

THE CENTRE FOR ENTERPRISE, MARKETS AND ETHICS

THEOLOGY AND THE MARKET SERIES

THE ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL TEACHING OF THE HEBREW SCRIPTURES

EDITED BY REVD DR RICHARD TURNBULL

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THE CENTRE FOR ENTERPRISE, MARKETS AND ETHICS

We are a think tank based in Oxford that seeks to promote an enterprise, market economy built on ethical foundations.

We undertake research on the interface of Christian theology, economics and business.

Our aim is to argue the case for an economy that generates wealth, employment, innovation and enterprise within a framework of calling, integrity, values and ethical behaviour, leading to the transformation of the business enterprise and contributing to the relief of poverty.

We publish a range of material, hold events and conferences, undertake research projects and speak and teach in our areas of concern.

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For further information please contact the Director, Revd Dr Richard Turnbull, at:

The Centre for Enterprise, Markets and Ethics
First Floor, 31 Beaumont Street,
Oxford OX1 2NP

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 on 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 will we hope stimulate further discussion and reflection.

CONTRIBUTORS

Revd Professor John Barton

John Barton was Oriel and Laing Professor of the Interpretation of Holy Scripture at the University of Oxford from 1991 to 2014. He is currently senior research fellow at Campion Hall, Oxford. His research interests include biblical studies in general, and particularly the prophets, biblical ethics, the biblical canon and issues in hermeneutics. As an ordained Anglican priest he assists in the parish of Abingdon-on-Thames. John Barton is a Fellow of the British Academy and holds the degree of Doctor of Letters from the University of Oxford. His most recent publication (2019) is *A History of the Bible: The Book and its Faiths*, published by Allen Lane (Penguin).

Revd Dr Ben Cooper

Ben Cooper is Minister for Training at Christ Church Fulwood in Sheffield, where he has been since 2010. He holds a degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Economics from Wolfson College, Oxford and a degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Biblical Studies from Moore Theological College, Sydney. Before training for ordained ministry, he was a post-doctoral research fellow in economic theory at Nuffield College, Oxford. Ben has published, among other things, *The Economics of the Hebrew Scriptures* (2017) for the Centre for Enterprise, Markets and Ethics.

Rabbi Dr Norman Solomon

After serving several congregations as Rabbi, Norman Solomon was appointed Koerner Visiting Fellow at the Oxford Centre for Hebrew and Jewish Studies in 1994. In 1995 he was appointed Fellow in Modern Jewish Thought at the Centre, and Lecturer in Theology in the University of Oxford. Following retirement, Norman remains a Senior Associate of the Centre and is also linked to Oxford University's Oriental Institute. He has published more than 80 papers and several books and was Specialist Adviser to the Council for National Academic Awards (1989–92) and President of the British Association for Jewish Studies (1994). He also served as a Member of the Commission on Religion and Belief in British Public Life (2013–15).

Revd Professor Paul Fiddes

Paul Fiddes is Professor of Systematic Theology in the University of Oxford and former Principal of Regent's Park College (1989–2007), where he now acts as Director of Research. He has served as Chair of the Board of the Faculty of Theology and Religion and is an Honorary Fellow of St Peter's College, Oxford. Professor Fiddes is an ordained Baptist minister and has served as the co-chair of conversations between the Baptist World Alliance and both the Anglican Communion and the Roman Catholic Church, and as an ecumenical representative on the General Synod of the Church of England. His research interests are in the doctrine of the Triune God, wisdom literature, the relations between theology, literature and late-modern philosophy, and ecumenical ecclesiology. He holds degrees from Oxford, including Doctor of Philosophy and Doctor of Divinity.

Revd Dr Richard Turnbull (editor)

Richard Turnbull is the Director of the Centre for Enterprise, Markets and Ethics. He holds degrees in Economics and Theology and a degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Theology from the University of Durham. He has authored or edited numerous books, articles and other publications in church history and business ethics. He is a visiting Professor at St Mary's University, Twickenham and a Fellow of the Royal Historical Society.

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INTRODUCTION

Revd Dr Richard Turnbull

The Hebrew Bible, or the Old Testament in the Christian tradition, challenges us to think very carefully about how the values, ethics and purposes of material from the Ancient Near East are relevant for today.

At a conference held at Campion Hall, Oxford, in January 2019, the Centre for Enterprise, Markets and Ethics brought together four distinguished scholars and thinkers to address this question. Can these ancient texts be of relevance to contemporary social and economic issues?

The papers in this publication are those presented to the conference and vary in style and approach. Our writers, united in the belief of the principle of relevance, help us explore the context, meaning and intent of aspects of the Hebrew Scriptures in relation to social and economic matters, seeking to allow the texts to speak for themselves rather than imposing a predetermined outcome on the material.

The role of money, interest, responsibility for the poor and the social fabric of society are at the heart of these papers. They investigate the nature of justice and responsibility in the context of a prevailing conservative social fabric. What precisely was the teaching around interest and loans? Were interventions on behalf of the less fortunate intended to be temporary in order to assist them in getting back on their own feet? What was the historic rabbinic teaching around these matters of loans and interest? Did it apply to commercial transactions or only to the personal? What was the role of the inherited 'wisdom' tradition in bringing wise experience to bear on these ethical questions?

The horizons of the Hebrew Bible and contemporary society are, of course, very different. Nevertheless, ethical principles are established on whose application to our own society we would do well to reflect. What is most remarkable is, in fact, just how relevant this material is for us today. The need for and encouragement of commerce, the problems of financial and social exploitation, weights and measures, loans and interest, the relationship of distributive and interventionist justice, personal as well as social responsibility, wise ethical decision-making – all these questions travel from then to now.

We hope these papers will stimulate readers to further and deeper exploration.

CHAPTER 1

SOCIAL TEACHING IN THE OLD TESTAMENT

Revd Professor John Barton

The Old Testament has a bad name among many people, including a good number of Christians, as a book about bloodshed and vengeance, ‘an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth’. It is the last place a lot of us would look for positive social teaching. At the same time, the modern Church has in many ways discovered Old Testament *prophecy* as rather an exception to the general rule about the pre-Christian character of the Old Testament, seeing in the prophets a drive to social justice in particular that has much to say to the modern situation. Where once the word ‘prophet’ raised in the minds of Christians the idea of messianic prophecy, to call someone a prophet nowadays means primarily to see them as one who proclaims the demands of God in the social and political spheres, and for whom justice is a major concern. The prophets will figure a lot in this paper, though I shall begin with some of the legal material in the Old Testament.

If we start from the popular idea of the Old Testament as a book of unthinking and uncaring vengeance, a lot of it will surprise us by how modern and reasonable it turns out to be once you actually read it. Its laws require justice in something very like our sense, in daily life, in the conduct of law courts, in commercial practice and in general personal relations. Deuteronomy, for example, stresses the need for harmony in daily living among neighbours:

You shall not watch your neighbour’s ox or sheep straying away and ignore them; you shall take them back to their owner. If the owner does not reside near you or you do not know who the owner is, you shall bring it to your own house, and it shall remain with you until the owner claims it; then you shall return it. You shall do the same with a neighbour’s donkey; you shall do the same with a neighbour’s garment; and you shall do the same with anything else that your neighbour loses and you find. You may not withhold your help. You shall not see your neighbour’s donkey or ox fallen on the road and ignore it; you shall help to lift it up. (Deut. 22.1–4)

More strikingly still, in Exodus and in Deuteronomy: ‘When you see the donkey of one who hates you lying under its burden and you would hold back from setting it free, you must help to set it free’ (Exod. 23.5; cf. Deut. 22.4).

Bribery and corruption in public life are condemned, not only in the laws but also in the wise sayings found in Proverbs, and there is a great emphasis on the need for probity in commercial transactions. Here are some examples:

You shall not have in your bags two kinds of weights, large and small. You shall not have in your house two kinds of measures, large and small. You shall have only a full and honest weight; you shall have only a full and honest measure. (Deut. 25.13–15)

A false balance is an abomination to the LORD, but an accurate weight is his delight. (Prov. 11.1)

Partiality in judging is not good. Whoever says to the wicked, 'You are innocent', will be cursed . . . (Prov. 24.23–24)

You shall not spread a false report. You shall not join hands with the wicked to act as a malicious witness. You shall not follow a majority in wrongdoing; when you bear witness in a lawsuit, you shall not side with the majority so as to pervert justice. (Exod. 23.1–2)

You shall take no bribe, for a bribe blinds the officials, and subverts the cause of those who are in the right. (Exod. 23.8)

Like our laws, the laws of the Old Testament recognise the importance of intention in deciding whether or not an action is a crime, citing the case of two people who are felling trees, when the head of one of the axes flies off and kills one of them accidentally: the one who was wielding the axe is then not regarded as a murderer (Deut. 19.4–7). Or someone who keeps an animal that turns out to be dangerous is punished if he knew about the danger, but not so heavily if he did not: this comes in the 'law of the goring ox', of which prototypes existed in other ancient Middle Eastern cultures from at least the early second millennium BC:

When an ox gores a man or a woman to death, the ox shall be stoned, and its flesh shall not be eaten; but the owner of the ox shall not be liable. If the ox has been accustomed to gore in the past, and its owner has been warned but has not restrained it, and it kills a man or a woman, the ox shall be stoned, and its owner also shall be put to death. (Exod. 21.28–29)

This is a position not unlike our laws about dangerous dogs, though admittedly we do not exact capital punishment; the principle involved is clearly a just one, however.

Like us, the ancient Israelites who wrote the Old Testament believed in distributive justice. They thought that people should get what they deserved, that justice should apply equally to all, that its course should not be perverted through sectional interest or taking bribes. They thought that the intention behind an act mattered, that one should weigh up what people could have reasonably foreseen as the effect of their actions. They believed certainly in punishment for crime, but they thought that it should be set at a fitting level – sometimes a higher level than we would think appropriate, but still proportionate. It is in that context that we should read the law about giving an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth. It does not mean that retribution is always to be exacted unforgivingly, and it almost certainly does not mean that crime is to be punished with bodily mutilation, a thing that Old Testament law hardly ever countenances, by contrast with many other legal systems in the ancient world and indeed in the medieval or modern periods. What it means is that punishment should be measured, and Jewish law has always understood it in terms of compensation – the value of an eye for an eye, and so on. One is not to be deprived of one's life for damaging an eye; there is not to be disproportionate vengeance. The New Testament of course says that Christians are to replace revenge altogether with forgiveness, but Old Testament law is not legislating for personal attitudes but trying to implement a workable legal system, and in that, some principle of proportionate punishment seems essential. Contrasting Old and New Testament teaching on this subject is thus not comparing like with like.

Now against that background – a legal system not identical in any way to ours but based on similar principles – there are a couple of major surprises in the Old Testament.

(1) The first is that the Old Testament knows not only distributive justice but also what we might call interventionist justice. To get into this, we might consider the case of king Jehoiakim, who ruled Israel in the late seventh century BC. He was the son of king Josiah, whom the Old Testament remembers as a particularly righteous king. Jehoiakim went in for building works on a large scale (a new palace of cedar wood from Lebanon), and apparently exploited the workforce, at least according to the prophet Jeremiah, who says this about him:

Woe to him who builds his house by unrighteousness, and his upper rooms by injustice; who makes his neighbours work for nothing, and does not give them their wages; who says, 'I will build myself a spacious house with large upper rooms', and who cuts out windows for it, panelling it with cedar, and painting it with vermillion. Are you a king because you compete in cedar? Did not your father eat and drink and do justice and righteousness? Then it was well with him. He judged the cause of the poor and needy; then it was well. Is not this to know me? says the LORD. But your eyes and heart are only on your dishonest gain, for shedding innocent blood, and for practising oppression and violence. (Jer. 22.13–17)

Here there is certainly a concern for ordinary justice: workers should be paid their wages. But we also meet a concern for what is called 'justice and righteousness', *mishpat* and *sedaqa*, which becomes a stock phrase in all the prophets, and which means more than giving to each his or her due. It requires rulers, and especially the king, to intervene in social affairs to redress a balance that has gone wrong, in which the poor and other people who cannot defend themselves – often summed up in a stereotyped phrase as 'orphans and widows' – are positively favoured. This attitude is commended in Proverbs:

Do not rob the poor because they are poor, or crush the afflicted at the gate [which means in the courts], for the LORD pleads their cause and despoils of life those who despoil them. (Prov. 22.22–23)

If a king judges the poor with equity, his throne will be established for ever. (Prov. 29.14)

... it is not for kings to drink wine, or for rulers to desire strong drink; or else they will drink and forget what has been decreed, and will pervert the rights of all the afflicted. Give strong drink to one who is perishing, and wine to those in bitter distress; let them drink and forget their poverty, and remember their misery no more. Speak out for those who cannot speak, for the rights of all the destitute. Speak out, judge righteously, defend the rights of the poor and needy. (Prov. 31.4–9)

The ideal ruler is thus not simply an impartial judge but one who actively seeks out the cause of those in distress and intervenes to improve their lot. This ideal ruler is described at length in Psalm 72, which is nicely paraphrased in the well-known hymn 'Hail to the Lord's anointed':

He comes with succour speedy
To those who suffer wrong;
To help the poor and needy
And bid the weak be strong;

To give them songs for sighing,
 Their darkness turn to light,
 Whose souls, condemned and dying,
 Were precious in his sight.

What all this reminds us of is that ancient Israelite society was not a modern welfare state, and it was easy therein for the weak to go to the wall – as indeed it still is, even in a welfare state. Justice was understood not simply as maintaining law and order and punishing crime but as positively intervening to implement what we refer to as social justice. There was no ideal of equality in Israelite society, no sense that getting rich was wrong or that poverty could be totally eliminated, but there was a sense that the cards were stacked against certain people and that the task of a good ruler and his government was to redress the balance. How exactly one is to try and implement this insight of the Old Testament's in modern British society I am unable to say, and certainly it cannot be equated with any particular political programme that is on the table for us. But there is an underlying principle that must apply in some way for people who still regard the Old Testament as part of their Holy Scriptures. The principle is what liberation theologians identified as the Bible's 'preferential option for the poor', a certain leaning over backwards to confer more rights on precisely those people who find it harder to obtain even the rights they officially have.

It is this ideal that passed into the minds of the great Israelite prophets; it may even be that they to some extent discovered the principle, at least in its practical working out, though some such idea had been part of the ideology of kingship in the Middle East from time immemorial. But the prophets filled it with a new sense of urgency and judged the upper classes of their day very strictly according to how far they had heeded it. We find this already in the first of the great prophets, Amos, who worked in the eighth century BC, more than a hundred years before Jeremiah, and who condemns the ruling class of his day for their neglect of justice and righteousness. This is the kind of thing he has in mind:

... they sell the righteous for silver, and the needy for a pair of sandals [probably 'sell' here means selling their legal rights for even trivial bribes] – they who trample the head of the poor into the dust of the earth, and push the afflicted out of the way, ... they lay themselves down beside every altar on garments taken in pledge [whereas the law said that if you took someone's garment in pawn you had to let him have it back before sundown, which in practice meant that if someone was down to his last outer robe you couldn't take it in pawn at all]; and in the house of their God they drink wine bought with fines they imposed. (Amos 2.6–8)

Again he condemns those who 'turn justice to wormwood, and bring righteousness to the ground!' (5.7), and he reserves particular criticism for people who live in luxury (or what then passed for luxury – probably still less luxurious than most of our daily lives), while ignoring the poor around them:

Alas for those who lie on beds of ivory [that is, decorated with ivory], and lounge on their couches, and eat lambs from the flock, and calves from the stall; who sing idle songs to the sound of the harp, and like David improvise on instruments of music; who drink wine from bowls, and anoint themselves with the finest oils, but are not grieved over the ruin of Joseph [meaning the kingdom of Israel, which according to Amos was on the brink of destruction]! (6.4–6)

Finally, he attacks people who exploit the poor by shady commerce:

Hear this, you that trample on the needy, and bring to ruin the poor of the land, saying, 'When will the new moon be over so that we may sell grain; and the Sabbath, so that we may offer wheat for sale [holidays get in the way of trading]? We will make the ephah small and the shekel great, and practise deceit with false balances, buying the poor for silver and the needy for a pair of sandals, and selling the sweepings of the wheat.' [The ephah is the measure for selling, so a small one means giving short measure; the shekel is the weight for measuring out silver, so an overlarge one means charging more than you should.] (8.4–6)

This tradition of criticism passed on to Isaiah, Amos's younger contemporary, and thence to Jeremiah, as we saw earlier. Isaiah is particularly exercised by the injustice of pushing people off their ancestral land, which apparently went on by something like compulsory purchase and offended against the age-old provision against disturbing boundary-markers – people who do that are cursed in Deuteronomy 27.17: 'Cursed be anyone who moves a neighbour's boundary marker.' Isaiah says: 'Ah, you who join house to house, who add field to field, until there is room for no one but you, and you are left to live alone in the midst of the land!' (5.8). It may remind us of the action of king Ahab, in a much earlier time, when he forced Naboth off his ancestral vineyard and was condemned for it by the prophet Elijah (1 Kings 21.1–16).

The point here is that there was not necessarily anything actually illegal in this kind of activity. Ahab offered Naboth full monetary compensation for his vineyard. It is condemned by the prophets as against justice and righteousness, not necessarily as directly against the law. The same is true of the excessive luxury singled out by Amos: there was no law against feasting and singing, but for the prophet these things are inappropriate at a time of national danger, and especially when it is through exploitation of the poor that the rich have enough money to afford their indulgences. Similarly with Jeremiah's attack on Jehoiakim's building works: they are not against the law but they do offend against justice and righteousness because they are carried out through something verging on slave labour. What the prophets attack is at least in part the infringement of the ideal for rulers, rather than literal lawlessness – far more respectable activities than actual crime. But these things offend against what I called interventionist justice, the ideal that those who have enough and are in positions of power have a duty to the downtrodden. Given the Old Testament's public image, then if people are surprised to find it defending normal human perceptions of justice, they might be even more startled to learn that it champions this kind of positive discrimination in favour of the lowly.

(2) A second feature of the Old Testament – and especially the prophets – that may be surprising is their attitude to and involvement in the domestic politics of their day. The rediscovery of the political dimension of Old Testament prophecy was one of the great achievements of biblical study in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. As I said at the beginning, instead of concentrating on the ability of prophets to predict the future (and especially the messianic future, which Christians saw as fulfilled in Jesus Christ), scholars recaptured the awareness that the prophets had contributed materially to what their own contemporaries thought about political life. All of them, as we have seen, spoke out against injustice and oppression of the weak by the strong, and this message has become widely known not only within the churches but to people at large, so that if someone is said to be making a 'prophetic' utterance, we all know that that will not mean predicting the future but denouncing corruption, greed or exploitation in society. The Christian churches have regained an awareness that the prophets were concerned about the social ills of their day, and that they can

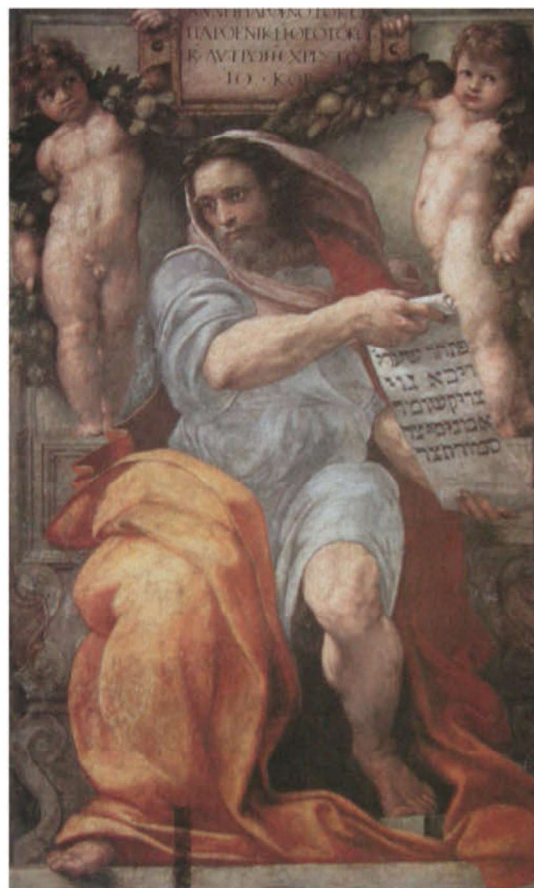
continue to challenge us in our day to consider how just we are in our dealings with each other. They spoke out against bad and oppressive government and predicted that God would punish rulers who practised it by letting them be deposed from their positions of power as their countries were enslaved by the great powers.

Isaiah is a particularly central figure in all this, but in his message there are indeed some surprises. Despite the fact that much of the book of Isaiah almost certainly comes from later periods, especially the collections in chapters 40—55 and 56—66, which we know by the names of Deutero- and Trito-, or Second and Third Isaiah, there is enough in chapters 1—39 that by general consent does go back to the prophet himself for us to be able to form quite a clear picture of his message about domestic politics. I want to concentrate on one chapter, chapter 3 (including the first verse of chapter 4).

Like the rest of Isaiah 1—39, this chapter consists of a number of separate oracles that may come from different periods of the prophet's activity. But despite this, it makes a coherent impression. Its argument is that because of the disordered life of the ruling classes in Jerusalem, there will be both social chaos and a military defeat, resulting in such a dire situation that, as we read in 4.1, very few men will be left, so that women – in a society in which not to be under the protection of a man was disastrous – will be reduced to asking those who do remain to marry them and so 'take away our disgrace'. This seems similar to the situation envisaged in 3.6–7, where the country will be so ravaged that it will be impossible to find anyone willing to take responsibility for ruling it. People will be so ruined that anyone who still has a cloak he can call his own will qualify as 'rich' and so eligible to rule, but the country will be in such a state that no one will be willing to take it on. The impression is of an overwhelming physical and human disaster. The chapter witnesses to a coherent message probably going back to Isaiah himself, that social and political bad practice are leading to a situation in which an enemy – no doubt the Assyrians – will come and devastate the country, leaving no one fit to rule and wiping out much of the male population.

Everything in Isaiah 3 concerns domestic political and social issues, apart from the implication that divine punishment for disorders in that realm will lead to international consequences, in the form of invasion by the Assyrians. But the social attitudes implied in the chapter turn out to be puzzling if you arrange them on the kind of political map we work with nowadays.

To begin with, many of Isaiah's attitudes are from our perspective obviously left of centre. He is not concerned with recommending the accumulation of wealth in the society of his day but with condemning those who are wealthy for the way they behave towards the poor and disadvantaged.



The Prophet Isaiah – Raphael (circa 1508)