

Paul and Economics: A Handbook

Thomas R. Blanton IV & Raymond Pickett (Eds). 2017. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press. ISBN: 978-1-5064-0603-9. 474 pages. \$39.00 (paperback).

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This collection of fourteen essays by scholars of religious studies, Biblical studies, and classics/history aims to cover the waterfront of “the main economic issues relevant to the study of the Pauline epistles” (p. xi). The authors were invited to deliver a concise orientation to the state of research in their fields and, where appropriate, point the way toward to new approaches that promise to be fruitful. Most of the essays grew out of a conference by the same name at the Lutheran School of Theology in Chicago in September of 2015.

During the last forty years, Pauline studies have been marked by a more careful understanding of Paul’s context – the realities of both the 1st century Roman Empire and the Jewish cultures that were sprinkled within it. Earlier interpretations of Paul have been criticized for too often hearing (or inventing) only what was comfortable to Reformation theologies and their subjective concerns, rather than accommodating the actual Jewish/Roman contexts in which Paul was formed, with which he worked, and to which he wrote. This “new perspective on Paul” began to draw on social scientific models – especially sociological and anthropological – in considering the world of the communities associated with Paul, and the larger culture in which they existed. The extent of inequality and exclusion within the Pauline assemblies... the construction of honor, shame, and patronage around and within them... the rhetorical, literary, and philosophical connections between Paul’s work and the world around him... these became topics of study.

But the specifically *economic* elements of Paul’s work and world took a back seat until the 21st century, with generalizations about the economic structure of the assemblies and the status of the “typical believer” filling the silence. Beginning in 1998, efforts to carefully reconstruct the 1st century Roman empire’s economic/class structure, and to place Paul’s assemblies within it, commenced in earnest. Was Roman culture really made up of a few insiders within a sea of “the poor,” offering nothing we would recognize as a middle class? Were Paul’s congregants drawn from “the poor,” surviving near or below subsistence and facing periodic malnutrition? Or was the deprivation more widespread and

more common? If not, what *was* the nature of these assemblies? And how should our conclusions affect our understanding of Paul's gospel?

Bruce Longenecker's 2010 book, *Remember the Poor: Paul, Poverty, and the Greco-Roman World* (reviewed here, Fall 2011) incorporates the succeeding decade's work on these issues. Simply put, it appears that Roman culture was composed of roughly 2-3% politically connected elite, then perhaps another 20-40% living at various levels above subsistence (with three-quarters of those stable but not far above subsistence), and the remaining 60+% probably bouncing around near subsistence. For perhaps a quarter of the empire at the bottom, subsistence was chronically out of reach – for widows, orphans, beggars, the disabled, unskilled day laborers, prisoners, and some subsistence farmers. Longenecker dispelled all notions that Paul's work was “absorbed with spiritual things,” demonstrating his central, practical concern with poverty. But the literature at that time, a decade ago, still had relatively little to say about the economic elements of Paul's work and his churches.

Paul and Economics offers itself as an orienting professional update on the last decade, an update that may also direct future work. I'll give a brief digest of each chapter.

Summary of Chapters

In “The Roman economy in the early Empire: An overview,” by David B. Hollander, Hollander acknowledges a growing influence of economic theory among historians of the period, though this work's focus parallels the economics profession's *Methödenstreit* of the 19th century: Are ancient economies so substantially different from ours that tools developed to analyze modern, market economies are not necessarily helpful for understanding Paul? Douglass North's new institutionalism is invoked, with “structure” (political and economics institutions, technology, demography, ideology) influencing/determining “performance” (output, income, distribution, habits of production). In this framework, the conversation identifies the Roman economy as robust, and the Roman state's regulation as dominant in production and distribution, affecting industrial policy, lending, coinage, exchange institutions, slavery and its organization, agriculture, and (importantly) the military, which may have drawn half the Roman budget and profoundly affected trade, regional well-being, and economic expansion. Annexation and conquest

exploited the benefits of trade; those benefits accrued disproportionately to Roman citizens, not the provinces. Still, a commercial economy, and local trading economies, appear to have operated outside of direct control by the state, though always in the context of the state's pervasive influence.

In "Urban poverty in the Roman Empire: Material conditions," by Jinyu Liu, Hollander's bird's-eye snapshot (above) is complemented by this chapter's gutter-level perspective. As in so many things, we know more about elite perceptions of imperial poverty than we know of the actual level of poverty and its effects on the daily experience of the poor. Literature and archaeology filter out or re-frame the experiences of the poor; material reconstructions (think garbage pits) and commoner literature (fables, proverbs, curse tablets) become important alternative sources of information. It seems undeniable that much of the empire – perhaps most – lived whole lives of deprivation, insecurity, chronic (or at least frequent) malnutrition, hostility from others, and thus profound anxiety. Some common strategies for survival may be discernible, but much of the common person's struggle to acquire and share the necessities of life remains, for us, unknown. Thus our comprehension of the Pauline communities' structure, practices, and rationalizations remains tentative.

"Economic profiling of early Christian communities," by Timothy A. Brookins, reviews what can be learned about the Pauline assemblies from the reconstructions of Roman economic levels that I summarized earlier.

How people from different socioeconomic and ethnic backgrounds interacted in a community organized around the event of a crucified Galilean Jew believed to be vindicated by the God of Israel is a central concern in understanding the dynamics of community life and structure, especially since the ethos of the assemblies is ostensibly set in contrast to certain Greco-Roman values and norms in the letters. (p. xix)

Given the current view that Roman culture was not a stark contrast between an elite and an impoverished remainder, Pauline communities likely included a broad variety of social and economic experience. Brookins requests a more sophisticated, self-aware, location-specific approach to analyzing Paul's churches, in part as a brake on the outsized

importance of Corinth in present work – an unusual city, when cities themselves were unusual, with the Empire’s population being 90% rural.

Richard A. Horsley’s essay, “Paul’s shift in economic “location” in the locations of the Roman Imperial economy,” finds continuity between the Jesus Movement’s challenges to Roman political/religious/economic conquest in rural Palestine and Paul’s urban work, where he counsels disengagement from Roman patronage temples, rituals, and social life. Paul is argued to have formed an apocalyptic interpretation of Jesus’ death as judgment of Roman rule, as Paul gradually came to see the Jesus Movement not as a threat to his own traditions but an embodiment of them.

Horsley also contributes some skepticism about reconstructions of the Roman world that he considers “neoclassical,” as they abstract economic analysis from society, and are thus “proto-capitalist.” The Roman economy, he argues, was driven by elites extracting surplus from subjected populations; it was not based on “supply and demand.” Jesus’ movement thus aimed to restore villages suffering under Roman taxation and oppression. I don’t know if such attitudes toward the mainstream in economics are widespread within the academic circles that produce this literature but, if they are, this may explain why no economists are present in this book’s conversation about economics. I would argue that even neoclassical economists might have something worthwhile to say about rent seeking, mercantilist practices, discrimination, lottery markets, location theory, insecure property rights, ... the things that concern so many of the essays in this collection. On the other hand, the median neoclassical economist might be too brassy and imperialistic for this conversation. It would take a self-aware person who could recognize professional habits that do not encode transcendent, time-invariant realities. That probably requires, among other things, training in the history of economic thought, and very few economists receive that anymore.

The literature has frequently assumed that Pauline churches met in houses, implying that there were members with sufficient status to own homes large enough for community gatherings. In “Architecture: Where did Pauline communities meet?” Weissenrieder, focusing on Corinth, argues that there were not houses available for the exclusive use of wealthy patrons. A diverse population, interacting socially, inhabited the *insula* in which most Corinthians lived; there was no bright line between

the people in *insula* and those in *villas*. One Corinthian church may even have met in the Corinthian political assembly hall (*bouleutērion*), though the suggestion hangs on an adventurous translation of a single word (which, I have argued elsewhere, is likely a theological pun rather than a description of a building).

Slavery was central to the Roman economy and way of life. Roughly 10% of the Empire's population were enslaved; in some areas the percentage was closer to 40%. Slaves were subject to total domination by masters. Ulrike Roth's essay, "Paul and slavery: Economic perspectives," considers the economic effects of slavery, and their subsequent effects on Paul's work. Roth steps outside some of NT studies' received wisdom to argue that slave exploitation was integral to Paul's mission. For her, slavery is fundamentally an institution of coerced labor power: the powerful extract surplus value from slaves, in order to maintain their dominance. Even so, the slave-master relationship suggests that slaves had a more secure livelihood than those in deep Roman poverty – the owners' investment created at least some incentive to grant regular meals, access to masters' resources, even personal allowances in some cases. Roth argues that slaves financially supported Paul, and that he sought out slave labor to support his work – Onesimus, for example, who is viewed as a slave jointly owned by Paul and Philemon.

Benefaction may have been the primary source of support for Roman social organizations, and the nature of the benefactors and their support influenced the relationships within the communities. Lacking precise information about the people whom Paul names as benefactors, Crook's essay, "Economic location of benefactors in Pauline communities," looks to other Roman voluntary associations – the most prominent type of social group in the ancient world – as models of benefaction. There was considerable diversity in Roman benefaction, both in status of donor and in type of giving, since the widespread cultural value of honor moved even those of modest means to donate. Still, most support likely came from the roughly one-third of society above subsistence but beneath elite status. Crook (and Kloppenborg, below) suggests Paul may have also relied in part upon church membership fees.

Food marked social status (it still does), and was influenced by religious and ethical considerations. Thus *eating* has a relatively prominent place in the New Testament. "Food and drink in the Greco-Roman world and in the Pauline communities," by John T. Fitzgerald, documents eating

patterns and practices in the 1st century Empire, suggesting that fish and meat *were* generally accessible, both financially and geographically, to the lower reaches of the social ladder. Most people were not forced to be “functional vegetarians,” though the wealthy could afford better meat that was often connected with pagan sacrifice. Fitzgerald takes Paul’s concerns about meat-eating to be fundamentally religious concerns, not concerns about economic inequality within the community.

Many reconstructions of Paul’s context for his discourse on abuses of the Eucharist in I Corinthians assume that the Corinthian meal was hosted in a wealthy member’s home; in that case, the conflict probably reflects class differences. In his essay, “Socioeconomic stratification and the Lord’s Supper (I Cor. 11:17-34),” Neil Elliott reminds us that there really isn’t much information about social patterns in Corinth. He then considers how ideologies underlying social scientific interpretations may be filling in the information gaps. One problem is a possible ideological focus on *status* rather than *poverty*, which the author takes as “an ideological influence of late Capitalism.” To those who do focus on poverty, and interpret Paul’s instruction as weak-willed capitulation to the wealthy – telling them to just eat at home first, then carry on as usual, with no expressed concern for the underlying issue of rampant poverty – Elliott suggests Paul is primarily concerned with establishing a consistent practice across fellowships, which might qualify as a form of justice.

With “The economic functions of gift exchange in Pauline assemblies,” by Thomas R. Blanton IV, we return to The Problem With Neoclassical Economists: autonomous, self-regulating markets are modern constructions; the Roman world was a political economy and an empire. There certainly were markets in which things were bought and sold but this was not a market economy. Karl Polanyi is invoked to contextualize market exchanges within social networks, yielding three categories of exchange: markets, redistribution, and reciprocity, the latter two constituting forms of gift exchange. Paul’s collection for Jerusalem is a redistribution/gift exchange. Yet he motivates givers with appeals to competition for honor among the churches. Elsewhere Paul invokes reciprocity, as when discussing hospitality or donations for his mission. To summarize, Paul was converting currency from market exchange into gift (redistribution and reciprocity) as a vehicle for seeking honor, which he presents as a “spiritual economy.” The Eucharist likewise memorializes

Jesus' gift and institutionalizes a reciprocal giving back to the patron, so disparities around the table (I Cor. 11) are incompatible with the nature of the meal.

As central as Paul's collection is to his story line, we know relatively little about its motives and practice. In "Paul's collection for Jerusalem and the financial practices in Greek cities," John S. Kloppenborg looks to parallel Hellenistic fiscal habits as an interpretive grid. He argues that voluntary donations/subscriptions, motivated by calls to good citizenship, provide a better parallel than Roman patronage systems. Private associations kept careful financial records to minimize abuses of funds; thus Paul explains (e.g. I Cor. 16) how his collection will proceed and be secured, partly because in this unusual subscription the funds would go to a distant, ethnically different group. Paul also encourages weekly record-keeping, and promises to acknowledge the donors to the recipients. This all parallels most other voluntary groups' practice.

If the common received wisdom is that Paul's mission involved the gradual expansion of a coherent movement that displaced a stubborn, regional Judaism, Cavan Concannon's essay, "Economic aspects of inter-city travel among the Pauline assemblies," reconstructs a different story: early Christianity as a fragile, shifting set of networks across geographic microregions, requiring constant and costly re-negotiation. Mapping the texts' references to network connections onto the texts' accounts of Paul's movements, yields a fresh account of Paul's travels, richer than the traditional linear diagrams of three "missionary journeys."

In "Marxism and Capitalism in Pauline studies," by L. L. Welborn, when the author affirms a Marxist lens, he means at least this: analysis should include class as a category, not exclude economic factors with the relatively imprecise "status"; analysts should be evaluating their own social location and its influence on their analysis; interpretation should not presume that the texts advocate for the inevitability of exploitation or the moral virtue of acquiescence to unjust structures or the valor of charity and survival strategies that do not question the status quo. When Paul calls for economic equality in II Cor. 8, or asks slave owners to imagine themselves as potential commodities in I Corinthians, maybe he actually meant to say those things. Whether these concerns are distinctively Marxist, I will leave to others to decide.

During the last decade, politically laden interpretation has been challenged by economically laden readings. In "A new horizon for Paul

and the philosophers: Shifting from comparative ‘political theology’ to ‘economic theology,’” Ward Blanton emphasizes the place of modern debt in this migration, suggesting that political sovereignty is being displaced by international debt obligations, which reduce democratically chosen governments to the role of debt managers. Biblical systems of debt and sacrifice were displaced by a messianic revolution against their implicit violence; if we mirror these notions with financial debt and austerity, operating under the drive to accumulate within global capitalism, Paul gives hope of an alternative, a dissenting voice and a new order that contrasts with imperial oppression. Such is Blanton’s hope.

Conclusion

Where are Pauline studies headed? Much of past work was probably overly idealistic, in the formal sense – presuming that Paul’s ideas, frameworks, and rhetoric formed an independent cause, and social realities were a passive response. As Paul’s context has been taken more seriously, it was probably inevitable that these fields would swerve toward materialistic frameworks, reversing the earlier cause-effect presumption. Paul’s words sometimes appear to almost be quaint afterthoughts to economic realities. If a wholesome balance has been exceeded, we can probably expect that the pendulum’s movements are dampened toward convergence to a less reductionist middle ground.

I do wish there were a parallel “new perspective on Peter” movement. The apostles were commissioned to bear witness to what they had seen in Jesus, and Peter saw a lot more of this than Paul saw. The Petrine corpus may be thinner – perhaps only Mark’s gospel and I Peter – but this corpus is addressed to a wider audience and exceedingly rich in economic content and commentary, I Peter being a virtual book review of the millennium’s standard economics textbook, Aristotle’s *Politics*. ■