Moral Discourse on Economic Justice: Considerations from the Old Testament
RICHARD NYSSSE
Luther Northwestern Theological Seminary, St. Paul, Minnesota

Our arguments about economic matters are legion even before we bring the Bible into the discussion. We do not agree on the central analytical questions to be asked, the definitions of the terms we use, how data is to be assessed, or how to project likely outcomes of the various options. One group says the central analytical question is, “How does a given group of human beings become wealthy?” Another group says the central analytical question is, “How does a given group of human beings become poor?” One group says capitalism is oppressive and its wealth is stolen: wealth is primarily derived from consumption of resources. Another says capitalism is an efficient and flexible system for efficient creation of wealth: wealth is primarily derived from efficient production techniques. One group asserts that economic value is a function of labor and, consequently, where there is inequity there has been exploitation. Another group counters that economic value is derived from what users find desirable and, consequently, where there is inequity, there has been disproportionate efficiency in producing desired commodities. One group regards a given practice as legitimate self-interest while another regards the same practice as human selfishness. Everyone is afraid of economic oppression, but there is disagreement on whether the greatest threat is from the business elite or the bureaucratic (state) elite. When faults are admitted within one’s favored economic system, adjectives are piled on the nouns (democratic socialism or compassionate capitalism), but the favored system is not abandoned. Between the arguments and counter-arguments there is an uneasy middle group which seeks to “steer a course between the ruthless efficien-
problems of distribution and systemic economic justice, it did resolve the issues of poverty and debt for the widow.

To bring biblical material to bear on current considerations of justice in the economic sphere of life does not reduce the contentiousness of the matter, since value-laden terms like “justice” are essentially contestable. What constitutes justice is not stable because, if for no other reason, the specifics of the economy change. The economic location and, therefore, the interests of those involved in the debates are not the same. In addition, the biblical material itself is not monolithic. There is considerable diversity in Scripture itself both in explicit statements and implicit assumptions. We have conflicting attitudes regarding Scripture’s authority and, therefore, its role in contemporary moral deliberation and action. Which specific portions of Scripture might or should we draw upon? How does “drawing upon Scripture” actually work? What influences our decisions in each of these questions? The shape of a just economy that can lay claim to the adjective “biblical” is, to state the obvious, an ambiguous and contentious matter for a host of reasons.

I. TYPES OF MORAL DISCOURSE

The contentiousness is heightened by our confusion over the nature of the moral deliberation we need and wish to have. Our discourse does not always match the task before us. James M. Gustafson has proposed a helpful typology which illustrates this confusion. He distinguishes among four types of moral discourse: prophetic, narrative, ethical, and policy. Each has a distinctive language or rhetorical pattern. Much of our contemporary frustration is the result of engaging in debates in which the participants are using different languages. Gustafson claims legitimacy for each of the languages, but stresses that they serve different purposes. There is overlap, of course, but, when the differences are not observed to a significant degree, there is little meeting of minds and even less concerted action.

In the church the Bible will enter each of these languages. The Bible, in fact, also gives evidence of similar diversity in discourse. It is heuristically useful to examine the way the Bible might enter each of these types of discourse and to note the problems that arise in each case. We will find, I think, that the Bible’s discourse on economic matters presses us into a theological discourse that cannot be compressed into the categories we normally employ in our general moral discourse and specifically economic debates. Theological discourse is central to any moral discourse which seeks the label “biblical.” That does not mean that other types of discourse are anti-biblical or necessarily suspect. It does mean, however, that the Bible does not work well as a “resource” or authority for moral deliberation that moves independently of discourse about the character and action of God.

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1Craig M. Gay, With Liberty and Justice for Whom? The Recent Evangelical Debate over Capitalism (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991) 239. Gay’s book thoroughly demonstrates how extensive the divisions are even within a single strand of American Protestantism. He discusses and documents most of the oppositions mentioned in this opening paragraph as well as many more.


3James M. Gustafson, Varieties of Moral Discourse: Prophetic, Narrative, Ethical, and Policy (Grand Rapids: Calvin College and Seminary, 1988).
First, policy discourse on economic matters is present in the Old Testament, most obviously in legal material. Occasionally, an Old Testament economic policy might be rather directly applied today. For example, Exod 22:5-6:

When someone causes a field or vineyard to be grazed over, or lets livestock loose to graze in someone else’s field, restitution shall be made from the best in the owner’s field or vineyard. When fire breaks out and catches in thorns so that the stacked grain or the standing grain or the field is consumed, the one that started the fire shall make full restitution.

Such correspondence is rare, for it is in the legal material that we experience some of the largest gaps between Old Testament policy and our contemporary sensibilities. An example of such a gap is the policy covering an ox that gores. A contemporary reader might assent to the policy until midway through the five verses which spell out the policy:

When an ox gores a man or a woman to death, the ox shall be stoned, and its flesh shall not be eaten; but the owner of the ox shall not be liable. If the ox has been accustomed to gore in the past, and its owner has been warned but has not restrained it, and it kills a man or a woman, the ox shall be stoned, and its owner also shall be put to death. If a ransom is imposed on the owner, then the owner shall pay whatever is imposed for the redemption of the victim’s life. If it gores a boy or a girl, the owner shall be dealt with according to this same rule. If the ox goes a male or female slave, the owner shall pay to the slaveowner thirty shekels of silver, and the ox shall be stoned. (Exod 21:28-32)

The statute is clearly a policy statement with economic ramifications, but it neither could nor should be put into practice today. Debate would certainly begin with the reference to capital punishment in the second sentence, but, it is to be hoped, the policy would be flatly rejected when the last sentence is read. It is bad enough that slavery is accepted without adding the blatant reduction of the slave’s worth to a few units of currency. Assessing the value of a female slave as highly as a male does not make the policy palatable.

4In this essay I use the term “economic” in a broad, non-technical manner to encompass all types of commerce and financial interaction, including making restitution for injury.

The passages we have examined thus far have been devoid of specific theological language, although we should note that even these laws are presented as the speech of God (Exod 20:22). But one does not need to read for long in Exodus 21-23 to encounter policy which is connected directly to theological discourse. For example, Exod 22:21-23:

You shall not wrong or oppress a resident alien, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt. You shall not abuse any widow or orphan. If you do abuse them, when they cry out to me, I will surely heed their cry; my wrath will burn, and I will kill you with the sword, and your wives shall become widows and your children orphans.
Here one must directly confront claims about God. We might all rejoice that God hears the cry of the afflicted, but from there on the language is more sobering. Does God defend widows by becoming a widow-maker? The language does not honestly permit us to have the divine sentiment without the divine action, but that admission pulls us into a discourse that is quite different from policy discourse.

*Ethical discourse*, in Gustafson’s categories, draws heavily from philosophy. Although the Old Testament does not speak the language of the western philosophical tradition, it does, nevertheless, have discourse that works with precepts and principles that project universal applicability, particularly in wisdom materials. Admitting from the outset that the parallels are not exact, we will look briefly at several verses from Proverbs which touch on issues addressed in our economic debates. First, Prov 29:6-7:

> In the transgression of the evil there is a snare, but the righteous sing and rejoice.  
> The righteous know the rights of the poor; the wicked have no such understanding.

A philosophically oriented ethicist might accept the following paraphrase of the second sentence: “An ethical person acknowledges the rights of the poor; an unethical person does not.” The first sentence is more problematic; “transgression,” “sing” and “rejoice” are terms that do not readily lend themselves to translation into the categories of philosophical ethics. But even this sentence expresses a world view which it regards as universal, not contingent on time-and-space particularity. Wisdom material is the least bound to the particularities of Israelite history and its resultant creeds and customs, and, in that respect, it comes closest to paralleling the universal applicability that has been sought in philosophical ethics. Despite this parallel in tone, the wisdom material soon spills beyond the category of ethical discourse by becoming explicitly theological. For example, the principle present in Prov 21:13 (“If you close your ear to the cry of the poor, you will cry out and not be heard”) becomes theological when we recognize that it is not just other people who note one’s attitude toward the poor. Prov 22:22-23 heightens the stakes: “Do not rob the poor because they are poor, or crush the afflicted at the gate; for the LORD pleads their cause and despoils of life those who despoil them.” The universalizing tone is still present, but the discourse becomes theological. The theological dimension is central when Job challenges this generalized world view: “How often is the lamp of the wicked put out? How often does calamity come upon them? How often does God distribute pains in his anger?” (Job 21:17). The discourse is not simply about a world view and the applicability of principles; the subject matter includes the character, commitments, and actions of God.

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*Narrative discourse* is obviously present in the Old Testament and in our use of it. The biblical accounts that are rehearsed through Sunday School lessons and Bible studies do shape our moral character. The language is quite different from that of laws or wisdom precepts, but the accounts inculcate habits, dispositions, and standards of assessment that have economic import. For example, the narrative about Ahab and Jezebel’s appropriation of Naboth’s vineyard (1 Kings 21) grips our moral imaginations in ways that move well beyond a literal repetition of the commandment not to steal. Our outrage upon hearing of Naboth’s murder parallels that of David
upon hearing of a rich man appropriating a poor man’s single sheep to feed his guests (2 Samuel 12). The narrative about Naboth entraps us just as David was entrapped by Nathan’s parable. The latent accusation, “You are the man,” meaning “You are Ahab/Jezebel,” is not easily quieted; it grinds away at our moral imaginations.

Biblical rhetoric that is poetry rather than prose (with less of the features that we associate with stories) can operate the same way. For example, Nahum’s relentless pounding of Nineveh may at first seem only to awaken an imagination for economic and political revenge. The addressee is Nineveh and, when that term is shaped by what Kings and Chronicles report, revenge understandably becomes the first passion. The Assyrians had destroyed the northern portion of Israel and for decades had economically pillaged the south. Narrative discourse, however, moves beyond singular, initial readings. When one becomes submerged in Nahum through repeated readings, the addressee is not so easily limited to historic Nineveh; the addressee can become the reader, not just an entity external to the reader. “Who can stand before his indignation? Who can endure the heat of his anger?” (Nah 1:6). These questions echo in Scripture in a way that makes it difficult to limit them to external enemies. The initial comfort of “The LORD is slow to anger” is checked by “but great in power” (1:3). Economic and political strength is no defense against the onslaught (“Though they are at full strength and many, they will be cut off and pass away” [1:12]). The wealth may, in fact, only inspire the plunderers (2:9). If readers are presently accused of exploitation from some quarter (and few readers of this journal would be exempt from such accusations), the last verse of the book is haunting, particularly its concluding question (“There is no assuaging your hurt, your wound is mortal. All who hear the news about you clap their hands over you. For who has ever escaped your endless cruelty?” [3:19]). The dis-ease is heightened by recognizing how many of the economic and political disasters to be visited upon Assyria are paralleled in words directed against Israel in other prophetic books. The reader need only go to the next chapter in the Bible, Habakkuk 1. The prophet cries out against the injustice and violence (including without doubt economic aspects) in Judah where “the law becomes slack and

There is no single narrative approach in theology and ethics. As with other popular movements, it has become many things. Gustafson notes Stanley Hauerwas as one central figure in this approach. One example which self-consciously employs a narrative approach to Old Testament ethics is Bruce C. Birch, Let Justice Roll Down: The Old Testament, Ethics, and Christian Life (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1991).


Elsewhere, “the LORD is slow to anger” is immediately followed by “abounding in steadfast love.”

justice never prevails. The wicked surround the righteous—therefore justice comes forth perverted” (1:4). God answers, “I am rousing the Chaldeans, that fierce and impetuous nation, who march through the breadth of the earth, to seize dwellings not their own” (1:6). The haunting question about the Assyrians at the end of Nahum now clearly becomes an economic threat to the reader. The narrative urges, even forces direct discourse about God.8

Prophetic discourse is by definition present in the Old Testament. Mic 3:1-3 can serve as an initial illustration of this type of discourse:
Listen, you heads of Jacob and rulers of the house of Israel! Should you not know justice?—you who hate the good and love the evil, who tear the skin off my people, and the flesh off their bones; who eat the flesh of my people, flay their skin off them, break their bones in pieces, and chop them up like meat in a kettle, like flesh in a caldron.

As Gustafson points out and these verses demonstrate, prophetic discourse is filled with evocative symbols, metaphors, and similes which convict and exhort. Many contemporary persons who are outraged by economic injustice use parallel rhetoric, but a second example from Micah points out where many would part company with Micah:

Alas for those who devise wickedness and evil deeds on their beds! When the morning dawns, they perform it, because it is in their power. They covet fields, and seize them; and houses, and take them away; they oppress householder and house, people and their inheritance. Therefore thus says the LORD: Now, I am devising against this family an evil from which you cannot remove your necks; and you shall not walk haughtily, for it will be an evil time. (Mic 2:1-3)

A significant number of those who employ prophetic discourse readily follow Micah through the first several sentences, but the last sentence makes it clear that a reader cannot honestly claim the mantle of Micah without engaging the claim of the book that these words are the “word of the LORD that came to Micah” (1:1). Later editors may have softened or generalized Micah’s original message, but there is no reason to think that Micah would have termed his preaching anything other than the “word of the LORD.” Micah sapped of transcendent referent is not Micah. Much contemporary moral discourse is prophetic in its style, but, when it lacks a transcendent referent, it is significantly removed from biblical prophecy.

II. BIBLICAL MORAL DISCOURSE

The Bible does not merely overlap the categories of policy, ethical, narrative, and prophetic discourse outlined by Gustafson; it moves beyond the categories in one consistent and fundamental manner. The biblical moral discourse is centered on God—it is directly theological. We could add the adjective “theological” to each of the categories to produce categories such as “theological prophetic discourse,” but it is better simply to regard the biblical discourse on ethical matters as yet

8For a penetrating discussion of the Bible’s capacity to move toward the modern reader, see Mark Daniel Carroll R., Contexts for Amos: Prophetic Poetics in Latin American Perspective (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1992) 279-289. This book attempts to “clarify the use of the Bible in the moral life of the Christian community in today’s world.” It provides a thorough assessment of methods, yet remains grounded in Latin American church life. The author works in Guatemala.

another category despite its various similarities to the four categories we have discussed.

A brief review of the prohibitions against deceptive weights illustrates this point. Moderns would surely agree that units of measurement should be accurate. It is a minimal
expectation for any just economic order. The legal codes declare the policy clearly:

You shall not cheat in measuring length, weight, or quantity. You shall have honest balances, honest weights, an honest ephah and an honest hin: I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt. (Lev 19:35-36)
You shall not have in your bag two kinds of weights, large and small. You shall not have in your house two kinds of measures, large and small. You shall have only a full and honest weight; you shall have only a full and honest measure, so that your days may be long in the land that the LORD your God is giving you. For all who do such things, all who act dishonestly, are abhorrent to the LORD your God. (Deut 25:13-16)

The lack of specific directions for the judicial consequences for those who violate this standard of justice is a deficiency from a policy point of view. To call the practice “an abomination to the Lord”⁹ (RSV) provides no sentencing guideline, an essential aspect of any policy deliberation and enactment.

That problem, however, is minor compared to the explicit theological discourse which the phrase “an abomination to the Lord” interjects. In Leviticus the policy is even tied directly to a credal statement: “I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt” (Lev 19:36). The phrase “I am the Lord (your God)” punctuates the statutes in Leviticus 18-26, occurring over 40 times, sometimes, as here, extended with reference to the exodus from Egypt and at other times by the phrase “who sanctifies you/them.” The credal phrase connects the prohibition against dishonest weights to a vast network of statutes dealing with topics as varied as sexual taboos (e.g., Lev 18:6), the manufacture of idols (19:4), mockery of the deaf and blind (19:4), dietary issues (22:8), harvesting practices (23:22), and redemption regulations (25:17). The language pulls us into a discourse that distances us from most policy discourse in our contemporary pluralistic culture. The Old Testament’s policy on measurements is integrated with theological and credal considerations; to strip these away produces a discourse different from that of the Bible.

Amos (8:4-6), Hosea (12:7-9), and Micah (6:9-16)¹⁰ intensify the theological character of the Old Testament’s discourse against false measurements. Each prophet leaves no doubt that false measurements were a central instrument in a policy that both exploited the poor and amassed considerable wealth. The depiction of the practice is realistic. The outrage is expressed in language that fits Gustafson’s category of prophetic discourse. Immersion in the rhetoric of these three prophetic texts in a manner consistent with narrative discourse will clearly shape or influence practices beyond the specifics of measurements. The language is not directly that of ethical discourse, but principles could be abstracted from the statements of disapproval.

⁹The same assessment is rendered in Prov 11:1; 20:10, 23.
¹⁰Ezek 45:10-12 also prohibits false measurements in the restored community.

But the overt theological language pulls the reader into a different kind of discourse. For example, Micah announces that God is working economic devastation and desolation. God has begun to smite Jerusalem. God will make the city a “desolation,” an object of “hissing” and
“scorn” among the peoples. Each of these terms has an economic and political shape in the Old Testament, namely, exile. The coming exile is the deed of God, and the text asserts that this harsh divine deed is justified because of the false measurements. The deceptive practices were an instance of walking in the counsel of Omri and Ahab, not in the counsel of God. For Micah, God is as much a part of reality as are Omri and Ahab. The line of demarcation is not between a preference for Omri or a preference for the poor; nor is it between a preference for monarchical tributary economic theory or a preference for a nearly egalitarian agrarian economic theory. The discourse of the text brings the reader into a direct engagement with God. This discourse denies neither the legitimacy of the other types of discourse nor the overlaps that exist between it and the others. Micah’s discourse, however, is not exhausted by any one or combination of the other discourses.

This brief survey of the nature of the biblical discourse against deceptive units of measurement indicates a distinct discourse. God is a factor in biblical discourse with a directness that does not easily coexist with our various, but much less transcendent discourses. In biblical discourse, the unjust often operated on the assumption that God was not a factor. With regularity, the unjust are depicted as making statements like the following: “The LORD will not do good, nor will he do harm” (Zeph 1:12), or “The LORD does not see; the God of Jacob does not perceive” (Ps 94:7), or “[God] will not call us to account” (Ps 10:13). Their victims confess that these assumptions are untrue. Their counter-confession is that God will not forsake them; God will be their stronghold and rock of refuge (Ps 94:22). The Lord will hear the desire of the poor and do justice for the oppressed so that the wicked will strike terror no more (Ps 10:18). Job’s questions cited earlier express some doubt and keep the counter-confession from being a mere formula. In fact, frequently the counter-confession is accompanied with pleas such as “O LORD, how long shall the wicked, how long shall the wicked exult?” (Ps 94:3). The victims are not naive; they know the stakes are high. If they are wrong about God, they know that their confidence has been at best an opiate and at worst a cruel hoax.

Such discourse neither arbitrates our arguments about economic matters nor allows us to escape the contentiousness. Biblical discourse on economic issues forces us to engage God, and that engagement pushes us into a discourse that is not fully encompassed by other forms of moral discourse in our culture. Biblical discourse does direct particular attention to the poor (a “preferential option for the poor” does exist), but it does so in a manner that leads to direct theological discourse. After this exploration of biblical discourse on economic issues, I am led to ask myself whether or not my first act of solidarity with the poor should be to ask them to teach me how to speak of God.11

11For a recent attempt to take seriously the gap between the “trained” reader committed to the poor and the “ordinary” reader who is poor, see Gerald O. West, *Biblical Hermeneutics of Liberation: Modes of Reading the Bible in the South African Context* (Pietermaritzburg: Cluster Publications, 1991).