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Symposium Introduction

Economic Ethics in Judaism and Early Christianity

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Introduction

The use of resources and related issues were prominent concerns in ancient ethical discourse, especially among religious writers. Jewish and Christian authors touched on economic issues such as wealth disparity and power dynamics, charity and benevolence, work and vocation, stewardship, saving and planning, taxation and the Empire, domestic life and slavery, and more. While this discourse is spiritually powerful and relevant for Christian ethics today, it arose in a remote time and from a different social and economic structure than most citizens live in today. Historical, theological, and ethical sensitivity is therefore needed to understand these ancient sources in their own contexts and to consider how to apply their maxims or principles today.

Those who have read much literature attempting to apply ancient ethical discourse to modern society will know that the applications are diverse. Biblical scholars generally have a difficult time discerning underlying economic and political principles and then employing plausible frameworks for applying those principles in modern societies. The discipline of biblical studies continues to become more and more specialized; authors can spend a decade writing a commentary on a book as small as 1 John. It should not be surprising, then, that these scholars do not have time to master political and economic theory, nor the monumental changes in social conditions since the Industrial Revolution. Thus, the tendency is to focus on exegesis and thematic synthesis of the biblical texts, and then rely on some superficial application of those principles to the lives of Christians (personal ethics) or to the church (corporate ethics) or to society (social ethics). The third category is where the lack of specialty in economic and political theory creates the most problems. That is why this research topic is important and worthy of organized research efforts. Not enough literature exists that attempts to bridge the historical and cultural gap in the interpretation and application of ancient ethical discourse to modern society. Yet, plenty of works continue to be published attempting to do so.[1]

The call for papers for this symposium invited submissions exploring any of the following:

1. Economic ethical teaching from Judaism (up to and including the Mishna) or Christianity (through the Patristic period);
2. Contextual data or frameworks about ancient economies or political structures that better enlighten Jewish or Christian economic ethical teaching;
3. Frameworks or methods for applying ancient Jewish or Christian ethical teaching in modern political and social systems.

One paper fell into the first category, authored by João Paulo Thomaz de Aquino. Dr. Aquino surveys the theme of "landowner" in Luke and contrasts an Evangelical, biblical reading of these texts against critical and Marxist readings. In special focus are those of the Landless Rural Workers' Movement (MST) in Brazil as well as the Brazilian Catholic Church. After providing an introduction and brief critique of the hermeneutics of liberation theology, Aquino uses narrative analysis to demonstrate that, by repeatedly presenting characters who are wealthy landowners and homeowners, Luke proposes a theological and ethical point about ownership of private property. First, God is the true owner of land as an economic good. Second, those who abuse their subordinate ownership of property for their own sake will be judged. Third, those who use their property and wealth to benefit others, especially while acknowledging that all property ultimately belongs to God, will be praised. Such a biblical reading that takes the text at face value both supports private ownership of property and places a strong ethical obligation on landowners to use their resources and wealth for the good of others, since ultimately the resources are God's, and he cares for the poor and needy.

In the second category of papers are my own and John W. Taylor's. Dr. Taylor evaluates Paul's collection for the Jerusalem believers in light of other types of giving and benefaction in the Jewish and Greco-Roman world. Paul's collection was distinctive in that it was trans-local and trans-ethnic. Paul also stressed the voluntary nature of the gifts, so there was no legal or religious compulsion involved, as opposed to, say, the Jewish poor tax. Rather than seeking honor from benefaction, Paul hoped that all honor would accrue to God. While some scholars have attempted a political-economic interpretation of Paul's act in line with Marxist ideologies, Paul's vision was more theological than political, not a vision of top-down patronage but of the poor supporting the poor in imitation of Christ. Taylor concludes with what lessons we might take away for thinking about aid in our globalized world today.

My paper considers themes of economic ethics in the Apostolic Fathers and attempts to explain why second- and third-century Christian economic thought differs from that of the apostolic era. I focus on prominent themes in the Apostolic Fathers, namely, wealth, work, business, and almsgiving. I argue that due to increasing urbanization and Roman neglect of the economic poor, the church increasingly assumed responsibility for this group in the second and third century. Church leaders developed a more positive view of wealth as a tool for charity, contrasting with apostolic skepticism about the accumulation of wealth due to its grave temptations. Almsgiving was elevated to the highest of Christian works, and work was affirmed because it is needed to produce resources needed to help the poor. But "excessive business" was denounced for fostering divided interests. A new "holy poor" class of clergy and monastics emerged, complicating the administration of alms. Their economic practices provided a litmus test for discerning true ministers. I suggest that understanding the historical and cultural context of any primary sources is necessary before using those texts to derive any normative applications of economic ethics to societies today.

Standing alone and boldly in the third category is David Kotter's commendable paper, which tackles the research question head-on by arguing for a framework with which we may take economic ethics from the biblical texts and apply them directly to our modern society. Kotter highlights the significant shift in poverty levels from the time of the New Testament and introduces the Time/Wage Index, a tool that calculates the economic cost of goods and services based on the number of hours of wages required for an average worker to make a specific purchase. This method aims to provide insights into the purchasing power and economic costs of both subsistence and luxury goods in the first century compared to today, thus offering a better understanding of the ethical expectations for generosity and stewardship in the New Testament. Kotter applies this index in three case studies focusing on generosity to the poor, tithing to the church, and purchasing luxury goods, demonstrating how the Time/Wage Index can shed light on New Testament passages. He concludes that while the Time/Wage Index highlights significant changes in economic conditions and living standards, the ethical imperatives of generosity, avoiding luxury and signaling wealth, and fostering gratitude remain highly relevant.

No set of four papers could address such a research question comprehensively. But this set of papers does happily span all three categories of papers, providing a sampler for those interested in the research question. Each author provided a different emphasis or expertise. Dr. Aquino exhibited the international perspective as one who lives, ministers, and researches among Latin American folk who sympathize with liberation theology. Dr. Taylor showed how rigorous historical and cultural analysis can help us better understand a biblical text or event. Dr. Kotter provided an actual framework that can be used by anyone who wishes to employ the Time/Wage Index on economic texts. I attempted to show the importance of interpreting ancient texts with historical and cultural awareness before attempting to apply them to societies today. Our hope is that this symposium will stimulate further research in the area and further events for collaboration.

We are grateful to the Acton Institute for providing a research grant and sponsoring the conference panel. I especially thank Dylan Pahman for his help in formulating the idea and guiding us through the process to hold the event and prepare the papers for publication. We also thank The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, particularly the Faith and Work Project, for hosting the event and providing marketing and technological support. We presented these papers in Louisville on September 23, 2023. Our group agreed that we ought to pursue further events in this area of study. Those interested in joining us for future research opportunities may contact me at todd_scacewater@diu.edu.

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Note

1. I hesitate to cite any specific works, lest it seem that I am being overly critical of any specific author. So, I will cite just a couple of works that are better than many others, but that still show the need for this research topic. See Walter Brueggemann, *Money and Possessions: Interpretation: Resources for the Use of Scripture in the Church* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2016); Craig L. Blomberg, *Neither Poverty nor Riches: A Biblical Theology of Possessions*, New Studies in Biblical Theology, vol. 7 (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2000); Verlyn Verbrugge and Keith R. Krell, *Paul and Money: A Biblical and Theological Analysis of the Apostle's Teachings and Practices* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Academic, 2015).