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Book Review: Jacob's Wealth: An Examination into the Nature and Role of Material Possessions in the Jacob-Cycle (Gen 25:19-35:29)

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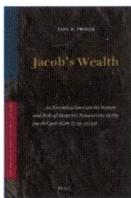
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Jacob's Wealth: An Examination into the Nature and Role of Material Possessions in the Jacob-Cycle (Gen 25:19-35:29)



By Paul D. Vrolijk. VTSup 146. Leiden: Brill, 2011. Pp. xiv + 363. Hardback, \$139.00. ISBN: 978-90-04-20329-7.

In a revised doctoral dissertation under Drs. Ernest Lucas and Gordon Wenham (Bristol, 2008), Paul Vrolijk explores the motif of wealth in the Jacob-cycle. By analyzing the multiple references to blessing, narrations of economic exchange and prominent regard to “the land,” Vrolijk attempts to better understand the role of material blessing in the portrayal of Jacob in hopes that such understanding can provide new perspectives on the patriarchal narratives. Vrolijk intentionally restricts his parameters: “In this study, I will limit myself to investigating the Jacob-cycle (Gen 25:19-35:29) and in particular the role of wealth within it” (6). His approach is primarily exegetical with little reference to theory, nor archaeology.

The book begins with a brief introduction to the issue of wealth and a standard literature review. Vrolijk surveys decades of research covering theological studies of wealth, ethics and Genesis. He recognizes the near absence of focused studies on the role of wealth in the patriarchal narratives, thereby making this study timely. His approach is highly synchronic, citing a distrust of historical reconstructions, as well as a judicious precaution when “integrating hypothesis within a theological construct” (24). He claims a process that is

both inductive and deductive, citing Grant Osborne’s *The Hermeneutical Spiral* as a methodological foundation.

Chapter Two (Gen 25-28), the first of three substantive chapters, centers on Jacob’s time in Canaan, covering the events surrounding the birth of Jacob, struggles with his older brother and the theophany at Bethel. Throughout these events, Vrolijk attempts to tie the narrative rhythm around the prevalent theme of material possessions. He is careful to not draw wide strokes, but rather highlights different streams of tension. For example, Gen 26:12-14 describes the considerable fortune of Isaac:

Isaac sowed seed in that land, and in the same year reaped a hundredfold. The LORD blessed him (12), and the man became rich; he prospered more and more until he became very wealthy (13). He had possessions of flocks and herds, and a great household, so that the Philistines envied him (14).

Vrolijk shows that material blessing may indicate a divine relationship (Gen 26:12) as well as the danger of a corruptive relationship (Gen 26:14). The blessing is based on earlier promises, but also presents the tension of Jacob’s future security in land and his eventual banishment. Overall, Vrolijk sees these opening chapters of the Jacob-cycle as utilizing material possessions in a substantive way to monitor the relational dynamics.

Chapter Three (Gen 29-31) begins with Jacob’s exit from Canaan and his twenty year stay with Laban. This period forms a crucial part of the Genesis narrative in regards to wealth, as Jacob begins the section without possessions, but eventually leaves with an enormous entourage of multiple wives, multiple concubines, twelve sons, many servants and abundant flocks. Vrolijk argues that material possession play a crucial role in indicating the complex relationships to Jacob. For example, Laban’s generosity in

allowing Jacob to keep possessions brings restoration to the relationship. The episodes of generosity contrast with relationship tensions when prioritizing the accumulation of material wealth,

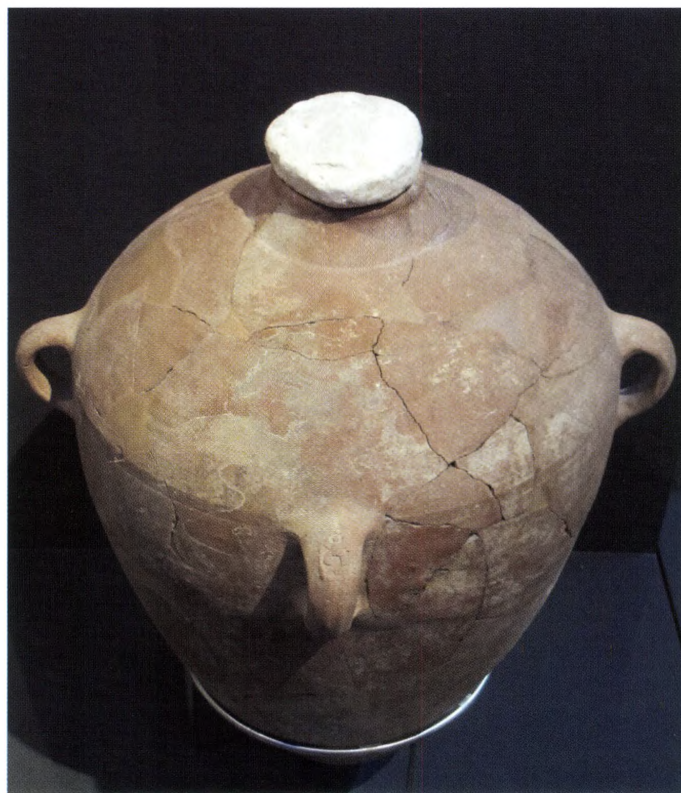


Figure 5. An Imlk jar used to collect/distribute royal goods during the Iron Age (Hebron). Israel Museum, Jerusalem. Photograph courtesy of Chamberi. Licensed under CC BY-SA 3.0 via Wikimedia Commons - [http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:LMLK_seal_\(Hebron\).Israel_Museum_Jerusalem_\(2\).JPG#/media/File:LMLK_seal_\(Hebron\).Israel_Museum_Jerusalem_\(2\).JPG](http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:LMLK_seal_(Hebron).Israel_Museum_Jerusalem_(2).JPG#/media/File:LMLK_seal_(Hebron).Israel_Museum_Jerusalem_(2).JPG).

particularly, the birthright battle between Jacob and Esau. Vrolijk emphasizes that the narratives ultimately underscore God's role in material blessing and divine favor.

Chapter Four narrates the return to Canaan (Gen 32-35), with the reunion with Esau and the wrestling theophany. The correlation between Jacob's life and material blessing reaches a culmination in Gen 33:10-11, as he grants a gift/blessing to Esau. Although Jacob prepared himself for a confrontation, Esau reciprocated the gift with generosity, thus bringing the birthright issue to some level of resolve. In this chapter, Vrolijk argues that the desires for material blessing no longer dictate the relationship, but at this point in Jacob's life, the presence of material blessings merely symbolizes restoration. In this sense, the narrative function of wealth changes, parallel to the changes in Jacob's life.

In the final chapter, Vrolijk reiterates the presence of material wealth as a pertinent theme throughout the Jacob-cycle, as well as the entirety of the patriarchal narratives. The book concludes with two appendices, a bibliography and multiple indices.

Vrolijk is to be commended for identifying a significant theological theme of the Jacob-cycle that has been largely neglected. I will briefly mention two major issues of this ambitious work. Attention to these areas would have greatly improved this study.

First, the three substantive sections offer little in terms of critical exegetical thought. He cites heavily from four authors in particular: his doctoral thesis committee member Wenham (210 references!), Waltke (164), Hamilton (162) and Fokkelman (149). Often, these exegetical sections seem more like a pastiche literature review taken primarily from these four different Genesis scholars. The staggering number of direct quotations compounds the composite feel of the book. Vrolijk relies on heavily on identifying structural (not structuralist) forms, particularly

chiasm, reminiscent of Wenham's flood analysis of Genesis 6-9. Although Vrolijk's review offers some interesting perspectives, little exegetical work is done in syntax within the smaller micro-units of the passages. He rarely engages with the rich textual witnesses outside of the MT such as the LXX, QL and Targumim. A more thorough exegetical effort could have added a much more refined description of the biblical portrayal.

Second, the book completely ignores the field of economic anthropology. The bibliography does not list a single reference to Karl Polanyi or Moses Finley. In his opening chapter, Vrolijk speaks of the importance of recognizing material blessing, yet does very little to actually define the term. A theoretical control of economic anthropology could better articulate his analysis of wealth on terms more native to ancient Israel. For example, Gary Stansell has done fine work on patriarchal wealth in Genesis using anthropological categories (though his work is curiously absent from the bibliography). Other fields, such as comparative ethnography and Levantine archaeology could have further nuanced analysis, particularly in protecting from anachronistic observations based on modern capitalism. Studies of economics in the biblical world are prime opportunities for biblical scholars to establish connections with the wider world of humanities,

while improving the sophistication of our own conclusions. Our ability to do so is crucial for the future viability of our field.

With such an important topic, it is unfortunate that Vrolijk did not deepen the exploration of this important question. With that said, it is hopeful that this work continues to stimulate more interest and dialogue in economic perspectives on biblical readings.

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Figure 6. A symbol of wealth: Megiddo ivories. Photograph courtesy of Deror Avi. Licensed under CC BY-SA 3.0 via Wikimedia Commons - http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Megiddo_ivories_IMG_7228.JPG#/media/File:Megiddo_ivories_IMG_7228.JPG.