

DID JESUS SIDE WITH THE POOR?

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Nowadays we often hear and read that Jesus sided with the poor against the rich, and that this controversial stand of his eventually brought about his downfall. In other words, many Christians imagine Jesus as a kind of religious Robin Hood whose struggle against the wealthy of his time met with a bad end. With such a notion mind, unfortunately, we are only one step away from making Jesus the champion of a social class in conflict with another social class, and that step is easily taken. When this happens, Jesus is once more used by activists of all colors, who have their preset agenda or ideology and who unwittingly fabricate a Jesus of their own in order to further their cause.

A look at the gospel data, however, yields a somewhat different picture of Jesus. And, in the following pages, I would like to examine the evidence in this respect, analyze it briefly and add a few remarks about some other passages which are tangentially relevant to our topic.

I. THE POLEMICS OF JESUS

A. GOSPEL DATA

Since the problematic picture of Jesus I am questioning here presents the career of Jesus as a wholesale assault on the rich, and his death as a direct result of his conflicts with the rich, the first thing to do is to survey systematically all the gospel passages where Jesus opposes himself to other people, specifying in each case who these people are and what is the topic

of the controversy. Such a survey should throw a decisive light on what the struggle of Jesus was all about. Here is a list resulting from my examination of the text of the four gospels. It contains 49 distinct controversial passages, the parallels having been regrouped together and considered as one single unit.

<i>Passages</i>	<i>Opponents</i>	<i>Topics</i>
1) Mk 4:23-28 Lk 4:33-37	unclean spirit unclean spirit	Jesus as destroyer of demons
2) Mk 2:1-12 Mt 9:1-8 Lk 5:17-26	scribes scribes scribes and Pharisees	forgiveness of sins
3) Mk 2:15-17 Mt 9:10-13 Lk 5:29-32	scribes of the Pharisees Pharisees Pharisees and their scribes	eating with sinners
4) Mk 2:18-22 Mt 9:14-17 Lk 5:33-39	some people John and his disciples Pharisees and their scribes	fasting
5) Mk 2:23-28 Mt 12:1-8 Lk 6:1-5	Pharisees Pharisees Pharisees	sabbath observance
6) Mk 3:1-6 Mt 12:9-14 Lk 6:6-11	Pharisees Pharisees scribes and Pharisees	sabbath observance
7) Mk 3:22-30 Mt 12:22-32 Lk 11:14-26	scribes Pharisees unnamed	exorcisms of Jesus
8) Mk 7:1-23 Mt 15:1-20	Pharisees and scribes Pharisees and scribes	ritual purity

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| 9) | Mk 8:11-13
Mt 12:38-39;
16:1-4 | Pharisees
scribes and Pharisees
Pharisees and Sadducees | sign from heaven |
| 10) | Mk 8:14-21
Mt 16:5-12
Lk 12:1 | (Pharisees and Herod)
(Pharisees and Sadducees)
(Pharisees) | teaching of the
Pharisees and
Sadducees/the
hypocrisy of the
Pharisees |
| 11) | Mk 10:1-12
Mt 19:1-9 | Pharisees
Pharisees | divorce |
| 12) | Mk 12:15-19
Mt 21:12-17
Lk 19:45-48
Jn 2:13-22 | chief priests, scribes
chief priests, scribes
chief priests, scribes
Jews | cleansing of the
Temple |
| 13) | Mk 12:27-33
Mt 21:23-27
Lk 20:1-8 | chief priests, scribes,
elders
chief priests and elders
chief priests, scribes,
elders | authority of Jesus |
| 14) | Mk 12:1-12
Mt 21:33-46
Lk 20:9-19 | chief priests, scribes,
elders
chief priests and scribes
chief priests and scribes | unworthy leaders |
| 15) | Mk 12:13-17
Mt 22:15-22
Lk 20:20-26 | Pharisees, Herodians
Pharisees
agents of scribes and
of chief priests | tribute to Caesar |
| 16) | Mk 12:18-27
Mt 22:23-33
Lk 20:27-40 | Sadducees
Sadducees
Sadducees | resurrection of the
dead |

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| 17) Mk 12:28-34
Mt 22:34-40
Lk 10:25-37 | scribe
Pharisee
lawyer | greatest command-
ment |
| 18) Mk 12:35-37
Mt 22:41-46
Lk 20:41-44 | (scribes)
Pharisees
scribes | Messiah, son of
David? |
| 19) Mk 12:38-40
Mt 23:1-12
Lk 11:43;
20:45-47 | (scribes)
(scribes and Pharisees)
Pharisees
(scribes) | hypocrisy and
vanity of scribes
and Pharisees |
| 20) Mt 5:20 | (scribes and Pharisees) | false virtue of the
scribes and
Pharisees |
| 21) Mt 5:21-48 | (scribes and Pharisees) | antitheses on
Mosaic Law |
| 22) Mt 6:1-18 | (hypocrites) | almsgiving, prayer,
fasting |
| 23) Mt 6:25-34
Lk 12:22-32 | (pagans) | trust in Providence |
| 24) Mt 7:15-20 | (false prophets) | false prophets |
| 25) Mt 7:21-27 | (false disciples) | true discipleship |
| 26) Mt 11:16-24
Lk 7:31-35;
10:13-15 | (contemporaries)
(contemporaries)
(contemporaries) | unbelief |
| 27) Mt 12:33-37
Lk 6:43-45 | Pharisees
disciples | integrity |

28)	Mt 12:40-42 Lk 11:29-32	scribes and Pharisees crowds	unbelief
29)	Mt 12:43-45 Lk 11:24-26	scribes and Pharisees unnamed	return of unclean spirit
30)	Mk 4:10-12 Mt 13:10-17 Lk 8:9-10	(unbelievers) (unbelievers) (unbelievers)	use of parables
31)	Mt 21:28-32 Lk 7:29-30	(chief priests, elders) Pharisees and lawyers	rejection of John the B.
32)	Mt 23:13-36 Lk 11:37-54	scribes and Pharisees scribes and Pharisees	religious hypocrisy
33)	Mt 16:2-3 Lk 12:54-59	crowds crowds	signs of the time
34)	Lk 13:10-17	synagogue official	sabbath observance
35)	Lk 14:1-6	lawyers and Pharisees	sabbath observance
36)	Lk 15:1-32	Pharisees and scribes	God's mercy
37)	Lk 16:9-15	Pharisees	love of money
38)	Lk 18:9-14	unnamed pseudo- virtuous	humility/hypocrisy
39)	Jn 5:1-16	Jews	sabbath observance
40)	Jn 5:17-47	Jews	Jesus' divine sonship
41)	Jn 6:22-66	crowds/Jews	Jesus, bread of life
42)	Jn 7:14-24	Jews	sabbath observance

43) Jn 7:25-30	crowds	origin of the Messiah
44) Jn 8:1-11	scribes and Pharisees	adulterous woman
45) Jn 8:13-20	Pharisees	Jesus' self-witness
46) Jn 8:21-59	Jews	unbelief, rejection of Jesus
47) Jn 9:1-41	Pharisees/Jews	sabbath observance
48) Jn 10:22-39	Jews	Jesus' divine sonship
49) Jn 11:45-54	chief priests, Pharisees	resurrection of Lazarus

B. SUMMARY ANALYSIS

Before spelling out some of the substantive findings resulting from this list, a few observations of a more formal nature are in order.

a) As the reader will probably have noticed, some of the "opponents" listed above are placed within parentheses. This is a practical way of referring to adversaries who were not actually present when Jesus criticized them. Their identity is deduced from the context or from an explicit mention made by Jesus. These passages are nevertheless retained here because it can be safely assumed that the criticisms uttered by Jesus either were repeated anew in the presence of the interested parties on some later occasion, or else were reported to these same parties by some of Jesus' listeners. At any rate, the effect of these utterances would have been presumably the same as if they had been made in the presence of Jesus' adversaries: a mounting antagonism against him, an antagonism which eventually caused his death.

b) This list does not include the passages containing polemical material involving, not the usual opponents of Jesus but his own disciples (for example, the section of Mk 8:14-21 where Jesus

reprimands his disciples for their lack of understanding). No doubt such passages are in a certain sense "adversarial," but I did not judge them relevant here, since we are exploring the possible cause of Jesus' death at the hands of his enemies, not his sometimes tense relationship with his followers.

Likewise, I did not include in this list the polemical material found in the various Passion narratives for the obvious reason that, by the time Jesus' trial had been initiated, his fate had already been sealed for all practical purposes, and whatever added criticism of his opponents he said then had no real effect on the course of subsequent events. And so, for the purpose of our present inquiry these passages can be disregarded.

Except, therefore, for the omission of the disciple-related polemics and of the Passion narratives, the foregoing list of controversies is complete.

c) The three Passion prophecies and the other allusions that Jesus made to his impending death are not included in this list either, since unlike the controversies they were not precipitating factors in the fate of Jesus but rather mere anticipated descriptions of what was eventually to happen. In other words, such passages do not show Jesus as fighting anyone, but only as announcing future events.

d) Some of the passages of this list do not report a hostile debate or a clash of *words* on a religious topic, but rather a controversial *action* of Jesus which provoked criticism or opposition or even murderous planning on the part of his adversaries: for example, his cures on the sabbath, his cleansing of the Temple, the resurrection of Lazarus, etc. Since his death did result partly at least from such polemical actions, I believe these actions should be included in the list of the polemical material found in the gospels.

And now, after these preliminary remarks, let us take a closer look at what our list reveals.

a) First of all, concerning the *topics* of the controversies involving Jesus and his opponents, we note that the greatest issues creating friction were, in order of decreasing importance:

* the credentials of Jesus and the source of his authority (cf.

the passages in the list under the numbers 2, 9, 13, 18, 40, 41, 43, 45, 48 — these total 9 passages out of 49, or 18 percent);

* the sabbath observance (numbers 5, 6, 34, 35, 39, 42, 47 — a total of 7 passages, or 14 percent);

* the hypocrisy/vanity of the scribes and Pharisees (numbers 10, 19, 20, 32, 38 — a total of 5 passages, or 10 percent);

* unbelief (numbers 26, 28, 31, 46 — a total of 4 passages, or 8 percent).

These four topics alone account for more than half the polemical material found in the gospels. The rest of this material covers a wide range of other topics.

The most important observation one can make in relation to our present concern, however, is this one: *we do not find a single text in which Jesus accuses his adversaries of oppressing the economically poor or where he is accused of siding with the poor.* The only passage which could suggest a remote connection with this idea is number 37, which deals with the danger of wealth and in which *Luke* (not Jesus!) accuses the Pharisees, not of being rich but of being fond of money. But we will have more to say on this matter below. For the time being, let us carefully take note that only 1 out of the 49 passages of our list (or 2 percent) deals with the topic of wealth — and this, not at all in the Robin Hood vein. A rather meager harvest, one must admit.

b) Concerning the *opponents* of Jesus, who are they? Here again our list yields interesting results. If we leave aside the non-relevant passage in which an unclean spirit is the opponent (this unclean spirit could hardly have had any perceptible influence on the events leading to Jesus' death) and the few passages where anonymous actors are mentioned ("some people" of Mk 2:18-22 and Lk 11:14-26; "hypocrites" of Mt 6:18; the "pagans" of Mt 6:25-34; etc.), we are left with 98 mentions, of distinctive groups of adversaries. These are, by order of decreasing importance: the Pharisees (42 mentions), the scribes (34 mentions), the chief priests (12 mentions), the elders and the Sadducees (5 mentions each). Naturally these groups are often presented in a given passage as attacking Jesus in a joint action. Moreover, these groups often appear in one or more parallel account(s) of the same incident, which explains why we can have 98 references to the opponents of Jesus while dealing with only 49 different

polemical passages. Finally, these figures would be slightly increased if we included here Luke's 3 mentions of a hostile lawyer or lawyers (a term equivalent to *scribe*, according to Pierson Parker¹) and John's 8 mentions of "Jews" (a term equivalent to *scribes* or *Pharisees*, according to John L. McKenzie²). However, be that as it may, it is quite obvious that, with respectively 42 and 34 mentions out of a total of 98 mentions, the Pharisees and the scribes clearly represent by far the most frequently mentioned opponents of Jesus (exactly 41 and 34 percent respectively, or more than 75 percent of all mentions if taken in combination). And correlatively, as we have seen, the balance of the mentions of opponents (only 25 percent) is divided among the chief priests, the elders and the Sadducees.

c) Now at this point of our study it is necessary to make a crucial observation in connection with the preceding statistics, an observation which will explain the full relevance of those statistics. And it is this: the Pharisees and the scribes, those arch-enemies of Jesus mentioned three-quarters of the time in the polemical passages of the gospels, *did not belong to a social class different from that of Jesus*. And, therefore, their opposition to him could hardly have been along the lines of a Robin-Hood-versus-the-wealthy quarrel. This point is so critical to the present study that I believe it is necessary to emphasize it somewhat — all the more so that most people are not aware of the socio-economic facts involved here.

For example, concerning the Pharisees the great Biblical scholar Joachim Jeremias³ writes in his investigation into the economic and social conditions during the New Testament period: "Sociologically speaking, there is no question of including the Pharisees among the upper classes." On the contrary, he adds, the Pharisees were "merchants, artisans and peasants."⁴ "In short, the Pharisaic communities were mostly composed of

1. Cf. Pierson Parker, "Lawyer," in *The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1962) 3:102.

2. Cf. John L. McKenzie, *Dictionary of the Bible* (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1975) 437.

3. Cf. Joachim Jeremias, *Jerusalem in the Time of Jesus* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1969) 246.

4. *Ibid.* 259.

petty commoners, *men of the people* with no scribal education, earnest and self-sacrificing; but all too often they were not free from uncharitableness and pride with regard to the masses, the 'ammê hâ-'āreṣ who did not observe the demands of religious laws as they did, and in contrast to whom the Pharisees considered themselves to be the true Israel."⁵ However, despite this aloofness on their part, "doubtless *the Pharisees were the people's party; they represented the common people* as opposed to the aristocracy on both religious and social matters."⁶

As for the scribes, Jeremias reminds us that it was forbidden that they should be paid for exercising their profession.⁷ Some of them were artisans and lived off their trade. However, on the main they lived on subsidies.⁸ And so, after a careful examination of all our extant sources of information, Jeremias concludes: "All things considered, therefore, we must reckon the Rabbis among the poorer classes."⁹ Nevertheless, because of their great learning especially in esoteric matters, they were venerated by all. "We have a mass of evidence," Jeremias writes,¹⁰ "attesting to the high esteem in which the majority of people held the scribes."

In view of the foregoing considerations, we must conclude that the opponents of Jesus were in general *not the rich as such*, but rather the professionally religious men of Israel, a small minority of whom (chief priests, elders and Sadducees) happened to be rich. Indeed one of the groups to whom Jesus addressed himself preferentially were the tax collectors, who were not only rich but who also oppressed the poor! Consequently, it is difficult to accept without major qualifications the thesis that the historical reason for Jesus' death was his uncompromising stand *on the side of the poor*. If this latter expression means that Jesus identified with the economically poor as a social class against the rich as another social class, it is simply not true. Jesus' worst enemies belonged to the social class to which he himself belonged; he was even bitterly criticized for siding with the

5. Ibid. The first italics are mine.

6. Ibid. 266. Italics mine.

7. Ibid. 112.

8. Ibid. 113.

9. Ibid. 116.

10. Ibid. 243.

oppressors of the poor, the detested tax collectors (Mk 2:15-17; Lk 15:2; 19:1-10). To state the contrary is to do violence to the texts.

All this is confirmed by the fact that, during his trial both before the Sanhedrin and before the Roman procurator, no mention was ever made of a social or class conflict between Jesus and his adversaries. The charges laid against Jesus centered on his prophecy concerning the destruction of the Temple (Mk 14:57-59) and his claim to be the Messiah (Mk 14:60-64 — a charge which is reflected on the inscription placed on the cross: Mk 15:26). Both these charges were repeated after the crucifixion (Mk 15:29-32) on the part of Jesus' opponents and are therefore a most likely reflection of the actual historical situation.

II. JESUS ON WEALTH AND POVERTY

A. GOSPEL DATA

We could, therefore, sum up our previous findings with two blunt statements of this sort: when Jesus picked a fight, he was generally not fighting with the rich; and when he did occasionally pick a fight with the rich, it was never about how the latter treated the poor. However, even if these two statements are true, this does not mean that Jesus had no interest or concern about the poor, poverty and the use of money. On the contrary, he is reported to have said significant things on these topics. And now we will briefly examine the gospel passages where he expresses himself on these matters.

First, I will present a complete list of the relevant texts. Then I will comment rapidly on them.

<i>Passages</i>	<i>Addressees</i>	<i>Topics</i>
1) Mk 10:17-22 Mt 19:16-22 Lk 18:18-23	a rich man a rich young man a rich ruler	renouncing possessions
2) Mk 10:23-27 Mt 19:23-26	disciples disciples	danger of riches

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| Lk 18:24-27 | a rich ruler | |
| 3) Mk 10:28-31
Mt 19:27-30
Lk 18:28-30 | disciples
disciples
disciples | renouncing possessions |
| 4) Mk 12:40
Lk 20:47 | crowd
disciples | scribes exploiting widows |
| 5) Mk 12:41-44
Lk 21:1-4 | disciples
disciples | widow's mite |
| 6) Mk 14:7
Mt 26:11
Jn 12:8 | some people
disciples
Judas | permanence of the poor |
| 7) Mt 5:3
Lk 6:20-21 | crowd/disciples
disciples | beatitude of the poor |
| 8) Mt 6:19-21
Lk 12:33-34 | crowd/disciples
disciples | true treasures/
almsgiving |
| 9) Mt 6:24
Lk 16:9-13 | crowd/disciples
disciples | right use of money |
| 10) Mk 6:8-9
Mt 10:8-10
Lk 9:3
Lk 9:3
10:4 | Twelve
Twelve
Twelve
Seventy-two | poverty of the missionary |
| 11) Mt 25:31-46 | disciples | Last Judgement/
almsgiving |
| 12) Lk 4:18 | crowd | good news to the poor |
| 13) Lk 6:24-25 | disciples | woe to the rich |

14) Lk 12:13-21	crowd	hoarding possessions
15) Lk 14:12-14	Pharisee	inviting the poor
16) Lk 14:28-33	crowd	renouncing possessions
17) Lk 16:14-15	Pharisees	Pharisees and love of money
18) Lk 16:19-31	Pharisees	rich man and Lazarus/ almsgiving

B. SUMMARY ANALYSIS

As in the previous section, I will first make a few observations concerning some general features of this list, and afterwards I will formulate some of the more substantive findings which can be drawn from it.

a) In terms of *quantity* of material contained in it, this list is rather sparse. Yet, it is complete. If we take as a basis of calculation the longest parallel for each of the passages having one or more parallels, we end up with a total of 86 verses. This is not very much if we compare with the list of the preceding section, where we had 138 verses dedicated to the question of the credentials and authority/origin of Jesus, and 96 verses on the question of the sabbath observance and its distortion — not to mention 50 verses on the sole topic of religious hypocrisy. Thus, at first glance at least, it does not seem that the financial betterment of the economically poor was uppermost in Jesus' concerns.

b) This is even truer if we consider the *variety of topics* treated by Jesus on this general theme of wealth and poverty. Some of these topics have no direct bearing on the plight of the poor. They represent Jesus' concern for the *rich*, namely, that the rich should not become entrapped by their wealth. Such teachings

(cf. the passages of the list under the numbers 2, 9, 14 — a total of 19 verses) do not even expressly mention the duty of almsgiving.

c) In confirmation of our first list containing the controversies of the gospels, we notice that none of the passages of this second list could be described as an attack on the rich for their exploitation of the poor. Even Mk 12:40 = Lk 20:47, which would seem at first blush to present such a case, does not really fit that description, as we shall see below. In fact, the only polemical material in this list (numbers 4, 6, 17, 18) merely mentions scribes, Pharisees and some disciples — people who did not qualify as wealthy, as we have seen above.

After these preliminary remarks we will now examine more closely the content itself of Jesus' teaching on the general theme of the poor, poverty and wealth. Are they aimed at alleviating the hardships of the economically poor?

a) Aside from the group of the three passages already mentioned, which treat only of the danger of wealth and do not even allude to the poor (numbers 2, 9, 14), we find a second group of passages in which Jesus invites disciples or would-be disciples to renounce all possessions so as to be able to follow him more faithfully (numbers 3, 10, 16 — namely a total of 13 verses). Taken together these two groups bring to 32 the sum of verses which in this second list are not dealing with the plight of the economically poor as such. This means that our original number of 86 verses for this entire second list is now reduced to a mere 54 verses.

b) In several of the remaining passages of this list Jesus exhorts his listeners to help the poor through almsgiving or some other form of sharing (numbers 1, 8, 11, 15, 17, 18). But even in these passages, it is not always clear whether the primary concern of Jesus is to ensure interior detachment on the part of the person who makes the renunciation or to bring about some improvement in the plight of the poor. At any rate, even if the latter interpretation were favored, these exhortations of Jesus as they stand in the gospels would be of little use to the economically poor of the modern world, because our needy contemporaries would be affronted if they were given alms, when actually what they claim as their right are economically just and human social

structures. And so, even this part of Jesus' teaching would have to be drastically transposed and adapted in order to satisfy the aspirations of today's indigent masses.

c) Of the 54 verses in this list which deal directly with the assistance due to the poor, the parable of the Last Judgement alone takes up 16 verses by itself (number 11). Yet, the economically poor as such are not the exclusive focus of this pericope; also mentioned as the beneficiaries of the Christian's assistance are the stranger, the sick and the prisoner. And so, even in this case it cannot be said without some qualification that these 16 verses are centered on the poor. And this further reduces the relevant gospel material dealing with the poor. The same is true for number 15, where not only the poor are mentioned, but also the maimed, the lame and the blind.

d) Number 17 in our list refers to "the Pharisees, who were lovers of money." Now, despite contrary appearances, these words do not invalidate what we have seen earlier about the fact that the Pharisees in general belonged to the poorer classes of Israel. For indeed, Luke here is very careful *not* to state that the Pharisees were rich (even though such a statement would have singularly strengthened the overall literary unity of this whole section of his narrative), because that would have been simply untrue. Consequently, Luke had to fall back on the accusation of greed — and this restraint on his part is an implicit admission that the Pharisees could not have been counted among the rich.

e) Likewise number 4 in our list, the verse about the exploitation of widows by *some* scribes (the generalization here is probably rhetorical) can hardly be used as a refutation of what we have said earlier about the poverty of the rabbis. For indeed, if the scribes were sometimes subsidized by women, some of whom were no doubt pious widows of means, it is because they had no source of income if they exercised their teaching profession on a full-time basis (since it was forbidden for them to be paid for their rabbinic services) — just as Jesus was subsidized by well-to-do ladies (Lk 8:1-3) when he himself was preaching and teaching on a full-time basis. That some of these teachers would have abused the generosity of their financial backers is not too surprising, and Jesus is keen on denouncing

such an abuse. But, paradoxically, all this means that we are not dealing here with the case of the rich exploiting the poor; we are dealing with the case of the poor exploiting the rich!

f) As for the statement of Jesus that we would always have the poor among us (number 6 in the list), it is doubtful that it has had any positive effect on the plight of the poor throughout the centuries. Naturally Jesus himself only meant to describe objectively what he sensed would remain a perennial problem for humankind, nothing more. But his declaration, unfortunately, has often been understood in a defeatist sense by the poor themselves ("what's the use of fighting against poverty if Jesus himself never anticipated an end to our struggle?") or has wrongly generated among the rich a smug acceptance of social inequalities ("why question the status quo if Jesus himself saw the poor as a permanent component of society?").

g) The pericope about the widow's mite (number 5) is one of the few passages of this section which constitutes an unambiguous encouragement to the economically poor, for it justly highlights the sort of heroic generosity which is so often found among them. Even this narrative, however, is not really the type of story which can be readily used by the economically oppressed in their struggle for their liberation from material servitude.

h) In terms of Jesus' commitment to the cause of the poor, not too much should be made of his statement that the Spirit has anointed him "to preach good news to the poor" (number 12). This for two reasons. First, because these words are found in a quotation borrowed from Isaiah; hence they do not necessarily express the thought of Jesus with perfect accuracy. Second, this preaching to the poor is only the first item in a series of five different items (release to the captives, sight to the blind, liberty to the oppressed, year of the Lord's favor), and so it could hardly be said to summarize by itself the whole of Jesus' mission. Thirdly, preaching the good news to the poor no doubt betrays a real interest in them, but it does not automatically ensure a successful transformation of the poor's economic situation. This depends in part on what Jesus' good news is all about.

i) Numbers 7 and 13 of our list are the only passages which have not been treated yet. They contain the beatitude of the poor

and the woe to the rich. Until Jacques Dupont proposed his masterful interpretation of these verses,¹¹ their meaning was usually "spiritualized" into an other-worldly pie-in-the-sky interpretation (the poor are blessed because their present sufferings will earn them an eternity of bliss in the afterlife, while the rich will be damned to hell), a message which the marxists rightly spurned as "opium of the people." But Dupont has decisively demonstrated the inadequacy of this traditional interpretation. His own reinterpretation (adopted now by most authors as far as I know) runs something like this.

The background of this beatitude is found in the Old Testament. There we see that God is on the side of the poor. This privilege of the poor is not to be sought, however, in their own presumed virtues or internal dispositions, but in God's disposition toward them. This is not surprising, for in the ancient Near-East the poor enjoyed the special protection of the kings, and the basis for this was that the gods were believed to be protecting them especially. The same idea was shared by Israel: Yahweh exercised towards the poor his "royal" (not distributive) justice. This interpretation of the background of the gospel beatitudes is confirmed by the study of the two other classes of the privileged in the Kingdom: the children and the sinners (all these are "worthless," defenseless . . .). Why are they proclaimed blessed? Because, with the appearance of Jesus, God is going to establish his Kingdom for the benefit of "the last, the lost and the least" (A. M. Hunter).

This does not mean that the Kingdom is refused to some people, for indeed it is given to all. But, as Segundo Galilea explains in an ingenious parable,¹² if a free clinic is opened in a remote area, the whole population of that area will benefit from it, even the rich; but the primary beneficiaries (the really

11. See J. Dupont, *Les Béatitudes* (3 vols.; Paris: Gabalda, 1954-73). Cf. also J. Dupont, "The Poor and Poverty in the Gospels and Acts," in A. George et al., *Gospel Poverty. Essays in Biblical Theology* (Chicago: Franciscan Herald Press, 1977) 25-52. This latter essay of Dupont is perhaps the most illuminating text I have ever read concerning this difficult problem. Also most helpful is the monograph of Luke T. Johnson, *Sharing Possessions. Mandate and Symbol of Faith* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1981).

12. Cf. Segundo Galilea, *The Beatitudes* (Quezon City: Claretian Publications, 1985) 14-15, 19-20.

"blessed" in this regard) will be the poor, for they cannot afford to go to a paying clinic.

Naturally Jesus' promise of the Kingdom to the poor is a promise which he himself only began to fulfill in the modest arena of his Palestinian ministry, and this in a most limited manner; for, after all, even his most large-scale miracles (miraculous catch of fish, multiplication of bread) hardly affected the overall condition of the poor of his day. Any really decisive improvement in the situation of the economically poor of the future was to be the result of the collective impact of his disciples on the society of their times. In that sense, his proclamation of the Kingdom was meant to be indeed very good news to the economically poor of all times — provided we Christians would follow it up with a total commitment to meet the needs of our fellow humans . . .

Although the corresponding woes to the rich were probably composed by Luke, as many commentators believe (P. Schanz, J. Schmid, R. Koch, J. Dupont, etc.), they probably reflect faithfully the mind of Jesus and express in a negative key the basic message of the beatitude.

Whatever the interpretation given in the course of history to this beatitude and its corresponding woes, we can hardly doubt that it invariably produced a strongly positive resonance in the hearts of the poor, at least by bringing them consolation and comfort in the awareness that Jesus had shown concern for their plight and had seen them as the natural heirs to his present/future Kingdom. Can this beatitude alone, however, inspire an entire philosophy of economic development, for example? Can it legitimately serve as the evangelical focus of a whole theological movement such as the liberation theology movement? Is this single verse enough by itself to justify the claim that Jesus' preferential option was for the economically poor? It seems to me that developments such as these need a stronger textual basis for their legitimate grounding on the gospels. I doubt if such a slender textual basis as the beatitude of the poor can bear such traffic without seriously distorting the figure and message of Jesus.

Naturally a lot more could be said about these 19 passages of the gospels on poverty and wealth, but I must submit to the

constraints of a mere article and be content with drawing a few brief conclusions at this point.

First, despite the repeated claim that Jesus was on the side of the economically poor and exercised a preferential option in their favor, one finds in the four gospels a surprisingly small quantity of material to support this claim: only 54 verses in all, and these must be read with the various qualifications I have suggested. Now, if we consider that the four gospels have a total of approximately 3,757 verses, those relevant 54 verses represent only 1.4 percent of the gospels. And, even if we discount those parts of the gospels which of their nature are not applicable to our topic (infancy narratives, Passion narratives, passages on John the Baptist — some 633 verses in all), we would still be left with a very small percentage (exactly 1.7 percent) of strictly Jesus-material dealing with the plight of the economically poor. Of course this quantitative aspect of the question is not the whole story; one must also look into the qualitative side of the texts (significance of the actions/utterances of Jesus, their degree of emphasis or solemnity, their circumstances, their socio-cultural context, etc.). But, again, one can hardly build an entire presentation of Jesus on such scant material, whatever its intrinsic import. As they say, one swallow does not make a summer.

Second, even while manifesting a genuine concern for the economically poor's betterment (especially through alms), Jesus seems to be even more concerned about the other side of the coin, which is the need to live a frugal life and not be encumbered by an excess of possessions. In our second list of texts we find several passages in this vein (numbers 1, 2, 3, 8, 9, 10, 13, 14, 16, 18) with a total of 57 verses, whereas we had only 54 verses addressing the condition of the poor.

The overall conclusion of this section, it seems to me, is that we do not have sufficient evidence to claim that Jesus was absolutely and simply on the side of the economically poor and that he exercised a preferential option for them.

III. ADDED REFLECTIONS

However, our tentative findings should not be taken as providing the last word on this delicate topic. We can legitimately

continue to maintain the siding-with-the-poor thesis, I believe. But in order for this thesis to rest on solid gospel grounds, it becomes necessary to broaden the meaning of the word "poor" and to include in it considerably more than only the economical indigent. This will be the aim of the third and last section of this study.

Before proceeding, however, I would like to forestall a possible (and often heard) objection. It goes something like this: even though Jesus might not have addressed the topic of material poverty that often, he nevertheless shared the wretched condition of the poor, "having nowhere to lay his head" (Lk 9:58), and chose his twelve apostles among the poorest of his countrymen.

This objection is easily refuted. In the above-mentioned study of Palestinian economic conditions by Joachim Jeremias, the author identifies three socio-economic classes: the rich, the middle class and the poor. The rich included the royal household of the Herods, the aristocratic priestly families (chief priests) and the lay nobility or elders. Among the middle class were the wholesale merchants, the retailers, the craftsmen who owned their working premises and did not hire themselves out for wages, the caterers and the priests. The class of the poor was constituted by the slaves, the day laborers, the scribes, the beggars and the handicapped.¹³ In connection with this classification, it is obvious that Jesus, as a carpenter, belonged to the middle class;¹⁴ so, too, at least some of his disciples such as the two sons of Zebedee (their father even had employees, cf. Mk 1:20) and Levi-Matthew, the tax collector (who was perhaps rather well-off, cf. Mt 9:9). As for the logion on "having nowhere to lay his head" (Lk 9:58), we need not understand it as emphasizing Jesus' poverty, but rather as emphasizing the insecurity and lack of comfort which necessarily mark the life of a wandering preacher. Actually, as Robert J. Karris states in

13. Cf. Jeremias, *Jerusalem*, 87-119.

14. This does not contradict what was said earlier about the Pharisees and the scribes belonging to the same social class as that of Jesus. It all depends on what segment of Jesus' life we are considering: as a craftsman exercising an honorable trade during his hidden life in Nazareth, he was of the same class as most of the Pharisees; as an itinerant preacher/teacher living off subsidies, he was of the same class as the scribes.

his commentary on Luke,¹⁵ Jesus is using here a hyperbole or exaggeration. For indeed, other evangelists show Jesus as residing most of the time in Capernaum (Mt 4:13), which Matthew tells us is Jesus' "own city" (9:1).

Another way of stressing Jesus' closeness to the economically poor is to say that he addressed himself preferentially to them. And by "poor" in such a context, most people would think of fishermen, small tradesmen, craftsmen, and the like. But these, as we have just seen, actually formed the middle class in Palestine at the time of Jesus. Secondly, the gospels constantly repeat that great crowds came to Jesus wherever he found himself and that he addressed these large crowds indiscriminately, i.e., without any distinction or selection in terms of their social components. We must therefore suppose that the usual audience of Jesus was composed, as are most popular audiences gathered randomly and spontaneously for an open-air event, of a solid majority of middle-class people (the latter being defined here as in our previous paragraph), of a sprinkling of rich, of a minority of poorer people. Thirdly, if one should insist that the so-called middle class of first-century Palestine was actually what we would call "the poor" today, then it would make little sense to persist in saying that Jesus addressed himself *preferentially* to the "poor," because in the logic of this hypothesis he had no other choice: if almost everybody in a given population is poor, then any popular preacher is perforce bound to address himself mainly to the poor. To speak then of a "preferential" option is rather odd.

Not surprisingly, then, there are many authors who, wanting to take into consideration all the gospel data that we have already examined, maintain the siding-with-the-poor thesis, but broaden the meaning of "poor" to include much more than the economically deprived people. Thus, they will readily state in the same breath that Jesus was killed by the ruling class of his day because of his courageous action in favor of the poor, but that these "poor" comprised a great variety of people, some of whom were not at all economically deprived. What these "poor" had in

15. Robert J. Karris, O.F.M., "The Gospel According to Luke," in *The New Jerome Biblical Commentary* (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1993) 701.

common was their state of misery — either from lack of social acceptance (the tax collectors, the lepers, the prostitutes), lack of health (the sick), lack of religious education (the simple “people-of-the-land”), etc.

All this is spelled out in an illuminating section of Joachim Jeremias' *New Testament Theology*¹⁶ entitled “Who are ‘the poor?’” Concerning these “poor,” Jeremias writes the following: “Summing up, then, we can now say that Jesus’ following consisted predominantly of the disreputable, the ‘*ammē hā-āres*, the uneducated, the ignorant, whose *religious* ignorance and *moral* behaviour stood in the way of their access to salvation, according to the convictions of the time.” Farther on, the same author comments about the quotation of Is 61:1 in Lk 4:18: “This makes it certain that ‘the poor’ are those who are oppressed in quite a general sense: the oppressed who cannot defend themselves, the desperate, the hopeless.” This wide group includes, not only the economically poor, but also the stranger, the sick, the captive (to guilt?), the broken-hearted, those who weep (for whatever reason), those who feel lost (the depressed?), the sinners.

In the same vein, Albert Nolan¹⁷ writes that “the term ‘poor’ in the gospels does not refer exclusively to those who were economically deprived,” and that it extends to sinners, social outcasts, prostitutes, tax collectors, herdsmen, the uneducated, etc.

Likewise, while William Reiser¹⁸ states that Jesus “made enemies among the ruling elites because he consistently took the side of the disadvantaged and the powerless,” he also specifies¹⁹ that Jesus’ preferential love extended to “the politically disenfranchised and the socially marginalized among the people of Israel.”

At this point it will be very useful to notice that, in English

16. Cf. J. Jeremias, *New Testament Theology* (London: SCM Press, 1971) 109-13.

17. Albert Nolan, *Jesus Before Christianity. The Gospel of Liberation* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1976) 22-23.

18. Cf. William Reiser, S.J., “Who will they be saying that I am?”, *The Catholic World* (Sept./Oct. 1993) 219.

19. *Ibid.* 218.

at least, the term "poor" also has several degrees of extension, just as it has in the gospels. The first of these degrees, naturally, is the most restricted one: at this level the term "poor" refers merely to a lack of material possessions, neediness, impoverishment. But then, as the dictionaries tell us, "poor" can also mean "lacking in some quality" (Webster). Sometimes the lack will be a lack of abundance, and we will speak of a "poor" crop. Sometimes the lack will be in productivity, and we will speak of a "poor" soil. Sometimes it will be in nourishment, as in a "poor" body; in excellence, as in a "poor" performance during an exam; in moral or mental qualities, as in a "poor" creature; in pleasure, comfort or satisfaction, as in a "poor" time.

Now, then, if we take our lead from this very flexible usage of "poor" as indicating *any kind of lack* (not only lack of material possessions), we will be able to say that Jesus did side with the "poor" and did exercise a preferential option for the "poor," as we have just seen.

Keeping in mind, therefore, the various reflections I have suggested in this third part of our study, along with the gospel data we have collected and analyzed in the first two parts, we are now in a position to answer the question-title of this article: "Was Jesus on the side of the poor?"

If we take the word "poor" in its limited sense of "lacking material possessions," then the answer is that Jesus did *not particularly* side with the poor. This does not mean, as I have insisted earlier, that Jesus had no interest or concern for the poor. It means, rather, that he did not take a militant stance in their favor. And here I would remind the reader of the precise meaning of the expression "side with" as defined by Webster: "to sympathize with or support (one party, faction, etc.) *in opposition to another*" (italics mine). In other words, Jesus surely sympathized with the materially deprived, but he did not "side with" them in any significant way, i.e., he did not enter into a class struggle on their behalf or oppose other groups for their sake.

And, in this respect, the expression "preferential option" would certainly be stretched to the limit — and beyond the limit — of the historical truth. For indeed, if we insist on speaking of preferential option, we could say much more aptly for example

that Jesus exercised a preferential option for the *sick*, because much more of the gospel material is about cures than about the economically poor. Likewise, we could say that Jesus exercised a preferential option for the (religious) *illiterate*, because throughout the gospel narrative we see Jesus teaching the crowds; he was even regarded as the equal of the ordained scribes and given the title "rabbi." In fact, if we wanted to indulge in paradox, we could even say that Jesus preferred the possessed to the economically poor, precisely for the same reason that we can speak of his other preferences: the gospels give far more weight to his exorcisms than to his sayings about poverty and wealth.

If, however, we should take the word "poor" in the extended sense of "lacking in something important for a full life" (such as the peace of soul that is obtained through forgiveness of sins, physical health, self-respect, religious knowledge, hope, freedom, friends, social acceptance, etc.), then our answer to the question, "Was Jesus on the side of the poor?" will be very different. We will then say: yes, most assuredly, Jesus' whole public ministry was focused on the care of these "poor."

CONCLUSION

For those who are involved in the liberation of the economically poor, perhaps my exegetical findings and accompanying reflections will prove pastorally disquieting or even upsetting. But this need not be the case. For indeed, it is one thing to ask ourselves *what Jesus did* in his own time (and to answer that question as honestly and scientifically as we can), and it is another thing to ask ourselves *what he would do* if he were faced with our present problems. After all, Jesus lived in a socio-economic situation quite different from our own. There was some poverty in the Palestine of his time, but not the kind of inhuman misery which eight hundred million people experience in our time, unable as they are to satisfy even their most basic needs. And we are talking here of a misery which should not be, because it results from the oppression of the many poor by the few rich, who create and maintain unjust socio-economic structures. The society Jesus faced was quite different, and in his time the

greatest forms of "poverty" he encountered were spiritual oppression through legalism, sickness, demon possession, religious ignorance — all evils against which he struggled to the extent of laying down his life in the process. And so, we may quite legitimately suppose that Jesus would do today what needs to be done so as to eliminate the particular form of "poverty" he would encounter.

In order to thus "transpose" Jesus' action to the present circumstances, we do not need, therefore, to do violence to the data and invent a Jesus who never existed, that is, a Jesus intensely engaged in a class struggle against the rich. For indeed, his teachings on the love of neighbor — for example, his parable of the Last Judgement (which, let us not forget, mentions also the sick, the stranger and the prisoner) — are quite sufficient in themselves to motivate our own efforts in creating a more just and fraternal world order.

On the other hand, not all of us are pastorally involved in the service of the economically poor. And here the more objective appraisal of the gospel data that I have proposed in this article might prove more pastorally usable. Because, then, those pastoral agents who are involved in spiritual formation or in teaching or in the care of the sick, for example, will no longer feel uneasy or even perhaps feel left out when they will hear their pastoral counterparts who are working with the poor invoke the example of "Jesus who sided with the poor and exercised a preferential option for them." Understanding the "poor" referred to in the *wider sense* in which it applies to the ministry of Jesus, they will be able to appropriate the formula for themselves.

Another advantage that our findings present, pastorally speaking, is that the formulas "siding with" and "preferential option," by losing their rigid restriction to the economically poor, become open to the future. For instance, if the terrible AIDS epidemic continues to spread, there might come a time in the next two or three generations when humankind's greatest social problem will not be the liberation of the economically poor but the liberation of the physically poor in health. If such a time ever comes, there will presumably arise a "theology of health" in response to the crisis. And then — quite aptly, as we have seen — the theologians of that generation will say that "Jesus sided

with the sick — Jesus exercised a preferential option for the sick.”
And they, too, will be right.

Likewise, if ever the Dark Ages of religious illiteracy returns, some will say (with an equally perfect validity) that “Jesus sided with the ignorant, he had a preferential love for them.”