends that the rich man was punished not for his wealth but for his "callous lovelessness and self-indulgence" (127) and Lazarus commended "not for his poverty but for his humility" (128). To say that the rich man was punished simply for possessing wealth is "a pernicious misreading of the parable" (127) as it is a "sociological interpretation that the Bible

does not sanction" (127). Significantly then, the parable's key message is the moral imperative for individuals to respond and take initiative whenever they encounter a fellow human being's suffering. Indeed, the parable is a warning against the "wanton neglect of one whom you regularly see and could help very easily" (Blomberg 2012, 258). This contention reinforces the notion that the individual is at the centre of the Lucan philosophy of compassion, charity, and generosity.

Perhaps more important for those inclined to say that socialism overlaps with the Lucan teachings about charity is Jesus's beatitudes. For Gary Dorrien (2015), the capitalist ideal of wealth accumulation was "plainly hostile to the Christian teaching" (171) and that Luke-Acts provide clear support for such a perspective. Specifically, Christian socialists often capitalize on the Sermon on the Mount because of its "message of hope for the poor and the forgotten" (Foote 1997, 44). But more importantly, they see the Sermon on the Mount as a "consistent and powerful argument against property" (Hardie 1910, 13). To an extent, this contention seems fair considering Jesus's repeated admonition against the love of money and the rich's indifference toward the needy, such as when he said, "woe to you who are rich" (Lk. 6:24) and that "it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God" (Lk. 18:25).

Nonetheless, the Christian socialist use of the Sermon on the Mount is also defective because the key takeaway from Jesus's proclamation is the danger of letting material wealth corrupt one's character (Longenecker 2000; Buckley and Dobson 2010; Rhee 2012; Wright 2014). Like capitalism, socialism is also focused on material wealth, albeit the latter is more concerned with its equitable sharing and redistribution while the former is concerned with its accumulation and promotion. Nonetheless, socialism is just as fixated on material wealth as capitalism. It follows that if wealth and property are the problems, socialists are no better than capitalists when adhering to Jesus's exhortation not to lay up treasures on earth but in heaven (Mt. 6:19-20). As Williams (2016) aptly puts it, "it is not evident that the creation of a socialist society would remove the Mammon worship against which the Christian socialists argued" (40). Jesus's admonishment to the economically wealthy in his Sermon on the Mount is an exhortation to put higher veneration on spiritual well-being over material possessions, considering how God will ultimately provide sufficient material needs to those who prioritize the search for His kingdom (Lk. 12:30-31).

Conclusion

To be sure, in arguing that Jesus's message regarding charity for the poor does not comport with the philosophy of socialism, this paper does not advance the view that capitalism or some other sociopolitical ideology would be a better fit. It is often problematic when contemporary social, economic, or political ideologies—like socialism and capitalism—are "superimposed onto Jesus" (Reed 2020, 8) partly because these conceptions only emerged centuries long after Jesus walked the Earth. More importantly, projecting such ideologies onto Jesus is unwarranted because Jesus was either elusive or outright dismissive when it comes to his view on how to set up a government or economic system (Eagleton 2007; Hengel 1977; Bowyer 2020; Baker 2020; Richardson 1973) as reflected on his insistence that his "kingdom is not of this world" (Jn. 18:36). Hence, it is misleading and perhaps even deceptive to enlist Jesus as a supporter of a modern ideological stance.

Another important nuance to note is that this is and should not be a binary issue. I fully acknowledge that the notion of collective responsibility, just like individual responsibility, has an important role in alleviating economic poverty. A collective body may be harnessed to make people "do good, to be rich in good works, to be generous, and ready to share" (1 Tim. 6:18). We see this in various charitable organizations and social welfare institutions devoted to helping financially underprivileged people in our society. In this sense, perhaps we could move beyond the fraught theological conversation that has rocked the relationship between the religious-types of the political Left and Right. As this paper has shown, the dignity and primacy of the individual, being the "partakers of the divine nature" (2 Pet. 1:40), is the cornerstone of Jesus's philosophy of caring for the poor.

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