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Economics and the Bible

At its essence, economics is the study of how societies make decisions on the allocation of limited resources. Whether subsistence, capitalist, socialist, or totalitarian, each society faces complex choices regarding the distribution of goods and utilities. In making such choices, economics involves the study of the various allocation processes such as production, consumption, exchange, forecasting, scarcity, and risk. But in all of these activities, economics is observable only through human behavior. Consequently, efforts to isolate economic behavior from social spheres are heuristic at best, misleading at worst. Economic decisions reflect deeper ideological values, hierarchies, and positions of power, often revealed in the dominant social institutions such as the royal court or the temple. A proper understanding of ancient economics can enhance understanding of the social worlds and moral visions of the Bible.

Despite the pervasive influence of economics, biblical interpretation rarely focuses on such matters as outlined within the Hebrew Bible and New Testament. Economic activities form such a vital and intrinsic component of life that one rarely sees outside of native paradigms. For example, most people cannot conceive of an economic life without currency, even though it was completely absent in most of ancient Israel during the HB period and limited as a marker of value in the Greco-Roman culture of the NT. The majority of peoples in biblical times lived a primarily agrarian lifestyle centered on subsistence. In addition, the wealthiest elites dominated all economic decisions of the biblical worlds. Economies served political purpose, and most peoples had to adjust their own subsistence strategies around elite coercion, whether politically through imperial taxation or socially through vehicles such as local temple tribute.

A single verse can illustrate the important role of economics in biblical interpretation. In Matt 6:24 (cf. Luke 16:13) Jesus declares, “No one can serve two masters; for a slave will either hate the one and love the other, or be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and wealth.” The verse assumes implicit knowledge of the economic background. What is the status between a household slave and a master? Does wealth/*mammon* refer to stored wealth or purchasing power? Does such a verse counter temple ideology or reinforce imperial allegiance? How can an individual understand such a statement in a world where economic choices are so limited? In order to assess the economic issues of biblical interpretation, this article briefly outlines the intellectual history of economic study of the Bible, then summarizes some of the social theories of economics that help to contextualize biblical interpretation. This leads to a brief investigation of the possible sources for reconstruction. Finally, three specific examples illuminate some of the issues of economics and biblical interpretation.

History of Research.

For much of the modern scholarship period, biblical studies have neglected intentional research on the economic aspects of the text. One of the first HB monographs to focus on economics was Moshe Elat's *Economic Relations in the Lands of the Bible* (1000–539 B.C.E.), published in 1977. Elat used the Neo-Assyrian tribute lists to understand the dynamics of exchange in the southern Levant. The decade of the 1980s witnessed a major development of social scientific approaches to the Bible and significant interaction with broader debates on the nature of the ancient economy. From this period, major works appeared that focused on the economics of biblical and ancient law, wisdom literature, and most prolifically, the historical contexts of preexilic prophetic literature. Most recently, southern Levantine archaeology has integrated social scientific theories with biblical texts to draw conclusions concerning the economics of ancient Israel.

New Testament scholarship shares a similar intellectual history. Before the 1980s, most studies—with rare exceptions such as Constantin Brunner (*Our Christ: The Revolt of the Mystical Genius*, 1921)—did not focus on economic systems. Biblical scholars built on the economic research in related fields such as classics and sociology, but it was not until the emergence of the NT Context Group that economic aspects of the NT world took a place of prominence. Bruce Malina's first edition of *The New Testament World: Insights from Cultural Anthropology* (1981) was particularly influential in his emphasis on the relationship between meaning and the social system of that particular language. For Malina, terms like “wealth” in the Greco-Roman world carry little semantic value to the modern reader. Malina's studies inspired many significant works focusing on the social world of Jesus, while drawing on stock phrases in anthropology such as honor-shame or limited good. Naturally, these studies made their way into the epistles and apocalyptic portions of the NT as well as Qumran literature.

With the growing recognition of the importance of reader context, coupled with interest in social settings of the biblical texts, the study of economics in the Bible enters a period of great fecundity. In order to properly engage in these studies, biblical interpreters of both testaments

must begin by considering the nature of the ancient economies of the biblical world.

Ancient Economies.

Although ancient economics is a fairly recent arena of study for biblical scholars, ancient historians and anthropologists have long debated the nature of such economies. A brief overview of these discussions is crucial for an informed understanding of biblical economics.

Formalism.

The majority of scholarship on economics and the Bible tends to assume formalism, that is, a world in which the principles of supply and demand govern allocation decisions. The pervasiveness of this viewpoint symbolically begins with Adam Smith (*An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations*, 1776), who famously argued that if left to itself, an "invisible hand" will signal market forces to make collective decisions on allocations, which will ultimately serve the greater good. Smith wanted to separate political decisions and leave economic control in the hands of the general population. Despite certain objections, Smith understood his capitalist theories as universal and timeless, and its essence remained unchallenged in the Western world until the twentieth century. The fundamental assumption of free markets on supply and demand is so intrinsic to Western thought that most ancient Near Eastern scholars make these assumptions without explicit explanation. In fact, outward defense of formalist economics arose only as a response to the counter theory of economic substantivism.

Substantivism.

In response to the classical political economy of Smith's *Wealth of Nations*, a growing number of anthropologists challenged the basic assumptions of supply-and-demand capitalism by drawing on direct ethnological observations. These anthropologists observed the efficiency of complex economic systems without the usage of currencies. Rather than rely on supply and demand, substantivist economies revolved around a different set of traditional forces: duties and obligations, beliefs and magic, social ambition and vanities. The works of early twentieth-century anthropologists influenced scholars of the ancient world, most notably Karl Polanyi, who in turn brought the conversations to biblical studies. Unlike Smith, Polanyi considered economic transaction as socially embedded at its core. Polanyi understood all economic exchange before the Industrial Revolution to fall under two general categories: reciprocity and redistribution. *Reciprocity* occurred as socially embedded exchange between equals under the obligation of an established relationship over any perceived profit. In contrast, *redistribution* refers to an asymmetrical exchange, with a central authority collecting goods, storing, then re-allocating them. Neither reciprocity nor redistribution depended on any supply and demand, but rather the enforcement and maintenance of these exchange patterns depended on social norms. While Polanyi was arguing for the substantivist economy of the HB world, the classicist Moses Finley made similar arguments for the Greco-Roman society in his monumental publication, *The Ancient Economy* (1985). Although by the NT times the Greeks had developed markets, improved exchange networks, and left an abundance of archaeological and numismatic evidence for trade, Finley argued that such infrastructure did not necessitate formalist exchange and that the coinage was symbolic more than functional. He also maintained that the interworking of the ancient economy depended on status, which restricted the options for commercial trade.

Marxism.

Much of the debate over the Bible and economics occurs because of the polarization of formalism-substantivism, though other important interpretive frames emerged, primarily as alternatives to formalism. Among them, those of Karl Marx had an enormous influence on both biblical studies and the economies of the ancient Near East. Marx saw a grand progression of struggle among capitalists along a dialogical continuum. Marx's primary contribution lies in the emphasis on the relations of production and its inevitable result in class-consciousness. Marxism fueled multiple trajectories that have been very influential in interpreting the ancient economic world. Karl Wittfogel (1957) argued that the Marxist concept of the Asiatic Mode of Production could explain the ancient Near East, with its restricted access to crucial resources resulting in an economic stagnation. The Leningrad School, comprised of scholars from both the East (Muhammad Dandamaev) and the West (Roland Boer), support some version of a two-sector model of the ancient Near East: a free sector alongside a nonfree sector. Immanuel Wallerstein's expression of Marxism in the world-system theory argues that resources freely move from periphery to center under coercion in a way analogous to the Marxian dichotomy of the exploited proletariat and the capitalist bourgeoisie. Marxism continues to be significant in biblical studies outside of ancient economic history. Indeed, Marxism was the theoretical basis for the influential peasant-revolt interpretations of Israelite state formation. In addition, Marxist hermeneutics continue to serve as a theoretical platform for postcolonial readings of both testaments.

Patrimonialism.

Unlike laissez-faire capitalism and Marxism, Max Weber never envisioned a universal paradigm of economic systems. Instead, Weber argued that each economy reflected a particular set of social norms. Formalist economic principles of Smith may govern modern Western economic behavior, but Weber acknowledged the noncapitalist motivations of other economies. For much of the ancient world, Weber argued that the system of patrimonialism served as an ideal type (*Verstehen*) for biblical economies. In patrimonialism, the larger governing structures, such as the court and the temple, patterned themselves after family households. Patriarchy also drove the governance of the smaller units such as the chiefdom, clan, or even the single household. In *Ancient Judaism* (1952), Weber identified biblical law as the single most powerful indicator of such patriarchal economic life in accord with the absence of any collective ownership and the assumption of the family as the dominant economic unit. He argued that Israel's religious commitment to covenant regulated an economic life centered on an egalitarian ethos. With the diversified topography of Israel and Judah, despotic centralized control was impossible. Weber thus argued that the social obligations of patrimonialism could manage the economies more effectively than political coercion.

Kinship.

Related to the idea of patrimonialism, the aspect of kinship finds expression in the economies of the NT. Malina argued that kinship connects political, religious, and economic spheres. Kinship was particularly important in allocation issues as it determined occupations, dowry,

inheritance, and land tenure. As an illustration of the ties of kinship to economics, one can consider that Herod the Great did not propose to the Hasmonean princess Mariamme out of amorous desire, but rather initially made a marriage contract with her family. Financial stipulations for the long process of marriage are listed in Josephus, the Mishnah, and early Jewish literature. Similarly, ancient Near Eastern literature contains several textual examples on the conditions of inheritance, prioritizing the claims of sons (Num 27:3–4).

Patronage.

The anthropological model of patron-client relationships has served as a powerful paradigm for understanding the economic world of the NT. During the time of Jesus, Jerusalem was under the authority of Roman client-rulers, running an extractive, hierarchical economy. The patron would provide a variety of services to the clients (legal support, provisions, citizenship, tax release, etc.) in return for the client's loyalty and honor. The Roman emperor was the primary patron and set a network of clients by which to oversee the empire. Such dominance on patronage creates gross economic disparities as the patrons continue to extract agrarian surplus, while rewarding the clients and not the peasants. It is within this patron-client setting that one can understand the instructions of Jesus reversing such patterns during his meal at the home of a prominent Pharisee. Jesus acknowledged that such banquets intended to give a patron (Pharisee) a chance to reinforce partnerships with guests (clients), though Jesus turned over this patron-client system by insisting, "But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind" (Luke 14:13).

Sources.

In studying the economics of the Bible, one must understand and actively engage in the major extrabiblical sources in reconstructing the social institutions of the ancient world. An informed understanding of these sources allows one to control hermeneutics and reveal new insights within biblical texts about economic life.

Archaeology.

In the last few decades, Levantine archaeology has revealed a greater sophistication in understanding economic systems as the advent of the "new archaeology" of the 1970s has forced new questions regarding the ancient social world. Archaeology no longer merely produces raw data, but the discipline now attempts to identify proper social theories and use them judiciously to interpret and articulate this data. In interpreting the ancient economy of the Bible, such data afford a unique opportunity to rethink economic systems. The study of archaeology is vast and overwhelming with its own multivalent theoretical approaches, but the limited space requires a focus on only two minor subdivisions of archaeology that are particularly important for illuminating ancient economies: installations and numismatics.

Installations.

The presence of any sort of production installation is tremendously valuable for reconstructing the ancient economy. Large productive installations, such as rock-cut oil presses, have significant fixed costs. They require the procurement of supplies and recruitment of dedicated labor; thus they presuppose some sort of central agency with the political and economic support for dedicated construction. The presence of a large-scale production facility, such as the Iron Age olive oil presses at seventh century B.C.E. Tel Miqne (Ekron) reveals that the society made a conscious decision to produce olive oil efficiently and at capacities far beyond local consumption. Such an investment requires the presence of a powerful and coercive central authority to manage the industry. With so much productive capacity, the olive oil must have traveled beyond the local vicinity whether as a tax, a gift, or an exported commodity. The olive oil installations at Tel Miqne contrast with the oil production facilities at Mansur al-'Aqab. These presses are large but not as numerous, and they existed alongside *miqvaot* or "ritual baths." This juxtaposition of oil presses and baths suggest that the production of oil at Mansur al-'Aqab required purity and that such oil was not useful for commodity trade but for ritual usage in the temple.

Numismatics.

Coins begin to appear in the ancient Near East in the sixth century B.C.E., but they become much more common with Hellenization of the fourth and third centuries. Archaeological studies of coinage and dies can reveal their social functions. They were markers of value and tokens of symbolic payment. To a degree, they facilitated trade, although the NT rarely refers to coinage in this sense. Numismatics often combined local and imperial cultural elements. For example, a coin may be struck at Gaza according to the actual die inscription yet still contain the Athenian owl, known throughout the Hellenistic empire. The limited distribution of locally made coinage demonstrates that they were primarily intended for local usage. In addition, coinage with its symbolic properties shows the inseparability between political hegemony and economic systems. For example, the Bar Kokhba rebellion devoted enormous resources to mint their own coins, despite the short-lived nature of their regime. Undoubtedly, the development of such coinage was an attempt at self-legitimization of their reign. This shows that political desires deeply imbedded within economic systems.

Textual Evidence.

Epigraphic records provide one of the most valuable sources for reconstructing the economic world of the Bible. The genres of written sources are much too exhaustive to cover. Besides the obvious economic archives, scholars turn to court records, epistolary letters, royal inscriptions, mathematic exercises, tribute lists, as well as ancient historiography, narrative, graffiti, treatises, seals, and seal impressions. Not all relevant textual evidence originates from biblical lands. For example, the Persepolis Fortification archives provide a rich resource for understanding the distributive organization of the Persian Empire. This discussion of textual evidence will be limited to two examples to illustrate the valuable usage of epigraphic texts for economics and the Bible: the Samaria Ostraca and the writings of Josephus.

Samaria Ostraca.

The Samaria Ostraca are a collection of pottery shards with ink, which document a distribution of oil and wine among various individuals surrounding the capital of Samaria during the eighth century B.C.E. Although seemingly mundane, this archive provides a rare direct window

into the prophetic invectives of Amos and Hosea. Significantly, the archive does not refer to mere wine and oil but consistently modifies the commodities as “aged wine” and “fine oil,” signifying luxury goods over subsistence commodity. Also, the units of the product are not particularly voluminous but are instead a mere *nebel*, (roughly one liter), which negates any significant movement of commodity. Consequently, the archive does not reveal a mercantile setting but more of an elite movement of luxury goods around a capital city in small quantities. This elite economy centered on acts of prestation to gain political loyalties.

Josephus.

Nonarchival literary texts can provide a valuable window to the economic world. For example, Josephus writes as a historian under the control of Roman propaganda, yet his writings reveal many aspects of the NT economy. He famously declared that despite industrial developments under the Roman Empire, “Judeans in Palestine were primarily agricultural” (*Ag. Ap.* 1.60), a figure confirmed by studies that estimate 80–90 percent of the workforce involved in agrarian work. Josephus also confirms the patron-client role of Herod (*J.W.* 1.408–15), the presence of a harbor for expanding sea trade (*J.W.* 1.409–14), and a variety of other economic indicators during the NT. Although historical documents contain biases and they do not intend to articulate descriptions of economic systems, their assumptions within the text allow for scholars to glean valuable insight to aid in economic concerns of biblical interpretation.

Limitations.

Although the biblical interpreter has a broad range of sources to aid in discovering the economic issues of the Bible, these sources are highly limited and require judicious caution for multiple reasons. First, much of the HB period has a relative dearth of epigraphic archival documents, particularly in comparison to other chronological periods such as the Late Bronze Age Levant or Ptolemaic Egypt. Second, even with impressive advances in archaeological technology, the limited evidence cannot solve certain fundamental economic questions. For example, archaeological science can now identify the Judean Hills origins of wheat according to the residue of ceramics of Ashkelon. But this cannot determine whether the wheat traveled to the port of Ashkelon for usage as a gift, tax, tribute, or commercial product. Third, one must beware of any economic reductionism in any of these sources, including biblical texts. When asking economic questions, one gets economic answers, which may not adequately cover the scope of the evidence.

Illustrations.

The discipline of biblical studies is interested in economic systems because these systems reflect human behavior. The economic oppression in Egypt catalyzes the events of the Pentateuch and the concomitant law codes designed to counter future injustices (“Remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt,” Deut 15:15). The possession of land, the most valuable economic resource of antiquity, drives the entire conquest narrative and the ensuing division of that land. Economic issues play a central role throughout historical narratives of the Israelite and Judean monarchies (1 Kings 5:10–12; 10:1–9). Prophets often critique the economic plans of nations with a greater call to justice (Isa 58). Reference to economic blessing and the curse of financial destitution are frequent in the liturgy of the Psalms (12, 72, 82) and the teachings of wisdom literature (Prov 22:1–16).

The NT world addresses similar economic concerns but within the Greco-Roman client rule. The parables of Jesus regularly include tax collectors, estate managers, and slaves. Because of the enormous disparities in wealth, many of the teaching of Jesus combat this disparity, as well as the concomitant oppressive measures of debt and taxation. An economic reading of the Lord’s Prayer (Matt 6:9; Luke 11:2) shows remarkable congruence with the social condition of most of the would-be hearers, making referring to hunger and provision, as well as issues of debt. This teaching is often explicitly coupled under the rubric of the kingdom of God, which countered the present oppressive economic realities of the day. The Pauline corpus also highlights the economic inequities (1 Cor 11:22), but also encourages the wealthy to sponsor communities of fictive kinships through the assembly or church (1 Cor 16:15). Acts implies a more favorable attitude toward Roman powers as the empire helps the Christian movement and the text takes a neutral view of commerce. (Acts 26:31–32) In contrast, Revelation boldly protests against the present economic practices, condemning Roman commercial practices (Rev 13:16–17).

A few brief examples can demonstrate a more specific analysis of the importance of economics in biblical interpretation.

The Law of Jubilee.

The importance of kinship necessitates the inalienability of land to the proper holder as determined by kinship ties. Several biblical passages reinforce this value (Gen 23, 1 Kings 21). The land of Canaan was God’s gift to people, both in covenantal promise, conquest, and subsequent allocation among the tribes. But due to the vagaries of agrarian economies in ancient Israel, farmers were vulnerable to economic downturns through drought, pestilence, or war. In such situations farmers had little choice but to go into debt, and the inevitable default on such debt resulted in seizure of their only asset, the family plot of land. In this context, the law of Jubilee protects the families from permanent loss of their ancestral land, “And you shall hallow the fiftieth year and you shall proclaim liberty throughout the land to all its inhabitants. It shall be a jubilee for you: you shall return, every one of you to your own property and every one of you to your family” (Lev 25:10).

The law of Jubilee has a lengthy history of precedent in other ancient law corpora, most prominently the Laws of Eshnunna. Ancient Near Eastern kings would proclaim such Jubilee as a symbol of their reign of justice. The essence of the Jubilee is the return of land to the original possessors.

Not only does one return the land, but the law of Jubilee allows for a release of Israelite slaves to their clans. “Then they and their children with them shall be free from your authority; they shall go back to their own family and return to their ancestral property” (Lev 25:41). Again, this law attempts to correct the results of economic circumstances that may lead an Israelite to be a bonded servant. Debt crises also resulted in indentured service along with the forfeiture of land to the lender. The release of Israelite slaves is thus tied to the release of the land—the emphasis of the field lying fallow for the Jubilee year connects the law to the holiness of the sabbath. Therefore, while the law is economic, the motivation to follow this biblical law is not economic but moral and religious. Few scholars contend that ancient Israel actually instituted such measures, as the Jubilee law is utopian and idealistic in character. But the codification of the Jubilee into biblical law reveals specific aspects

of the ancient Israel economy. Land was theoretically inalienable, but certain economic circumstances must have resulted in the loss of land plots from their original holders. The Jubilee law intended to level such a social inequities. The motivation is not economic gain but rather recognition of the holiness of the land.

Amos's Condemnation of the Wealthy.

Both the patristic interpreters and early Jewish writings recognized the explicit economic content of Amos. An economic reading of Amos 6:1–7 brings new insight to the background of a particularly derisive invective. In this passage, the prophet explicitly condemns the “notables of the first of the nations,” a term in parallel with those “at ease in Zion” and “secure on Mount Samaria.”

A few observations emerge in an economic reading. First, the inhabitants of Samaria and Judah likely found much solace in their economic strength rather than devotion to Yahweh. The inhabitants saw their prosperity as a reflex of God's blessing, a natural understanding of much Old Testament ethic. A brief survey of the eighth-century strata of Samaria, in fact, confirms much of this prosperity in a thriving city and significant luxury items such as ivories in the material remains. But for Amos, such material blessing does not equate spiritual well-being. The prophet compares them to other polities, specifically the Hittite city Calneh, the Aramaic stronghold Hamath, and the Philistia metropolis, Gath. All three city-states had thriving economies but eventually experienced major military defeat. In this sense, Amos points out that economic oppression may bring financial gain, but it is temporary and subservient to the providence of God's justice. Significantly, the prophet does not condemn the entire populations but only the “choicest,” implying a significant division between the elite and the peasants who fed and provided for the elite. The former certainly read the words of Amos with fear and scorn, while the latter saw Amos as a hopeful message of blessing.

Second, Amos further condemns the material blessing of the elite by pointing out many of the trappings of their wealth. Amos condemns: (1) ostentatious furniture: “beds of ivory” (v. 4), “couches” (v. 4); (2) luxurious meals: “lambs from the flock” (v. 4), “calves from the stall” (v. 4), “wine from bowls” (v. 6), “finest oils” (v. 6); (3) excessive leisure: “sound of the harp” (v. 5), “instruments of music” (v. 5). All of these terms are consumption goods beyond the level of mere subsistence. Amos contrasts these items with the Israelites' own spiritual heritage and obligation. As a result, the prophet portends disastrous consequences, “Therefore they now be the first to go into exile, and the revelry of the loungers shall pass away” (v. 7). The prophetic condemnation is not against the wealthy but against the accumulation of wealth via unjust means.

The Parable of the Pounds.

Luke 19:11–27 (cf. Matt 25:14–30) presents a particularly puzzling condemnation of an economic situation through parable. A master compliments several of his stewards for taking an initial investment and increasing the total gain. But when one steward confesses to merely hiding the financial investment at no profit, he is sharply criticized, “Why then did you not put my money into the bank? Then when I returned, I could have collected it with interest” (Luke 19:23). The king then revokes the initial investment and hands it over to a faithful steward. Most interpretations of this parable center on two themes: (1) eschatology through admonition to act responsibly in preparation for Jesus's second coming, or (2) stewardship to exhort faithfulness and responsibility of one's resources given by God.

An economic reading of the parable of the pounds allows for a different understanding. Within a political economy of oppression, and an unmitigated cycle of elites extracting goods from the majority peasants, a social scientific approach shows that Jesus's parable attempts to expose these inequities. The returns of tenfold and fivefold from the initial investment are not revealed as anomalous but, in fact, line up with debt practices of the Greco-Roman peasants. Because peasants practiced subsistence strategies, the ideas of amassing wealth was incongruous to their own lifestyles, particularly in light of the anthropological notion of limited goods. Although the nobles who heard the story may have discerned a parable on honor and responsibility to the patron-client relationship, the peasants likely saw this parable as a protest against an economic system that allows such disparity. The protest becomes explicit when Jesus condemns the inequality by stating, “I tell you, to all those who have, more will be given; but from those who have nothing, even what they have will be taken away” (Luke 19:26). On a secondary exegetical level, interpretation must distinguish between the social context of the illiterate Galilean peasants who heard this message during the life of Jesus of Nazareth and the elite scribes who wrote this message.

An Assessment of Economics and the Bible.

Biblical interpretation must continue to pursue an informed understanding of the economics of the text as they relate to the foreground and the background of the biblical message. Dialogue between the spheres of philology, anthropology, and archaeology provides a solid foundation for these matters. Continued advancements in each of these fields, as well as the growing technological prowess in archaeology, portend optimism in the field of economics and biblical interpretation.

[See also CLASS CRITICISM; EMPIRE STUDIES AND BIBLICAL INTERPRETATION; HISTORICAL CRITICISM, subentry HEBREW BIBLE; HISTORICAL CRITICISM, subentry NEW TESTAMENT; MATERIALIST CRITICISM; POSTCOLONIAL BIBLICAL INTERPRETATION; SOCIAL SCIENCES, subentry HEBREW BIBLE; and SOCIAL SCIENCES, subentry NEW TESTAMENT.]

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