

A “Marketless World”? An Examination of Wealth and Exchange in the Gospels and First-Century Palestine

Edd S. Noell
Professor of Economics
Department of Economics and Business
Westmont College

Research on the economic context of Jesus’ teaching on wealth and exchange points to the need to take into account the nature and extent of market arrangements in first-century Roman Palestine. This context involves changing relations among reciprocity, redistribution, and market exchange. Studies of the relevant archeological evidence point to intra- and inter-regional trade, increasing specialization, and monetization. This article claims that in the Gospels we find Jesus recognizing a growing role for market exchange and a legitimate pursuit of economic gain through risk-taking alongside of the need for the practice of general reciprocity. Perceived hostility toward wealth and market exchange is explained in terms of the institutional features of the Palestinian agrarian economy, including extractive wealth transfer by the Roman state and religious authorities. The article concludes that Jesus’ teachings on wealth and market exchange have greater moral relevance to modern economic life than is commonly thought.

Introduction

Christian moral philosophers, theologians, and economists in the twenty-first century face a special challenge in reflecting upon and applying the teachings of Jesus on wealth and possessions. In attempting to speak to a culture preoccupied with material prosperity, a prosperity largely linked to the modern reliance upon specialization, innovation, and private contracting conducted through market institutions, we draw upon the New Testament gospels. Yet, one might ask, in what sense do market institutions play any role in first-century Palestine? When the Gospels address the accumulation of wealth, are they not extremely cautious about it and/or full of warnings about possessions and market exchange?

Certainly there are scholars who suggest that the Gospels offer little or no recognition of market-based allocation of resources (Kitsch 1998). Instead, the Gospel writers are said to address exchange and wealth within the context of an embedded economy grounded in reciprocity and redistribution. Drawing upon the work of Polanyi (1944, 1957), Carney (1973), Finley (1992), and others, particular studies have been helpful in applying the constructs of reciprocity and redistribution to examples in the teachings and ministry of Jesus on exchange of resources and/or products (Hanson and Oakman 1998, Oakman 1996). Several instances in which trade and obligation are better understood in terms of ritualized gift-giving and receiving (reciprocity) or the collection and distribution of goods by a central authority (redistribution) are highlighted in this literature. Making use of this analysis for understanding the economic context of first-century Palestine, Malina emphasizes the consequent difficulty of gleaned instruction on economic matters from New Testament teaching: “It would be impossible to utilize the biblical documents as directives in the contemporary world without tearing the social fabric of this world and replacing it with kinship as focal social institution and collectivism as personal orientation” (1997, 15; cf. Hanson and Oakman 1998; Malina 2001).¹

In addition, some economists emphasize the dangers of wealth expressed in the Gospels and highlight Jesus’ call for dispossession (Gordon 1989; Dodd and Gotsis 2000).² Likewise, among a group of New Testament scholars there is great weight put upon the spiritual difficulties for the disciple of Christ associated with possessions (Wheeler 1995), and, more forcefully, a perceived hostility toward wealth and market exchange, particularly in the Synoptic Gospels (Schmidt 1987).

Any discussion of the Gospels’ teaching on economic issues must take into account both the nature and the perceptions of economic institutions in antiquity. Halteman (2004) is correct in stating that we best comprehend scriptural teaching on wealth by recognizing “how ethical teaching in the ancient world was impacted by its understanding of economic concepts” (28). Certainly there is much value in recognizing the complexity of the warnings about wealth expressed in the Gospels and the institutional role played by reciprocity and redistribution. Less convincing are the arguments made that reciprocity and redistribution almost exclusively characterize the “marketless world” of ancient political economy. Unfortunately, no account of economizing behavior is drawn upon to explain these nonmarket forms of trade. It seems that a fuller account of the thrust of the gospel teachings on wealth and market exchange is needed.

This article argues that in the teachings of Jesus on wealth and exchange there is a growing recognition of market-based institutions. His teachings are cogni-

zant of the relevance of several modes of exchange for all those he addressed in first-century Palestine. Relying on recent research on ancient economies and preclassical economic thought, this article contends that the backdrop for the gospel teaching on economic concerns involves changing modes of economic organization and institutions in first-century Palestine. Studies of the archeological evidence pointing to intra- and inter-regional trade, increasing specialization, and monetization (Freyne 1995a; 1995b; 1998) suggest that alongside the ancient perception of a world of limited goods there was a growing cognizance of the way in which market activity was supplanting reciprocity. A fuller comprehension of this evidence flows from a consideration of the nature and extent of price behavior in the early Roman Empire of which Palestine was a part.

Following the insights of Douglass North (1981), this article contends that the pursuit of economic gain characterized economic activity in ancient Palestine, but such a pursuit did not occur in a world without transaction costs. Accounting for the significance of transaction costs in explaining a range of forms of exchange in first-century Palestine provides a better framework for understanding and applying the gospel teachings. Moreover, Jesus recognized the growing role for market exchange alongside reciprocity in his teaching. This is reflected in the examples of the pursuit of economic gain through risk-taking in the literary and historical contexts of his parables as well as in particular encounters in his recorded ministry. Perceived hostility toward wealth and market exchange in the Gospels is explained in terms of the institutional features of the agrarian economy of first-century Palestine, such as the role of the Roman state and religious authorities in altering property rights through extractive wealth transfer (rent-seeking activity). Jesus’ teaching related to dispossession and his stern rebukes of the wealthy are set in the broader context of his perspective on the moral dimensions of economic life. He does not set forth a categorical condemnation of market exchange as such. The article concludes that the first-century setting of the Gospels does not hinder our ability to apply their moral directives for contemporary economic life; indeed, Jesus’ teaching on wealth and exchange speaks with more relevance in the twenty-first century than is commonly thought.

The article is organized into the following five sections. In section 2, there is an overview of the role of reciprocity and redistribution in ancient Palestine. The ways in which nonmarket exchange is relied upon are explained in terms of transaction costs. Section 3 discusses the economic changes in first-century Palestine that increasingly displaced reciprocity with market arrangements. It discusses these changes in terms of the evolving manner in which transaction costs were addressed in Palestine’s agrarian economy. The role of the Roman state in extractive transfers is examined in section 4. It discusses how

redistributive activities account for perceived hostility toward wealth and exchange in the Gospels. Section 5 discusses the use of both market-based and nonmarket-based allocation concepts in several gospel passages. Here Jesus' teachings on wealth, occasions for dispossession, risk-taking, and the pursuit of economic gain are examined. In providing a conclusion, section 6 affirms the continuing relevance of Jesus' economic teaching for our day and raises possible directions for further research.

Reciprocity and Redistribution

Any examination of the economic institutions prevalent in the Gospels should include the writings produced not only in ancient Palestine but also in other centers of civilization in and around the Mediterranean basin (Baeck 1994). Consider how Polanyi brought to bear insights from the framework of economic anthropology to the ancient Eastern Mediterranean economies. While recognizing the practice of market exchange, he emphasized instead the significance of customs, traditions, and religious norms that were embedded in these economies. These norms of social relationships governed the economic activity of the individual to the extent that Polanyi would claim that “he does not act so as to safeguard his individual interest in the possession of material goods; he acts so as to safeguard his social standing, his social claims, his social assets” and thus “the economic system will be run on noneconomic motives” (1944, 46). Polanyi suggested that for premodern economies, order in production and distribution of goods and services was ensured by the twin behavioral principles of reciprocity and redistribution (1944, 47) rather than market exchange, that is, trading relationships based on prices established through supply and demand.³ He asserted that “individual acts of barter or exchange—this is the bare fact—do not, as a rule, lead to the establishment of markets in societies where other principles of economic behavior prevail” (1944, 61). Following Polanyi, Oakman (1996) claims that markets “played only a limited role in the economic affairs of premodern societies. There, economic activities were always socially restrained or constrained” (128). That is, economic activities were embedded in social relations and governed by reciprocity, which is “characterized by formal dyadic contracts—social give-and-take—within household and village. A gift accepted implies an obligation owed” (1996, 129). Gift exchange is personal, in contrast to “*commodity exchange*, which is impersonal” (Stansell 2002, emphasis in original). Malina adds that this principle of reciprocity can be seen as “perhaps the most significant form of social interaction” in the ancient world. Unlike modern market exchange, which often entails some form of enforcement mechanism,

reciprocity “is a sort of implicit, nonlegal contractual obligation, unenforceable by any authority apart from one’s sense of honor and shame” (2001, 94).

Economists recognize the role of obligation in trade and the significance of the absence or presence of an enforcement mechanism. Since “an essential precondition for price-making markets is the existence of well-defined and enforced property rights over the good or service to be exchanged,” when transaction costs (the costs of delineation of the property rights or their enforcement) exceed the benefits, there will likely be nonmarket allocation of the good or service, as is the case with reciprocity (North 1996, 162). To be more precise, reciprocity entails standardized prices. Rates of exchange are set by custom for grain, wine, olives, grapes, and other ancient-Mediterranean products. In reciprocal exchanges, prices do not “vary in response to economic conditions” (Temin 2001, 172). Instead, status drives economic relations such as exchange rates; social obligations need to be met through the exchange of goods and/or services.

Along with standardized prices, scholars have suggested that a reciprocal exchange system is largely based on payment in kind. Bargaining is said to be largely absent, and the scope of exchange is understood to be inherently limited. Polanyi (1944) found that in antiquity “the idea of profit is barred; higgling and haggling is decried; giving freely is acclaimed as a virtue; the supposed propensity to barter, truck, and exchange does not appear” (49). Reciprocity meant that exchange would not be driven by the desire for gain but motivated by provision for the household; as North observes, Polanyi argued that “exchange and trade does not necessarily imply economic motivation” (1996, 160). Describing the significance of trading goods in kind, Hanson and Oakman claim: “Peasants, concerned as they are about provisioning the household, prefer to exchange real goods (ordinary barter). Within the household or village, exchanges are either general (borrow now, repay sometime) or balanced reciprocity (borrow now, repay shortly)” (1998, 124). In addition, the prevalence of barter limited the ability of the trading area to expand. Polanyi sought to counter the notion that “individual acts of barter lead naturally to the rise of local and then wider markets.” Due to the significant governing exchange forms of reciprocity and redistribution, “the extent of the market had no automatic tendency to widen” (Hejeebu and McCloskey 1999, 291).⁴

Hand in hand with the prevalence of reciprocity was the perception that the ancients lived in a world of limited good. Contending that “productive capital was not part of the biblical writers’ perspectives” (2004, 32), Halteman highlights the significance of a zero-sum game mentality that underlies attitudes toward wealth accumulation. This is reflected in biblical warnings focused on consumption wealth rather than capital wealth, the latter being a concept not recognized until at

least fourteen hundred years later (Halteman 2004, 28). The zero-sum worldview of antiquity stands in contrast to modern perceptions of the widespread benefits of productive capital and was the basis of moral outrage against the wealthy in the ancient world, as Perkins observes:

In order to understand the moral condemnation of the piling up of such resources by the rich, it is necessary to distinguish between surplus in a modern economy and excess wealth in the ancient economy. Surplus wealth produced in a modern, capitalist economy is perceived as available to participants at various levels of individual wealth, social status, and power or influence.... In the ancient world, which must be described as a limited-goods economy, all of these elements—power, honor, material goods, and even personal freedom—are in a fixed and limited supply. Consequently, if one person increases his or her share of such goods, someone else loses. (1994, 47)

The limited good worldview seemed to particularly characterize the economic perceptions of first-century Palestinians. Malina explains that it applied beyond material possessions:

... the people presented in the pages of the New Testament would see their existence as determined and limited by the natural and social resources of their village, their preindustrial city, their immediate area and world, both vertically and horizontally. Such socially limited and determined existence could be verified by experience and lead to the perception that all goods available to a person are, in fact, limited. Thus extensive areas of behavior are patterned in such a way as to suggest to one and all that in society as well as in nature—the total environment—all the desired things in life, such as land, wealth, prestige, blood, health, semen, friendship and love, manliness, honor, respect and status, power and influence, security and safety—literally all goods in life—exist in finite, limited quantity and are always in short supply. (2001, 89)

Given that respect and status were seen to be finite, the drive to preserve social standing was reflected in exchange patterns, which in turn reflected particular relationships among family and friends. Perkins elaborates on the pattern of organization:

the limited-goods society is organized in terms of personal relationships which bind persons together as family, as friends, and as patron and client. Both friendship and patronage relationships can be inherited. Patterns of exchange, whether economic or in some other form of assistance or nonmaterial goods like honor, are determined by the nature of the relationship between the persons involved. (1994, 48)

Both the friendship and the kinship relationships brought with them reciprocal obligations regarding a household’s possessions.

The mutual aid associated with reciprocity was manifest in first-century Palestine’s agrarian economy. Archeological evidence suggests that a typical, single-land size for a peasant was on average from six to nine acres. On such a small piece of land “many engaged in mixed farming in an effort to meet the family’s basic dietary requirements—vines, olives and grain” (Freyne 1995b, 609). In Jesus’ day, the realities of an uncertain dependence upon agriculture were reported to be unavoidable: “The Synoptic Gospels devote much attention to the processes of planting seed, harvesting fruit, grinding grain, eating bread. Sometimes there is a surplus to gather into barns. Sometimes it is a matter of bare subsistence ...” (Stambaugh and Balch 1986, 68). A surplus allowed for commodities to be gained through trade. Yet reciprocity required that a family member or kin to draw from their surplus to provide sustenance for others who had experienced an inadequate crop. Gift giving as a personal element of exchange characterized economic practices toward friends as well. This practice was widely understood in the ancient Mediterranean world according to New Testament scholars Achtemeier, Green, and Thompson, who contend that “economic sharing was embedded in social relations. To share with someone without expectation of return was to treat them as kin, as family. Conversely, to refuse to share with others was tantamount to relating to them as though they were outside one’s community” (2001, 172).

While one does not have to accept Polanyi’s characterization of ancient individuals as essentially heedless of gain, there is still explanatory value in the heuristic notion of reciprocity for understanding trade in antiquity. Reciprocity is a form of nonprice allocation that can be understood in the light of transaction costs. North describes the economic significance of small-scale trade in antiquity, when personal kin relations characterize exchange and “people have an intimate understanding of each other.” Personal relations in effect keep transaction costs relatively low:

Small-scale village trade exists within a “dense” social network of informal constraints that facilitates local exchange, and the costs of transacting in this context are low. (Although the basic societal costs of tribal and village organization may be high, they will not be reflected in additional costs in the process of transacting). (1991, 99)

Thus, North affirms that “reciprocity societies can be considered as a least-cost trading solution where no system of enforcing the terms of exchange between trading units exists” (1996, 165).

Polanyi identified the other dominant element in ancient concepts of exchange as redistribution. Redistribution involved the collection of produce in a central location for storage, display and distribution (1944, 47–48). Malina observes that the centralized collection of produce by “the rich man who seeks to found his security upon economic self-sufficiency and a large estate” (Luke 12:20) was labeled as the actions of a fool and could be seen as part of redistributive economy (1997, 10). However, more often, taxation by the state and religious institutions stood out as redistributive mechanisms mentioned in the New Testament; redistribution meant “the politically or religiously induced extraction of a percentage of local production, the storehousing of that product, and its eventual redistribution for some political end or another” (Oakman 1996, 129). In Palestine, redistributive institutions included Roman taxation as well as the tithe and payment at the temple (Oakman 1996, 129). In Palestine and elsewhere around the ancient Mediterranean world, redistributive practices also involved wealthy individuals (often but not always associated with the power of the state) who seized land from subsistence farmers who defaulted on their loans. As Rae observes, in line with zero-sum game thinking, these practices generated strong doubts about the legitimacy of acquiring and accumulating wealth: “The wealthy were viewed with suspicion and great emphasis was placed on the potential temptations of becoming wealthy, because the ancient world had so few morally legitimate avenues to acquire wealth” (2002, 7). We will explore the connections between various redistributive practices and Jesus’ teachings on wealth in light of the concurrent growth of market institutions during the time of the Gospels.

Consideration of the interaction between redistributive institutions and market-based allocation is part of an analysis of the role of transaction costs in explaining key institutional features of the agrarian economy of first-century Palestine. First, we must consider the rise of market activity and its ramifications during the period in which the Gospels are set. This will allow us to examine the interaction between market exchange and particular redistributive institutions in the Gospels.

Growth of Market Activity in First-Century Palestine

A significant amount of recent research suggests that market exchange increasingly operated alongside nonmarket trading institutions in first-century Palestine. We now turn to recognize the ways in which price-making markets operated so that market “trade competed with other means of distributing food, goods and metals in the ancient world” (Hopkins 1983, x). The intervention of Roman authority was

significant in shaping the interplay among reciprocity, redistribution, and market trade. For example, consider the widening of trade under Roman rule once the Republic ended through civil wars and was replaced by the Principate:

[While] various types of exchange, ranging from reciprocal (i.e., barter) to redistribution (state controlled) were operative in antiquity, often side by side within the same region ... it does seem more probable that some free trading did occur, at least on an inter-regional basis, and that the emergence of the Principate was a considerable stimulus to more long-distance trading also. (Freyne 1995a, 37)

Evidently, the reign of the Caesars extended the rule of law in Roman territory and provided a significant enforcement mechanism for the terms of exchange.

Furthermore, the role of market prices and price movements in the Roman provinces in the eastern Mediterranean region needs to be examined. Temin contends that there is “ample evidence of extensive market prices and exchanges in the Principate” (2001, 176) for there were a range of forms of market-established prices in the Roman Empire: “Tenants paid rent on their apartments in Rome, employers paid wages to free workers and rent for slaves, travelers paid for food and drink for themselves and their animals” (2001, 173). In addition, Temin demonstrates that price movements in fact affected the allocation of resources in grain and other foodstuffs. For trade in the city of Rome itself, the shipping of goods across the Mediterranean, and exchange between Roman provinces in Egypt and northern Africa with other parts of the Empire, “there were enough market transactions to constitute a market economy ... [so that] markets in the early Roman Empire typically were equilibrated by means of prices” (2001, 170).⁵ Throughout the Roman Empire, the growth of trade is reflected in legal developments governing market exchange and the practice of bargaining.⁶

The extent to which market exchange became dominant in first-century Palestine under Roman rule is suggested by research pointing to growing intra-regional and inter-regional market trade. There were numerous transactions in the Palestinian village markets in animals, land, slaves, and agricultural produce; as Safrai notes, these were transactions “between households, and supplementary to their regular occupations or pastimes” (1994, 231). There seemed to be less self-sufficient household activity dependent on exchange at fixed rates occurring.

Galilee in particular is illustrative of the spread of market exchange in Palestine. It stands out in a first-century source such as the Gospels for its pattern of “references to markets, village traders, and laws to do with buying and selling,” a pattern that also continues in later rabbinic sources (Freyne 2004, 31). Furthermore, Galilee’s geographical placement is economically significant among

the Roman provinces in the region. Freyne points to Galilee's location "as the hinterland of the great Phoenician coastal trading centers of Tyre and Sidon, as well as Ptolemais/Acco." Freyne expands upon the significance of Galilee as a trade center:

This gave it immediate access to the sea-lanes that were so important for availing of the more extended opportunities for trading which the hellenistic age provided. Equally, caravans of traders and merchants going to the east had to pass through or around Galilee. It seems legitimate to infer that the material evidence from a later period in terms of coins, ceramics and glass-ware, which have been found in the Upper Galilean sites, are indicative of older patterns of contacts through trade, which did not at all signify cultural or religious assimilation. (1998, 156)

Added evidence is provided by archaeological work that has uncovered remains of a significant infrastructure supporting economic activity around the lake of Galilee. Freyne notes that "archaeological surveys around the lake have uncovered the remains of many breakwaters, anchorages, harbours, storage pools and the like from the Roman period" giving evidence of a "high level of commercial activity" (1995a, 35). Perkins observes that the evidence of an expanding population and "extensive building projects" points to Palestine as having "a flourishing economy" in Jesus' day. (1994, 51)

The rise of a thriving market economy in Palestine was associated with technological change,⁷ the development of a number of trades and increasing specialization in agriculture. Handicrafts such as tannery and pottery took some people away from the land (Applebaum 1976, 680–81; Perkins 1994, 51), as did the growth of a fishing industry. At the same time, an olive industry developed in Palestine, especially in Galilee. The production of olives grew as "climatic and soil conditions in upper Galilee seem to have been particularly suited for their cultivation, though they were cultivated in lower Galilee also" (Freyne 1995a, 34).

Momentum toward growth of a market-based allocation accelerated under Herod Antipas, the Roman tetrarch over Galilee. The market of ancient Palestine was not limited to the *agora* or public space central to Roman towns; rather it signified a more complex exchange arena in which "supply and demand meet to the mutual benefit of buyers and sellers" (Freyne 1995a, 29). Freyne posits that "the reign of Antipas represented a particularly significant moment for Galilee in the development of this demand/supply network ..." (1995a, 29). Under Antipas, market exchange was no longer confined to very local trading. The evidence

of growth in the pottery industry based on regional specialization adds further credence to this notion:

This pattern of considerable specialization at various centres based on locally available raw material (black clay is mentioned in the rabbinic sources) or produce (as in the case of the fish industry) confirms the impression that larger market conditions rather than purely local needs were operative in Galilee and that many Galileans, not just the inhabitants of the two main Herodian centres, had adapted to the changes. (Freyne 1995a, 36)

The two main Herodian centers were Sepphoris and Tiberias with their attendant settlements. It has been speculated that, prior to his public ministry, Jesus as a builder (*tehton* in Mark 6:3) from nearby Nazareth was employed in the construction efforts at Sepphoris. Whatever the validity of this speculation, these projects generated greater output and spurred the movement toward more intense agrarian cultivation, which operated on an increasingly larger scale in Galilee, as demonstrated by archaeological evidence from the two settlements. Herod Antipas’ efforts at building Sepphoris and Tiberias contributed significantly to an emerging market economy in first-century Palestine:

The changes in the economic conditions involved in the building of two new centers such as Sepphoris and Tiberias should not be underestimated, since these projects involved demand for labor, materials, development of roads, water systems, and the introduction of some skilled craftsmen into the region. These in turn must have acted as further spurs for attitudinal changes. The new settlements increased the demands for basic food supplies for their inhabitants, thereby stimulating the rural economy also. (Freyne 1995a, 36–37)

Increased demand for agricultural products spurred efforts toward specialization in the use of Palestinian land. Rabbinic thought in the period expressed opposition to specialization, providing further evidence of a widening division of labor.⁸

Specialization in use of the land had wide-ranging consequences for patterns of production, exchange, and distribution. With the widening of the market due to the development of Sepphoris and Tiberias as “centers of commerce between rural and urban populations” (Riches 1996, 388), both intensive and extensive cultivation increased, thus making small Galilean peasant farming less feasible. While there is some debate over the extent of specialization that occurred in first-century Galilee, the evidence seems to suggest that “there was an appreciable move away from small family run holdings in which reciprocity was still the basic mode of exchange, toward a situation of land use as a revenue-generating

resource” (Freyne 1998, 107). Freyne explains how market exchange increasingly supplanted reciprocity:

In an agrarian economy specialization would mean a shift in land-owning patterns from small, family-run farms to larger estates in which the tenants would work the estate, often for an absentee land-owner under a manager, receiving a subsistence living in return for their labour. In a developing economy where surplus production is necessary in order to maximize profits such estates make it possible to have increased production and specialization in various crops and to develop a rational and monetized economy. (1995a, 33)

Monetization increasingly supplanted barter as the reliance on market-based allocation grew.

The use of coinage as a means of payment was not new to first century Palestine. Safrai observes that “tens of thousands of coins have been discovered in the course of excavations in Palestine” (1994, 302), reflecting usage going back several centuries. Yet, there is a pattern by the first century of a growing intra- and inter-regional trade, specialization, and spread of a price-based transactional mode that greatly extended the reliance on money, as Freyne observes:

As a medium of exchange money had been in operation in Palestine at least from the Persian period, as is evidenced by the famous *yehud* coins. Succeeding overlords, Ptolemaic and Seleucid, as well as the Hasmonean rulers, had minted their own coins, in part for personal propaganda reasons but also to facilitate intra- as well as inter-regional exchange ... Moreover cities such as Tyre, Ptolemais and Scythopolis struck their own coins from the Hellenistic age and these were current in Palestine also. The large Jewish Diaspora in Egypt, Syria, Asia Minor, Mesopotamia and the western Mediterranean cities meant that there was bound to be a steady flow of people to and from the homeland, requiring goods and services, inevitably contributing to a greater supply of money in the economy generally. (Freyne 1995a, 38)

The transaction costs associated with barter are reduced through the use of a generally accepted medium of exchange. Certainly, the New Testament notes the pervasive spread of coins as the means of payment and the displacement of barter among all income levels in Palestine. Freyne observes that

The Synoptic Gospels testify, in their different ways, to the fact that money was widely used in everyday transactions, even by the poor. This would point to the fact that the use of money had penetrated right through the society and was now the standard form of exchange even among the day-labourers, widows and other marginalized people. (1995a, 41)

Through adoption of a generally accepted means of payment, lower transaction costs enable markets to widen and the benefits of a more extensive division of labor to be realized. Yet, some scholars contend that the move to monetization by the Roman authorities made many Palestinians worse off. Where Palestinian peasants had been accustomed to barter in practicing reciprocity, now they were required to use bronze coins for paying taxes and making other transactions:

Village exchanges are now “converted” into the form of balanced reciprocity accountable in money. Peasant villagers can no longer routinely trade real goods in a informal barter economy. Thus the political authority can better assess agricultural production and maximize tax income. (Hanson and Oakman 1998, 124–25)

Certainly the usage of a standard coin facilitated easier taxation in Palestine, and of course, the requirement of payment in coinage is a means for any State to ensure its widespread adoption. Jesus recognized the requirement to pay Caesar in the form of a denarius with Caesar’s inscription (Matt. 22:19–22). Nonetheless, one could reasonably argue that the fact that there is virtually no mention of barter-based reciprocity among the sayings of Jesus suggests that “people are presumed to have money for purchasing necessities or to meet other emergencies (Mark 6:36–38, Luke 10:35)” (Freyne 1995a, 41).⁹

It also has been argued that the displacement of reciprocity withdrew a safety net for lower income groups in first-century Palestine. Small landholding peasant farmers had relied on reciprocal exchange and standardized rates for transactions. Yet increasingly, prices for agricultural products and other goods began to vary with changing economic conditions. As discussed previously, the small landowner would be especially vulnerable when a natural disaster or bad harvest occurred; without the protection of reciprocal benefits, the peasant was subject to the vagaries of market conditions. Freyne suggests that in this situation “the reciprocal system of exchange with its in-built concerns for all members of the extended household or clan is more favorable to the poor than is the market economy which functions in favor of the ruling elite and their administrative retainers” (1995b, 609). As will be argued in the next section, redistributive mechanisms functioned in Palestine to the benefit of a small group who benefited from the power of the Roman state.

In general, then, there is evidence of a rising conflict between reliance on reciprocity and the growth of market institutions that were regulated and manipulated for the benefit of the Roman state and its benefactors. The struggling peasant farmer in first-century Palestine faced some difficult options. Blomberg describes the possibilities:

If the climate or the economy proved unfavourable for too long, the peasant farmers who still owned their own property would be unable to pay their taxes, would go deeper into debt, and in extreme cases would be thrown into slavery or debtors' prisons. The three main options for peasants who did not own their own land were to work as tenants paying a fixed rent to their landlords, to pay a predetermined portion of their produce to their owner, or to join on with one of the great latifundia and be functionally equivalent in status to a slave. (1999, 91)

Clearly, these options would often dramatically lower incomes for peasant farmers. Combined with the active redistribution by the Roman state that shaped the concentration of power and wealth into fewer hands, there were rising social tensions in ancient Palestine. The conflict between reciprocity and market-based allocation is evident in both the background and the foreground of a number of the synoptic teachings of Jesus, particularly the parables:

The tensions between these two types of economic systems and the increasing dominance of the latter in Herodian Galilee generated the social situation that many gospel parables depict—day labourers, debt, resentment of absentee landlords, wealthy estate owners with little concern for tenants needs, exploitative stewards of estates, family feuds over inheritance, etc. In these vignettes we can catch glimpses of both systems in operation and the clash of values that are inherent... (Freyne 1995b, 609)

It can be argued that in fact redistributive extraction by certain institutions generated the social contexts described in the teachings of Jesus, particularly the resentment toward the wealthy mentioned by Freyne. An examination of the actions of the Roman state and the economic practices associated with the temple will help to illustrate the ways in which the growth of market-based allocation is addressed in the Gospels.

Redistribution: The Roman State and the Temple

The power of the Roman state was evident in a number of ways in the first-century Palestinian economy. For the people of Israel, Rome was an occupying power that dominated much of their lives through centralized decision-making (Gordon 1975, 84–85). In Palestine, Roman rule was exercised through the procurators and tetrarchy that expanded the scope of state power. Finley observes the scope of this power in the Roman Empire: “The authority of the state was total, of the city-states as of the autocracies, and it extended to everyone who resided within the territorial borders” (1992, 154). The Roman government was famous for

supplying the physical and legal infrastructure for an economy. Roman roads and the rule of law were important elements in expanding the output of territories in the Roman Empire. At the same time, there were no observed constraints on the power of the Roman government in the economy, as Finley notes: “There were no theoretical limits to the power of the state, no activity, no sphere of human behavior, in which the state could not legitimately intervene provided the decision was properly taken for any reason that was held to be valid by a legitimate authority” (1992, 154–55). For the growth of market activity, it is crucial that property rights are specified and enforced by the state; in first-century Palestine the ruling Roman authorities not only specified and enforced property rights but altered them without constraint with particular effects upon the distribution of wealth (North 1978, 975).

Rome governed Palestine through the appointment of rulers over its provinces in the region that directly intervened in economic activity. Herod the Great had been procurator in Palestine from 37 B.C.–A.D. 4. His son Herod Antipas was tetrarch of the Roman provinces of Galilee and Peraea from A.D. 4–A.D. 39 (Stambaugh and Balch 1986, 24–25; Horsley 1985, 260). Each took great strides to extend the power of the state in the Israelite economy. In Jesus’ day, Herod Antipas sought to prove himself to the Roman authorities in the hope of retaining his place as tetrarch. This was evident in the naming of newly built or rebuilt cities in Galilee (as previously noted) and in the growth of his administrative apparatus for the region:

Indeed the name *autokrator* as applied to Sepphoris and the calling of Tiberias after the Emperor shows how much he kept Roman imperial patronage in his sights. Rome allowed him a personal income of two hundred talents, in the collecting of which he had need of a well disciplined, loyal and efficient administrative bureaucracy—tax-collectors, notaries, judges, military personnel, store and market managers—in short, a whole range of retainers, who could insure that he and his court would reap the full benefits of a relatively fertile region within an agrarian economy. (Freyne 1995b, 604)

Herod Antipas’ administrative bureaucracy altered the distribution of property through taxation and rent-seeking activity.

Rent-seeking activity, that is, efforts to obtain or defend monopoly or contrived rents through the power of the state, was rampant among the retainers who sought gains from government taxation of agricultural products. It generated inefficiencies because resources were wasted in being devoted merely to transfer income in the direction of the Roman government’s retainers. An example is found in the organization of the Roman taxation system, which was structured

around three levels. The types of tax collectors included publicans at the top of the administrative hierarchy, with chief tax collectors at a second level, and then tollbooth operators underneath them. In the Gospels, Zacchaeus is identified as a chief tax collector (or customs official) (Luke 19:1–10), and Matthew is most likely a tollbooth operator (Matt. 9:9, Mark 2:14). Schneider observes that publicans acted as supervisors over “a kind of multilayered investment business done under contract with private citizens who agreed to pay the sum of the tax due from conquered territories to the government.” The chief tax collectors and tollbooth operators acted as tax farmers, paying for the right to collect taxes and duties, and then being “free to collect the money from the territories in any way they saw fit, and to do so at a profit” (2002, 121).¹⁰

Roman regulation extended to Galilean fishing activity as well. Hanson and Oakman identify the fishing enterprise as part of the Roman state’s control of economic activity:

Even fishers who owned their own boats were part of a state-run enterprise, and a complex web of financial relationships. Fishing was controlled by the ruling elites. The local rulers (king, tetrarch, prefect) sold fishing rights to brokers (*telonai*, commonly translated “tax collectors” or “publicans”), who in turn contracted with fishers. The fishers received capitalization along with fishing rights and were therefore indebted to the brokers. The location of Matthew’s (or Levi’s) toll office in Capernaum—an important fishing locale—probably identifies him as just such a contractor of royal fishing rights. (1998, 106)

Hanson and Oakman suggest that “the fishers could hardly be classed as ‘entrepreneurs’ in such a highly regulated, taxed, and hierarchical economy” (1998, 109), but of course the activities of the brokers are classic examples of entrepreneurial rent-seeking in Palestine in the form of the pursuit of monopoly rights to broker fishing gained from the Roman state. Rent-seeking extended to the distribution of the fish product, as the availability of fish to those who marketed it was regulated by the state authorities: “The distribution of the catch was also controlled by government-approved wholesalers” (Hanson and Oakman 1998, 109).

The direction of income to particular favored groups shaped attitudes toward wealth accumulation in first-century Palestine. Indeed, in the New Testament era, it can be argued that the rich or wealthy “as a rule meant [those who were] ‘avaricious, greedy’” (Malina 1987, 355), rather than those who held a specific level of net worth. The wealthy obtained their standing by extractive or redistributive actions; resentment was generated toward these individuals who “impose tributes, extract agricultural goods, and remove them for ends other than peasants want” (Hanson and Oakman 1998, 113). This notion dovetailed with the

notion that participation in the economy was a zero-sum game. Schneider asserts that in Palestine “the rich were very often (though not always) people who had made a bargain with the devil Rome”; the gouging of the typical farmer through overpayment of taxes and other means suggests that “we will comprehend the New Testament better if we understand that financial advantage in Israel often implied direct involvement with political evil and injustice” (2002, 121). Hanson and Oakman add that “rich and powerful people could be looked upon as robbers and thieves as much as benefactors” (1998, 111).

Financial arrangements to fund the temple contributed to this animosity toward the wealthy. At times, the rich would be linked with the priesthood who laid a burden on small farmers in Palestine in this period of Second Temple Judaism. For these farmers, funding for the religious authorities who administered the liturgy in the temple was a priority: “The demands of the tribute, other taxes and the religious dues had first to be met . . .” (Freyne 1995b, 609); furthermore “the temple establishment claimed ‘taxes’ in kind (sacrificial goods) and money (the half-shekel) on top of the rest . . .” (Hanson and Oakman 1998, 114). However, it was Herod Antipas who engaged in the most egregious redistribution that favored the elite members of the temple priesthood:

One of Herod’s favorite ploys was to take land from the people whom he distrusted and give it to proven loyalists. To these belonged the holy priesthood and all the riches that went with it, including revenues from taxation and a corner on all sorts of markets connected with the religious life of the nation. (Schneider 2002, 120)

The actions of Herod as Roman authority over Palestine fed the perception that the acquisition of wealth involved participation in a zero-sum game.

A number of expressions of hostility toward wealth and exchange in the Gospels are best understood in the light of the action of the Roman authorities and the state-tolerated control over markets exercised by religious authorities in Palestine, particularly those associated with the temple. We now turn to consider how these institutional features bear on particular examples of Jesus’ actions and discourse on economic matters.

Exchange and Wealth in the Ministry and Teachings of Jesus

We now consider how Jesus’ teachings on wealth, dispossession, risk-taking, and economic gain engaged the increasing reliance on market arrangements in

first-century Palestine. For the purposes of this article, we limit our discussion to several of the representative passages and/or texts. It is recognized that there are certainly complex facets to Jesus' teachings, but it is argued here that they are best understood in light of the interplay between reciprocity and market exchange and the fairly widespread perception of a limited goods economy in which an elite few benefited from the redistributive activities of the Roman state and religious authorities.

Extractive transfer by the Roman and priestly authorities underscored the reasons for hostility toward wealth and exchange in Palestine. The cleansing of the temple by Jesus (Matt. 21:12–13; Mark 11:15–17; Luke 19:45–47; John 2:13–16) can be understood in this light. In the outer court of the temple, the money changers converted various currencies brought from outside of Judea to facilitate the purchase of sacrificial animals. Jesus drives the money-changers out of the temple and speaks of their making the temple “a robbers den” (Matt. 21:1). Blomberg suggests that one reason why Jesus might have made this declaration was that “it is quite possible that Caiaphas and the Sadducees have only recently moved this trafficking from the Kedron Ravine into the temple and that they have grown enormously wealthy on outrageous exchange rates” (1999, 143). While it makes sense to note that money changers “performed the essential service of converting small bronze coins into larger silver or gold denominations or exchanging the coins of one city for equivalent coins of another city” (Stambaugh and Balch 1986, 73), it is most likely that the temple money changers had a monopoly on the provision of this service. It seems reasonable to conclude that the benefits of lower transaction expenses provided by the services of these middlemen were outweighed by the higher costs of social losses due to their monopoly.

Redistributive practices in first-century Palestine, as part of the forces that made for widening economic inequalities, became more transparent to the Palestine populace. Pockets of bandits and guerilla fighters (or zealots) arose in response to Roman economic rule (Horsley and Hanson 1985). Some have portrayed Jesus as part of the peasant rebellion against Roman oppression, not as a violent guerilla but as a peasant Mediterranean cynic. For example, Crossan emphasizes that Jesus sought to establish an egalitarian kingdom in which there is “... sharing of spiritual and material power at the most grass-roots level” (Crossan 1991, 344).¹¹ Similar depictions of Jesus identify him with the poorest class of Palestinian society and contend that he deliberately pursued a lifestyle of poverty in spurning participation in the Roman Palestinian economy of his day. These related portrayals of Jesus have garnered both scholarly attention and some popular appeal.¹² They have

contributed to a perception that Jesus rejected wealth (seen as “unjust gain”) in practicing dispossession and condemned market exchange.

In fact, the evidence suggests that Jesus and his disciples likely were not among the very poorest class in Palestine. While Jesus clearly calls the poor “blessed” (Luke 6:20), he never explicitly identifies himself as poor. In fact, “Jesus implicitly sets himself over against and distinguishes himself from the poor, about whom he is so concerned” (Meier 2001, 252) in that he proclaims good news to the poor and singles them out in his audience. What little we know of the thirty years prior to Jesus’ public ministry suggests that Jesus’ work as *tehton* made him part of the construction trades in Palestine that earned well above a subsistence income. Likewise, his disciples “did not come from the really poor sectors of society. They came mainly out of small businesses and trades that belonged to something like the Palestinian ‘middle class’” (Schneider 1994, 103). Moreover, as Schneider notes, Jesus did in fact choose to participate in the economic system of his day rather than shun it for autarchy; the Gospels do not portray a Jesus who was “... a landed peasant, [and] never set foot in a city, refused to use Roman coinage, and roundly condemned all businesspeople as traitors to their faith” (2002, 129).

While Jesus did not reject participation in the growing market economy in Roman Palestine, there remains the question of his criticism of wealthy individuals and call for dispossession. The gospel of Luke purposefully develops a theme of abandoning possessions, a theme that culminates in Jesus’ encounter with the rich young ruler (Luke 18:18–25). In answer to the rich young ruler’s claim that he has kept all the biblical commandments, Jesus tells him that he must sell all his material goods and distribute the proceeds to the poor in order to inherit eternal life. The rich young ruler goes away sad. One understanding of Jesus’ injunction considers it a warning that a retention of possessions leads to eternal separation from God. In effect, this interpretation suggests that the material world is evil, yet this view is very hard to reconcile with the record of Jesus’ activity that included eating with tax collectors and benefiting from his followers’ financial and material support. In this connection, Schneider helpfully notes that “Jesus called his disciples to *leave* but not exactly to become *poor* in material things ... they did not live in want of good things” (1994, 132). Moreover, Jesus did not “demand that all of his followers leave their homes, much less that they become poor” (1994, 133). In the Gospels, we find examples of disciples with material means who had not abandoned all their possessions: Mary, Martha, and Lazarus, who had a house in Bethany; Peter’s mother-in-law, who owned a large house with servants; and other women whom “Jesus depended on for financial backing and support” (Schneider 1994, 134).

Further insight into the meaning of the severe requirement laid upon the rich young ruler may be found by considering the way in which the nonmarket conventions of first-century Palestine applied to his response. Thus, Achtemeier, Green, and Thompson pursue the kinship theme of reciprocity to understanding this encounter. Referring to Luke's emphasis on God's priority for the poor, they contend that

when the rich ruler refused to sell what he had and give the proceeds to the poor, he was making not only an economic decision but a social one as well. In choosing to preserve his own wealth he distanced himself from those in need—an action that is outside the bounds of discipleship in a Gospel where God has declared his salvific purpose to be realized in raising up the lowly and filling the hungry with good things (2002, 172–73).

In addition, a consideration of the theme of Jesus' severe teachings on wealth suggests that he issues a broader warning about the need for dispossession by those who have gained wealth through some form of exploitative redistribution. Jesus does not necessarily call his disciples to reject material goods in following him, but rather "Jesus directs them not to be rich in a manner that affirms the corrupt and corrupting system and the ways of the people who rule and profit most from it" (Schneider 2002, 153).

We find additional support for this understanding of Jesus' teachings on wealth in Luke's deliberate recording in his narrative of a subsequent encounter with another rich individual (Luke 19:1–10). It is the tax official Zacchaeus who provides a telling counterexample to any suggestion of the requirement of dispossession for all of Jesus' followers. Zacchaeus was no ordinary tax collector, but in fact "the archbishop of tax collectors," and a "contractor who gave jobs to men such as Matthew" (Marx 1979, 151). He worked as a customs official who met Jesus in Jericho, "a frontier post between the Roman province of Judea and Peraea" (Stambaugh and Balch 1986, 78). The customs tariff "had to be paid not merely at the ports but also at the boundaries of individual cities and tetrarchies" (Applebaum 1976, 686). In a sense, Zacchaeus is the prototypical rent-seeker; he "had become rich at the expense of the poor" (Schneider 1994, 134) by paying the Roman state for the right to collect taxes and then milking taxpayers for whatever he could, keeping for himself what he obtained through gouging them. Blomberg suggests that he likely commandeered "extortionary profits" (1999, 140). This kind of predation certainly reinforced the notion of a lump sum of wealth in regard to the economic activities of those associated with the Roman government.

In light of his encounter with the rich young ruler, one might anticipate that Jesus would extend the demand for dispossession to Zacchaeus; he would be expected to sell his material goods and provide the proceeds to the poor. Instead, Jesus states that he will enter this man’s home and dine with him, not speaking a word of condemnation of his occupation or a demand that he sell all his possessions (Schneider 1994, 135). Jesus does not command him “to do *anything*” (Blomberg 1999, 140, emphasis in original); rather he receives the promise of Zacchaeus to give half of his possessions to the poor. Zacchaeus also promises “if I have defrauded anyone of anything, I will give back four times as much” (Luke 19:8). Hearing this, Jesus simply declares, “Today salvation has come to this house, because he too is a son of Abraham” (Luke 19:9). Zacchaeus applied the Old Testament provision for restitution to himself, as Schneider explains:

The requirement was to put back a minimum of twice the amount stolen, and in worse cases more than twice (Ex. 22:7; 2 Sam. 12:6). So what Zacchaeus did was to apply that code rigorously enough to himself to cover all the possible instances of theft that might have happened under his watch as a supervisor of the tax collection system. Moreover, it is reasonable to presume that he remained in that position, for had he left and followed Jesus we would have expected Luke to mention the fact (2002, 165).

Zacchaeus makes a voluntary promise to exceed the Old Testament requirements.

Additional light is shed on Jesus’ message on wealth by considering that Luke provides these two encounters as part of his narrative of Jesus’ teaching en route on his public journey to Jerusalem (Luke 9:51–19:27). Once they have arrived in Jerusalem, Jesus no longer requires dispossession; instead, he tells the disciples: “but now if you have a purse, take it; if you have a haversack, do the same; if you have no sword, sell your cloak and buy one” (Luke 22:36). Gordon considers the possible significance of this changed requirement:

It is difficult to gauge the import of this change of instructions, but it could mean that in the era to come, when Jesus is not with them as he has been, the apostles must take a radically different attitude toward possessions than the one which was appropriate for their sojourn with him (1989, 67).

Indeed, after the events of the passion week, the disciples reclaim their possessions. Schneider observes how Peter retrieves his physical capital: “... after Jesus’ death and resurrection, Peter seems to have brought his boat and nets out of storage and gone back to fishing (John 21)” (2002, 162).

We find in the parables of Jesus a further discussion of wealth and exchange that upon close examination displays recognition of the important role of economic gain in everyday Palestinian life. The various *pericopae* in the Synoptic Gospels are replete with references to the economic circumstance in Palestine (Shillington 1997, 11). In some instances, we find Jesus addressing the economic situation of his audience by speaking to the value of general reciprocity; thus, we read “Give, and it will be given to you . . . the measure you give will be the measure you get” (Luke 6:38).¹³ At the same time, the tension between older reciprocity arrangements and the growing reliance upon market exchange is reflected in the examples of market purchases, risk-taking by servants, and wage laborers. We find Jesus exhorting the wealthy (and others) not to trust in mammon and to freely share from their possessions, but the wealthy are not condemned simply because of the amount of assets they hold. Jesus often depicts the rich “as empty, desperate, evil, and lost to God” (Schneider 2002, 167), yet it remains true that “it is striking that in his parables he often depicts the social milieu of Galilee with its great landowners, landlords, administrators and slaves, without engaging in any specifically social polemic . . .” (Hengel, 1974, 28). Moreover, in several parables, Jesus describes the pursuit of economic gain as an expected phenomenon. For example, in two Matthean parables, Jesus compares the nature of the kingdom of heaven to the search for enrichment. As Grant observes, each parable “accept[s] the goal of large returns. A man covers up a treasure he has found in a field, then sells all he has and buys the field . . . (Matt. 13:44). Similarly, a trader in search of fine pearls finds a precious one and puts all his assets into buying it (Matt. 13:45)” (1990, 14). Two other synoptic parables expand more significantly on the connection between risk-taking and the pursuit of economic gain.

In the parable of the talents (Matt. 25:14–30), Jesus speaks of a master who entrusts funds to three servants. One is given five talents, another two talents, a third one talent. The two servants who invested their talents and doubled their original funding are lauded by the master and promised even more funds; the one servant who buried the talent in the ground is reproved. Risk-taking and consequent economic gain are endorsed by the master. The reasoning employed in the parable of the talents challenges the perspective that any increase of possessions through trade is inherently exploitative—gain is possible without coming at the expense of others, and such gain often comes through taking risks with funds.

Further affirmation of the pursuit of economic gain is found in a parallel story in Luke 19:12–27, known as the parable of the pounds (*mina*). Again, a story is told of a nobleman who disperses financial capital to his servants, in this instance ten *minas* each to ten servants. The two servants who invested their funds and doubled them are lauded by the nobleman and promised the opportunity to rule

over some cities; one servant who did nothing with the *mina* is reproved. Schneider contends that “this is a parable of power and the enlargement of dominion through wealth. . . . It is a parable that honors the *enlargement* of people who would become stronger, and would make their master stronger, through the creation of wealth” (2002, 189, emphasis in original). He adds that “the parable (in its context) is a strong warning against those who would erode the strong, aggressive, competitive spirit of behavior (particularly economic behavior) among Christians who believe that their king has given them pounds to trade until he comes” (2002, 190). Thus, in the parable of the pounds, we also find that economic gain is attained, yet it is not associated with unjust redistributive extraction.

It is of course problematic to make too much of the affirmation of economic gain in these last two parables in light of the rest of Luke’s emphasis on (at times) the need for dispossession.¹⁴ Elsewhere in the Gospels, we find Jesus warning against the storing up of treasures on earth (Matt. 6:19). Nonetheless, we do have here recognition of the important place of risk-taking and expansion of assets in obedience to the will of the Creator. In this way, these parables challenge the limited or lump sum view of wealth in regard to private economic activity.¹⁵

Conclusion

This article has sought to harvest the evidence from a range of studies to argue that trade in Roman Palestine was increasingly characterized by market exchange alongside the transactional modes of reciprocity and redistribution. It is inaccurate to claim that “price-making markets [were] the exceptional occurrence” (Neale 1957) for the eastern Mediterranean world of the first-century and to identify ancient Palestine as a “gainless and marketless economy” (Hejeebu and McCloskey 1999). Instead, it is fair to say that market forms of trade increasingly dominated Palestinian agrarian economic activity, a part of “the economy of the early Roman Empire [which] was primarily a market economy” (Temin 2001, 169). In first-century Palestine, the growth of market activity and the pursuit of economic gain were in tension with traditional concepts of reciprocity and a worldview of limited good. There was a gradual yet steady movement away from reciprocal exchange based on standardized prices toward market-based allocation in which product prices varied according to economic conditions.¹⁶ Increasingly, gains from specialization and the lowering of transaction costs through market exchange (often by means of monetization) were being realized as the Roman rule of law provided an enforcement mechanism for the terms of trade. Jesus’ teaching reflects and to some degree affirms these gains, opening the way more widely to granting moral legitimacy to the acquisition of wealth.

We also find Jesus challenging his disciples to be cautious with wealth and to make provision for the poor.

Careful study of the complex ways in which Jesus points to the dangers and duties associated with wealth in the context of economic change is needed for application to our modern questions regarding possessions. Nevertheless, the Gospels remain both authoritative and morally relevant for Christian moral philosophers, theologians, and economists in addressing our increasingly affluent culture. Indeed, Jesus' call to his disciples to choose serving God over serving mammon (Luke 16:13) speaks urgently to how our priorities ought to be established, both as individuals and as Christian scholars ministering in the church and perhaps, where applicable, helping to shape modern economic policy. At the same time, Jesus' example suggests that Christians guided by serious moral reflection may with integrity participate in modern market institutions.

Certainly, further exploration of these topics could be pursued. The approach taken in this article could be applied to other examples of the recognition of the elements of market-based allocation in Jesus' teaching. One instance would be the role of bargaining and consent in the parable of the laborers in the vineyard (Matt. 20:1–16); this is particularly evident in the dialogue between the employer and those whom he hires at various hours of the day.¹⁷ Another example would involve examining the ways in which Jesus' teaching addresses the debilitating effects of the economic changes associated with the rise of market exchange in supplanting reciprocity. Thus, his teaching drawing on the problem of peasant farmers' indebtedness might be analyzed (Luke 16:1–13). Another extension could be made by exploring the role of the Roman state in first-century Palestine. Clearly, it provided benefits in enforcement of property rights through the rule of law and a standing army. Yet, how much of its resources were expended in efforts to fight banditry and confiscation of wealth? How many resources were dissipated in extractive wealth transfers, particularly through Antipas' employment of redistributive favors? How much of the income disparities in Palestine were due to rent-seeking activity and how much due to market forces? How are these factors reflected in the teachings and ministry of Jesus in the Gospels and elsewhere in the New Testament? Further research on these questions would likely yield greater understanding of how the economic institutions of first-century Palestine are significant for scriptural teaching on wealth and market exchange.

Notes

1. For a response defending the use of Scripture for guidance on modern economic issues from a Roman Catholic perspective, see McKee (1998).
2. Spiegel (1991) identifies both an “indifference to economic considerations” and a “hostility and disapproval of wealth and the search for wealth” in the Synoptic Gospels (41–42).
3. Polanyi and Carney both tend to refer to the market as a “physical location, a market place” (Carney, 1973, 22).
4. Polanyi makes a deliberate contrast of exchange in ancient times with Adam Smith’s (1776) depiction of the characteristics of market bargaining and market extension.
5. In a similar study of price movements in the ancient world, Temin (2002) examines the price data for ancient Babylon from 500 B.C. to beyond A.D. 100 and finds that prices of agricultural goods moved in a random walk.
6. Roman law depicted bargaining between equals as the basis for establishing a current market price, the price identified in the law as the just price (Wood 2002, 153).
7. For a discussion of the process of technological diffusion in the ancient world that recognizes the growth of market exchange, see Gunderson (1982); for a direct challenge to Finley’s portrayal of technological blockage in the ancient world, see Greene (2000).
8. Safrai observes: “The rabbis much preferred self-sufficiency in all spheres to specialization in one sphere and the marketing of a single product” (1994, 309).
9. There are only two suggestions of barter found in the Gospels. One is found in Luke 6:38 (paralleled by Matthew 7:2) and refers to the measure one gives determining the measure one receives. The other mention of barter occurs in the parable of the unjust manager (Luke 16:1–9) (Freyne 1995a, 41).
10. Hanson and Oakman identify specific levels of the amount of taxation: “Roman imperial arrangements in the first century usually adopted Hellenistic taxation structures in the eastern Mediterranean. Herod the Great claimed 25–33 percent of Palestinian grain within his realm and 50 percent of the fruit from trees. Direct taxation also included poll (head) taxes in money” (1998, 114).
11. Freyne (1997) provides a critique of Crossan’s argument in light of economic conditions in Galilee.
12. Portrayals of Jesus along these lines have been associated with the infamous Jesus Seminar but are not exclusive to them. Blomberg (1999), a significant critic of the Seminar, has produced a careful inductive exegetical study of the Old and New Testaments that seeks to develop a less polemical portrayal of Jesus’ teaching on wealth as part of a broader biblical theology of material possessions.

13. For a discussion of the language of gift exchange in the Synoptic Gospels, see Stansell (2002).
14. Indeed, Schneider recognizes the overall thrust of Jesus' teaching on wealth and possessions and qualifies his argument while affirming the place of the pursuit of economic returns:

Quite obviously, Jesus did not pronounce an unqualified blessing upon economic gain. His life and teachings all demonstrate the conditions for godliness that must exist before our gains become true enlargement of his kingdom, before they become fruitfulness. However, if those conditions have been recreated, then the creative, productive economic life becomes something that is absolutely true to our humanity and to the identity of God. (2002, 190–91)
15. Halteman acknowledges the role of interest payments in the parable of the talents but contends that the “notion of interest itself does not imply an understanding of productive capital” (2004, 32). He suggests that interest payments may be warranted in this case as compensation for an uncertain stream of future income. This perspective does not rule out the possibility of interest payments being understood here as economic gain for risk taking in which one party's gain is not another's loss.
16. The extent to which there was price convergence for products in the early Roman Empire was limited by the slow speed of both shipping for goods and information flows. Temin observes, “While the price of land was similar in a local region ... there is no reason to expect prices of all goods to be uniform across the extensive Roman Empire” (2001, 179) due to delays in the transmission of information and difficulties in shipping goods to certain regions.
17. For a discussion of the way in which bargaining and consent are understood in the parable by Patristic authors Jerome and Augustine, see Noell (1998). Augustine's interpretation of the parable stresses the role of consent, consistent with the emphasis found in the Roman law.

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