The Centre for Enterprise, Markets and Ethics

Theology and the Market Series

The Economics of the Hebrew Scriptures

'That the LORD your God may bless you'

Ben Cooper

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Theology and the Market

Our Theology and the Market series is the more academic of our publications series.

Our aim is to explore the central role of the market economy built upon ethical foundations. We want to encourage business professionals, church leaders, policy makers, academics and other interested groups to think deeply about the foundations of economic life. Our authors bring their intellectual and academic skills to this task.

Contributors are free to debate the intellectual arguments and express opinions. These views are not necessarily those of CEME, its board or staff, but we hope they will stimulate further discussion and reflection.

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Chapter 1

Introduction

No one makes up their own economics. Everyone has *some* theory of how the economy works, however simple or crude, but not one they've made up on their own. Theories of the economy get built in multiple ways. We build a tacit model of the economy as we engage in economic activity with other people or other parties. The models are refined as we listen to others arguing or debating economic issues. Some of us have had more formal economic training – explicitly learning from others. But howsoever they are shaped, our theories of the economy are always shaped in part by other people or other sources. Keynes famously quipped that 'Practical men, who believe themselves to be quite exempt from any intellectual influences, are usually slaves of some defunct economist', but he could easily have added that that those 'defunct economists' were also slaves to the many other economists or thinkers who went before them.[1] This is not intended as a negative observation. A dependency on others is more often than not a good thing. There are not many things people agree on when it comes to economics, but most are agreed that economic systems are mightily complicated, frustratingly unpredictable, and span multiple dimensions of human activity and multiple disciplines of human thought. We need all the help we can get.

The question is: 'Are we getting all the help we can?' Economists can be frustratingly insular – even imperialist – towards those outside the discipline, subsuming other subject areas into their own sometimes rather narrow patterns of thought. The Czech economist Tomas Sedlacek has recently argued that economists would do well to open themselves up to outside ideas, ideas spread but forgotten throughout human history. 'I argue', he begins, 'that there is at least as much wisdom to be learned from our own philosophers, myths, religions and poets as from exact and strict mathematical models of economic behaviour.'[2] Part of his stimulating thesis is the claim that there is much we can learn from the 'Old Testament' of the Christian canon of Scripture – the 24 or so (depending on how one counts them) books that constitute the Hebrew Scriptures or Tanakh.[3] This claim – re-examined and restated – is the topic of this study.

The idea that we might learn from this text not only within but beyond the Christian community may not seem at first an especially compelling or attractive claim. Mention of the Hebrew or Christian Scriptures can provoke a sharp reaction. For some this is a defunct text, of historical interest only – with many in this group very happy to leave the historical investigation to others. The ethics found in this text are primitive (it is assumed), and we have moved on. For others this

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1 John Maynard Keynes, *The General Theory of Employment, Interest and Money* (London: Macmillan & Co., 1936), pp. 383–4.

2 Tomas Sedlacek, *Economics of Good and Evil: The Quest for Economic Meaning from Gilgamesh to Wall Street* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), p. 9.

3 The Tanakh is made up from the five books of the Torah (Genesis to Deuteronomy), the eight books of the Nevi'im or Prophets (Joshua to Kings, Isaiah to Ezekiel and the Minor Prophets) and the eleven books of the Ketuvim or Writings (Psalms to Chronicles). In the protocanonical books of the Christian Old Testament, Samuel, Kings, Chronicles and Ezra(-Nehemiah) are each split in two, and the Minor Prophets are divided into their 12 component parts, giving 39 books in total. The order is also different, following that of the third-century BC translation of the Hebrew Scriptures into Greek known as the Septuagint or LXX.

is a merely religious text that still holds an irrational sway over a fundamentalist minority. For an increasing number the Bible text is simply a mystery, its contents unknown and undiscovered. I will argue, to the contrary, that this ancient text is a feast or meal for the mind and soul, a life-giving source to a body deprived of essential nutrients. The Bible text is like a scalpel, able to cut through the complexities of the human condition – even the economic complexities.

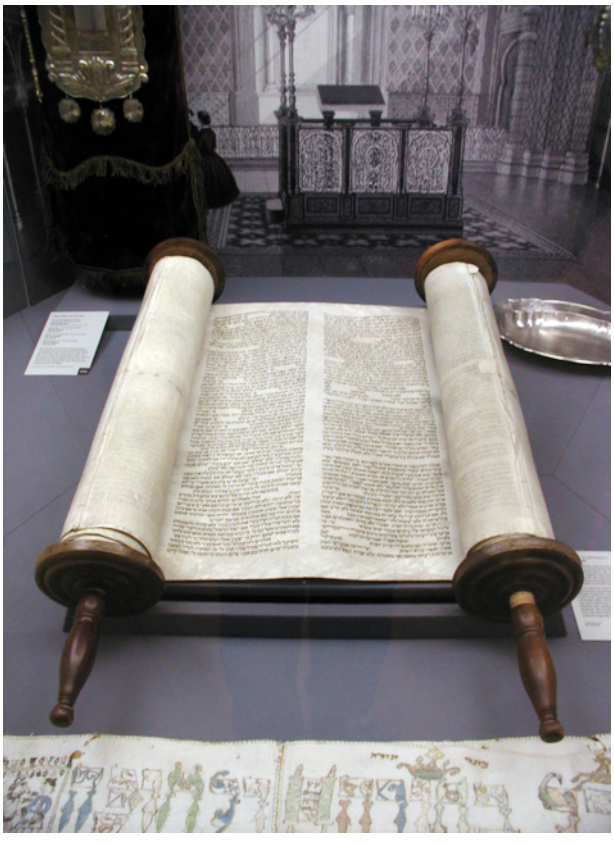
Economic analysis is indeed rather like a surgical deliberation. For the surgeon, a key question has always been, 'Should we operate? Or will it do more harm than good?' The human body is a remarkable organism, generally quite happy getting on without any interference, with built-in regulation and a sometimes extraordinary capacity for self-healing. But things do go wrong, and then quite seriously. Indeed, in the end, going wrong is inevitable. The question then is: 'Should someone intervene, and, if so, how and with what effect?' The history of medicine and surgery is littered with sorry examples of inappropriate medical interventions driven by ignorance, unfounded hope or hubris.

Compare this to our approach to economic governance. Behind all the pontificating about economics, the simple truth is that if we take the vast totality of economic activity, it seems people are usually quite capable of making good economic decisions for themselves, and collectively this tends to work out more or less fine much of the time. With a very minimal framework supporting property rights and simple contracts, it seems that the majority of economic activity generally looks after itself. But things do go wrong. Sometimes they go wrong very seriously. As the world continues to struggle in the fragile aftermath of the 2008 global financial crisis, we should be very aware of this. Everyone agrees that something went wrong, but what, if anything, should be done? Should governments intervene? How should they intervene? Will it do any good? Might it make things worse? What interventions might prevent a reoccurrence? Economic history is littered with sorry examples of inappropriate government interventions driven by unfounded hope or hubris. Even when well-intentioned, intervention has often been woefully ignorant of or insensitive to its unwanted consequences.

As economic science grows and develops, we can hope for an improvement, for more understanding and awareness of the unintended consequences of a given action or intervention. We can hope for deeper understanding of the circumstances under which we are best able to flourish economically. It may be, however, that many of the economic problems facing us go beyond the merely structural or technical. What if the fundamental issues causing problems both at the level of regular economic activity and economic intervention were *moral* issues – failures of value, principle and character? This might leave some economists feeling outside their comfort zones, but the days of pretending economics can be a purely 'positive' science are thankfully long gone. The positive/normative distinction was never especially helpful in the first place. As Tomas Sedlacek observes, 'the comment itself "economics should be a positive science" is a *normative statement*'.[4] We might desire some kind of moral neutrality in our analysis, but it's an illusion – a myth. Where, then, can we look for help? In the UK at the beginning of the twenty-first century we might be under the misapprehension that the places our ancestors looked to for answers to the fundamental questions of life have been exhausted. In a confused world, with economic systems not working as we would like them to, perhaps our search for answers *should* involve looking to the past – including places we thought we knew about but perhaps don't know nearly so well as we imagined. In particular, the Hebrew Scriptures are a place worthy of our attention, overflowing with good things for us to consider.

4 Sedlacek, *Economics of Good and Evil*, p. 7; emphasis in original.

Part of my aim is to summarise the economic teaching of the Hebrew Scriptures such that we can see its relevance for us today. In other words, this is an exercise in what is sometimes called 'biblical ethics'. Biblical ethics is never entirely straightforward. It is very tempting, for example, to sweep through all the commands and instruction across the Hebrew canon that have a vaguely 'economic' feel to them, and simply bundle them together. That would be a mistake. Instructional material is almost always context-specific, and the ethical teaching of the Bible is always placed in the context of an unfolding story (or history). History and Torah (Law) are overlapping. Indeed, the word Torah 'encompasses not only specific legal or moral instruction, but also a historical review of Israel's past'.[5] There are well-known perils involved in making ethical inferences from narrative material, but it is hard to avoid concluding that the Old Testament narratives have, as Gordon Wenham puts it, 'a didactic purpose, that is, they are trying to instil both theological truths and ethical ideals into their readers'.[6] I shall attempt to do justice to both history and Torah, narrative and instruction, in the Hebrew Scriptures.



Sefer Torah at old Glockengasse Synagogue, Cologne

We will concentrate on the contribution of one book in particular: Deuteronomy. Of course there is plenty of other material in the Hebrew Scriptures relating to the ethics of economics, and the intention is not to ignore this (although it will necessarily have to be treated at less depth). Focusing on one book, with its own logic and integrity, will give a clarity and sharpness that would be missing in a more general approach, and will contribute to the overall picture presented by the Hebrew Scriptures on economic issues.

Why the book of Deuteronomy? This collection of sermons, given by Moses, was preached to God's people in the region of Moab on the borders of the Promised Land, at a key moment of decision for the people of God. It may seem like a distant and alien setting, and yet we can relate to this instruction – which includes a relatively high density of material related to the ethics of economics – with sufficient closeness to discern powerful values and principles for our own time. As we shall see, Deuteronomy is a pivotal book in the Old Testament storyline, which simply would not make much sense if it were not there. James Robson begins his excellent introduction to Deuteronomy by quoting a conversation between two archaeologists, one American and one Israeli, in James Michener's 1965 novel *The Source*. The American archaeologist wants to know what to read in order to understand the Jewish people better. The answer is simple: if you want to understand Judaism, read Deuteronomy five times – 'It's the greatest central book of the Jews and if you master it you'll understand us.'[7]

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5 Peter Enns, 'Law of God', in Willem A. VanGemeren (ed.), *New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology and Exegesis* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1996), vol. 4, p. 897.

6 Gordon J. Wenham, *Story as Torah: Reading the Old Testament Ethically* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 2000), p. 3.

7 James Robson, *Honey from the Rock: Deuteronomy for the People of God* (Nottingham: Apollos, 2013), pp. 13–14; James A. Michener, *The Source: A Novel* (New York: Dial Press, 2012), p. 187.

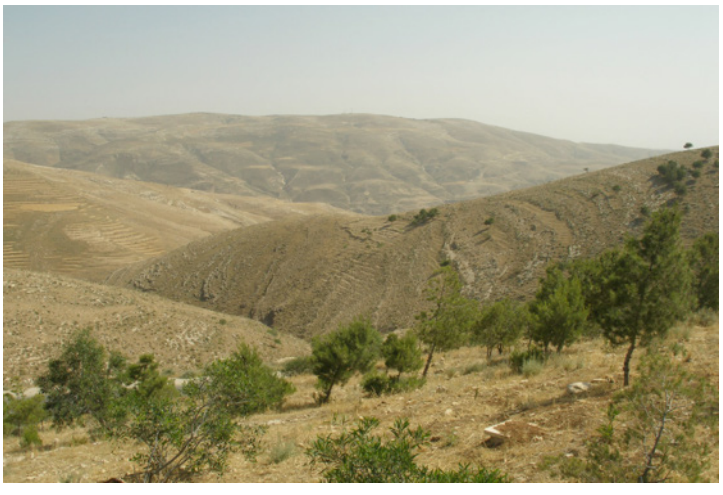
This publication is therefore a gateway to understanding a uniquely influential outlook on life. Seen in its context within both the Tanakh and the Christian canon of Scripture, we are taken even further. Engaging with Deuteronomy and other biblical texts related to economics does more than simply supply values and principles for more secure performance in the present day. Even thousands of years later, rightly discerning the relevance of these texts also requires us to recognise our place in the same history that concerns them.

Chapter 2

The setting

2.1 The economic world of the ancient Near East

I am writing this in the UK in 2016, a long way in distance, time and culture from the Plains of Moab on the borders of the land promised to the people of Israel. Nevertheless, if somehow we were able to make that journey, the evidence suggests we would not find a world entirely alien to our own but one with at least some points of contact to our experience of economic life.



Mount Nebo, Plains of Moab

For example, in the latter part of the period of history we are concerned with, there was a limited use of coinage for exchange – the so-called 'Axial Age', running from approximately the eighth to the third centuries BC. Coins were a means for governments to pay mercenary soldiers in a way that was portable and transferable – hence funding the violent global warfare of the times. The growing usage of coins opened up all sorts of new markets across all sorts of boundaries. The radical changes and new moral issues this brought about prompted thinkers and prophets around the world to react, their thoughts more easily circulating – and surviving – in a new world of trade and literacy. Whatever one makes of this, the coins themselves cannot be disputed. The first coins date from Lydia, in modern-day Turkey, around 600 BC, made of a gold–silver alloy. In intercity or international transactions the coins were treated according to the weight of metal. Within the city, coins were always worth more than the gold or silver of which they were made. In times of crisis, Greek city-states would mint coins of bronze or tin, 'which everyone would agree, while the emergency lasted, to treat as if they were really made of silver' – thus anticipating modern fiat money.[1]

Even apart from such minted coinage, weighed silver and gold were widely used as a common medium of exchange. The Hebrew word *kesep*, which appears a number of times in Deuteronomy (2.6, 28; 7.25; 8.13; 14.25, 26; 17.17; 21.14; 22.19, 29; 23.20; 29.16), can be translated either 'silver' or 'money' – and was weighed in shekels (about 11–13 g). A talent was 3,000 shekels (about 33–39 kg). A *daric* may have been a Persian gold coin (1 Chron. 29.7; Ezra 8.27).

1 David Graeber, *Debt: The First 5,000 Years* (New York: Melville House, 2011), p. 246.

So what was being produced for exchange? In Israel there was some minor industry: pottery, textiles, wine and olive oil production, even some metalwork and mining.[2] Iron and copper was mined, smelted and cast in ingots.[3] There was perfume distillation.[4] Some wine and oil was branded.[5] There were well-used international trade routes. Speaking of the period after the division of the nation after Solomon, Morris Silver concludes:

> During the eighth and seventh centuries, specialized production centres emerged and applied mass-production techniques, most notably in the areas of ceramics and residential housing. Israelite agriculture exported its products and displayed notable technical sophistication, including a rather remarkable adaptation to the desert environment of the Negeb. Testimony to a lively commerce is provided not only by specialized production, but also by the growing use of stone in building, by warehouse facilities, firms with complex managerial structures, brand names, land consolidation, and by the existence of significant population concentrations such as Samaria and Jerusalem.[6]

Apart from these instances of 'lively commerce', some things would be familiar because they hardly change. The subsistence farming undertaken by a large proportion of Israelites in this period would not have been vastly different from what we observe in the developing world today. Indeed, the prevalence of subsistence farming would probably be our dominant impression.[7]

But we should not think this ancient world too much like our own. There may have been some degree of specialisation of labour in non-rural areas, but nothing like that we see in a modern industrial economy. And while it's inaccurate to characterise the pre-seventeenth-century world as without growth or innovation, the ancient economic history of Israel doesn't seem to have been driven by technological innovation to any significant extent.[8] Recent excavations at Tell el-Kheleifeh uncovered industrial ruins that were initially dated to the time of Solomon and described by archaeologists as the 'Pittsburgh of Palestine', but subsequent research showed them to be much more modest affairs, and of a later date.[9]

Moreover, we are a long, long time before the invention of anything like effective medical practice. Life was therefore relatively hard. We need to remember that poverty has changed in character in the modern world.[10] People lived closer to malnutrition and severe ill-health, with low life expectancy.

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2 Morris Silver, *Prophets and Markets: The Political Economy of Ancient Israel* (Boston: Kluwer-Nijhoff, 1983), pp. 15–18.

3 Silver, *Prophets and Markets*, p. 18.

4 Silver, *Prophets and Markets*, p. 18.

5 Silver, *Prophets and Markets*, pp. 29–34.

6 Silver, *Prophets and Markets*, p. 247.

7 'In terms of modern economic analysis, the system approximated to the kind of subsistence farming which characterizes much of the rural economy in the third world' – Donald A. Hay, *Economics Today: A Christian Critique* (Leicester: Apollos, 1989), p. 37.

8 Rodney Stark, in his book *The Victory of Reason: How Christianity Led to Freedom, Capitalism, and Western Success* (New York: Random House, 2005), argues that innovation and growth was far more prevalent before the seventeenth century than we sometimes imagine. He also argues that it was Christianity and Christian ways of thinking that provided the seed-bed for this development. If so, then we need to explain why things seem to have been different in Israel in the millennium before Christ. We shall return to this below.

9 Silver, *Prophets and Markets*, p. 18.

10 Abhijit V. Banerjee and Esther Duflo, *Poor Economics: A Radical Rethinking of the Way to Fight Global Poverty* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2011), pp. 19–32.

Life expectancy at birth in Ancient Rome, for example, was between 20 and 30 years – driven down by extremely high infant mortality rates.[11]

The great empires of the age had their own ways of self-organisation. Otherwise, there were city-states or tribal groups led by judges or kings. For a time the tribes of Israel were united under a common monarchy. There was a limited royal court. There was also in Israel an extended priestly class, funded by tithes. There was an extensive legal framework, administered by judges or elders – as we shall consider more closely below. There was a distinction between statutes and case law that we might find familiar. But the legal system was not policed as a modern system might be.

On top of the general differences between the ancient world and the world today, Israel had its own distinctive economic characteristics. As already noted, the nation was more rural than city-based. Importantly, Israel was also on the trade route between Egypt and the empires to north and east. That meant plenty of foreigners (Hebrew: *nokri*) passing through, some of whom will have taken up temporary residence (the *ger* in Hebrew – often rendered as 'sojourner' in English translations). It also placed the nation in an internationally strategic position, making it vulnerable to the ambitions of predatory empires.

We shall have to factor-in many of these differences and distinctive features in applying the principles of the ethical teaching in the Hebrew Scriptures to the world today. For the moment we should note, in particular, that the points of *economic vulnerability* would have been different in Ancient Israel compared to, say, the modern West. As a relatively rural economy, there were lower risks from external, international economic factors. There could be a crisis in Babylon, Rome or even Tyre or Sidon, and few would have been greatly affected. The peculiar economic issues of the city – such as externalities or public good problems[12] – would not have been dominant. On the other hand, rather like the developing world today, there would have been higher risks from direct natural shocks – such as a failed harvest.

Nevertheless, the main point of vulnerability would have been exactly the same: the human heart. Can the ancient texts of the Hebrew Scriptures address this fundamental issue in a way we seem to have lost today?

2.2 THE SETTING IN THE THEOLOGICAL HISTORY OF ISRAEL

History, like all good stories, is shaped around characters. When it comes to Jewish history, the foundational human characters are Abraham and Moses. Abraham is the receiver of the promises, the man of faith and the father of the nation. Some 400 years later, Moses is the servant of the LORD,[13] the first of the prophets – the one through whom the LORD acts on his covenantal promises to Abraham to rescue and redeem his people from slavery in Egypt.

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11 A third of all babies died before the age of one, and half of children died before age ten. But if a child survived to age ten, they could expect to live to about 48 years on average – Karen Cokayne, *Experiencing Old Age in Ancient Rome* (London: Routledge, 2003), p. 3.

12 Externalities are costs or benefits imposed on third parties to an economic activity that are not reflected in the market price. In cities, obvious examples would include pollution of various kinds, which tends to be overproduced because those producing the pollution do not have to compensate those who suffer from it. A key feature of 'public goods', such as street lighting or flood-control systems, is that it is hard to exclude people from their consumption. Those not paying for the good can 'free ride' on it, reducing the incentive to pay and thereby the incentive to supply.

13 In this publication the capitalised form 'Lord'. is used to represent the Hebrew 'YHWH', the covenant name of God.

It is common in some Christian interpretations of the Hebrew Scriptures to pit these two characters against one another as representing two entirely different paths of life. But the narrative in the first two books of the Hebrew canon, the books of Genesis and Exodus, simply does not read that way. As the story moves from Abraham and his early descendants in Genesis to Moses in Exodus, there is no jarring clash of gears or other suggestion that things are now moving in an entirely new direction. Rather, the LORD remembers the promises he made to Abraham (Exod. 2.23–25) and acts upon them – which, having rescued his people from Egypt, includes the giving of the Law through Moses.

This is important. It means we do not ignore the instructional and legal material associated with Moses simply because we prefer to follow a so-called different way set out through and by Abraham. Similarly, to understand the instructional material given through Moses, including that relating to economics, we do need to trace the story back to Abraham.

2.2.1 Standing alongside Abraham

According to the history implied by the book of Genesis, we are some time in what we would now call the second millennium BC. Abraham is the name by which later generations know this pivotal character, but we are introduced to him in chapter 11 of Genesis as *Abram*, son of Terah. Indeed, it is as Abram that he is the recipient of the foundational promises of the LORD, as outlined in Genesis 12.1–3, some of the most significant words in the whole Bible:

> Now the Lord said to Abram, 'Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you. [2]I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. [OR ... name great. Be a blessing.] [3]I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse; and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.'

These are promises to replace curse with blessing. Abram responds by showing that he believes and trusts what the LORD has said by leaving and going, as he has been told. This becomes a pattern in the story. When the LORD speaks, Abra(ha)m responds – and acts – largely with belief and trust. Sometimes he fails to, but we can infer whenever he does respond rightly because the LORD affirms his response by speaking again to him – usually by repeating his promises. In Genesis 12, for example, Abram obeys the command to 'Go from your country' and leaves with his wife, nephew and others in his household (verses 4–5). His trust-expressed-in-obedience is commended with a further promise from the LORD of a particular Land for Abram's family and the nation they will form – 'To your offspring I will give this Land' (Gen. 12.7). In these patterns we can see that the narrative has a clear didactic purpose, based on these identifiable right responses to the promises. It's a purpose that pervades the whole book: to evoke in its readers a trusting belief in what the LORD has promised – a trust that shows itself in action, doing what the LORD demands.

To understand *why* the promises the LORD made to Abram were necessary, we need to look even further back in history, to Genesis chapters 1—11. These early chapters of Genesis feel strange to modern readers, but should feel less so when we recognise that 'prehistory' is being described using figures, tropes and elements of cosmography familiar to people of the second or first millennium BC.[14] Once this has been recognised, the message of these chapters is not obscure. Yes, we do live – just like Abraham – in a desperate cycle of death, conflict, wickedness and economic scarcity

14 A 'cosmography' is a description or representation of the universe or the earth.

from which there seems no escape. But the cycle has a cause, and the universe has a beginning and a purpose

2.2.2 Looking back with Abraham

In the beginning, things were different. In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth (Gen. 1.1); that is, we can infer, he created everything, from nothing. There is much to say about the description of this creative process as it is portrayed in the famous six days of Genesis 1, but broadly we may infer that what the Creator God is doing is creating a *space* to fill for some purpose. What is the purpose? It seems an obvious and vital question, but few readers of Genesis have felt brave enough to tackle it. For Jonathan Edwards, it was because of:

> a disposition in God, as an original property of his nature, to an emanation of his own infinite fullness, was what excited him to create the world; and so that the emanation itself was aimed at by him as a last end of the creation.[15]

Rather more simply, for John Calvin, 'The world was no doubt made, that it might be the theatre of the divine glory.'[16] Creating 'the theatre of the divine glory' sums up Genesis 1 rather well. What we then see is that God places himself centre stage by making humanity as his image-bearers to spread and multiply that glory – his life and blessing – in all the earth. The key verses are Genesis 1.26–28:

> [26]Then God said, 'Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the wild animals of the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth.' [27]So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them. [28]God blessed them, and God said to them, 'Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth.'

Humankind, male and female, is given the world. They are given a theological task: to represent and display the Creator God on earth. The relationship of generosity, creativity and care God has to the creation as a whole, men and women are to display in the dominion they are given.[17] Within this, we may also say that they are given an *economic* task – to be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it – constrained in only one regard. The constraint, given most explicitly in Genesis 2.16–17, is necessary given their theological task. It is that they shouldn't assume for themselves the role of God.[18] They exist to display *God*'s glory, not their own.

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15 Jonathan Edwards, 'Concerning the End for Which God Created the World ', in Paul Ramsey (ed.), *Ethical Writings*, vol. 8 of *The Works of Jonathan Edwards* (New Haven, CT and London: Yale University Press, 1989), p. 435.

16 John Calvin, *Commentaries on the Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Hebrews* (trans. John Owen: Wipf & Stock, 2007), p. 266. Calvin is commenting on Hebrews 11.3, 'By faith we understand that the worlds were prepared by the word of God, so that what is seen was made from things that are not visible.'

17 There is much more to say about the implications of being made 'in the image of God', but this would seem to be at least one key implication suggested by how Genesis 1.28 follows so directly from 1.27.

18 Genesis 2.16–17 reads 'And the Lord God commanded the man, "You may freely eat of every tree of the garden; [17]but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall die".' Gordon Wenham rightly concludes that 'the knowledge of good and evil' is 'a wisdom that is God's sole preserve […] To pursue it without reference to revelation is to assert human autonomy, and to neglect the fear of the LORD which is beginning of knowledge' – Gordon J. Wenham, *Genesis 1—15* (Dallas, TX: Word Books, 1986), p. 63.

We should recognise just how radical the Genesis perspective was in the ancient world. In the Hebrew perspective of time and history, there are some repeated cycles: there is day and night, six days of work and one of rest – patterns established by God himself in Genesis 1. Over time, something of an annual cycle also develops. But these are very much subservient to a bigger, linear dynamic. The economic tasks of productive work, creativity and governance are seen as *going somewhere*, as humanity multiplies and creatively brings order, in the theological task it has been given.

All of which is of foundational importance in the construction of a biblical ethics on economics. If the driving force behind what we now call 'capitalism' is individual families being given responsibility to work, grow and multiply – and to do so with a creative freedom – then Genesis 1 would suggest that 'capitalism' (broadly conceived) is not something to be scrapped or abandoned entirely, only ever reformed.

But we shouldn't get ahead of ourselves. This is only the beginning of the story. When the man and the woman, deceived and disobedient, abandon their theological task and instead attempt to set themselves up 'like God' (Gen. 3.5, 22), the dynamic is fatally twisted. As warned (Gen. 2.16–17), death enters the world (Gen. 3.19; 5.5). The dynamic of growth is *slowed down*: childbirth and work become painful and difficult; days are numbered (Gen. 3.16–19). It is slowed down but not stopped. More seriously, the dynamic of growth is corrupted. The rebellion of humanity means that rather than the spread of life, blessing and the glory of God, sin, death and curse spread instead. So the corollary to the statement that 'capitalism' (broadly conceived) should not be abandoned is that if individuals or families are using their creative freedom to work, grow and multiply for purposes *other than* displaying the good character of God (for self-serving or destructive purposes), then what emerges from capitalism could be a grotesque counterfeit of how things should be. This is one of the messages of the Prophets in the Hebrew Scriptures. Ezekiel 28 recounts the word of the LORD against the King of Tyre, a city-state famous for its trade and wealth. With deliberate echoes of Genesis 1—3, the LORD speaks of the King's fall from grace because the King had said, 'I am a god' (Ezek. 28.2). The LORD continues: 'By your great wisdom in trade you have increased your wealth, and your heart has become proud in your wealth' (Ezek. 28.5). The result is violence (Ezek. 28.16) and 'many sins and dishonest trade' (Ezek. 28.18 NIV). We may conclude from Genesis 1 that our aim should be the reformation of capitalism rather than destructive revolution, but that shouldn't detract from the reminder in Genesis 3 – and the Prophets – that the *need* for reformation is utterly desperate.

2.2.3 Looking forwards from Abraham

We have looked back into prehistory from Abraham's perspective. Now, as we look forwards, we see that the fulfilment of the promises continues to have an economic dimension. Abraham responds to the promises with trust and faith, but a key component of faith is *patience*. Abraham is relatively wealthy, but he has been promised more and is commended when he waits for it patiently in obedience to the LORD. In Genesis 13, he and his nephew Lot separate to live apart. Lot eyes the plain of the Jordan, 'well watered everywhere like the garden of the LORD, like the land of Egypt' (Gen. 13.10), and chooses to dwell there, despite the wickedness of the inhabitants. Abram chose to stay in the land he was promised but did not (yet) possess. He is rewarded with a repeat of the promise from the LORD (Gen. 13.16–17). (We may note, not with the Land itself!) On the other hand, when Abram acts *impatiently*, as when he ignores the promise of a son with Sarai by having a son with her servant Hagar (Genesis 16), the LORD does not respond, and there is 30 years of silence. When the silence is broken, Abram is sternly called to order (Gen. 17.1) and

is reminded of his pivotal role as the one through whom the promises will reach out even to the nations. It's at this point he is renamed Abraham – because the LORD has made him 'father of many nations' (Gen. 17.5 NIV).

After Abraham's death (Gen. 25.8), the narrative continues to be rich with detail, much of it with an economic flavour. Abraham's twin grandsons Esau and Jacob represent two attitudes to economic gain (Gen. 25.19–34). Esau is animal-like, a hunter, impulsive and impatient. Jacob is more of 'the capitalist' – civilised, calculating, hard-working and patient. But he is in need of reformation – many of his economic gains are achieved through deception. Against his brother and father the deception is serious (Gen. 27); against his uncle Laban (Gen. 30.25–43) it is ingenious (somehow!), but still not free from guile. Jacob has deceived his brother and father; when he fled to his uncle Laban, his uncle then deceived him by giving him the 'wrong' wife (while hinting he knew of Jacob's previous deception – Gen. 29.26); Jacob then retaliates with this further deception. Jan Fokkelman notes that the story goes like this:

Sacrifice of Isaac — Rembrandt, 1635

Genesis 27	*Jacob is a deceiver*
Genesis 29	*Laban is a deceiver of a deceiver*
Genesis 30	*Jacob is a deceiver of a deceiver of a deceiver*

He adds: 'whenever people like Jacob and Laban mix with each other, there is no end to it.'[19] Eventually Jacob is reformed through a humbling and weakening encounter with the LORD at Peniel (Gen. 32.22–32). The LORD renames him *Israel* because 'you have striven with God and with humans, and have prevailed' (Gen. 32.28) – which becomes the patronymic for the nation. It's only after this that Jacob gets rid of all the household idols to mark his undivided devotion to the LORD (Gen. 35.2–4). Jacob stands as an example of the reformation that needs to happen to a human heart striving for blessing (or happiness or prosperity) – perhaps even a symbol of what needs to happen to capitalism more generally.

Jacob's eleventh son, Joseph, stands as an even clearer example of patient and faithful hard work, even in the face of injustice. First he is sold into slavery, then unjustly imprisoned. Eventually Joseph's faith in the LORD is vindicated – he even ends up second to Pharaoh in Egypt (Gen. 41.41–43). Does Joseph the administrator stand as an example of appropriate state intervention to avoid an economic crisis (or even of 'Keynesian anticyclical fiscal policy')? Tomas Sedlacek

19 J. P. Fokkelman, *Narrative Art in Genesis: Specimens of Stylistic and Structural Analysis* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 1991), p. 151.

suggests he might.[20] Joseph receives a forecast (via a divinely given – and interpreted – dream to Pharaoh) of seven years of abundance followed by seven years of scarcity. His plan is taxation on grain at 20 per cent, which is stored in granaries to even out the cycle (Gen. 41.34–36). What should we make of this? On the one hand, we would have to say that the 'macroeconomic forecast' in this case was perhaps uniquely accurate! On the other, if a state administrator knows with sufficient certainty that markets are inadequately developed or otherwise incapable of dealing with a coming crisis *better than* an intervention, then intervention makes sense. The biblical story would *seem* to endorse such an application of common sense.[21]

The economics of the Genesis famine are fascinating, but the bigger theological point being made is that the promises to Abraham are beginning to be fulfilled in Joseph, at least in some small measure: in one of Abraham's descendants, the families of the earth are being blessed. The families of Egypt, in fact. The Genesis story ends with Abraham's own family blessed and growing in Egypt. They are not quite yet a nation, but the story isn't over.

2.2.4 Moses, the Ten Commandments and the Mishpatim

The book of Exodus picks up the story some 400 years later, when the blessing in Egypt has turned to curse and slavery under the oppression of a Pharaoh nervous about the Hebrews. In the biblical dynamic, this takes us backwards: the family of Abraham now sharing in the hard and difficult toil of post-fall humanity in general, with procreation made even more difficult by the edict to kill male Hebrew newborns (Exod. 1.16, 22). It would have felt very much like living under curse rather than blessing. The setback means that when the LORD does act in response to the cries of his people (Exod. 2.23–25), the movement from curse towards blessing is highlighted. He responds on the basis of his covenantal promises to their forefather Abraham. The LORD chooses Moses to lead his people and, with great signs of judgement, shows his glorious identity as the LORD to the Egyptians and the world as he redeems and rescues his people, bringing them out of Egypt while protecting them from the death (curse) he brings upon his enemies.

Just before the people reach Sinai, we get a significant insight into Israelite judicial process (Exod. 19.13–27). Moses has been taking his seat every day to serve as a judge for the people. This, then, is how justice functioned. When an issue arose, the people would come to *find* judgement. Moses' father-in-law Jethro notes that there is too much work for Moses to do. Moses' solution is to appoint capable men, *multiple* judges for the people, whom he will then teach and instruct.

It is into this context that the LORD speaks to his people through Moses, that they might live as his people, with him in their midst. This is foundational to the relationship between the LORD and his people at that time, but the speaking and then the writing down of what the LORD says also serves an ongoing practical purpose. This is how the people are to live and this is how the newly appointed judges are to judge. This is what Moses will use to teach and train them. The Ten Commandments (Exod. 20.1–17) stand as the foundation of this instruction. We shall encounter these again below, in their repeated form in Deuteronomy 5. But alongside the Ten Commandments there are also

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20 Tomas Sedlacek, *Economics of Good and Evil: The Quest for Economic Meaning from Gilgamesh to Wall Street* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), pp. 62–5. Others strenuously argue that the Joseph example must be a unique or special exception. Most vocal would be Theonomists or Christian Reconstructionists, as in Gary North, 'Was Joseph an Immoral Ruler?', *Biblical Economics Today* 14:2 (1992).

21 It's hard to find anything in the Genesis account to single out the planned response to the coming crisis as exceptional and unrepeatable. It's simply presented as a wise course of action in the circumstances.

the *Mishpatim*, Exodus 21.1—24.18. This is the judicial wisdom of the LORD applied in various scenarios, or what we might call 'case law'.[22]

As with modern case law, there is the expectation that these rulings can be applied to similar circumstances. Importantly, they do not present us with ideal ethical states but rather practical judicial wisdom in the messiness of the real world; that is, they represent in part what Michael Hill has called a 'retrieval ethic' – 'the goal is then to retrieve as much good as one can in the situation and limit as much harm as is possible'.[23] To achieve this, there are two key principles that seem to operate through the *Mishpatim*. The first is the principle of restoration or restitution. Suppose something happens to destroy or upset good community order, such as a theft. The party at fault is compelled to restore things (Exod. 22.1–15). The second principle is retribution. Suppose something *irreversible* happens, which cannot be restored, such as destruction or serious injury. The guilty party is then compelled to participate and suffer from the disorder. This is the principle behind the *Lex Talionis* of Exodus 21.23–25 – 'If any harm follows, then you shall give life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot, burn for burn, wound for wound, stripe for stripe.'

We shall consider some of the *Mishpatim* as they relate to economic issues in Deuteronomy in more detail below. However, one contentious example from the Exodus material before moving on: the teaching on slavery in Exodus 21.2–11. Slavery is clearly an emotive issue, and many would cry out in alarm at verses that at the very least seem quite accepting of it. As we shall see, much of the economic instruction in the *Mishpatim* concerns what to do when people fall on hard times unexpectedly. One alternative to destitution was to bind your future labour to someone for a time; that is, become what in other parts of history might be called a villein or an indentured servant. Since 'slavery' is such an emotive word, it might be better to use more descriptive terms such as 'bonded servant' and 'bonded labour'. The judgement in Exodus 21.1–11 *regulates* the practice of bonded labour. It limits its duration to six years, for example. The bonded servant can choose to stay, which gives his master an incentive to treat him well. Or he is free to go.[24] Similarly, the same passage seems to accept the practice of polygamy (verse 10). The daughter sold as a servant in verses 7–11 is probably some sort of servant-concubine, given her marital rights in verse 10. There is *some sort of* marriage bond, which is why she's not free to go after six years. Like bonded labour, any sort of polygamy is not an ideal ethical state (especially, perhaps, the kind implied here), as should be clear from the narrative of one man joining with one woman in Genesis 2.[25] Again, the situation in view is not endorsed but regulated – with the vulnerable party given protection. If she's mistreated, she's free to leave.

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22 Peter Enns, 'Mishpat', in Willem A. VanGemeren (ed.), *New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology and Exegesis* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1996), vol. 2, pp. 1142–4.

23 Michael Hill, *The How and Why of Love: An Introduction to Evangelical Ethics* (Sydney: Matthias Media, 2002), p. 133. Compare James Robson: the laws 'were God's ways of controlling, circumscribing or maintaining something as close to ideal as was practical' – James Robson, *Honey from the Rock: Deuteronomy for the People of God* (Nottingham: Apollos, 2013), p. 184.

24 The detail of these verses is admittedly tricky. It could be that the wife 'given to' the bonded servant doesn't leave with him in verse 4 because she has not served her six-year term. We might also note that in Exodus 21.16, slave *trading* is explicitly prohibited and condemned as a capital offence.

25 David Instone-Brewer suggests that when Jesus links Genesis 1.27 and 2.24 in Mark 10.5–9 in his teaching on divorce, he is arguing for monogamy. In Mark 10.11, Jesus goes on to argue that 'Whoever divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery against her.' If a man was allowed more than one wife (polygamy), then it would be no crime for him to remarry, even if his divorce from his first wife was invalid – *Divorce and Remarriage in the Bible: The Social and Literary Context* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2002), pp. 136–41, 151.

2.2.5 Law and history continuing in Leviticus and Numbers

In the book of Leviticus, the LORD continues to provide instructions about how the people will be able to live with him. Basically, as in Exodus (with all its lengthy instruction about protecting the people from the holiness of the LORD using an elaborate tent), it won't be easy – requiring sacrifice, ritual cleanness, atonement and holiness. 'Be holy, as I am holy' (Lev. 11.44, 45; 19.2; 20.7, 26; 21.6, 8) is the repeated exhortation from the LORD. The call to holiness in Leviticus 19.2 is followed by a call to love one's neighbour as oneself (19.18). But the holiness required by the LORD is not easily simplified and had multiple dimensions. It involved being set apart from the surrounding nations as culturally different and ritually pure. It also involved being set apart from the nations morally, not indulging in their practices – of sexual immorality, for example. Moreover, not all of the instruction on holiness is easily compartmentalised under these two categories. The Sabbath, for example, both set the nation apart as different but also was in itself an expression of faith. The principle of weekly Sabbath rest – in part an expression of economic dependency on the LORD and trust in his provision – was already built into the Ten Commandments and highlighted as a particular sign of the covenant between the LORD and his people (Exod. 20.8–11; 31.12–17; 35.1–3). We've already seen that bonded labour should end in the seventh year (Exod. 21.1–11). The Sabbath principle is then extended to the Land – the gift of the LORD to his people – in Leviticus 25. Every seventh year the Land was to enjoy a Sabbath rest. Every seven such Sabbath years, in the Jubilee year, the Land was then to be 'reset' to its original state – 'you shall return, every one of you, to your property and every one of you to your family' (Lev. 25.10). Why? The reason, the LORD says, is 'for the land is mine; with me you are but aliens and tenants' (Lev. 25.23).

In the book of Numbers, the story of the journey from Egypt continues. It's an ongoing story of the people struggling with trust and patience There is plenty of grumbling, disobedience and even an acute act of idolatry. The people suffer 40 years of nomadic life in the wilderness. When the Exodus generation has died off, the new generation take a new census, and prepare to invade the Land from the Plains of Moab.

2.3 Deuteronomy 1—3: the setting for a decision

Finally, then, we reach the Plains of Moab. And here we listen to some sermons – sermons, from Moses, given on the borders of the Land, sermons now written down and embedded in a wider narrative, for the benefit of subsequent generations. The first few verses locate the sermons both in place (on the Plains of Moab, just across the Jordan from Jericho) and time (the precise day is given in Deuteronomy 1.3). They also assert the origin of his words – commanded from the LORD himself.

Moses begins by reminding the people of the promise of the LORD through Abraham, Isaac and Jacob – focusing on the promise of the Land. Perhaps as he speaks they can even see it. Surprisingly, the next verses (Deut. 1.9–18) recall Exodus 19 and the appointment of judges. As in that chapter, we are primed to expect material that will help in the impartial and godly judicial decisions of Israel's leaders – judicial decisions they will exercise once they have entered the Land they've been promised.

But these early chapters in Deuteronomy are also preparing the way for a more fundamental decision about the people's alignment with the LORD. To help the people with that decision, Moses first looks back to the poor decisions made by them some 40 years earlier and then to the more recent past, and some of their military victories. And so with both failure and success behind them, the people have a choice to make.

Chapter 3

The decision facing the people

We could summarise what Moses is initially preaching to the people like this:

> *Today, here and now, at the moment of decision, choose blessing and life. Do this by following the LORD who redeemed you, to the place he shows you. Love him and obey him, living there the way he tells you – displaying your relationship with him to the nations around you.*

3.1 Deuteronomy 4—11

Deuteronomy chapters 4—11 outline this basic decision facing the people. Deuteronomy 4 is in many ways a summary chapter. It begins with an exhortation:

> [4]So now, Israel, give heed to the statutes and ordinances [*Mishpatim*] that I am teaching you to observe, so that you may live to enter and occupy the land that the Lord, the God of your ancestors, is giving you. (Deut. 4.1)

Moses with the Ten Commandments — Philippe de Champaigne, 1648

Moses continues: don't neglect them as they did in the past, with disastrous results. Rather, observe them carefully, and the nations around will see that the LORD is near you (verses 5–8). This chapter contains a warning about future corruption in the Land (verse 25–31), foreshadowing what Moses will say later, but finishes with an editorial aside, reminding us of the setting and preparing the way for Moses to speak again. In chapters 5—11, Moses then looks back to Horeb (the name he uses here for Sinai) and the Ten Commandments, forwards to entering the Land, and prepares the way for the *Mishpatim* of chapters 12—26. To this new generation, Moses is issuing a call to a new obedience under God's blessing.

The Ten Commandments once again provide the foundation. Numbers four, eight and ten give the particular foundation for economic life in the Land: observe the

Sabbath day, don't steal and don't covet.[1] Or to put it another way: depend upon the LORD, trust him for provision; so don't take from others; don't even *think* about taking from others. The *relational* foundation for this instruction comes exclusively from the LORD: 'the Lord your God has chosen you out of all the peoples on earth to be his people, his treasured possession' (Deut. 7.6). Indeed, Moses reminds the people they are the LORD's '*treasured possession*' again in 14.2 and 26.18, spanning the *Mishpatim* of those chapters.

The decision facing these people is then whether to continue with the LORD, expressed by listening to and following his instruction, or not. More specifically, the call is to *love* the LORD – with heart, soul and strength (Deut. 6.4–5; the *Shema*). The benefits of doing so are strongly emphasised in chapters 4—11. Repeated over and over again is a conditional promise of blessing, beginning with a summary in Deuteronomy 4.39–40:

> [39]So acknowledge today and take to heart that the Lord is God in heaven above and on the earth beneath; there is no other. [40]Keep his statutes and his commandments, which I am commanding you today for your own well-being and that of your descendants after you, so that you may long remain in the land that the Lord your God is giving you for all time.

So important is this promise that it is repeated frequently – at 5.33; 6.1–3, 18, 24; 7.13–14; 8.6–8 and 11.8–15, 21 at least.

3.2 THE ETHICAL DETAIL IN DEUTERONOMY 12—26

Deuteronomy 12.1 introduces the heart of the instruction material in the book: these are the statutes and ordinances [*Mishpatim*] that you must diligently observe in the land that the LORD, the God of your ancestors, has given you to occupy all the days that you live on the earth. Discerning any coherent order in these chapters is at first rather hard. But a good case can be made that the presentation roughly speaking follows the order and pattern of the Ten Commandments.[2] The *Mishpatim* in this section are greatly expanded from those in Exodus, spanning 15 detailed chapters. Sprinkled throughout we have reminders of the conditional promise of blessing (e.g. 12.7, 15; 15.4; 22.7). In 14.29; 23.20 and 24.19, the motivation is 'that the Lord your God may bless you'.

3.3 ECONOMIC INSTRUCTION IN DEUTERONOMY

Most of the Mishpatim related to economics have some connection to the plight of the needy. In the Deuteronomic *Mishpatim*, five areas are covered: tithes; giving loans; bonded labour; paying workers; business honesty. That so few potential areas are addressed is itself quite remarkable. This is in part because of the way the *Mishpatim* function. The life of the people, including their economic life, is generally expected to carry on uninterrupted. It is only as things go wrong, or are anticipated to go wrong, that the *Mishpatim* are needed.

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1 That is, using the Jewish and Reformed numbering of the commandments. In the Roman and Lutheran understanding (which sees one commandment concerning the worship of the LORD and two concerning coveting), these would be commandments three, seven and ten.

2 See J. G. Millar, *Now Choose Life: Theology and Ethics in Deuteronomy* (Leicester: Apollos, 1998), pp. 106–8.

The *Mishpatim* on tithing begin in Deuteronomy 14.22:

> [22]Set apart a tithe of all the yield of your seed that is brought in yearly from the field. [23]In the presence of the Lord your God, in the place that he will choose as a dwelling for his name, you shall eat the tithe of your grain, your wine, and your oil, as well as the firstlings of your herd and flock, so that you may learn to fear the Lord your God always.

To 'tithe' is simply to give a tenth. So a tenth of all vegetable produce was to be set aside and taken to 'the place that [the LORD] will choose as a dwelling for his name'. This is probably the same 'tenth' set aside to support the Levitical system and priesthood mentioned in Leviticus 27.30–33 and Numbers 18.21–25.[3] The instruction here simply adds that when the produce is offered, a feast should be held – a physical reminder (in his presence) to fear the LORD their God who had provided it. If the distance is too great, then the people can exchange the produce for 'money' (that is, silver), and then exchange it again when they get to the feast (verses 24–26). The Levites back home should not be missed out in this (verse 27). Every third year, instead of taking the produce away, it is stored locally, so that others without access to land (the *ger* or resident aliens, the orphans and the widows – not excluding the Levites, of course) may share in the produce (verses 28–29). In short, those with access to land are to give a flat 10 per cent of their produce to support those without such access – that the LORD their God may bless them (14.29).

The *ger* or resident aliens, the orphans and the widows are also provided for by leaving behind some produce for them to glean at the time of harvest (Deut. 24.19–22). Again, this is 'that the Lord your God may bless you'.

This same verb 'to give a tenth' is used by the Prophet Samuel in 1 Samuel 8.15, 17 to warn the people about the demands a king might well place upon them. The tithe in Deuteronomy – and Leviticus and Numbers – was for the good of the people and associated with the blessing of the LORD. Under the tithe in 1 Samuel 8, however, Samuel warns the people they 'will cry out because of your king, whom you have chosen for yourselves; but the Lord will not answer you' (1 Sam. 8.18). There would seem to be good tithes and bad tithes; appropriate rates of tithing and excessive or oppressive rates.

In Deuteronomy, the *Mishpatim* on loans begin in chapter 15:

> Every seventh year you shall grant a remission of debts. [2]And this is the manner of the remission: every creditor shall remit the claim that is held against a neighbour, not exacting it from a neighbour who is a member of the community, because the Lord's remission has been proclaimed. [3]From a foreigner you may exact it, but you must remit your claim on whatever any member of your community owes you.

One means of helping a neighbour who has fallen on hard times – for whatever reason – is through a loan. (And as we noted above, by 'hard times' in the context of the Ancient Near East we almost certainly mean *really* hard times.) Deuteronomy 15.1 tells the creditor in some sort of loan arrangement to grant 'a remission' every seventh year. What kind of loan arrangement are we talking about? The text does not say explicitly. Some commentators suggest that similarities with an earlier *Mishpat* commanding a fallow year for land every seven years (Exod. 23.10–11) means we

3 Richard E. Averbeck, 'Maser', in Willem A. VanGemeren (ed.), *New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology and Exegesis* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1996), vol. 2, pp. 1035–55.

may be talking about mortgaged land.[4] The 'remission' – there is no 'of debts' in the original – then returns the land given as a security or pledge to the debtor. Taking security or a pledge for a loan was permitted, but should never unduly harm the debtor (see also Deut. 24.6, 12–13, 17). But it is probably more straightforward to take this as a remission of the loan itself.[5]

As with many of the Exodus *Mishpatim*, the implied principle here is one of restoration or restitution. When a fellow Israelite falls on hard times, the exhortation is: do not take advantage of the situation, leaving them trapped in poverty. Rather, it is to intervene in a *temporary* manner to help them back to productive activity. Again, the background assumption is that productivity is good, part of what it means to be human – a responsibility. (Compare the extended critique of the 'sluggard' in the book of Proverbs – Prov. 6.6, 9; 10.26; 13.4; 15.19; 19.24; 20.4; 21.25; 22.13; 24.30; 26.13, 14, 15, 16.)

We can see how such judgements in Deuteronomy support the long-term welfare of debtors, protecting them from what we might now call a 'poverty trap'; but might it mean potential creditors not lending to the needy when they see the seventh year coming? Deuteronomy 15.9–10 describes this as a 'wicked thought' and commands instead: 'Give liberally and be ungrudging when you do so, for on this account the Lord your God will bless you in all your work and in all that you undertake.' Translate such a command to a modern, anonymous, commercial setting and it might sound like mere wishful thinking. But in the context of close kin-like relationships between fellow Israelites, in covenantal relationship with the LORD their God, who should be eager to help one another, it makes more sense.

The *Mishpatim* in Deuteronomy 23 make it clear that any loan made to a fellow Israelite should not involve charging at interest:

> [19]You shall not charge interest on loans to another Israelite, interest on money, interest on provisions, interest on anything that is lent. [20]On loans to a foreigner you may charge interest, but on loans to another Israelite you may not charge interest, so that the Lord your God may bless you in all your undertakings in the land that you are about to enter and possess. (Deut. 23.19–20)

I have argued elsewhere that the distinction here between 'another Israelite' and a 'foreigner' was to protect those in close relational proximity to the creditor from *any possibility* of exploitative lending, such that the creditor would benefit from their poverty.[6] 'Foreigners', on the other hand, represented more distant, anonymous, 'commercial' transactions – with creditor and debtor benefiting mutually from the loan.

The Deuteronomic *Mishpatim* on bonded labour (Deut. 15.12–18) are very similar to those we saw in Exodus above, including the remission in the seventh year and the option to remain in service permanently. Here, there is an additional encouragement to be liberal and generous in the release: 'giving to him some of the bounty with which the Lord your God has blessed you' (Deut. 15.14).

The *Mishpatim* cover paying workers in Deuteronomy 24.14–15:

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4 So argues Christopher J. H. Wright, *God's People in God's Land: Family, Land, and Property in the Old Testament* (Exeter: Paternoster Press, 1990), pp. 147–8, 167–73, 249–59.

5 James Robson, *Honey from the Rock: Deuteronomy for the People of God* (Nottingham: Apollos, 2013), p. 191.

6 Ben Cooper, *The Ethics of Usury* (London: Latimer Trust, 2012).

> [14]You shall not withhold the wages of poor and needy labourers, whether other Israelites or aliens who reside in your land in one of your towns. [15]You shall pay them their wages daily before sunset, because they are poor and their livelihood depends on them; otherwise they might cry to the Lord against you, and you would incur guilt.

Once again, the exhortation is not to benefit economically from the poverty of others – indeed, the poverty of *anyone*, whether 'Israelites or aliens'.

The *Mishpatim* cover the issue of honesty in exchange in 25.13–16:

> [13]You shall not have in your bag two kinds of weights, large and small. [14]You shall not have in your house two kinds of measures, large and small. [15]You shall have only a full and honest weight; you shall have only a full and honest measure, so that your days may be long in the land that the Lord your God is giving you. [16]For all who do such things, all who act dishonestly, are abhorrent to the Lord your God.

Stones or 'weights' might have been used to measure out silver for exchange. A 'measure' (Hebrew *ephah*) would have been used for measuring out grain. False weights and measures are effectively a means of stealing during the process of exchange and are thus 'abhorrent to the Lord'. A similar encouragement to honest exchange is found across the book of Proverbs (Prov. 11.1; 16.11; 18.11; 20.10, 23).[7]

7 The issue is also addressed in Leviticus 19.35, 36; Ezekiel 45.10; Hosea 12.7; Amos 8.5; Micah 6.11.

Chapter 4

The outcome

The promise undergirding the whole of Deuteronomy has been repeated over and over again – keep the statutes and commandments of the LORD, and the promise is: 'so that you may long remain in the land that the Lord your God is giving you for all time' (Deut. 4.40). The *detail* of these commandments is then spelled out in Deuteronomy 12—26. As Gary Millar comments: 'Deuteronomy 12—26 is at pains to define what God's model society will look like in the Land' – and the exhortation is that if the people conform to this it will be for their best and the best of their descendants. We have noted the repeated encouragement in the *Mishpatim*: do this 'that the Lord your God may bless you'. Yet as Millar goes on to say:

> there is no shortage of material which apparently assumes the worst. Major areas of concern in the Deuteronomic laws include compromise in the cultic realm, economic exploitation, ritualism, injustice, laxity in religious obligation, lack of respect for authority and improper behaviour in personal relationships.[1]

That is, built into the very fabric of the *Mishpatim* is the expectation that the people are going to struggle deeply to love their God and love their neighbour. This difference between what is exhorted and what is expected pervades the book of Deuteronomy. And as he begins to look to the future path of the nation, Moses is saying, 'While you *should* do this, you *won't* do this!' –

> ... when [Moses] turns from the past to the future, there is an intriguing interplay between what Israel should do and what they will do, between what could happen and what will happen. Such an interplay takes us to the heart of Deuteronomy's ongoing significance.[2]

This pessimism about the people in the future begins early on in Deuteronomy 4.25–31:

> 25When you have had children and children's children, and become complacent in the land, if you act corruptly by making an idol in the form of anything, thus doing what is evil in the sight of the Lord your God, and provoking him to anger, 26I call heaven and earth to witness against you today that you will soon utterly perish from the land that you are crossing the Jordan to occupy; you will not live long on it, but will be utterly destroyed.

There's an 'if' – but the detail in these verses strongly suggests that the condition will be met. Even as he preaches, Moses knows that these are people who will very easily forget what he's saying (Deut. 6.10–12; 8.10–18).

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1 J. G. Millar, *Now Choose Life: Theology and Ethics in Deuteronomy* (Leicester: Apollos, 1998), p. 171.

2 James Robson, *Honey from the Rock: Deuteronomy for the People of God* (Nottingham: Apollos, 2013), p. 31.

4.1 THE OUTCOME FORESEEN IN DEUTERONOMY 27—34

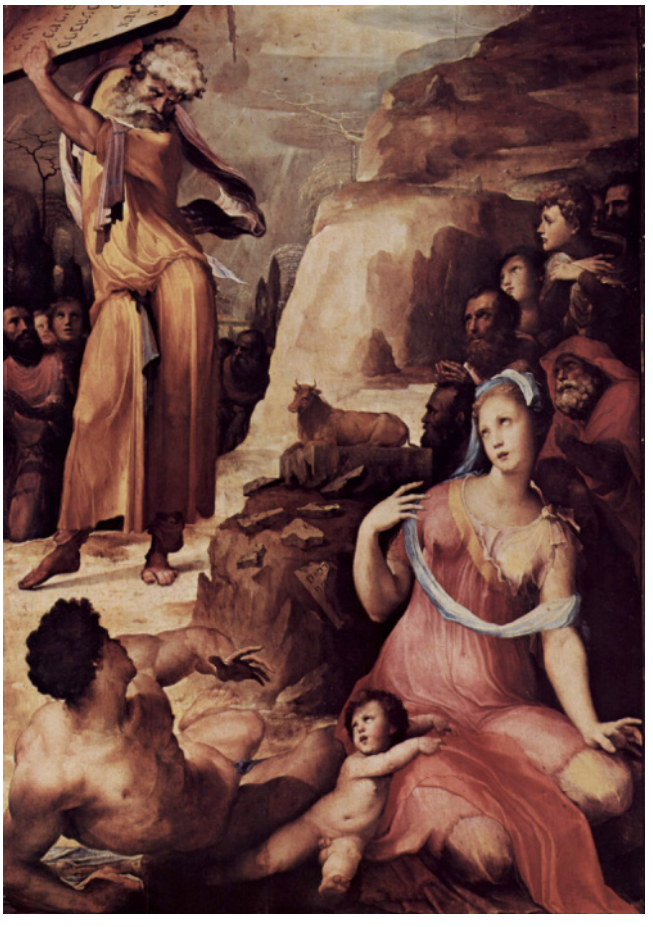
After he has outlined the ethical detail of Deuteronomy 12—26, Moses returns to the basic decision facing the people. Within a covenantal relationship between the LORD and his people, there will be curses if they don't obey and blessings if they do (Deut. 27—28). But it is the curses that Moses emphasises: 'if you will not obey the Lord your God by diligently observing all his commandments and decrees, which I am commanding you today, then *all these curses* shall come upon you and overtake you' (Deut. 28.15). As in chapter 4, there's an 'if' – but the detail once again strongly suggests that the condition will be met.

The curses and blessings form the heart of the covenant the LORD commands Moses to cut with the people at Moab (Deut. 28—30). The covenant is like the covenant at Horeb (Sinai), but this time there is a built-in recognition that it will be broken by failure. The covenant is not, however, devoid of hope. There's a further 'if'. Moses adds: *if*, after the failure and the triggering of the covenant curses, you:

> return to the Lord your God, and you and your children obey him with all your heart and with all your soul, *just as I am commanding you today*, [3]then the Lord your God will restore your fortunes and have compassion on you, gathering you again from all the peoples among whom the Lord your God has scattered you. (Deut. 30.2–3)

When Moses issues his final exhortation it therefore serves – at least – a double purpose. He calls powerfully on the people in 30.19–20:

> [19]I call heaven and earth to witness against you today that I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Choose life so that you and your descendants may live, [20]loving the Lord your God, obeying him, and holding fast to him; for that means life to you and length of days, so that you may live in the land that the Lord swore to give to your ancestors, to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob.



Moses receiving the Tablets of the Law — Domenico Beccafumi, 1537

This is a call to the people *on that day* (verse 19). But it also serves as a call to the people in the future, *after* their failure, to return to the LORD. Moses has already said concerning that future, 'return to the Lord your God, [...] *just as I am commanding you today*' (verses 2–3).

Even after this call, we are reminded one last time (the fourth time in the book) in a word from the LORD to Moses that the people will indeed fail (Deut. 31.15–29) – a sombre word Moses then passes on to the people in a song (Deut. 32)!

4.2 THE OUTCOME WORKED OUT IN ISRAEL'S HISTORY

It is one of the basic messages of all the Prophets that Israel does indeed turn away from the LORD, sinking to the level of the nations around them, thus triggering the covenant curses. Sometimes the Prophets warn the people in advance (Jeremiah stands out in particular), but still they do not listen. The Northern Kingdom is attacked by the Assyrians. A hundred and forty years later, the Southern Kingdom experiences successive attacks. Finally, Jerusalem is destroyed. It's the lucky ones who end up in exile.

According to the Prophets, this turning from the LORD expresses itself in part through economic behaviour. Indeed, failure in economic matters is second only to idolatry in the eyes of the Prophets. They cite a huge quantity of damning evidence. It includes the accumulation of land and property by the rich out of greed (and unjustly at the expense of others), generating poverty (Mic. 2.1–2; Isa. 5.8; Amos 6.4–7) – breaking Commandments Eight and Ten, as well as the Jubilee regulations. Dishonesty rules (Amos 8.5; Mic. 6.10–12). In short, the needs of the poor have been neglected (Isa. 58.7). What's more, the poor have been exploited for personal gain, plundered; their faces have been ground into the dust, justice has been denied (Isa. 3.14–15; 10.1–2; Amos 8.4–14; Jer. 22; Ezek. 22.12). It's a sorry picture.

4.3 THE PURPOSE OF THE BOOK OF DEUTERONOMY

What a curious book this is, then, exhorting obedience to the good instruction of the LORD but calmly expecting the opposite! We noted above that at first glance the point of Moses' sermons to the people on the Plains of Moab seems to be to exhort them to follow the right path: to *choose blessing and life* – by following the LORD who redeemed them to the Land and living there the way he tells them to live. So how do we factor-in the deep pessimism of the sermons regarding the people's capacity for faithfulness and obedience? Well in one sense the basic exhortation doesn't change – the people will never do any better than choosing blessing and life and following the LORD. But the low expectations should at least inject a deep sense of humility into the people's response. Deuteronomy essentially prefaces the basic exhortation with a qualification: *Even though you (or others in future generations) will fail*, choose blessing and life and so on. This should then help the people to respond with a humble dependence on the future grace and mercy of God, looking beyond failure for renewed blessing and life.

But the people on the Plains of Moab do not even constitute the very first readers of the *book* of Deuteronomy. The book presents the sermons written down, packaged for future generations. How would these sermons sound to those reading or hearing them later in Israel's history? For example, how about after the covenant curses have been triggered; that is, in exile (the setting many scholars envisage for the final edition of the book)? At this point the implied exhortation of, for example, Deuteronomy 30.2–3 applies: that when you 'return to the Lord your God, and you and your children obey him with all your heart and with all your soul, just as I am commanding you today, [3]then the Lord your God will restore your fortunes'. In other words: seize hold of God's promises of mercy post-failure; and then – the basic exhortation remains the same – choose blessing and life and follow the LORD.

4.3.1 The Christian purpose of Deuteronomy

The future path of the nation of Israel thus looks decidedly unstable from the perspective of Deuteronomy. The call to blessing and life makes sense, but the faithfulness and obedience it demands will prove impossible for the nation. Even if there is hope for the nation beyond the

covenant curses, this will be of little comfort for most individual Israelites, who will be caught up in the destruction when they are enacted. Only a few survive as the nation lurches from blessing to curse and then back to some sort of blessing again. It does not seem a dynamic capable of bringing a sustained blessing consistent with the promises to Abraham – still less a blessing spreading out to all the families of the earth.

Read in the context of the whole Christian Bible, however, the dynamic set up in Deuteronomy is not the end of the story. In the Christian understanding, Jesus Christ bears the covenant curses upon himself in his death, hung for exposure on a cross. A text from the *Mishpatim* of Deuteronomy is used to establish this: Deuteronomy 21.22–23, which reads in part 'anyone hung on a tree is under God's curse'.[3] The person – or group – united by faith to Christ thus has that fatal dynamic instability removed. Rather, united to him, the Christian believer can be united to one who relates to God faithfully and obediently – the perfect Israelite, if you like – and thus participate in his vindication, including his resurrection to life. What's more, *anyone* can become united to Christ by faith, even without becoming Jewish – thus spreading the blessing of God in the world in fulfilment of the promises to Abraham.

This does not, however, cause the basic exhortation of Deuteronomy simply to evaporate away. Far from it. For example, the New Testament book of Hebrews is a 'word of exhortation' (Heb. 13.22) with a similar rhetorical thrust to Deuteronomy. Just as Moses looked back to the failure of the people in the wilderness and forwards to blessing in the Land, so does the writer of Hebrews – though instead looking forwards to the blessing or 'rest' that faithful Christians can enjoy in the future. 'Let us therefore make every effort to enter that rest,' he says, 'so that no one may fall through such disobedience as theirs' (Heb. 4.11). So the basic exhortation of Deuteronomy continues: choose blessing and life – by faith in Jesus. That is, even though you have failed and will fail, continue daily to choose blessing and life in Christ, united to him, your failure continuously absorbed by him even as he breathes new life into you. Each day you can look forward to fresh grace and mercy, with the hope of the blessings of the new heavens and earth ahead of you. But choose today to live by faith in Jesus with a renewed heart in humble obedience to your God.

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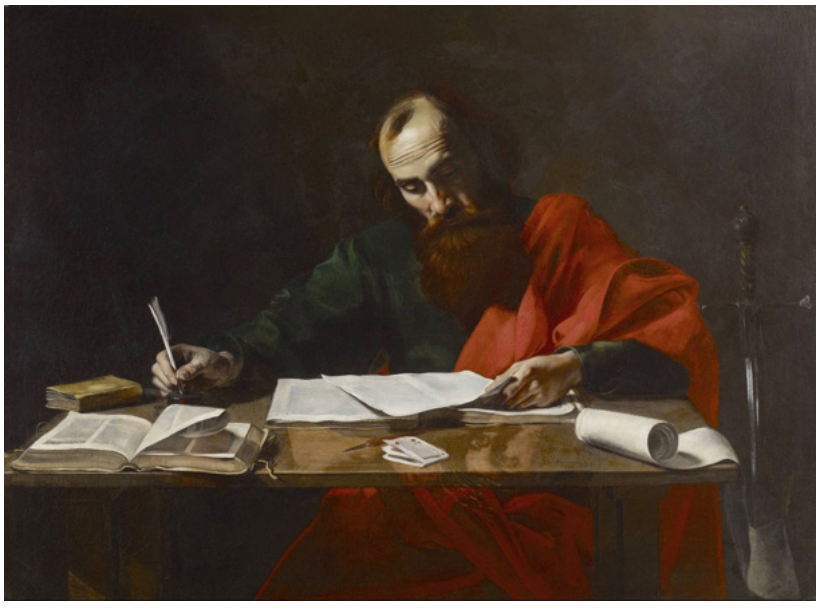
3 The most explicit statement that Jesus died a curse-bearing death is Galatians 3.13: 'Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us – for it is written, "Cursed is everyone who hangs on a tree".' But it is implicit in any New Testament reference to Jesus hung or dying on 'a tree' (Acts 5.30; 10.39; 13.29; 1 Pet. 2.24). I have also argued that it is strongly implicit in Matthew's passion narrative – see 'That Cursed Messiah: The Curse-Bearing Death of Jesus in Matthew 26:57—27:54', in Peter G. Bolt (ed.), *Listen to Him: Reading and Preaching Emmanuel in Matthew* (London: Latimer Trust, 2015).

Chapter 5

The contribution of the Hebrew Scriptures to a biblical ethics of economics

So the basic exhortation of Deuteronomy to choose life does not disappear for the Christian reader, even if it is modified in important ways. This does strongly suggest that the *Mishpatim* in Deuteronomy, which spell out the practical expression of its exhortation, should also not evaporate into irrelevance for its Christian readers, even if they too are modified in important and significant ways. After all, Christian readers still have to work out what it actually looks like in practice to live by faith in Jesus with a renewed heart in humble obedience to their God.



Saint Paul Writing His Epistles — Valentin de Boulogne, circa 1620

This is a contentious area in Christian ethics. Those in Protestant Reformed circles are relatively happy to take the Mosaic Law seriously as morally binding. The Apostle Paul exhorts Christians to *fulfil* the Law (Rom. 8.4; 13.8–10; Gal. 5.14), but this does not seem to mean the ethical content of the Law disappears or is replaced wholesale. Paul's own ethical teaching draws on the moral content of the Law without embarrassment, explicitly and implicitly.[1] Not all Christian ethicists would be quite so happy with such a positive attitude to the Mosaic Law, however, though even those who want to maintain some distance between the Christian and the Mosaic Law would also argue that it contains divinely given 'wisdom for living'.[2]

How then are these commands to be fulfilled in practice? How should they be adapted, or the wisdom within them extracted and reapplied? Many schemes have been proposed for discerning the ethical principles in Old Testament legal material so that they can be reused in contemporary

1 '[T]he distinction between ceremonial and moral [though not quite Pauline] is not without a point, since Paul does think the (moral, patently not the ceremonial) commands of the Mosaic law embody the expectations of goodness inherent in the human condition. And Christians, too, are to do the "good"' – Stephen Westerholm, *Perspectives Old and New on Paul: The 'Lutheran' Paul and his Critics* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2004), p. 437. Compare Article Seven of the 39 Articles of the Church of England: 'Although the Law given from God by Moses, as touching Ceremonies and Rites, do not bind Christian men, nor the Civil precepts thereof ought of necessity to be received in any commonwealth; yet notwithstanding, no Christian man whatsoever is free from the obedience of the Commandments which are called Moral.'

2 E.g. Brian Rosner, 'Paul and the Law: What he does not say', *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 32:4 (2010), p. 418.

contexts. For example, Christopher Wright has a detailed fourfold scheme to move us towards a contemporary context (the third of which involves answering ten questions).[3] But the key thing to remember is that biblical ethical instruction is given in a particular situation (time and place), to a particular group of people. To apply it we simply need to consider both the change in situation and the change in audience. From a Christian point of view, the situation has changed theologically. Things have of course also changed economically in radical ways over the last two or three millennia.

5.1 SUMMARY OF THE ECONOMIC INSTRUCTION OF THE HEBREW SCRIPTURES

Before turning to these differences, it will be helpful to summarise the economic instruction of Deuteronomy in its context within the Hebrew Scriptures. This suggests that the pursuit of blessing – including economic blessing – through hard work and creative production can and should be a good thing, a fulfilment of God's purposes in creating the world in the first place. However, it only *truly* becomes good in alignment with the LORD. Apart from such an alignment, the outcome is a counterfeit of what it should be – as the King of Tyre illustrates in Ezekiel 28. Key features of the alignment include trust, dependence and patience. Even when blessing is promised, the timing will often be uncertain. Patient dependence is built into the Sabbath principle. Many biblical characters from Abraham onwards demonstrate this patience for us – perhaps most dramatically in 'the patience of Job' (as James famously puts it – James 5.11 AV).

The basic approach to legislation we have seen in Deuteronomy is, first, to lay down basic or broad rules (the Ten Commandments) and basic values; second, to leave the people to get on with their lives within these boundaries and according to these principles; third, to address potential problems and conflicts as they arise with case law – the *Mishpatim*.

The basic economic boundaries are do not steal and do not covet. The basic value is to love the LORD, the *Shema* (Deut. 6.4–5). From Leviticus we also have: love your neighbour (Lev. 19.18). But the detail lies in the *Mishpatim*. Some of the instruction on economic issues in the Exodus *Mishpatim* deals with stealing and maintaining property rights. Much of the remainder we have considered in the book of Deuteronomy is concerned to deal with unexpected poverty. There were limited options for those facing adverse shocks or falling on hard times in the ancient world. One could sell land, look for a loan or gift or – as a last resort – sell one's future labour within some sort of bonded servanthood. All these options were regulated by the *Mishpatim*. This alone suggests that the danger of exploitation, or of people getting trapped in poverty, was significant. If there were some genuinely without access to the resources to support themselves (such as the Levites), then there was provision through the tithe. Otherwise the provision was to be appropriate and *temporary*, aimed at restoring normal working conditions. So land sold reverted to its original allocation (Leviticus 25); loans within Israel's polity were interest-free (making them easier to repay); debt and bonded labour ended after a period.

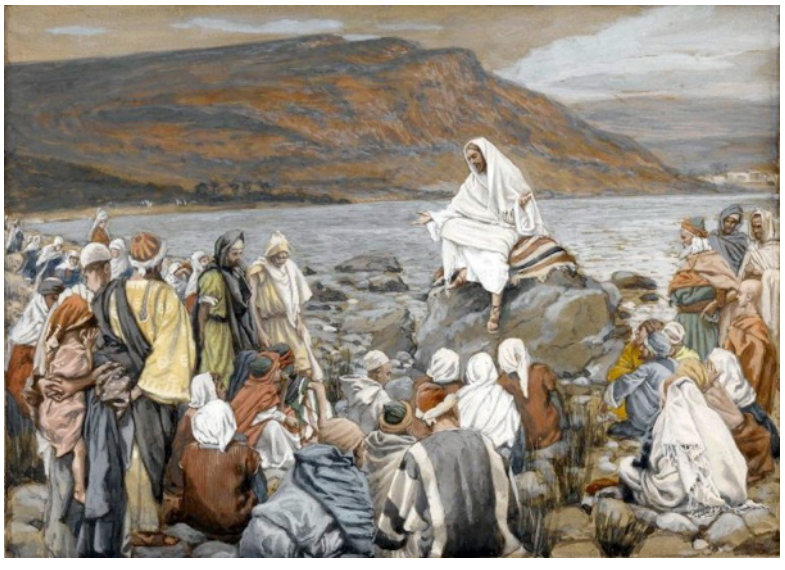
Apart from these provisions and regulations to deal with unexpected poverty, the *Mishpatim* encourage integrity. Deception and manipulation are explicitly identified and condemned. Workers should be paid promptly and correct weights and measures used in exchange.

This alignment with the LORD and his instruction is presented as a good path to follow – a good life in the Land, under his blessing. Nevertheless, as we have observed, this good life is presented

3 Christopher J. H. Wright, *Old Testament Ethics for the People of God* (Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press, 2004), pp. 321–4. See also James Robson, *Honey from the Rock: Deuteronomy for the People of God* (Nottingham: Apollos, 2013), pp. 171–201.

with an awareness of much failure and stupidity to come; a sober expectation that the people will fail to embrace what the LORD has offered.

5.2 THE CHANGE IN SITUATION: THEOLOGICAL



Jesus Teaches the People by the Sea — James Tissot, circa 1890

From a Christian point of view, the book of Deuteronomy encourages its readers to choose life and blessing – but to find it in Jesus Christ. In him the curse Deuteronomy warns about is borne; and in him it is possible to become the true Israelite, relating to the LORD God as Deuteronomy exhorts, encourages and implies. The ethical instruction of Deuteronomy should also inform how a person actually lives – and how they should live communally. But there are significant changes in situation to take into account. For example, the economic instruction in Deuteronomy and elsewhere in the Hebrew Scriptures is frequently related to the *Land*. The Land has a special theological significance within the Mosaic Law.[4] It belongs to the LORD (Lev. 25.23), his to give as a gift. It is a component of the Abrahamic promises (beginning at Gen. 12.7). It is given to the people to inherit (Exod. 32.13), an inheritance given to them as a *place* to live with him as their God. How then does this apply for the Christian relating to God in Christ Jesus, who could live in any nation or region of the world?

There are multiple views on how the Land should be viewed from a Christian perspective.[5] One aspect of a connection, however, is clearly picked up by Peter in 1 Peter 1.3–5 as he talks about 'an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you'. Similarly the apostle Paul talks of Christian believers adopted as 'sons' and heirs – heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ (Rom. 8.17) – waiting with patient hope for the whole of creation to be liberated from its bondage to decay (Rom. 8.18–25). That is, just as Abraham was promised the Land, so the person adopted in Christ can also look forward to an inheritance – a much greater one.[6] According to the New Testament, there are many present blessings from being adopted in Christ, but this

4 The Land stretched from the Wadi of Egypt to the Euphrates according to the promise of Genesis 15.18. In Numbers 34.2–12 the boundaries are identified with the land of Canaan – a much more restricted area. In 1 Kings 4.21, King Solomon rules over almost all the area specified in Genesis 15 – 'from the Euphrates to the land of the Philistines, even to the border of Egypt').

5 For a brief summary of the issues, see J. G. Millar, 'Land', in T. Desmond Alexander, Brian S. Rosner, D. A. Carson and Graeme Goldsworthy (eds), *New Dictionary of Biblical Theology* (Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press, 2000), pp. 623–7.

6 The connection between Abraham's promise of the Land and the promise of a greater inheritance is implied in Romans 4.13, where Paul talks about 'the promise that he [Abraham] would inherit the *world* [*kosmos*]'.

does suggest that many material blessings lie predominantly in the future.[7] We shall return to the significance of this shortly.

5.3 THE CHANGE IN SITUATION: TECHNOLOGY, POLITICS AND ECONOMICS

We saw earlier that the ancient world that provided the context for the Hebrew Scriptures had some significant differences from our own. Compared to the developed world, at least, it was relatively impoverished and rural, with low levels of trade. In principle and on average, the extent of need is a great deal lower today.[8] In ancient Israel, a key issue was access to land as a food-producing resource. Those without access were supported through the tithe. There remain issues with access to productive resources today, but the options are much wider. On the other hand, the community and family support networks for those without access to resources are perhaps weaker. An adverse shock in the ancient world (such as a crop failure), as in the developing world today, could be devastating. In the developed world today, shocks are generally less life-threatening but come in a huge variety of forms. For example, we would expect households in industrialised economies with high levels of specialisation in labour to be vulnerable to the possibility of involuntary unemployment. Access to more developed markets today means that some of these risks are mitigated – although there are well-known limitations to the market provision of insurance, in particular. Where markets have failed, numerous state-based solutions to adverse shocks and poverty have been tried in the developed world over the last 100 years or so. These too have their issues, of course, but at least we may say they add to the range of options. The particular issues and problems of urban living – externalities of many kinds and public good problems[9] – are also more significant today. The *Mishpatim* in the Bible were written for a relatively rural economy, so we shouldn't read too much into the fact that they don't directly say much about such issues.

The diversity in the kind of shocks we can experience in a modern economy is mirrored by the diversity of ways we can be deceived or manipulated. The *Mishpatim* on accurate weights and measures indicate that the incentive to deceive was also an issue in the ancient world (e.g. Jacob). From the very earliest times, we could say that the tendency to deceive and manipulate has always been there, and the incentive to do so has always been the soft underbelly of capitalism. But the sheer complexity of the economy in the world today – especially in the age of computer trading and the internet – makes it uniquely vulnerable. Economists are very aware of these issues: how asymmetric information can lead to market inefficiency. It's the extent of the problem that is contested. The economists George Akerlof and Robert Shiller talk about deception and manipulation as 'phishing for phools'. 'Phishing' is the act of deception or manipulation (as in a 'phishing' email); the 'phool' is the one taken in by it. 'Most countries have learned respect for free markets,' they conclude, 'and, for the most part, rightfully so.' However, 'competitive free markets will not just be the playing field for providing us with what we need and want. They will also be the playing field for phishing for phools.'[10] Rather than simply a caveat, a qualification, to the normally good working of markets,

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7 A failure to understand this point is a fundamental error of the so-called 'prosperity gospel'. There are of course many other problems with it. A recent critique is David W. Jones and Russell S. Woodbridge, *Health, Wealth & Happiness: Has the Prosperity Gospel Overshadowed the Gospel of Christ?* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Publications, 2011).

8 In terms of calories per capita, this is even true of the developing world today.

9 See Chapter 2, note 12.

10 George A. Akerlof and Robert J. Shiller, *Phishing for Phools: The Economics of Manipulation and Deception* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2015), pp. 163–4.

they regard the phenomenon as endemic – affecting and distorting outcomes across the economy: in consumption, politics, agriculture and finance.[11]

5.4 APPLICATION IN THE PRIVATE AND COMMUNITY SPHERE

What, then, should be done? Let's begin with the kind of personal response encouraged by the Hebrew Scriptures, thinking of the book of Deuteronomy in particular. We've seen that, not least in its wider biblical context, Deuteronomy is a call to a life of faith. This faith reconnects those who express it with the wider purpose of life, established at creation, to spread and multiply the glory of God in the world. This is of necessity a *humble* faith – aware of the weakness and fragility of the human heart and very much dependent on God's mercy. It is also a *lively* faith, expressed in real behaviour.

Deuteronomy gives no explicit solution to the problem of the human heart and its need for reformation. For the Christian reader, that solution comes in Jesus Christ. But faith focused on Jesus Christ remains humble and is expected to be lively – a faith 'working through love', as the apostle Paul puts it (Gal. 5.6). I've argued that the ethical detail and demand of Deuteronomy remains relevant for its Christian readers, so long as they appropriately account for the change in situation, as they work out what it means for their faith to work through love in practice.

We have noted already that one significant difference between an Israelite, say, standing on the Plains of Moab listening to Moses preach, and a Christian reader of the book concerns the *timing* of blessing. The first recipients of the instruction on tithing in Deuteronomy 14, for example, are encouraged with the promise 'so that the Lord your God may bless you in all the work that you undertake' (Deut. 14.29). Thus we may infer that this blessing will be received as they work in the Land God is giving them, maybe not immediately, but it will come soon. There are present blessings from being adopted in Christ, but New Testament teaching does suggest that many blessings will lie in the future (e.g. Mark 8.35). For some, like the rich man in Mark 10.17–22, this will mean giving up material riches now for 'treasure in heaven' (to be enjoyed in part in the future). *Patience* in faith is thereby emphasised. We have seen already, in the examples of Abraham and Job, that patience is an important aspect of faith in the Hebrew Scriptures.

Nevertheless, it would be wrong to say that the reformed and sanctified materialism of Deuteronomy is replaced by asceticism in the New Testament teaching. Rather, the future security of Christian believers allows them to sit somewhat loose to their present material condition – neither despising material things when their condition is good, nor consumed by want and desire when it is not. As Paul says:

> I have learned to be content with whatever I have. I know what it is to have little, and I know what it is to have plenty. In any and all circumstances I have learned the secret of being well-fed and of going hungry, of having plenty and of being in need. (Phil. 4.11–12)

Thus Paul found a position distinct from Stoicism on the one hand and Hedonism on the other. His ethical teaching to wealthy people warns of the dangers of desiring riches; it encourages instead not asceticism but gratitude and generosity (1 Tim. 6.6–10, 17–18).

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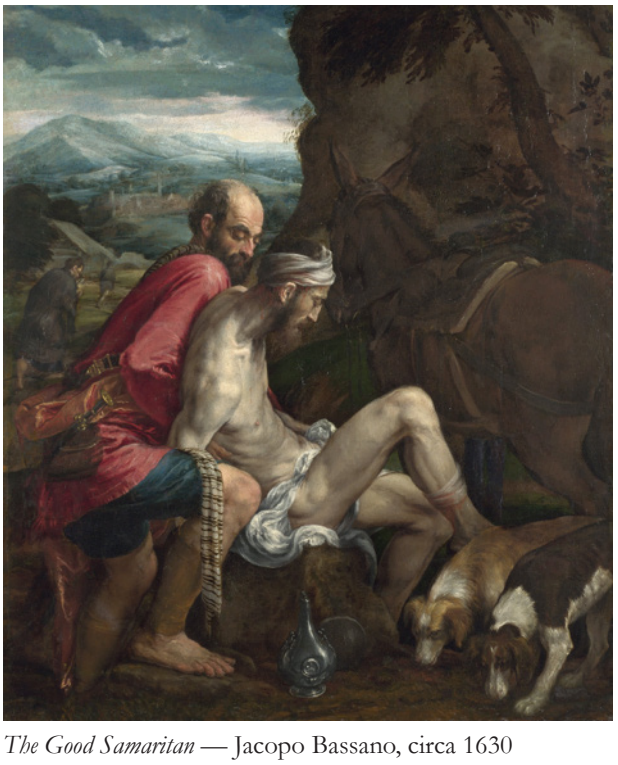
11 As we shall consider briefly below, even if one were to agree with this gloomy assessment, this would be just the start of it. We would also have to deal with the issue that any measure we might introduce to deal with the problem is also likely to be subject to the incentive to deceive and manipulate, and would also be at risk of corruption.

So the reformed materialism of Deuteronomy also speaks to Christian believers, with an ethical demand that their hearts should be redirected in respect of economic questions. The teaching on tithes encourages a concern for those without access to productive resources or other forms of support. (A worked example of this principle is 1 Timothy 5.3–16 applied to a church community: 'Honour widows who are really widows', he says (v. 3); that is, those without other support. Much of Paul's detailed instruction is devoted to ensuring that those put on the list of widows *really are* without other support.) The teaching on loans and bonded labour demands that the Christian believer never take advantage of another's misfortune. Rather, there should be a concern to help people *out of* poverty – to restore normal productive conditions as far as possible. The teaching on paying workers and on accurate weights and measures demands that Christian believers should not personally succumb to the temptation to deceive or manipulate others for personal gain. Rather, they should do what they can to distance themselves from such behaviour.

If there are sufficient numbers of people having their hearts so reformed in a given area or community, then the regional social impact can be significant – as with the abolition of slavery in the eighteenth century. Some, such as Christians in business, may have larger social influence and their reformation can therefore have a disproportionate impact – the Quaker businesses of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries are a good example.[12] More general social reformation – at least to some extent – is also possible. The political scientist Robert Woodberry argues that Protestant missionaries – whose sole concern was to make Christian converts without any overt thought of social reform – were the cause of the conditions that made liberal democracy possible in many developing countries.[13]

5.5 APPLICATION IN THE PUBLIC SPHERE

The book of Deuteronomy was spoken to a people and nation who had at least professed trust and devotion to the LORD their God. I am writing this, however, in the United Kingdom in the early twenty-first century AD – in a nation that, while it has a modicum of (rapidly disappearing) Christian ethos in its history and institutions, seems to have very little contemporary interest in Christian *faith*. I have suggested that were this to change, social reform should – eventually – follow, even if slowly and locally, as the hearts of Christian believers are transformed. Indeed, we might also claim that this is the only kind of social reform that will be deep and lasting; any other kind will always fall short. However, this does not mean that Christian believers should be uninterested in social, economic and political matters outside of the task of making disciples and in the reformation of their own lives and



The Good Samaritan — Jacopo Bassano, circa 1630

12 Richard Turnbull, *Quaker Capitalism: Lessons for Today* (Oxford: Centre for Enterprise, Markets and Ethics, 2014).

13 Robert D. Woodberry, 'The Missionary Roots of Liberal Democracy', *American Political Science Review* 106:2 (2012).

communities. Christian believers are called to love their neighbours – even if their neighbours persist in being their enemies. Hence, being interested and involved in secular issues and government is a *means* of loving neighbours. Concerning themselves, Christians may have to face all kinds of social injustice without seeking immediate retribution (following the pattern set for them by Jesus – 1 Pet. 2.21). But Luther maintained that '*on behalf of others* [a Christian] should and may seek vengeance, justice, protection, and help, and do as much as he can to achieve it'.[14]

We've seen a realism in Deuteronomy that the people will struggle to love the LORD and love their neighbours – hence the need for the ethical detail. But the response to likely failure is not to give up and legislate nothing. Likewise today, even if we know that legislation is only going to be a very partial answer to the problems of society, given that some form of legislative framework will exist, we would like it to be as helpful as possible. The biblical teaching suggests that Christians should have realistic expectations about the feasibility of real and radical social reformation apart from people becoming disciples of Jesus; nevertheless, they are encouraged do what they can in the societies in which they find themselves.

So what guidance does the book of Deuteronomy give in this direction? On the one hand, we have noted that the legislative framework within it pertaining to economics is *limited*. The basic approach to legislation is to lay down basic rules and values, leave the people to get on with their lives within these boundaries and according to these principles, and then only when particular abuses and issues have arisen in practice, apply the more detailed legislation such as we find in the *Mishpatim*. The principle does seem to be: *only intervene further if necessar*y; and if necessary, do so with the aim of restoring normal productive conditions. What's more, we may note that the *Mishpatim* most certainly do not even attempt to cover every minutia of economic activity. All this speaks against *excessive* intervention, especially that which removes incentives for creative productivity and enterprise.

On the other hand, while it may be limited, the legislative framework *is there*. It does constitute what we would now call market interference or intervention. In other words, Deuteronomy is not advocating an absolutely pure laissez-faire approach to economic activity. If it did, then there would be no legislation beyond that pertaining to property rights. Although limited and selective, it is definitely there. Some, indeed, might find even this limited intervention excessive. For example, Morris Silver considers Deuteronomy to be tied to the rhetoric of the classical prophets as they reacted to the new affluence of the eighth and seventh centuries BC with a call for social justice. He argues that some of the regulations, if enacted, would have been 'irrational and suicidal' from an economic point of view.[15] So strong is the market interference in the regulations, in his view, that he concludes: '[A]s an economist and social scientist, I can testify that whatever its presumed moral virtues, the advice of the classical prophets was destructive from the standpoint of economic affluence and political strength.'[16]

It is hard, therefore, to make a case for a super-minimalist state from the Old Testament evidence. The Deuteronomic regulations do interfere in and regulate markets to protect the vulnerable.

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14 Martin Luther, *Career of the Reformer Part 4*; Luther's Works 34 (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1955), p. 161; emphasis added. See also Robert Doyle, 'The Seach for Theological Models: The Christian in his Society in the Sixteenth, Seventeenth and Nineteenth Centuries', in Barry G. Webb (ed.), *Christians in Society*; vol. 3 of *Explorations* (Homebush West, New South Wales: Lancer, 1988).

15 Morris Silver, *Prophets and Markets: The Political Economy of Ancient Israel* (Boston: Kluwer-Nijhoff, 1983), p. 241.

16 Silver, *Prophets and Markets*, p. 249.

What guidance does Deuteronomy then give about the kinds of intervention one should undertake? There is much one could say, of course, but we may at least begin to sketch some possible directions.

First, with regard to poverty, Deuteronomy does legislate a mechanism – the tithe – to support those who do not have access to productive resources or other forms of support. This implies support for similar mechanisms today – with a similar qualification that the mechanism should be for those who *really don't* have access to other forms of support. This qualification is important in relation to the other Deuteronomic concern, which is to help those struggling in poverty to leave it and be restored to sustainable productive activity. The Jubilee laws, and the legislation on bonded labour and loans, are all partly shaped around this concern. Expressing this concern today may not be straightforward, of course. We live in a far more complex economic situation, with many more ways for things to go wrong. Whether one should intervene is a more open question, given that poverty is less life-threatening (in developed countries at least). *How* to intervene, if one chooses to, is also a complex issue, given there are many more possible instruments available to use.[17] Economists refer to the possibility, acknowledged in Deuteronomy, of getting stuck in poverty as a 'poverty trap'. They disagree on both the prevalence and the solutions.[18] However, despite the complexity, the example set by Deuteronomy demands proper concern and investigation.

Second, with regard to honesty in trade and business integrity, false weights and measures are condemned (Deut. 25.13–16). There is no explicit penalty prescribed or system of inspection, just the encouragement to comply 'so that your days may be long in the land that the Lord your God is giving you', and the warning that 'all who act dishonestly are abhorrent to the Lord your God' (v. 15). Such motivations may not be very meaningful or effective for those who are not Christians. It's good to echo the condemnation of dishonesty, of course, but an actual reduction in dishonesty might require formal systems of inspection and regulation. The difficulty is that whatever system one introduces for inspection or regulation will also be subject to the same incentives to deception, manipulation and corruption. There is no simple solution – apart from a radical change of heart! Without such, we are engaged in retrieval ethics, patching things up as best we can, recognising that regulators also have weaknesses. Thus it may well be that some regulation proves better than none – especially if, as seems likely, deception and manipulation really are such a huge brake on the practical effectiveness of capitalism to bring about good outcomes.

In these areas at least, the ethical vision of Deuteronomy stands very much against a crude conception of capitalism or free markets in which greed and selfishness somehow come to serve the common good – as (in)famously in Bernard Mandeville's *The Fable of the Bees*.[19] In the fable, the bees turn from vice to virtue and their society collapses. Stick with vice, Mandeville was saying, and through the mechanism of the economy you will prosper. Tomas Sedlacek notes: '[Mandeville] holds an opposite view from the Hebrews (and Adam Smith) who believed that virtue

17 So it shouldn't be necessary, for example, to have recourse to bonded labour arrangements in a modern developed economy.

18 On the sceptical side of the debate lies William Easterly – in, for example, *The White Man's Burden: Why the West's Efforts to Aid the Rest Have Done So Much Ill and So Little Good* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006). On the other hand, Jeffrey Sachs sees poverty traps almost everywhere – in, for example, *The End of Poverty: Economic Possibilities for Our Time* (London: Allen Lane, 2005). Banerjee and Duflo present a more nuanced view in *Poor Economics: A Radical Rethinking of the Way to Fight Global Poverty*. Theirs is an evidence-based, micro-level approach to dealing with poverty traps when they do arise.

19 Bernard Mandeville, *The Fable of the Bees: Or, Private Vices, Publick Benefits* (New York and London: Penguin, 2007).

is economically beneficial and vice is not.'[20] Indeed, Adam Smith in his more ethically reflective moods stands shoulder to shoulder with Deuteronomy.[21] Greed is not good. Market transactions do not somehow sanctify immoral behaviour. Let the untransformed heart run wild, and the Bible will once again take us back to Ezekiel 28 and the counterfeit prosperity and disturbing arrogance of the King of Tyre.

20 Tomas Sedlacek, *Economics of Good and Evil: The Quest for Economic Meaning from Gilgamesh to Wall Street* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), p. 190.

21 If human society is like a vast machine, then 'virtue, which is, as it were, the fine polish to the wheels of society, necessarily pleases; while vice, like the vile rust, which makes them jar and grate upon one another, is as necessarily offensive' – Adam Smith, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* (London and New York: Penguin, 2009), pp. 371–2.

Chapter 6

Conclusions

I suggested in the Introduction that the source of many of the economic problems facing us go beyond the mere structural or technical – they are, at heart, *moral* problems. Our forefathers in the study of economics would have agreed; it was only in the dark days of the twentieth century that economists attempted the – futile – pursuit of a morality-free economics. For help with a moral perspective on economics we would be foolish to ignore the most ancient sources, including the Hebrew Scriptures.

The book of Deuteronomy is a keystone of the Hebrew Scriptures, but we have not found a straightforward or simplistic approach to the issues of economic morality! The *Mishpatim* on economic issues in Deuteronomy do not supply us with a salve we can simply and directly apply to the wheels of the economy to make them run a little more smoothly. They do present a picture of economic activity that, translated into modern circumstances, might well correspond to – using Brian Griffiths' neat summary – 'a market economy bounded by biblical principles of justice'.[1] And it's an attractive picture. The people have a safe place in which to reap the blessings of being productive, with the vulnerable protected. But the *Mishpatim* of Deuteronomy also suggest that the path to such a state of affairs may not be a direct one. They form part of a wider package of instruction and exhortation that exposes the human heart. It's humbling and uncomfortable. Nonetheless, it is in the end cathartic for those who engage with it seriously – encouraging a realignment with the deeper purposes of our existence, purposes set by the one who made us.

1 Brian Griffiths, *Morality and the Market Place: Christian Alternatives to Capitalism and Socialism* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1982), p. 9.

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