

Power and Poverty: Divine and Human Rule in a World of Need

Dewi Hughes. 2008. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press. ISBN: 978-0-8308-2809-8, \$25.00 (paper).

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What does the Bible say about the causes of poverty? Obviously it does not give us empirical analysis of a quantitative kind. So, is this a pointless question? Far from it, argues Dewi Hughes, a theological adviser to Tearfund—a Christian-based international relief organization, headquartered in London. Hughes argues, from Scripture, that poverty is rooted in the way human beings use and abuse power. He offers a compelling, thorough, and biblical analysis of poverty and power.

This book will be a very helpful resource to anyone who wants to take seriously what the Bible says about poverty. This explains its relevance for Christian economists. For such, a focus on the fundamental causes of poverty is of double interest. First, all Christians (economists or otherwise) are, on Hughes's account, called to care for the poor—which means that the question of *causes* is of vital importance. Secondly, as economists, the prevalence of poverty today in today's world is clear evidence that the allocation of scarce resources is far from satisfactory. Thus Hughes has done us a great service with this careful and coherent account. Essentially he traces the whole message of the Bible from Genesis to Revelation, but always concentrating on those aspects which have to do with poverty. Hence we are provided with a healthy antidote to "proof-texting." Recent Christian literature exhibits plenty of examples of authors who have, for one purpose or another, lifted individual scriptural verses out of their context and announced that "this is what the Bible says about the poor and needy." Hughes shows a much better way.

Part one of the book (comprising chapters 1-6) examines the Old Testament (OT). From Genesis chapters 1-11, Hughes shows that the roots of poverty lie, fundamentally, in alienation from God the Creator. "It takes the rest of the Bible to tell God's story of redemption" (p. 30). We are then taken through this story in careful, stimulating, and God-glorifying detail. (Readers would do well to take their time as they work through this, and have their Bible to hand as they do so.) Hughes explains how the story of redemption commences with God's covenant with Abram (later continued with his descendants in the people of Israel). The promise is made of what could be called God's "empire": an empire which (in contrast to Babel) will be a blessing to all, "which must mean the flourishing of all nations and peoples" (p. 31).

As the people of Israel are formed into a nation, Hughes argues that we see a divinely ordained method of government, which he claims is (in a limited sense) pluralistic and somewhat democratic—but all subject to the law of God. His analysis of OT law is compelling: “What is striking about OT law is that it recognises the very strong human bias to self-interest and provides a moral and legal framework to control it.” Thus much of that law puts limits on the rich and powerful: “This is a fundamental thrust of all the laws concerning leaders as well as the laws on debt, interest, and the release and restoration of land in the Jubilee” (p. 75). He also shows the careful way in which the OT law ensures welfare provision for the poor and needy: “God rules that the vulnerable are to be provided for in a way that preserves their dignity.” Hughes concludes strongly that provision “is not seen as something to be left to the charitable whims of the rich and powerful, but is a matter of human rights” (p. 82).

And yet ... Israel failed. That is the stark message of the rest of the OT. The problem, argues Hughes, was (and is) “the deep deception of the human heart... In a sense, the covenant proved to be a failed covenant, as anticipated in Deut. 29-32” (pp. 89-90). Hughes makes this case—central to the message of the whole Bible—extremely well. But the OT was not the end. Far from it, in fact: for it is the OT itself which looks forward to the new covenant and the promise of the Messiah Jesus. This takes us to the second part of the book (chapters 7-12).

Part two is entitled “Jesus and the final revelation of divine government,” and discusses the power and poverty theme in the New Testament (NT). Hughes writes these fine words: “For a Christian wanting to overcome poverty, there can be no better place to begin than at the feet of our humble and exalted Saviour, the Lord Jesus Christ. Who he is, what he has done, what he taught, what he is doing and he will do should be the main sources of our inspiration and motivation” (p. 96). And those words also sum up well the content of this part of the book. Central to all this, argues Hughes, is what Jesus Christ achieved on the cross. This case is made in (for this reader) a most compelling way, as Hughes explains the importance of the atonement as a penal substitution: “It was here [at the cross] that the power of sin, and therefore the sinful use of power, was broken. It was the cross that made possible the actual rule or “kingdom” of God in human lives, so that the use of our power to bless becomes a reality” (p. 118).

Hughes’s analysis includes a helpful discussion of the terms “poor in spirit” and “poor” in the Gospels: “Both the poor and the wealthy need to become poor in spirit, and ... their doing so is a crucial step in the direction of literally blessing the poor” (p. 129). In a similar vein (on the

Beatitudes) he states: “Poverty of spirit drives us to God, mourning drives us to God with the evils of the world, meekness is the attitude that makes it possible to do something about it in God’s strength” (p. 131). Here Hughes brings home powerfully the challenge that a central part of justice is to seek justice for the poor. As Prov. 29:7 says, “The righteous person cares about justice for the poor, but the wicked have no such concern.”

It is clear by now that Hughes is no naïve “do gooder.” The problem of poverty lies in the human heart. Only if that is changed and renewed can anything of substance be done. Having died to break the power of sin, Jesus Christ gave to his followers the gift of the indwelling Holy Spirit—as shown throughout the New Testament. Here, then, argues Hughes—again in a most engaging way—is the practical solution to poverty: “It is inconceivable that anyone indwelt by the Spirit can be indifferent to the suffering poor. Living by the Spirit is the most powerful engine for overcoming poverty” (p. 168).

Chapter 12 looks forward to the final judgment, which Hughes argues strongly is crucial to the biblical account of power and poverty. For example, he draws on Jesus’ parable of the rich fool: “The selfishness, anxiety, lost opportunities to bless God and neighbour are followed by utter futility, because the rich fool is called to account before he has the opportunity to enjoy his possessions, and, since he has nothing invested with God, is banished from his presence. As Paul says, the greedy will not inherit the kingdom of heaven, and greed is one of the reasons why the wrath of God is coming” (pp. 182-183).

The theme of part three (chapters 13-15) is “God’s governed society—the church.” The ground for this has already been laid, but Hughes nevertheless offers a powerful vision and challenge for the people of God now. This is illustrated when he writes: “The joy generated by the resurrection of Jesus unleashed the powerful centrifugal force of the Spirit into the world. The upside-down kingdom of the servant Messiah creates communities where possessions are given away rather than hoarded.... Power is given away so that the powerless can be empowered” (p. 223).

It is only in part three that any significant questions arise, as far as this reviewer is concerned. The questions relate particularly to some of the contemporary applications offered by Hughes, not to the biblical analysis. For example, Hughes declares the following regarding merely human empires:

Empires are founded on the belief that power must be acquired in order to ensure well-being and security.... It is easy to see the characteristics of empire in the dominant Roman power of the NT

era. But empire building did not end with the collapse of Rome. There have been many other empires since, and the dominant current “empire” is unquestionably the US. As the heart of the capitalist economic world order it is the central hub from which that order is becoming more and more dominant in the world (p. 238).

Is that actually so? There are at least some claims here that might require further justification. Note that this reviewer is a citizen not of the US but the UK. I might thereby perhaps be more likely to be swayed by these claims, but I am not entirely persuaded. Perhaps the problem is that the degree of attention and space Hughes devotes to application is very small, relative to the rest of his (biblical) analysis. Hence the application is in danger of being rather flimsy and unsubstantiated. He proceeds to offer a critique of NGOs, but it is provided in less than a page (p. 239), and no references are cited for any of the claims here (or for the sentences quoted in the previous paragraph).

In his discussion of “Speaking God’s word in the context of empire,” Hughes again refers to “empire that by definition aims for global hegemony” (p. 238). Is that really the aim of the US? Hughes states that “the US Empire is busily capturing the imagination of the world through images becoming more and more pervasive around the world” (p. 230). Surely it is true that the power of American multinational corporations should disturb us—and there is plenty of work going to try to curb and/or re-channel such power—but is this really the “US Empire”? If one wants to offer a critique of globalization, why pick on the US? Many countries are, by definition, involved in the process of globalization. Is Hughes implying that the continuance of world poverty is a consequence of globalization? He does not say that directly, but he seems to imply it at times. But to make such a case would require assessment of the evidence that market forces and economic growth, in the context of globalization, may have contributed to helping many people *out* of poverty over the last two or three decades. This book does not address that evidence, however.

Nevertheless, apart from some questions concerning application, this is a very fine book indeed. It brings a biblical, powerful, and timely challenge.