The Bible on Community, Poverty, and Riches

written by Russell Pregeant | February 15, 2012

THE RELIGIOUS RIGHT IS WRONG on many points, but perhaps its most outrageous distortion of truth is its use of the Bible in support of predatory capitalism. The Hebrew prophets' bombastic indictments of the exploitation of the poor by the rich are fairly well known outside the boundaries of right-wing fundamentalism.[1] What I emphasize in this article is a broader point: the centrality of economic justice in ancient Israel's self-understanding as a community in covenant with God and in the New Testament as well.

As Richard Horsley observes, early Israel made a radical break with the imperial economies of the ancient Near East, in which the people basically served the rulers. Those in power took much of the people's produce to maintain the military forces that engaged in conquests and kept the empires intact. They also used the people's labor to build monuments symbolizing their rule and employed religion as a means of sacralizing their regimes. The Israelites, however, withdrew from this system to form "an alternative society in which the people no longer bowed down and served the Forces of civilization, but served a transcendent Force of freedom, who insisted upon justice in relations with other people, not hard labor."[2]

The ancient world knew nothing of our modern tendency to think of religion, politics, and economics as separate spheres of existence. The laws of ancient Israel embraced both sacred and secular matters, without distinction. And the people's responsibility toward God embraced their responsibilities toward their neighbors. We therefore find in the Torah a remarkable set of provisions protecting the welfare of all members of the community.

At the heart of ancient Israel's view of economics was its attitude toward the land, classically expressed in Leviticus 25:23-24: "The land shall not be sold in perpetuity, for the land is mine; with me you are but aliens and tenants. Throughout the land that you hold, you shall provide for the redemption of the land." This means that all human ownership is relative: the land is God's. As God's tenants, however, human beings have a limited claim upon it. God has in a sense leased the land to families, and each family is entitled to its ancestral holdings. Any sale of the land is therefore temporary. If a family is forced to sell because of economic failure, it retains the right to buy it back when their fortunes are reversed (Lev 25:25-27). Leviticus 25:9-10 also provides for a Jubilee Year (every fiftieth year) in which the families who have lost their land can return to their property. We are unsure whether this was actually practiced or remained an ideal. Either way, it reveals the intention, also expressed in the promise in Deuteronomy 15:4-5, that if the people obey God's commandments "there will be no one in need among" them.

To achieve that goal, the Torah commanded both lending to needy neighbors (Deut 15:7-11), coupled with a prohibition of interest-taking (Exod 22:25), and the cancellation of all debts every seven years (Deut 15:1-2). It also forbade farmers to harvest to the edges of their fields, granting both the Israelite poor and resident aliens (!) the right to glean what was left. (Lev 19:9-10)

In withdrawing from the imperial economies, early Israel initially rejected monarchical rule. There are two strains of tradition in the books of Samuel, one favoring the establishment of a royal household and another that interprets the desire for a king as a rejection of God. We therefore find in 1 Samuel 8:11-17 a speech by Samuel that warns the people how a king would treat them. These excerpts capture the essence of the speech:

> [H]e will appoint for himself commanders of thousands…and some to plow his ground and to reap his harvest, and to make his implements of war and the equipment of his chariots….He will take one tenth of your grain and of your vineyards and give it to his officers and his courtiers….He will take one-tenth of your flocks, and you shall be his slaves.

This description fits what actually happened when monarchical government was instituted. The harsh rule of Jerusalem kings led to the secession of the northern tribes, which split the Israelites into two nations. The pattern of exploitation was found in both; however, and in both cases the ruling class used religion to legitimate their power. Thus, as Horsley observes, "the monarchy stood in opposition to the Mosaic Covenant, in which Israel declared exclusive loyalty to God as their king precisely as a way of avoiding falling back into bondage to a human king."[3] Whereas the Mosaic Covenant made God's protection of the nation contingent upon the people's obedience to covenant law, the rulers in Judah (the southern monarchy) promoted a new version of the covenant that declared God's unconditional support of the House of David in perpetuity. (2 Samuel 7:4-17)

It was against this background of exploitation by kings and their officers that the great Hebrew prophets spoke their powerful condemnations of economic injustice. Thus Isaiah indicted those "who add house to house, who add field to field, until there is room for no one but you" (Isaiah 5:8), and the book of Amos is a relentless attack on the rich, "who oppress the poor, who crush the needy" (Amos 4:1). Jeremiah, moreover, inspired by his loyalty to the Mosaic covenant, condemned the Jerusalem temple itself. Naming it a "den of robbers," he indicted those who appealed to the Davidic covenant as an assurance of God's protection even as they committed gross abuses. (Jeremiah 7:8-15)

The heavy tax burden placed on the peasants by the monarchies was increased by the imposition of further taxes by the series of empires that consumed the societies of the ancient Near East. During periods under Roman Rule, the Israelites paid taxes to the Jerusalem Temple, the Herodian royal household, and Rome itself. The Herods used taxes to fund elaborate building programs, and the Romans exploited the subjects of their empire to feed their troops and the population of Rome itself. The Temple was the center not only of religious life but also of the Judean economy, and the tithes and offerings it demanded added to the burden. Although the religious authorities had no means of enforcement, those unable to pay "faced social ostracism, shunning, and vilification by Temple authorities."[4] Estimates of the percentage of peasants' produce paid in the combined taxes range from 20 to 50 percent, "a significant and damaging amount for those living near subsistence levels."[5] Faced with financial failure, many people had to borrow from the aristocracy, which added to the latter's wealth as the situation of the poor became ever more desperate.

In light of these circumstances, it appears probable that Jesus' demonstration in the Temple (Mark 11:15-19) was at least partly a protest against the exploitative practices of the Temple aristocracy. In any case, the gospels present economic justice as a central motif in Jesus' preaching of God's Rule. We see this particularly in the beatitudes in Luke and Matthew. Following a formula of blessings and curses familiar from covenantal contexts in the Hebrew Bible (Deuteronomy 28),[6] Luke's version (6:20-23) is followed by a series of woes (6:24-26). Blessings on the poor (destitute), the hungry, and those who mourn are paralleled by woes upon the rich, those who are full, and those who laugh. The passage is not only an expression of solidarity with the poor but also a condemnation of the exploitative system that makes some poor and others rich. And the economic dimension is clear in Matthew's version (5:1-11) also.[7] The shift from "poor" to "poor in spirit" does not, as many commentators claim, represent a "spiritualization" of the concept. The "poor in spirit" are those whose spirits have been crushed by oppression. Nor are the "meek" those who are mild-tempered. They will "inherit the earth" (land) precisely because they are the dispossessed—those

who have lost their ancestral holdings to the rich and powerful. And in v. 10, we should translate the Greek word *dikaiosyne* not as "righteousness" but as "justice." The point is that those who are persecuted because they seek justice for the downtrodden will receive God's Rule along with the poor themselves.

At other points, Jesus criticizes the scribes as those who "devour widows' houses" (Mark 12:40), proclaims the difficulty the rich will have of entering God's Rule (Mark 10:25-27), and lambastes the Pharisees for neglecting "justice, mercy, and faith." (Matthew 23:23) Also, two lines in the Lord's Prayer reveal the economic dimension of God's Rule. "Give us this day our daily bread" is a request of people who live in daily fear of impoverishment. And the petition to "forgive us our debts as we have also forgiven our debtors" has a literal as well as a figurative meaning. Those who pray the prayer commit themselves to keep the covenantal responsibility to forgive the financial debts of those who cannot repay. Along similar lines, Jesus follows traditional covenantal guidelines when he urges his hearers to "lend, expecting nothing in return." (Luke 6:35)

The theme of economic justice continues in other parts of the New Testament. Acts twice describes the early Jerusalem church as having a communal economy (2:43-47; 4:32-37), and it was central to Paul's ministry to take up a collection in all his churches for that impoverished community. (1 Cor 16:1-4; Gal 2:10) The book of Revelation, moreover, condemns Rome for its exploitative practices (see esp. Rev 18). And the letter of James echoes the Hebrew prophets in its indictment of the rich who oppress the poor: "Listen! The wages of the laborers who mowed your fields, which you kept back by fraud, cry out, and the cries of the harvesters have reached the ears of the Lord of hosts." (5:4)

This last passage in particular should resonate with anyone familiar with the financial collapse in the United States in 2008, brought on by the rapacious practices of major financial institutions. But do the people and the leaders of the industrialized nations have the will and the courage to ask hard questions about our economy? Current economic theory assumes that there are actual "laws" of economics, ignoring the fact that all economic arrangements are human constructs. It also assumes that human beings act almost entirely out of self-interest, stifling all attempts to think creatively about how a new economy, focused on justice and ecological responsibility, might be possible. To that extent it stands as a major example of idolatry. The Bible, on the other hand, invites us to think and act differently.

My concern, however, is less with specific remedies than with the criteria we use to evaluate them. And one would hope that persons of biblical faith would make their evaluations on the basis of biblical principles rather than a preconceived economic ideology. In our current arrangement, human beings are treated as cogs in a machine, servants of a system that has taken on the quality of an idolatrous religion. For many people throughout the world, this system resembles Pharaoh's Egypt more than the covenantal economy enshrined in the Torah and retrieved as an ideal in the New Testament. That biblical vision is of an economy that serves the people—one that works not for the advantage of a favored few but for the common good and that enhances our humanity rather than diminishes it.

THE BIBLICAL WRITERS were well aware, however, that action on behalf of the common good inevitably runs into serious opposition from institutionalized forces. Although Paul declares that those in Christ manifest a "new creation," he envisions the faith community as living in an in-between time, when "the present evil age" (Gal 1:4) overlaps with the age to come. Forces that he identifies variously as "the rulers (of this age)," "authorities," and "powers"[8] are still active in the world. Scholars once debated whether these terms refer to demonic forces or earthly institutions such as governments. But Walter Wink has shown that "[t]hese powers are both heavenly and earthly,' divine and human, spiritual and political, invisible and structural."[9] That is, earthly

institutions are the tangible manifestations of cosmic forces.

The New Testament view of these powers is complex, because Paul also says that God instituted governmental authorities (Rom 13:1-7); and the author of Colossians states that they were created through Christ (1:15-18). Also, Paul lists angels among the forces against which the faith community struggles (Rom 8:38-39). What are we to make of all this? Wink argues that "the powers" have a legitimate place in God's creation but become corrupt when they are ignorant of God's plan. And when human beings give them the unqualified allegiance that belongs only to God, the result is idolatry. Thus, in Wink's words, "even then good, made absolute, becomes evil."[10] The biblical perspective thus demands discernment in dealing with these powers, encouraging cooperation with them when they serve God's purposes but opposition to them when they demand idolatrous loyalty and stand in opposition to God. Often, however, popular readings of two biblical passages discourage confrontation of "the powers that be."

The first is Roman 13:1-7, where Paul counsels his readers to "be subject to the governing authorities." Some Christians think this means that they must obey the dictates of any government that might happen to rule over them. To "be subject," however, does not necessarily mean to "be obedient to." The nonviolent civil rights demonstrators of the 1950s and 1960s remained subject to the laws of the Southern states even when they broke the segregation laws. They acknowledged governmental authority by submitting to arrest even as they engaged in civil disobedience. It is clear, moreover, that Paul's ultimate allegiance was to God alone, since he was willing to suffer frequent imprisonment for the sake of the gospel. Nor did he shrink from indicting "the rulers of this age" for the unjust crucifixion of Jesus or from proclaiming that they are "doomed to perish." (1 Cor 2:6-8) In Romans 13, Paul warned his readers against conflict with the Roman authorities; but he expected them, when faced with a choice between obeying God or human authorities, to obey God.

The second passage is a saying of Jesus. Asked whether it is lawful to pay taxes to Rome, he replied, "Give to the emperor the things that are the emperor's, and to God the things that are God's." (Mark 12:17; Matt 22:21; Luke 20:25). This saying has been used to support the notion that God instituted two realms—the religious and the secular—and human beings owe obedience to both. It is also the root of an attitude expressed in a letter to a major newspaper claiming that "Jesus was politically neutral." The intent of such a claim is to de-legitimate Christian social action, but it is based on a misunderstanding of the passage. Jesus' statement is actually a clever way of making a "subversive" point without getting oneself in trouble—a well-known tactic among subjugated peoples.

All Jews knew that everything belongs to God, and the notion of separate political and religious spheres would have been unintelligible to Jesus' listeners. The coin Jesus asked to see, moreover, was a *denarius*, which depicted the emperor and claimed divine status for him. As William Herzog comments, it was "a piece of political propaganda that staked Rome's claim to rule the cosmos."[11] Jesus implies that the coin must be given back to the emperor "because it is blasphemous and idolatrous,"[12] not because the empire is worthy of loyalty. Jesus could not say this directly without being arrested, but his hearers would have understood the point: "Pay the tax if you have to, but withhold your loyalty."

There are, of course, no simple guidelines for knowing when to resist "the powers" and when to join forces with them. Sometimes, however, the right choice is clear, even though many have found ways of distorting the biblical witness in order to avoid it. Some Christians in Nazi Germany joined the Confessing Church, which opposed the regime; others embraced German Christianity, which supported it. Some Christians have supported murderous, totalitarian regimes in Latin America that oppressed the poor. Others, notably Bishop Oscar Romero and a number of Roman Catholic priests and nuns, were murdered because they opposed these governments and stood in solidarity with the

poor. Some persons of biblical faith joined or supported the civil rights movement, while others opposed or ignored it. If my reading of the Jewish and Christian scriptures is accurate, however, there should be no doubt as to which of these groups were faithful to the biblical witness and which were not. Contrary to the pronouncements of the religious right, the Bible clearly demands of those who profess to worship God that they challenge "the powers that be" whenever they "push aside the needy in the gate." (Amos 4:12)

Footnotes

1. I discuss the nature of Hebrew prophecy in Chapter 4 of *Reading the Bible for All the Wrong Reasons* and address biblical economics more broadly in *Knowing Truth, Doing Good: Engaging New Testament Ethics* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2008).

2. Richard A. Horsley, *Covenant Economics: A Biblical Vision for Justice for All* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009), Ch. 1; quotation from p. 15.

3. *Ibid*., 57.

4. William R. Herzog II, *Parables as Subversive Speech: Jesus as Pedagogue of the Oppressed* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1994), 181.

5. Warren Carter, "Taxes, Taxation," *The New Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible S-Z*, Vol. 5 (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2009), 479.

6. Horsley, 107.

7. Mark Allen Powell, *God with Us: A Pastoral Theology of Matthew's Gospel* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995), 119-40; Donald A. Hagner, *Word Biblical Commentary, Vol. 33 Matthew 1-13* (Dallas: Word Books, Publisher, 1993), 87-96; Russell Pregeant, *Knowing Truth, Doing Good*, 129-33.

8. 1 Cor 2:6-8, 15:25; Rom 8:38.

9. Walter Wink, *Naming the Powers: The Language of Power in the New Testament* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984), 11; emphasis original.

10. *Ibid*., 49.

11. William R. Herzog, *Prophet and Teacher: An Introduction to the Historical Jesus* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2005), 185.

12. *Ibid*., 189.

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