

The Church and Wealth

W. J. Sheels + Diana Wood (ed.)

Oxford: Basil Blackwell

(Studies in Church History 24)

1987

THE VINE AND THE ELM TREE:
THE PATRISTIC INTERPRETATION OF JESUS'
TEACHINGS ON WEALTH

by J. A. MCGUCKIN

If patristic tradition on the subject of wealth and possessions often appears ambivalent in its attitudes, then perhaps one of the reasons for this is that this tradition grows from an exegesis of Gospel teachings on the subject that themselves are far from being straightforward, even though they are immensely forthright. Clement of Alexandria, for example, has frequently been accused of twisting the simple and immediately obvious demand of Jesus: 'Sell all you have and give to the poor' (Mark 10.21) and subverting a radical vision of Jesus into a comfortable exhortation that any pious property-owner, bourgeois or aristocratic, could be happy to live with. If the rich young man had understood Christ's real message, as Clement would have it (not so much to renounce his ownership of goods as to free his heart from attachment to them), then he might not have had such a crisis about following Jesus. Whether or not Clement's case is, in the end, convincing as an exegesis, it none the less successfully raises all the implicit problems of interpreting the New Testament teachings on wealth in any kind of universalist sense—as teachings that are meant to apply to all, and for all time. And there are, consequently, many dangers in being too ready to dismiss Clement's allegorism as an anachronistic exegesis, not least the danger of reverting to a different kind of biblical fundamentalism than the one Clement thought he was attacking: for contemporary biblical criticism, as it attempts to separate out the original message of Jesus and the insights of his later disciples, and to locate the original words in their correct historical and sociological milieu, has rightly warned us against over-confidence in our historical interpretations of Gospel material.

The problem of interpreting the evangelical demands, warnings, and denunciations on the subject of wealth arises precisely in this act of seeking the correct matrix of thought in which to contextualize the words. For example, 'Foxes have dens, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head' (Luke 9.58) has often been pressed into service to create a romantic vision of a totally poor Lord who has no property beyond that in which he stands. But it all depends on the context in which the Evangelist chooses to set the logion, and Redaction Criticism has more and more clearly shown

