

Biblical Economic Ethics: Sacred Scripture's Teachings on Economic Life.

Albino Barrera. 2013. Lanham, MD: Lexington Books. ISBN: 978-0-7391-8229-1. \$70.29.

Reviewed by Mary Hirschfeld, Villanova University.

What does the Bible teach us about economic ethics? In *Biblical Economic Ethics*, Albino Barrera takes on the daunting task of reflecting on the copious, often contradictory discussions of economic affairs one finds embedded in the 73 (Roman Catholic canon) or 66 (Protestant canon) books of the Bible in order to answer that question. Drawing on such unwieldy source material for moral reflection is challenging enough. To complicate matters, there is a vast literature of commentary on the Bible ranging from the reflections of the Church fathers, to the writings of the Protestant reformers, to the highly technical critical analysis of Scripture by modern-day exegetes. It would be impossible to write a book responsible to the entire body of literature, given the disparity of approaches. But that means that at the outset of a project such as Barrera's, one has to make a defining choice, since the secondary literature one engages necessarily shapes the ensuing analysis.

In this book, Barrera has chosen to engage modern scholarship on Scripture. That choice has the advantage of escaping thorny questions about which set of Church fathers or Church reformers to engage. It has the further advantage of avoiding the complication of having to think about the impact of their historical setting on their reading of Scripture. However, it comes at the cost of losing direct access to the wisdom of a tradition that has been reflecting on this material for over two millennia. In some sense, Barrera has to reinvent the wheel, and while he delivers some compelling insight into biblical teachings on economics, it is not clear that a reliance on the modern scholarly apparatus can help us see as clearly as it might the profound challenge to contemporary sensibilities posed by sacred Scripture.

Biblical Economic Ethics is a model of careful and thorough scholarship. Barrera begins with a chapter on methodology, ably setting out the contours of modern debates both about how to understand Scripture, and how to deploy Scripture in theological and ethical reflection. Having laid out the range of modern approaches, Barrera clearly articulates his own position in relationship to those debates. First, he argues for the value of investigating the individual books, considering their approaches to economic ethics against the socio-economic backdrop against which they were written and within the context of the theological view of the various biblical authors. Second, Barrera nonetheless maintains that attention to

the individual voices of Scripture should not detract from the fundamental unity of the Bible, attested to by the canonization of these books by an ecclesial community. Finally, because the individual writers and the canon are taken to be inspired, Barrera argues that we can “take meaning beyond that which was originally meant by their authors or editors” (22).

The structure of the book reflects this approach. Part I begins with a chapter on the socio-economic context of the writings of the Old Testament. Barrera then canvasses the books of the Old Testament with chapters devoted to the covenant law developed in the Pentateuch, the prophets, and the wisdom literature. For each, Barrera lays out the material directly related to economic ethics, connecting it to the theological perspective embodied in the book in question. Part II takes up the New Testament, with chapters covering Mark, Matthew, Luke-Acts, and the Pauline Letters along with James. In each of these chapters, the distinctive theological accents of each of the evangelists and Paul are used to show how the economic teachings of each illuminate the underlying theology. Finally, in Part III, Barrera steps back from the individual books to identify the core themes he sees as emerging from the canon taken as a whole.

Although Barrera uses the same approach for both the Old and the New Testaments, Part II is more satisfying than Part I. Because the Old Testament covers much more historical ground, it is difficult to relate the material in the chapter on socio-economic conditions to the particular circumstances of the individual books as Barrera takes them up. One would have to flip back and forth between the chapters on the particular events narrated in the Bible and the chapter on socio-economic conditions in order to see how they line up. That same historical sweep makes it more difficult to integrate the economic teachings with the theological concerns of the writers. The covenant law deals with God’s establishment of a special relationship with Israel. The prophets and the wisdom literature deal with the complex relationship between God and his chosen people as they go into and return from exile. If the core question is how to understand one’s temporal concerns in light of one’s relationship with the eternal God, the fact that Israel’s relationship with God is evolving throughout the Old Testament complicates any attempt to discern the meaning of economic life.

By contrast, the New Testament deals with the singular event of the life of Jesus Christ. It is therefore more straightforward to understand the relationship between the socio-economic landscape of those few decades and the teachings as presented in the New Testament, even allowing for the fact that the gospels were written over the course of the following half-century or so. More importantly, the New Testament is written in response to the defining event within salvation history. The economic teachings are thus presented against the backdrop of God’s definitive revelation

concerning the relationship between Himself and his people. For these reasons Part II provides rich material for more fully reflecting on the relationship between biblical teachings on economic life and a life lived in relationship with God. Barrera skillfully narrates the distinctive accents of the three Synoptic gospels while unpacking the implications that has for their teachings on economics. In particular, what comes through is the striking impact the shift in eschatological horizon has on thinking about economic life. Whether one expects an immanent parousia or a delayed one, the New Testament's laser-like focus on the relationship between the Kingdom of heaven and this life throws into relief the core question any theological approach to economics must raise: how do we relate temporal earthly flourishing to the joy we hope to know in the next life? It is against this backdrop that the consistent scriptural exhortations against greed and for economic justice, with a special concern for the poor, make the most sense. It is against this backdrop that we can understand the distinctive note introduced by the New Testament: the call for voluntary poverty, as a witness against the dangers of mistaking temporal flourishing for our ultimate end.

In Part III, Barrera undertakes the difficult task of drawing out a unified theological perspective on economic life based on his close reading of the individual books of the Bible. He begins by arguing that there is a divine order of conditional prosperity. By that Barrera means that God has ordered the world in such a way that there will be provision for material sufficiency for all, as seen most clearly in God's promise of material prosperity to Israel that is a recurring theme of the Old Testament. In order to realize this prosperity, however, Israel must conduct herself uprightly, most notably by observing God's precepts about economic justice and special concern for the poor. There is an important truth to Barrera's insight. Throughout salvation history, God has promised his people abundance. But this is a difficult theology to sustain if one understands abundance primarily as temporal flourishing in this life. First, it does not help us understand the problem of why the good often suffer, the dilemma at the heart of the book of Job. Second, it makes the emphasis on voluntary poverty and material self-abnegation of the New Testament difficult to understand. And finally, it risks distracting our attention from the fulsome accounts of the abundance of the Kingdom of heaven that the New Testament presents as our proper object of desire. Barrera notably struggles with this tension as he confesses that "the divine gift of economic security is not a recurring theme in the New Testament" (236). A theology that recognizes God's promises of material flourishing to Israel as a mode of communicating the nature of salvation to a people who have not yet received the full revelation of God's salvific plan in Christ more easily handles the difference between the Old and New Testaments on the role of material prosperity in this life.

Although Barrera begins his conclusions with a theme that places too much weight on the Old Testament's view of the relationship between material prosperity in this life and God's promise to us, his subsequent chapters work to refocus attention on how the biblical teachings on economics reshape our understanding of true flourishing. He does this in a series of chapters considering God's ordering of the world in relationship to economic life as a series of gifts. First, we are given the gift of acting in the *imago dei*, image of God. Insofar as we work, and especially insofar as we give, we are acting as God acts, which is an intrinsic good. Second, we are given the gift of each other. The demands of economic justice and especially of care for the marginal or the poor help us to see that our proper joy as human beings is found in community with one another. And finally, we are given the gift of the earth, the gift of material flourishing in this life. In this chapter, Barrera deals more thoroughly with the difficulty of integrating the Old and New Testaments on this point, and offers a good discussion of the long-standing Christian question of whether the call to voluntary poverty is compatible with an understanding that some Christian disciples might nonetheless hold material wealth. His concluding chapter draws together his themes under the rubric of seeing economic life as ordered within Divine providence, and thus allows the reader to see the coherence of biblical teachings on economic life, and especially their intrinsic connection to biblical teachings on life well-lived in relationship with God and each other.

Biblical Economic Ethics offers a valuable resource for those interested in reflecting on scriptural teachings on economic life. Barrera relies on the vast literature of modern scriptural exegesis, especially as it pertains to economic life, and he brings together that scholarship in an accessible form. Even if one disagrees with some of his theological choices, the book is brimming with insight. The simple project of carefully exploring the individual books reveals both the continuity of scriptural teaching, and its development in light of God's unfolding revelation. There are some places where Barrera invokes the scholarly apparatus with insufficient explanation. For example, readers are presumed to have some familiarity with the Synoptic problem, and the modern solution which posits a "Q" source. But that does not detract from the clarity of the exposition. Readers looking for a balanced and careful synthesis of modern scholarship on biblical teachings on economics could not do better than to turn to this volume. ■