

## Basil and Gregory's Sermons on Usury

### *A Simple Historiography*

USURY IS NOT GENERALLY regarded as a provocative subject. According to authors B. J. Meislin and M. L. Cohen the subject is so low on the stimulation scale that only “the social and religious philosophers, historians and other scholars of the past are still excited by the moral implications of this prohibition.”<sup>1</sup> Despite this claim, the amount of texts devoted to the subject of usury—though primarily from an economic rather than a theological or even an historical perspective—suggests that usury is of import to a larger group, and the rising interest in poverty studies and the social justice theologies of early Christian authors suggests that there is clear recognition that the troubling realities of debt remain a concern for early Christians and their bishops as well as modern day citizens of any given location. This first chapter addresses twentieth and twenty-first century historiography of usury scholarship that considers the social justice sermons on usury of Basil the Great and Gregory of Nyssa, and considers to what degree authors subordinate Gregory's work to that of his brother's. This chapter will not include each historian who mentions “usurers” or “money-lenders”<sup>2</sup> within their texts, but seeks to record the more specific projects that deal with the work of the Cappadocian brothers in a significant way.

1. Meislin and Cohen, “Backgrounds of the Biblical Law against Usury,” 250.

2. “Money-lenders” is the more popular term used among historians to describe a usurer. For example, A. H. M. Jones makes no mention of usury in his formidable *The Later Roman Empire* 284–602, and only refers to money-lenders rather cursorily; the treatment is similar in his *Roman Economy*.



As a result of Lecky's charges against Christianity and commerce in his *History of the Rise and Influence of the Spirit of Rationalism in Europe*,<sup>3</sup> Patrick Cleary's 1914 *The Church and Usury* demonstrates how Christianity reacted to and changed in the face of developing financial circumstances. Beginning with passages in Acts<sup>4</sup> and I Peter,<sup>5</sup> he devotes a modest section of the text to the "Early Christian Church"<sup>6</sup> in which he discusses early Christian attitudes towards money.<sup>7</sup> Cleary largely confines<sup>8</sup> patristic

3. Lecky wrote that Christianity long desired to fetter commerce, while at the same time opposing it; in Cleary, *The Church and Usury*, v.

4. Cleary notes the works of Tabitha of Joppa, "full of good works and alms-deeds," whose loans were donations. Acts 9:36 (Cleary, *The Church and Usury*, 37).

5. According to Cleary, Peter warns against the greed of ministers: "Tend the flock of God . . . not yet for filthy lucre but willingly" (1 Peter 5:2) (Cleary, *The Church and Usury*, 37). In addition, Paul cites greed as a reason not to elect someone in the ministry for advancement: "Bishops must not be lovers of money, deacons must not be greedy of filthy lucre" (I Timothy 3:3) (Cleary, *The Church and Usury*, 37–38). Cleary includes additional passages in the New Testament that warn against desire for money: Titus 1:7, Titus 1:11, and Acts 15:29; Cleary, *The Church and Usury*, 38.

6. Cleary, *The Church and Usury*, 37–62.

7. He points to the Didache (*Didache*, 1; Cleary, *The Church and Usury*, 39), to demonstrate an early trend towards generosity, Apollonius to proclaim that those who take usury are false prophets (Apollonius, in Eusebius, *Historia ecclesiastica*, 5.18; Cleary, *The Church and Usury*, 40), Clement of Alexandria to demonstrate that usury is against charity (Clement of Alexandria, *Stromata*, 2.18; Cleary, *The Church and Usury*, 40–41), and Tertullian to caution against lending to those who cannot repay (Tertullian, *Adversus Marcionem*, 4.17; Cleary, *The Church and Usury*, 41). Cleary quotes Cyprian, who, in his "On the Lapsed," laments the fate of those who put their salvation in jeopardy by increasing "their gains by multiplying usuries" (Cyprian, *De Lapsis*, 5.6; Cleary, *The Church and Usury*, 42). He covers early conciliar statements against usury, beginning with the Council of Elvira and continuing with mention of the Councils of Carthage, Arles, Nice (Nicaea), and concluding with a definition of trading for profit—a form of usury—by Pope Julius (337–52): "It is filthy lucre, when one in the harvest time through avarice not through necessity gets grain at two denarii per peck and keeps it till he gets four or six" (Gratian, *Decretals* 5; Cleary, *The Church and Usury*, 46. This was later adopted by the Council of Tarragona in 526; Cleary, *The Church and Usury*, 44–46). Cleary ends this first section with an interesting discussion on the connection between usury and trade: clergy were discouraged from engaging in trade primarily because the purpose of business transactions is for the two parties to "try to overreach one another," and reaping where one has not sown is highly unsuitable behavior for a minister in any age. These are the words of the second century Pomponius; though Cleary quotes him, he does not provide any citation.

8. Additional authors noted briefly in this portion of the chapter are Sts. Hilary (Hilary, *Tractatus in psalmos* 14, PL 9:307; Cleary, *The Church and Usury*, 53.), Jerome

reaction to usury to Basil the Great's *Homilia in psalmum* 14,<sup>9</sup> Gregory of Nyssa's *Contra usurarios*,<sup>10</sup> and Ambrose's *De Tobia*.<sup>11</sup> He treats all three theologians together, summarizing the contents of their texts, and claiming that it is primarily Basil's text from which the other two have drawn.<sup>12</sup> Cleary notes that all three discuss the fertility of money as well as the revolting conditions in which the debtor must live,<sup>13</sup> to make the point that

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(Jerome, PL 25:176–77; Cleary, *The Church and Usury*, 54), Augustine (Cleary mentions Augustine's opinion on usury—"St. Augustine would, if he could, impose and obligation of restitution on all usurers for they are murderers of the poor, but, alas, the very laws sanction their practices. He, too, looks at the matter from the point of view of charity, for he would order restitution only to stop oppression."—but, oddly enough, does not provide a citation.) and Chrysostom (Chrysostom, PG 57:61–62; Cleary, *The Church and Usury*, 56).

9. Basil, *Homilia in psalmum* 14; Cleary, *The Church and Usury*, 49–53.

10. Gregory of Nyssa, *Contra usurarios*; Cleary, *The Church and Usury*, 49–53.

11. Ambrose, *De Tobia*; Cleary, *The Church and Usury*, 49–53.

12. "His homily on the fourteenth psalm is professedly used by St. Gregory of Nyssa and by St. Ambrose, and both borrow freely from it" (Cleary, *The Church and Usury*, 49).

13. In fairness, he contrasts their opinions with that of Sidonius Apollinaris, a bishop of the latter half of the fifth century who was more lenient towards usury (Cleary, *The Church and Usury*, 51–52), and Gregory of Tours, who tells of a bishop who borrowed from King Theudericus and promised to pay him back "with usury." As it turns out, the citizens fared so well with the gift that they no longer experienced any financial difficulties. Cleary, *The Church and Usury*, 57. Cleary does not provide details beyond what is stated above, but in the *Historia* it is King Theudebert who makes the loan to the bishop, not Theuderic, as Cleary writes. Although it does not connect necessarily with early Greek Christian authors, and although it is a few hundred years outside of the time period of this project, nevertheless it is such a brilliant example of Jesus's statement to "lend, expecting nothing in return," that it is worth noting the episode: "King Theuderic had done much harm to Desideratus, Bishop of Verdun. After long disgrace, ill-treatment and sorrow, Desideratus regained his liberty with God's help and again took possession of his bishopric, which was in the city of Verdun, as I have said. He found the inhabitants of the city poor and destitute, and he grieved for them. He had been deprived of his own property by Theuderic and had no means of succouring his townsfolk. When he observed the charity of King Theudebert and his generosity towards all men, Desideratus sent messengers to him. 'The fame of your charity has spread throughout the whole world,' he said, 'for your generosity is so great that you even give to people who have asked nothing of you. If in your compassion you have any money to spare, I beg you to lend it to me, so that I may relieve the distress of those in my diocese. As soon as the men who are in charge of the commercial affairs in my city have reorganized their business, as has been done in other cities, I will repay your loan with interest.' Theudebert was moved to compassion and made a loan of seven thousand pieces gold pieces. Desideratus accepted this and shared it out among his townfolk. As a result the business people of Verdun became rich and they

early Christian authors wrote against usury more often because of the difficult situations in which the lenders left the debtors than because usury in itself was unjust.<sup>14</sup> In sum, Cleary's work provides an excellent beginning to the study of usury in early Christianity, and a fairly fair treatment of the three theologians who devote an entire sermon to the topic of usury.

Stanislas Giet's 1941 publication, *Les idées et l'action sociales de saint Basile* includes partial translation of Basil's *Homilia in psalmum* 14 with minor commentary. Giet's comments are concerned principally with Basil's use of the word *τόκος*<sup>15</sup> and with his position on lending at all, aside from lending with interest.<sup>16</sup> One interesting point unique to the Giet document is that he notes comparisons made almost a century earlier by E. Fialon between Basil's *Homilia in psalmum* 14 and Plutarch's *That One Ought Not to Borrow*;<sup>17</sup> however, Giet dismisses Fialon's claim that Basil depends on Plutarch.<sup>18</sup> Giet's article of three years later, "De Saint Basil à Saint Ambroise: La condamnation du prêt à intérêt au IV<sup>e</sup> siècle," elaborates on his previous work and explores the texts in greater detail, detailing to what extent Basil influenced Ambrose<sup>20</sup> and who, in turn, influenced Basil.<sup>21</sup> Giet's secondary goal is an examination of the two documents as

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still remain so today. The bishop eventually returned the borrowed money to the King, but Theudebert replied: 'I have no need to take this money. It is enough for me that, when you asked that I should make a loan, those who were poor and in dire distress were returned to prosperity.' By taking no payment Theudebert restored the citizens of Verdun to affluence" (Gregory of Tours, *History of the Franks*, 190–91).

14. "The statements of the popes to which reference has been have no definitive value; whilst the opinions of the Fathers seem, when sifted, to condemn usury, not as opposed to justice, but merely as opposed to charity in so far as it may be extortionate" (Cleary, *The Church and Usury*, 36).

15. "*τόκος*—birth, offspring, interest or oppression" (Liddell and Scott, *A Greek-English Lexicon*, 1803).

16. Giet claims that Basil—who in his travels had seen the benefits of lending in an agricultural setting—was not opposed to the practice of lending, but was opposed to lending with interest, or lending which had as its goal the impoverishment of an individual. Giet, *Les idées et l'action sociales*, 120–21.

17. Plutarch, *De vitando aere alieno*, 317–39.

18. Giet, *Les idées et l'action sociales*, 121.

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20. *Ibid.*, 106–19.

21. *Ibid.*, 120–21. Giet condemns a second time the comments of Fialon and adds to this dismissal the work of M. Marconcini, who suggests a strong philosophical influence in Basil's position.

symptomatic of the difficulty of rapport between the churches of the East and the West.<sup>22</sup>

From 1971 to 1974, Robert P. Maloney produced articles focusing on usury from one of four different angles: philosophy of ancient societies, conciliar legislation, early Christianity and the ancient Near East. Based on his 1969 doctoral thesis, *The Background for the Early Christian Teaching on Usury*,<sup>23</sup> Maloney's articles together compile a large group of sources including ancient philosophers, Rabbinic and New Testament sources, ending with the figure of Pope Leo the Great (390–461). Maloney's Christian sources include Eastern and Western theologians, and are explored in historical sequence. Early Christian authors included in his articles mirror Seipel,<sup>24</sup> but they do not include Cyril of Jerusalem<sup>25</sup> or Theodoret of Cyrillus,<sup>26</sup> whose brief mentions of usury will be considered in chapter 4 of this project. Among Maloney's many contributions is his notation of the influence of Philo of Alexandria's writings on Clement of Alexandria, Basil the Great and Ambrose. In reference to Clement of Alexandria's *Stromateis*, Maloney notes that Clement "borrows copiously" from Philo, sampling lines from Philo's *De virtutibus* almost word for word.<sup>27</sup> Maloney

22. Ibid., 95–96, 128.

23. Maloney, *The Background for the Early Christian Teaching on Usury*.

24. Clement of Alexandria, *Paedagogus* 1.10 (PG 8:364); *Stromateis* 2.19 (PG 8:1014); Tertullian, *Adversus Marcionem* 4.17 (PL 2:398–99); Apollonius, in Jerome's *De viris illustribus*, 40 (PL 23:655); Cyprian, *De lapsis*, 6 (PL 4:470–71); Lactantius, *Institutiones divinae* 6:18 (PL 6:698–99); Athanasius, *Expositio in psalmum*, 14.2–5 (PG 27:100); Hilary of Poitiers, *Tractatus in psalmos* 14.15 (PL 9:307); Basil, *Homilia in psalmum* 14 (PG 29:264–65); *Epistula* 188 (PG 32:682); Gregory of Nyssa, *Contra usurarios* (PG 46:433–52); *Epistula ad Letoium* (PG 45:234); Gregory of Nazianzus, *Oratio* 16.18 (PG 35:957); Ambrose, *De Tobia* (PL 14:759–94); John Chrysostom, *Homilia* 56 in MT. (PG 58:558); *Homilia* 41 in Gen. (PG 53:376–77); *Homilia* 13 in 1 Cor. (PG 61:113–14); Jerome, *In Ezechielem Commentarii* 6.18 (PL 25:176–77); Sifre on Deuteronomy; Augustine, *Ennarationes in psalmos*, 36, *Sermo* 3.6 (PL 36:386); *Ennarationes in psalmos*, 126 (PL 37:1692); *Epistula* 154 (153) 25 (PL 33:665); *Sermo* 38 (PL 38:239–40); *Sermo* 86.5 (PL 38:525–26); *De baptismo contra Donatistas* 4.9 (PL 43:162); Leo the Great, *Nec hoc quoque* (PL 54:613); *Sermo* 17 (PL 54:180–82); Maloney, "Teaching of the Fathers on usury," 243–63.

25. Cyril of Jerusalem, *Catechesis* 4: *De Decem Dogmatibus*, PG 33:454–504.

26. Theodoret, 78: *To Eusebius, bishop of Persian Armenia*, PG 83:1252–56.

27. Maloney, "Teaching of the Fathers on Usury," 243. In all fairness, the same year as Maloney's article was published, Martin Hengel also noted the heavy influence of Jewish wisdom combined with Stoic and New Testament ethics in Clement of Alexandria. This, plus the situation in Alexandria resulted in a revaluation of the radical criticism of property, which was turned inward, rather than the open renunciation of wealth. Hengel, *Property and Riches in the Early Church*, 77–78. Further, Maloney does

comments also that Basil's closing statements in his *Homilia in psalmum* 14 resemble the same text,<sup>28</sup> and that Philo subsequently influenced the Western Ambrose through the Eastern Basil, as Ambrose relied heavily on Basil's texts for his *De Tobia*.<sup>29</sup> In addition to noting passages of scripture Basil heaped up in defense of his position,<sup>30</sup> and that Basil chided both rich and poor for their greed—the rich for wanting more at the expense of another and the poor for wanting money for things that they do not need, such as fancy clothes and rich foods<sup>31</sup>—Maloney observes Basil's debt to Philo of Alexandria and Aristotle, whose play on the word *τόκος* enters into the works of both. Gregory's position on usury is given almost equal attention by Maloney, who notes Gregory's argument against lending from nature (fecundity and sterility), the way by which the evil of debt pervades society, and the paradox that borrowing increases need, rather than diminishing it.<sup>32</sup> Of all the early Christian authors on whom he writes, Maloney devotes his attention primarily to Ambrose's *De Tobia*,<sup>33</sup> which he claims is "comprehensive," but "far from original."<sup>34</sup> Maloney's contribution to the study of usury cannot be over-emphasized, as his four

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not, however, quote the lines from Philo which Clement allegedly copiously borrows.

28. Maloney, "Teaching of the Fathers on Usury," 249.

29. *Ibid.*, 251.

30. Ezekiel 22:12; Deuteronomy 23:19; Jeremiah 9:6; Psalm 54:12; and Matthew 5:42.

31. Maloney, "Teaching of the Fathers on Usury," 247–48.

32. *Ibid.*, 249–51.

33. *Ibid.*, 251–56.

34. Ambrose, *De Tobia*, 28.29 (PL 14:769); 36 (PL 14:771–72), in Maloney, "Teaching of the Fathers on Usury," 253. In addition to rebuking the greedy lender, Ambrose provides anecdotes which demonstrate the ravages of interest on society; some borrowed from Basil and some his own Ambrose, *De Tobia*, 42 (PL 14:792), in Maloney, "Teaching of the Fathers on Usury," 254. In addition to abuses such as the pledging of one's family or own body against a loan, there was *anatocism*, which was the scandalous practice of the accumulation of additional interest capitalised on the original interest. Ambrose attacks an abuse of usury known as *anatocism* (PL 14:778) and condemns any type of usury, whether it is in the form of money or less obvious payments such as food or clothing. Maloney briefly addresses Ambrose's belief—fairly unique among early Christian authors—that the New Testament does not necessarily abolish the right to take interest, pointing out that Ambrose saw the "foreigner" as the enemy of Israel. Ambrose, *De Tobia*, 54, 85 (PL 14:780–81 and 791), in Maloney, "Teaching of the Fathers on Usury," 254. Maloney raises the problem of Ambrose's commentary Deuteronomy 23:19–20—the "irritating text"—but fails to address it satisfactorily; at length he dramatically casts the understanding of it to "the course of later history." Maloney, "Teaching of the Fathers on Usury," 264–65.

articles pull together a huge variety of primary sources and provide an additional abundance of secondary source material to consult for further study. Though a few primary sources are omitted, together the articles cover much of the necessary groundwork needed for further projects on usury in the early Christian world.

According to Homer and Sylla, interest rates in Latin America have traditionally been higher than those in North America and Europe; consequently, while the United States experienced double-digit inflation in the 1980s, by the 1990s, Latin America had experienced triple- or even quadruple-digit inflation.<sup>35</sup> As a result of the injustices that occur under such stressful economic conditions, United Methodist Minister, liberation theologian Justo L. González felt compelled to explore texts from the early Christian era that dealt specifically with economic issues. González states in the introduction to his 1990 publication, *Faith and Wealth: A History of Early Christian Ideas On the Origin, Significance, and Use of Money*,<sup>36</sup> that one of his goals was to make known such materials because in light of the protests of Catholics and Protestants against papal or Church involvement in or opinions on the US economy,<sup>37</sup> economics was from the earliest times—and still should be today—a theological concern. In his section on the Cappadocians,<sup>38</sup> González cites both *Contra usurarios*<sup>39</sup> by Gregory of Nyssa, and *Homilia in psalmum* 14<sup>40</sup> by Basil of Caesarea; his examination of both texts is general, but he focuses primarily on Basil, as Evelyne Patlagean does briefly in *Pauvreté économique et pauvreté sociale à Byzance, 4e–7e siècles*.<sup>41</sup> González suggests that Gregory of Nyssa's text is based on that of his brother Basil's and addresses only one minor difference in the brothers' works, specifically their audiences.<sup>42</sup> To demonstrate consistency between Basil's *Homilia in psalmum* 14 and some of Basil's other works, González quotes from an additional homily of St. Basil's in

35. Homer and Sylla, *History of Interest Rates*, 619.

36. Norman Jones's *God and the Moneylenders: Usury and Law in Early Modern England*, the publication of which preceded González by one year, was exclusively the "biography of the Act of Usury of 1571," and confines his history of usury from the Old Testament to the mid-sixteenth century to one paragraph.

37. González, *Faith and Wealth*, xiii.

38. *Ibid.*, 173–86.

39. Gregory of Nyssa, *Contra usurarios*, in *ibid.*, 175.

40. Basil, *Homilia in psalmum* 14, in *ibid.*, 175.

41. Patlagean, *Pauvreté économique et pauvreté sociale*, 177–78.

42. González, *Faith and Wealth*, 175–76.



which he blames the drought of 382 on the greed of the community.<sup>43</sup> As Maloney did before him, González mentions the influence that Basil's *Homilia in psalmum* 14 had on Ambrose, pointing out that passages in Ambrose's aforementioned *De Tobia* quote the Cappadocian saint "almost word for word."<sup>44</sup> González concludes in his "Retrospect"<sup>45</sup> that usury is soundly condemned by the early Christian authors, with perhaps the sole exception being a passage by Clement of Alexandria, who may have believed that the prohibition against interest could be applied only to loans to fellow believers.<sup>46</sup> Although only a small portion of his text touches on the subject of usury, still González lists the highlights of the patristic position, citing—if not quoting—from the most important primary sources.

The following year, Casimir McCambley translated Gregory of Nyssa's *Contra usurarios*, which was published in the *Greek Orthodox Theological Review*. Prior to the translated text he provides introductory material on Gregory of Nyssa's text,<sup>47</sup> in which he references Maloney's "The Teaching of the Fathers on Usury." McCambley begins by discussing usury in general and how the two brothers stand in a long line of tradition of denunciation of the practice. Unlike any other author, McCambley claims that early Christian authors used the phrase "Forgive us our debts, as we have forgiven our debtors," as justification for their position.<sup>48</sup> McCambley compares the works of the two brothers on what appears to be level ground: he mentions Gregory's deference to Basil's previously public statements on the evils of usury,<sup>49</sup> references Ezekiel and how they both maintain that usury debases an individual to the status of a slave.<sup>50</sup> McCambley cites Basil's use of the word *τόκος*, and he does not tie the word to Aristotle; rather, he observes how Gregory demonstrates the foulness of *τόκος* by comparing it to fertility in nature in his *Commentary*

43. Similar to Gregory of Nazianzus in his *Introduction to Oration*, 16. *On His Father's Silence, Because of The Plague of Hail*, Basil exhorts his community to "Destroy the contract with heavy interests so that the earth may bring forth its produce. Basil, *Homilia dicta tempore famis et siccitatis*, 4 (González, *Faith and Wealth*, 177).

44. *Ibid.*, 190.

45. *Ibid.*, 225–34.

46. *Ibid.*, 225. It is interesting that González does not mention that this sounds very much like what Bishop Ambrose believed as well. Unfortunately, González does not quote or even cite the Clement of Alexandria text, which would be interesting to compare with Ambrose.

47. Basil, *Homilia in psalmum* 14, PG 29:263–80.

48. McCambley, "Against Those Who Practice Usury," 288.

49. Gregory of Nyssa, *Contra usurarios*, in *ibid.*, 288–89.

50. Gregory of Nyssa, *Contra usurarios*, in *ibid.*, 289.



on *Ecclesiastes*,<sup>51</sup> and McCambley devotes the remainder of the article to Gregory's understanding of conscience and human nature, influenced by both Plato and Scripture.<sup>52</sup> McCambley's article is helpful not only for the valuable translation he provides and his notation of other texts by Gregory that touch on the subject of usury—such as the aforementioned *Commentary on Ecclesiastes* and Gregory's fifth homily on *The Lord's Prayer*<sup>53</sup>—but also for his insightful reflection on Gregory's theological anthropology.

In 1997, Thomas Moser published his thesis on usury laws and history, *Die patristische Zinslehre und ihre Ursprünge: Vom Zinsgebot zum Wucherverbot*. An examination of pre- and post Christian usury theory, Moser follows in the footsteps of Maloney, organizing his text and modeling his thesis along the same lines as his predecessor. However, though their texts are similar in form, their theses differ: Moser's thesis is that the usury prohibition adopted by patristic authors is not dependent solely on Scripture, but comes to be formed by equal influences of Scripture, Hellenistic philosophy and Roman legislation hostile to interest taking.<sup>54</sup> Though Maloney would not likely disagree strongly with this—and though Maloney tied these same themes together in his thesis of thirty years prior—still, his claim is that the primary motivation against usury was a Christian concern for “practical charity among the brethren.”<sup>55</sup> Moser's text is divided into two portions, with a lengthy first part dedicated to providing a thorough examination of interest in the ancient world and the Hebrew Bible (law and poetic books), demonstrating effectively continuity of condemnation. Again, like Maloney does before him, Moser emphasizes the role of Philo of Alexandria;<sup>56</sup> however unlike Maloney, Moser demonstrates the synthesis that Philo provides in his usury theory, combining the injunction of Deuteronomy with the Aristotelian ban against breeding money from money in his statement against usury in *De virtutibus*.<sup>57</sup> After providing

51. Gregory of Nyssa in *ibid.*, 290; Gregory of Nyssa, *Fourth Homily*, in *Commentary on Ecclesiastes*; In *Ecclesiasten* (PG 44:615–754).

52. McCambley, “Against Those Who Practice Usury,” 290–94.

53. Gregory of Nyssa, *De Oratione Dominica* (PG 44:1119–94).

54. Moser, *Die patristische Zinslehre*, 5.

55. Maloney, *The Background for the Early Christian Teaching on Usury*, 4.

56. Maloney concisely states that through “Clement, Basil and Ambrose, he [Philo] influences the development of Christian thought on the point” (Maloney, “The Teaching of the Fathers,” 243).

57. “He forbids anyone to lend money on interest to a brother, meaning by this name not merely a child of the same parents, but anyone of the same citizenship or nation. For he does not think it just to amass money bred from money as their yearlings are from cattle.” Philo, *De virtutibus*, 14. Also in Moser, *Die patristische Zinslehre*, 101.

additional sources from Philo on usury,<sup>58</sup> Moser concludes that Philo influences the future of the discussion on usury on three main counts: first, the taking of interest has dire consequences for the usurer;<sup>59</sup> second, the morally objectionable attitude of the financier; and third, the existence of interest is objectionable from a moral point of view because money is not capable of reproduction.<sup>60</sup> The second portion of Moser's text focuses its attention on the texts that concern usury. Although Moser generally includes the customary figures east and west, he incorporates authors not yet included in studies on usury, such as Johannes Mandakuni<sup>61</sup> and Aristides of Athens.<sup>62</sup> Yet, in his elucidation on the passages, Moser curiously neglects to include Gregory of Nyssa's *Contra usurarios*, choosing instead to cite passages from Gregory's *Fourth Homily* from his *Commentary on Ecclesiastes*. This omission, though mystifying, does not diminish his fine contribution to the study of usury in the letters, sermons and councils of the early Christian era.

The final consideration of Basil and Gregory's sermons on usury in this first chapter is from Susan R. Holman's *The Hungry Are Dying: Beggars and Bishops in Roman Cappadocia*.<sup>63</sup> Holman's text considers how the Cappadocian bishops—Basil, Gregory Nazianzen and Gregory of Nyssa—depict “the poor” in sermons which deal specifically with poverty, and how in this particular portrayal they sought to incorporate the poor under the mantle of the Church by appealing to Christian philanthropy. Prior to examination of Basil's *Homilia in psalmum* 14 and Gregory of Nyssa's *Contra usurarios*, she provides a pithy history of usury, to provide the necessary cultural background against which the sermons were written.<sup>64</sup> Her examination of Basil's *Homilia in psalmum* 14 focuses on the way in which Basil's understanding of the debtor and “the poor” are reflected in

58. Philo of Alexandria, *De specialibus legibus*, 2:74–76.

59. See Ezekiel 22:6–13.

60. Moser, *Die patristische Zinslehre*, 104–5. This was Aristotle's concern and will be addressed by Basil and Gregory as well.

61. *Ibid.*, 194–95.

62. *Ibid.*, 131.

63. Holman, *The Hungry Are Dying*. Holman has published two additional articles on this subject. See Holman, “The Entitled Poor,” 476–89; and Holman, “You Speculate on the Misery of the Poor,” 207–28.

64. Holman, *The Hungry Are Dying*, 115–20. In this section she refers to Maloney's “Teachings of the Fathers on Usury,” and cites the known texts (Holman, *The Hungry Are Dying*, 119 n. 71).

his sermon. She notes that Basil's emphasis on redemptive alms<sup>65</sup> in no way suggests radical reconstruction of society to the benefit of the poor, but upholds the conventional Roman notion of civic patronage, and urges that the wealthy discontinue making a mockery of the patronage system by robbing the poor of their civic rights.<sup>66</sup> One is to "lend to God"—in this case meaning "the poor"—because God is the ultimate benefactor. At the conclusion of her section on Basil, Holman—as Cleary before her—claims that Basil's text provided immediate inspiration, the themes of which "are soon repeated by Gregory of Nyssa, Ambrose, and John Chrysostom."<sup>67</sup> Holman proceeds to draw fine comparisons, but privileges Basil and Ambrose's texts, demonstrating effective connections and comparative language; with Gregory's *Contra usurarios*, Holman notes that he emphasizes the role of the creditor and debtor while Basil the role of the lender,<sup>68</sup> that Gregory uses wilderness imagery in his sermon,<sup>69</sup> and that they are both in agreement that the relationship between creditor and debtor must be radically redefined "in both the cosmic and the civic realm"<sup>70</sup> in order to solve the problem of the financial enslavement of the poor.<sup>71</sup> In her thoughtful work on the responsibility of religion and famine dynamics, Holman comes closest to a balanced treatment of the two sermons.

## Conclusion

Prior to the arrival of subprime lending in the early 1990s, scholars habitually wrote that usury in our day is a dead issue;<sup>72</sup> that Christians repeatedly pay out interest without thinking twice;<sup>73</sup> that society is numb to both the

65. I refer to redemptive alms as it specifically relates to usury as "heavenly usury."

66. By "civic rights" Holman means their patrimonies, inheritances, the inheritances of their children, personal freedom, human dignity, etc. (Holman, *The Hungry Are Dying*, 122).

67. Holman, *The Hungry Are Dying*, 123; see note 46. She is generous to Gregory in her article "Usury as Civic Injustice," stating that Gregory's "later sermon against usury was deliberately constructed as a supplement to Basil's *HP14b*" (Holman, "You Speculate on the Misery of the Poor," 218).

68. Holman, *The Hungry Are Dying*, 123–24.

69. *Ibid.*, 123–24.

70. *Ibid.*, 124.

71. *Ibid.*

72. Ballard, "On the Sin of Usury," 210; Sutherland, "The Debate Concerning Usury in the Christian Church," 3.

73. Maloney, "Early Conciliar Legislation on Usury," 145; Maloney, "The Teaching

idea of moderate interest and dialogue on the subject altogether.<sup>74</sup> The financial crisis of the first decade of the twenty-first century reminded us of the importance of reflection on economic morality and responsibility, and provided evidence that it is time for re-evaluation of the role of debt in our lives and its effects on local and global communities. The distortion of the “American Dream” of a home and two cars financed by debt has instigated new conversation<sup>75</sup> on the topic between ethicists, economists, theologians and historians as well as the construction of legislation,<sup>76</sup> and a selection of texts devoted to the subject of economic justice and human resources have emerged, including Susan R. Holman’s edited volume *Wealth and Poverty in Early Church and Society* and Leemans, Matz and Verstraeten’s edited volume *Reading Patristic Texts on Social Ethics: Issues and Challenges for Twenty-first-century Christian Social Thought*, both of which emerged from scholarly conferences devoted current research on poverty, wealth, and social ethics.

This first chapter has considered a select twentieth- and twenty-first-century historiography of usury from the early Christian era, for the purpose of examining to what degree Gregory and Basil’s sermons are being considered by poverty and social justice scholars of the early Christian era. This examination of usury scholarship suggests that the author most quoted, noted, translated and analyzed is Basil the Great; while Gregory of Nyssa is present in these treatments, still, Ambrose remains the comparable companion to Basil. Gregory sermon, though hardly derided, remains consistently to be considered the text of lesser import. The sole exception to this is within McCambley, whose analysis offered before the translation focused, naturally, on Gregory.

Though the topic of usury does not burn in the breasts of most theologians, historians or religion scholars of the past century, still, the subject is intriguing enough that by the 1970s interest in interest elevated

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of the Fathers on Usury,” 241; Maloney, “Against Those Who Practice Usury by Gregory of Nyssa,” 287; Buckley comes to the rescue of the subject, writing that “Usury today, however, is not the dead issue that might be imagined” (Buckley, *Teachings on Usury in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam*, xv).

74. Sutherland, “Usury: God’s Forgotten Doctrine,” 14; Sutherland, “The Debate Concerning Usury in the Christian Church,” 3; Mills, “The Ban on Interest,” 1; Mills, “Interest in Interest,” summary.

75. Geisst, *Collateral Damaged*. See also Deconto, “The People’s Interest.”

76. *Credit Card Accountability Responsibility and Disclosure Act of 2009*, HR 627, 111th Cong. Online: <http://www.gpo.gov/fdsys/pkg/PLAW-111publ24/pdf/PLAW-111publ24.pdf/>.

alongside the economy, and modern writers desired to fill in the empty centuries passed over by historians who concentrated their efforts in the Middle Ages. In the 1980s, the world poverty situation made usury a convenient topic for theologians who chose to segue from the denunciations and condemnations in Jewish and Christian scriptures to contemporary economic disasters brought about by usury. When capitalism began to subordinate human progress to economic ends, Christians stepped up to address economic life in the capitalistic world and the damage in its wake.<sup>77</sup> As thoughtful citizens of the world are becoming increasingly outraged by the wholesale destruction wrought upon human bodies due to poverty, the subject of usury will continue to be addressed. Usury as a topic might not be provocative, but the circumstances of dire poverty are. Usury, credit, debt—however you want to name it—has for too long subordinated human health and dignity to economic ends,<sup>78</sup> and despite the advances of science and technology, people yet live in the same circumstances as the original recipients of laws against it.<sup>79</sup> Those whose eyes glaze over by the notion of usury would do well to clear their sight.

77. Jones, *Capitalism and Christians*, 8.

78. Ibid.

79. Sutherland, "Usury: God's Forgotten Doctrine," 14.