

## "Capitalism is the crisis" — Occupy Wall Street master

We live in an age in which economic, ecological, and political crises are not the exception but the rule. The Cold War context that shaped an earlier political exegesis has been replaced. Bruce Worthington argues that increasingly, crisis is the engine of a global "turn-to-capitalism." In this volume, edited by Worthington, biblical scholars and activists describe and exemplify the shape of a biblical interpretation that takes seriously the crisis itself as its most important context. Subsequent essays examine the salient aspects of our critical situation, especially in relation to the dominant economic system and its pervasive values. In addition, contributions address themes of ecological, political, and environmental crisis in dialogue with texts from the Old and New Testaments. Throughout the volume, the authors are careful to describe the global, for-making, alternative, and prophetic across historical, cultural, and socio-economic distances between the world of the Hebrew Bible, the New Testament, and our own. Richard A. Horsburgh's postscript pointing to next steps in political interpretation.

### Praise for *Reading the Bible in an Age of Crisis*

"As a deep structural crisis endures more of humanity and the planet than at any time in history, the question is not whether but how the work of political exegesis needs to be done. This book offers a welcome wealth of insights, providing deeper understanding of the crises produced by the hegemony of capital over life as a whole, which affects all persons, as well as the political. The result is not lament or hand-wringing but new and inspiring encounters with the transformative powers of the Bible."

Joseph Flaxson  
Perkins School of Theology

"*Reading the Bible in an Age of Crisis* is part of a developing ideology and methodology in biblical studies. Its particular strength is that it locates its subtextual, unspoken, and often postmodern capitalism or neoliberalism in the very heart of the biblical text, in the bangality of the differentiated, but the "we" of the "I" of the "you" of the "positions." This provocative collection of essays is a must-read for anyone interested in political, cultural, and social studies and politically radical interpretation."

Alanna Grosvenor  
University of the Pacific

Bruce Worthington is pursuing a Ph.D. in New Testament studies at Wellesley College, University of Toronto. He has published a number of articles in biblical interpretation, philosophical hermeneutics, and biblical studies.



Religion / Bible

ISBN: 978-1-4514-6286-7



54900

9 781451 482867

fortress press

scholarship that matters  
[fortresspress.com](http://fortresspress.com)

WORTHINGTON

READING THE BIBLE IN AN AGE OF CRISIS

fp

POLITICAL EXEGESIS FOR A NEW DAY

BRUCE WORTHINGTON, EDITOR

## Reading the Bible with the Poor

*Building a Social Movement, Led by the Poor, as a  
United Social Force*

Liz Theoharis and Willie Baptist

Biblical texts have long been used to justify the inevitability of poverty and inequality and to provide religious sanction for the dispossession of the majority for the benefit of the few. In particular, Jesus' saying that "the poor will be with you always" (Matt. 26:11, parallels in Mark 14:7 and John 12:8) has been interpreted either to establish that God condones poverty or that although God condemns poverty, it is an unfortunate but unalterable reality of the human condition.<sup>1</sup> For many people, the fact that Jesus is the one saying this

1. Regular Google searches of "the poor will be with you always" reveal the omnipresence of this biblical missive (728,000 mentions on one search) as well as a debate emerging on the role of Jesus, the Bible, and faith communities in the eradication and amelioration of poverty. Typically, the entry is a personal assertion, reflection, blog post, or series of questions on whether this statement from Matthew 26:11, John 12:11, and Mark 14:7 is saying: a) that we can never end poverty, b) that it is the role of Christians, not the government, to try

statement about the "poor" and that he uses the word "always" makes the meaning clear and unequivocal: they may not know where this line falls in the biblical story or the context of the Gospel of Matthew, but they posit that this biblical statement establishes poverty as perpetual and inevitable. Even for those more versed in the Gospel of Matthew, the use of this passage still results in a similar conclusion. For some, Jesus and the poor are juxtaposed in Matthew 26, and the point of the saying is that attending to Jesus and the spiritual realm is rendered more important than concern for the poor. For others, Jesus' discussion of the ointment and his invoking of Deuteronomy 15 (see below) suggest that money and/or charity are the biblical solution to poverty, which makes the wealthy the ones with agency in this story.

However, a more robust contextual exegesis of Matthew 26:1-16, with an emphasis on verses 6-13 in their intertextuality with Deuteronomy 15:1-11, reveals a critique of charity or euergetism and the ancient slavery-based Roman imperial economy. Insight into this intertextuality shows how Jesus, his disciples, and various writings the New Testament apply an extant biblical theology of justice taken from the Hebrew Scriptures.<sup>2</sup> The Roman Empire, like earlier empires, was a highly class-stratified economy. Every imperial

to care for the poor, or c) that Jesus rather than the poor should be our concern, as well as other common interpretations of this passage. There are various interpretations that support this statement including those discussed in: Ulrich Luz, *Matthew 21-28*, trans. J. E. Crouch, Hermenia (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2005), 340; Craig Evans, *Matthew*, New Cambridge Bible Commentary (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 426; Grant R. Osborne, *Matthew*, Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2010), 951; Gail O'Day, "John," in *Women's Bible Commentary*, ed. Carol A. Newsom and Sharon H. Ringe (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1998), 367-88; Amy-Jill Levine, "Matthew," in *Women's Bible Commentary*, ed. Carol A. Newsom and Sharon H. Ringe (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1998), 349.

2. In order to understand the potential relationship between Deuteronomy (especially ch. 15) and Matthew 26 (especially v. 11 about the poor), one must first explore the concept of intertextuality in general. Richard Hays proposes seven criteria (availability, volume, recurrence, thematic coherence, historical plausibility, and history of interpretation, satisfaction) to determine the potentiality of echoes in Scripture (*Echoes of Scripture in the Letters of Paul* [New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1993]). We are confident that Deuteronomy 15 and Matthew 26 agree with Hays' criteria for intertextual echoes.

conquest of oppressed peoples added to the growing ranks of the impoverished classes and accumulated more wealth for the ruling slave-holding strata.<sup>3</sup> The hegemonic theology that found expression in the different religious belief systems of the time upheld a set of values and views that justified cruelly unjust societies.<sup>4</sup> In contrast,

3. One such example of this comes from an account of the dispossession of the Italians as told by Appian: "The rich had got possession of the greater part of the undivided land. They trusted in the conditions of the time, that these possessions would not be again taken from them, and bought, therefore, some of the pieces of land lying near theirs, and belonging to the poor, with the acquiescence of their owners, and took some by force, so that they now were cultivating widely extended domains, instead of isolated fields. Then they employed slaves in agriculture and cattle-breeding, because freemen would have been taken from labor for military service. The possession of slaves brought them great gain, inasmuch as these, on account of their immunity from military service, could freely multiply and have a multitude of children. Thus the powerful men drew all wealth to themselves, and all the land swarmed with slaves. The Italians, on the other hand, were always decreasing in number, destroyed as they were by poverty, taxes, and military service. Even when times of peace came, they were doomed to complete inactivity, because the rich were in possession of the soil, and used slaves instead of freemen in the sowing of it" (Appian, *Bell. civ. 1.7* [White, LCL]).

4. There are many expressions of the imperial theology and the system of euergetism and patronage that helped uphold that ideology and justified the slave-based economy. Some come from Caesar Augustus himself who, although he was the richest person in the world and responsible for the dispossession and poverty of the majority in the empire, claimed to be a savior of the poor:

"To the Roman plebs I paid out three hundred sesterces per man in accordance with the will of my father, and in my own name in my fifth consulship I gave four hundred sesterces apiece from the spoils of war; a second time, moreover, in my tenth consulship I paid out of my own patrimony four hundred sesterces per man by way of bounty, and in my eleventh consulship I made twelve distributions of food from grain bought at my own expense, and in the twelfth year of my tribunician power I gave for the third time four hundred sesterces to each man. These largesses of mine reached a number of persons never less than two hundred and fifty thousand. In the eighteenth year of my tribunician power, as consul for the twelfth time, I gave to three hundred and twenty thousand of the city plebs sixty denarii apiece. In the colonies of my soldiers, as consul for the fifth time, I gave one thousand sesterces to each man from the spoils of war; about one hundred and twenty thousand men in the colonies received this triumphal largesse. When consul for the thirteenth time I gave sixty denarii apiece to the plebs who were then receiving public grain; these were a little more than two hundred thousand persons." (*Res gest. divi Aug. 3.15*)

Aristotle also writes philosophical justification for poverty and inequality:

"If one is a better man than the other, he thinks he has a right to more, for goodness deserves the larger share. And similarly when one is more useful than the other if a man is of no use, they say, he ought not to have an equal share, for it becomes a charity and not a friendship at all, if what one gets out of it is not enough to repay one's trouble. For men think that it ought to be in a friendship as it is in a business partnership, where those who contribute more capital take more of the profits. On the other hand the needy or inferior person takes the opposite view: he maintains that it is the part of a good friend to assist those in need; what is the use (he argues)

as Richard A. Horsley has argued, the Hebrew Bible depicted God's will and God's justice in the context of, *and in opposition to* the unjust theology, poverty, and inhumanity of the empires of those times.<sup>5</sup>

Interpreting and contextualizing Matthew 26:11 within a biblical theology of justice also attributes a leading agency to the poor, and promotes the primacy of material security and prosperity for all humanity. In this verse, Jesus reacts strongly to the disciples. His words echo Deuteronomy 15:4 ("there will be no one in need among you"), so Matthew 26:11 is to be read not as a prediction,<sup>6</sup> but as a warning regarding the perils of disobedience to God's

of being friends with the good and great if one is to get nothing out of it?" (Aristotle, *Eth. Nic.* 1163a [Rackham, LCL])

One other quote comes from Plutarch and speaks to how the imperial theology was imposed among the people in an effort to instill inequality:

"The masses are more hostile to a rich man who does not give them a share of his private possessions than to a poor man who steals from the public funds, for they think the former's conduct is due to arrogance and contempt of them, but the latter's to necessity. First, then, let the gifts be made without bargaining for anything; for so they surprise and overcome the recipients more completely; and secondly they should be given on some occasion which offers a good and excellent pretext, one which is connected with the worship of a god and leads the people to piety; for at the same time there springs up in the minds of the masses a strong disposition to believe that the deity is great and majestic, when they see the men whom they themselves honour and regard as great so liberally and zealously vying with each other in honouring the divinity." (Plutarch, *Mor.* 279-81 [De Lacy and Einarson, LCL])

5. "At the center of the Pentateuch/Torah, both substantively and as the organizing structure, is the Mosaic Covenant. From Exodus 19 through the rest of Exodus, all of Leviticus, and up to Numbers 10, Israel is encamped at Mount Sinai receiving the Covenant and covenantal law. The whole book of Deuteronomy is then a 'second (covenantal) law' taught by Moses as the Israelites prepare to enter the land. . . . The historical books include key passages that summarize and elaborate the political-economic structure of the monarchs, including how they replicate the structure of ancient Near Eastern empires. The earliest oracles of the classical prophets pronounce God's indictment and punishment of kings and their officers for violating the principles of the Covenant and the economic rights of the people. . . . That Jesus was every bit as concerned with economic issues as the Hebrew prophets has often gone unnoticed. The biblical tradition of covenantal principles and mechanisms continued into the time of Jesus. This can be seen particularly in the covenant renewal and extensive covenantal teachings evident in some of the Dead Sea Scrolls. The renewal of the Mosaic Covenant was also central to Jesus' proclamation of the kingdom of God." Richard Horsley, *Covenant Economics: A Biblical Vision of Justice for All* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2009), xix-xx.

6. The verbs used are not in the future tense. The disciples have (*echete* meaning "you have" in the present tense) the poor around—the Jesus-movement is based among them—but time is running out for Jesus (*ou pantote echete* meaning "you do not always have" me).

commandments (resulting in poverty and inequality) and even as Jesus' call to the disciples to continue to take up the struggles of the poor for economic and social justice even after his death.<sup>7</sup> That the woman who anoints Jesus in this passage is not named, that she does not follow euergetic patterns of benefaction, that Jesus reacts so strongly to the practice of buying and selling suggested by the disciples, and that later in the passion narrative, the potter's field donation of money for the poor (from the blood money offered to Judas by the temple elites) is treated negatively—all point to a strong critique of money, charity, and hegemonic economics on the part of the Evangelist.

Unpacking the context and implications of this consequential passage is an appropriate and important part of a larger exegetical and political project of centering the interpretation of the poor themselves. Located at the intersection of poverty and the New Testament, we seek in this essay to examine how the Bible has been used to justify and condemn poverty and how poor people are both coming up against this use of the Bible and simultaneously using the Bible in their own quest to end poverty. By gathering and analyzing the perspectives of Poverty Initiative Poverty Scholars (grassroots anti-poverty organizers and leaders who are working to build a social movement to end poverty, led by the poor as a united force), we offer these interpretations as revealing, legitimate, and important for scholars, religious leaders, and others in our communities to hear. Finally, we suggest that the messiah Jesus is a leader of a social

7. "The disciples' concern for the poor is by no means incorrect. . . . Jesus' statement 'you always have the poor among you' (v 11) must not be taken to mean that as a consequence one need not worry about them or that all attempts to ameliorate the condition of the poor are ill-founded and futile. This cannot be made clearer than by citing the full text of Deuteronomy 15:11 . . . The ongoing presence of the poor does not provide an excuse to ignore them and their plight, but, quite the contrary, it provides the ongoing opportunity and stimulus to help them" (Donald A. Hagner, *Matthew 14-28*, WBC 33 [Dallas: Word Books, 1995], 759).

movement who works to reign in God's kingdom and end slavery, debts, and poverty on earth.

This article is a partnership between two leaders of a growing movement of the poor who have worked closely together for over twenty years: the Rev. Dr. Liz Theoharis and Willie Baptist. I, Liz, am both a trained interpreter of biblical texts and a committed activist in a growing effort to end poverty. I am also a mother of two and an ordained minister in the Presbyterian Church (USA). For the past twenty years I have been organizing, educating, and uniting the poor aimed at building a movement to end poverty. I first got involved with the National Union of the Homeless and the Kensington Welfare Rights Union in the early 1990s, helping to weave a network of poor people's organizations dedicated to using a human rights framework to confront poverty in the late 1990s and early 2000s. Through this organizing work, I returned to my religious roots, consulting for the National Council of Churches and other mainline Protestant denominations that were struggling with new interpretations and questions about the Bible's message regarding poverty. I received my PhD from Union Theological Seminary in 2014, where I wrote my dissertation, "Will the Poor Be With You Always?: Towards a Methodological Approach to Reading the Bible with the Poor."<sup>8</sup> In my work, I concentrate on poor people's actions and theologies in the twenty-first century, inspired by Jesus, as part of a loosened and contemporary biblical canon and in concert with prominent theologians and biblical scholars. I seek to systematically document the stories, lessons, and interpretations of poor people organizing to end poverty in order to illuminate implications for our churches and to chart the development of a liberation theology for the United States for the twenty-first century.

8. Available at <http://dx.doi.org/10.7916/D85Q4T7D>.

I, Willie, have been an educator and organizer amongst the poor for over forty years. I first got involved in politics as a youth participant in the 1965 Watts Rebellion. I was an organizer with the Black Student Union at Pepperdine University from 1965 to 1969 and founder of Operation Cereal Bowl in Watts in 1971. I was an organizer and shop steward with the United Steel Workers, the Texas Farmworkers, Jobs with Peace, and the National Union of the Homeless. I have lived a life of poverty, spending time on the streets of Philadelphia, homeless. I served as the education director for the Kensington Welfare Rights Union for ten years and was founder and co-coordinator of the University of the Poor. I am a father of three and have 3 grandchildren. I was raised in the Baptist Church, preached my first sermon at age twelve, and was planning to become a Baptist preacher but got pulled more deeply into freedom and anti-poverty movements.

Both of us helped found the Poverty Initiative at Union Theological Seminary and its umbrella the Kairos Center for Religions, Rights, and Social Justice; Liz serves as the Co-Director of Kairos and Coordinator of the Poverty Initiative and Willie as the Coordinator the Poverty Scholarship and Leadership Development for the Kairos Center and Poverty Initiative. The genealogy of the Kairos Center traces back through efforts of the poor to organize themselves across racial and other dividing lines into a united, leading, new, and unsettling force,<sup>9</sup> including the National Union

9. Much of this genealogy and the lessons and influences from this work are documented in a series of articles written by leaders of the Kensington Welfare Rights Union and Poor People's Economic Human Rights Campaign, including: Willie Baptist and Noelle Damico, "Building the New Freedom Church of the Poor," *Grass Currents* 55, no. 3 (2005): 352-63; William Baptist and Mary Bricker Jenkins, "The Movement to End Poverty in the United States," in *Economic Rights in Canada and the United States*, eds. Rhoda E. Howard-Hassmann and Claude E. Welch, Jr. (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2006), 103-20; William Baptist, Mary Bricker-Jenkins, and Monica Dillon, "Taking the Struggle on the Road: The New Freedom Bus—Freedom from Unemployment, Hunger and Homelessness," *Journal of Progressive Human Services* 10, no. 2 (1999): 7-29; Willie Baptist and Cheri Honkala, "A New

of the Homeless, the National Welfare Rights Organization, the "Redneck Army" of black and white Appalachian miners, Bonus marchers, and the Southern Tenant Farmers Union.<sup>10</sup> We have exchanged lessons with social movements of the poor globally including the Landless Workers Movement of Brazil, the Assembly of the Poor in Thailand, the Indian Farmers Movement, and the South African Shackdwellers Movement.<sup>11</sup> Our work has drawn special direction from Martin Luther King's Poor People's Campaign and its effort to bring together Native American poor, Chicano poor, sanitation workers, poor women, and poor white Appalachians on the basis of what they have in common. Since our founding in 2003-2004, we have been working to live into our mission of raising up generations of religious and community leaders dedicated to building a social movement to end poverty, led by the poor. Through three national poverty truth commissions, two leadership schools, eleven poverty immersion courses, ten faculty-sponsored semester-long courses, sixteen one-day seminars, five books and numerous written religious and theological resources, nine strategic dialogues, six intensive study programs and numerous events, symposia, and exchanges with global grassroots and religious leaders, the we have established a wide and deep network of community and religious leaders, spanning across thirty states and seventeen countries around the world. Since launching our *Pedagogy of the Poor* National Tour in 2011, based on a book written by Willie and Jan Rehmman, we have personally witnessed the breadth and depth of this network by

and Unsettling Force" *The Other Side Magazine* (2003): 38-39; David Wagner, *What's Love Got to Do with It? A Critical Look at American Charity* (New York: New Press, 2000); Guida West, *The National Welfare Rights Movement: The Social Protest of Poor Women* (Westport, CO: Praeger, 1981); David Zucchino, *Myth of the Welfare Queen* (New York: Scribner, 1997).

10. These movements are the same ones used in the contextual Bible studies we have held within the Poverty Initiative.

11. For a list of key Poverty Initiative partners see <http://povertyinitiative.org/partners>.

connecting with the heroes and heroines fighting on the frontlines of the struggle to end poverty in thirty states of the U.S.<sup>12</sup>

### The Curse of Poverty

Jesus' ministry is central in the New Testament. In Luke 4:18-19, Jesus inaugurated his ministry by reading from the prophet Isaiah,

The spirit of the Lord is upon me; therefore he has anointed me. He has sent me to bring glad tidings to the poor, to proclaim liberty to captives, recovery of sight to the blind and release to prisoners, to announce a year of favor from the Lord.

Further, in Luke 6:20-24, Jesus says,

Blessed are you who are poor for yours is the kingdom of God.

Blessed are you who hunger now, for you will be satisfied.

Blessed are you who weep now, for you will laugh.

Blessed are you when men hate you, when they exclude you and insult you and reject your name as evil, because of the Son of Man.

Rejoice in that day and leap for joy, because great is your reward in Heaven. For that is how their fathers treated the prophets.

But woe to you who are rich, for you have already received your comfort.

In 1967, the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., said, "The curse of poverty has no justification in our age. The time has come for us to civilize ourselves by the total, direct, and immediate abolition of poverty."<sup>13</sup> Committing himself as Jesus did to bring about a

12. Willie Baptist and Jan Rehmman, *Pedagogy of the Poor: Building the Movement to End Poverty* (New York: Teachers College Press, 2011).

13. Martin Luther King Jr., *Where Do We Go From Here: Chaos or Community?* (New York: Harper and Row, 1967; repr. Boston: Beacon, 2010), 175. Citations refer to the Beacon edition.

revolution of values of preaching good news to the poor and in bearing the cross, Dr. King vowed,

I choose to identify with the underprivileged. I choose to identify with the poor. I choose to give my life for the hungry. I choose to give my life for those who have been left out. . . . This is the way I'm going. If it means suffering a little bit, I'm going that way. . . . If it means dying for them, I'm going that way.<sup>14</sup>

While King's words are passionate and moving, poverty in the United States and across the world has deepened since they were preached nearly fifty years ago. Since the unfolding of the "Great Recession" in 2007-8, four in five Americans live in danger of falling into poverty and/or joblessness, and recent reports reveal that one in two Americans are poor or low-income (living at less than 200 percent of the poverty line).<sup>15</sup> Ten thousand homes are foreclosed every day in communities across the United States. Nearly 40 percent of Americans between the ages of twenty-five and sixty will experience at least one year below the official poverty line; half of all American children will at some point during their childhood reside in a household that uses food stamps for a period of time.<sup>16</sup>

Poverty manifests itself in myriad ways in the United States: the many poor whites, Latinos, Asians, and Blacks who suffered the most devastation and death by Hurricane Katrina in 2005; the thousands of families displaced in New York, New Jersey, and Connecticut by Hurricane Sandy in 2012; the hundreds of thousands whose water has been shut off in Detroit since the year 2000 who are now having their children taken away because of their poverty and lack of running

14. Vincent Harding, *Martin Luther King: The Inconvenient Hero* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1995), 58.

15. Associated Press, "4 in 5 Americans Live in Danger of Falling into Poverty, Joblessness," July 13, 2013, <http://usnews.nbcnews.com/news/2013/07/28/19738595-ap-4-in-5-americans-live-in-danger-of-falling-into-poverty-joblessness>.

16. Mark Rank, "Poverty is Mainstream in America," *New York Times*, November 2, 2013.

water; the thousands of people who have to share heart attack medicine in New Jersey, do not get chemotherapy in Vermont, or are denied Medicaid in Mississippi and North Carolina and thus cannot afford medicine, their health care deductibles, or health insurance premiums even after the Affordable Care Act of 2013; and native-born and immigrants who pick tomatoes in Florida for poverty wages and sometimes in slave rings, even in the twenty-first-century United States. Poverty is made visible when children die in fires in Philadelphia because of fire station brownouts; when families in West Virginia lose their homes and family burial grounds because of mountaintop removal; when homeless citizens are buried in unidentified mass graves in potter's field in New York and many other states across the country; and when millions of workers are paid too little to be able to adequately feed, house, or clothe their families across the United States.<sup>17</sup>

The issue of poverty appears throughout the Bible: the Old and New Testaments are full of references to how we are to respond to poverty and injustice. Jim Wallis of *Sojourners Magazine* surveyed key biblical themes, noting,

in the Old Testament, the suffering of the poor was the second most prominent theme. . . . In the NT we found that one out of every 16 verses was about the poor. In the Gospels, it was one out of every ten, in Luke, one of every seven, and in James, one of every five verses.<sup>18</sup>

17. These anecdotes come from our experience organizing and educating among the poor in the United States for the last decades. There are organizations addressing these issues including slavery and poverty wages for farm work in Florida and the American South with the Coalition of Immokalee Workers ([ciw-online.org](http://ciw-online.org)), universal healthcare and people's budgeting in Vermont with the Vermont Worker's Center ([workerscenter.org](http://workerscenter.org)), families fighting foreclosure, eviction and the privatization of water and other public utilities in Detroit with the Michigan Welfare Rights Organization ([mwro.org](http://mwro.org)), low-wage workers fighting for poverty's end in Maryland with the United Workers ([unitedworkers.org](http://unitedworkers.org)), poor and working people's issues including cuts to public services, education, and wages with the Media Mobilizing Project in Philadelphia ([mediamobilizing.org](http://mediamobilizing.org)), and residents fighting against Mountaintop Removal and strip mining and its ecological impact in West Virginia with Stop Mountaintop Removal.

Common throughout the New and Old Testaments are texts addressing the redistribution of wealth and the abolition of poverty: "Is this not the fast I choose: to loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke? Is it not to share your bread with the hungry, and bring the homeless poor into your house; when you see the naked, to cover them?" (Isa. 58:6-7); "[God has] lifted up the lowly; he has filled the hungry with good things" (Luke 1:52-53); "For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink . . . Truly I tell you just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me" (Matt. 25:35, 40).

Yet, while passages like these are common, many people fixate on a small handful of passages: "The poor will always be with you" (Matthew 26:11) (as discussed above); "If you do not work, you shall not eat" (2 Thess. 3:10); "For to all those who have, more will be given, and they will have an abundance; but from those who have nothing, even what they have will be taken away" (Matt. 25:29). These verses above are regularly cited to assert that poverty cannot be ended and that if God wanted to end poverty, God would do so.<sup>18</sup>

18. Jim Wallis, *Faith Works: Lessons from the Life of an Activist Preacher* (New York: Random House, 2000), 71. Jim Wallis is the Founder of *Sojourners Magazine* and community in Washington, DC. He is one of the most vocal evangelical voices on poverty in the United States.

19. Following are a few examples gathered from the Internet that show how this passage is used by self-declared conservatives and liberals alike to assert the inevitability of poverty and that the poor are either charity cases or criminal cases: Poverty will never be eradicated. As Jesus said, "The poor will be with you always. . . ." There will always be people who are physically unable to work, and people who will never work because they simply will not, and people who are too stupid to work for very much money, and people who are criminally inclined to steal from stupid or helpless people, etc. And there will always be people who want to take money away from the higher paid, smart, energetic and enterprising people who are the backbone of this country, and give it to those who are not. Those are the people who refuse to believe what God has said. Poverty CANNOT be cured or eradicated, but there will always be people who try ("How Can Poverty Be Eradicated?" *Answers.com*, [http://wiki.answers.com/Q/How\\_can\\_poverty\\_be\\_eradicated](http://wiki.answers.com/Q/How_can_poverty_be_eradicated)). Jesus said the poor will be with you always. It has been over two thousand years and this statement still holds true. We cannot eradicate poverty but if a neighbor comes to us and asks for a loaf of bread, we should care enough to share if we can meet that need. With that in mind I propose establishing a directory with a Website

They have been used to claim that the only "good news" that poor people will hear will be in heaven, and interpreted to mean that while some lepers and hungry people in Jesus' day deserved compassion, today's poor people are at fault for their own poverty.<sup>20</sup>

### Reading the Bible with the Poor

This essay aims to further develop and describe a biblical hermeneutic that we have termed "Reading the Bible with the Poor."<sup>21</sup> In many cases, starting with these difficult texts used to justify inaction in the face of growing economic insecurity, Reading the Bible with the Poor suggests a biblical theology of justice and promotes the agency of the poor. This approach is first distinguished from the prevailing approach of reading the Bible either against the poor, or toward charity for the poor. This method of contextual biblical study draws from the methods developed—and developing—in South Africa with the Academy of the Poor and Latin American liberation theology and Christian base communities.<sup>22</sup> What is particularly distinctive about Reading the Bible with the Poor is its US context: a large population

[www.GalesburgCares.org](http://www.GalesburgCares.org) containing all organizations offering various types of assistance. It would include churches, nonprofit organizations and government agencies to better connect the providers with recipients. The groups might be categorized by food, clothing, medical, child care, financial management, housing, etc. I would also like hard copies of the directory to be distributed to all participating organizations connecting the groups with one another for a unified approach to poverty in Galesburg. (Eric Delawder, "Mayoral Candidate Eric Delawder: Galesburg Mayoral Candidate Eric Delawder Answers Questions From The Register-Mail Editorial Board and Speaks on Video About Why Voters Should Elect Him," *The Register-Mail*, March 20, 2009, <http://www.galesburg.com/archive/x1331535567/Mayoral-candidate-Eric-Delawder>.)

20. Luz, *Matthew 21-28*, 340, explains that putting concern for Jesus over concern for the poor has been a central interpretation throughout the ages; he writes that Theophylactus (Theophylactus, *Ennaratio in Evng. Marc.*, PG 123.645, 648) asserted that Jesus deserved better than the poor and that John Calvin suggested that with the approach of Jesus' death, concern for Jesus should take precedence.

21. Reading the Bible with the Poor has developed within the context of the Poverty Initiative at Union Theological Seminary including professors like Dr. Brigitte Kahl and other empirical and liberationist scholars committed to freedom from poverty. Therefore we use the pronouns "we," "our," and "us" to describe the communities of practice and accountability to this method and a larger liberation project with the Bible.



of impoverished Christians who are already familiar with the Bible (and its damaging interpretations), a population moving from self-blame to making a social claim in a rights-based framework, and a heterogeneous group that is growing everyday as a result of increasing sections of the middle income strata being reduced to poverty even as the poor are reduced to superfluousness.

Reading the Bible with the Poor grows out of global examples of contextual Bible study and liberation theology in Latin America, South Africa, and many other places across the globe, and has developed within the framework of the Poverty Initiative and Kairos Center for Religions, Rights, and Social Justice at Union Theological Seminary and particularly its US context. The theological and biblical battles of the nineteenth-century anti-slavery movement have been a core area of study and influence on Reading the Bible with the Poor. Abolitionists used the Bible to argue that God condemned slavery and that all Christians and people of conscience should follow. Indeed, these religious interpretations provided a crucial moral force for the abolitionist movement because the biblical legitimacy of slavery was widely assumed and thus a key prop to the institution of chattel slavery in the United States.<sup>23</sup>

22. Although Reading the Bible with the Poor has been influenced by a wide range of postcolonial, feminist, liberationist and other biblical scholars, particularly important have been three exemplary Bible study models, from South Africa (from Gerald West and the Academy of the Poor), Latin America (from Ernesto Cardenal and *The Gospel in Solentiname*) and the United States border (with Bob Ekblad's *Reading the Bible with the Damned*).

23. Slaveholders quoted "Slaves, obey your masters" (Col. 3:22, Eph. 6:5, 1 Pet. 2:18) and the book of Philemon about returning runaway slaves to their masters and produced a Bible without the book of Exodus or other teachings about freeing slaves to maintain and legitimate their cause. For books on the topic of slavery and the Bible see: Isaac Allen, *Is Slavery Sanctioned By The Bible?* (Ann Arbor, MI: CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform, 2013); Hector Avalos, *Slavery, Abolitionism, and the Ethics of Biblical Scholarship* (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix, 2013); Stephen R. Haynes, *Noah's Curse: The Biblical Justification of American Slavery*, Religion in America Series (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002); Mark A. Noll, *The Civil War as a Theological Crisis* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006).

Reading the Bible with the Poor also draws inspiration especially from the words and work of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and his launching of the Poor People's Campaign in 1967-68.<sup>24</sup> The strategic concept introduced by this historic campaign aimed "to lift the load of poverty" through uniting the poor across color lines into "a new and unsettling force."<sup>25</sup> Other influential US social movements that take up the Bible in their push for social justice include Paul Rauschenbusch and the Social Gospel Movement and the revivals and spirituals of the Southern Tenant Farmers Union. These influences and movements are integrated into our Bible studies.

Turning from the influences to the methodology of Reading the Bible with the Poor, we note that there are a set of theoretical assumptions that inform the study and use of biblical texts. First, successful social change has most often been led by those most affected by the problems they are working to resolve. Second, committed, competent, connected, and clear leaders of such a social movement need to be developed and conscientized. Third, faith and religion play a critical role in these struggles and movements; therefore the content and impact of Bible study and religious practice matter. We will explore these tenets that inform the contextual Bible study method here.

24. Robert T. Chase, "Class Resurrection: The Poor People's Campaign of 1968 and Resurrection City," *Essays in History* 40 (1998), <http://www.essaysinhistory.com/articles/2012/116>.

25. From Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King's "Nonviolence and Social Change" in the Massey Lectures for the Canadian Broadcast Company:

"The dispossessed of this nation—the poor, both white and Negro—live in a cruelly unjust society. They must organize a revolution against . . . the structures through which the society is refusing to take means . . . which are at hand, to lift the load of poverty. There are millions of poor people in this country who have very little, or even nothing, to lose. If they can be helped to take action together, they will do so with a freedom and power that will be a new and unsettling force in our complacent national life." (Martin Luther King Jr., *The Trumpet of Conscience* [Boston: Beacon, 1968], 53-66.)

### Building a Social Movement Led by the Poor as a United Social Force

The Great Recession that started between 2007-2008 continues to impoverish increasingly more families years later.<sup>26</sup> Community leaders and their organizations wage innovative campaigns to demand access to affordable housing, living wage jobs, healthcare, immigrant rights, workers' rights, and education reform, but even as these grassroots organizations win unprecedented victories including labor protections,<sup>27</sup> higher wages,<sup>28</sup> universal health care,<sup>29</sup> and so on,

26. About rising inequality and the need to develop new models of organizing, Ann Robertson and Bill Leumer write,

"Thanks to Occupy, most working people are well aware of the growing inequalities in wealth. . . . In other words, not only are the rich getting richer, the rest of us are getting poorer. Many factors have converged to produce these trends. Good-paying manufacturing jobs have migrated overseas. Technology has replaced many other good-paying jobs. More importantly, across the country many unions have demonstrated an overwhelming willingness to accept concessions without waging a struggle, thereby contributing to the growing inequalities. This willingness to give up hard won gains in turn has resulted in the continuing decline of union membership, which now stands at 8 percent" (Ann Robertson and Bill Leumer, "Rising Poverty and Social Inequality in America," August 4, 2012, <http://www.globalresearch.ca/raising-poverty-and-social-inequality-in-america>).

27. Domestic Workers United won a Domestic Workers Bill of Rights in 2011 where, for the first time in history, domestic workers are guaranteed limited benefits, worker protections, and better pay under New York State law. In the fall of 2013, the National Domestic Workers Association was able to win a more universal law where domestic workers are included in the National Labor Relations Act for the first time in history. For more information on the Domestic Workers Bill of Rights, see both Domestic Workers United and the National Domestic Workers Alliance. For more information on federal labor law, see <http://www.dol.gov/whd/homecare/finalrule.htm>.

28. In 1999, the Coalition of Immokalee Workers (CIW) launched their Taco Bell campaign where they started pressuring companies for which Florida farmworkers picked tomatoes. Their demands were simple: pay one penny more per pound for the tomatoes (and ensure that the penny is passed on to the worker) that would double the wages of farmworkers, offer training and monitoring of the growing associations by the CIW, and broker agreements between the growers, farmworkers, and fast-food and supermarket industries. To date, Taco Bell, YUMI Brands, McDonalds, Burger King, Whole Foods, Wal-Mart, and Chipotle have all signed on. For more information on the Coalition of Immokalee Workers and the Campaign for Fair Food, see <http://ciw-online.org>.

29. In 2012, the Vermont Workers Center won universal healthcare for all Vermont residents after a five-year long campaign across the state. For more information on this bill and the bigger healthcare as a human right campaign that has grown to Maryland, Maine, and Pennsylvania, see <http://workerscenter.org>.

conditions are worsening and the victories are small and temporary compared to the erosion of rights, lowering of wages, widening of inequality, and dispossession.<sup>30</sup> To those engaged in community struggles, the conditions demonstrate the need for a broader social movement.<sup>31</sup>

Learning lessons from the Southern Christian Leadership Conference and its key role in the US civil rights movement, a modern movement requires a sophisticated core of leaders, versed in the Bible and liberative theology, capable of analyzing and developing solutions that address the complexity of poverty and injustice today.<sup>32</sup> Inspired by Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s

30. Nationwide, the count of America's poor remains stuck at a record number: 46.2 million, or 15 percent of the population, due in part to lingering high unemployment following the recession. . . . The risks of poverty also have been increasing in recent decades, particularly among people ages 35-55, coinciding with widening income inequality. For instance, people ages 35-45 had a 17 percent risk of encountering poverty during the 1969-1989 time period; that risk increased to 23 percent during the 1989-2009 period. For those ages 45-55, the risk of poverty jumped from 11.8 percent to 17.7 percent. Higher recent rates of unemployment mean the lifetime risk of experiencing economic insecurity now runs even higher: 79 percent, or 4 in 5 adults, by the time they turn 60 . . . By 2030, based on the current trend of widening income inequality, close to 85 percent of all working-age adults in the U.S. will experience bouts of economic insecurity. "Poverty is no longer an issue of 'them,' it's an issue of 'us,'" says Mark Rank, a professor at Washington University in St. Louis who calculated the numbers. ("4 in 5 Americans live in danger of falling into poverty")

31. There are many sources for understanding the political economy of neoliberalism and the economic crisis. A few of the resources for this economic analysis include Mike Davis, *City of Quartz: Excavating the Future in Los Angeles* (London: Verso, 1990); Davis, *Planet of Shums* (London: Verso, 2006); Gérard Duménil and Dominique Lévy, *Capital Reurgent: Roots of the Neoliberal Revolution* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004); David Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1990); Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005); Naomi Klein, *The Shock Doctrine: The Rise of Disaster Capitalism* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2007); Paul Krugman, *The Return of Depression Economics and the Crisis of 2008* (New York: Norton, 2009); David McNally, *Another World is Possible: Globalization & Anticapitalism* (Winnipeg: Arbeiter Ring Publishing, 2006); June Nash, *From Tank Town to High Tech: The Clash of Community and Industrial Cycles* (New York: State University of New York Press, 1989); Alejandro Portes, Manuel Castells, and Lauren A. Benton, eds., *The Informal Economy: Studies in Advanced and Less Developed Countries* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1989); William Robinson, *A Theory of Global Capitalism: Production, Class, and State in a Transnational World* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2004).

32. For more on lessons from the civil rights movement and Black Freedom struggle, see Aldon Morris, *The Origins of the Civil Rights Movement* (New York: Free Press, 1986); Carol Anderson,

conclusions about the need for the poor in the United States to unite across color lines and issues, our work over the past two decades has focused on developing a core of highly skilled leaders in order to build a powerful multiracial, multifaith, multi-issue network of grassroots, low-income, community and religious leaders.<sup>33</sup> Such leaders are not just born—they rely on systematic education and training. In fact, decades of organizing experience have shown that organizations with a comprehensive education and leadership development program are more able to sustain their efforts.<sup>34</sup>

Historically, successful social movements have been led by those most affected by the problems they are working to resolve. Slaves and ex-slaves led the anti-slavery movement; people of color led the civil rights movement; women led the women's suffrage movement.<sup>35</sup> In their own time, those very people struggled for recognition that

*Eyes Off the Prize: The United Nations and the African American Struggle for Human Rights, 1944–1955* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003); John Dittmer, *Local People: The Struggle for Civil Rights in Mississippi* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 1995); David Garrow, *Bearing the Cross: Martin Luther King Jr and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference* (San Francisco: William Morrow, 2004); Charles Payne, *I've Got the Light of Freedom: The Organizing Tradition and the Mississippi Freedom Struggle* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007); The Poverty Initiative, *A New and Unsettling Force: Re-igniting Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King's Poor People's Campaign* (New York: Poverty Initiative, 2009); Jeanna Theoharis and Komozi Woodard, *Groundwork: Local Black Freedom Movements in America* (New York: New York University Press, 2005); Howard Zinn, *SNCC: The New Abolitionists* (New York: South End Press, 1964).

33. Many authors, scholars, and social justice leaders suggest that Martin Luther King Jr. left a void when he was assassinated. Books on this topic include: Michael Eric Dyson, *I May Not Get There with You: The True Martin Luther King Jr* (New York: Free Press, 2001); Vincent Harding, *Martin Luther King: The Inconvenient Hero* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2008); William F. Pepper, *An Act of State: The Execution of Martin Luther King* (New York: Verso, 2008); William F. Pepper, *Orders to Kill: The Truth Behind the Murder of Martin Luther King* (New York: Carroll and Graf, 1995).

34. It has been our experience that grassroots organizations that do not have a focus on leadership development and education are not able to sustain the people who get involved in their organization. The National Union of the Homeless went into demise in the mid-1990s for lack of education and training of its leaders. Other examples from non-profits, NGOs, and other community organizations also tell the same story.

35. This understanding of the history of social movements and social change as well as an emphasis on political education and leadership development is emphasized in Baptist and Rehman, *Pedagogy of the Poor*.

the problem they were facing was immoral, that their struggle was legitimate, and that they were fit to lead it.<sup>36</sup> Yet today, we readily recognize the moral evil of slavery, and the right—and necessity—of slaves and ex-slaves to lead the struggle to end it.

Given popular images of the poor that dominate in US culture as lazy, crazy, addicted, ineffective, violent, or pathetic, the concept of the leadership of the poor as a united social force and as individual leaders seems remote.<sup>37</sup> Everyone *but* the poor is looked to for solutions to end poverty, whether it is social workers, church members, lawyers, or legislators. But as Frederick Douglass had to argue to others in the Abolitionist Movement: the leadership and unity of the slaves was the first step in ending slavery. He insisted on the moral, political, and epistemological agency of enslaved people.<sup>38</sup>

36. For more information about the abolitionist movement and the struggles many slaves and ex-slaves had to establish their agency and legitimacy, see especially the biographies of many of the most influential (religious) leaders: Frederick Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass: An American Slave, Written by Himself* (London: St. Martin's, 2002); W. E. B. Dubois, *Black Reconstruction in America 1860–1880* (New York: Free Press, 1999); Kate Clifford Larson, *Bound for the Promised Land: Harriet Tubman: Portrait of an American Hero* (New York: Ballantine Books, 2004); Stephen Oates, *To Purge This Land of Blood: A Biography of John Brown* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1984).

37. Valeria Strauss, "Five Stereotypes About Poor Families and Education," *Washington Post*, October 28, 2013, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/answer-sheet/wp/2013/10/28/five-stereotypes-about-poor-families-and-education>.

38. In his powerful speech about West Indian Emancipation, Frederick Douglass critiques those, even within the anti-slavery movement, who diminish the role, political agency, and aptitude of the slaves and former slaves. This speech has been influential in the work of the Poverty Initiative where poor people have gotten inspiration knowing that slaves and ex-slaves had to struggle to assert their agency and dignity:

"I know, my friends, that in some quarters the efforts of colored people meet with very little encouragement. . . . This class of Abolitionists don't like colored celebrations, they don't like colored conventions, they don't like colored Anti-Slavery fairs for the support of colored newspapers. They don't like any demonstrations whatever in which colored men take a leading part. They talk of the proud Anglo-Saxon blood, as flippantly as those who profess to believe in the natural inferiority of races. Your humble speaker has been branded as an ingrate, because he has ventured to stand up on his own right, and to plead our common cause as a colored man, rather than as a Garrisonian. I hold it to be no part of gratitude to allow our white friends to do all the work, while we merely hold their coats. Opposition of the sort now referred to, is partisan opposition, and we need not mind it. The white people at large will not largely be influenced by it. They will see and appreciate all honest efforts on our part to improve our condition as a people. Let me give you a word of the philosophy of reform. The whole history

Within the Poverty Initiative network, we believe that the strategic direction of a movement is determined by uniting and placing those most affected by the problem at the forefront. The first step in building such a movement is the identification and systematic development of leaders who are highly intelligent and devoted to establishing this strategic direction. While rooted in the unity of the poor, this movement has to involve a broad cross section of people.

One of the main purposes of contextual biblical interpretation is to allow those participating in the study to view the Bible from the standpoint of the struggles of the poor and draw parallels to biblical texts, thereby challenging misconceptions of poverty, religiosity, and modes of social transformation. Since biblical interpretation has been in the hands of scholars and preachers predominantly trained in institutions of higher education, endorsed and dominated by the perspectives of the rich and the status quo—offering the space for poor people to interpret biblical stories and apply these interpretations to their life situations constitutes a considerable contribution to the field of New Testament studies.<sup>39</sup> Bible study is typically done in the context of a Sunday school class, oftentimes

of the progress of human liberty shows that all concessions yet made to her august claims, have been born of earnest struggle. The conflict has been exciting, agitating, all-absorbing, and for the time being, putting all other tumults to silence. It must do this or it does nothing. If there is no struggle there is no progress. Those who profess to favor freedom and yet deprecate agitation, are men who want crops without plowing up the ground, they want rain without thunder and lightning. They want the ocean without the awful roar of its many waters. This struggle may be a moral one, or it may be a physical one, and it may be both moral and physical, but it must be a struggle. Power concedes nothing without a demand. It never did and it never will. Find out just what any people will quietly submit to and you have found out the exact measure of injustice and wrong which will be imposed upon them, and these will continue till they are resisted with either words or blows, or with both. The limits of tyrants are prescribed by the endurance of those whom they oppress. In the light of these ideas, Negroes will be hunted at the North, and held and flogged at the South so long as they submit to those devilish outrages, and make no resistance, either moral or physical. Men may not get all they pay for in this world, but they must certainly pay for all they get. If we ever get free from the oppressions and wrongs heaped upon us, we must pay for their removal. We must do this by labor, by suffering, by sacrifice, and if needs be, by our lives and the lives of others." (Frederick Douglass, "West India Emancipation: Speech delivered at Canandaigua, New York, August 3, 1857," <http://www.lib.rochester.edu/index.cfm?PAGE=4398>)

under the direction and leadership of a pastor or other established leader, and often only addressing texts those established leaders deem relevant. Reading the Bible with the Poor provides a more far-ranging approach by putting poor people's agency, leadership, and

39. Following is an example again from South Africa of the type of interpretation of biblical texts on the part of the organized poor. The Poverty Initiative has used this speech and other writings by leaders in the South African Shackdwellers in our Poverty Scholars program and contextual Bible studies. What has been particularly influential about this quotation is the way that biblical texts are interpreted alongside the life experiences of today's poor. Rather than accepting the "interpretations" of scholars, clergy and others, poor leaders such as Mdlalose apply the stories from the Bible to their situation finding many resonances and parallels between life in the shacks of South Africa and the slums of Galilee:

"As young leaders, our elders don't forget to advise us about the 10 commandments of God which are in Exodus 20. I full [sic] engaged with this chapter, looked deeply in to it and started to compare it with the way that we are living today. I look into verse 12 which says "Respect your father and your mother, so that you may live a long time in the land that I am giving you." I don't stop asking myself if the leaders like Nigel Gumede, have even thought of reading the Bible. They don't respect elders in our presence. I fail to understand why old people are still living in shacks. How does one feel when one's elders are living in such state, while the politicians are all living in fancy houses? And our elders are treated liked naughty children when they want to discuss matters with the politicians. Building houses does take some time. But engaging people in a respectful way takes no time. All it takes is to recognise them as human beings. Verse 15 says, "Do not steal." I wonder if all the councilors who are running the communities' and government's resources as if they are running their own spaza shop where they take and give whenever they wish to—with the result that today there are lots of people who are being left homeless while according to the computers they are seen as if they have homes—have had time to read this chapter thoroughly. Verse 16 says, "Do not accuse anyone falsely." There are people from Kennedy Road who today still don't have homes after they were falsely accused and chased out. Twelve members of Kennedy served a year of imprisonment for a crime that they did not commit. Even though the police used torture to try and manufacture a case against the 12 their case was thrown out of the court. The judge found that witnesses were lying and that the police had written witnesses statements. I wonder what Nigel Gumede and Willies Mchunu will say to God for all the tears and stress and frustration they caused to people made in the images of God. Today Gumede and Mchunu are living in their homes while there are leaders from Kennedy who are still in Exile. God will answer one day. No stone will be left unturned, no tear will drop on the flow. God has a dish where all the tears are flowing to and surely he shall answer them. Soon we will be worshipping with Psalm 6:8: "Away from me, all you who do evil, for the LORD has heard my weeping. The LORD has heard my cry for mercy; the LORD accepts my prayer. All my enemies will be ashamed and dismayed; they will turn back in sudden disgrace." God made all people, rich and poor, and any oppression of any people is a sin in the eyes of God. All oppressors will have to account for their oppression. God is on the side of all struggles for justice. His spirit moves in our struggles and keeps us strong. As we struggle we are bringing his spirit into the world. Amandla! The Struggle of the poor going alongside God shall continue. Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I will dwell in the house of the LORD forever. I am blessed to be Umlali baseMjondolo." (Bandle Mdlalose, "God in My Struggle," *Abahlali baseMjondolo*, July 3, 2012, <http://abahlali.org/node/8911>).

analysis at the center of the discussion. This includes a broad range of texts, including difficult biblical texts on poverty, along with the insistence that leaders of the Bible study include organizers of the poor especially from the ranks of the poor themselves.

Some assert that the theological condoning of poverty takes place because many American churches have lost a connection to the poor.<sup>40</sup> But mere awareness of poverty issues does not transform interpretations of "the poor are with you always" or other biblical justifications of poverty. Many poor people believe the same things about who is to blame for poverty that middle-income or wealthy people do.<sup>41</sup> This is why we have found it important to base new interpretations of the text not just among the poor, but among the poor who are organizing themselves against the issues of poverty, and to return to and reinterpret religious texts that have been used to justify poverty and define obedience to God in individualistic terms between a human on earth and God in heaven. Just as not having a connection to the poor can justify middle-class ideas on why people are poor, not having a connection to organized poor people more easily reinforces the predominant charity approach according to which what the fortunate, especially Christians, need to do is save the poor. So, this experience can often be transformative for poor people themselves, both intellectually and spiritually.

The form of leadership development and consciousness-raising employed in our method of Reading the Bible with the Poor combines rigorous study and applied practice. Therefore, churches and classrooms, anti-poverty campaigns and organized protests, all become locations of contextual Bible study and general political education. This variety has been effective in helping promote a

40. Jim Wallis, *God's Politics: Why the Right Gets It Wrong and the Left Doesn't Get It* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 2005), 211.

41. Throughout our decades of anti-poverty organizing, we have found that most poor people blame themselves for their poverty and are therefore ashamed of being poor.

transformation of values, including new theoretical interpretations and new leadership practices alongside the organized poor.

The organized poor in the United States are engaged in contextual Bible study alongside their brothers and sisters in the global community through a methodology of Reading the Bible with the Poor. Reading the Bible with the Poor has an epistemological framework that encourages newly emerging leaders to examine the existing possibilities for ending all poverty and contends that organized poor people are makers and interpreters of this good news from the poor. The methodology draws from a long liberationist heritage including feminist, empire-critical, and postcolonial theories of interpretation.<sup>42</sup> The Bible studies combine social movement

42. Some of the theories of interpretation and books most influential for our work include: A. K. M. Adam, *What Is Postmodern Biblical Criticism?* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress Press, 1995); Adam, *Postmodern Interpretations of the Bible: A Reader* (New York: Chalice, 2001); David Tuesday Adamo, *Biblical Interpretation in African Perspective* (New York: University Press of America, 2006); Joe Bageant, *Deer Hunting with Jesus: Dispatches from America's Class War* (New York: Crown, 2007); Bible & Culture Collective, *The Postmodern Bible* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1997); Walter Brueggemann, *An Introduction to the Old Testament: The Canon and Christian Imagination* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2003); James Cone, *God of the Oppressed* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1997); Musa Dube, *Postcolonial Feminist Interpretation of the Bible* (St. Louis: Christian Board of Publication, 2000); Musa Dube and Musimbi Kanyoro, *Grant Me Justice! HIV/AIDS & Gender Readings of the Bible* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2005); Dube, *Other Ways of Reading: African Women and the Bible* (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2001); Ulrich Duchrow, *Global Economy: A Confessional Issue for the Churches?* (Geneva: WCC Publications, 1987); Cain Hope Felder, *Stony the Road We Trod: African American Biblical Interpretation* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress Press, 1991); Norman Gottwald, *The Tribes of Yahweh: A Sociology of the Religion of Liberated Israel, 1250-1050 BCE* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1999); Joel Green, *Hearing the New Testament: Strategies for Interpretation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1995); Gustavo Gutiérrez, *On Job: God-Talk and the Suffering of the Innocent*, trans. Matthew O'Connell (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2003); Gustavo Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation: History, Politics, and Salvation*, trans. Caridad Inda and John Eagleson (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1988); Ched Myers, *The Biblical Vision of Sabbath Economies* (Washington, DC: Church of the Saviour Publishing, 2001); Carol Newsom and Sharon H. Ringe, *Women's Bible Commentary: Expanded Edition with Apocrypha* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1998); Jorge Pixley and Clodovis Boff, *The Bible, the Church and the Poor: Biblical, Theological, and Pastoral Aspects of the Option for the Poor* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1987); Kwok Pui-lan, *Postcolonial Imagination and Feminist Theology* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2005); Christopher Rowland and Mark Comer, *Liberating Exegesis: The Challenge of Liberation Theology to Biblical Studies* (Louisville:

organization and action (people being compelled to organize to change their conditions and those around them), intellectual analysis (including an appreciation for academic scholarship), and a theological and spiritual approach. The model describes not simply a theory but an ongoing practice of foregrounding the polarization of wealth and poverty as the defining issue of our day.

Reading the Bible with the Poor is not a biblical hermeneutic for the poor, as is suggested by the old and prevalent notion of what has been called "faith-based organizing." That is, it is not a biblical hermeneutic *for* the poor, which tends to restrict religiosity to organized religious institutions and view poverty as due to the sins of the poor rather than the sins of an unjust society. Rather, it is a summary of a biblical hermeneutic developed out of struggle, living politics, and a deep spirituality that represents the program of the poor and dispossessed. The methodology itself is interested in uniting people across difference (in race, geography, religion, gender, sexual orientation, age, ability, and so on) rather than having those differences used by those in power to divide and isolate. It argues that the poor are the epistemological, political, and moral agents of change in our society and not cases of charity nor criminality. When the organized poor appropriate the Bible, a biblical program of political, economic, and social justice is brought into clear view.

Westminster John Knox, 1990); Elisabeth Schlüssler Fiorenza, ed., *Searching the Scriptures: A Feminist Commentary*, 2 vols. (New York: Crossroad, 1993–1994); Schlüssler Fiorenza, *Jesus and the Politics of Interpretation* (New York: Continuum, 2001); Fernando Segovia, "Methods for Studying the New Testament," in *New Testament Today*, ed. Mark Allan Powell (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1999), 1–9; Segovia, *Decolonizing Biblical Studies: A View from the Margins* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2000); Fernando Segovia and R. S. Sugirtharajah, *Postcolonial Commentary on the New Testament Writings* (New York: T&T Clark, 2007); R. S. Sugirtharajah, *Voices from the Margins: Interpreting the Bible in the Third World* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2006); Justin Ukpong et al., *Reading the Bible in the Global Village* (Cape Town: Society of Biblical Literature, 2002); Delores Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness: The Challenge of Womanist God-Talk* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2000); Vincent Winbush, *African Americans and the Bible: Sacred Text and Social Texture* (New York: Continuum, 2001); Vincent Winbush, *The Bible and African Americans: A Brief History* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003).

### Jesus as an Organizer

When we explore Jesus' revolution of values as expressed especially in the Beatitudes in Matthew and Mary's Magnificat in Luke, as well as other practices and teachings of ministry, a condemnation of the Roman Empire and the promotion of communities of resistance and renewal across the Mediterranean comes into clear view.<sup>43</sup> Starting with the assertion that Jesus was poor and living under class-stratified Roman imperial rule, leaders and organizers from the ranks of the poor and Poverty Scholars generally make a series of connections and important interpretational moves. Jesus becomes recognizable as a poor person and a popular social movement leader, if we extrapolate from New Testament depictions of early Christian communities, as a budding social movement. Poverty Scholars suggest that what happens to Jesus throughout the Bible and the anointing scene in Matthew 26 specifically is not completely special or unusual, but shares similar characteristics with other poor people's experiences (including being surrounded by and finding shelter among other

43. Based on close exegetical work of Matthew, historical-critical scholarship of Galilee, Antioch, and the larger Roman Empire, and our contextual Bible study commitments as experienced through *Reading the Bible with the Poor*, we agree with the profile developed by Poverty Scholars and argue that Jesus was a teacher, leader, prophet, and ruler of a budding revolutionary social movement of the poor that practiced and preached about God's coming reign of abundance, dignity, and prosperity for all. This religious and political movement was accurately understood by the ruling elite of the Roman Empire to be in stark opposition to Rome, especially with respect to its economic, political, and religious structure. This Poverty Scholars' profile of Matthew's Jesus as teacher and social movement leader with a program of covenant economics connects with ideas from biblical scholars. Marcus Borg asserts that Jesus was one of four characters: a prophet, a sage, a revitalization movement founder, or a spiritual leader. John Dominic Crossan proposes that Jesus was a Cynic philosopher, a visionary teacher, and a peasant protestor. Richard Horsley depicts Jesus as a social revolutionary. E. P. Sanders suggests that Jesus is a teacher of "Jewish restoration eschatology." N. T. Wright asserts that Jesus was a messianic prophet. Geza Vermes argues that Jesus was a Galilean holy man. William Herzog writes that Jesus is a prophet in the tradition of Israel's prophetic figures, a subversive pedagogue of the oppressed, a shamanistic figure, and a reputational leader who brokers the justice of Yahweh's covenant and coming reign. Others including Stevan Davies, J. C. Becker, Joachim Gaikka, Dale Allison suggest he was seen as a healer or prophet or apocalyptic figure for the kingdom of God.

poor people, being concerned about debt and resources, valuing at times dignity over money, critiquing charity) as well as the experiences of social movement leaders in particular (including holding these leaders to high standards, emphasizing political education among movement leaders and participants, evoking movement teachings and sacred traditions, suggesting non-participation in dominant economic systems, and assuming that controversy will arise). Similarities between early Christian communities and contemporary poor people are not surprising; as social theorist James C. Scott notes, "to the degree structures of domination can be demonstrated to operate in comparable ways, they will, other things equal, elicit reactions and patterns of resistance that are also broadly comparable."<sup>44</sup> Such connections suggest that a depiction of Jesus as a movement leader, popular messiah, and pedagogue of the oppressed is historically possible and interpretations of biblical texts that presume this are potentially valid.<sup>45</sup> The social location of contemporary poor people who are engaged in the work of social transformation helps these Poverty Scholars participating in Reading the Bible with the Poor Bible studies understand and draw meaning from the words and actions in the Gospel of Matthew. These Bible studies also show that diverse people can interpret together across their differences of experience, racial and gender composition, formal education levels, and theological persuasions. Jesus is a recognizable leader of a social movement in first-century Palestine. Poverty Scholars posit that Jesus and his community of followers in Matthew and the other Gospels dealt with the politics

44. James C. Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1990), xi.

45. This assertion follows the work of Stevan Davies who relies on the presence of contemporary exorcisms in parts of Western Africa similar to the exorcisms found in the New Testament to demonstrate that Jesus' exorcisms may be historically reliable. See Davies, *Jesus the Healer: Possession, Trance, and the Origins of Christianity* (New York: Continuum, 1995).

of food and healthcare and spoke in stories. Their ministry and movement developed new forms of struggle and organization countering a class-based imperial structure, and a mission that informs us still today, two thousand years later. Following from developments in social history that posit that social transformation is fueled by the poor and dispossessed, we can observe that Jesus' teachings and actions around poverty, wealth, and power, especially in Matthew's Gospel, lend further support to a portrait of Jesus as a social movement leader. In fact, exploring the teachings and actions of Jesus in Matthew, Poverty Scholars propose six "M's" to highlight the focus on justice and movement building in the gospel: *message*, *martyrdom*, *miracles*, *media*, *mentoring*, and *missionary work*.

#### Message

Jesus proclaimed the "good news" that everyone was created in the image of God and has worth. Jesus and his disciples demonstrated this "good news" through shared meals, conversation, and healing. He taught stories and metaphors wherein the "least and the last" become the "greatest and the first" (Matt. 25:40; 18:1-4; 23:11); and the poor are proclaimed "blessed" (Matt. 5:1).

#### Martyrdom

Jesus and the disciples revealed the inequities of Roman society, which excluded the sick and the poor (Matt. 11:5). Through the turning over of the tables in the temple, Jesus disrupted commerce and drew attention to the system of economic and ritual exchange that impoverished and excluded so many poor people (Matt. 21:12). Jesus was accused of sedition and crucified by Rome as an enemy of the state and alternative "King of the Jews" (Matt. 26:63-68; 27:24-44).

### Miracles

As a poor man working among the poor of his society, it follows that Jesus' miracles were about providing the survival needs of the people—care and healthcare (Matt. 8:1-34; 9:1-14; 14:34-36; 20:28-34) and other things that were denied them by the society and economic system of that time. Faced with a hungry crowd of more than five thousand (Matt. 14:13-21; 16:9) that was eager but too hungry to learn, Jesus turned to his disciples and said, "You give them something to eat."

### Media

Jesus and his disciples used various means of communication. He preached sermons and handed down instruction as in the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5-7). He traveled throughout the area connecting up with more communities and people. Indeed theirs was a peripatetic movement; the Roman roads served as a medium through which they carried their message.

### Mentoring

Political education and leadership development were at the heart of the early Christian movement. Throughout his ministry—in his responsiveness to lepers (Matt. 8:2; 10:8; 26:6), through his exposure of the temple system's regularized defrauding of the poor (Matt. 21:12), and in his teachings in parables (Matt. 13:1-53; 18:10-14, 23-34; 22:1-14; 25:1-30)—Jesus exposed the disciples to the conditions under which people were suffering and unveiled the ways in which the Roman Empire produced this misery.<sup>46</sup> Further, Jesus

46. There are a few parables unique to Matthew, a major form of Jesus' revolutionary teaching, that reaffirm a focus on instruction and economics, including the Parables of the Weeds (13:24-30, 13:36-43), Hidden Treasure and Pearl (13:44-46), Net (13:47-50), New and Old Treasures (13:51-52), Laborers in the Vineyard (20:1-16), Two Sons (21:28-32), and Ten

promoted leadership development by entrusting his followers to carry out healing and preaching and then to return back together to reflect on their experiences. When Jesus was doing miracles himself, he was developing other leaders. Jesus also focused on self-doubt and self-hatred, exorcising spirits and demons (Matt. 4:24; 8:23-28; 5:16)—a major hurdle that poor people must confront and conquer if they are to be successful leaders.

### Missionary Work

In his own life and ministry, Jesus represented the coming together of the other five "M's" of movement building. Each of these things inseparably raised the consciousness of and built organization first among the people who were called the "least of these" (Matt. 25:40). Matthew 28:16-20, called the "Great Commission" and the finale of the Gospel of Matthew, is about charging Jesus' disciples to follow him in carrying forward their seditious mission. Focusing on this

Bridesmaids (25:1-13). The Parables of the Weeds, Net, New and Old Treasures, and Two Sons speak to the praxis of unity of words and deeds and the judgment of God for those who bear bad fruit and injustice. The Parable of the Laborers in the Vineyard (Matt. 20:1-16) is particularly important for understanding this dialectic of learning and economic practice. Workers go out to work and make an agreement with the farmer to receive one denarius, the standard rate for day laborers. When some workers start their work hours later, they are still paid the daily rate. These "undeserving" workers earn money for work they do not do. This sounds similar to an economic logic where God provides and people do not have to worry about (or work for/deserve) their daily needs. This could be an echo of the manna story in the Exodus narrative (Exod. 16:1-22) or the teaching on the lilies of the field from the Sermon on the Mount (Matt. 6:25-34). Perhaps this parable shows the difference between the Roman greed-based money economy and God's need-based economy as Jesus teaches to his followers and is told (and perhaps even practiced) by the Matthean community. Also important to explore here is the Parable of the Talents/Pounds. Although contained in both Matthew 25:14-30 and Luke 19:12-30, the versions of the stories differ (in Matthew the laborers are given talents to invest while in Luke they only receive pounds—worth much less as mentioned above). Activities such as banking, trading, investing, and making outrageous profit (usury) that may have violated Torah stipulations (Lev. 25:35-38; Deut. 7-11) pervade the language of these parables, however—contributing to any analysis that a critique of these economic practices occurs throughout the Gospel. Throughout Matthew, there are economic turns and twists—places where Jesus teaches and/or demonstrates that the economy of God's kingdom is not what one would expect.



mission reminds everyone that each person is a crucial contributor to the movement's success or failure; that it is about them and their own choices, not solely focused on Jesus and his charismatic personality.

Jesus was a leader of a social, economic, political, and spiritual movement led by those at the bottom of the Roman Empire who united across nationality and other lines of division to promote dignity, prosperity, and justice for all people. Jesus' words and actions, as exemplified in the story of the "anointing at Bethany" and throughout the New Testament, can be seen as instructions for the poor to unite and organize today to transform society and end poverty for all. Therefore, the hyper-spiritualization of poverty and the call to ending poverty only in heaven does not hold.

Preacher, professor, and Poverty Initiative leader Barbara Lundblad suggests that faith is key to building a social movement to end poverty: a belief that ending poverty—especially in times of unheard-of wealth—is possible, an understanding that this is what God requires, and a conviction that this is how Christians must act out their commitment to Jesus.

Do we need more statistics? More courage? More time to volunteer? Perhaps most of all we need more faith. Jesus' parable [on the rich man and Lazarus] ends with these ironic words: "Abraham said to the rich man, 'If they do not listen to Moses and the prophets, neither will they be convinced even if someone rises from the dead.'" Someone has risen from the dead. What more do we need?<sup>47</sup>

But instead of developing faith that ending poverty (existing unjustly in the midst of plenty) is possible, we ignore the controversial, revolutionary nature of a poor, resurrected Jesus as Lord and Savior who challenges the wealthy, immortalized Caesar. We forget that Jesus' kingdom is about economic and social rights in the here and

now and that the messiah Jesus came to usher in this reign. The good news of the Bible has been reduced to an individualized acceptance of Jesus Christ as a Lord and Savior, severed from his mission to the world. We deny that the poor are at the center of God's concern, ignoring that Jesus was a leader of a revolutionary movement of the poor who, rather than mitigating the unfortunate inevitability of poverty, called for a movement to transform heaven and earth.

If Matthew 26:1-16 continues to be interpreted as God willing poverty and the only solutions offered continue to be charity, if our religious institutions offer Band-Aid help and superficial solace instead of social transformation with the poor as a united social force at the helm, and if followers of Jesus Christ do not take up the call to follow Jesus and observe God's commandments, then Matthew 26:11 (and Deuteronomy 15:11) will come true. For this is what Matthew 26:11 warns: if we don't recognize Jesus, a messiah of the poor (and what Jesus asks his followers in carrying out his mission), poverty will exist forever—in disobedience to and disregard for God's will and God's justice.

47. Barbara Lundblad, "Closing the Great Chasm: Faith & Global Hunger Part 2," *Day One*, June 20, 2010, [http://day1.org/2036-closing\\_the\\_great\\_chasm\\_faith\\_global\\_hunger\\_part\\_2](http://day1.org/2036-closing_the_great_chasm_faith_global_hunger_part_2).

# Reading the Bible in an Age of Crisis

**Political Exegesis for a New Day**

Bruce Worthington

**Fortress Press**  
*Minneapolis*