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How Should Christian Economists Use the Bible? A Study in Hermeneutics
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I. THE NORMATIVE CHARACTER OF THE ECONOMIC MATERIALS

A very intelligent student heard me lecture on Deuteronomy 24. This chapter includes several topics pertinent to economics, including not taking a millstone in pledge, not going into the home to take the pledge of a poor person, not oppressing hired servants, resident aliens, and widows, and not harvesting over again a reaped field. After the lecture, the student looked over notes he had made several months previously upon reading the chapter. He had written:

1 vv. 1-4 dealing with divorce
2 v. 5 “honeymoon”
3 v. 8 leprosy
4 v. 10 making a loan
5 v. 16 “no substitution”

In his words, he had set aside as insignificant the rest of the chapter.

There may be several reasons why economic materials of the Bible are not noted or applied. We may miss them because we do not expect the Scriptures to deal with such matters. We may feel that the portion of the Bible in which they are found is not applicable to the Christian, or we may sense that they are bound to a cultural situation too distant from ours to provide helpful guidance. In this essay my concern is to provide some suggestions on how to use the Bible correctly and helpfully for normative guidance of contemporary economic thought. My own understanding of the content of that contribution will be given only for illustration. 1

Does the Bible have an economic message? That there is an abundance of material in the Bible that has some relationship to economics becomes obvious upon reflection. For example 27 percent of the teaching material in Luke 3-22 refers to possessions or the poor. 2 In the Lord’s Prayer we petition for daily bread. Elsewhere we hear God’s promise that God “will bless your bread and your water...and take sickness away...” (Exod. 23.25, RSV), and we are mindful of the stipulations in the Mosaic law for care of the poor. But are these matters what the Bible really is about?

A seriousness about economics fits the historical dimension of Scripture. In Greek philosophy, history is a shadow which helps one to arrive at reality, which is behind the scenes. In the Bible what is significant, including liberation, occurs within the political and economic order. Its revelation is not based on observations of the universe and oriented to the cosmos or nature. It is not psychologically directed involving analyses of dimensions of the soul. Philo, a Jewish contemporary to Jesus and Paul trained in Greek philosophy, had this understanding and accordingly allegorized the historical materials of the Scriptures. Rather the primary orientation is historical, dealing with the fate and liberation of groups in history.

The great events of our salvation which are recorded in the Bible thus form a history of salvation. This salvation transcends history but is not in discontinuity with it and the sphere of economics. The human race was created to live in the garden and to till it. The fall of the human race affected the earth and humankind’s working relationship with it. But God did not give up humanity and the rest of creation. God called out a people who prepared for Christ and received the Law, which disclosed God’s desired

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1 For an essay by me which gives a content approach to the Bible and economics, cf. “The Contribution of the Bible to Economic Thought,” Transformation 4,3-4 (June/Sept-Oct/Dec, 1987), 25-34. It will provide expansion and further documentation for some of the illustrative points in this essay.

ways for human conduct. God entered history in a new way working to overcome the fall and its evil to provide a new society at the end of history. This reassertion of God’s sovereignty is called the Kingdom, or Reign, of God. The creation will be redeemed along with the people of God, who through Christ are delivered from sin and death, so that finally all things will be reconciled to God (Col. 1:20; Eph. 1:10, 22). Within this history of creation, fall, and restoration of creation, are placed the economic materials of the Bible, representing an aspect of God’s restorative concerns. The economic concerns of Scripture must be Christocentric, but they are no less economic.

Not all Christians agree with this description. The social materials of the Bible for some become mostly an arena for a salvation which relates to the social dimension only with difficulty, if at all.

But this approach does not adequately explain the continual concern with the social and material world throughout the Bible, including the prophetic promise of social and economic justice, and its partial fulfillment in the ministry of Jesus.

Some Christians would concede the genuine economic concerns of the Old Testament but would argue that with the New Testament there is a turning of the tables. There is a reversal so that salvation once political and external is now individual and internalized.

This position is correct that the individual level is heightened in the New Testament, including the internal dimensions of redemption; but it misses the continuing social relationships of the redeemed person and the connections of those relationships to salvation. This position illustrates the danger of an over-individualization of the ethic of the New Testament that occurs when the continuity with the Old Testament is lost.

The Gospel writers, however, take pains to show the connection of Jesus to the Old Testament, including its economic concerns. Luke introduces his Gospel with the faithful, expectant remnant, who, as expressed in the Magnificat of Mary, used the language and concepts of the Old Testament to express the ancient hopes for one whose delivering actions included feeding the poor and sending the rich away empty (Luke 1:53). Luke introduces Jesus’ teaching with his identifying himself with the prophetic figure of Isaiah 61 who had a ministry of proclaiming release to the oppressed. Matthew similarly inaugurates Jesus’ earthly ministry with the Beatitudes in which the blessings of the Reign of God are placed upon groups very similar to those of Luke 1 and 2 and 4.18-19. All the Gospels show John the Baptist as the one who preaches for Jesus. John, the greatest of the prophets (Matt. 11:7-11 par), providing a link with the Old Testament, calls for repentance, the ending of exploitation, and sharing of goods (Matt. 3.2 par; Matt. 3.7-10 par; Luke 3.10-14).

Other links with the economic message of the Old Testament are provided by the Gospel writers. For example, in the story of the beggar, Lazarus, the rich man is told that his brothers do not need someone to rise from the dead to warn them about the proper obligations to the poor. They have Moses and the prophets, which is sufficient (Luke 16.29-31). Luke places before this parable Jesus’ statement that heaven and earth can pass away more easily than one “dot” from the Law (v. 17). The Old Testament is adequate and normative in its instructions on property relationships.

The Epistle of James provides further evidence of the continuity in the New Testament of the economic concerns of the Old Testament. Luke Johnson shows that James, when quoting the “royal” command of love (James 2.8) from Leviticus 19.18, likewise uses it in the context of critiquing social partiality (cf. James 2.1, 9; Lev. 19.15). In addition, several of the ethical injunctions in James show a further reflection upon Leviticus 19.12-18. For example, the condemnation of holding back the wages in James 5.4 reflects Leviticus 19.13, “The wages of the hired servant shall not remain with you all night until morning.” The author of James regards such injunctions from Leviticus 19 as concrete demonstrations of the royal law of love.3

The New Testament provides more than continuity. As was mentioned above, the response of the individual is greatly enhanced without denying concern for his or her social involvement. There is a heightened urgency for response to God and mission in light of the Reign of God, which is about to break into history with blessing and judgment. A more radical expectation for the lifestyle of the believer occurs with Jesus’ hard sayings, including the renouncing of possessions. But at the same time there is empowerment to carry out God’s demands through the atonement of Christ and the coming of the Holy Spirit. Love clearly takes the central position in the ethic, heightening gracious response to every person.

The major shift in the content of the social ethic in moving from the Old Testament to the New Testa-

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ment is the position of social status rather than class as the central concern. Social inclusion is the distinctive contribution of New Testament ethics. It is represented particularly by Jesus' teaching of universal love for those who belonged to the various groupings of his social world and by the Epistles' challenge to the status distinctions of the surrounding culture in forming the new Christian communities. Concern for economic deprivation, property relations, and economic power continues in the New Testament, while its social inclusion allows the Old Testament's care for the indigent among the people of God to be universalized.

What I have shown so far is how the normative economic materials of the Bible are connected to God's work of salvation. They are not extraneous. The economic content of the message of the Old Testament is continued in the New Testament although it occupies a less central position.

There is an economic message in Scripture, but can it be appropriated in the contemporary world?

II. THE PROBLEM OF CULTURAL SPECIFICITY

The validity of Old Testament economic injunctions.

The Mosaic law provides the most helpful concreteness for the contemporary Christian economist, but is it still of normative significance? The Mosaic law contains the most explicit and detailed economic stipulations in Scripture, including welfare provisions, and regulation of credit, profit, and productive property. Such policies applied to the entire society. The Law was designed for a time when the people were in charge of their own institutions, a situation closer to ours today than is that of the New Testament. But the applicability of the Old Testament law has frequently been a matter of dispute among Christians. What is the place of the Law for those who are "not under law but under grace"? Are the provisions of the Mosaic covenant or dispensation applicable to us who are in a new covenant, or dispensation, centered in Christ? Do the regulations of Israel apply to the church and do provisions in the unique theocracy of Israel have relevance among the nations, including ours, who lack the worship of God at their center? Some Christians have answered these questions in the negative. For many the laws of the old covenant are set aside unless they are specifically taken up in the new covenant. We must address these concerns. The question now is not whether the New Testament shares the Old Testament interest in economics but whether the norms of the Old Testament period are authoritative in the Christian era.

Almost every Christian recognizes some part of the Old Testament as no longer binding. Certainly, the sacrificial system is not; and most Christians do not recognize the food laws, the feast days, and aspects of the civil law, such as stoning rebellious children (Deut. 21.18-21). Paul in Galatians speaks about the Law as having had a function for definite period of time until the coming of Christ. It kept the people under restraint until the day of freedom. With the Gospel, there is a new law of Christ, a law of love which fulfills the Law (Gal. 4.21, 24-26, 31; 5.1, 13f.; 6.2).

On the other hand, however, a clear normative statement is made in 2 Timothy 3.16: "Every Scriptural passage is inspired by God and useful [or profitable] for" among other things "instruction in righteousness" so that we "may be prepared [or equipped] for every good deed." Righteousness (dikaiosynē) in the Pastoral Epistles is paired with godliness (eusebeia) (1 Tim. 6.11) and thus has the meaning of the performance of social duties in general, which would include its more narrow meaning of justice (as assigning to each person his or her due). The "Scriptures" indicated in this passage are the Old Testament, the Scriptures of the early church. The Law still provides norms for social conduct. Is there a way in which this perspective can be reconciled with that of Paul in Galatians?

In Romans Paul also speaks of not being "under law but under grace" (6.4). Paul’s concern there is not the Law as a source of moral authority, which is our concern, but as a source of justification, the grounds for being a member of God’s community. In Galatians he faced the problem that the Galatians were concerned about receiving the physical markings of Judaism, such as circumcision, as necessary for salvation (3.24f.; 5.3-5). Paul was not concerned with circumcision in itself—he was willing to be to the circumcised as circumcised (1 Cor. 9.20). His concern was with the grounds of salvation. The phrase he uses in his discussion of circumcision in 5.3-5, "justified by the Law" (v. 4), appears to be what "under the Law" meant. He uses "justified by the Law" three other times in Galatians (2.16, 21; 3.5). Paul is attacking a form of piety, a self-justification, the humanly distorted law of works (cf. Rom. 3.27). He is not attacking the revelatory Law itself. It is not appropriate to subsume the Old Testament under

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law when law is understood as a form of piety contrasted to one of grace.  

The concept of fulfillment in the law of Christ, or the law of love, does not exclude the continuance of the ethical validity of the Law. Fulfillment means to bring something to fullness in all of its significance. Jesus taught according to Matthew that the revealed Law is interpreted by the canon of love (Matt. 22.40). In this perspective there even can be an intensification of the moral demands of the Law, as in the antitheses of the Sermon on the Mount (Matt. 5.21-48). Some of the Law is no longer valid, but only because the function of those parts have been more adequately met in the sacrifice of Christ and because the basis of the people of God has been separated from the nationalistic base. But the interpersonal and intersocial needs behind other aspects of the Law, including its economic provisions, continue.

The Old Testament itself provides a universal basis for its law. The fundamental grounds of the Law’s caring and protecting provisions lie in the character of God. The injunction to return by evening a garment taken in pledge, for example, has its sanction in the simple statement by God, “For I am compassionate” (Exod. 22.26f.). A reason for loving the resident alien is that Yahweh “executes justice for the fatherless and the widow and loves the sojourner” (Deut. 10.18f.).

The bases of these laws thus is not in the particular covenant or dispensation arranged through Moses but in God’s character. The basic meaning is universal as God is universal. In the Psalms, God’s justice is related to God being the sovereign of the universe through creation (e.g. Ps. 99.1-4; cf. Jer. 9.11; 10.6-12). These laws do not function primarily in the context of personal salvation, symbolizing and preparing for the coming of Christ and consigning all to sin. Rather, their meaning first of all is to be found in God’s love for all the needy. They are connected at that fundamental level to redemption in God’s concern to overcome all the evil and suffering in creation.

Israel had a sense of being a servant and light to the nations. This mission was founded in God’s covenant with Abraham that he would be a source of blessing to the nations. The latter part of Isaiah particularly picks up this perspective. In the future the Law and God’s justice will go forth as a light to the peoples (Isa. 51.4). As a potential gift and blessing and comfort to the nations, Israel’s law has universal significance far beyond the borders of Palestine and the closing of the pre-Christian era.

The authority of the concrete economic injunctions. Establishing the continuing validity of the Old Testament and the Mosaic law does not solve the further question of its applicability. How should the Scriptures be used authoritatively for contemporary economic concerns? What in the Bible is authoritative for us? What is the nature of Scripture?

Many contemporary writers on the relationship of the Bible to ethics stress how the biblical revelation is distorted when it is interpreted as an ethical code or a book of systematic ethics. So one writer, speaking of the New Testament, states that in vain do we search for “precise norms of, or even directions, for a social ethic.” Another writer argues that our approach should not be to find parallels between our situation and that of the biblical writers in order that the Bible might speak to us. Behind such objections lies a view that the nature of biblical authority does not lie in giving precise ethical maxims.

Some writers instead would see that the Bible is a message of the great acts of God. Our understanding of life which is being tuned by the Bible will be one which draws upon these mighty events of historical salvation or upon the basic theological affirmations. The exodus from Egypt or the resurrection of Christ from death becomes a protest against human affliction; in response one asks how the biblical horizon of freedom can be mediated to the oppression of the present. The biblical affirmation then provides a basic motivation and direction for the study and performance of economics.

The concept of the Reign of God is an example of a basic theological affirmation, rather than a specific mighty act of God (although it involves such). It is expressed in many ways in many different portions of the Scriptures. For some Christians the Reign of God provides a basic motivation for social ethics in that as God in Christ has made all things new so we are required to share in this transformation of the world. In a manner similar to our response to the exodus or the resurrection, we can no longer accept the contrary perpetuation of injustice. We are to seek to develop political and social plans that are analogies.


of the Kingdom, giving coherence and effectiveness to action in various fields, including economics.9

Another theological theme is the concept of power in the New Testament. The power of God transforms human weakness into self-respect. In response we are sensitive to the powerlessness and alienation of many in our society, and we seek consistent uses of power which contribute to self-respect through political and economic means.10 Again one seeks to express in social life meaning which is analogous to the basic acts and affirmations of the Bible. Other pertinent theological themes frequently applied to economics are creation, with implications for the goodness of material world and the concept of stewardship, and humanity as the image of God, with applications for the dignity of the person and the human being as a rational, productive, and responsible actor.

Other Christians would see the authority of the Bible also contained in its explicit moral teachings while avoiding building directly on the concrete injunctions. The ethical authority of the Bible then would lie in ethical themes which are pervasive and which progressively intensify within the Bible. The Scriptures themselves point to basic norms which re-capitulate the meaning of other passages. We are reminded in Jesus’ teaching of the double commandment of love, upon which “the whole Law and the Prophets hangs” (Matt. 22.40). One then would seek to understand the biblical meaning of love and investigate how it relates to aspects of the economic enterprise. Even though from this perspective of Matthew and other biblical writers love sums up the meaning of the rest of Scripture, there are additional ethical themes in the Bible which indicate the character that an action must have to be an expression of love. One such norm is justice, which Jesus described along with mercy and faith as the weightier aspect of the Law (Matt. 23.23). The pertinence of justice for economics is immense.

Several of these concepts which we have mentioned pertain to basic elements which belong to any social ethic. A social ethic must have conceptions of justice, human nature, history, power, and the relationship of the individual to society. A Christian in developing his or her socio-economic world and life view must draw upon the Bible as it touches upon such elements.

But other Christians understand the concrete teachings, commandments, and examples in the Bible as themselves having an authority for the present day. The Bible has a continuing, unique role in the history of salvation even though each part was originally written for very specific situations of the people of God. The whole canon was revealed, written, and preserved for generations throughout history as a record of God’s provision of salvation of all people and as the authoritative guide for their conduct. Paul spoke of particular instances, admonitions, and warnings of the Old Testament people of God: “They were written for our instruction” (1 Cor. 10.11). We can say the same. This affirmation should not mean a denial of the differences in our situation from that of the original reception of the biblical passages, nor should it deny the incompleteness of these commandments for the whole of ethical guidance. It means that since God’s revelation does come in concrete forms, every passage and every commandment of Scripture should be examined for whatever meaning that they might contain which would transcend the original situation and relate to the situation of the reader of another place and time.

A particular understanding of the canon is involved. The text itself is the revelation of God. The text is not only a divinely provided context for encountering the revelation behind the text in the community which produced it (as in some feminist hermeneutics) or for the revelation to occur as the Spirit speaks from the text to the modern reader (a Barthian approach).

Recognition of the authority of God in the particular teachings and stories of Scripture must be combined with an acknowledgement of the other ways in which the Bible is authoritative. These different ways in which the Bible is recognized as being authoritative are not exclusive although they are often treated that way. The authority of God in the concrete injunction must be interpreted with attention to God’s authority in mighty acts, in the theological affirmations, and in the prevailing ethical principles. And the specific teachings and propositions are needed to give concrete interpretation of the broad and general truths and actions.

Interpretative framework for the concrete economic materials.

If the concrete commandments are interpreted apart from consideration of the implications of the great acts of God recorded in Scripture and its basic theological affirmations, our ethical response is in danger of being theologically vacuous and cut off from the core of Christian life and commitment. The Bible does not teach independent ethical universals.
God is the universal, and God’s acts supply means and power for the ethics.

The concrete ethical injunctions also must be interpreted with reference to the ethical themes of Scripture. One of them, crucial for the economic understanding of the Bible, is the ethical meaning of the land. Elie Munk, a French Jewish Old Testament scholar, stated that “the point of departure of the system of social economy of Judaism is the equal distribution of the land among all its inhabitants.” This distribution is an assumption and a hope of the Law and prophets. Before the people entered the promised land to carry out the Mosaic stipulations, the provision was made for the division of the land (Num. 26). This distribution was a recorded memory influencing the Law and its application. For example, the warning against removing a neighbor’s landmarks is given with the reminder that the land is one which has been portioned out by Yahweh (Deut. 19.14). With the breakdown of the system which God had instituted comes the prophetic promise that in the future there will be a new distribution of the land which then will include the resident alien (Ezek. 47.13f, 21-23).

The standard by which the land was distributed was equality (Num. 26.54; Ezek. 47.14), as difficult and rough as such division must be within rain-dependent agriculture and a land as variegated as Palestine. The productive culture which resulted was the egalitarian peasant society that occurs when inherited property (nāḥala), patrimony in property in the soil, accompanies membership in the covenant community.

Various provisions of the Law, and many of the warnings and hopes of the prophets—and this is the point of this extended example—cannot be understood without the framework of this legal institution, and this memory, among the people. Institutions which reflect the intention of this provision for all the extended families include the Jubilee, the law of levirate, the access of the temporarily landless people to the land and its harvest, and other welfare provisions for the poor. Even the regulation of the credit system, particularly the proscription upon interest, must be related to the land. (Note the proximity of Leviticus 25.36 to the discussion of the Jubilee in 25. 8-34.) The abuse of this system had as its consequence (and, evidence from villages in contemporary Bangladesh would indicate, as its goal) the loss of (foreclosed) land.

Land does not have constant economic and social meaning across cultures. To interpret the theme of land in the Scriptures and then to understand its universal normative significance, one first must inquire into the function of land in the Palestinian culture. In that culture land was the crucial form of productive power, the means of subsistence or of production. Land will not have the same meaning in a fishing culture. Instead, one must identify the prevalent form of productive property in the particular culture and relate to it the norms expressed with the land in the Bible. To apply the biblical concern for the land to an industrial society, one would identify the factory as the prevalent form of productive power and examine the factors in the ownership and control of the factories. The egalitarian biblical principles cross-culturally would raise concerns, as were raised by the prophets, against economic developments contributing to elite ownership or control of the productive property, no matter whether that elite is bourgeois, proletarian, aristocratic, governmental, or party.

The basic economic unit also will vary from culture to culture. In the biblical societies it was the extended family (the bet-ay, “the house of the father”). Particular policies, laws, and customs will be evaluated as to their impact on inclusion of the basic economic units in the ownership and control of the productive power.

The pervasive ethical themes are not the only way the Scriptures provide an interpretative framework for the concrete injunctions. Some commands themselves are general in their demands. They may, like the commandments of justice, refer the hearer or reader to pervasive themes of God’s revelation. They may indicate a general purpose which other injunctions carry out in more detail.

Such a general appeal in Leviticus 25 follows the instituting of the Year of Jubilee. A close rendering of the Hebrew of v. 35 would read, “If your brother becomes poor and his power slips in relationship to you, you shall make him strong.” The purpose of this action is stated at the end of the verse and in the following injunction on interest: “that he may live with you,” that he may “live beside you” (vv. 35b, 36). The references to “you” indicate the community context. The distress of poverty is the loss of power so as not to be able to continue even minimal participation in the social and economic community. In this

11 Elie Munk, La justice sociale en Israël (Boudry, Neuchâtel [Switzerland]: Bacconnière, Israël et le monde 3, 1948), 75.


13 Hazag, “to be strong” in the Hiphil, causative, conjugation.
chapter the loss of land (vv. 13-17, 25-28) and slavery (vv. 39-55) represent the extreme results of such power diminutions. The responsibility of the community is to restore the power needed to regain that participation. Opportunity for productive struggle is reestablished.

The general admonition of v. 35b is followed by concrete applications. The first is the prohibition of interest on loans to the distressed fellow member of the community (v. 36). Credit exploitation is one of the processes which tear people down. The second application is the instruction against selling them food at profit. The general admonition helps us to understand and apply these particular injunctions. We are not to profit from furnishing the basic needs of the impoverished because this is contrary to the principle of restoring them to power. Similarly, the institution of slavery is modified to a form of hired service (vv. 39-46).

The general statement of Leviticus 25.35, sensitive to the loss by the poor of power in the community, sees the obligation of the community to respond by restoring power to the poor. It is associated with the preceding great institution of empowerment, the restoration to productive power in the Year of Jubilee, which ties the people to the source of productive power in that culture—the land.

The principle of Leviticus 25.35 reflects a basic concern and normative responsibility that may alert us to similar concerns present elsewhere in the Law. For example, in Deuteronomy 24.6 not taking in pledge a mill or a millstone is singled out. The selective, paradigmatic character of the Law, to which we will soon be turning, is striking here. Why a millstone? What aspect of the society does it represent? Like the land, the mill and the millstone are means of production. When they are gone, the person has lost the instruments of developing the resources of the earth to provide for his or her social unit. Economically, their “hand is wavering” in relationship to the village. They are cut off from the economic community. Deuteronomy 24.6 appropriately comments: it would be “taking a life in pledge” (RSV).

Deuteronomy 24 goes on to describe credit and employment treatment of these people clinging to the edge of community. One does not enter their homes to collect property pledged to secure a loan (v. 10f.). The dignity of the poor is to be preserved. Similarly, a pledge cannot be taken if it will cause suffering to the debtor; and wages, even those of the resident alien, must be paid immediately (vv. 12-15, cf. 17). As in Leviticus 25, economic arrangements, even if “freely” engaged in by both parties, are illegitimate if they contribute to tearing down one of the parties.

The chapter ends with the institution of limiting the harvest of one’s field or vineyard so that sustenance may be left for the resident alien, the fatherless, and the widow (vv. 19-22). What these groups have in common is the loss of power because of their formal separation from the land. The resident alien was not included in the patrimony, and the fatherless and the widow were cut off from the male lines of land inheritance and control. This provision recognizes their powerless situation and gives them a degree of empowerment. They too had rights in the land to produce from it, and to be fed; and these rights limited the control of others of their own land and the profit from it.

The injunction to strengthen the poor so that they can gain self-sufficiency within the community is a standard by which to weigh social and economic policy in other cultures. In other cultures what might need to be proscribed or prescribed for this purpose will often be very different in its specific nature. Identifying the solution requires combining biblically based normative concerns with careful economic and sociological analysis.

Principles within the injunctions.
In addition to general and summary commands, many very specific commandments have within themselves a generalizing character. This characteristic is very obvious in the teaching of Jesus. The command to “turn the other cheek” (Matt. 5.39 par.) is specific in its wording yet that particular action is far from being intended as the only obligatory way to deal with the ethical question of how to respond to public insults. These specific commandments are paradigmatic. They point to a range of activity much broader than what is stated. They model behavior which the hearer, or reader, is expected to identify and to apply to similar areas of life. John the Baptist’s call for sharing in face of the arrival of the Reign of God cannot be limited to the tunic or to food (Luke 3.11), but one must recognize the concern for sharing excess which relates to any basic need of the poor. Identification of other applications requires the hearer at some level of thought to define a principle of conduct which unites the specific commandment to other specific, yet different applications. The modern reader similarly must identify the principle and determine appropriate applications in her or his social situation.
The Hebrew Law itself, like other Ancient Near Eastern laws, is paradigmatic. As the law for the whole society, with its limited number of regulations (about 600), it can only function in an exemplary way. It set standards to which those who applied the law, such as the judges or elders in the gate, referred in deciding different specific cases which came before them. Interest on loans to the impoverished or selling food to them at profit are only two ways of exploiting the needy. The command to leave some of the harvest for the indigent does not mention figs or olives, and among the needy folk there is no mention of the crippled and the retarded (Lev. 19.9-14). The commandments are not handled correctly if one seeks to follow only the letter of the law or if one does not search diligently to apply the principle to all relevant forms of conduct in one's own situation.

One accordingly has to be careful about arguing from silences in the Law. A failure to respond to the paradigmatic character of the Law is a weakness in the objection which some from a contemporary group of Christians would make to applying the economic materials to contemporary law and public policy. The "Theonomist" school holds that society should be governed by the "law of God," which is the Mosaic law. While they accordingly would expect a modern court to apply Pentateuchal punishments for cursing of parents or homosexual practice, in the economic sphere they surprisingly support laissez-faire policies. One defence of this seeming inconsistency is the posing of a hermeneutical criterion that where the Law does not provide sanctions for its injunctions or apparatus for enforcement, it is not part of the civil law of Israel and is not to be part of the civil law of today. Thus the Jubilee restoration of property or the prohibition of usury are to be strictly voluntary arrangements (moral but not legal).

This criterion is not valid because it misses the paradigmatic and partial nature of the Law. One cannot argue from such silences. It also is not consistent exegetically. The storehouses in the village appear to be a civil implementation of the third year tithe for the poor (Lev. 14.28), land redistribution was carried out by a legal assembly of the people (Mic. 2.5), and Nehemiah interpreted as civil law the prohibition on interest and the tithes for Levites despite the lack of sanctions within the Mosaic provisions (Neh. 5.7; 11.23; 12.44-47; 13.10-14).

Diversity in the Bible.
Another difficulty in responding to the authority of concrete injunctions in Scripture is the variety and diversity in the Bible. The Bible is not a book of systematic ethics (or theology). It is the Word of God addressed initially to many different situations and crises of the people of God. No human editor prepared a final copy reconciling the differences and ambiguities. We are aware of the conflict between statements that there is neither male nor female in Christ Jesus (Gal. 3.28) and the statements that women are to be silent in the churches and not to exert authority over men (1 Cor. 14.34; 1 Tim. 2.12). Similarly, there is neither slave nor free in Christ Jesus, yet Scripture provides regulations within slavery.

There are similar conflicts regarding wealth and property. Jesus makes a condition of discipleship the selling or renouncing of possessions (Luke 12.33; 14.33). In Pauline and wisdom literature the norm for property is sufficiency (1 Tim. 6.8; Prov. 30.8f.; Eccles. 3.12f.; 9.7-9). Great persons in the Bible, such as Abraham and Job, had wealth, and wealthy people were present in the early church (1 Tim. 6.17-19). How does one deal with such conflicting values in the Bible?

If one views the whole canon as itself the revelation of God, then one must reflect upon the full biblical data on a particular issue. All materials must be considered although there finally may be consistent reasons why some material is less pertinent to the concluding position. If we regard the Bible as authoritative, we cannot set it aside in despair on a topic on which there is variety, ambiguity, or conflict. It is hard to think of any theological or ethical topic on which there is not some material which is difficult, at least initially, to assimilate.

We must first do careful exegetical work, understanding each passage in its own context and in terms of its own vocabulary. Some of the tension may then be relieved. Abraham and Job were persons of great wealth, but they also were persons of great responsibilities. Job, as well as Abraham, may well have had a position of rule within his own cultural context. Certainly, both are presented as those who gave of their wealth unselfishly to the needy around them. Their wealth is not presented as an expression of justice, as a norm of distribution.

The normative significance of some biblical references to wealth is more dubious than others. The meaning of narrative material is hard to assess. Is it

The wealth of some biblical personages may not be more normative than is their concubines or their multiple wives. The narrative references do not stand with the same weight as more explicitly principal injunctions on the matter.

Jesus' position may not be that different from the broader biblical teaching on sufficiency. His most explicit and unqualified injunction, "Sell your possessions" (Luke 12:33), comes in the context of condemning excess (vv. 15-21); and he uses possessions interchangeably with treasures (on earth) (v. 33f.). My conclusion is that by possessions Jesus meant that which is beyond one's present needs. His standard was one of sufficiency stated in its sharpest form.

But even if one accepts the validity of these interpretative suggestions, some tension must be acknowledged as remaining between the call to sell the second coat in repentance before the imminent Reign of God and the favorable references to the wealthy among the people of God.

The new and the old in biblical ethics.
At this point the value and need is seen of relating the concrete injunctions and examples to the mighty acts of God and the basic theological affirmations of Scripture. From the standpoint of eschatology the attitude toward wealth in Scripture becomes more negative as there is a shift in theology from this life to the end of history.

But the shift in perspective involves more than theology. With Jesus comes the breaking into history of the Reign of God. A new form of social existence is arriving. The prophets had anticipated it in their promise of a new day in which all would have the peace and security of having regained possession of productive property (e.g. Mic. 2.4-5; 4.4). The values of Jesus' teaching are those of this new Reign. They stand in sharp critique of the practices of the world, of the present society as it is organized in hostility to God. Two ages are in conflict: the old which is passing away and the new which is arriving. With the new age comes the radical challenge to human conduct, including the removal of discrimination by sex and of slavery, the ending of exploitation, and the sharing of material goods and the renunciation of material excess.

Some Christians do not see the Kingdom as imposing upon present Christian conduct. In the classical Dispensational approach, the Kingdom as revealed in the early teachings of Jesus was intended for the Jewish nation. When it rejected Jesus' offer, the Kingdom was postponed until the Millennium.

It is true that the Reign of God has arrived only partially and that this partial fulfillment will be characteristic of history until the second coming of Christ. Yet the tension of the new and old remains and is pronounced in Paul. Even though the full promise of the Reign of God is not upon us, the revelation of its requirements do manifest God's intentions for life. The eschatological vision presents a continuing critique of all that falls short of it.

We have a normative glimpse of a perfect society; yet we have ongoing responsibilities in a world in the midst of which Christ has left us (John 17.18)—a society which is unable to live on that renewed basis. From the perspective of this dual challenge, we can discern two types of ethical teaching in the Bible. The first calls forth radically new social relationships. The second indicates the responsible conduct that God requires in the context of the continuing previous relationships. Behavior in areas not yet transformed by the higher demand is still controlled by Scriptural teachings. A tension between the two remains unresolved within the Bible.

Some significant aspects of the diversity within biblical ethics can be understood in this light. There is a demand for a new form of sharing and institutions which reflect it. Yet the rich and the poor remain, and instructions are given for responsible relationships between them. This realism occurs in the Old Testament as well as the New. For example, in Deuteronomy 15 God states that there will be no poor in the community if they obey God for God will abundantly provide (v. 4f.); yet the passage then states that the poor will never cease in the land (v. 11), and instructions are made for their care (vv. 7-11).

The new and higher standards of the new age are not separate from God's creation and its institutions, nor are they adverse to it. One traditional mode of Christian thinking in ethics distinguished abruptly between the orders of creation, which provided the norms for the social, economic, and political world, and the order of salvation. The latter pertained to the means of our eternal destiny. The saving work of Jesus and his teachings pertained to the order of salvation, the church, and perhaps the personal life of the believer; they did not apply to the social world in which the believer lived.

But the ethic of the Reign of God is an ethic of the restoration of God's purposes for the creation. It is not isolated from creation. The believer is renewed in the image of his or her Creator (Col. 3:9-11), and the basic social relationships are also restored. Jesus' appeal to the time of creation—"from the beginning it was not so"—presents the higher standards of his new society. He ties the standard to the creative order and applies it to the ongoing community.

While the ethic of the old age continues, it does not do so without being challenged and refined. One recognizes the need for concessions in on-going conditions of society (cf. Paul's language of concession to sinfulness in 1 Corinthians 7:6, 9b), but one also is alert to new ways of transforming them by the higher standards of the righteousness of the Kingdom. Property patterns are respected, the rich are admitted into Christian fellowship, but within a context of support of the poor through policies of redistribution and the encouragement of personal lifestyles which move toward sufficiency.

To operate in a manner which is faithful to Scripture and its diversity, both aspects of biblical ethics must operate in relationship. The economist at times views the Christian social ethic as utopian, an idealist, and irrelevant. There is an utopian aspect of Christian ethics that we have discussed. But its function is not to bring into history the perfect society or to be kept aloof from all that falls short. A deep sense of the depths and permanence of human sin also is an essential part of the Christian social ethic. Rather the ideal serves as a continual reminder of the imperfection of all human efforts. It shows that every social and economic situation contains possibilities of greater manifestations of love and justice. It forces us to be aware of elements of personal selfishness and group self-interest that enter subtly into our thoughts and policies. The economist concentrates on what is feasible and as a Christian needs to be made aware of a broad horizon of what is intended for humanity and indeed of what is possible by God's grace.

The concrete injunctions and historical examples of the economic materials of the Bible do have an important role, we have argued, in giving expression to more general principles. They may reveal the dynamic movement of God in history restoring God's creation from the fall. Or they may be a form of controlling the continuing imperfect human society within institutions not yet changed by God's redemp-

tive work. Much of these concrete materials relate to economic life.

**Appropriate and inappropriate questions for the biblical text.**

The concrete materials have normative significance for us. They reflect a God of history who works through our social existence, is concerned about it, and has revealed ways in which God's creatures are to relate with each other. Scripture is very concrete because of God's care for humanity in its particular material and social existence. But the Bible's very involvement with the historical moment makes the injunctions of Scripture dated for those who are struggling to be faithful in situations far removed in time.

Yet the Bible deals with perennial human experiences. Despite great differences between societies in the form of social organization, forms of production and distribution, customs, and interpretations of life, there are many basic constants. God is unchangeable and human nature is basially unchanging. Basic patterns of life in community thus also exist across cultures. Conflict over power and the oppression by the strong of the weak are constant human experiences.

As the Scriptures address such universal conditions, one can recognize the abiding word of God.

In studying a particular passage which has normative economic significance, one must ask how the injunction or example relates to enduring social experience. One must comprehend how the concrete particulars functioned in that biblical community. Anthropological ability to discern how different practices function in terms of the whole community and to recognize functional similarities and differences across cultures is very helpful. The failures in interpretation labeled as literalism come not from taking seriously the concreteness of the text but often from lacking anthropological sensitivity in detecting how to translate legitimately the meaning of a practice from one cultural system to another. Those who would simply impose a biblical civil penalty, such as stoning children who blaspheme their parents or capital punishment for practitioners of homosexual intercourse, fail to see that a penal code as a part of a particular cultural system cannot be simply transposed onto a different system without acquiring a new meaning different from the biblical one to which one has unsuccessfully attempted to be faithful.

Another form of anthropological insensitivity to the concreteness of Scripture is to force it to answer questions brought to the text which are culturally foreign to it. The apologies which locate capitalism or

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socialism in the Bible make this mistake. A complex modern economic arrangement and ideological mindset is found in a vastly different agrarian and tribal culture. Included is a naivete regarding the diversity of forms of property arrangements across cultures. The choice is not bipolar between private and collectivistic property so that the existence of private property in the Bible can be equated with capitalism or the existence of tribal controls on property can be equated with socialism. Rather there exists a broad spectrum with great variations in the form and degree of community control of property. The fact that the biblical property pattern is neither capitalistic nor socialist in itself is not a biblical argument against either. But the biblical support for a modern economic arrangement must be much more complex and indirect. One must discover the values in the economic, social, and political systems in the Bible and in theological reflection upon the Bible and the subsequent history of the church and indicate the modern arrangements which would best implement those values. Such a case will require empirical and historical information far beyond that which can be furnished from the Bible.

The particular property arrangement indicated by the Law appears to be close to what Wiles describes as that of the “traditional co-operative village” in which the livestock, crops, and tools belong to private peasants but no family may sell its land. The purpose of this restriction is so that no family shall impoverish its heirs by improvidence and so that there always shall be some land available for everyone. The normative cross-cultural application is not to reproduce in different cultures a close proximity to this concrete expression. The cooperative specifics of this arrangement do not in themselves directly mandate industrial cooperative arrangements as much as one might want to argue for them from less direct and more principal reasons. Rather one must ask, as we have done above and as Wiles has done in the passage just summarized, “What significance does this arrangement have for the social and economic life of that people?”

After noting the contribution of land to self-sufficiency and the interest in ensuring its general availability, the cross-cultural concern then is to strive for property institutions which enable people to have power and to achieve as much self-sufficiency as can be effectively achieved in a particular society. Accordingly, as we have argued above, we should strive against either public or private concentration of ownership and control of productive property. The community controls which limit the private choices within the economy would lead one to expect in other cultures controls of some nature which economically empower the basic social units without at the same time publicly centralizing power so as ultimately to undercut the desired self-sufficiency.

Discovering cross-cultural equivalencies often must be more indirect than locating in the biblical culture and in the contemporary culture the functions which appear to be the closest in nature. The efforts to form the relationship of employer and employee in modern industry from biblical injunctions regarding master and slave presumably widely the basic distinctions between these relationships despite the appearances of being the relationships which are most similar. Such an application is not the word of God even though it is drawn from Scripture.

The best methods of biblical exegesis must be used to understand what a particular injunction means within the text and within the biblical culture. The authority of the Scriptures lies within the intentionality of the passage, what concerns are meant to be addressed by the text, not what is incidental to them. Accordingly, a biblical reference to the sun rising does not establish the relationship of the sun to the earth, nor does a parable which mentions a king establish a priority for monarchy among the forms of government. To cite an example which pertains more to economics, a biblical reference to a tithe being collected for the indigent in the community (Deut. 14.28f.) does not establish a principle that a government may not tax more than 10 per cent of a person’s income unless it can be established from the text that its concern is the limitation of the state. The text appears to be concerned to establish a minimum of community support out of compassion for the weak. The passage is preceded by an admonition to care for the Levite (v. 27). This verse states the fact of the Levite’s lack of land. The purpose of the action is that the needy groups may “eat and be filled” with the consequent blessing of God upon the people for their generosity. No indication of concern to limit government is reflected in this passage. Further, to deal adequately with the difficulties of cultural translation, one should deduct from the text a principle that an adequate portion of private production be gathered for the needy rather than to focus upon the particular proportion appropriate for the Hebrew village.


III. BIBLICAL ECONOMIC VALUES IN A SEMI-CHRISTIAN SOCIETY

A key aspect of ethics involves motivation and the formation of character. The Bible in its message of liberation of course offers much more than directions for shaping the social order. It also is a message of renewal of the individual as she or he through faith is restored to the relationship to God which was intended in creation and provided through Christ's redemptive work. The fulfillment of the social message of Scripture is dependent upon the power and motivation which this renewal provides. The impact that Christian faith has upon the economic actor has been the subject of classical works in the sociology of religion and numerous works reflecting upon them. Important attitudes of seriousness and discipline in the world, self-reponsibility, frugality, and responsibility for others in the community may be formed for the economy when God is understood as sovereign of both the world and the individual, when God is viewed as concerned about the social conduct of the world, and when the individual finds meaning in life in serving God's purposes in the world.

The economist in approaching Scripture accordingly is also interested in personal transformation and how it relates to the social ethic. The formation of the church and its function in supporting individual growth and evangelism also is pertinent. Realism regarding the limits of genuinely renewing evangelism globally and in a secular and pluralistic society, however, mean that social responsibility cannot be limited to evangelism. It also raises questions about the validity of seeking to implement the biblical social and economic ethics beyond the reaches of evangelism.

The close link of the biblical social ethic to the transformation of the individual has led some Christians to reserve the economic and social message of the Bible to the Christian community. Its fulfillment is regarded as beyond the capacity of a secular person not empowered by God's special grace. Such a Christian might withdraw from responsibility for shaping society.

Another response to this perception, however, is to see one as being guided in society by natural law—an ethic based on rational reflection on the created order and the truth in it which ultimately reflects the sole Source of truth. In this understanding, the Bible provides but minimal guidance to discern the content of natural law. Since non-believers are also rational creatures, Christians and non-Christians can work comfortably together in forming a socio-economic understanding of life.

In general it could be suggested that Christian economists tend to be guided primarily by natural law thought. Christian ethicists vary broadly from those who are primarily natural law and philosophically oriented to those directed much more fully by what they see as unique biblical and theological conceptions. It would seem that all would agree that while some of the particular concerns of the economist are included in biblical social ethics, many valid issues have little relationship to the Bible and demand serious independent rational thought.

Yet the weakness of the natural law response is that what appear to be universal dictates of reason are usually found to be much more conditioned by culture than realized. The New Testament perspective of the fallen cosmos suggests a sharper dichotomy between Christian thought and secular thought than the natural law model assumes, and many Christians raise questions about the adequacy of fallen reason. Other alternatives should be sought between romantically imposing a biblical ethic upon a society not prepared to receive or to apply it and abandoning the challenge of the biblical ethic to society.

There are continuities within the biblical ethic to the surrounding cultures. For example, in the Ancient Near Eastern cultures surrounding Israel there is found a conception of justice which like biblical justice also centers on the defense of the weak against mighty elites. The biblical ethic is not a strange ethic beyond the understanding of other peoples. Jesus even in his "hard sayings" was renewing God's creative intention, rather than imposing odd and unheard-of standards. In addition, as elsewhere in the Bible, he used illustrations from the natural order and God's ways in the world. At the same time, the ethics of the Reign of God reflect God's concerns for all of life as God is winning back the fallen creation. The biblical revelation provides special vantage points to God's will for human communities. Where the revealed materials are pertinent, Christians may work with nothing less.


21 e.g. Reinhold Niebuhr, "Christian Faith and Natural Law" [1940], in Niebuhr, Love and Justice, ed. D.B. Robertson (Gloucester, MA: Peter Smith, 1976), 48-49.

The values of the Bible belong to the whole world yet human beings vary in their preparation to receive them. Application of biblical ethics in a semi-Christian society will be sensitive to the point at which people are able to respond in their degree of understanding and faith. Rather than simply imposing the values in a perfectionistic and idealistic manner or completely withdrawing them from society, our concern is to find the highest point at which members of our societies can respond.23 What that level is will vary from issue to issue, from time to time, and from culture to culture. An area of life which may seem most intractable to these values because of the high level of self-interest involved is the economy. But our hope and task must be that there too God’s sovereignty will be manifested and that there too God will be glorified.