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0521385229 - The Early History of Greed: The Sin of Avarice in Early Medieval Thought and Literature

Richard Newhauser

Excerpt

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I

Alms and ascetes, round stones and masons: avarice in the early church

THE DEADLY SIN TRADITION: AVARICE AND THE WANING OF ESCHATOLOGICAL EXPECTATIONS

The third vision in the *Shepherd of Hermas*, written in Rome for the young Christian community there during the early part of the second century, is an allegory of the ideal construction of the church, and it may serve as a guide in examining the responses to greed in early Christian literature. Hermas is shown angels erecting a tower of stones which fit together perfectly; these stones, he is later told by a woman who is herself another personified image of the church, are the ecclesiastical officials, martyrs, the righteous, and recent converts who form the solid core of the building. He also observes other stones found unsuitable for the masonry, though not rejected outright, and they include round, white rocks. To his ingenuous request for their allegorisation, Lady Church responds: they are the wealthy whose commerce interferes with their faith when persecution threatens. They will remain unfit for construction until they have been squared off, until their excess wealth has been hewn away. The situation presented by this allegory is in a number of ways an important point of departure for the history of avarice: first, it is decidedly not the possession of money in itself to which the lady objects, but to a spiritual danger, apostasy, which may be its result. Second, by describing the requirement to cut away needless riches, *Hermas* is not demanding that the church enforce poverty as a prerequisite for being numbered among the faithful; for the author of this allegory, only self-sufficiency can both counter greed and still leave the Christian with enough possessions to be able to aid the poor.¹

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The *Shepherd of Hermas* is typical of one type of Christian reception of the Jewish apocalypse in propagating moral instruction through the protagonist's visions, and as Lady Church patiently explains to Hermas, every evil desire, especially that greed which abandons eschatological goods for worldly profits, results in death and captivity. This may be an explicit reference to avarice's place among the Deadly Sins, a somewhat diffuse phenomenon the origins of which have been identified in Jewish and Christian traditions reaching back in written form at least to the rabbinical literature of the first century B.C.E. In this tradition, the sins are considered lethal because they lead to the death of the soul. Unlike the Capital Vices to be examined here later, the number and ordering of evils in the list of Deadly Sins was never fixed.² Avarice, however, was frequently included in lists of such evils in early Christian literature – both in descriptive catalogues and in those with a parenetic function³ – or at least understood under the aegis of Deadly Sin. It is the first important intellectual context in which the sin is found in Christian culture.

The Deadly Sins are an expression of an authoritative and institutionalized morality; in early Christianity they were characteristically formulated on the basis of the commands and prohibitions handed down in the Decalogue, the distillation of the Law which was still retained and systematized by the early church. A foundation in the Ten Commandments is not made explicit in every discussion of avarice in this tradition, but it can be illustrated clearly among the writings of the “apostolic fathers” in the *Epistle of Barnabas* (first half of the second century). Part of this work, as part of the *Shepherd of Hermas* as well, is concerned directly with the most schematic representation of scriptural morality: the two-ways teaching, that is to say, the concept that there is a path of righteousness leading to heavenly bliss and another mode of behavior culminating in eternal torment. Among other criteria, *Barnabas* defines the Way of Light by adherence to the ethical principles of the Commandments: not to be desirous of more possessions (not to be *pleonektes* [πλεονέκτης]) is presented as a way of further specifying “Thou shalt not covet what is your neighbor's.”⁴

The virulence of avarice for the author of the *Shepherd of Hermas* was due to its worldliness, for that was directly opposed to Christianity's eschatological concerns. This orientation had been announced by Jesus'

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call to store up riches where no moth and no rust destroy them (Matt. 6:19–21), words which also later served as the groundwork for Christianity's ethical rejection of worldly wealth as deceptive or false and in need of replacement by the true wealth of heaven. This relativizing of the value of material goods was an important step in reorienting Christian consciousness to an ideology dominated by otherworldly rewards; the process of this reorientation was reinforced homiletically by a consciousness of death's imminence. The rich man in the parable in Luke who decided to enlarge his grain silos is said to be foolish because God's judgment makes a permanent mockery of his futile attempt to guarantee his life with perishing wealth.⁵ But even beyond this, avarice was one of the evils which themselves were made accountable for the approaching day of wrath. In a characteristic use of the Decalogue which combined the sixth and tenth Commandments interpreted on the basis of the injunction against idolatry, the Colossians are warned to put away the worldliness inherent in *pleonexia* (πλεονεξία – the desire to have more), because it ignites God's anger, and elsewhere the *philargyroi* (φιλάργυροι – the greedy) are depicted as representative of humankind's moral degeneration in the last age.⁶ The depth of the vice's opposition to eschatological rewards is further demonstrated by its equation with idolatry, for in scriptural terms the servant of idols has renounced all hopes connected with the coming of the divinity.⁷ The avaricious have given themselves up to another, a demonic, power and have thus cut themselves off completely from God and the spiritual ideals of His worshipers.

Hermas, too, must be warned not to give up the good things which are to come, for by the second century that expectation of an imminent eschatological moment which was held by the earliest Christian communities had begun to wane, and the attack on avarice came to be supplemented by a more philosophically founded ethic.⁸ The influence of popular philosophy on the Christian concept of the vice can be detected most obviously in the varied uses of a gnome which in its circulation in Antiquity was attributed to an astonishing plethora of writers and which, as documented by the *Oracula Sibyllina*, had a firm place in Hellenistic thought as well.⁹ Most important for the Christian understanding of the sin is the form of this proverbial wisdom in 1 Timothy 6:10: "For the root of all evils is *philargyria* (φιλαργυρία –

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avarice),” and then in parallel statements by Polycarp, Tertullian, and Clement of Alexandria.¹⁰ In its myriad forms, the gnome did inexhaustible service as the most common scriptural foundation for Christian authors’ invectives against avarice; it neatly summed up the centrality of the vice in their view of immorality. The malleability of the proverb is clearly seen in the words of a fifth-century poet who, with encyclopedic fervor, warned his audience that:

Because the minds of many have been tainted by this disease,
Avarice is the root, the cause, the head, the fount, and the origin
of evil.¹¹

But the productivity of the gnome went even further: it served as a model for reflections on the nature of the sin itself and, eventually, on that of virtues opposed to the sin. Hence, one has *The Sentences of Sextus* (composed c. 180–210 C.E.): “A yearning to possess is the origin of greed” (*pleonexia*), and Lactantius’ consideration that a desire for heaven which leads one to disdain others’ earthbound longings is the mother of continence.¹² These inventive uses of proverbial wisdom can be observed again and again in commentaries on the vice of avarice throughout the Middle Ages.

In 1 Timothy 6:10, as in the *Shepherd of Hermas* as well, the sinfulness of avarice is opposed to a virtuous self-sufficiency, a satisfaction with fulfilling simple wishes.¹³ Yet, in its connection with the vice in early Christian literature, this *autarkeia* is anything but a revolutionary concept: it is neither an all-encompassing end in itself, nor the motivation for rigorous asceticism it was to become. It has, rather, an essentially conservative character as an ideologically normative attribute to be cultivated by the individual so that he can ward off dangerous excesses of desire and be content with his present state.¹⁴ Its ideal representative is not the Christian who is totally indigent, but the one who is content with modest prosperity.

AVARICE AS A SOCIAL PROBLEM IN EARLY CHRISTIANITY

Of course, in the early literature of the Christian era, the problem of avarice was not only defined in terms of the individual’s spirituality. In the section of *Hermas* devoted to similitudes, the shepherd explains the

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parable of the elm and vine to the protagonist as an image of the harmony of social classes: a vine bears fruit by climbing up a tree which itself is without fruit, just as the wealthy (here not members of a nobility, but rather Christian freedmen, part of the “middle class” of Roman tradesmen) support society’s indigent in a theocentric compromise. The rich give from their surplus to those who are in need, and the poor pray for their benefactors.¹⁵ The image here is essentially a static one; what it depicts is, of course, not the institutionalized redistribution of wealth, but a functional class balance on the order of the estates theory of the Middle Ages: the organic universe of the parable remains productive only when each entity fulfills its preordained function, thereby retaining its distinctive essence. The wealthy and the indigent continue in harmonious symbiosis insofar as they keep their place as elms and vines. The *Shepherd of Hermas* is not alone in recognizing the sin of avarice as a threat to the existing social order, nor in prescribing alms as its cure. In these social dimensions, the desire for more was seen to express itself most destructively in the exploitation and deception of one’s brethren, a point which had been made specifically in 1 Thessalonians 4:6 in an injunction against defrauding one’s fellow human beings in legal or business affairs.¹⁶ As will be seen, it was the social implications of the concept of avarice, more than any other factor, which account for the longevity of interest in the vice in intellectual history.

Among the lay groups which showed the practical consequences of avarice most clearly, merchants were singled out with particular frequency. Even bankers were exempt from such stern reproach, though one must also remember that the merchant in Late Antiquity was not the irreplaceable agent of trade he was to become, but frequently only a dealer in luxury goods.¹⁷ The author of *Hermas* understood the problem of wealth primarily as an issue for the mercantile class. For Tertullian (c. 160–c. 220 C.E.), as well, greed seemed to be implicated in most acts of commerce. “Moreover,” he noted, “if cupidity is done away with, what is the reason for acquiring? When the reason for acquiring is gone, there will be no necessity for doing business.”¹⁸ But along with this seeming radicalism, he also pointed out that there may be just businesses and that his arguments would not make all commerce impossible for Christians, though he does not refer to these

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justifications of trade at great length or with the clarity one might wish.¹⁹ Merchants as an undifferentiated class, in any case, were to be linked firmly to the evil effects of the vice until the Carolingians heralded a decisive change in this attitude.

If it was important for the entire congregation of the saintly to be free of avarice,²⁰ this was all the more true for those among their number who had positions of authority. Some of the earliest references to an avarice of the perversion of authority are to teachers of the faith, or those passing themselves off as such, who in their covetousness exploited their followers.²¹ Apparently, even Paul himself was not spared such accusations, at least not at the hands of the Corinthians, as he implies when he writes to them on the subject of his collection for the Jerusalem community.²² Polycarp (110–156 C.E.), like the author of *Hermas*, focused on the importance of controlling one's desires in presenting this aspect of the vice. Of Valens, a fallen presbyter, Polycarp wrote: "For how can he who cannot control himself tell another to do so?"²³ It was essential, in other words, that those exercising spiritual leadership not be guilty of the base worldliness which the early church saw in avarice, for the purity of its social life on earth could only be guaranteed by that of its authorities. It is, thus, no surprise that the beginnings of conciliar legislation on the problem of cupidity, to be found later in the acts of the Council of Nicea (325), were directed at the clergy.

THE TERMINOLOGY OF GREED AND MALLEABILITY IN
THE LIMITS TO POSSESSIONS

Although the first centuries of Christian thought are fundamental for the future development of the history of avarice, they do not as yet provide one with any systematic analyses of the vice. As will be seen, this lack was felt most keenly among the Cappadocians. It is apparent not only in the brevity of discussions of the sin, but also in the want of a firm *terminus technicus*. *Philargyria* and *pleonexia* (and their derivatives), though they are not the only designations one comes across, are the two most common.²⁴ They were, at times, used interchangeably as designations for the vice, but they are also indicative of the different tendencies inherent in the concept of avarice in early Christian

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literature. *Philargyria* is, of course, the more narrowly defined, depicting a literal love of money as the most material of worldly goods. *Pleonexia*, however, implies a broader sense of the vice. The “desire to have more” which can be identified in its etymology is somewhat open-ended, for while the majority of the word’s uses is directed at the effort expended for material possessions alone, other occurrences place it in the context of fulfilling unclean desires of various kinds, including sensual ones. Yet, whether for this reason *pleonexia* and its derivatives can also be understood as referring to a sexual sin in 1 Thessalonians 4:6 and other passages, as later exegetes – most notably Jerome – have argued, is questionable.²⁵ Such a reading is not supported by other, non-Christian, texts in which avarice, whatever its designation, is found in an environment similar to that of 1 Thessalonians and where it is nevertheless clear that the object of avarice’s desire is distinguished from that of sexual longing.²⁶ As it appears, “*pleonexia*” was used by early Christian authors to name a passion which was only similar to lust, related to it in that both were seen as types of uncleanness and both were used in a combination of the sixth and tenth Commandments (forbidding, respectively, adulterous lust and covetousness) characteristic of early Christianity’s use of the Decalogue. But without a systematic discussion to guide them, later Christian interpreters were able to take the word’s textual proximity to terms for sexual excess as part of the concept’s essence.

If avarice was defined as the desire for more material wealth, the question still remained at what point “more” began. There was no authoritative answer to this problem. Jesus had called upon his followers, or those among them who desired to be perfect, to give up their possessions, and as long as the coming of God’s kingdom was still considered to be imminent, the thorough lack of care for possessions implied in this injunction seems to have been taken literally at Jerusalem and in Paul’s mission.²⁷ When eschatological expectations became less immediate, total indifference no longer always characterized the Christian attitude towards acquisitions. Jesus, too, had described the heavenly kingdom in terms any person involved in business could easily grasp: “A merchant looking out for fine pearls found one of very special value; so he went and sold everything he had, and bought it.”²⁸

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Among the earlier literary contexts of avarice, as in the *Shepherd of Hermas*, “more” did not come to imply the mere fact of private ownership. The rejection of private property altogether by some Gnostics, voiced for example in the second century by Epiphanes as reported in Clement of Alexandria’s *Stromata*, may highlight by contrast the common orthodox, Christian attitude. Epiphanes argues that the law of the divinity requires a justice which amounts to communal equality in material possessions (and, in fact, in all other things, and women, as well). To prove his point, he draws on a number of *topoi* which will be found later in the orthodox Christian use of the mythology of the Golden Age and its decline: natural elements, in this case sunshine in particular, are given equally to all; nourishment is provided for the entire animal kingdom, according to its species, in communal harmony; but humanity’s law, the legislation which regulates property, has partially destroyed the communism demanded by the divinity.²⁹

Orthodox theologians use many of these same commonplaces in their reflections on the Golden Age, but while they treat the *aurea saecula* as a lost era and find it necessary to come to terms with the post-lapsarian system of private ownership evinced in Late Antiquity and the Middle Ages, Epiphanes writes as if the conditions of the Golden Age were fundamentally still in force and could be reasserted merely by doing away with the law which governs individual property holdings. The *Sentences of Sextus*, too, is clearly more rigorous than other orthodox views, though it echoes 1 Timothy 6:8 in exhorting the Christian not to possess more than what is required for the needs of the body.³⁰ This injunction seems clear enough, but the vagueness which was later built into most appeals to mere propriety in ownership may be indicated in a gloss to the Latin translation of Irenaeus’ *Adversus haereses*. Irenaeus (c. 130–c. 200 C.E.), Bishop of Lyons, was countering the pagan polemic which argued that several gods are mentioned in Christianity’s spiritual literature. When Jesus referred to *Mammonas*, Irenaeus notes, he made use of a word which does not signify a deity, but only “the covetous man” (rendered here in Latin as *cupidus*). It is at this point that the Latin translator, in an attempt to clarify the meaning of Irenaeus’ *πλεονέκτης* (*pleonektes*), adds his own definition of the *cupidus* as one “desiring to possess more than what is fitting.”³¹ Irenaeus himself had no illusions about the difficulty of avoiding the sin. Later in

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the same work he used the language of asceticism to note that Christians' possessions are the result of their avarice before conversion or the goods procured through injustice by parents, relatives, or friends and given them as gifts. And even after baptism Christians continue to acquire, for who sells and does not want to make a profit from the buyer? It was, in fact, impossible for them to reject commercial occupations altogether, and for Irenaeus this amounts to conceding that some degree of avarice will always be found among Christians, too, though this unavoidable evil can be offset by almsgiving.³² In any case, the Latin gloss, which raises the question of propriety, also solves this question by necessarily introducing a subjective and supple element into the analysis of greed: what went beyond what is fitting for one person might be thoroughly appropriate for another. Much depended on one's social rank and the expectations which it legitimately allowed. Thus, the seeds for a future justification of wealth were contained already in the early condemnation of greed.

Nevertheless, criticism of the avarice of the rich remained frequent and severe, especially so in the Ebionitic tradition represented in apocalyptic literature (and perhaps also in the Epistle of James) which depicted in frightening detail the torments of the rich in hell.³³ Yet, as the shepherd's interpretation of the elm and vine shows, more room was allowed for the wealthy than what might appear at first sight. Tertullian asserted that God hates the rich, and yet he also had to admit that their wealth could be used to perform many deeds of justice.³⁴ Injunctions against avarice which understood it as the desire for more were not yet directed towards the very rich, but rather towards those, below them in social standing, who wished to become so. The rich were generally identified with that aspect of the sin which attempted to retain what it already had, which refused to share to whatever degree with others, in particular by withholding alms. Still, the urge to acquire was the expression of avarice which was potentially the most subversive to maintaining the institutions of society as they were and it remained in the foreground of earlier Christian invectives against the vice. Where miserliness is mentioned at all, it is generally condemned only in its relation to greedy acquisition, a phenomenon which once again points up the lack of a systematic distinction between these two aspects of avarice.³⁵

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CLEMENT OF ALEXANDRIA'S JUSTIFICATION OF THE RICH

By the third century, a spectrum of attitudes towards the rich and their possessions had developed within Christian thought, a variety which is reflected in the changing appearances of avarice. That members of the upper classes became a larger factor in the conception of the vice is hardly surprising, for there was an increasing number of them to be found in Christian communities. The later part of the second and early third century saw these congregations gradually incorporate all levels of society, including the senatorial class itself.³⁶ The situation in North Africa is typical for this period; four major writers who originated here will serve to illustrate the responses to greed and the rich at this point in the development of Christianity: from a moderate acceptance of the affluent in the community of the church to an ascetic rejection of them, from the pastoral emphasis on curing greed through alms to the beginnings of a "historical" analysis of the vice.

In particular at Alexandria, perhaps the wealthiest and most important city in the eastern Mediterranean, the rich were a vital force in the Christian social order. It is also here that one finds the first theologically argued moderation of the idea of avarice in the works of Clement of Alexandria, in his day the city's most famous Christian teacher and a member of its social elite. Clement's moderateness marks somewhat of a caesura in the history of the vice. This becomes all the clearer when his justification of private property found in *Quis dives salvetur?*, his apology for Alexandria's wealthy Christians, is compared to what Irenaeus had to say on the same topic. Though he knew of Irenaeus' work, Clement contends that a Christian's wealth is legitimate if he was born into a rich family or if he worked for his wealth before conversion and, through thrift, acquired a modest amount of possessions. Such thrifty earnings are precisely what Irenaeus had earlier qualified as the wages of avarice.³⁷

Riches themselves are neutral, a tool only, as Clement noted further in *Quis dives salvetur?*³⁸ And in the same work he criticizes literal exegetes typical of the Ebionitic tradition who found in Jesus' words to the rich youth ("Sell your possessions . . .") a command to renounce everything that one owned. In keeping with his justification of the wealthy, Clement saw in this passage not primarily a call to action; he