

Five Factors of New Testament Economic Interpretation

Rohrbaugh's Parable of the Talents

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This study raises awareness of the diversity of interpretations of the New Testament Greco-Roman economic context by providing an orientation to the literature regarding five key factors employed in Rohrbaugh's countertraditional study of Jesus' parable of the [talents: (1)] an interdisciplinary research method, (2) Foster's theory of "limited good," (3) models of the rich-poor spectrum, (4) views regarding the predominant economic activity characterizing the Greco-Roman era, and finally, a factor of a different sort, (5) the role of canonical Scripture within an interdisciplinary research method. Awareness of the challenges in the study of economic data in the New Testament may encourage a more cautious approach in making interpretive claims, reflecting a humble recognition of the present limitations of evidence.

Introduction

The examination of economic matters in Scripture is a daunting interpretive task, as Walter Brueggeman notes:

Any study of money and possessions in the Bible is confronted with a mass of data that is complex and diverse in a way that refuses any systematic summary. Indeed, one can find in Scripture almost anything on the topic one wants to find... It is impossible in any survey to notice or discuss every possible reference, so one's treatment of the subject is sure to be selective.¹

The topic itself carries its own challenges in that interpreters must make particular assumptions about the very complex ancient economic conditions in the biblical world, while also themselves holding to contemporary economic and political

viewpoints. Furthermore, our knowledge base on such matters is usually not settled. For example, information about Greco-Roman economics is changing, which can then affect the explanation of New Testament (henceforth NT) texts bearing on economic matters. Within the last decade, there has been a surge of publications on the subject. For example, Oxford University Press's series, Oxford Studies in Roman Economy, has published thirteen volumes since 2009, including topics about agriculture, natural resources, coinage, craftsmen, trade, and urbanization. Therefore, cautious assertions would seem a better fit regarding such a multifaceted topic for which there is increasing but still incomplete evidence.

The present study offers, primarily for those outside of NT studies, a brief orientation to some key factors regarding the understanding of economic data in NT texts for which differing interpretations arise.² For example, consider one countertraditional interpretation of Jesus' parable of the talents. Although the text records that the master praises the first two servants while the third is called "wicked and slothful" (Matt. 25:26 ESV) according to Richard Rohrbaugh, it is rather the third servant who is the intended hero of the story.

[The third servant] does not participate in the scheme to double the master's money, but honorably refrains from taking anything that belongs to the share of another. . . . [I]t can be seen that the [third] servant . . . was the one who acted honorably in a limited good world and who, in the canonical versions, held fast his convictions in spite of his fear of the greedy master by faithfully guarding the money and returning it to him intact.³

Although I hold to the conventional understanding of this parable and disagree with Rohrbaugh's conclusion, I will employ details of Rohrbaugh's countertraditional line of thinking to illustrate how each of five key factors may have relevance in *one* NT passage.⁴ Details of the parable of the talents are included solely to exemplify these broad factors; no complete study of the parable is intended.⁵ An extended discussion of one particular factor, Foster's theory of "limited good," may benefit both those inside and outside of NT studies. The first factor involves the diverse fields of study employed as sources offering relevant input for the interpretation of economic evidence.

An Interdisciplinary Research Method

New Testament studies and classical Greco-Roman history and literature are the fields with the longest interdisciplinary partnership.⁶ Additional fields have been welcomed into this dialog about NT texts: archaeology and contemporary cultural anthropology. Regarding the former, James Charlesworth notes, "Virtually

all aspects of NT research are impacted by archaeological advancements and insights, including exegesis, rhetorical criticism, and hermeneutics, and new perceptions and paradigms are beginning to appear. Archaeology has produced amazing and fundamental data.”⁷

On the latter disciplinary partner, often designated as “social scientific criticism,” NT scholars have adopted various perspectival frameworks drawn from studies of recent villages as analogies that can help our understanding of the social relationships and economic features of the Greco-Roman era. Rohrbaugh employs this approach in his study. “Given the avalanche of writing on the parables of Jesus ... little of this work on the parables has taken into account recent efforts to use the social sciences in Second Temple interpretation. That is certainly the case with the parable of the Talents/Pounds ... about which there are no social science treatments to date.”⁸ David deSilva explains that models developed by sociologists and cultural anthropologists “have allowed interpreters to investigate the environment of the early church, the life and challenges of the early church, and the NT texts themselves from a variety of enriching angles that never would have occurred to biblical scholars without the interdisciplinary conversation that has emerged.”⁹

Due to the temporal and cultural distance from NT times, there is a genuine need for inclusion of knowledge from these social science disciplines. Yet, similarly, due to our distance in time and culture from any ancient era, discernment and care are needed when employing such contemporary frameworks to gain insightful benefits and avoid inappropriate and misguided applications. For example, in assessing an interpretation of Galatians 2:1–5 by Philip Esler, David Horrell clarifies how a model can become the overriding factor beyond textual evidence. Esler wrote, “Here we see Mediterranean man reveling in typical fashion in relation to his success over his adversaries.” Horrell responds,

This assertion is made not on the basis of what is in Paul’s text but purely on the grounds of what “Mediterranean man” typically does (according to the generalized model of challenge-response as the means to increase honour in an agonistic society). Here the model not only supplied the understanding of Paul’s methods and motives—such evidence being lacking in the text—but also “trumps” without exegetical argument any other interpretations of this verse.¹⁰

Although the purpose for using any cultural or anthropological model is “to bridge the cultural gap that exists between [a scholar’s] own contexts and the ancient Mediterranean,”¹¹ in some cases it may itself become an exercise in ethnocentrism or anachronism when applied too broadly or too rigidly.

In sum, regarding interdisciplinary engagement, the complexity of the task to understand the Greco-Roman world—and particularly the province of Roman Judea in the time of Jesus—will require scholars to find a way to keep abreast of the diverse and recent literature. Another challenge is discerning the wheat from the chaff. Jonathan Reed offers an honest evaluation of the limitations from each of these three disciplinary partners: “Literary sources are notoriously unreliable, archaeological excavations are spotty, and [social science] theoretical models are often forced onto anecdotal literary or archaeological evidence.”¹²

In the following section, one contemporary framework is considered at length to illustrate the challenges for NT scholars when drawing a concept from an empirical social science field of study and applying it within a NT study that is typified by a literary humanities-oriented research methodology.

Foster’s Theory of “Limited Good”

A predominant concept in Rohrbaugh’s study is Foster’s theory of “limited good,” which is given a lengthier treatment than the other factors:

What might be interesting, therefore, is to look at the parable in light of what anthropologists have learned about peasant economies, and particularly in light of the notion of “limited good” which typified peasants in what has been called the “Mediterranean culture-content...” What this means is that the pie is limited. A larger share for one automatically means a smaller share for someone else.... To a peasant, however, who believes that there is nothing within his or anyone else’s power that can be done to increase the size of the pie, who believes that rich people are thieves without mercy and that honorable men seek only what is already theirs, to such a peasant could this text have been anything but frightening?¹³

The theory of limited good involves a proposed perception of peasants who constituted the majority of the Greco-Roman population, in which they considered their local economy as a closed system or a fixed pie with set boundaries of finite resources. Thus, if some take more than their fair share, then others would necessarily have less—a zero-sum economic game. This concept plays an important role in economic NT interpretation. For example, in his 2012 commentary on Luke, regarding the parable of the rich man (Luke 12:16–21), John Carroll states: “In a limited-goods economy, the accumulation of goods for the wealthy man necessarily carries with it a diminishment in resources for others.”¹⁴

The primary source of this limited good theory is the anthropologist George Foster’s (d. 2006) 1965 article.¹⁵ This much-cited theory in the anthropological

literature was based on Foster's fieldwork from 1958–1963 in central Mexico, in the village of Tzintzuntzan (literally, "the place of hummingbirds"). This village was the capital of a regional empire when the Spanish arrived in 1520. The area includes a unique set of five semicircular pyramids dating from the thirteenth century and the monastery or convent of San Francisco, begun in 1530.

According to Foster, the purpose of the "Image of Limited Good" theory was to identify perspectives that hinder economic growth in a village so that others (e.g., community development personnel) might have greater insight about how to facilitate change more effectively. He concluded that one important factor was a debilitating cognitive orientation: peasants *believed* that material resources were fixed and that "no amount of extra hard work will significantly change the [amount of wealth]." ¹⁶ Furthermore, since villagers perceive their local economy as a closed system (i.e., a fixed pie, zero-sum game) and that someone's gain is another's loss, they will actively restrain those who try to do more or earn more. "Hence an apparent relative improvement in someone's position with respect to any 'Good' is viewed as a threat to the entire community.... [I]t is clear that ... [any display of achievement or initiative] is met by sanctions that a traditional villager does not wish to incur." ¹⁷

Foster's theory received much attention in the anthropological literature. To respond to specific criticisms, in 1972 Foster clarified certain aspects of his theory, four of which are relevant to the discussion.

Limited Good is an ideal type ... to be used as a mode of analysis, but not intended to *describe* any specific community or society. ¹⁸

Were I rewriting the article, I would avoid hyperbole and simply say "*most good*" is seen to exist in finite, limited quantities, which would state my views more accurately. ¹⁹

Classic peasants behave the way they do, I believe, because they *perceive* their system to be closed, not because it *is* closed. ²⁰

People ... also know that there is more "good," perhaps in unlimited quantities, beyond the boundaries of their system, hence normally not available to them.... Acquisition of additional good is permitted (but not encouraged) by tapping sources outside the system.... Since such "good" clearly is not at the expense of others, it is "safe," and can be permitted without threatening the stability of the system. ²¹

To summarize, Foster's limited good concept includes these ideas: even though peasants perceive *most* goods—not all goods—within their local economy as limited (although in fact it is an open system), they act as if it is a closed system.

Peasants who attempt to acquire additional goods within their local economy may be restrained in various ways (e.g., Foster identifies: “gossip, backbiting, witchcraft, and assault”²²). They are aware that much good exists beyond their local economy and their community permits some to pursue this additional good. Once villagers notice the successes of local entrepreneurs as sanctions diminish, others will follow suit.

Two points of evaluation are raised: (1) variation within a culture and (2) the notion of a fixed, limited good. First, does a “one-size-fits all” *Mediterranean culture* viewpoint apply to the rural population in Jesus’ day? In an evaluation of the concept of *peasant*, Sharon Lea Mattila states:

Studies of actual rural communities, both past and present, and in diverse regions of the world, have also shown that the concept of “peasants” is not empirically sound. The concept has tended to obfuscate the following two crucial characteristics of most “peasant” societies that have actually been examined: (1) the often marked socioeconomic inequalities that have existed among members of the same “peasant” community; and (2) the often great multiplicity of economic strategies that have been employed by “peasants” to procure their livelihoods, which have involved diverse and complex mixtures of market- and subsistence-oriented agriculture.... For this reason, the even more common concept of the “historical peasant” has also been increasingly challenged, not only by anthropologists but also by historians of the medieval and early modern periods. It is also very questionably a sound concept to apply to the ancient world. Indeed the evidence that does exist from first-century Galilee, both archaeological and textual, consistently contradicts the validity of applying this concept to the vast majority of people in Jesus’ world.²³

Eckhard Schnabel also cautions: “The larger methodological problem is the premise of a single ‘Mediterranean culture’ which overlooks local and regional variations.”²⁴

Second, when the concept of limited good is employed in biblical studies, Foster’s theory about villagers’ *perceptions* of a fixed pie is sometimes represented as a fixed fact of reality, a closed system, as conveyed in Carroll’s comment noted earlier on Luke 12: “In a limited-goods economy, the accumulation of goods for the wealthy man necessarily carries with it a diminishment in resources for others.”²⁵ Bruce Malina, a noted pioneer of social scientific criticism in biblical studies, includes a *prescriptive* emphasis when discussing the concept, perhaps using hyperbole for effect as Foster had done. “This means that everything of any value in life can be increased only at the expense of others.... The result is a zero-sum game in which any individual or group advancement is done to the detriment of others. This item of information from cultural anthropology serves

to explain not a few perceptions and *prescriptions in biblical literature*.”²⁶ David deSilva wisely cautions “against the deterministic use of models.... The models [then] cease to be heuristic tools and become Procrustean beds upon which the texts are made to lie and to which they are made to conform.”²⁷

Moreover, Foster regarded the notion of limited good as a debilitating component of a peasant’s worldview that needed changing:

The primary task in [economic] development is ... to change the peasant’s view of his social and economic universe, away from an Image of the Limited Good toward that of expanding opportunity in an open system, *so that he can feel safe* in displaying initiative. The brakes on change are less psychological than social. Show the peasant that initiative is profitable, and that it will not be met by negative sanctions, and he acquires it in short order.²⁸

Unfortunately, citations by NT scholars of Foster’s proposal do not tend to include this evaluation of the need for change, which was part of Foster’s own conception of the theory.

Furthermore, economists would note that, although natural materials are finite, the variety of uses of these limited resources by human ingenuity is how the size of the pie can be increased, in that more value and wealth is created. For example, there is a finite quantity of agricultural land, but production is varied along a continuum depending on the techniques and tools used by farmers, thus yielding, for example, “thirtyfold and sixtyfold and a hundredfold” (Mark 4:8).

Finally, Rohrbaugh’s limited view of limited good entails the moral fact that the accumulation of any surplus is necessarily evil, which “is the basis for the widespread notion in agrarian societies, including the one in the ancient Mediterranean culture-content, that rich people are inherently evil.”²⁹ Rohrbaugh confirms his view of traders as “evil exploiters” who “amassed wealth” by citing the ancient literary elite (e.g., Aristotle, *Sirach*) who generally had a decidedly negative regard for those engaged in commercial trade and in business in general.³⁰

Sufficient available evidence indicates support for Rohrbaugh’s point that *some* villagers suffered under the exploitive economic practices of *some* rich (landowners and government officials) and *some* traders. Scripture emphasizes the potential evil related to money and riches (e.g., Matt. 6:24; 1 Tim. 6:6–10). Yet Scripture does not support the claim that every financially wealthy person is necessarily evil. Some elite individuals with surplus appear in a positive light (e.g., Job, Job 1:1–3; Joseph of Arimathea, Matt. 27:57). Moreover, Jesus and Paul, two prominent persons of the NT, both worked with their hands as lowly regarded artisans for many years in the business world of that day, affirming that labor in commerce can be an honorable and good endeavor.³¹ Furthermore, some

economists regard the very notion of a zero-sum game, implied in Rohrbaugh's view, as an economic fallacy.³²

Accordingly, NT scholars employing theories from different fields of study will need to reconnect periodically with the social science literature to note further developments and relevant critiques in order to include any qualifying comments for their analogical application. Also, discerning how pervasive a limited-good perspective was among the Greco-Roman population depends on a decision about percentages for those living at or below subsistence, with models inferring a 99 percent, 85 percent, or 55 percent figure, as discussed in the next section.

Models of the Rich-Poor Spectrum

Third, NT scholars have utilized various models of a rich-poor spectrum. An older scholarly consensus has been a long-standing binary model of 1 percent elites to 99 percent non-elites.³³ Bruce Longenecker regards the basis for the two-part categorization as weak: "This binary model reflects the rhetorical differentiation that is common in Greco-Roman literature, in which the respectable elite are contrasted with the ordinary poor.... Consequently, rhetorical constructs of this kind are illegitimate economic indicators in the reconstruction of ancient economic situations."³⁴

Other scholars, including Rohrbaugh, have employed a multilayered categorization of social relationships developed by widely respected sociologist Gerhard Lenski (d. 2015), whose theories have dominated the field for decades.³⁵ Lenski and other sociologists and anthropologists have developed their frameworks, principles, and insights based on the studies of village life around the globe, from the recent past and the present (i.e., twentieth and twenty-first centuries). Within his oft-cited pyramid-type figure of the "relationship among classes in agrarian societies" presented in his classic 1966 text, Lenski differentiates six general categories, emphasizing relationships of power and prestige of the elite over against the non-elite. These models are then applied analogically to the Greco-Roman era. For the following percentages for each of these six groups, Rohrbaugh slightly adapted Dennis Dulling's summarization of Lenski's theory:³⁶ (1) the elite who are in power (1 to 2 percent); (2) their retainers, such as tax farmers and bureaucrats (5 percent); (3) the urban non-elite, such as merchants and artisans (3 to 7 percent); with the remaining 85 percent composed of (4) the vast majority of rural villagers (75 percent), (5) the unclean, such as prostitutes and dung carriers (5 percent), and (6) the disabled (5 percent).

A more recent proposal arranges persons and work roles according to a different scheme, offering more insight for economic purposes. In 2004, Stephen Friesen created a seven-layered “poverty scale,” for which differing income levels were estimated, specifically taking into consideration particular factors from the Greco-Roman era, based on a consideration of wheat consumption in light of the financial resources of the time.³⁷ Longenecker, who adopted this seven-scaled framework in his own research and renamed it as an “economic scale” (ES), presents this rationale:

For at least two reasons, then, Friesen’s proposed model has merit [offering a nuanced tool for the analysis of economic stratification]: (1) the instability of ancient discourse on poverty necessitates the construction of a heuristic tool in order to stabilize academic discourse; and (2) Friesen’s model is not only articulated (as opposed to implicit), but is sufficiently nuanced (as opposed to a sharply dichotomous binary model).³⁸

Table 1 presents Friesen’s model with Longenecker’s slight revisions.³⁹ Longenecker’s estimates include an elite (ES1, ES2, ES3) of about 3 percent, a “middling” group with some surplus (ES4) of 15 percent, a group of 27 percent with some stability of living above subsistence, and the remaining 55 percent barely at subsistence or below it.

Legend:

- A. Friesen’s seven-part numerical categories, using Longenecker’s term “Economic Scales (ES)”
- B. Friesen’s description of kinds of work roles fitting each category
- C. Friesen’s estimates of the Greco-Roman population for each category
- D. Friesen’s estimates of Annual Income needed in Rome by Family of Four (adapted from another source); “based on 2,500 calories per day for an adult male, and include nonfood expenses such as housing, clothing, and taxes” (“Poverty in Pauline Studies,” 344 #66).
- E. Longenecker’s estimates of the Greco-Roman population for each category.

Table 1
“Economy Scale” of the Greco-Roman World
by Friesen with Longenecker’s Adaptations

A. Scale	B. Includes	C. Pop % (Friesen)	D. Needed Annual Income	E. Pop % (Long.)
ES1 Imperial elites	imperial dynasty, Roman senatorial families, a few retainers, local royalty, a few freedpersons.	0.04%	————	3%
ES2 Regional or provincial elites	equestrian families, provincial officials, some retainers, some decurial families, some freedpersons, some retired military officers.	1.00%	————	
ES3 Municipal elites	most decurial families, wealthy men and women who do not hold office, some freedpersons, some retainers, some veterans, some merchants.	1.76%	25,000–150,000 denarii	
ES4 Moderate surplus resources	some merchants, some traders, some freedpersons, some artisans (especially those who employ others), and military veterans	7% (est.)	5,000 denarii	15%
ES5 Stable near subsistence level (with reasonable hope of remaining above the minimum level to sustain)	many merchants and traders, regular wage earners, artisans, large shop owners, freedpersons, some farm families.	22% (est.)	ES5–ES6 <i>in Rome:</i> 900–1,000 denarii	27%
ES6 At subsistence level and often below minimum level to sustain life	small farm families, laborers (skilled and unskilled), artisans (especially those employed by others), wage earners, most merchants and traders, small shop/tavern owners.	40%	<i>in a city:</i> 600–700 denarii	30%
ES7 Below subsistence level	some farm families, unattached widows, orphans, beggars, disabled, unskilled day laborers, prisoners.	28%	<i>in the country:</i> 250–300 denarii	25%

Proposing estimates of economic status along a spectrum of gradations offers more scope for economic clarification within NT studies, estimating the village population living at or below subsistence as somewhere around 55 percent or 85 percent, depending on the model employed.

The Predominant Economic Activity Characterizing the Greco-Roman Era

Regarding this fourth factor, Rohrbaugh claims that peasants did not regularly participate in a market exchange economy:

Of key importance here is the fact that the only markets that existed in the pre-industrial world were those among the urban elite. Market economics as we know them in the capitalist world simply do not apply to peasant societies.... As widely recognized cross-cultural studies have shown, peasant production was primarily for [their own] use rather than [for] exchange [selling surplus production].... Peasant economies are primarily subsistence economies and thus the purpose of labor was not the creation of value but the maintenance of the family and the well-being of the village.... Some surplus production for the purpose of exchange did of course exist among peasants, particularly temporary tradework in the off season when fieldwork was at a lull. But exchange was never the primary orientation of peasant labor.⁴⁰

Here, Rohrbaugh adopts the “primitivist” assumptions regarding the long-standing “modernist-primitivist” dispute among Greco-Roman scholars about commercial activity, a debate that occupied much of the latter half of the twentieth century. On the modernist side, as Jack Pastor explains, “the differences between the modern economy and the ancient are differences only of scale and technological sophistication.”⁴¹ Others regarded the Greco-Roman world as predominantly a primitive agrarian economy without much market activity, as argued by three influential scholars: political and economic historian Karl Polanyi (d. 1964; associated with the term “substantivist” over against “formalist”),⁴² classical historian Moses Finley (d. 1986; associated with the term “primitivist” over against “modernist”),⁴³ and sociologist Gerhard Lenski (d. 2015),⁴⁴ whose theories have dominated the field for decades. Walter Scheidel notes how interpretive analogies played a key role in the debate:

De facto, if not in principle, these positions frequently tend to correlate with divergent assessments of the scale of economic development, with formalists keen to document growth and integration and with substantivists pointing out constraints.... This debate underlines the pivotal role of comparison, theorizing,

and model-building. Divergent modern reconstructions are ultimately shaped by analogies: with post-Roman Europe in the case of market-centered narratives or with other patrimonial empires in the case of coercion-based models.⁴⁵

Yet some scholars consider that engaging this old debate is fruitless, even counterproductive. Claire Holleran states, “Although this debate set the tone for much that has been written on the Roman economy, it has been increasingly recognized in recent years that arguing about the place of Rome on a linear spectrum between two extreme viewpoints is both futile and unhelpful.”⁴⁶ Increasing evidence indicates more market activities existed during the Greco-Roman era than previously realized, as Fiensy notes:

Scholars of classical history are going through a revolution in their thinking about the ancient economy. In particular, they are debating the usefulness of certain classicists’ (e.g., Moses Finley’s) assumptions and methods for understanding and researching the Greco-Roman world. Those studying the economy of Galilee in the late Second Temple period are also involved in this debate but often unaware of its counterpart in classical scholarship.⁴⁷

Consider the following four comments, each from a different scholar, which affirm some form of market economy.

1. “It is all too obvious that even the capitalism of the nineteenth century differed greatly from the Roman system.... What differentiates the late-republican Roman system [133–127 BC] from a simple form of capitalism was not that it lacked markets in capital, in goods, in land or even in labor, for it did not, but that its urban production was carried out by households rather than firms.”⁴⁸
2. “But when we look at the archaeological evidence from the Roman world, a radically different picture emerges: the cities of the empire were increasingly shaped by commercial classes, whose economic and social prospects depended on specialized production and trade not primarily on their position within a status group such as a medieval guild.... From the early second century B.C.E. onward, urban commercial classes began to flourish all over the ancient world, and cities transformed from ‘agrotowns’ with limited markets into vibrant commercial centers.”⁴⁹
3. “I argue that the economy of the early Roman Empire was primarily a market economy. The parts of this economy located far from each other were not tied together as tightly as markets often are today,

but they still functioned as part of a comprehensive Mediterranean market.”⁵⁰

4. “Although some historians hesitate to affirm a market economy in Lower Galilee... I accept this characteristic especially in light of recent archaeological discoveries. Archaeologists have revealed that at least four villages were producing and marketing their wares for the rest of Lower Galilee and even beyond: Kefar Hananya, Kefar Shikhin, Bethlehem of Galilee, and Kefar Reina.”⁵¹

This final quote challenges Rohrbaugh’s claim about no market activity among rural villagers in that day. It may be better to regard the economic activity of villagers in the Greco-Roman era, as Mattila has concluded, as involving a “diverse and complex mixtures of market- and subsistence-oriented agriculture.”⁵²

The Role of Canonical Scripture within an Interdisciplinary Research Method

Fifth, we consider a factor along different lines—not one directly related to economic evidence, but an important factor that indirectly affects the interpretation of economic data. What role and priority does the interpreter give to the scriptural text during the interpretive process? For example, Rohrbaugh can easily challenge the conventional understanding of the parable of the talents by raising doubts that Jesus has any authorial connection with it: “Given all we have said to this point, it remains an open question whether this parable [of the Talents], even in its basic elements, goes back to Jesus.”⁵³ Accordingly, it then seems appropriate to incorporate another methodological question. To use Robert Yarborough’s label: Does the interpreter place a higher or a lower priority on a *cognitive reverence* for the canonical [scriptural] text?⁵⁴ For example, in a review of method, Marianne Sawicki asserts that “Jesus historians have been reading sociology too reverently and [ancient] texts too suspiciously.”⁵⁵ In contrast, a higher value of *cognitive reverence* signifies that the interpreter privileges the scriptural text “over human reason, experience, and tradition, without in any way denying that reason, experience, and tradition are necessary and welcome factors in how we go about understanding Scripture.”⁵⁶ In assessing the literature basis of any NT study of economic factors that employs various fields of inquiry, it is worth noting whether any particular discipline receives pride of place, and what degree of cognitive reverence is given to the Scripture itself.

Regarding the parable of the talents, scholars like Rohrbaugh who affirm the third servant as the hero are scandalized that Jesus, as the implied master of the

parable, would ever recommend a commercial transaction of earning interest as recorded in the text (Matt. 25:28; Luke 19:27). Rohrbaugh exhibits his disregard for scriptural cognitive reverence in this case when he exegetically severs the clear contextual designation of the good master as Jesus to permit a drastic revision of the parable's message. For Rohrbaugh, a likely later second-century variation on the parable in the *Gospel of the Nazoreans* cited by Eusebius (d. 340 AD) in which the third servant is "accepted (with joy)," is the more *original* version of the parable.⁵⁷ Rohrbaugh's depiction of the master as evil and greedy, along with his first two servants, fits his understanding of a predominantly exploitive culture of commerce as already noted. Although the abuse of the working poor by powerful elites did take place in that day, the extent of that evil is speculative.

Interpreters affirming scriptural cognitive reverence accept the clear recognition of Jesus as the generous master who entrusts each servant with his possessions and then rewards the two diligent servants by inviting them to "enter into the joy of your master" (Matt. 25:21, 23 ESV). Klyne Snodgrass clarifies the message of the parable: "The parable anticipates Jesus' absence and return and both reward (probably messianic banquet) and punishment, like most other texts speaking of judgment.... As a master rewards or punishes his servants for their productivity during his absence, so Jesus will hold his followers accountable for their productivity in the kingdom during his absence."⁵⁸ In this parable, Jesus affirms the good that can be associated with commercial engagement, while in other parables (e.g., Rich Fool, Luke 12:16–21; Lazarus and the Rich Man, Luke 16:19–31), he highlights the bad effects of such engagement.

Conclusion

In his 1993 study of the parable of talents (which was reaffirmed in a 2007 publication⁵⁹), Richard Rohrbaugh arranged his argument around five factors to support his claims that the third servant is the intended hero of the story: (1) an interdisciplinary research method, (2) Foster's theory of limited good, (3) models of the rich-poor spectrum, (4) views regarding the predominant economic activity characterizing the Greco-Roman era, and (5) the role of canonical Scripture within an interdisciplinary research method. The present study offered a brief survey of current trends in the literature for each, since decisions about these factors can yield diverse interpretations of economic data in the NT, as exemplified in the upside-down interpretation of the parable offered by Rohrbaugh. Awareness of the benefits and the challenges in the study of economic data in the NT may encourage a more cautious approach in making interpretive claims, reflecting a humble recognition of the present limitations of evidence.⁶⁰

Notes

1. Walter Brueggeman, *Money and Possessions* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 2016), 1.
2. Peter Oaks provides further analysis of these interpretive matters and includes an extensive bibliography, “Methodological Issues in Using Economic Evidence in Interpretation of Early Christian Texts,” in *Engaging Economics: New Testament Scenarios and Early Christian Reception*, ed. Bruce W. Longenecker and Kelly D. Liebengood (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009), 9–36.
3. Richard Rohrbaugh, “A Peasant Reading of the Parable of the Talents/Pounds: A Text of Terror?” *Biblical Theology Bulletin* 23 (1993): 36, 37. Scripture references are from the English Standard Version (ESV).
4. A sixth factor Rohrbaugh incorporates to support his argument, but not developed here, is a reliance on Aristotle’s views of commerce and economics, which the Church Fathers also utilized to support their ban against usury. See Brenda Llewellyn Ihssen, *They Who Give from Evil: The Response of the Eastern Church to Moneylending in the Early Christian Era* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2012), 46–50. For further reading on usury, see Klaus Issler, “Lending and Interest in the Old Testament: Examining Three Interpretations That Explain the Deuteronomy 23:19–20 Distinction in Light of the Historical Usury Debate,” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 59, no. 4 (2016): 761–89.
5. Craig Blomberg offers a well-informed defense of the conventional understanding of this parable: *Interpreting the Parables*, 2nd ed. (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2012), 269–76. For a critique of Rohrbaugh’s study, see Joel Wohlgenut, “Entrusted Money (Matt. 25:14–18): The Parable of the Talents/Pounds,” in *Jesus and His Parables: Interpreting the Parables of Jesus Today*, ed. V. George Shillington (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1997), 103–20. For a discussion of other relevant topics about economic matters, see Helen Rhee, *Loving the Poor, Saving the Rich: Wealth, Poverty, and Early Christian Formation* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2012), which focuses attention primarily on Christianity in the second and third centuries AD.
6. Included within this category would be the study of economics in rabbinic texts from the tannaitic and talmudic periods (70–400 CE); see Ben-Zion Rosenfeld and Joseph Menirav, *Markets and Marketing in Roman Palestine, Supplements to Journal of the Study of Judaism in the Persian, Hellenistic and Roman Period*, 99, trans. from the Hebrew by Chava Cassel (Leiden: Brill, 2005). For the use of rabbinic documents, see the projected six-volume series by David Instone Brewer, associated with the six orders of the Mishnah. “These volumes do not contain *all* the pre-70 rabbinic traditions, but they contain all the traditions *for which there is sufficient evidence to conclude that they originate before 70 CE*,” *Traditions of the Rabbis from the Era of the New Testament, Volume 1: Prayer and Agriculture* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004), 4 (*italics original*).

7. James Charlesworth, "Jesus Research and Archaeology," in *The World of the New Testament: Cultural, Social, and Historical Contexts*, ed. Joel Green and Lee Martin McDonald (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2013), 461. His chapter treats a number of the "many amazing archaeological discoveries for Jesus research and the NT" (453). Further implications for NT studies from archeological evidence of living space are developed in Peter Oakes, *Reading Romans in Pompeii: Paul's Letter at Ground Level* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2013).
8. Rohrbaugh, "A Peasant Reading," 32.
9. David deSilva, "Embodying the Word: Social-Scientific Interpretation of the New Testament," in *The Face of New Testament Studies: A Survey of Research*, ed. Scot McKnight and Grant Osborne (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2004), 118–29.
10. David Horrell, "Models and Methods in Social-Scientific Interpretation: A Response to Philip Esler," *Journal of the Society of New Testament* 78 (2000): 92.
11. L. J. Lawrence, "Social-Scientific Criticisms," in *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels*, 2nd ed., ed. Joel Green (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2013), 877.
12. Jonathan L. Reed, "Instability in Jesus' Galilee: A Demographic Perspective," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 129, no. 2 (2010): 343.
13. Rohrbaugh, "A Peasant Reading," 32, 33, 35. Rohrbaugh includes an extended quote from Foster on 33.
14. John Carroll, *Luke: A Commentary* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 2012), 268.
15. George M. Foster, "Peasant Society and the Image of Limited Good," *American Anthropologist* 67, no. 2 (1965): 293–315; reprinted in *Peasant Society*, ed. Jack Potter, May Diaz, and George Foster (Boston: Little Brown, 1967), 300–323.
16. Foster, "Peasant Society," 297.
17. Foster, "Peasant Society," 296–97, 309.
18. George M. Foster, "A Second Look at Limited Good," *Anthropological Quarterly* 45, no. 2 (1972): 61, emphasis in original.
19. Foster, "A Second Look," 62, emphasis added.
20. Foster, "A Second Look," 62, emphasis original.
21. Foster, "A Second Look," 58–59.
22. Foster, "A Second Look," 58.
23. Sharon Lea Mattila, "Jesus and the 'Middle Peasants'? Problematizing a Social-Scientific Concept," *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 72 (2010): 313.

24. Eckhard Schnabel, "Fads and Common Sense: Reading Acts in the First Century and Reading Acts Today," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 54, no. 2 (2011): 268.
25. Carroll, *Luke*, 268.
26. Bruce Malina, "Wealth and Poverty in the New Testament and Its World," *Interpretation* 41 (1987): 362, emphasis added.
27. deSilva, "Embodying the Word," 127.
28. Foster, "A Peasant Society," 296, emphasis original.
29. Rohrbaugh, "A Peasant Reading," 34.
30. Rohrbaugh, "A Peasant Reading," 34.
31. See Klaus Issler, "Exploring the Pervasive References to Work in Jesus' Parables," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 57, no. 2 (2014): 323–39; Verlyn D. Verbrugge and Keith Krell, *Paul and Money* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2015), 53–75.
32. See Thomas Sowell, *Basic Economics: A Common Sense Guide to the Economy*, 5th ed. (New York: Basic, 2015), 517–18.
33. For example, see Justin Meggitt, *Paul, Poverty and Survival* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1998), 49–50.
34. Bruce Longenecker, *Remember the Poor: Paul, Poverty and the Greco-Roman World* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010), 40, 43–44.
35. Gerhard Lenski, *Power and Privilege: A Theory of Social Stratification* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1966). A new thirteen-page preface by Lenski is included in the paperback reissue of the book in 1984 by the University of North Carolina Press.
36. Dennis Duling and Norma Perrin, *The New Testament: Proclamation and Parenthesis, Myth and History*, 3rd ed. (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1994); Rohrbaugh accessed a prepublication copy.
37. Steven J. Friesen, "Poverty in Pauline Studies: Beyond the So-Called New Consensus," *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 26 (2004): 323–61. Further refinement of Friesen's argument appeared in Walter Scheidel and Stephen Friesen, "The Size of the Economy and the Distribution of Income in the Roman Empire," *Journal of Roman Studies* 99 (2009): 61–91, in which they develop a more discreet framework of 600-plus income scales.
38. Bruce Longenecker, "Exposing the Economic Middle: A Revised Economy Scale for the Study of Early Urban Christianity," *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 31 (2009): 249.

39. Longenecker, *Remember the Poor*, 46, 53, and 295. Longenecker suggests that, at Jesus' birth, Joseph and Mary were probably in ES6 due to their offering of doves or pigeons (Lev. 12:8; Luke 2:24), while by the end of Jesus' working years as a builder, Jesus' family's economic scale was likely "towards the lower end of ES5," 117.
40. Rohrbaugh, "A Peasant Reading," 33, 34.
41. Jack Pastor, "Trade, Commerce, and Consumption," in *The Oxford Handbook of Jewish Daily Life in Roman Palestine*, ed. Catherine Hezser (Oxford: Oxford University, 2010), 298.
42. See Karl Polyani, *The Great Transformation: The Political and Economic Origins of Our Time*, 2nd ed. (Boston: Beacon, 2001 [1944]), 45. This special 2001 edition includes a helpful twenty-page introduction to his thought by Joseph Stiglitz.
43. See Moses Finley, *The Ancient Economy* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1973). A second edition appeared in 1984 with small corrections and an additional chapter 7, "Further Thoughts" (London: Hogarth). In 1999, the University of California released an updated first edition with an introduction by Ian Morris. Rohrbaugh cites Finley's work on one minor matter.
44. See Gerhard Lenski, *Power and Privilege*.
45. Walter Scheidel, "Approaching the Roman Economy," in *The Cambridge Companion to the Roman Economy*, ed. Walter Scheidel (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 2012), 7–8, 9.
46. Claire Holleran, *Shopping in Ancient Rome: The Retail Trade in the Late Republic and the Principate* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 23.
47. David A. Fiensy, introduction to *The Galilean Economy in the Time of Jesus*, *Early Christianity and Its Literature*, vol. 11, ed. David A. Fiensy and Ralph K. Hawkins (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2013), 1–2.
48. William V. Harris, "Consumption and Living Conditions," in *The Cambridge Economic History of the Greco-Roman World*, ed. Walter Scheidel, Ian Morris, and Richard Saller (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 529.
49. Emanuel Mayer, *The Ancient Middle Classes: Urban Life and Aesthetics in the Roman Empire, 100 BCE–250 CE* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2012), 14, 15.
50. Peter Temin, *The Roman Market Economy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013), 4.

51. David Fiensy, "Ancient Economy and the New Testament," in *Understanding the Social World of the New Testament*, ed. Dietmar Neufeld and Richard E. DeMaris (London: Routledge, 2010), 202.
52. Sharon Lea Mattila, "Jesus and the 'Middle Peasants'?" 313.
53. Rohrbaugh, "Peasant Reading," 37, 38.
54. Robert Yarborough, "The Future of Cognitive Reverence for the Bible," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 57, no. 1 (2014): 5–17.
55. Marianne Sawicki, *Crossing Galilee: Architecture of Contact in the Occupied Land of Jesus* (Harrisburg: Trinity, 2000), 68.
56. Robert Yarborough, "The Future of Cognitive Reverence," 8.
57. For a brief introduction to the extra-canonical gospels, see Andrew Gregory, "Jewish-Christian Gospels," *Expository Times* (2007): 521–29.
58. Klyne Snodgrass, *Stories with Intent: A Comprehensive Guide to the Parables of Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), 535.
59. Richard Rohrbaugh, *The New Testament in Cross-Cultural Perspective* (Eugene: Cascade, 2007), chap. 8, 109–24.
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