

**Missional Economics: Biblical Justice and Christian Formation**

Michael Barram. 2018. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans. ISBN 978-0802875075. \$26.00 (paperback).

*Reviewed by Henry Hao, Gordon College*

Understanding what the Bible says about economic practices could be difficult for many modern readers. Unlike Abraham and Sarah, we no longer live in a tribal economy. Unlike Jesus and his disciples, we are not asked to obey the sociopolitical dictates of the Roman Emperor. It is not easy for most Americans to read passages that call them to forgive debts, to share property, or to give all their possessions to the poor. We must therefore ask ourselves, “How should we draw parallels between the Bible stories and our lives today?”

In *Missional Economics*, Barram explores the above question, suggesting that the economic thinking and behavior of contemporary American Christians are largely shaped by their worldly experience, rather than guided by the Bible. For example, most Americans tend to perceive the texts very differently from those who come from other cultural, economic, political, and racial backgrounds. Further, Barram argues that there is always a temptation to ignore or downplay the texts that make us uncomfortable, but to focus on those that are more easily adopted in our lives. Barram guides readers to revisit a range of Bible passages on making economic decisions in daily life.

*Missional Economics* focuses on the implications of economic reasoning that stays faithful to biblical teachings. Barram begins with a chapter calling modern Christians to transform the ways we reason about economic matters such as economic justice, well-being, and community. He further argues for a broader understanding of the meaning of Christian mission, which is commonly known as the evangelistic outreach of the church but should in fact contain all aspects of our life called to God’s purpose. Barram reminds us that we should interpret every biblical text from a missional perspective, that is, from the vantage point of a community called to fulfill God’s purpose and follow His commands.

The structure of the book therefore reflects a missional hermeneutics approach. In the subsequent chapters, Barram reflects on a variety of passages in both Old Testament and New Testament and provides a range of comments concerning economic justice, and lastly provokes

readers to transform their way of thinking and acting. The following section outlines and summarizes three themes Barram uses to describe God's character related to economic thinking and to urge us to change our own economic practices accordingly.

### **God's Special Concern for the Marginalized**

In Chapter 3, Barram highlights Jesus' mission statement in Luke 4:18-19: "to bring good news to the poor ... to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, and to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor." In addition, he discusses the Beatitudes (Luke 6:20-26) to emphasize that while many Christians today strive to be rich, full, happy, and highly regarded, God's blessings rest on those who are poor, hungry, weeping, excluded, and reviled. In Chapters 4 and 7, Barram guides readers through the stories of Exodus and of the biblical prophets to explore God's character as the liberator of the oppressed Israelites: He is attentive to the needs of those who suffer, and does not remain neutral in the face of injustice; He manifests deep concern for economic justice and economic well-being among His people. Barram adjures contemporary Christians to reflect on God's special concern for the marginalized and allow ourselves to be transformed – caring for those in need or in pain, and upholding social and economic justice. Barram suggests that an essential move toward Christ-like economics is to abandon the emphasis on scarcity. Rather than focusing on individual wealth accumulation, the economy should be centered around the welfare of the members of the community. In sum, God's people are directed to tend to the needs of the marginalized groups and ensure that the needy receive their fair share of the community's resources.

### **God's Covenant with God's People**

In Chapters 5 to 8, Barram discusses a range of responsibilities that God sets out for His people, under His covenant with them to protect their economic and spiritual well-being. Barram describes the initial biblical covenant emerging at the beginning of Genesis as a shared promise between the Creator and the creation. The Creator fills the world with good things, providing abundance and livelihood for all living creatures.

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In return, the creation, both human and nonhuman, is charged with using this abundance in accordance with the created order. Because of God's covenant, God remains faithful to the Israelites, acting in history to assure their survival. At the same time, God commands that His people fulfill their covenantal responsibilities by abiding by the legal codes in Exodus, Leviticus, and Deuteronomy, such as protection of widows (p. 90), gleaning-related laws (p. 96), and remission of debt (p. 105). God's people, however, are not always faithful to God's covenant. The prophets therefore are sent to call Israel back to faithfulness, both in spirit and in action. Barram points out that faithfulness to God involves more than proper temple worship; the covenantal responsibilities of God's people encompass all aspects of their individual and communal lives, including the command to take care of the weak and needy. Barram again urges that we transform our economic choices and behavior so as to fulfill our responsibilities.

### **God's Abundant Provision**

In Chapters 9 to 13, Barram emphasizes the importance of trusting in God's abundant provision. Jesus commends the poor widow who gives all she has to live on (Mark 12:41-44; Luke 21:1-4), for she trusts in God's provision. On the other hand, He castigates the rich who focus on the accumulation of material possessions and do not share their wealth with others. Jesus further reveals that those who take care of the poor and needy in this life will receive blessings, but those who are selfish and oblivious shall face eternal judgement (Matthew 25:31-46). Barram therefore urges Christians today to reflect upon God's abundant provisions, and in turn be generous, trusting God to meet the needs of both the giver and receiver. Barram's concluding chapter draws together his three themes under a unifying theme: if we are assured of God's abundant provision to ourselves, we ought to feel secure, able, and compelled to share such provision generously with others, care for the marginalized, and follow economic practices as set out in the Bible. Barram thus shows that biblical teachings are still highly relevant to our economic reasoning today.

*Missional Economics* could be a valuable resource for those interested in learning about godly economic thinking and behavior from scripture. If all of our life is under God's care and judgement, this

includes the full range of economic problems and decisions that confront us. From the themes that Barram discusses emerge several important implications for the transformation of modern Christians.

First, Christians are called to be genuinely concerned about our neighbors, who include not only our family, friends, and literal neighbors, but also strangers from all walks of life. We are responsible for the well-being of the people closest to us — for example, in our household — but we also work toward the full inclusion of all people, some of whom may come from a different economic or social background than ours, into an extended community. Similar to the way we take care of our loved ones, we should make sure that all in the community have access to the resources necessary for life and that all are allowed to fully participate in the life of the community. We are called to not only proclaim the presence of God in our midst, but also live a life that reveals His presence by fighting against poverty, oppression, and economic injustice.

Second, Christians are called to recognize that living a faithful life is a form of worship as well as a mission. The themes discussed by Barram highlight that biblical faithfulness involves more than worship at church and daily prayer. God is also worshipped by faithful daily living, which means following God's command to love all neighbors, both nearby and far away. God judges individuals and nations who are not faithful and who deal unjustly with the poor and powerless. We should consider it a mission to overcome our own greed and insecurity, trust in God's provision, and give generously to the needy.

Third, Christians are called to listen to the views of the poor. God's particular concern for the poor must be mirrored by those who act as God's agents on earth. Jesus challenges the affluent to put on the lenses of the poor and see what life is like to those who have less. People who live comfortably should view life through the eyes of those who struggle. At times, what we think would help the poor may not be what they need. Meanwhile, our personal and institutional lifestyles could sometimes contribute to the poverty, fear, and powerlessness of others. Being open to such confessions and taking appropriate actions remain a challenge to both individual Christians and the institutional church.

Having reviewed the content of this book, I'd like to voice some concern about the title of the book. *Missional Economics* seems to suggest that this is a Christian theological book written about economics, but I believe the subtitle, "Biblical Justice and Christian Formation," could

be a more appropriate title for this. Readers with an economics background might be disappointed as Barram addresses several economic issues from a theological perspective but fails to acknowledge the complexity of these issues from an economic viewpoint. It may be tempting to criticize a capitalist (market) economy without fully understanding how the economy works, but in the eyes of many Christian economists, a capitalist economy, although not perfect, is able to reflect the biblical ideals better than alternative economic systems. This is because capitalism takes into account the sinful human nature that tends toward greed and exploitation. Most market economists would defend capitalism as a system in which bad people can do the least harm, and good people have the freedom to do much good. Capitalism not only works well when individuals are morally upright, but also functions adequately when people are selfish and greedy. Nevertheless, Barram's book still guides us to rethink and reflect on biblical teachings about our economic reasoning and practices. ■