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A Biblical/ Theological Case for Basic Sustenance for All

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This article defends the proposition that all human persons merit basic sustenance on biblical grounds. The nature of humankind, God's design for creation, the distribution of the land of Canaan, covenant law, an option for the poor, and Jesus' teaching all serve to support this proposition. The article does not propose specific political-economic means to effectuate this biblical mandate. Rather it seeks to show that the mandate requiring basic sustenance for all is a matter of justice that can be carried out in contemporary societies through a variety of political-economic strategies.

"The Bible says.…" This three-word preface can be a fear-inspiring beginning for sermons, political debates, and scholarly inquiry. Nevertheless, Christians throughout the centuries have attempted to guide their lives and their societies on just such grounds. The article that follows will attempt to do so as well, specifically relating what the Bible says to contemporary economic practice. Using the Bible as our primary resource, we will attempt to show that providing basic sustenance[1] for all human persons is a responsibility that is mandated within Christian Scripture. We will support this claim by examining biblical themes such as Creation, the Exodus and the distribution of the land, covenant law, the poor, and equality.

The contemporary social context that makes this type of study crucial is overwhelming world poverty. The World Development Indicators report, "Each year 10 million children die before their fifth birthday. More than 100 million do not attend primary school. And more than a billion people lack access to a safe source of water."[2] The same report shows that in 1999, more

than 23 percent of the world's population or 1,169,000,000 people live on less than $1.00 per day.[3] Clearly, investigations regarding the Bible's teachings on human poverty and misery are *apropos* today.

While it seems easy to cite biblical texts that show society's responsibilities toward the poor, or laws on how to distribute the goods of creation, we must be conscious of the hermeneutical questions that arise when seeking moral guidance from Scripture.[4] Of necessity, all readers of Scripture approach the texts with their personal and cultural assumptions as to its meaning and implications. Recognizing this, we will attempt to be conscious of those assumptions and avoid an approach to Scripture that simply uses a few texts to support a particular agenda.

The respected contemporary Protestant ethicist James Gustafson suggests that ethicists typically approach Scripture with the expectation of finding three things: norms, analogues, and virtues.[5] In addition to these expectations mentioned by Gustafson, liberation theologians and feminists also take a self-conscious stance of advocacy on behalf of the poor or of women when approaching Scripture. Attempting to unseat dominant views, these interpreters highlight scriptural themes that show a preference for the poor and the marginalized that have often been ignored in traditional theology. In the section that follows, we will focus on the norms for economic justice in Scripture, while at the same time giving ear to various voices and traditions. The norms we examine will for the most part be derived from biblical cosmology, anthropology, and law. Though we acknowledge the virtue of virtues and advocate advocacy, we will focus on the norms, principles, and duties that direct our thinking about distributive justice.

As biblical cosmology and anthropology set the framework for any assertions based on a Christian worldview, tracing the nature of humankind, as well as the place of humanity within the cosmos will be necessary if we are to make judgments about what these texts have to say about how the goods of this world ought to be distributed.

Creation

In Jewish and Christian Scriptures,[6] creation is seen as a gift of God, which is intended to provide for the sustenance of his creatures, especially human persons. Humans are uniquely capable of deriving their sustenance from this world, because, as those created in the image and likeness of God, we have the creativity and resourcefulness to develop the potential that is inherent in creation. The distinctiveness of a Christian understanding of the cosmos and of

humanity is brought to the fore when contrasted with the two following views, one ancient and the other modern.

The ancient Babylonian creation account, the "Enuma Elish," shows little concern for the basic needs of humankind.[7] In that story, an old female goddess, Tiamat, becomes annoyed by the other noisy, rambunctious young gods and goddesses and threatens to silence them forever. The young gods, however, find a champion in Marduk, who agrees to battle Tiamat and her forces if the other young gods will recognize him as their supreme leader. The gods do battle, and Marduk conquers. Marduk then assigns each of the victorious gods a place in the universe, and each begins to work on his sector. Creating, however, is difficult work—and tiresome. So, the gods seek someone else to do the hard labor. They decide to create humans, who can then serve as their slave laborers. To do so, the gods take blood from one of the conquered gods and mix it with the clay of the earth, forming humankind. The humans' assignments are to present offerings and sacrifices to the gods and to labor in the construction of the new creation.

This Ancient Near Eastern creation story has numerous parallels with Genesis. It shows that humans are created from a part of the gods and from the dust of the earth just as the story of Genesis relates. Rather than serving as the culmination of creation as they are in the Genesis story, the humans in the Babylonian story are a dispensable afterthought, created to provide free and subservient labor for the lazy and warlike gods. Human well-being, and the sustenance required for it, is never a concern of those gods. They show no care for the condition of their slaves—except in their ability to labor.

Within a purely naturalistic modern worldview, provision for the basic sustenance of each person is also not implied. In such a system, the strong are likely to prevail on the basis of their genetic superiority. The species, in fact, might thrive if some of the weaker die off from deprivation. As biologist D. J. Futuyama writes, "Future conditions cannot affect present survival. The enduring variations may increase the organisms' complexity or behavioral repertoire, or they may decrease it. They may increase the likelihood of survival through subsequent environmental changes, or they may increase the likelihood of subsequent extinction."[8] Thus, if future conditions change in such a way that the viability of the human organism is decreased, so be it. Other, more formidable organisms may take their place. In such a system, the survival of the species called humanity is not a priority; nor is its flourishing the highest of goals.

In Genesis, however, God's desire to sustain human persons is patent.[9] The first five days of creation are spent making a world that would be able to sustain

humankind.[10] The waters are separated from the land, and fish are made to live in them. The lights are created to govern day and night, and vegetation grows on the surface of the earth. The heavens are created above, and birds populate the sky. The land is made fertile, and animals are given life within it. Then, only after the world has been so marvelously provisioned, does humankind make its appearance. Moreover, God does not subject his human creations to servitude, or demand that they survive by their own wits or face extinction. Rather, God makes a majestic grant to the new arrivals: "Throughout the earth I give you all plants that bear seed, and every tree that bears fruit with seed: They shall be to you for food" (Gen. 1:29, REB).[11] The world is glorious and valuable in its own right, but its fruitfulness is to serve as the means of provision for humankind.

Humans can develop and reap the produce of creation because they are made like God: re-creators. In Genesis 1:26–27, humans are described as being created in the image and likeness of God. "Then God said, 'Let us make human beings in our image, after our likeness, to have dominion over the fish in the sea, the birds of the air, the cattle, all wild animals on land, and everything that creeps on the earth.'" God the creator has made beings who are capable of taking the basic materials provided in creation and transforming and developing them for new uses.

The terms lying behind the biblical anthropology are *image* (*tselem*) and *likeness* (*demut*). Christian interpretations of this and other *imago dei* texts have varied widely throughout the centuries.[12] Irenaeus, for example, believed that humans lost the likeness of God at the Fall, while retaining the image. Some early interpreters saw the image as the physical nature of humanity and the likeness as the spiritual or rational aspect.[13] Others saw the image as the person created whereas the likeness referred to the person as glorified.[14] Thankfully, contemporary biblical scholarship has curbed speculation on this subject.

Today it is recognized that these terms are nearly synonymous, and the phrase *image and likeness* is a hendiadys.[15] Terms such as *image* and *likeness* do not pretend to present a philosophical anthropology; rather, they show that among all the creatures of the earth, humans are those who are most like God. The similarities between God and humankind identified by contemporary exegetes often focus on the particular capabilities that define the essence of humanity.[16] Humans are God's representatives on the earth and thus are royalty. As Gerhard von Rad puts it: "Just as powerful earthly kings, to indicate their claim and dominion, erect an image of themselves in the provinces of

their empire, so man is placed upon earth in god's image as god's sovereign emblem."[17]

To be effective as God's representatives means that humans must be able to perform certain tasks. The texts that follow in Genesis describe the kinds of tasks these representatives will need to do as they represent God on earth.

The principal task given to humankind as God's official representatives is to "rule and have dominion" over nature (Gen. 1:28). The human ability to rule is derived from the nature of the ultimate ruler and creator—God. Although some commentators see this text as implying a benevolent rule,[18] the actual Hebrew terms used for *rule* and *dominion*, are quite strong. As Gerhard von Rad writes, "He (man) is really God's representative, summoned to maintain and enforce God's claim to dominion over the earth.… The expressions for the exercise of this dominion are remarkably strong: *radha*, tread, trample (e.g., winepress); similarly *kabhash*, stamp.[19]

The softening of, or at least explanation about, the beneficence of this strong human rule awaits declaration in Genesis 2 where God instructs his rulers to "till and keep" the earth that is now in their charge.

Genesis 2 provides the first job description for humankind. Before assigning them their tasks, however, God makes provision for his people. God causes moisture to nourish the plants of the earth and provides them with a lovely garden. Then, we learn that their task is to till or work, and keep the place they have been given. *Tilling* (*avad*) is clearly an agricultural term. They were not to leave the world untouched but to develop its potential in such a way that its productivity is unleashed for good. As Christian ethicists Ronald Sider and Stephen Mott write, "Just, responsible creation of wealth is one important way persons obey and honor the Creator."[20] Use of the world's resources, and development of the world's potential for the maintenance of life and culture is an explicit desire of God. Humans are asked to do more than catch the fruit that falls from the trees; they are also asked to continue the creative work that God began.[21] The term *keeping* is derived from the Hebrew (*shamar*); it has the connotation of guarding. People are to be the guardians of creation, protecting and watching over it. Both of these terms are used in later sections of Scripture that refer to proper worship.[22]

Later, after the flood narrative, God explicitly gives humans the option of providing for their nourishment by eating animal flesh. "Fear and dread of you will come on all the animals on earth, on all the birds of the air, on everything that moves on the ground and on all fish in the sea; they are made subject to you. Every creature that lives and moves will be food for you; I give them all to you, as I have given you every green plant" (Gen. 9:2–3).

God clearly intended to provide for his creatures, chief among them humankind. He prepared the earth in such a way that it would grant them sustenance, and he created humans with the creativity and power they would need to use the earth for their own provision. This perspective may challenge modern views that see property rights as the only means of making a legitimate claim upon the world's goods. A father of the modern republic, John Locke, recognized the legitimacy of claims to goods based not only on legal title but also on each person's nature and need. Consider the following citations from Locke's *Second Treatise on Government*,[23]

> Whether we consider natural Reason, which tells us that Men, being once born, have a right to their Preservation, and consequently to Meat and Drink, and such other things, as Nature affords for their Subsistence: Or Revelation which gives us an account of those Grants God made of the world to Adam, and to Noah, and his Sons, til ver clear, that God, as King David says … has given the Earth to the Children of Men, (i.e.) given it to Mankind in common (II, 25).

Locke also writes: "The fundamental law of nature is the preservation of mankind" (II, 25). Locke here is in lock-step with Scripture. Creation is given to all of humankind for the sustenance of all God's image-bearers.

The Exodus and Distribution of Land

While slaves in Egypt, the people of Israel had enough to eat[24] but were not free to be God's people. In the book of Exodus, God claims the Israelites as his own. In order to do so, he must free them from all other powers. As Leviticus 11:45 states, God's desire was to create a new people who will reflect his holy presence among them[25] and thus be a witness to the surrounding nations.[26] God brought his people out of Egypt and into Canaan not only with the goal of liberating them from slavery but also in order to create a new people who would incarnate his own holiness and justice. As biblical scholar Juan Alfaro states regarding Canaan, "The land was to be a 'sacrament' of the liberation received, and the place where the ideals of the Covenant would become a theological, political, and socioeconomic reality."[27]

God called Israel out of Egypt, and supplied their daily sustenance in the desert in the form of manna and quail. When Israel entered Canaan, the produce of that land was also to be viewed as a gift of God. With divine leadership,[28] the Israelite tribes destroyed fortified cities and routed the more technologically advanced peoples of Palestine.[29] This gift of land surpassed all the

hopes that the Israelites had for it.[30] After the conquest, each tribe and clan was given an appropriate portion of the Promised Land. "Appoint three men from each tribe, and I shall send them out to travel throughout the country. They are to make a survey of it showing the holding suitable for each tribe, and come back to me, and then it can be shared out among you in seven portions" (Josh. 18:4). What was a suitable holding for each tribe? We are not told the basis upon which this decision was made, but we clearly see that the distribution was divinely ordained. The method of casting lots was used to show that God directly guided the allotment process (Josh. 18:6). The portions were divided by lots so that God might provide each tribe their place in the land where they might thrive as his people.

Thus, God first created his people to be his special treasure on the earth; he then provided this people with earthly treasures such as the land of Canaan so that they might thrive. The land of Canaan was the inheritance of the children of God. It was a "land flowing with milk and honey" (Ex. 3:8; Lev. 20:24; Num. 13:27; Deut. 6:3). This poetic depiction describes a land that provided for considerably more than basic needs. Milk was considered a luxury in the warm climates of the Ancient Near East because it spoiled quickly; thus, a land flowing with milk would imply the constant presence of lavish provisions.[31] Honey, too, was considered a rare treat, as it required very good luck or delicate cultivation.[32] Thus, God's design was to provide his people with a land that was more than sufficient for their basic needs.[33] As Old Testament scholar Raymond van Leeuwen puts it: "God shows us his love by means of this world."[34]

This world and its riches, however, were not to be squandered. They were to be the place in which God's people could demonstrate that the presence of holy God was among them.[35] Once people were settled in the land with houses, barns, fields, and so forth, they came to see possession of the land not as a gift but as a right. Instead of being the grateful recipients of a gift, the Israelites began to see themselves as jealous proprietors.[36] God the giver was banished from his own land. As Walter Brueggemann writes, "In such a consciousness Israel is no longer recipient of land but controller, no longer creature of grace but manager of achievement. There is no more radical word than that in Deuteronomy 8:15: 'Yahweh, your God, it is he who gives you power to get wealth.'"[37]

The land, however, was not a purely unconditional grant; it was a conditional gift, and continued life with God in the land required continuous obedience to God. As Brueggemann notes, "Covenant law exists so that Israel will never forget who owns the land, and how it was received."[38] In his study of

ethics in Deuteronomy, J. Gary Millar, too, notes, "While the land is often presented as an unconditional gift of Yahweh (which Israel must simply accept), occupation also seems to be conditioned upon the obedience of Israel (e.g., in Deut. 11:8–9)."[39]

At the heart of scriptural teaching on wealth, property, and poverty is the belief that the world and all things within it belong to God, and whatever portion of it we may receive is a gift of God. This belief affected the way in which property transactions were executed: "No land may be sold outright, because the land is mine, and you come to it as aliens and tenants of mine" (Lev. 25:23). The land and all the wealth that derives from it remains God's to do with as he wills. Among the commands expressing the will of God are many mandating that all his children, especially the weakest among them, have sufficient goods for their daily needs. Some members of Israel, such as orphans, widows, and aliens, were cut off or dispossessed from their inheritance. Nevertheless, these members of the community merited a share of the produce of the land even if they were no longer its officially recognized owners.[40] This leads into the next issue—the covenant law Israel was called to practice in the land they had been given.

Covenant Law

The covenant was the framework for justice in Israel. Keeping covenant meant caring for people and property in God's stead, with God's own holiness and justice as the baseline. Traditional Ancient Near Eastern covenants often occurred among suzerains and their vassals.[41] In these covenants and/or treaties, the suzerain would declare the relationship between the two parties and set forth the conditions required of the vassal. Fidelity to these stipulations would result in blessing and infidelity in curses. God's covenant with the vassal Israel included a number of provisions about property. Stipulations included the prohibition of theft, maintaining fair weights and measures, leaving gleanings for the poor, being openhanded toward the needy, aiding the orphans and widows, and so forth.

The commandment that seems to explicitly recognize the legitimacy of personal possessions is the prohibition of theft, "Do not steal" (Ex. 20:15). As John Calvin notes, however, this prohibition also implies positive duties. Commenting on this passage he writes, "[God] sees the hard and inhuman laws with which the more powerful oppresses and crushes the weaker person.… And such injustice occurs not only in matters of money or in merchandise or land but in the right of each one; for we defraud our neighbors of their prop-

erty if we repudiate the duties by which we are obligated to them."[42] For Calvin, guarding property also implies that we render what is due to others. This rendering might include such diverse things as sharing with others in need, aiding others to keep what rightfully belongs to them, or even showing honor to magistrates and ministers.[43]

Within the covenant code, many laws show special concern for those who experienced the greatest need—the widow, the orphan, and the alien. In Old Testament literature, the widow, the orphan, and the alien are a veritable trinity of neediness, and a number of covenant laws are especially enacted to provide for them. If covenant law were fulfilled in the land, an absence of poverty would result. Deuteronomy 15:4–5 reads: "There will never be any poor among you if only you obey the Lord your God by carefully keeping these commandments which I lay upon you this day; for the Lord your God will bless you with great prosperity in the land which he is giving you to occupy as your holding" (see also Deut. 14:29; 16:11, 14; 26:12, 13). God mandated that his people serve the neediest among them by keeping laws that were specifically enacted to sustain them. This mandate to provide for the needs of the poor is seen in the covenant legislation of the Pentateuch. Note that these are in fact *law*, and not *options* for the compassionate. Among these laws are included:[44]

1. The third-year tithe goes to poor widows, orphans, and sojourners as well as to the Levites (Deut. 14:28–29).
2. Laws on gleaning that permit the poor to harvest leftovers in fields that were not their own (Lev. 19:9–10; Deut. 24:19–21). The story of Ruth shows how this law was enacted.
3. Every seventh year the fields lay fallow, and the poor were permitted to harvest the natural growth.
4. A zero-interest loan must be available to the poor, and if the balance is not repaid by the sabbatical year, it is forgiven (Ex. 22:25; Lev. 25:35–38; Deut. 15:1–11). (Though God did permit interest charges, especially on foreigners,[45] the poor were not to be charged interest.)
5. Israelites who became slaves in order to repay debts go free in the seventh year (Lev. 25:47–53; Ex. 21:1–11; Deut. 15:12–18). When the freed slaves leave, the "master" must provide liberally for them, giving the former slaves cattle, grain, and wine (Deut. 15:14) so they can again earn their own way.
6. The poor, who needed their daily wages for their daily provisions, were to be paid daily (Deut. 24:14–15). Related to this, was the command that a man's coat could not be held as collateral overnight

because the poor man would need that coat to keep himself warm during the night (Deut. 24:13).

7. Redemption by a near family member, by which the next of kin could bail out the indebted or hopeless poor, also served as remedy for those in extreme need (see again Ruth).

Commenting on covenant laws such as these, New Testament scholar David Holwerda writes, "These stipulations sought to provide the poor with an economic base necessary to guarantee a livelihood and personal liberty."[46] Theologian Douglas Meeks comments, "Gleaning rights are not voluntary acts of charity of the rich toward the poor; they are the poors' right to livelihood."[47]

Keeping these and other covenant stipulations would result in blessing for Israel, including a great deal of material prosperity. For example, Leviticus 26:3–5 states: "If you conform to my statutes, if you observe and carry out my commandments, I shall give you rain at the proper season; the land will yield its produce and the trees of the countryside their fruit. Threshing will last till vintage, and vintage till sowing; you will eat your fill and live secure in your land."

However, failure to keep the covenant stipulations would result in a series of curses, including some increasingly devastating property devaluations. For example, Leviticus 26:20 states, "Your strength will be spent in vain; your land will not yield its produce, nor the trees in it their fruit." If the Israelites continue to break covenant, God says, "I shall cut short your daily bread until ten women can bake your bread in a single oven; they will dole it out by weight, and though you eat, you will not be satisfied" (Lev. 26:26). Finally, if the Israelites insist on breaking covenant, God would banish them from the land they had been given. "I shall scatter you among the heathen, pursue you with drawn sword; your land will be desert and your cities heaps of rubble" (Lev. 26:33). In Israel, then, holding property was conditioned upon covenant obedience. Property could be kept only as long as God's tenants used it for good, as stipulated in the covenant. These covenant stipulations required special care for the weakest in that society—the orphan, the widow, and the alien. Property managers who did not follow these stipulations were, literally, cursed.

Note, too, that these curses and punishments were national punishments. For instance, there may well have been some Israelites at the time of the exile who kept the covenant faithfully, used their property with integrity, honored and nurtured the poor, and kept themselves from idols. Nevertheless, just as the blessings of the covenant were awarded to Israel as a whole, so, too, were

covenant curses, such as famine and exile, poured out upon the whole nation. Covenant responsibility entailed corporate responsibility.

The national responsibility to keep covenant also extended across generations. The third commandment states, "I am a jealous God, punishing the children for the sins of the parents to the third and fourth generation of those who reject me. But I keep faith with thousands, those who love me and keep my commandments" (Ex. 20:5b–6). An application of this is seen in Judah at the time of the exile into Babylon. The Jews of that time chafed at this intergenerational responsibility, complaining, "Our forefathers sinned; now they are no more, and we must bear the burden of their guilt" (Lam. 5:7). Their complaint was likely justifiable.[48] The low point of covenant infidelity had occurred two generations previously, during the reign of Manasseh. Yet, as the text relates, the people of Judah paid the price of this infidelity approximately four decades later.

Nor was the justice demanded in covenant law seen as a standard of justice that was applicable only in Israel. The just nature of God himself was the basis for God's demand of justice (cf. Neh. 9:33; Ps. 7:9; Isa. 45:21; Zeph. 3:5), so wherever God is, this standard of justice is also present. God's holy presence was seen most explicitly in the just laws of Israel, but this law was also expressly established to serve as a testimony to the nature of God among Israel's neighbors. Deuteronomy (4:5–8) thus speaks of the wide relevance of covenant law.[49]

> I have taught you statues and laws, as the LORD my God commanded me; see that you keep them when you go into and occupy the land. Observe them carefully, for thereby you will display your wisdom and understanding to other peoples. When they hear about all these states, they will say, "What a wise and understanding people this great nation is!" What great nation has a god close at hand as the LORD our God is close to us whenever we call to him? What great nation is there whose statutes and laws are so just, as is all this code of laws which I am setting before you today?

In light of this global applicability of covenant law, various passages in Scripture condemn not only Israel but also surrounding nations for their greed, violence, and practices of economic injustice. For example, Amos 1:13 reads "For crime after crime of the Ammonites I shall grant them no reprieve, because in their greed for land they ripped open the pregnant women in Gilead." This and other passages[50] show that these covenant laws were not merely local customs but precepts that were applicable worldwide; they reflected the nature of God's own justice. This justice, we reiterate, includes

God's demand that the poor, the widow, and the alien have provision. Laws such as these serve to create a "biblical jurisprudential tradition,"[51] that once guided Israel and continues to guide believers.

For Christians, this tradition of law is believed to derive from, and reflect the just nature of, God. Whereas it may not be fitting to apply the specific rules of the Old Testament to contemporary societies,[52] the principles and responsibilities inherent in this tradition remain valid, inasmuch as these laws continue to reflect the just and merciful character of God. Whereas the means by which these principles and responsibilities are actualized will differ from society to society, the principles and responsibilities themselves have ongoing validity.[53]

The responsibility to care for the weak in society is maintained in the New Testament.[54] Commenting on the difference between justice in the Old and New Testaments, biblical scholar J. G. Gibbs says:

> It is remarkable, in view of greatly changed political circumstances, that this theme of God's social and economic justice was not lost within the early Church. It is not that social justice became less important to God in New Testament times, but rather that the Church was in a very different situation from that of tribal amphictyony or theocratic monarchy.[55]

Advocacy for the Poor

It should be noted at the outset that in the basic sense of those lacking physical goods, Jesus and his disciples were not necessarily among the poorest. The fishermen from Galilee were small business owners. Jesus and his disciples also gave alms, rather than receiving them. As Luke T. Johnson points out: "The poverty of Jesus is not to be found first in his lack of possessions, for he and his followers seem to have received support from others and had sufficient funds to help the poor. The poverty of Jesus is to be found first in his faith. He refused to finally possess anything but the will of his Father."[56]

While the term *poor* does take on wider connotations,[57] a baseline understanding certainly implies that the poor are people who suffer physical lack. Justice in Israel required advocacy for such poor. If, for example, a king would be a worthy representative of God himself, he would stand up for the poor (e.g., Ps. 72; Prov. 29:14). Josiah, for example, is presented as a good king because he defended the poor (Jer. 22:16). David, the model for Israel's later kings, responds to Nathan's story of a rich man who robs the poor man of his only sheep with absolute fury, condemning the culprit to death (before Nathan turns the tables on David himself).[58] In wisdom literature, we hear that "God

… deals out justice to the oppressed. The Lord feeds the hungry and sets the prisoner free" (Ps. 146:5–6), as well as, "The righteous care about justice for the poor, but the wicked have no such concern" (Prov. 29:7).

The call to be an advocate for the poor is based on God's own special concern for them. Stephen Mott and Ronald Sider see this special concern reflected in Scripture in four ways:

1. The Sovereign of history works to lift up the poor and oppressed (e.g., the Exodus).
2. Sometimes, the Lord of history tears down rich and powerful people … because the rich sometimes get rich by oppressing the poor.
3. God identifies with the poor so strongly that caring for them is almost like helping God (Prov. 19:17).
4. God commands that his people share his special concern for the poor (e.g., Ex. 22:21–24; Deut. 15:13–15).[59]

The covenant also includes stipulations regarding tithes and offerings, some of which were used for relief of the poor. Craig L. Blomberg summarizes what these tithes were and how they were to be used.

The tithe in Leviticus 27:30–33 mandates that a tenth of all the produce of one's land and all of one's flocks should be given to the Lord. In Deuteronomy 14:22–29, a tithe of one's produce and flocks was to be eaten at the central sanctuary. Every third year, however, the tithes would go to the local storehouses so that they could be distributed not just to the Levites but also to other poor and marginalized people: "the aliens, the fatherless, and the widows (Deut. 14:29). Prorated annually, these added up to a 23.3 percent tithe.[60]

The most thoroughgoing legislation that attempted to restore the poor to their place in Israel, however, were the Sabbatical and Jubilee Laws. In the Year of Jubilee, (the fiftieth year) most, but not all[61] land in Israel was to revert to the heirs of those who received it in the initial distribution under Joshua. Thus, we see a strong restorative intent to the Jubilee command. The land that had been directly assigned by God to each tribe was to remain the possession of that tribe and clan.[62] The basic premise of the Jubilee legislation is, again, that God owns all the property and wishes to allocate it in a way that meets the needs of all his people.

The subject of the Year of Jubilee has received extensive treatment in Christian economic studies and is a contested field of inquiry.[63] Some, for example, question whether the Year of Jubilee was ever practiced; others ask whether it can bear any relationship to contemporary nation-states or

economies. In addition, hermeneutical issues abound. Recognizing the difficulties surrounding our understanding of the Year of Jubilee, Hans Ucko nevertheless concludes, "Whether it is a dream of hope or a utopia that is nowhere, the jubilee is a resolve against a status quo of continued oppression and exploitation of people and creation.… There must be a temporary suspension or reprieve, a change of mind and conditions."[64]

The Jubilee intends to restore, it seeks to bring people back into the fullness of life within Israel; it diminishes inequality and provides opportunity for renewed life.[65] Enacting Jubilee was to practice true religion. Isaiah, in a famous passage, condemns those who observed rites of worship such as fasting without also performing deeds of justice and mercy. Rather than "bowing one's head and fasting in sackcloth and ashes," Isaiah (58:6–7) asks:

> Is not this the fast I require?
> to loose the fetters of injustice,
> to untie the knots of the yoke,
> and set free those who are oppressed,
> tearing off every yoke?
> Is it not sharing your food with the hungry,
> taking the homeless poor into your house,
> clothing the naked when you meet them,
> and never evading a duty to your kinsfolk?

As the above passage illustrates, covenant law did not merely require that no harm be done to the neighbor; instead, positive, outgoing service to the poor—*sharing*, *taking home*, *clothing*, *never evading*—was also required for the practice of justice. Deuteronomy 15:7–11 also shows that an openhanded *disposition* toward the poor is required: "The poor will always be with you in your land, and that is why I command you to be openhanded toward any of your countrymen there who are in poverty and need."[66] This passage is the source of Jesus' famous saying in Mark 14:7—"You have the poor among you always, and you can help them whenever you like; but you will not always have me."[67]

By citing this passage, Jesus responds to those[68] who condemn the woman when she anoints Jesus with expensive oil, rather than cashing in the ointment and using the money to help the poor. Jesus uses this text from Deuteronomy to expose their insincerity. "The poor are with you always," he says, leaving unspoken but implying the remainder of the text—"therefore be openhanded toward them." Jesus, Judas, and the Jews who condemned the woman no doubt

knew the full text. They recognized that the text did not mandate that they keep the poor poor, but that the presence of the poor was to serve as the reason to be constantly openhanded toward them. Jesus in effect says, "This woman has lavished love upon me; don't you dare condemn her by your sudden and hypocritical concern for the poor. Were you really concerned for the poor, you should be serving them with open hands all the time. The poor, as well as God's command to serve them is constantly with you."

Jesus does not permit the disciples to use the concern for the poor as an excuse to condemn the woman's spontaneous and liberal gratitude. New Testament scholar R. S. Sugirtharajah notes that many biblical scholars from prosperous lands have downplayed the economic impact of Jesus' saying.[69] Paul Minear, for example, writes: "In this context the saying about the poor should not be taken as a teaching on poverty but simply as a pointed reminder of Jesus' death and of the appropriateness of acts of love and adoration."[70] As Sugirtharajah notes, however, the Jubilee context of Jesus' citation from Deuteronomy does indeed constitute a teaching on poverty.

Jesus knew that by selling the perfume for whatever price was not going to solve the problem of the poor. If the disciples were honest about the poor, the only way to tackle it was not to engage in piecemeal charitable acts but to follow the radical social redesign envisioned in Deuteronomy.[71]

From this interpretive vantage point, contemporary readers who use this text to dismiss our responsibility to the poor, "since they will always be with us anyway," risk the same kind of condemnation that the hypocritical disciples incurred.

Elsewhere in the New Testament, Jesus regards compassion for the needy as the standard of genuine righteousness. In the end-times tale of the sheep and the goats (Matt. 25:31–46), Jesus insists that feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, and showing hospitality to the stranger are norms of righteousness. The parable of the rich man and Lazarus condemns the rich man not for a particular act of theft or fraud but for his general neglect of the poor Lazarus (Luke 16:9–31). The parable of the rich fool (Luke 12:13–21) shows just how futile constant accumulation can be. In Luke 12:33, Jesus tells all his disciples (not only the rich young man), "Sell your possessions and give to charity." In a similar vein, James insists that caring for orphans and widows constitutes true religion (James 1:27). In passages such as these, we see that doing justice requires more than passively doing no harm to our neighbor. It requires, rather, that we go out of our way to love the neighbor by seeking out their good, especially the physical good of the poor neighbor.[72]

One passage, however, has been suggested as a challenge to the claim of basic sustenance for all. The text often cited in this regard is the Pauline admonition in 2 Thessalonians 3:10, "Already during our stay with you we laid down this rule: Anyone who will not work shall not eat." Some believers in Thessalonica evidently took the imminent return of the Lord as an excuse to become idle busybodies.[73] They then seemed to expect that their fellow believers would sponsor them in this idleness. Such behavior is clearly not permitted. Other members of the community were not to support a bad habit derived from an overanxious eschatology. Willful sloth brought about by a misguided theology is not to be sponsored by other believers. The mark of a true fellow believer, Paul suggests, is to challenge both their bad eschatology and their idleness.

While this command to those with a hyperactive eschatology might provide a parameter for understanding the mandate to provide basic needs of the poor, it certainly does not overthrow it. Two New Testament scholars provide wise cautions in this regard. Beverly Roberts Gaventa, for example, writes:

> Some will be tempted to hear the command "Anyone unwilling to work should not eat" as an inviting slogan for a new social policy. Those who wish to render this bit of proverbial wisdom into a rule of law proscribing the care of human beings for one another need to remember that this is not the only word in the canon about how people are to be fed. It is one thing to say that idle people should get back to work, but the unmistakable message of the Bible is that humankind rightly honors its creator only when it also protects all those made and loved by that same creator.[74]

Ernest Best concurs, saying:

> It is impossible to move from the teaching of this passage to political or social conclusions for today; it is equally impossible to draw conclusions about the dignity of labor, of its value for the worker himself, or of its economic and social importance. What Paul says relates to a community held together by bonds of religion in a period of economic scarcity; nations in the West are not held together in this way, nor is there the same economic scarcity.[75]

Our description of the biblical mandate for basic sustenance in Scripture would be incomplete if we did not briefly depict its final goal. The various types of justice promoted in Scripture are in and of themselves good, but they also serve as means by which the kingdom of God is made manifest.[76] Justice becomes the social manifestation of the righteousness that God requires.

Through it, we have the format in which the genuine wholeness of *shalom*[77] can be found. As Christian philosopher Nicholas Wolterstorff notes: "In shalom, each person enjoys justice, enjoys his or her rights. There is no shalom without justice. But shalom goes beyond justice."[78] Just distribution, for example, is not yet shalom. In the peaceable kingdom, the King makes complete peace via the Prince of Peace. When that peace is present, we experience not merely the cessation of hostilities or war but wholeness throughout all of life. In true *shalom*, relationships among persons are renewed, as is the relationship between God and humankind and between humanity and the creation. As Wolterstorff concludes: "To dwell in shalom is to enjoy living before God, to enjoy living in one's physical surroundings, to enjoy living with one's fellows, to enjoy life with oneself."[79] It is justice that provides the framework upon which this *shalom* is built.

Equality

Whereas the above passages do indicate that God mandates basic provision for the poor, note that the biblical witness does not require equality, at least in the sense of completely equal goods or conditions for all. Arguments for equality are often derived from the summary passages in Acts where it is said of the early Christians, "Not one of them claimed any of his possessions as his own; everything was held in common" (Acts 4:32). We must examine whether this really implies a completely equal distribution of goods. Only a verse later, we receive a clarification regarding the process: "There was never a needy person among them, because those who had property in land or houses would sell it, bring the proceeds of the sale, and lay them at the feet of the apostles, to be distributed to any who were in *need*" (Acts 4:34). As seen in this description, the motive for the redistribution was based on the relief of *need*, not the desire to create equality.

There are three further reasons why these narratives do not imply a complete equality of goods among all believers. First, the story of Ananias and Sapphira, which immediately follows, confirms that Christians were free either to hold individual property or offer it to the church leaders (Acts 5:4). Peter's condemnation of them lay not in the fact that they kept some property for themselves but that they lied about the property that they did give.

Second, the verb "to sell" in the above passage (Acts 4:34) is in a participial form (*pipraskomenon*), which likely indicates an ongoing process, rather than a one-time event.[80] The passage does not thus suggest a once-for-all sale

of all property by all believers but a process by which some Christian property owners sold off possessions in response to others' needs.

Third, in other parts of the New Testament, selling one's property and sharing all of one's possessions is not demanded of all disciples.[81] While coming to the aid of the poor is mandated in the New Testament as well as the Old, the procedure of combining goods into a common pot is not. Rather, throughout the New Testament, we find a number of possible strategies for the alleviation of poverty, such as offerings, tithes, sharing meals, and so forth. Selling one's goods and placing the proceeds in a communal pot so that no one would be needy is but *one* strategy employed by the early church to fulfill the long-standing desire of God that there "will be no poor among you" (Deut. 15:4). We conclude that communalism was not then, and need not today, be the only strategy pursued to meet the needs of the poor.

Conclusion

In this article, we examined scriptural teaching on economic justice and have seen a strong mandate that the needs of all human persons be met. From Creation, we saw the special care that God provides for his image bearers, whose godlike qualities include their ability to creatively recreate the world in such a way that their needs are met. In the Exodus and the Conquest, we saw that God frees his people to serve him and receive their inheritance. We saw the risks as well as the obligations involved in landholding among covenant people. In the Law, we found that justice included special provision for the weakest in Israel: the widows, orphans, and aliens, and that this justice included both restoration and advocacy. In the prophets, we found that God's people were called to emulate God's character, which includes doing justice, mercy, and righteousness. We saw that these demands applied not only to all of Israelite society but were also to be viewed as God's will for the nations. Jesus confirms that these laws are evidence of kingdom love. James sees care for the poor as true religion. We found, however, that complete equality is not mandated in Scripture, though sharing goods in a common pot may be one of the strategies employed to meet needs.

From the above investigation, we draw the following moral principle: *Inasmuch as all human persons are created by God and bear his image, and inasmuch as God's creation is intended to provide sustenance for all of God's image bearers, and inasmuch as all persons are called to be recreators within this creation; all human persons merit sufficient resources to maintain their lives and participate in human society.*[82]

Note the many things that this mandate does *not* do. The mandate does not render judgment about capitalism or socialism. It does not claim that all persons are due a handout. It does not argue that all of the world's goods ought to be distributed equally. It does, however, argue that the Bible does instruct us about how the goods of this world ought to be distributed, urging that their distribution occur in such a way that all human persons have basic sustenance. We make this moral claim, believing that the word of God expresses the will of God and that God's will is yet regnant. We thus enunciate the moral principle that the provision of basic sustenance is a mandate of justice.[83]

Although we must cross time and cultures when we appropriate the Scriptures today, the living Christian tradition continues to direct. Fulfilling the mandate of basic sustenance for all is a contemporary task that can be accomplished in many ways, just as it was in Bible times. Providing productive work, enabling people to be self-sufficient, or providing direct aid to those who cannot help themselves are among the many potential strategies for providing basic sustenance for all.[84] Seeing that it is fulfilled in effective, efficient, and compassionate ways is a duty for economists, politicians, businesspeople, and, indeed, all who continue to hold to the importance of what the Bible says.

Notes

1. Definitions of basic sustenance vary substantially from those that are hierarchically based such as Lawrence Kohlberg's famous theory of moral development: Lawrence Kohlberg, Charles Levine, and Alexandra Hewer, *Moral Stages: A Current Formulation and a Response to Critics* (Basel and New York: Karger, 1983); and relational models such as that proposed by John Jones, "Assessing Human Needs, *Philosophy and Theology* 5 (1990): 55–64. The definition I find most helpful is found in Amartya Sen's "Capability and Well-Being," in *The Quality of Life*, ed. Martha Nussbaum and Amartya Sen (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997), 30–53. Sen urges that all must have capabilities to perform basic functions within one's society. These functions may vary somewhat from person to person and between societies. Therefore, one set of goods cannot be universally thought of as basic and capable of enabling all people to perform basic functions.
2. James D. Wolfenson, *World Development Indicators* (Washington: The World Bank, 2003), v.
3. Ibid, 5–6.

4. For a critique of various approaches to reading Scripture as a moral guide in economic questions and a possible way forward, see Max Stackhouse, "What Then Shall We Do? On Using Scripture in Economic Ethics," *Interpretation* (October 1987): 382–97.

5. From Allen Verhey, "The Use of Scripture in Ethics," in *Readings in Moral Theology No. 1: The Use of Scripture in Moral Theology*, ed. Charles E. Curran and Richard A. McCormick (New York: Paulist Press, 1984), 213–41. For further study of the Bible and ethics, see the remainder of the Curran and McCormick volume. Also see William C. Spohn, *What Are They Saying About Scripture and Ethics?* (New York: Paulist Press, 1995) and Jeffrey S. Siker, *Scripture and Ethics: Twentieth-Century Portraits* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997).

6. I will not be making distinctions between the two at this point. Later, when treating the Christian Scriptures found in the New Testament, I will refer to them as such.

7. From D. J. Wiseman, "Babylonia," *International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, ed. Geoffrey Bromiley (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979), 1:398 (hereafter, *ISBE*).

8. D. J. Futuyama, *Evolutionary Biology* (Sunderland, Mass.: Sinauer, 1979), 7. Cited in Elisabeth A. Lloyd, "Evolution: Theory of" in *The Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward Craig (London: Routledge, 1998).

9. We recognize that creation is valuable in its own right, apart from the sustenance it provides to humans. We also recognize that a significant question today is whether creation can sustain continued economic growth. A growing literature on ecological ethics addresses this. See, for example, Larry Rasmusen, *Earth Community, Earth Ethics* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1998); James M. Gustafson, *A Sense of the Divine: The Natural Environment from a Theocentric Perspective* (Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 1994); Herman E. Daly and John B. Cobb, *For the Common Good: Redirecting the Economy toward Community, the Environment, and a Sustainable Future* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1989). See also Julian L. Simon, "An Interchange with Paul Erlich," *Population Matters* (1990): 359–80, for a famous debate on the question of the sustainability of human life under current resource usage patterns.

10. I intend to take up no debate on the science-religion questions surrounding the creation narratives. I read the texts as theological history, and see them as crucial for the understanding of anthropology and cosmology that we here pursue.

11. *The Revised English Bible* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989). All further Bible references will be to the REB unless otherwise noted.

12. For a historical summary of these understandings see David Cairns, *The Image of God in Man* (London: SCM Press, 1973).

13. Gordon J. Wenham, *Genesis 1–15* (Waco: Word, 1987), 29.

14. See also G. W. Bromiley, "Image of God," *ISBE*, 803–5 for a brief historical presentation of views on the image and likeness.

15. A hendiadys is "the use of two words connected by a conjunction to express the same idea as a single word with a qualifier." *Funk and Wagnalls New Practical Standard Dictionary* (New York: Funk and Wagnalls, 1956), 620. From an exegetical viewpoint Gerhard von Rad writes: "One will do well to split the physical from the spiritual as little as possible: the whole man is created in God's image." *Genesis* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1972), 58.

16. Wenham, *Genesis 1–15*, 32.

17. von Rad, *Genesis*, 60.

18. Gordon Wenham, for example says, "Mankind is here commissioned to rule nature as a benevolent king, acting as God's representative over them and therefore treating them in the same way as God who created them. Thus animals, though subject to man, are viewed as his companions in 2:18–20." Ibid, 33.

19. von Rad, *Genesis*, 60.

20. Stephen Mott and Ronald Sider, "Economic Justice: A Biblical Paradigm," in *Toward a Just and Caring Society*, ed. David P. Gushee (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1999), 21.

21. For a theology that thoroughly works out this relationship between creation and culture from a Reformed theological perspective see Henry Van Til, *A Calvinistic Concept of Culture* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1999).

22. For example, the command to keep the Sabbath day holy (Ex. 20:8) uses this term.

23. John Locke, *Two Treatises on Government*, ed. Peter Laslett (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970).

24. See passages such as Numbers 11:18; 14:1–4, where the Israelites complain that they were better off in Egypt where they had plenty of food.

25. "Be holy, for I, the LORD your God am holy." Also, Lev. 19:2.

26. Isaiah 42:6, for example.

27. Juan Alfaro, "God Protects and Liberates the Poor—O.T.," in *Option for the Poor: Challenge to the Rich Countries*, ed. Leonardo Boff and Virgil Elizondo (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1986), 32. See also the same author "The Land—Stewardship" *BTB* 8 (1978): 51–61.

28. See, for example, Deuteronomy 9:3–4; 11:23; and Joshua 23:9–10 for depictions of the strength and evil of the Canaanites, as well as the promises the Lord made to drive out these nations on behalf of Israel.

29. For a comparison of the relative backwardness of the Israelites *vis à vis* their Canaanite opponents, see Neal Bierling, *Giving Goliath His Due* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1992).

30. See, for example, Deuteronomy 8:7–10.

31. See R. K. Harrison, "Milk," in *ISBE*, 3:335.

32. See J. A. Patch, "Honey," in *ISBE*, 2:749.

33. See John R. Schneider, *The Good of Affluence: Seeking God in a Culture of Wealth* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003) for an extended treatment of this point. Schneider argues that God desires to provide his people with the "delight" that can come as a result of earthly blessings.

34. Raymond van Leeuwen, "Enjoying Creation—Within Limits," in *The Midas Trap*, ed. David Neff (Wheaton: Victor Books, 1990), 24.

35. A number of Old Testament texts reflect this idea (e.g., Deut. 7:6; 10:15; Ex.19:6; Isa. 42:6; 49:6).

    1 Peter 2:9 then picks up these themes and applies them to the new Christians. "But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a dedicated nation, a people claimed by God for his own, to proclaim the glorious deeds of him who called you out of the darkness into his marvelous light."

36. Walter Brueggemann, *The Land* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1977), 45–70.

37. Ibid., 56.

38. Ibid., 61.

39. J. Gary Millar, *Now Choose Life: Theology and Ethics in Deuteronomy* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 57. Millar here represents and agrees with the position of J. G. Ploger.

40. See Luke T. Johnson, *Sharing Possessions: Mandate and Symbol of Faith* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1981), 91.

41. There were also covenants between relative equals, seen, for example, in Genesis 20 between Abraham and Abimelech.

42. John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, trans. Ford Lewis Battles, ed. John T. McNeill (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960), 2.8.409.

43. Ibid., 410.

44. See Mott and Sider, "Economic Justice," 40–41.

45. Deuteronomy 23:20.

46. David Holwerda, "The Poor," *ISBE*, 3:906.

47. Douglas Meeks, *God the Economist* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1989), 87.

48. 2 Kings 23:24–27.

49. It might be asked at this point or others: Why does a Christian ethicist so focus on Old Testament law? I have two responses: First, these are also Christian Scriptures, and second, the Old Testament law provides rich details of a divine plan for a just society. Whereas the New Testament emphasizes the salvific work of Christ, the Old Testament emphasizes life as God's people in God's land.

50. See also Jeremiah 47–48; Isaiah 23–24; Zechariah 9:1–4, and earlier oracles in Amos for similar condemnations of the unjust nations.

51. This helpful phrase was suggested by Daniel Maguire in my dissertation defense. The dissertation is entitled "Distributive Justice and the Free Market: Toward a Reformed Theological-Economic Approach" (December 2003). It will soon be available via the University of Michigan microfilm dissertation collection.

52. One school of Protestant thinkers, "theonomists," does seem to hold that these ancient rules of Israel should yet be in force. See, for example, Gary North, *Theonomy: An Informed Response* (Tyler, Tex.: Institute for Christian Economics, 1991); and Rousas J. Rushdooney, *Institutes of Biblical Law* (Vallecito, Calif.: Ross House Books), 1986.

53. For an effective distinction between responsibilities, which are global and cross-cultural, and duties, which are cultural and particular, see Joel Feinberg, *Rights, Justice and the Bounds of Liberty: Essays in Social Philosophy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980).

54. Although already in the New Testament not all of the specific duties of Old Testament civil law are maintained; for example, Jesus proclaims the liberation of Jubilee (Luke 4:19) but does not call for the return of all tribal lands to the heirs of their original owners.

55. J. G. Gibbs, "Just," *ISBE*, 2:1167. Gibbs mentions passages such as Colossians 4:1, "Masters treat your slaves justly," as well as Jesus' comments on tithing in Matthew 23:23, Luke's emphasis on the poor, and the Gospel's apocalyptic writings on justice (Matt. 24–25; Mark 13; Luke 21:8–36) as showing that the cry for justice found in the Old Testament is maintained in the New Testament.

56. Johnson, *Sharing Possessions*, 70. See also Schneider, *The Good of Affluence*.

57. In Hebrew the terms: *anawim*, poor, humble, oppressed; *dal*, weak, poor; *rash*, poor, needy; *ebyon*, in want, needy; and *misken*, dependent, socially inferior, all treat various aspects of a similar concept and are often used interchangeably (cf. e.g., Ps. 82:3f). The poor were also often seen as the oppressed. In some biblical literature (e.g., Ps. 14:6–7; Isa. 3:15; 14:32), the poor are even identified as the people of God because they are those who can turn to God alone for their vindication. In the Septuagint and the New Testament, the Greek terms used for the poor

are *praus*, *penas*, and *ptochos*. Outside the Psalms, *praus* is never used; instead one finds *tapenoi* and *ptoxoi*. See David Peter Seccombe, "Possessions and the Poor in Luke-Acts," *Studien zum Neuen Testament und Seiner Umwelt* (1982) for further elaboration of the terms meaning "poor."

58. 2 Samuel 12:5–6.

59. Mott and Sider, "Economic Justice," 27–29.

60. Craig L. Blomberg, *Neither Poverty nor Riches: A Biblical Theology of Material Possessions* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 46. Blomberg also cites J. G. McConville, "Law and Theology in Deuteronomy," *JSOT* (1984): 68–87, as he calculates the overall percentage of the Israelite tithe.

61. A house sold within a walled city, for example, is not redeemable by its original owner more than one year after the sale (Lev. 25:29–21).

62. The story of Naboth's vineyard, in 1 Kings 21:1–19, shows how this notion that land is an inherited gift from God conflicted with the view of King Ahab that property is a commodity.

63. Hans Ucko edits a good recent analysis of the Year of Jubilee by both Jews and Christians of various traditions: *The Jubilee Challenge: Utopia or Possibility?* (Geneva: WCC Publications, 1997). See also M. Weinfeld, "Sabbatical Year and Jubilee in the Pentateuchal Laws and their Ancient Near Eastern Background," in *The Law in the Bible and in Its Environment*, ed. T. Veijolo (Gottingen: Vanden-Hoeck & Ruprecht, 1990), 39–62; M. Harris, *Proclaim Jubilee: A Spirituality for the Twenty-First Century* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1996); and "Sabbatical Year and Jubilee," in *Encyclopedia Judaica* (Jerusalem, 1971), 14:574–86.

64. Hans Ucko, "The Jubilee as Challenge," in *The Jubilee Challenge: Utopia or Possibility?* 2.

65. John Schneider correctly notes that Jubilee does not obviate the legitimacy of private property. He argues further, however, that the Jubilee redistribution might not have had equalizing effects because it returned land to Israelites on the basis of the original distribution under Joshua rather than on the basis of the actual needs of its then-current residents (Schneider, 83–84). If the original distribution of land, directed by the hand of God as seen in the casting of lots, was designed so that *all* God's people would have a place to thrive in God's land as God's royal representatives, a fifty-year redistribution would necessarily restore *all* Israelites to this condition of near equality, prohibiting a *few* Israelites from "adding plot to plot, and house to house."

66. For a contemporary commentary on the theological and ethical challenges of Deuteronomy, see J. Gary Millar, *Now Choose Life: Theology and Ethics in Deuteronomy* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998).

67. Parallels in Matthew 26:11 and John 12:8. Only Mark cites the fuller deuteronomic text. John and Matthew say: "The poor you will have with you always, but you will not always have me."

68. In Matthew it is "the disciples," in Mark it is "some present," and in John it is Judas Iscariot.

69. R. S. Sugirtharajah, "'For You Always Have the Poor with You': An Example of Hermeneutics of Suspicion," *Asia Journal of Theology*, 4, no. 1 (1990), 102–7.

70. Paul Minear, cited on page 103 of Sugirtharajah. (Sugirtharajah refers us to Minear's gospel commentaries but does not provide the specific citation.)

71. Sugirtharajah, "For You Always Have the Poor with You," 105.

72. The answer to the question: "Who is my neighbor?" has been definitively answered in the parable of the Good Samaritan found in Luke 10:29–37.

73. The term used to describe these people—*periergadzomenous* may suggest more than just laziness. It seems that they were not only avoiding their own work but also interfering in that of others.

74. Beverly Roberts Gaventa, *First and Second Thessalonians* (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1998), 131–32.

75. Ernest Best, *A Commentary on the First and Second Epistles to the Thessalonians* (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 1986), 339.

76. Relating wealth to distributive justice and Hebrew wisdom, Raymond van Leeuwen writes, "wealth is not necessarily a sign of God's blessing. It all hangs on whether wealth stays within the boundaries carved out by righteousness and justice, whether wealth serves the kingdom of God or the kingdom of the self." Van Leeuwen, "Enjoying Creation Within Limits," 37–38.

77. "The noun *shalom*, one of the most significant theological terms in Scripture, has a wide semantic range stressing various nuances of its basic meaning: totality or completeness. The nuances include fulfillment, completion, maturity, soundness, wholeness (both individual and communal), community, harmony, tranquility, security, well-being, welfare, friendship, agreement, success, and prosperity. R. F. Youngblood, "Peace," in *ISBE*, 3:732.

78. Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Until Justice and Peace Embrace* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983), 69. (Wolterstorff does not italicize shalom.)

79. Ibid., 70. One can hardly miss the echoes of the first question and answer of the Westminster Shorter Catechism here: "Q: What is the chief end of man? A: To serve God and enjoy Him forever."

80. The participle is in the perfect, whereas a once-for-all action would likelier be indicated by an aorist.

81. There is, however, always a moral and spiritual risk involved in holding on to one's possessions. As Luke Timothy Johnson writes: "Every form of idolatry is a form of possessiveness. Whether it be beauty, material things, power, or prestige, the centering of ourselves on some created reality as ultimate involves a claim of possessing. An idolater is one who, quite literally seeks to have god in his pocket." Luke T. Johnson, *Sharing Possessions: Mandate and Symbol of Faith* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1981), 55. See also Colossians 3:5 where Paul equates ruthless greed with idolatry.

82. A wide range of churches and individuals support just such a mandate. For example, the *Oxford Declaration* writes, "Justice requires conditions such that each person is able to participate in society in a way compatible with human dignity. Absolute poverty, where people lack even minimal food and housing, basic education, health care, and employment, denies people the basic economic resources necessary for just participation in the community. Corrective action with and on behalf of the poor is a necessary act of justice. This entails responsibilities for individuals, families, churches, and governments" (par. 40). Also, "In affirmation of the dignity of God's creatures, God's justice for them requires life, freedom, and sustenance.… Human beings therefore have a claim on other human beings for social arrangements that ensure that they have access to the sustenance that makes life in society possible" (par. 51). Herbert Schlossberg, Vinay Samuel, and Ronald J. Sider, *The Oxford Declaration and Beyond* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), 81–99. The British economist and evangelical John P. Wogaman sums up his view of just distribution, saying "*The capacity of any economic system or policy to meet the rudimentary needs of all is surely the most elementary criterion of the moral acceptability of that system or policy*." John P. Wogaman, "Economic Problems as Ethical Problems," in *Concilium. Christian Ethics and Economics: The North-South Conflict*, ed. Dietmar Mieth and Jacques Pohier (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, and New York: Seabury Press, 1980), 80, my italics. For critical surveys of other official Protestant statements on economic justice see Paul F. Camenisch, "Recent Mainline Protestant Statements on Economic Justice," in *The Annual of the Society of Christian Ethics* (Knoxville: Society of Christian Ethics, 1987). Also, chapter 5 of Max L. Stackhouse, *Public Theology and Political Economy* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987).

83. Arguments to the contrary would need to show that either there is not any discernible biblical teaching or mandate on this subject, or it is God's will that some people do not have sustenance sufficient for their basic needs. Both of these options seem far-fetched.

84. This article does not presume to dictate which strategies would be most wise to implement today. Our task has been to show that basic sustenance for all is a claim that all humans can make in light of biblical teaching.