

*Michael Bonner*

**Poverty and Economics in the Qur'an** The Qur'an provides a blueprint for a new order in society, in which the poor will be treated more fairly than before. The questions that usually arise regarding this new order of society concern its historical context. Who were the poor mentioned in the Book, and who were their benefactors? What became of them? However, the answers to these apparently simple questions have proved elusive. Few written records survive from seventh-century Arabia, the Qur'an being the greatest exception. Our main sources for the life of Muhammad and the original Muslim community are narrative texts that date no earlier than the eighth century, and are open to challenge in matters of detail, not least of all when they deal with poverty and the poor. These sources often say more about the piety and the polemics of, say, ninth-century Baghdad, than about seventh-century Mecca and Medina. This overlapping is important and interesting in itself, but scholars have only begun to sort it out.

Although no agreement on a framework for understanding the historical context of poverty in early Islam is yet in place, providing a sketch of one is worthwhile, even if it never becomes widely accepted. Since Islam in the seventh century took over much of the physical space previously occupied by the Roman Empire, it must have become heir to at least some of the late antique notions and practices regarding poverty and the poor discussed by Patlagean, Brown, and others. In other words, the treatment of the poor in early Islam is best understood in relation to what came before it, both in Arabia and in the urban Near East, as well as in relation to what occurred around it, in several of the environments and religious traditions discussed elsewhere in this

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