

2014

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Ancient Israel did not know the economic concepts of banks, insurance, tuition, profit and retirement. Other economic terms such as taxes, labor, debt and even prices were all fundamentally different in meaning. When interpreting biblical texts, we must carefully consider the different settings of modern capitalism and ancient Israel's economy.

See Also: [*Portrayals of Economic Exchange in the Book of Kings*](#) (Leiden: Brill, 2012).

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May 2014

In recent years, a certain reading of 1 Chr 4:9-10, known from the popular book *The Prayer of Jabez: Breaking Through to the Blessed Life*, admonishes people to regularly recite the simple prayer, "Oh that you would bless me and enlarge my border, and that your hand might be with me, and that you would keep me from hurt and harm (NRSV)!"¹ Although Wilkinson does not explicitly tie the prayer to financial success, the usage of modifiers, like "extravagant" and "blessing" have connected Jabez's prayer to the prosperity gospel. Fourteen years and eleven million copies later (as well as a host of secondary books, workbooks, audios, videos, downloads and merchandise), the *Prayer of Jabez* continues to see wide success both in sales and the cultural imprint of the interpretation of these two obscure biblical verses.

But does the *Prayer of Jabez* accurately reflect biblical ethics on economic blessing? Of course, the answer is complicated. Part of the complexity lies in the fact that economic values are so central to our lives, that we often lack any awareness of our own modern presuppositions that may potentially cloud our readings. Understanding the economies of the Bible through the lens of Western capitalism is a precarious venture at best.

A more effective economic reading of the Bible requires that we step back and consciously consider the dynamics of economic life in ancient Israel. As a starting point, today's reader can think about the vast difference between today's economic challenges against those of an agrarian farmer in settings such as Iron Age Judah. Our modern life trajectory of economic decisions centers around a set of values and customs that guide these choices. But many of these values such as profit, retirement and insurance were essentially unknown in the ancient world. Modern concepts like taxes, labor, debt and prices had completely different meanings.

Even the fundamental idea of "money" is essentially foreign to the world of the Hebrew Bible. Classical Hebrew has no analogous word for "money," but rather, the more accurate translation is "silver," which was weighed on balance scales against inscribed weights to secure economic transactions. In only two cases, the Bible mentions the "daric," referring to a specific coin accepted in the Persian Empire.² Although Judean coinage appeared from 400 BC, specimens of coins are extraordinarily rare until the Roman Empire, suggesting that circulation was far from common, and limited to elite circles.

Biblical Economies and Karl Polanyi

So how does one begin to think in terms of the ancient economy in the biblical world? Exchange is a good place to start. Without money, how did a society make fundamental decisions on the allocation of goods? Equally important, without money, what incentives fueled the division of labor? Looking at exchange can greatly improve our own understanding of ancient economies.

Karl Polanyi articulated that people can exchange in three different modes, and his descriptors can help to clarify the nature of pre-industrial economies. First, Polanyi suggested that people exchange through *reciprocity*³. This mode of exchange involves two symmetrical parties, equal in social stature, making an exchange based on social relationship. For example, an Israelite farmer may give surplus grain to a first cousin in exchange for oil. The exchange is reciprocal because such a gift obliges the recipient of the grain to repay the favor, whether synchronously, or during a future time of need. Reciprocity does not require a promissory note, but the social relationship effectively guarantees future fulfillment of any obligation.

The biblical text is replete with specific examples of reciprocity, where exchange is not motivated by supply and demand, but through the duties of a social bond. In 1 Kgs 10, the Queen of Sheba gives a generous amount of gold, spices and precious stones (v. 10), to which Solomon counters "out of his royal bounty" (v. 13). Notice major components of the narrative that are outside a pure economic exchange: ornate feasting, the establishment of Solomon's wisdom and generous words of praise. The text does not mention any price negotiation, a hallmark of Western capitalist exchange. Similar reciprocal exchanges appear throughout the Bible, particularly the books of Kings among political leaders (1 Kgs 5:15-32; 13:1-10; 14:1-3; 2 Kgs 5:8-27; 8:7-11; 20:12-15), but also with non-elites (1 Kgs 17:8-15).

It is important to note that even Western capitalist economies include some degree of reciprocally based exchange. Birthday gifts and wedding presents are all expressions of reciprocity. In fact, it is reciprocity (social obligation) that makes it difficult and awkward to refuse your neighbor, who needs to borrow your power tools. Lending a table-saw does not maximize your economic utility, but it can preserve your social standing with said neighbor. The preserved relationship permits you to borrow some eggs from that same neighbor at a future time.

Second, Polanyi described the exchange mode of *redistribution*. Redistribution is the movement of economic goods from the multitude of people to an authoritative center, which then redistributes to the people in another form. Taxes and tribute are two common expressions of ancient redistribution.

Like reciprocity, economic redistribution is socially-embedded, and not based on supply and demand. In other words, social relationships motivate the redistributive exchange. But instead of symmetry, redistribution is characterized by political imbalance and asymmetry. The relationship is often couched in language of citizenship, or even kinship, such as reference to the king as a father. This relational language helps to ensure payment. Of course, alongside these relationships, redistribution often relies on political ideologies or even physical coercion.

Because the ancient Near East was a world of empires, redistribution was a major component of the economic fabric. In the biblical texts, many of Solomon's administrative efforts were economically redistributive in nature. He collected labor and materials, and redistributed the wealth through architecture (temple, palace, cities). Similarly, Exodus portrays Pharaoh's forced labor as a form of redistribution, by extracting available labor from the Hebrews, then redistributing the fruits of said labor through the creation of monumental architecture. As with asymmetrical exchange, redistribution was often oppressive against the marginalized groups.

In today's world, redistribution in the modern world appears with different degrees of coercion. Taxes are collected, then value is theoretically redistributed through public services and collective defense. Of course, redistribution looks different in Canada than the USA, and much more different in totalitarian regimes like North Korea.

Third, Polanyi described the exchange mode of *market-driven exchange*, controlled by supply and demand. Whereas this mode of exchange dominates today's Western economies, Polanyi argued that it did not exist before the Industrial Revolution. Polanyi declared that reciprocity and redistribution were the sole means of exchange. Ancient society had no true markets, and that coinage was merely symbolic and did not function as true money.

But despite Polanyi's pleading, it appears that market exchange did exist, at least in a limited scale. One of the most telling passages is in 2 Kings 4, when Elisha meets with a destitute widow, and miraculously provides a supply of oil. The passage features the most marginalized person of the ancient world, a widow without any social ties, nor land. In addition, the widow has children on the verge of debt slavery, and in desperation for basic sustenance.

Whereas the passage centers on the encounter and service of Elisha, a close reading gives two major clues on the economic life of Iron Age Israel: (1) The widow, despite having no social ties is able to sell in a market; (2) Oil is not strictly utilitarian, in this case, it is an acceptable means of exchange.

In this one setting of pre-exilic northern Israel, the infrastructure is provided for a limited market exchange. Such a setting makes historical sense, considering the relative wealth of northern Israel in the eighth century, as well as its industrial installations, major roads and rich topography.

But such examples of market exchange are extremely rare in the biblical text. By far, movements of reciprocity and redistribution are far more common, thus implying that socially-embedded trade was much more significant in the economy over supply-and-demand. This prevalence of reciprocity and redistribution demonstrates the deep connection of economy and all our social relationships: ethnic, tribal and family. Economy is deeply related to all of the daily activities in ancient Israel: labor, food, parenting and routine survival.

The concepts of reciprocity, redistribution and market exchange provide terminology to help us think through the economies of ancient Israel. Because economics is so intrinsic and subconscious to our thinking, exchange categories can guide our reading of Israel's important narratives, and force us to guard against anachronistic thinking. More significantly, thinking about exchange may help us to understand the vast ways in which economic values undergird so much of our interpretation.

Biblical Economies and Levantine Archaeology

More recently, biblical scholarship is turning to Levantine archaeology for better understandings of ancient economies. Admittedly, archaeological studies have major limitations. One can now examine a collection of pottery, identify the time period, reconstruct the size of the vessels via typologies and analyze the origins of the clay, but one cannot determine whether the commodity traveled via reciprocity, redistribution or market exchange. Most significantly, archaeological remains are notoriously selective due to the accident of permanence as well as the accident of discovery.

But regardless, archaeology can still be a tremendous tool to help fill our vast lacunae in the knowledge of biblical economies. Recent movements in Levantine archaeology can support a greater understanding of biblical economies. The advent of the "new archaeology" of the 1970s has catalyzed fresh discussions regarding the ancient social world. Archaeology no longer merely produces data, but it also now tries to find social theories to interpret such data. In interpreting biblical economies, such data affords a unique opportunity to rethink our interpretations.

Two minor examples of archaeological discovery can help illustrate their value in understanding biblical economies: installations and ostraca. The remains of any sort of production installation is tremendously valuable for reconstructing the ancient economy. These installations have productive capacities far beyond a household. Consequently, they require significant procurement of supplies, materials and dedicated labor, as well as a powerful central agency that can command and direct such labor.

For example, the remains of the enormous olive oil presses at seventh century BCE Tel Mique (Ekron) reveals that the society made a conscious decision to efficiently produce olive oil at capacities exceeding local consumption. The presence of such a facility requires a central authority to manage this operation as well as the export of the excessive oil whether via trade or taxation. The olive oil installations at Tel Mique contrast with the more modest oil production facilities at Mansur al-'Aqab. The location of these presses adjacent to *miqvaot* or "ritual baths" suggest that the production of oil at Mansur al-'Aqab related more to the economy of the local temple more than commodity trade.

In addition to installations, epigraphic archives are the best sources for reconstructing the ancient economy. Although the archives are typically broken and laconic in content, they are rare in that they present firsthand primary source to economic transactions.

One of the best collections for ancient Israel's economy is the Samaria Ostraca. This eighth century archive records the deliveries of "aged wine" and "fine oil" to individuals associated with areas near Samaria. The presence of only two high quality elite products in small quantities indicates that the archive does not refer to large scale movement of goods, nor commercial

activity, but rather elite gift-giving. The geographic locations of the ostraca surround Samaria with a bit more distribution in the western region of the Shechem syncline, an area with greater banditry and instability. I have previously argued that such the Samaria Ostraca reflect a systemized gift giving by the Israelite king, working to buttress political support through social alliances.⁴ Such activity aligns well with other archaeological finds of eighth century Samaria: high-level royal and military construction in eighth century BCE Samaria, decorated ivories and a rich ceramic assemblage betraying a strong international network. Collectively, the evidence suggests a strongly centralized elite economy for this reason.

Conclusions

The *Prayer of Jabez* centers around a theologically remarkable passage, but interpretation must check itself against the economic world of the Chronicler. The book of Chronicles is set in the world of post-exilic Judah. Social-scientific studies show that the tiny Judean community struggled to survive. They faced economic oppression from Persian imperial taxation. They encountered ethnic persecution from neighboring groups as well as the local community that was never exiled. The Jerusalem temple was a mere shadow to the grandeur of the Solomonic temple. Archaeological surveys show that the land of Judah was severely depopulated. The displacement of families through the exile and the return likely decimated the social networks that preserved and enforced reciprocal exchange. The disruption of these important kinship bonds certainly hampered major methods for economic exchange.

This context of poverty and disruption of a socially-embedded economy must inform the reading of the *Prayer of Jabez*. By Jabez boldly asking, "Oh that you would bless me and enlarge my border," and for God to grant the request is more reflective of God's providence in the midst of economic turmoil and struggle. Before claiming the promise within the comparative richness of today's Western world, a careful reading must consider the economic context of marginalization to dissuade potentially harmful applications.

Ultimately, such a deliberate effort to think about the ancient Israelite economies will give us a more sophisticated understanding of the important theological tropes related to economy. In doing so, we will be *richer* in our biblical interpretation.

Notes

¹ Bruce Wilkerson, *The Prayer of Jabez: Breaking Through to the Blessed Life* (Sisters, Ore.: Multnomah Publishers), 2010.

² Ezra 8:27; 1 Chr 19:7.

³ Karl Polanyi, *The Great Transformation* (New York: Farrar and Rinehart), 1944.

⁴ Roger Nam. "Power Relations in the Samaria Ostraca," *PEQ* 144, 3 (2012): 155-163; also see Matthew Suriano, "A Fresh Reading for 'Aged Wine' in the Samaria Ostraca," *PEQ* 139 (2007): 27-33.
