WALTER BRUEGGEMANN

Money and Possessions

INTERPRETATION *Resources for the Use of Scripture in the Church*

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For
Peter Block
and
John McKnight

The Three Cries of History

And the great owners, who must lose their land in an upheaval, the great land owners with access to history, with eyes to read history and to know the great fact: when property accumulates in too few hands it is taken away. And that companion fact: when a majority of the people are hungry and cold they will take by force what they need. And the little screaming fact that sounds through all history: repression works only to strengthen and knit the repressed. The great owners ignored the three cries of history. . . .

. . . The great owners formed associations for protection and they met to discuss ways to intimidate, to kill, to gas. . . . Three hundred thousand hungry and miserable; if they ever know themselves, the land will be theirs and all the gas, all the rifles in the world won't stop them. And the great owners, who had become through their holdings both more and less than men, ran to their destruction, and used every means that in the long run would destroy them.

—John Steinbeck, *The Grapes of Wrath*

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SERIES FOREWORD

This series of volumes supplements Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching. The commentary series offers an exposition of the books of the Bible written for those who teach, preach, and study the Bible in the community of faith. This new series is addressed to the same audience and serves a similar purpose, providing additional resources for the interpretation of Scripture, but now dealing with features, themes, and issues significant for the whole rather than with individual books.

The Bible is composed of separate books. Its composition naturally has led its interpreters to address particular books. But there are other ways to approach the interpretation of the Bible that respond to other characteristics and features of the Scriptures. These other entries to the task of interpretation provide contexts, overviews, and perspectives that complement the book-by-book approach and discern dimensions of the Scriptures that the commentary design may not adequately explore.

The Bible as used in the Christian community is not only a collection of books but also itself a book that has a unity and coherence important to its meaning. Some volumes in this new series will deal with this canonical wholeness and seek to provide a wider context for the interpretation of individual books as well as a comprehensive theological perspective that reading single books does not provide.

Other volumes in the series will examine particular texts, like the Ten Commandments, the Lord's Prayer, and the Sermon on the Mount, texts that have played such an important role in the faith and life of the Christian community that they constitute orienting foci for the understanding and use of Scripture.

A further concern of the series will be to consider important and often difficult topics, addressed at many different places in the books of the canon, that are of recurrent interest and concern to the church in its dependence on Scripture for faith and life. So the series will include volumes dealing with such topics as eschatology, women, wealth, and violence.

The books of the Bible are constituted from a variety of kinds of literature, such as narrative, laws, hymns and prayers, letters, parables, miracle stories, and the like. To recognize and discern the contribution and importance of all these different kinds of material enriches and enlightens the use of Scripture. Volumes in the series will provide help in the interpretation of Scripture's literary forms and genres.

The liturgy and practices of the gathered church are anchored in Scripture, as with the sacraments observed and the creeds recited. So another entry to the task of discerning the meaning and significance of biblical texts explored in this series is the relation between the liturgy of the church and the Scriptures.

Finally, there is certain ancient literature, such as the Apocrypha and the noncanonical gospels, that constitutes an important context to the interpretation of Scripture itself. Consequently, this series will provide volumes that offer guidance in understanding such writings and explore their significance for the interpretation of the Protestant canon.

The volumes in this second series of Interpretation deal with these important entries into the interpretation of the Bible. Together with the commentaries, they compose a library of resources for those who interpret Scripture as members of the community of faith. Each of them can be used independently for its own significant addition to the resources for the study of Scripture. But all of them intersect the commentaries in various ways and provide an important context for their use. The authors of these volumes are biblical scholars and theologians who are committed to the service of interpreting the Scriptures in and for the church. The editors and authors hope that the addition of this series to the commentaries will provide a major contribution to the vitality and richness of biblical interpretation in the church.

The Editors

FOREWORD

A proper introduction to Walter Brueggemann and his inspiring lectures and books would require a whole book. But Brueggemann needs no introduction. He is surely the most widely admired and appreciated biblical scholar of this generation. His books on biblical theology have decisively shaped the thinking of a whole generation of teachers, students, ministers, and laypeople. Countless prophetic insights have found their way through his books into preachers' sermons and teachers' lectures. In a time of proliferating specialization in biblical studies, when most scholars concentrate on one section of one book, Walter commands the whole canon. He regularly brings together critical insights from new lines of analysis into his broader exposition of a wide range of texts that speak to key issues of the life of the church or the urgent concerns of our common life.

Among his most remarkable powers, in addressing a wide audience of clergy and laity as well as students and scholars, Walter has an uncanny ability to draw directly upon a broad range of biblical texts to illuminate cantankerous or troubling contemporary issues. Who other than Walter Brueggemann could undertake a survey of attitudes toward money and possessions in the books of the Bible as a whole? Highly unusual among biblical interpreters, Brueggemann has a grasp both of each biblical book and of the larger literary repertoire of which it is a part (e.g., Torah, prophets, Deuteronomic history). For sections of the overall biblical repertoire, such as the books of the Torah and those of the prophets, moreover, he has an uncanny sense of particular symbols or statements or commandments that open toward the whole and provide the door through which we can enter to explore its treasures.

Brueggemann's treatment of money and possessions in the Bible is a decisive departure in theology and biblical studies. In the dominant culture of the modern Western world, economics, politics, and religion have become separate spheres, with religion reduced to individual faith. Economics, which deals with money matters, has become autonomous, no longer required to take people, society, or its devastation of the environment into account. With the Bible having been defined as religious, biblical interpreters rarely deal with

economic matters.[1] But Brueggemann sees that money and possessions are unavoidably relational in biblical texts, in which God is concerned with all of life, not just religion. Possessions, which in ancient society consisted primarily of land and what was produced on land by people's labor, belonged properly to communities of people, indeed provided their living. Throughout biblical texts and throughout Brueggemann's treatment, possessions and money are embedded in social relations, often political power relations.

Brueggemann sees the narratives, songs, and legal collections of Israel's origins as a sustained struggle between the insatiable acquisitiveness of Pharaoh and "neighborliness" in commitment to sharing the common good. In treatment both of the origins of Israel in the exodus and covenant at Sinai and of the restatement of the Mosaic covenant as a centralizing reform of the monarchy (or was it the temple-state?), he begins with the commandment against coveting the possessions of others, the very basis of their livelihood. He begins with coveting, surely, because he is addressing us in our life in the belly of the overstuffed beast of consumer capitalism, where the ubiquitous images of the good life that pervade public space and invade all our senses manipulate our desire for commodities. Coveting, greed, the desire to take possession and control, as channeled by advertising, is what drives the consumption of mostly unneeded commodities that generates profits for capital. Coveting, greed, is what enables the wealthy to "grow" their wealth.

Following this compelling way in, Brueggemann opens up the Sinai covenant as guidelines for how to live faithfully outside Pharaoh's world of expropriation of more and more of people's possessions until they are utterly dependent on centralized wealth, even for the seed to sow their fields (Gen. 40; 47). The covenant commandments are principles of durable relations of trust in communities of neighborliness in which people share the common good. That is, the Ten Commandments are not so much rules of morality as guidelines of social-economic relations among the people, so that possessions, resources such as the land, are used for the support of families and communities. Assuming that people have economic rights to a livelihood, covenantal torah demands collective responsibility to guarantee those rights. The key to living faithfully outside

1. Only recently have a few of us started program units on economics and poverty in the Society of Biblical Literature.

Pharaoh's world of increasing extraction of people's possessions until they are impoverished is surely the second commandment. It is important to hear the whole commandment: not just no images, but you shall *not bow down and serve them* with your produce and possessions, which would presumably today mean your salary or wages spent in consumption of more and more commodities that serve to generate more profits for capital. By desiring the images all around us, we are serving the powers that generate those images, symbolized by the idols that induce service of those powers that are false gods.

Critical analysis with the aid of comparative studies of agrarian societies has suggested that the collections of Mosaic covenantal torah and customs in the books of the Torah have adapted what were popular customs and practices in village communities that kept the component families economically viable.[2] Subsistence farmers were perpetually plagued with the threat of falling into debt, when predatory creditors would swoop in to take advantage of a bad harvest. Correspondingly today, credit card companies and banks are only too eager to maneuver the poor into spiraling debt through high interest rates, penalties, and subprime mortgages. Speaking directly to such situations, Brueggemann presents a compelling treatment of the seemingly puzzling passage on cancellation of debts in Deuteronomy 15. If the people were to really follow the covenantal commandments (not coveting, not stealing, not dealing falsely), customs (lending at no interest), and practices (sabbatical cancellation of debts)—that is, sharing resources in social solidarity—then there would be no one in need among them (15:4). But since in fact they do not obey the commandments, they do indeed have poor among them (15:11), making all the more urgent the exhortation to lend willingly, give liberally, and actually practice the sabbatical release of debts. That this covenantal expectation continued in the village communities of the people for centuries comes vividly to the surface in the Matthean version of the Lord's Prayer: "Forgive us (cancel!) our debts as we also herewith forgive our debtors" (Matt. 6:12; my translation).

2. Douglas A. Knight, *Law, Power, and Justice in Ancient Israel*, Library of Ancient Israel (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011); Richard A. Horsley, *Covenant Economics: A Biblical Vision of Justice for All* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009), chaps. 2–3, drawing upon James C. Scott, *The Moral Economy of the Peasant* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1976).

In the historical books, Brueggemann finds much implicit and even explicit critique of the obscene stockpiling of wealth by Solomon and other kings, from which he draws incisive parallels in the practices of transnational megacorporations of global capitalism today. Remarkably, these historical narratives include the rebellions of the Israelites whose labor and produce were coercively extracted and whose land was seized for debts to provide luxury goods for those who wielded power. And the prophetic books provide scathing prophecies calling down God's judgment against the predatory extortion, exploitation, and expropriation by the wealthy and powerful that leave the people destitute of the land that had provided their livelihood.[3]

When he comes to the books that deal with the rebuilding of the temple and the supposed origins of Judaism, Brueggemann follows recent critical departure from previously standard biblical interpretation that seemed largely oblivious to the fact that Judea and the Judeans were henceforth subject to one empire after another. Indeed, the rebuilding of the temple and perhaps even the collection of cultural traditions, including covenantal torah, were sponsored by the Persian imperial regime. The Persians restored descendants of the previously deported Jerusalem elite as the heads of the newly established temple-state, which functioned in effect as a branch of the imperial administration. The narrative in Nehemiah 5 vividly illustrates the devastating effect on ordinary people. In response to the desperate outcry of impoverished and ravished Judeans, Nehemiah, the high-ranking Judean who had been sent by the Persians as governor, forced the predatory wealthy Judeans to cancel the people's debts and restore their lands. But he offered no relief from the tribute the people owed to the Persian regime that had brought them into debt in the first place. Nehemiah appeals to the covenantal customs by which the land and other possessions supposedly purposed for the livelihood of the people would not be expropriated by the powerful. But Judeans were now subject to an

3. The articles by Marvin L. Chaney, such as "'Coveting Your Neighbor's House' in Social Context," in *The Ten Commandments: The Reciprocity of Faithfulness*, ed. William P. Brown (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004), 302–17; and "The Political Economy of Peasant Poverty," in "The Bible, the Economy, and the Poor," supplement 10, *Journal of Religion and Society* (2014): 34–60, provide solid exegetical exploration and grounding for Brueggemann's incisive statements about prophetic indictments.

imperial system of extraction that operated at a double level: tithes and offerings for support of the temple and high priesthood, and tribute to the imperial court.

The books of the New Testament were produced not by professional scribes in the service of rulers but by ordinary people—the descendants of the Israelites whose covenantal customs protected the common good of a mutually supportive village community, whose exploitation was protested by the prophets, from Elijah to Jeremiah. Brueggemann insists repeatedly that the previously standard individualistic and narrowly spiritual interpretations of the kingdom of God proclaimed by Jesus or the grace of God preached by Paul—detached from the concrete concerns of debts and daily bread—are distortions of the gospel message. He has an uncanny ability to discern how Paul's emphasis on the freely given grace of God generates communal generosity and sharing in the assemblies of Christ. Picking up on the recent recognition that Paul's mission was directly opposed to the Roman imperial order that siphoned off subject people's resources to the wealthy imperial elite, he explains how Paul was pushing what was in effect an alternative society, even an alternative economy.[4] Fulfilling "the law of Christ" meant bearing one another's burdens (Gal. 6:2), within the local community of sisters and brothers and in the collection for the poor among the saints in Jerusalem. Paul repeatedly exhorted the assemblies to withdraw as much as possible from dealings with the local imperial economy, "the [Roman] world" of supposed "peace and security" that was "passing away" (1 Cor. 7:29–31; 1 Thess. 5:1–11). In contrast to the vertical imperial extraction of resources, Paul pressed for the horizontal sharing of their meager possessions among subject peoples, working "for the good of all," as well as especially for "the family of faith" (Gal. 6:10).

The most explicit performance of an alternative economy in opposition to the imperial economy of extraction in Brueggemann's exposition of New Testament books is the practice of communal property that provided support for all in the assembly of Jesus loyalists in Jerusalem, in the early chapters of Acts (2:44–45; 4:32–37). He discerns that "there was not a needy person among them," echoing

4. Richard A. Horsley, "1 Corinthians: A Case Study of Paul's Assembly as an Alternative Society," in *Paul and Empire: Religion and Power in Roman Imperial Society* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 1997), 242–52.

the traditional regulation of debt cancellation in Deuteronomy 15:1–18. Certainly the earlier Israelite customs of mutual economic aid in village communities evident in the Mosaic covenantal laws in Deuteronomy and Leviticus stand behind the communal property in the Jerusalem community. Once we move beyond the individualistic reading of the New Testament texts, as Brueggemann insists, the Mosaic covenantal customs can be discerned also at the center of the Gospel stories of Jesus' mission. This has been obscured particularly by the focus on isolated individual sayings of Jesus that has continued as standard in most recent treatments of "the historical Jesus," resulting in a domesticated individual teacher of individuals. But the Gospels present Jesus as a prophet like Moses and Elijah, working in village communities. And in the most sustained of his speeches, specifically the Sermon on the Mount/Plain and the dialogues in Mark 10, he performs renewals of Mosaic covenantal community in village social-economic life, including explicit citations of and multiple allusions to traditional covenantal teaching of mutual aid and cooperation.[5] As Brueggemann insists, particularly in exposition of key parables of Jesus, "you cannot serve both God and mammon" is the summary of the stark choice between renewal of cooperative covenantal community, in which people do not covet and defraud one another, and the greedy storing up of private treasures of the extractive imperial economy.

While New Testament interpreters have often emphasized the extent to which the later-produced letters compromised with the dominant order in various ways, Brueggemann finds that the Pastoral and Catholic Epistles continue to advocate that the assemblies embody an alternative economy of generosity. James in particular sharply condemns exploitative practices that deny the rights of laborers, and Brueggemann points to the parallel in today's predatory exploitation of people, particularly in credit and mortgage arrangements and union busting.

In significant ways, Brueggemann's analysis of the book of Revelation and its implications for today provide the compelling climax of his survey of money and possessions in the Bible. In contrast with the scholarly misunderstanding of "(Jewish) apocalypticism" as obsessed with the end of the world in "cosmic catastrophe"

5. Horsley, *Covenant Economics*, chaps. 7–8; Horsley, *Jesus and the Powers: Conflict, Covenant, and the Hope of the Poor* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2011), chap. 6.

(Schweitzer; Bultmann), he recognizes that this is visionary prophecy of God's condemnation of Roman imperial power, particularly its extractive economy, and the anticipation of an alternative economy (Rev. 17–18; 19–22). The "contemporary analogue," declares Brueggemann, is the global capitalism that has become the dominant political-economic and even cultural power that can control even the strongest governments, the power that some now call Empire. That some had not received "the mark of the Beast" indicates that some Christ loyalists had been resisting the demands of the imperial order, although it had involved suffering for the sake of the gospel (13:11–17; 20:4). In the contemporary analogue, Brueggemann insists, we can discern that the Empire of global capitalism is ultimately unsustainable, since it is destroying the very earth on whose resources it depends and is devouring the people it has subjected who increasingly have no money left to buy the commodities on whose sale it depends. Resistance is possible and an alternative economy is possible and both are indeed happening, usually in local cooperation. But both resistance and an alternative require refusal to participate in global capitalism—that is, obedience to the covenantal commandment against coveting, to come full circle. In effect, Brueggemann, like John on Patmos, is delivering a prophetic call to "come out of her, my people!"

Richard Horsley

PREFACE

The purpose of this book is to exhibit the rich, recurring, and diverse references to money and possessions that permeate the Bible. While we might conventionally assume, as we do in practice, that economics is an add-on or a side issue in the biblical text, an inventory of texts such as I offer here makes it unmistakably clear that economics is a core preoccupation of the biblical tradition. It is sufficient for this volume, I judge, to make that extended inventory of references to money and possessions available and visible, without needing or being able to exposit fully all of the texts. If I have offered a fair exhibit of these texts, then the reader can continue the interpretive work of making judgments about the meaning and relative importance of each text. I have along the way, of course, made interpretive judgments about texts. But the main work in that regard is up to the reader.

The title of the book reflects the sober Presbyterian series in which the book is placed. Were it elsewhere, it might properly be titled "Follow the Money" or "It's the Economy, Stupid." In writing the book I have, in ways that have surprised me, come to the conclusion that the Bible is indeed about money and possessions, and the way in which they are gifts of the creator God to be utilized in praise and obedience. In such a frame of reference, money and possessions are of course intensely seductive, so that they can reduce praise to self-congratulations and obedience to self-sufficiency. Whatever is to be made of this expansive inventory of texts, it is clear that the economy, in ancient faith tradition, merited and received much more attention than is usual in conventional church rendering.

I have found the writing of this book to be a difficult challenge on two counts. First, the biblical material on the theme is rich, diverse, and plentiful, so that I have had to be somewhat selective about the texts upon which I have commented. It is of course true that other interpreters might well select different texts or make different interpretive moves about them. At times I have been almost overwhelmed by the richness of the material. It is my hope that readers will make the necessary allowances for that challenge and

recognize that no selection or commentary is innocent or without vested interest.

The second difficulty for me is that the assignment has pressed me into making critical judgments about the New Testament, which I have never done before. Consequently I have had to rely more extensively on the work of other scholars, most especially the work of Luke Timothy Johnson, although I have made my own interpretive judgments.

I did not set out to make this book into a statement of advocacy. My task has been reportage about the texts. I have found, however, that the texts themselves pressed in the direction of advocacy. While there is great diversity among the texts, I have concluded that in their great sweep, the biblical texts on money and possessions pivot on "God and mammon" as a decisive either-or (Matt. 6:24; Luke 16:13). When that distinctive mantra on the lips of Jesus is transposed into economic interpretation, the large sweep of the text suggests a critical exposé of an *economy of extraction* whereby concentrated power serves to extract wealth from vulnerable people in order to transfer it to the more powerful. That extraction is accomplished by the predatory if legal means of tax arrangements, credit and loan stipulations, high interest rates, and cheap labor. The combination of these practices reduces vulnerable people to hopeless debt that in the ancient world led to a form of slavery, that is, debt slavery. That recurring predatory economy of extraction is countered in biblical testimony by an *economy of restoration* that pivots on debt cancellation. In the ancient economy of extraction, debt cancellation was unthinkable, as it would most certainly damage, if not destroy, conventional economic practices and arrangements. Much biblical testimony, however, suggests that the proponents of debt cancellation, with a passion fueled by faith in the God of abundance, did not flinch from that radical and deconstructive alternative. It is clear, moreover, that such a map of economics is descriptive in our own time, when an economy of extraction operates both internally in the United States and internationally, so that the vulnerable are increasingly left with hopeless debt that takes various forms of bondage. Thus the map of the economy consists in interaction and tension between the extractors and those vulnerable to such extraction. Extraction proceeds by tax policy, credit and loan provisions, interest rates and cheap labor; the vulnerable require debt relief if they are to participate in a viable socioeconomic life.

Given such an economic map that receives many variant articulations in the Bible, it is simply astonishing that the church has willingly engaged in a misreading of the biblical text in order to avoid the centrality of money and possessions in its testimony. The church has done so by focusing on individual destiny (and sin), by spiritualizing and privatizing evangelical testimony (among both liberals and conservatives), and by offering hopes that are otherworldly. A study of money and possessions makes clear that the neighborly common good is the only viable sustainable context for individual well-being. Commitment to the neighborly good exposes the lie of privatization and the flight from material reality in much popular "spirituality." The recovery of the economic dimension of the gospel of course will require a rearticulation of much that passes in our society for serious Christian faith.

The church has long been haunted by a dualism with a commitment to the "fruits of the Spirit" in interpersonal relations while "works of the flesh" are too readily embraced in public life. But the Bible eschews every dualism and asserts the materiality of creation over which God generously presides. That pernicious dualism has readily produced a religion that is disconnected from public reality and that has sanctioned predatory economic practices that go hand in hand with intense and pious religion. Thus the earlier robber barons were card-carrying Christians in good standing; and in our time the church is mostly silent in the face of a predatory economy that reduces many persons to second-class humanity. That deceptive misreading is aided and abetted by a lectionary that mostly disregards the hard texts on money and possessions.

It is my hope that this exhibit of textual materials might evoke in the church a greater attentiveness to *a keener critical assessment* of the extractive economy around us in which we are implicated and *a more determined advocacy* for an alternative neighborly economy congruent with and derived from the gospel we confess. It is clear enough that voices that may champion and legitimate such alternative policy and practice are minimal in our society; the voicing of such alternative urgently requires the recovery of the tradition of neighborly money and possessions that has been entrusted to us.

I have benefited from a number of generous companions, most especially Timothy Beal, Davis Hankins, K. C. Hanson, and Tod Linafelt. I am grateful to Patrick D. Miller, who long ago initially invited me to work on this theme, and to Samuel Balentine, editor of the Interpretation series, and especially to Ellen Davis, who have

devoted uncommon attentiveness and unstinting diligence to the great improvement of my work. I have long enjoyed the good work of David Dobson and his staff at Westminster John Knox Press, most especially Julie Tonini, to whom I am most grateful.

I am glad to dedicate this book to Peter Block and John McKnight, both tireless champions of and advocates for the neighborhood. They continue to instruct me, even while I delight in their generous friendship.

Walter Brueggemann

CHAPTER 1

Introduction

A Material Faith

Any study of money and possessions in the Bible is confronted with a mass of data that is complex and diverse in a way that refuses any systematic summary. Indeed, one can find in Scripture almost anything on the topic one wants to find. E. J. Dionne, after attending a Republican rally with many appeals to Ronald Reagan by a great variety of Republican speakers, was moved to quip: "Republicans of all sorts can appeal to the authority of Ronald Reagan in the same way that all Christians of every sort can appeal to the Bible as an authority." All readers can find what they want in the Bible concerning money and possessions. It is impossible in any survey to notice or discuss every possible reference, so one's treatment of the subject is sure to be selective.

I

As a way to begin this particular selective discussion, I propose six theses concerning money and possessions in the Bible that will provide a general frame of reference for the textual particularity that follows. In light of these theses I will survey, in canonical sequence, a variety of texts that variously witness to the truth of these theses. 1

1. Money and possessions are gifts from God. "All good gifts are sent from heaven above." For that reason a proper response

to such gifts is gratitude: "Then thank the Lord, O thank the Lord, for all his love." This affirmation is grounded in the doxological confession that God is the creator of the world and all that is in it. The lyrical poetry of Genesis 1 attests that without God there is only chaos. It is the creator God who transforms chaos into a living, generative environment that is blessed and fruitful in a way that produces abundance. That Genesis narrative, echoed in the Psalms, singularly credits the Creator with all plant and animal life. In its doxologies, Israel knows that all commodities of value are derivative from the generativity of the earth and that money (gold and silver) is a social symbol of value that derives from created commodities. In the Old Testament, in an agricultural economy, the three great money crops are grain, wine, and (olive) oil.[1] These are the produce of a generative earth, and that produce could be and was converted into wealth that eventuated in social well-being, social power, and social control.

The insistence that possessions are gifts and not achievements or accomplishments is a decisive check in biblical faith on any temptation to imagine self-sufficiency or autonomy. When the gift quality of possessions is forgotten, one can imagine that one has made the produce one's self. This temptation is reflected in the illusionary claim of Pharaoh, the great cipher of self-sufficiency, whom God reprimands for his imagined autonomy:

> Thus says the Lord God:
> I am against you,
> Pharaoh king of Egypt,
> the great dragon sprawling
> in the midst of its channels,
> saying, "My Nile is my own;
> I made it for myself."
> (Ezek. 29:3)

Pharaoh could not remember that it was the other way around: the Nile had made him, and the Nile is a river wrought by the creator God. This gift quality is the most elemental claim the Bible makes concerning money and possessions. It is an exceedingly important claim in a society like ours that easily imagines it is self-sufficient

1. See Samuel L. Adams, *Social and Economic Life in Second Temple Judea* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2014), chap. 3.

in its unrestrained eagerness for more. When the giver of all good gifts is forgotten, the gifts themselves are sure to be distorted in destructive ways.

2. Money and possessions are received as reward for obedience. This claim that runs throughout the Bible voices a robust quid pro quo connection between obedience and prosperity. That connection is clearly voiced in Psalm 1, which functions as an introduction to the book of Psalms:

> Happy are those
> who do not follow the advice of the wicked,
> or take the path that sinners tread,
> or sit in the seat of scoffers;
> but their delight is in the law of the LORD,
> and on his law they meditate day and night.
> They are like trees
> planted by streams of water,
> which yield their fruit in its season,
> and their leaves do not wither.
> In all that they do, they prosper.
>
> (Ps. 1:1–3)

And then the psalm adds tersely: "The wicked are not so!"

Prosperity arises in the wake of obedience to Torah, because the creator God is not indifferent to human conduct. Thus the commandments of the Sinai Torah are disclosures or regulations for bringing one's life into sync with the ordered quality of creation that is not negotiable. Taken in the most healthy way, such obedience consists in the joy of being in sync with God and not a burden, because it is simply an acting out in real life of one's true life with God and delight in God's companionship. A life in sync with the purposes of God is a life that will flourish!

Of course such a connection between obedience and prosperity that is based on mutual trust can be hardened into hard-nosed bargaining in the form of works righteousness. In such a distortion of glad obedience, one may obey in order to prosper, or one may imagine that one is owed prosperity for obedience. But such a bargaining expectation abuses and distorts a love relationship of glad responsiveness. The old temptation of works righteousness in our society, moreover, has morphed into the form of hard-nosed calculation in a market ideology in which there are no free

lunches and no glad gratitude but only payouts for performance and production.

The distortion of this claim is even more pernicious when the rhythm of obedience that leads to prosperity is reversed, as in the case of Job. In that distorted rendering, Job's adversity is reckoned by his friends to be a result of disobedience. The biblical tradition knows, in its wise honesty, that the simple sequence of obedience–prosperity is not a fully reliable one. There are enough undeniable exceptions to evoke doubt around the so-called issue of theodicy. Thus this thesis is a guiding assumption of biblical faith that affirms that human conduct matters to human well-being because the Creator is not indifferent to conduct. In some great part, human conduct chooses human futures. But a guiding assumption cannot be reduced to a close, rigid calculus.

3. Money and possessions belong to God and are held in trust by human persons in community. In church practice, it is this claim that stands behind all thinking about stewardship. As is evident in the odd narrative of Isaiah 22, a steward is the "master of the household" who is responsible for its proper management, a role assigned to the human couple in the Genesis creation narrative concerning having "dominion" (Gen. 1:28). The steward is not the owner but is accountable to the owner (see also the parables of Jesus: Matt. 20:8; Luke 12:42; 16:2–4). In biblical faith, what human persons "possess" is in fact held in trust by God, who is the legal, entitled owner. Thus the psalmist can gladly assent:

> The earth is the LORD's and all that is in it,
> the world, and those who live in it;
> for he has founded it on the seas,
> and established it on the rivers.
> (Ps. 24:1–2)

The whole earth is the creation that belongs to the Creator who "has the whole world in his hands." This means, of course, that the stewards, all those who hold possessions in trust, are accountable for their use and management. When their possessions are well managed, they flourish, to the credit of the Creator. When they are mismanaged long enough, they may be withdrawn from the steward who has distorted the intent of the Creator-owner.

That reality of "held in trust" is readily forgotten. Thus in 2 Samuel 3:12, the wily general, Abner, sends a message to David:

"To whom does the land belong?" Abner is urging David to seize the land that is under the control of Saul. He has no notion that the land belongs to YHWH. Implied in his question to David is an invitation to David that if David wants the land, that is, if he wants to rule, he can do so and Abner will help him do it. More broadly, this was a risky assumption in ancient Israel about ownership of the land. Over time, Israel (and especially its kings and moneyed class) could imagine that the land could be held and used with impunity. Thus Ahab in the narrative of Naboth's vineyard (1 Kgs. 21). But as history eventuated, it became clear that the land finally belonged to YHWH, and Israel lost the land through its mismanagement. In the New Testament, the same risk of mismanagement is reflected in the parable of Luke 12:16–21, in which the main character is saturated with first-person pronouns, imagining that it all belonged to him. But of course as the narrative ends, his mismanaged "ownership" and autonomy are exposed as false.

4. Money and possessions are sources of social injustice. When possessions are held in trust, they may be well managed according to the will of "the owner," that is, for the sake of the neighborhood. But when possessions or money are viewed as "mine" without accountability, then they may be deployed in destructive ways at the expense of the common good.

The tradition of Deuteronomy is insistent that money and possessions must be managed in the practice of justice, that is, for the good of the entire community. That tradition further insists that Israel, in covenant with God and compelled by Torah, is to handle possessions and money differently from all others, so that economic resources are subordinated to the common good, that is, for the well-being of the neighbor, most particularly the neighbor without resources. Deuteronomy is clear that this is the mandate of the Creator-owner of worldly goods. As a result, the tradition makes a close connection between *remembering God* as owner and *doing neighborly justice*. Conversely, *forgetting God* is closely linked to the practice of *exploitative injustice*:

> In the pride of their countenance the wicked say, "God will not seek it out";
> all their thoughts are, "There is no God." 5
> . . . . . .
> They lurk in secret like a lion in its covert;

they lurk that they may seize the poor;
they seize the poor and drag them off in their net.

They stoop, they crouch,
and the helpless fall by their might.
They think in their heart, "God has forgotten,
he has hidden his face, he will never see it."
(Ps. 10:4, 9–11)

Thus remembering God is not an intellectual act; it is a practical act of managing money and possessions differently.

And, of course, it is a common and recurring theme in the prophets that economic injustice and exploitation will in the end bring destruction and loss of one's possessions:

"Alas for you who heap up what is not your own!"
How long will you load yourselves with goods taken in pledge?
Will not your own creditors suddenly rise,
and those who make you tremble wake up?
Then you will be booty for them.
Because you have plundered many nations,
all that survive of the peoples shall plunder you—
because of human bloodshed, and violence to the earth,
to cities and all who live in them.
(Hab. 2:6–8)

The initial "alas" is traditionally rendered as "woe," that is, "big trouble coming!" The mismanagement of money and possessions is here identified by the terms "pledge" and "credit," which will be readily reduced to "booty" and "plunder," that is, to great economic upheaval. The practice of exploitative economics, culminating in "human bloodshed" and "violence," finally will bring trouble. The creator God will not tolerate unjust management of money and possessions. Nor will "your own creditors," who will, so the poet anticipates, "suddenly rise." The prophetic tradition is uncompromising concerning the linkage between mismanagement, suffering, divine indignation, and eventual loss.

5. Money and possessions are to be shared in a neighborly way. A core theme of biblical faith is that economic practice and policy must be ordered to serve the common good. The term "neighbor" means other members, that is, all members of the community. All

members of the community are entitled to the wherewithal for a viable life of security, dignity, and flourishing. This core mandate amounts to a rejection of any notion that the economy is autonomous and without reference to society. Thus the religious discipline that is required is nothing less than neighborly economics:

> Is not this the fast that I choose:
> to loose the bonds of injustice,
> to undo the thongs of the yoke,
> to let the oppressed go free,
> and to break every yoke?
> Is it not to share your bread with the hungry,
> and bring the homeless poor into your house;
> when you see the naked, to cover them,
> and not to hide yourself from your own kin?
> (Isa. 58:6–7)

The final phrase, "your own kin," is more exactly "your own flesh," an insistence on solidarity of all the neighbors, and especially solidarity between those with resources and those without resources. That mandate from Isaiah is echoed in the more familiar words of Jesus concerning neighborly engagement:

> Then the king will say to those at his right hand, "Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me." Then the righteous will answer him, "Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?" And the king will answer them, "Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me." (Matt. 25:34–40)

The phrase "members of my family" (or "my brothers") may originally have pertained to members of the Jesus community. But surely its implication is that all persons belong to this community of need and attentive care.

6. Money and possessions are seductions that lead to idolatry.[2] The Bible attests that money and possessions are not inanimate objects. They are rather forces of desire that evoke lust and "love" in a way that compels devotion and eventually servitude. The Bible asserts that such commodities, notably silver and gold, are not innocent but are in fact addictive and compel loyalty that rivals loyalty to God. Thus Moses can warn Israel that the worship of such possessions can talk Israel out of covenantal faith:

> Since you saw no form when the LORD spoke to you at Horeb out of the fire, take care and watch yourselves closely, so that you do not act corruptly by making an idol for yourselves, in the form of any figure—the likeness of male or female, the likeness of any animal that is on the earth, the likeness of any winged bird that flies in the air, the likeness of anything that creeps on the ground, the likeness of any fish that is in the water under the earth. And when you look up to the heavens and see the sun, the moon, and the stars, all the host of heaven, do not be led astray and bow down to them and serve them, things that the LORD your God has allotted to all the peoples everywhere under heaven. . . . So be careful not to forget the covenant that the LORD your God made with you, and not to make for yourselves an idol in the form of anything that the LORD your God has forbidden you. (Deut. 4:15–19, 23)

That seductive power is narrated in the story of the golden calf in Exodus 32, in which Israel can imagine that it was the *calf (bull!) of gold* that secured their emancipation from Egypt. It does not require much imagination to transpose the bull of gold to the icon of Wall Street, with its "bullish" markets, to see the allure of money that may distort neighborly covenantal relationships. Thus the narrative of Daniel can portray the self-destructive idolatry of Belshazzar and his court:

> Under the influence of wine, Belshazzar commanded that they bring in the vessels of gold and silver that his father Nebuchadnezzar had taken out of the temple in Jerusalem, so that the king and his lords, his wives, and his concubines might drink from them. So they brought in the vessels of gold and silver that had

2. See Jacques Ellul, *Money and Power* (Downers Grove, IL: Inter-Varsity Press, 1984).

> been taken out of the temple, the house of God in Jerusalem, and the king and his lords, his wives, and his concubines drank from them. They drank the wine and praised the gods of gold and silver, bronze, iron, wood, and stone. (Dan. 5:2–4)

The unnecessary repetitions of the narrator intend to mock the scene of extravagant self-indulgence that culminates in worship of the precious objects. We should not imagine, as the narrator did not imagine, that such extravagance was an innocent kind of prosperity. It was rather a seduction into complacent self-aggrandizement that led, in the narrative, to the demise of the power of Belshazzar. The seductive fascination with "gold and silver" culminates in the verdict of Paul in 1 Timothy 6:10: "For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil, and in their eagerness to get rich some have wandered away from the faith and pierced themselves with many pains."

There may indeed be other theses that could be formulated on our topic, but these are the ones that have seemed clear to me.

II

I observe further that each of these theses in fact voices a clear contradiction to the conventional wisdom of the ancient world and that in our own time each of them contradicts the uncriticized wisdom of market ideology.[3] I am aware as I write that I do so in the midst of a market ideology (in which I am implicated) that occupies almost all of our imagination, and that readers will be situated in a similar way. It is this force of contradiction at the heart of the Bible that makes our study so demanding and difficult and which for the same reasons makes it urgently important. Thus:

1. To view money and possessions as gifts from God contradicts market ideology in which there are no gifts, no free lunches; there are only payouts for adequate performance and production.

2. To view money and possessions as reward for obedience is too readily transposed into the reward system of the market, so that

3. See Gerald Berthoud, "Market," in *The Development Dictionary*, ed. Wolfgang Sachs, 2nd ed. (New York: Zed Books, 2010), 74–94. Naomi Oreskes and Erik M. Conway write of "market fundamentalism" in *The Collapse of Western Civilization: A View from the Future* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014), 37.

those who are productive should receive all the rewards that the system has to offer, even though the rewards often go not to the productive but to the well advantaged and the well connected. Such a distortion of biblical teaching results in the unproductive (the poor, the old, etc.) being excluded and left behind without merit or voice.

3. To view money and possessions as a trust from God contradicts the pretension of market ideology that imagines, not unlike Pharaoh with his Nile, that "my money is my own; I earned it and can do with it what I want."

4. To view money and possessions as a source of injustice is to contradict the easy assumption of the market that autonomous wealth is not connected to the community and so is not located in a venue where issues of social justice can even surface. Market ideology imagines that such autonomous wealth brackets out justice issues, so that what we get in our society, instead of transformative justice, is at most "charity" that does not acknowledge the huge sociopolitical leverage of wealth that is readily deployed against those without resources.

5. To view money and possessions as resources to be shared in a neighborly way contradicts the market assumption that there are no neighbors; there are only rivals, competitors, and threats. When neighbors are redefined and recast in this way, predatory strategies of wealth against them are taken as legitimate. Acknowledgment of neighbors makes predatory practices illegitimate.

6. To view money and possessions as seductions that lead to idolatry contradicts the market view that money and possessions are inert and innocent neutral objects. The thesis might invite us to reconsider the quasireligious passion of a consumer economy that is propelled by insatiable desire, in which we never have enough money or enough of the possessions that money makes possible. As any serious church leader knows, the one and only thing that is off-limits for comment or critique is the money system and its military support that undergird the illusionary well-being of our society.

Thus on all counts my own study of this subject has required me to think more clearly and more honestly about the way in which the testimony of Scripture is a deep misfit and an acute inconvenience in our society, with its tacit economic assumptions. It is my hope that the reader will, from this study, not only have more information about the data of biblical teaching but also see, as I have

attempted to see, that the claims of the Bible amount to a deep critique of common practice and a summons to engagement with that common practice.

III

My task of introducing the topic requires of me one other introductory foray. The Bible is relentlessly material in its focus and concern. It refuses to let its passion be siphoned off into things spiritual, a matter of intense concern given the current rage about "spiritual" and "spiritual but not religious." Everywhere the Bible is preoccupied with bodily existence.

1. Creation faith as voiced in Genesis, Isaiah, the Psalms, and belatedly in Colossians is celebrative of the world as a world God has declared to be "very good." It is a real world of food and work and sexuality, all of which are understood to be under the rule of God's intent for all creatures. The commandments of Sinai are not arbitrary regulations that fall out of the sky. They are discernments of how the world works and what it means to be in sync with the ordering of creation that is not negotiable. Any flight from bodily creation is a distortion of this faith.

2. The Bible of necessity articulates God as a bodily agent, as one who has eyes, ears, mouth, face, hands, and arms.[4] Israel does not imagine God to be an unformed spiritual force, but an agent who occupies the space of the world and the drama of history.

3. The world as creation culminates, in Christian confession, in the Word that has become flesh in Jesus of Nazareth. Thus the link from creation to incarnation assumes that Christian faith will be acutely focused on the bodily life of the world. Jesus' several miracles of healing, feeding, and casting out demons consistently have as their outcome the restoration and rehabilitation of bodily life in the world, a gift given to bodily persons who have lost their capacity for a viable bodily life in society.

4. The human person, characterized in the Old Testament as a *nepeš*, is a body that is breathed on, engaged and empowered by the gift of God's spirit (*rûaḥ*):

4. See Benjamin D. Sommers, *The Bodies of God and the World in Ancient Israel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009).

> When you hide your face, they are dismayed;
> when you take away their breath [*rûaḥ*], they die
> and return to their dust.
> When you send forth your spirit [*rûaḥ*], they are created;
> and you renew the face of the ground.
>
> (Ps. 104:29–30)

And because the human person is a body, there is characteristically a concern for security, for food, and for home. This in turn means that the Bible talks relentlessly about economics, about the management and distribution of life resources so that all the neighbors can live an "abundant life." As a result the Bible is inimical to the sentiment heard by so many courageous preachers, "Stick to religion and stay away from politics and economics." This faith is intensely committed to bodily life in the world and so is preoccupied with social goods, social power, and social access.

5. The bodily reality of creation, the bodily characterization of God, the Word become flesh in Jesus of Nazareth, and the bodily reality of the human person means that the Bible is acutely concerned with the body politic. There is no private faith, no private intimacy with God, but only life as a participating member in the body politic with all the political and economic reality that pertains.

6. As a result, when the biblical tradition comes to think about the future (popularly, "life after death"), it does not speak about going to heaven to be with one's loved ones. It speaks rather of "a new heaven and a new earth," a new city, a new social reality. And so the creeds faithfully echo with their culminating anticipations:

> "I believe in . . . the resurrection of the body; and the life everlasting" (Apostles' Creed).
>
> "We look for the resurrection of the dead, and the life of the world to come" (Nicene Creed).
>
> More than that, the church prays, after the manner of Jesus, that the will of the Father God will be done "on earth as it is in heaven" (Matt. 6:10).

We live in a society that would like to bracket out money and possessions (politics and economics) from ultimate questions. The Bible insists otherwise. It insists that the issues of ultimacy are questions about money and possessions. Biblical testimony invites a

serious reconsideration of the ways in which our society engages or does not engage questions of money and possessions as carriers of social possibility. The gift-giving God intends an abundant life for all creatures (John 10:10). That abundant life, however, includes all the neighbors, human and nonhuman. That inclusiveness requires a recharacterization of the body politic as an arena for the performance and embodiment of the will of the creator God, a will that contradicts much of our preferred, uncriticized practice.

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