

CHRISTIAN SOCIAL THOUGHT

Tight Fists or Open Hands: Wealth and Poverty in Old Testament Law

David L. Baker

Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 2009 (411 pages)

Tight Fists or Open Hands is a splendid review of numerous laws in the books of Exodus, Leviticus, and Deuteronomy that relate either directly or indirectly to economic and social issues. Baker divides the laws that he discusses into three categories—property and land, marginal people, and justice and generosity—and within each category, there is a further subdivision of various laws that pertain to the particular category. Altogether, Baker discusses thirty sets of laws.

With regard to each law, Baker provides a succinct review of the textual issues concerning the law and quotes numerous sources that discuss the law. For several laws, he proposes novel explanations. For example, he makes the interesting suggestion (170–72) that the laws in Leviticus 25:39–43, 47–55 refer to a bonded laborer and not to a slave, which resolves the apparent discrepancy between these laws and Exodus 21:2–6 and Deuteronomy 15:12–18.

One difficult explanation that Baker claims is that “lending at interest is forbidden in the Bible because it tends to increase the poverty of the poor and the wealth of the rich” (265). This explanation appears to be due to Baker’s reading of contemporary society, but it is at variance with his textual discussion of the laws of interest where he maintained that the prohibition of interest was applicable to all Israelites. If the prohibition also pertained to wealthy Israelites, then it is unlikely that the prohibition was based on the perception that interest hurts the poor. In addition, it is not obvious that interest truly harms the poor.

The proponents of microfinance claim that loans to the poor, even with high interest rates, enable the poor to escape poverty. Instead, it is more likely that the Bible forbids interest out of a sense of brotherhood, as suggested by Edwin Neufeld (“The Prohibition Against Loans at Interest in Ancient Hebrew Laws,” *Hebrew Union College Annual* 26 [1955]: 355–412; he is referred to by Baker, 262), and Benjamin Nelson (*The Idea of Usury: From Tribal Brotherhood to Universal Otherhood*, 2d ed., Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1969).

In addition, Baker provides a valuable service by presenting a comparison of each law discussed with its parallels in ancient Near Eastern law collections. These comparisons are particularly enlightening because Baker notes intriguing differences among these laws and the biblical laws. For instance, within the set of laws relating to care of property, Baker notes a dichotomy among the laws in the Bible and the laws in the ancient Near East (62–74). The Bible mostly refers to borrowing, and the one brief mention of renting puts the onus on the owner of the animal. However, in the ancient Near Eastern laws, there is no mention of borrowing animals, but rental contracts are discussed at length with the renter being responsible for any damage to the animals unless the damage was completely unrelated to him. Baker deduces from these differences that the aim of ancient Near Eastern laws was to protect property owners, while the Bible’s goal was for the Israelites to lend animals to each other when needed and without interest, which usually meant to assist the poor.

Another example pertains to military service. The ancient Near Eastern laws stress the obligation of soldiers to serve, while according to the laws in Deuteronomy, “in some circumstances responsibilities relating to the land take precedence even over the duty to serve king and country” (107). A third example is Baker’s noting that “no extant law collection outside the Old Testament actually legislates for holidays” (295).

Baker also attempts to relate the biblical laws to contemporary society, and he makes interesting observations in this context as well. For example, while the biblical laws regarding weights and measurements may not be relevant to a modern economy, Baker argues that that principle of the law is applicable to modern advertising, which at times “is designed to make potential customers think the product on sale is bigger and better than it really is, even if nothing is said or written that is strictly inaccurate” (304). However, at times his applications to contemporary society seem distant from the biblical text. For example, after Baker relates the laws of weights and measures to modern advertising, he writes: “Worse still, in sourcing produce from poorer countries, multinational corporations and other powerful companies are in a position to exert enormous leverage on suppliers, forcing selling-prices far below ‘fair’ levels, often with disastrous consequences for the livelihood of local workers” (304). While one might be upset with the practices of multinational corporations, there appears to be little connection between their “unfair” prices to suppliers and the biblical law prohibiting false weights and measurements.

This question of the relationship between the biblical laws and contemporary society also appears in the brief postscript of the book where Baker makes sweeping generalizations. He writes: “Are property and land to be grasped and exploited to maximize profit

or enjoyed as a gift of God and shared with others” (315)? Baker’s implied answer is that property and land are to be shared, and apparently equally. His source for this equality appears to be the law of gleaning about which he writes that the law demonstrates that the “landless have as much right to benefit from it (the land) as the landowner” (238). Yet, the law of gleaning seems only to allow the poor to take the leftovers and does not grant them full equality with the property owner. Furthermore, while the biblical laws impose limitations on the farmer, the Bible allows a person to maximize his wealth subject to these limitations, as occurs in any firm in a modern economy. This maximization in a competitive market can benefit society by increasing the number of goods in the economy.

Notwithstanding the few questions raised here, and they are few relative to the breadth of material presented in the book, this book can surely serve as a valuable reference source for all students of the Bible as well as for those contemplating the relevance of biblical laws to modern life.

—Andrew Schein (e-mail: aschein@netanya.ac.il)
Netanya Academic College, Israel

Engaging Economics: New Testament Scenarios and Early Christian Reception

Bruce W. Longenecker and Kelly D. Liebengood (Editors)
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The volume, *Engaging Economics*, contains thirteen essays by various theologians and biblical scholars, as well as an introduction and afterword written by one or both of the editors. As the subtitle suggests, almost all of the contributed papers have been grouped into two sections. As described by the editors in their introduction, the seven chapters as laid out in the first category “explore the interface between economics and a healthy section of the New Testament,” while the five chapters in the second part “examine the reception of particular New Testament texts in the patristic age” (7). The initial section of the book also includes a chapter by Peter Oakes, in which he outlines three possible relationships between economics and the biblical text: the use of economics as an analytical framework, the gathering of economic evidence as the aim of interpretation, and the employment of economic evidence as a resource for interpretation (13).

The chapters in the first major section are ordered in a basic, sequential manner with respect to the biblical canon. After exploring the legacy of property and possessions in the Torah, Stephen Barton maintains that wealth is employed as a symbol by the gospel writers in the following manner:

Matthew—wealth as a symbol of the moral life

Mark—detachment from wealth as a symbol of eschatological faith

Luke—economic relations as a symbol of salvation and judgment (the gospel of Luke), and wealth practices as a symbol of unity in the Holy Spirit (the Acts of the Apostles)