

**The Economics of Honor: Biblical Reflections on Money and Property**

Roelf Haan. 2009. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans. ISBN 978-0-8028-6012-5, \$15.00 (paper).

*Reviewed by Steven McMullen, Calvin College.*

**R**oelf Haan, a Dutch economist and economic development leader, has written a lucid and thoughtful collection of essays about economics, each inspired by biblical passages. Bert Hielema (translator) and Eerdmans did an excellent job with this volume, which has previously appeared both in Dutch and English. It is difficult, in a work of this type, to draw a thesis out of the book, but in this case there are a set of themes that emerge. First, Haan draws heavily from French philosopher and Christian anarchist Jacques Ellul, adopting most conspicuously Ellul's suspicion of impersonal technocratic systems. Second, Haan's experience doing economic development work in Latin America leads him to see the global economic system through a lens of economic exploitation. Finally, Haan sees much good in the relationships that can, when activity is based on biblical norms, develop through economic exchange, and places these relationships at the heart of his alternative economic organization.

First, though, a note about Haan's method: the book is organized as a series of short reflections on specific Bible passages. Each essay draws on the passage to illuminate some element of economic thought or practice. The difficulty of his task lies in the fact that he is not engaged in either biblical scholarship or economics as these two disciplines are defined by their respective guilds. While he draws on the work of biblical scholars and economists, their scholarship does not feature prominently in the book, and he does not engage in debates with other interpretations of scripture or other social scientific theories. Instead, this book must be read as a popular account of an economic philosophy that is grounded in a particular reading of scripture.

The essays, or sermons, are grouped into four thematic parts, which organize the book broadly by the focus of the reflections. Part one contains only one essay in which Haan highlights the story from 2 Sam. 23:13-17 of David's warriors risking their lives to get him a drink of water. David's refusal of the water is seen to be a paradigmatic recognition of the "true cost" of the water. Similarly, we are encouraged to consider costs "before the face of God" (p. 7). This chapter would make an excellent complement to the material in an introductory economics course.

Part two, titled "Economic Development," focuses on systematic

injustice. Haan argues that we can read about biblical figures like Cain and Abel not just as individuals, but also as symbols of economic systems (pp. 19-22). Cain's status as a farmer, city-builder, and murderer place him symbolically in the place of economic hegemon and oppressor. This allows Haan to find lessons about trade, urbanization, and military power in the book of Genesis. The narrative in this section is that, apart from God, people will place idolatrous trust in technology and military power to ensure peace and prosperity. Thus, in response to insecurity people amass political and economic power, and exploit the weak.

The essays in part three, titled "Signposts," sketch out a picture of economic activity as it should be, at the level of individual relationships. The key theme is that our relationships and care for other people are often at odds with economic priorities, and that the relationships should come first. Haan traces this theme throughout the Bible, starting with the command to "honor your father and mother" (chap. 8) and finishing with a series of passages about personal wealth (chap. 14). In each section, he contrasts the priorities given to us in scripture to those dictated by economic incentives. He makes a strong case that economic activity needs to be based on a strong ethical foundation to avoid the abuse of economic power.

Finally, part four, titled "Justice and Expectation," focuses on more systematic issues, and here Ellul's concept of "Technique" as an encapsulation of the modern tendency toward impersonal technocratic solutions becomes a central theme. Haan argues that our global economic system has a tendency toward totalitarian concentration of power, and results in systematic exploitation even if the motives of individual actors are pure (p. 20). This force must be countered by making personal and systematic sacrifice for those in need a central economic priority (chap. 17). Readers familiar with Bob Goudzwaard's (1979) work will see obvious parallels, most notably the thesis that the modern system idolizes technology and progress.

The best part of Haan's work is his willingness to delve into specific scripture passages in depth. This focus allows him to illustrate well the connection between economic problems and individual sin. He convincingly describes the path from idolatry to injustice, with the focus on individual responsibility before God (i.e., chap. 4). Haan does not stop there, however. He also is able to show where the Bible addresses systematic injustice and dysfunction. This ability to hold together the importance of both personal responsibility and systemic order is his true gift to the field of biblical economic ethics. Haan's essay on Isa. 58 (chap. 19) especially stands out in this regard. Haan also does an excellent job

of weaving historical examples into his reflections from around the globe, though twentieth century Latin American examples predominate.

Unfortunately, in some important areas, Haan's ethical vision seems too narrow. In his strong reaction to the abuse of political and economic power, he too quickly attributes the sins of Latin American dictators to an underlying economic system. It is true that combinations of economic and political power have, historically, been extremely dangerous, but this observation does not automatically implicate the discipline of economics the way Haan argues it does. Haan's reading of Milton Friedman, for example (p. 73), strangely misses the motivation behind Friedman's suspicion of government control of the economy. Indeed, libertarians like Friedman share many of Haan's concerns about the abuse of political and economic power. They disagree only on whether a reliance on markets will lead to a concentration of power, as Haan argues, or decentralized power, as Friedman (1982) famously argued. This narrow and negative view of economic ethics also shows up in Haan's treatment of poverty and wealth. Readers will search in vain for a moral distinction between wealth gained through abuse of government power and wealth gained through entrepreneurial activity. Instead, Haan seems to agree with the dependency theorists that all wealth is necessarily implicated in oppression (see chaps. 7 and 21).

This book could be a very helpful resource for pastors and theologians studying scripture, since the author is able to discuss political and economic issues with an almost complete absence of technical jargon. The format of the book would also make it useful in a discussion group or as materials for a class, since the book consists of self-contained short essays. There is a depth of reflection in each passage that would give plenty of material for a small group or class reflection. In any of these cases, the book would be best paired with other scholarly treatments of the subject matter, either from biblical scholars or social scientists, to give a broader perspective on the author's interpretations of scripture and economic philosophy. Professional economists will find very little material in this book that they recognize methodologically as economics, but may, nonetheless, find much of value in the book as a guide for reading scripture.

### **References**

**Friedman, M.** (1982). *Capitalism and freedom* (2nd ed.). Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

**Goudzwaard, B.** (1979). *Capitalism and progress: A diagnosis of western society*. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans. ■