

Wealth*

By DEREK KIDNER

IN THIS ARTICLE, wealth will bear its everyday meaning, not its old sense of 'wellbeing'. We turn first to the Old Testament, then to the New, finally to the modern world in the light of these.

The Old Testament

The fact that the Old Testament opens with the account of an abundant creation which is pronounced 'very good' carries implications which the New Testament makes explicit in such a passage as 1 Tim. 4:1-5. God is generous: we are to take and be thankful. The companion fact, that one thing was withheld from man on pain of death, carries from the outset the balancing implication that 'a man's life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions' but in his reponse to 'every word that proceeds from the mouth of God'—and his use of material things will be an effective expression of that response.

The attitude which the Old Testament fosters in this realm can be summed up by saying that it teaches us to view possessions as *blessings* and as *responsibilities*.

1. *Blessings*. Although the word 'blessing' sometimes denotes a human gift (*e.g.* Gn. 33:11; 2 Ki. 5:15), it is the characteristic term for a divine one; and as such, it makes earthly goods embodiments of good will, tangibly communicating God's love and power. We need not labour the point, which is richly elaborated in *e.g.* Deuteronomy 28, and which became so firmly fixed in popular thought that the book of Job became necessary to protect it from its friends. With all its tendency to be misunderstood, this view is a preservative against wealth's particular temptations to pride and materialism. As A. Weiser comments on the promise of domestic bliss in Psalm 128, 'The deeper meaning which the Psalmist . . . wants to bring out is that a man's delight in wife and children is experienced as God's blessing. It is this attitude which first transforms happiness into "blessing"; for without religion the very element which makes these things a blessing is missing'.

*An abridgement of a paper read to the Biblical Theology Study Group, July, 1964.

2. *Responsibilities*. Properly speaking, there was no absolute ownership in Israel, whereby a man might say, 'This is unconditionally mine'; e.g. Naboth was not free even to consider the enhanced value of his vineyard. It was not his to sell. Indeed it was not only what he called 'the inheritance of my fathers': the law added a stronger consideration: 'The land is mine; for you are strangers and sojourners with me' (Lv. 25:23). Out of this statement flowed the detailed regulations for the reversion of property to its ancestral holders. Quite apart from these, however, the law fostered a sense of general responsibility of 'haves' to 'have-nots', by laying down specific charitable duties (such as the triennial tithe-feast for the socially insecure, Dt. 14: 28, 29, and the laws on loans, pledges, gleanings, etc.) and by urging a spirit of generosity without which the best regulations defeat their own object (cf. Dt. 15:9). Here it is worth noting that the law against usury (Dt. 23:19, 20) was simply an insistence on brotherly kindness. It was not based on any theory that money was sterile and interest improper, for it was proper to charge it to an outsider. Rather, within the family one gives one's help in a crisis; and all Israel was the family.

It is in tune with this that Job called down the curse of heaven on himself if he had lived in selfish luxury: 'if I have withheld anything that the poor desired, . . . or have eaten my morsel alone' (Jb. 31:16, 17). Nabal lived down to his name by doing just this ('lo, he was holding a feast in his house, like the feast of a king' : 1 Sa. 25:36), and Nabals were all too numerous in the age of the kings, so that wealth meets us in the prophets' preaching as anything but a blessing or an acknowledged responsibility. By now the laws of land tenure have broken down, and rich men are adding field to field; for the only values they recognize are monetary—a pair of shoes worth more to them than a man, certainly more than justice. As for responsibility, riches have killed it by turning grown men into playboys who lounge away the last days of Israel (Am. 6:1-7). All this has been encouraged by that general loosening of the family and tribal structure of Israel which the monarchy made inevitable by creating a new class of courtier-landowners ('he will take . . . your fields . . . and give them to his servants'—1 Sa. 8:14); but whatever the shape of society, riches invite these abuses.

So the Old Testament adds to its laws and preaching on the subject various observations from human experience. While the Torah pointed to the Giver of wealth, and the Prophets to certain users of it, the Wisdom writers looked at the characteristics of wealth itself. They are not blind to its comforts—to the shelter it

gives from blows that would cripple a poor man ('A rich man's wealth is his strong city; the poverty of the poor is their ruin' —Pr. 10:15), to the popularity it buys (which may be worth little, but at least is pleasanter than to be 'disliked', 14:20, and snubbed by all and sundry, 19:7), and to the power it confers to call the tune (22:7) and to be as rude as one likes (for 'the poor use entreaties, but the rich answer roughly', 18:23). But they call attention to its limitations as well. It is no index of true worth, for 'better is a poor man who walks in his integrity than a man who is perverse in his speech' (Pr. 19:1), and 'a good name is to be chosen rather than great riches' (22:1). It is no guarantee of happiness, for 'better is a dinner of herbs where love is than a fatted ox and hatred with it' (15:17). Above all, it has no permanence, either in itself ('for suddenly it takes to itself wings', 23:5) or in face of life's major calamities. 'Riches do not profit in the day of wrath, but righteousness delivers from death' (Pr. 11:4). So wealth, by its tantalizing failure after its glittering promise, adds its special bitterness to secularism's 'vanity of vanities'.

There had been mercy, then, in the judgment that made wealth hard of attainment for fallen man (Gn. 3:19), and we return to the Pentateuch, to Deuteronomy 8, for what is perhaps the most balanced Old Testament statement of the lessons of poverty and wealth. Poverty was God's training course in humility: its supreme lesson was that 'man does not live by bread alone' (verse 3). But wealth was also in God's will, 'for the Lord your God is bringing you into a good land, . . . a land . . . in which you will lack nothing' (verses 7, 9); and the joy of it irradiates Deuteronomy. But there is also the warning 'lest you say in your heart, "My power and the might of my hand have gotten me this wealth"' (verse 17)—a warning, we may feel, addressed to the present age as much as any other in history, when man has begun to boast that he has come of age and can fend for himself. 'You shall remember the Lord your God, for it is He who gives you power to get wealth' (verse 18).

Abundance without arrogance—some such phrase may sum up the Old Testament's vision. God would give Solomon riches and honour—but was delighted that he had not asked for them. He would accept the splendour of the temple—but not without the reminder that by choice He had always lived in a tent. And if there is the prospect of the riches of the Gentiles flowing to Zion in the last days, it is balanced by the homelier picture of Israelites entertaining one another in modest affluence: 'every one . . . under his vine and under his fig tree' (Zc. 3:10).

The New Testament

In the New Testament we are at once aware of a new emphasis. There is no conflict with the Old, and we have already noticed that the teaching that 'everything created by God is good' underlies the New Testament attitude to material things just as it underlies the Old Testament. But the centre of gravity has changed.

If we had to single out one new thing that supremely accounts for the change, we might well point to the fact that in the New Testament, 'it is the last hour' (1 Jn. 2:18). A person in the grip of this conviction cannot look at his possessions as he once did; and we shall return to this fact. But this is not the whole story: there are other transforming influences intertwined with it, and perhaps the best summary of the new attitude is given in the New Testament's own threefold cord of faith, hope and love. These are all existing words, but in the New Testament newly significant and newly prominent.

1. Faith. The dictum about the camel and the needle's eye illustrates the 'agonising reappraisal' which the gospel made necessary by its insistence on repentance and faith. The aristocrat whose sorrowful departure provoked the saying had been faced particularly sharply with the fact that saving faith is a naked self-committal to Jesus; and whatever else may have contributed to his refusal, our Lord picked out his wealth as decisive. Wealth takes on this new look throughout the gospels and epistles, not indeed as the decisive obstacle in every case, but as a powerful ingredient of false confidence and divided aims. It was the ruin of Judas, it was even a factor in the hostility of the Pharisees, who scoffed at the warning that you cannot serve God and mammon. They were 'lovers of money', comments St. Luke, and our Lord added that they loved their earthly standing: 'You are those who justify yourselves before men' (Lk. 16:14, 15). Salvation was for the empty-handed and single-minded, and while there are poor men who are proud and rich men who are humble, it is a steeper climb down for the rich to renounce the way of self-help. 'Has not God chosen those who are poor in the world to be rich in faith . . .? . . . Is it not the rich who oppress you, . . . who drag you into court?' (Jas. 2:5, 6). In a sense there was nothing new in this, for rich men in Old Testament days had made life hard for the faithful poor, as the Psalmists testify; and other rich men like Abraham and Moses had had to venture out in faith, long before the gospel age, making the choice the rich young ruler refused. But the issues were clearer now, and the call to saving faith more searching.

2. *Hope*. The second word sums up that sense of living in the last days which we have already noticed as a transforming influence of the gospel. It also speaks of the fact that Jesus 'brought life and immortality to light' (2 Tim. 1:10). Where the Old Testament had pointed out that when a rich man dies 'he will carry nothing away' (Ps. 49:17), Jesus, more positively, urged us to lay up treasure in heaven, turning perishable assets into imperishable. He enshrined this in vivid sayings, composed one of His most startling parables (The Unjust Steward) about it, and threw it in as an aside to the rich young ruler when He told him to sell up: 'and you will have treasure in heaven'. But His promise to return in glory gives still sharper point to it, which St. Paul presses home in the words: 'brethren, the appointed time has grown very short; from now on, let those who . . . buy (live) as though they had no goods, and those who deal with the world as though they had no dealings with it. For the form of this world is passing away' (1 Cor. 7:29-31). Negatively, too, Paul sees riches as a threat to hope as much as to faith. 'As for the rich in this world, charge them not . . . to set their hopes on uncertain riches, but on God . . . (1 Tim. 6:17). These were not empty words. Whatever assets he himself had once possessed he had already surrendered, he tells us, as he pressed 'on toward the goal' and awaited the Saviour from heaven (Phil. 3:7, 14, 20).

3. *Love*. Without the third and greatest word, the picture of New Testament teaching would be a caricature. It had shone through the Old Testament—it was the Law and the Prophets—but it now unveiled its full glory as redeeming love, or grace. This quality must hallmark the Christian. Like his Master, he will do good to those who cannot repay him and have no claim on him; and our Lord's instances of this behaviour are largely chosen from the realm of money. 'If you lend to those from whom you hope to receive, what *charis* is that to you?' 'Give to every one who begs from you.' 'When you give a feast, invite the poor . . . , and you will be blessed, because they cannot repay you.' C. H. Dodd's well-known comment on these and other sayings of Jesus on money bears repetition:

'Clearly, it is impossible ever to say, categorically, that you *have kept* such precepts as these in their full scope; and yet, if you take them seriously at all, they will make themselves felt in every single thing you do that is concerned with the disposal of your money. They are not vague or ambiguous. Approaching the conscience through the imagination, they make abundantly

clear what must be the quality of every action that has to do with money, and in what direction it must tend, and that quality and that direction may be recognizable in actions that are trivial, or imperfect, or even mistaken. In so far as that is so, Christ's precepts have been obeyed; and yet they are not fulfilled, because they open up vistas towards an unattainable and even inconceivable perfection.¹

This attitude was certainly to be seen in New Testament days. It showed itself in the spontaneous selling and giving in the early Jerusalem church, in the sacrificial self-giving of Paul and his companions ('as poor, yet making many rich'), and in what Paul spoke of as 'the grace of God . . . shown in the churches of Macedonia' when they gave 'beyond their means, of their own free will' and out of 'their extreme poverty' to help their distant friends. It is significant that when Paul urged the Corinthians to prove their love 'genuine' (2 Cor. 8:8) he begged them to throw themselves into this enterprise, which he called 'this grace' (2 Cor. 8:6, 7; cf. 2 Cor. 8:1); and he clinched his appeal by recalling 'the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though He was rich, yet for your sake He became poor' (2 Cor. 8:9).

In fact, even when the church forgets its call in this direction, the world is ready to remind it that its Master embraced poverty: not only the poverty of renouncing heaven (on which the world has its doubts) but an unmistakable shortage of earthly goods which leaves most of us, His followers, with something to explain away.

The Modern World

From the variety of economic patterns which are described in Scripture with evident approval, it is clear that there is no one canon laid down in this field. We find property allotted to nations, tribes and families in the Old Testament; and those who had it must not lightly part with it. Within the same scheme there were classes deprived of it, either by social status (as were the *gērîm*, the sojourners) or by religious office (as were the priests and Levites), and there were lessons to be learnt by holders and non-holders through this diversity. The former were to learn care for others; the latter, unworldliness: the Lord was their protector and their inheritance. In the New Testament, too, there is more than one pattern adopted. The communism of the Jerusalem church was spontaneous, and was recognized to be so ('While it remained

¹ *Gospel and Law* (Columbia University Press, 1951), p. 76.

unsold, did it not remain your own? And after it was sold, was it not at your disposal?'). The Gentile churches do not seem to have adopted it, nor were they urged to; but they were expected to care for the poor, both within their ranks (as the scheme for widows in 1 Tim. 5 shows) and further afield, as we have been reminded. All this indicates that economic systems are, like governments, necessary (for we find careful organization a safeguard against friction in Acts 6, against idleness in 1 Tim. 5, and against muddle and procrastination in 1 Cor. 16:1-4), but are secondary to the spirit in which they are operated. Perhaps it also implies that among imperfect people, even godly ones, every system will carry its peculiar temptations, sometimes through fitting their imperfections too well, sometimes from chafing them too hard. It is difficult to pronounce between the snares and snobberies glimpsed in 1 Timothy 6 and James 2 on the one hand, and the hypocrisy of Ananias and Sapphira on the other. What we can attempt, however, is some comparison of Biblical and human attitudes to a few features of the economic realm.

I. *Natural Resources*. 'The earth is the Lord's, and the fulness thereof.' Man is steward over it, not sovereign. He is invited to dig into its ores for metal (Gn. 2. 12; Dt. 8:9), and to farm it; but he is not to exhaust it, nor boast in it—the laws of firstfruits and of the fallow sabbath-year were the Old Testament reminders of this (see Lv. 25:20, 21). Use the land impiously, enjoying its wealth irresponsibly, and, declares God, it will 'vomit you out, when you defile it' (Lv. 18:28). It is not hard to see a chain of causation between *hybris*, decadence and ruin; the Bible reminds us that the chain is God's.

2. *Money*. Scripture does not inveigh against money, to praise a barter system. Corn captivated the Rich Fool as effectively as gold. But it does warn against the love of money (1 Tim. 6:10), in its strongest terms, and while it enjoins responsible saving (1 Tim. 5:8; cf. 2 Cor. 12:14), it points out the iniquity of hoarding. 'You plutocrats . . . your gold and silver are tarnished. Yes, their very tarnish will be the evidence of your wicked hoarding and you will shrink from them as if they were red-hot' (Jas. 5:1, 3, Phillips). It can usurp the place of God ('You cannot serve God and mammon'), and when this happens, the only values that are left are money values. We saw this in Amos; it should sharpen our perception of the signs of it in our own society, where new techniques, e.g. of investment, of advertising, and of gambling, add new subtleties to old temptations.

3. *Men*. To God, people are worth dying for: to men, they are expendable. In the ancient world we need look no further than the eloquently paired trading items in Ezekiel 27:13, 'persons of men and vessels of bronze' (*cf.* Rev. 18:13). In modern commerce, less blatantly, private enterprise tends to subordinate persons to profits, and state enterprise to subordinate them to policies; both agencies attempt to manipulate them, puppet-like, by devices of 'hidden persuasion'² and to swallow them up in machine-like organizations. Against all such depersonalizing the Church has to assert man's due status as God's image and offspring. It must do so humbly, not pontificating on details beyond its expertise—for quack remedies can be as disastrous in economics as in medicine—yet tenaciously, too; for God must not be less than Lord in His world.

'The earth is the Lord's'; 'The silver . . . , the gold is mine'; 'All souls are Mine': these truths about resources, money and men are for steady proclamation by the Church, and for detailed application to the economic scene by Christians whose special field it is. They must also be lived out in faith, hope and love by the rest of us, who may never be good economists but are called to be good stewards—and good Samaritans.

² See Vance Packard, *The Hidden Persuaders* (Pelican, 1962), *passim*.