

Temples, Tithes, and Taxes: The Temple and Economic Life of Ancient Israel

Marty E. Stevens

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The purpose of this book, as stated by Stevens (24, 25, and 173), is to increase awareness that the temple in ancient Israel was not just for worship but was also “concerned about economics.” In addition, the book aims to demonstrate that the worship of God in ancient Israel was not disconnected from “politics, economics and sociology.” The book attempts to fulfill these goals by reviewing various aspects of the temple that relate to economic issues, such as the construction of the temple, its income, and its expenses.

To Stevens’ credit, she lists (22–24) five assumptions that are the basis for the book. The first two assumptions relate to the biblical text, and Stevens maintains that a careful reading of the text can “discover economic concerns in the texts.” This is a reasonable supposition, but derivations based on these assumptions depend on readings of the text that are not always obvious.

Within the section of temple expenses, Stevens attempts to show that the temple functioned as a community welfare agency, and this argument depends on her reading of various verses in Psalms. For instance, Psalm 27:10 states that if a person is abandoned by one’s parents, then God will gather him up. The verse is most likely to be understood figuratively, but the author writes, “perhaps . . . orphans worked in the temple precincts in return for food, clothing and shelter” (133). Another example is that Psalm 147:14 records that God would provide the people with wheat. This verse does not appear to relate to the temple, but Stevens suggests, “with storage facilities for surplus commodities, the Jerusalem temple would have been the logical candidate to supply wheat to the community in times of shortages” (134). Stevens’ interpretations of these verses are part of her argument that the temple was concerned with economic issues independent of the worship of the temple, but they are not the simple reading of the text.

Stevens’ third assumption is that it is valid to “commingle information from different time periods.” This assumption is potentially confusing because it is not always apparent which practices in the temple were permanent and significant and which were just temporary measures. For example, Stevens argues that the temple also collected taxes from the people for the royal household because this made the taxes more palatable (125). The source for this argument is 1 Kings, chapters 4 and 5 with regard to King Solomon. Yet, even if these chapters relate to the temple—which is not self-evident because the tax collection is recorded before the construction of the first temple—still this type of tax collection might have been a one-time case by Solomon.

This third assumption also enables the author to discuss the construction of the tabernacle, which ostensibly does not relate to the temple. However, Stevens states, “It is virtually impossible that the freed slaves would have had access to these specified materials in the wilderness of the Arabian Peninsula. Scholars, therefore, agree that the description of the elaborate Tabernacle in Exodus is based on a later structure” (30).

Stevens then suggests that the elaborate record keeping recorded in Exodus 25–39 was a form of inventory accountability similar to the record keeping found at the Mesopotamian temples (33). Yet, not all scholars agree that it was impossible for the Israelites who left Egypt to have constructed the tabernacle. For example, Umberto Cassuto (*A Commentary on the Book of Exodus* [Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1967], 327, 453) writes that the Israelites would have been able to purchase the needed materials from caravans that passed near them in the wilderness, and he noted that the text in Exodus followed the literary style of the ancient East. (See also Nahum Sarna, *Exploring Exodus* [New York: Schocken Books, 1986], 196–200.) Furthermore, the Midrash long ago stated that the details in the end of Exodus are to show Moses' accountability by the building of the tabernacle. (See N. Leibowitz, *Studies in Shemot*, Jerusalem: World Zionist Organization, 1976], 684–87.)

Stevens' fourth and fifth assumptions are that the Jerusalem temple functioned similar to the temples of the other nations in the ancient Near East, especially Mesopotamian temples from the seventh to fifth centuries B.C. Based on these assumptions, Stevens presents an informative survey of the economic activities of the various temples and makes the interesting suggestion that the people who manned the gates of the temple and the scribes were also accountants. These assumptions also lead to unsubstantiated claims. For example, Stevens argues that the Jerusalem temple functioned as a "financial intermediary," though she notes that this practice cannot be ascertained from the biblical text. Instead, she argues, "to the extent that the broader ancient Near East culture influenced the economic environment of Israel/Judah, it seems reasonable to expect that the temple did make loans of its surplus commodities, especially silver and grain" (150). However, it could very well be that once silver and grains were given and/or donated to the temple, then they would be forbidden to be used for common purposes and they were not loaned out.

Certainly, the worship in the temple had implications for the economic life in ancient Israel, and Stevens does a fine job in cataloguing these effects. Nonetheless, this does not imply that the temple was "also concerned about economics." Stevens attempts to show that the temple participated and contributed to the economic life of ancient Israel independent of the worship in the temple. It is left for each reader to decide how persuasive and convincing are Stevens' readings and assumptions.

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The Marketplace of Christianity

Robert B. Ekelund Jr., Robert F. Hébert, and Robert D. Tollison
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In many ways, *The Marketplace of Christianity* is a remarkable book. It is, first and foremost, an examination of the supply and demand for Christianity, using the tools of neoclassical economics, by a trio of accomplished scholars. Although the book often