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Beggars Before God

THE FIRST BEATITUDE

By M. H. FRANZMANN

The $\pi\omega\chi\omicron\iota \tau\tilde{\omega} \pi\nu\epsilon\acute{\upsilon}\mu\alpha\tau\iota$ of the first Beatitude have always been the subject of exceedingly diverse interpretation, and translations have been correspondingly various.¹ And scholars are, it seems, not yet unanimous. One is surprised and disappointed to find the Revised Standard Version continuing in the footsteps of the Vulgate and Wycliffe by retaining the translation of the Authorized Version, "Blessed are the poor in spirit," a translation, ambiguous though literal, which ignores the results of much careful scholarship from Tertulian on down through Bengel, Tholuck, Zahn, Macchioro, and others. The retention of the old translation is all the more surprising in view of the fact that one of the R. S. V. translators, E. J. Goodspeed, had, in his own American Translation of 1939, offered a translation ("Blessed are those who feel their spiritual need": similar to, but clearer than, Moffatt's of 1913: "Blessed are those who feel poor in spirit"), which, while it does not convey the full intent of the original, is much truer to the Greek and clearer in English. Goodspeed has reasserted, rather than defended, his translation in his *Problems of New Testament Translation* (1945), but he seems to have been unable to persuade his cotranslators of its correctness.² The question as to the exact meaning of the first Beatitude is, then, still open.

The point at which translators and interpreters part ways is the interpretation of the word $\pi\omega\chi\omicron\varsigma$. What, exactly, is its meaning, and just what sort of persons are $\pi\omega\chi\omicron\iota \tau\tilde{\omega} \pi\nu\epsilon\acute{\upsilon}\mu\alpha\tau\iota$? To put the question more precisely: Is the original meaning of $\pi\omega\chi\omicron\varsigma$ as the *cowering, cringing mendicant* still

¹ A convenient survey of ancient and modern interpretations is given by Vittorio Macchioro, "The Meaning of the First Beatitude," in *Journal of Religion*, Vol. 12, pp. 40—49. For the most important English translations see E. J. Goodspeed, *Problems of New Testament Translation*, pp. 16—17.

² The R. S. V. translators are, of course, not alone in retaining the older rendering: it is retained also by such modern translations as Weymouth (1903), Twentieth Century (1904), Improved Edition (1912), Ballantine (1923), Montgomery (1924), Spencer (1937), the Catholic revision (1941), and the Basic (1941).

alive in the New Testament period, or does the word signify no more than *poverty*, either literal or figurative?

Etymologically, the case is clear: *πτωχός*, originally an adjective from the stem of *πρώσσω*, to *cringe*, *cow*, indicates more than mere poverty; it stresses not so much the idea of lack, or poverty, as the *attitude* of him who lacks and knows that he lacks. It is the cringing, cowering beggar, all self-sufficiency lost, all pride forgotten, all shame jettisoned, who is indicated by *πτωχός*. The deposed and exiled kings Odysseus und Oedipus, who have nothing and are absolutely dependent on others for the necessities of life, are designated as *πτωχοί* in Greek poetry.

In classical usage the distinction between *πτωχός*, the beggar, and *πένης*, the poor man, was clearly felt. That is made clear by the passage from Aristophanes' *Plutus*, cited by Macchiario, in which the personified Poverty indignantly rejects the accusation that Poverty and Beggary are twin sisters:

'Tis a beggar [*πτωχός*] alone who has nought of his own,
nor even an obol possesses.

My poor man [*πένης*], 'tis true, has to scrape and to screw
and his work must never be slack in;

There'll be no superfluity found in his cot;
but then there will nothing be lacking.

Similarly Plato in his *Republic* (X. 618 a) is conscious of the distinction:

There were tyrannies among them, some uninterrupted to the end, and others destroyed midway and issuing in penuries [*πενίας*] and exiles and *beggaries* [*πτωχείας*]. (Tr., Shorey.) where the order — "penuries," "exiles," and "beggaries" — is both chronological and climactic.

Macchiario in the stimulating and suggestive study of the first Beatitude mentioned above makes the statement that the "differentiation between *πτωχός* and *πένης* had been lost in Hellenistic Greek." That statement can hardly stand without reservations; for Tertullian, who was able to speak and write Greek and gives evidence of familiarity with both its prose and poetry, translates *πτωχοί* with *mendici*, with express reference to the Greek.³ It is true that he elsewhere uses the translation that became the current one (*pauperes*), but we find him again defining *πτωχοί* as persons "*qui sicut sunt*

³ Contra Marc. IV, 14. "*Beati mendici*"; *sic enim exigit interpretatio vocabuli, quod in Graeco est.*

humiles, ut semper adiutorium Dei sint mendicantes" (Op. p. 56). Marcus Aurelius shows a similar sensitiveness for the classical sense of πτωχός: πτωχός ὁ ἐνδεής ἑτέρου καὶ μὴ πάντα ἔχων παρ' ἑαυτοῦ τὰ εἰς τὸν βίον χρῆσιμα. Further, the material cited by Moulton under πτωχός, πτωχεία, and πένης does not warrant the assumption that the distinction was entirely abandoned even in popular usage. And surely the fact that πτωχεία in Justinian's Code (I. 3. 41. 23) is used in the sense of "poor relief" is significant.

Neither is the situation in the Septuagint quite as hopeless as Macchioro represents it.⁴

It is true that the wealth of Hebrew synonyms in the realm of poverty and humility led the translators into some rather loose uses of such words as πένης, πτωχός, and πραύς; but the complexion of things varies from book to book. In the Psalms, for instance, πτωχός is used almost exclusively for the Hebrew יָגֵן,⁵ occurring as the translation for that word in 24 out of 28 passages. Similarly, in the book of Ezekiel in the three places where the combination of יָגֵן and יָגֵן occurs the words are in each case carefully translated by πένης and πτωχός, respectively. The word יָגֵן occurs 75 times in the Old Testament, and in 38 of these 75 occurrences the word is translated by πτωχός. In view of the fact that even the Hebrew does not always distinguish precisely between the word יָגֵן and its synonyms, such a predominance of πτωχός in translation is not without significance. The situation in Hellenistic Greek regarding this word πτωχός seems to be analogous to that of many other linguistic phenomena, both lexical and grammatical, in the Greek of the period. A certain looseness and fluidity has replaced the crisp and rigid outline of the classical language, but distinctions are by no means wholly lost or wholly unfelt.

In the New Testament the word πτωχός and its cognates predominate as a designation for poverty.⁶ For the great majority of the occurrences of πτωχός in its literal sense the word πένης could be substituted without producing any sig-

⁴ Op. cit., p. 46, "In the LXX there is no difference at all; both words are used with the same meaning."

⁵ This word, or its Aramaic equivalent, is probably the background of the πτωχοί of the first Beatitude in Matthew and Luke. See below.

⁶ The word πένης occurs but once in a quotation from the Septuagint, 2 Cor. 9:9; ἐνδεής also occurs once, Acts 4:34.

nificant change in meaning. Even in the literal use, however, a feeling for the original stronger sense is apparent in the application of the word as an adjective to the poor widow, Mark 12:42, 43.⁷ Similarly, the fact that the *πτωχοί* are often grouped with "maimed, the halt, and the blind" (all of them, be it noted, persons in a position of helplessness and dependence), e. g., Luke 14:13-14, indicates a feeling for the original sense of *πτωχός*; and the only *πτωχός* of whom we have a full-length portrait in the New Testament, Lazarus (Luke 16:20 f.), certainly corresponds to the picture of the *πτωχός* painted by Lady Poverty in Aristophanes.

However, it is in the figurative sense of the word that the feeling for the old distinction is most apparent. When St. Paul (Gal. 4:9) calls the elements of the world "weak" and "beggary," he is thereby marking the extreme contrast to the power and resources of the true God in His ultimate revelation.⁸ And when St. Paul wishes to mark the extremity of our Lord's humiliation (2 Cor. 8:9), he says of Him that He became a *πτωχός* for our sake. Just as in Phil. 2:7, when he speaks of Him as taking on the form of a slave, *δοῦλος* marks the extreme contrast to the glory and power of the Godhead, so *πτωχός* marks the extreme contrast to the wealth of the Godhead.⁹ Our Lord descended from divine affluence to—beggary! Most significant of all is the passage 2 Cor. 6:10, where Christian ministers are described as, in one aspect, *πτωχοί*; in another, as "making many rich" (*πολλοὺς πλουτίζοντες*). Here the antithesis is not so much between giving much and having nothing as between giving much and needing everything from a source outside themselves.¹⁰

⁷ Cf. v. 44, "She, out of her poverty, has put in everything she had," R. S. V., where *ὕστερησις* might perhaps be better translated "want" or "lack."

⁸ Cf. Moulton and Milligan, s. v. *πτωχός*: "In Gal. 4:9 the translation 'beggary' is not very happy: The *στοιχεῖα* are such that there is 'nothing in them'—no one is the better for them."

⁹ There may be even more implied in the word than "beggary." As in Philipians the *δοῦλος* marks the obedience as well as the humiliation of the Son, so here the fact that He is *πτωχός* may mark the fact that "His human life was a constant living on the fullness of His Father's love; He evermore, as a man, took the place which becomed the creature in the presence of the Creator" (Trench). Trench, in commenting on the "lowly in heart" of Matt. 11:29, speaks of this phrase as "the acknowledgment . . . of absolute dependence, of having nothing, but receiving all, from God."

¹⁰ Cf. 3:5. Not that we are sufficient of *ourselves* . . . our sufficiency is of God. Cf. also Rev. 13:17, where *πτωχός* as applied to the church of

The question of which Aramaic or Hebrew word lies in the background of $\pi\omega\chi\acute{o}\varsigma$ is not of decisive importance for the interpretation of the first Beatitude; but since, as was shown above, $\pi\omega\chi\acute{o}\varsigma$ is used *predominantly* as a translation for אָנִי in the Septuagint, the question is not wholly impertinent. In Luke 4:18 our Lord applies the words of Is. 61:1, "to preach the Gospel to the poor," to Himself as a designation of His mission in the world and as a description of the kingdom of heaven realized in His coming. Now, the word translated in the Septuagint by $\pi\omega\chi\acute{o}\varsigma$ in this passage is the Hebrew אָנִי . But in view of the twofold fact that the usual translation of אָנִי in the Septuagint is $\pi\rho\acute{\alpha}\upsilon\varsigma$ and that that translation is used in the quotation from Ps. 37 in the third Beatitude, there can be little doubt that the Hebrew and the corresponding Aramaic background to the word in the first Beatitude is the Hebrew אָנִי and its Aramaic equivalent.¹¹

The אָנִי of the Old Testament is, as Zahn puts it, "the oppressed and suppressed, the man visited by misfortune and wretched, the man without help and without rights in the world." Applied, then, to the inner life, אָנִי describes the man who in his relationship to God is conscious of his own wretchedness and of his own inadequacy; and this gives religious significance to the word. "The pious man who in the anguish of his heart comes before his God with the confession that he is wretched and in need of help and knows and expects no other help than that which he implores from a merciful God, he is truly an אָנִי ." (Zahn.) This color of אָנִי is seen particularly in the Psalms: Ps. 25:16: "Turn Thee unto me, and have mercy upon me; for I am desolate and afflicted [אָנִי]." Ps. 70:5: "But I am poor [אָנִי] and needy; make haste unto me, O God. *Thou* art my Help and my Deliverer; O Lord, make no tarrying!" Ps. 86:1: "Bow down Thine ear, O Lord, hear me; for I am poor [אָנִי] and needy"; cf. vv. 4-5: "Rejoice the soul of Thy servant; for unto Thee, O Lord, do I lift up my soul. For Thou, Lord, art good and ready to forgive and plenteous in mercy unto all them that call upon Thee."

Laodicea is contrasted not only to $\pi\lambda\acute{o}\upsilon\sigma\iota\varsigma$ but also, and significantly, to $\text{o}\ddot{\upsilon}\delta\acute{\epsilon}\nu\ \chi\rho\epsilon\iota\acute{\alpha}\nu\ \acute{\epsilon}\chi\omega$.

¹¹ It is interesting to note that both Schemtob and Delitzsch in their Hebrew versions of the New Testament translate the first Beatitude as אָנִי הָרַחֵם .

The religious significance of the word as over against a merely social or economic aspect of it is insured by the modifier τῷ πνεύματι. God is a πνεῦμα, and any positive relationship to Him must be on the πνεῦμα level. "God is a spirit; and they that worship Him must worship Him in spirit and in truth" (John 4:24).

Etymology and usage, both classical and Hellenistic, as well as the probable Hebraic-Aramaic background of the word πτωχός thus combine to demand something stronger of the word than is expressed by our English "poor." It is not saying too much if one describes the πτωχός τῷ πνεύματι as the man who is acutely conscious of his own nothingness, of the poverty and lack of his self, of his need for another, of being ἐτέρου ἐνδεής, *de aliena liberalitate pendens* (Bengel). And in view of the context in which the Beatitude appears, it may be safely said that this πτωχεία of spirit involves a recognition of, and a turning toward, the only Other that can fill the need. For it must be borne in mind that the first Beatitude was uttered not at the beginning, but at an advanced stage of Jesus' ministry,¹² and that it was addressed to persons already His disciples (Matt. 5:1; Luke 6:20). These πτωχοί are men who have heeded the call to repentance and have attached themselves to Jesus. We need have no fear of giving the concept a too distinctively Christian coloring. This consideration of the time of speaking and of the persons addressed disposes also of such interpretations as the one offered by Strack-Billerbeck, Vol. I, p. 190, who see in the πτωχοί the פְּתוּרֵי עַמִּי,¹³ or that of Bauer in his *Woerterbuch*, s. v. πνεῦμα: "Die in ihrem inneren Leben arm sind, weil ihnen das pharisäische Hochgefuehl geistlichen Reichtums abgeht." Both these interpretations would indicate predisposing factors for the acceptance of the Kingdom rather than a quality to be attributed to those already under its influence and sway. The

¹² Cf. Matt. 4:23-25 and especially Luke 6:12, where it is clear that the Sermon on the Mount was delivered after the calling of the Twelve.

¹³ "Sie kannten weder in genuegendem Masse die Auslegung, die die pharisäischen Schriftgelehrten dem Gesetz zuteil werden liessen, noch trauten sie sich die Kraft und die Freudigkeit zu, ihr religioeses Leben nach den Satzungen der Rabbinen erfolgreich zu ordnen und zu regeln. Dabei erfuhren sie taeglich aufs neue, wie sie von den Gesetzesstrengen verachtet und gemieden wurden; was Wunder also, wenn sie schliesslich eine Beute des Pessimismus wurden und sich selber als eine *massa perditionis* vorkamen!"

disciples whom Jesus is addressing had not only been *πρωχοί* before contact with Jesus Christ. They remained such as His disciples.

The word *μακάριος* also favors a full and specifically religious content for *πρωχός*. "Neither 'happy' nor 'blessed' is quite accurate or adequate. The happiness implied is of a particular type. It is religious happiness. But, moreover, it may be doubted how far the meaning is that the person described as happy experiences acute feelings of delight. At any rate, this is not the only, and probably not the chief, meaning. The main meaning probably is that they are religiously fortunate; that they enjoy, or will enjoy, a peculiarly divine blessing or favor." (Montefiore, as quoted by Selwyn on 1 Pet. 3:14.)

The remaining Beatitudes also confirm our interpretation of the first. To be "poor in spirit" and to be hungerers and thirsters after righteousness are but two aspects of one basic attitude toward God, the Christian attitude. Nor is the thought of verse 8, "Blessed are the pure in heart," the description of the men of unalloyed and unswerving loyalty to God, essentially different. Only the poor in spirit, the self-emptied hungerers and thirsters after righteousness, are capable of such singleness of devotion. And when one comes to consider the more active qualities predicated of the believers (the merciful, the peacemakers, and the bearers of persecution), one understands all the better why the "poor in spirit" were given first place. Only such as have become a vacuum for God to fill are capable of the life here described.

The second half of the Beatitude itself, "Theirs is the kingdom of heaven," while not decisive for the meaning we would give to the "poor in spirit," yet fits best with it. For if there is one thing sure of the kingdom of God, it is this, that man receives it as God's gift. It is the Father's good pleasure to give the Kingdom to His own, to the little flock (Luke 12:32). The Kingdom shall be taken from the hardened Jews and given to a nation bringing forth the fruits thereof (Matt. 21:43). Christ appoints the Kingdom unto His disciples even as His Father has appointed it unto Him (Luke 22:29). God has called us unto His kingdom in glory (1 Thess. 2:12). God has translated us into the kingdom of His dear Son (Col. 1:13); and God will preserve the believer unto His heavenly

kingdom (2 Tim. 4:18), even as He has *promised* His kingdom to them that love Him (James 2:5). Man, on the other hand, is the recipient of the Kingdom. He *awaits* it (Mark 15:43); he *receives* it as a little child (Mark 10:15); he *inherits* it (Matt. 25:34). And all this not of his own reason or strength. It is God's doing; only the regenerate can see the kingdom of God (John 3:3: "Jesus answered and said unto him, Verily, verily, I say unto thee, Except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God"); in his birth and rebirth man is *passive*. Only a man who knows he has nothing and sees and seeks in God everything can be a recipient of the Kingdom.

Parallels to, and exemplifications of, the *πρωχοὶ τῷ πνεύματι* as interpreted above present themselves in embarrassing fullness. To be a *πρωχός* is to be at the opposite pole from the Jews who are represented as saying, "We *have* Abraham to our father," the Jew who rested complacently upon the possession of his Law and his theocratic privileges (Rom. 2:17 ff.), who sought to call the tunes to which God should dance (Matt. 11:16). To be a *πρωχός* is to be the opposite of all that. It is to accept God as He has condescended to reveal Himself (Is. 57:15: "For thus saith the High and Lofty One that inhabiteth eternity, whose name is Holy: I dwell in the high and holy place, *with him also that is of a contrite and humble spirit*, to revive the spirit of the humble and to revive the heart of the contrite ones"). To be a *πρωχός* is to be conscious of the fact always that man *lives* by every word that proceedeth from the mouth of God (Matt. 4:4). To be a *πρωχός* is to answer: "O Lord God, Thou knowest," when God asks: "Son of man, can these bones live?" To be a *πρωχός* is to be akin to believing Abraham, who believed on Him that justifieth *the ungodly* (Rom. 4:5); who, though he saw his own body now dead, staggered not at the promise of God; who against hope believed in hope (Rom. 4:18-21). To be a *πρωχός* is to see everything in God and nothing in oneself.

To be a *πρωχός* is to join that procession of suppliant men and women whose faith Jesus recognized and praised; such men as the paralytic and his bearers, who brought, climbed, dug, let down (insistent beggary), simply to present their need to Jesus (Matt. 9:1 ff.); such men as the centurion with his absolute dependence on the omnipotent word of the

Son of God, who knew that the slightest that Jesus could do was more than the all that he could offer, whose faith Jesus marveled at (Matt. 8:5 ff.); a procession that includes such women as the Canaanite woman, who dropped all pride and insistently cried after Jesus and His disciples and obtained what she sought: "O woman, great is thy faith; be it unto thee even as thou wilt" (Matt. 15:28).

In the ranks of the *πρωχοί* stands also the publican who would not so much as lift up his eyes to heaven, but beat his breast and asked for mercy on the sinner; who went down into his house justified rather than that full and satisfied Pharisee (Luke 18:9 ff.). There, too, stands the prodigal son who brought nothing home but his emptiness and his confession thereof, and was received and honored (Luke 15:11 ff.).

To be a *πρωχός* is to be like Peter when he said: "Lord, to whom shall we go? Thou hast the words of eternal life." (John 6:68.) Paul became a *πρωχός* upon the road to Damascus (cf. Acts 9:11: "Behold he prayeth") and remained one all his life: "By the grace of God I am what I am. . . . But I labored more abundantly than they all; yet *not I, but the grace of God which was with me.*" (1 Cor. 15:10). Nor would he let others forget that they to whom the kingdom of heaven belonged were beggars before God: "God hath chosen the foolish things of the world. . . . And God hath chosen the weak things of the world . . . and base things of the world and things which are despised hath God chosen, yea, and *things which are not.*" (1 Cor. 1:27 ff.) This last is perhaps the ultimate expression of our Christian *πρωχεία*.

This being a beggar before God is strongly akin to that fear of the Lord which is the beginning of all wisdom. "What man is he that feareth the Lord? Him shall He teach in the way that he shall choose." (Ps. 25:12.) Knowledge shall be given to the beggar: "It is *given* unto you to know the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven." (Matt. 13:11). To the beggar, as to him that fears the Lord, belongs the kingdom of heaven. God's redemptive rule holds sway over them: "And His mercy is on them that fear Him from generation to generation" (Luke 1:50). And what we are when God's redemptive rule takes hold of us we remain all our lives long: "Work out your own salvation *with fear and trembling*, for it is God which worketh in you both to will and to do of His

good pleasure" (Phil. 2:12-13). This beggary of ours means that we are proud only of being δοῦλοι of God and of Jesus Christ; all other pride is forever gone.

The Christian interpreter must remain a beggar if he would be a true interpreter of God's Word, remembering that it is *given* to men to know the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven. He will find his feeling towards Scripture classically expressed in Luther's last words: "Versuche nicht diese goettliche Aeneis, sondern neige dich tief anbetend vor ihren Spuren! Wir sind Bettler — das ist wahr." For none can interpret that does not adore. And the Christian preacher remains ever a beggar before God, and all pretentious tinsel of "pulpit oratory" must be swept away by the beggarly simplicity of: "Lord, open *Thou* my lips that my mouth may show forth Thy praise." And the health and life of the Church depends upon her beggary, on her remaining conscious of the *sola gratia, sola fide*. For this beggary, though it leaves no room for personal pride and no room for personal glory, does leave full room for God and for His kingdom, for His sovereignly redemptive sway, and so leaves room for a glory that surpasseth.

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