Ancient Economics—Modern Interpreters: The World of Jesus

By David M. May*

ABSTRACT

Jesus was keenly aware of the economic realities in his age, and many of his sayings and parables reflect these realities. Contemporary readers, however, tend to "de-economize" them in order to extract theological truths or to read Jesus' words through capitalistic lenses. A considerate reader of the New Testament, however, needs an appropriate template for reading economic situations within their original contexts.

Jesus' economic world was embedded within two major social domains: kinship and politics (powers). These two social domains serve as twin institutions for understanding the economic language, imagery, and focus of Jesus' words. Jesus' saying about leaving family and land in Mark 10:29-31 serves as a test case for examining some of the prominent economic issues of Jesus' day.

No magical bridge can take us from the land of "now" to the land of "then" when it comes to the world of our first-century ancestors in faith. Yet to find and cross such a bridge would be helpful in understanding how the category of economics operated in the ancient world. While no bridge exists, this essay will attempt to build a small, but secure, scaffolding so readers may walk tentatively and cautiously into the first-century world in order better to grasp what it was like to exist in the economic environment of that day and age. While the scaffolding of this essay will be minimal, the foundations upon which it rests are deep and solid.

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**Challenges for an Economic Understanding of the New Testament**

An emphasis over the last few decades is the importance of the social and cultural contexts of Scripture; however, interpreters still ignore or misappropriate the economy environment of the New Testament world. Frequently, readings separate the New Testament from its concrete economic mooring resulting in a type of pious doceticism. A spiritualized hermeneutic is applied to passages in the New Testament related to economics. These passages are interpreted as transcendent truths usually in the form of spiritualized admonitions. By over-writing the everyday economic scripts with personal spirituality application, this approach utilizes an allegorical method where economic contexts are quickly discarded as superficial while an interpreter probes for the deeper spiritual meanings beneath the passage.

For example, recently a person emailed me with a question about the wording in the Lord’s Prayer as found in Matt 6:9-13, especially verse 12. This person was unsettled as a member in a congregation that used the words debts/debtors instead of sin/sinners or transgressions/transgressors (v. 12). This person wrote, “When I hear the words ‘debt’ and ‘debtors,’ I feel like it is a real cop out. All the rest of the words are meaningful and apply to our everyday life. We are all sinners and transgressors but we are NOT all debtors.” I pointed out, ironically, that people who faithfully recite this prayer each Sunday in the pew are most likely indebted to many different financial institutions. Yet, this person’s assumptions are ones frequently carried by many Bible readers: the truths, insights, and narratives of the Bible are about spiritual not economical realities.
A truism for today is that an interpreter who ignores or spiritualizes away the economic environment of the New Testament will grasp only a small fragment of the meaning contained within its pages. Any attempt to understand and exegete the world of Jesus and the self-understanding of the early Church must take into consideration the daily economy environment of the first-century Mediterranean world.

Of course, the pendulum can and does swing in the opposite direction. Interpreters with this proclivity read many New Testament passages via an economic lens; however, a particular form of contemporary economics influences their interpretative approach: capitalism. The Good Book becomes a Christian self-help book on financial well being. Attempting to utilize a contemporary economic system such as capitalism for understanding the New Testament, however, is doomed as ethnocentric and anachronistic. Yet, because capitalism is the system in which many interpreters move and have their being, this hermeneutic is the one applied to biblical narratives.

Consider for example the Parable of the Talents in Matt 25:14-30. Interpreters almost universally condemn and castigate the last servant who hides his one talent in the ground and presents it back to the master. They are prolific, however, in praise of the ones who “make more money” and thereby impress the master and earn his greedful gratitude. These servants are presented as role models. In the ancient world, which was not a capitalistic market system, the opposite was true. The servants who gained five and two talents would have horrified the original peasant listeners. Peasants instead would have cheered on and praised the one unjustly condemned. This last servant was honorable and a true steward/preserver of what had been entrusted to him. Yet contemporary interpreters are grounded in capitalism and value entrepreneurship not stewardship.

### Approaching the New Testament with Proper Economic Lenses

Rule number one should always be: The economic environment of the ancient world is not our economic reality. When the economic world of the ancients begins to sound and feel like Main Street USA or Wall Street, we have misunderstood that world. Careful research, discernment and appropriate boundaries are necessary in assessing and understanding the economic reality of the ancient world versus ours.
The New Testament writings were conceived in and birthed out of the very real economic conditions of the Greco-Roman world. Reflected in the pages of the New Testament, whether implicitly or explicitly, are economic dynamics that shaped the early Christian movement. As Stephen Barton notes, "... economic practices are not at all marginal to Christianity either in its originating movements or subsequently . . . . [T]hey are at the heart of early Christian self-definition, moral formation, and sociality." If economics lie at the heart of early Christian self-definition, interpreters need appropriate categories to recognize economic realities and how these functioned for our ancestors in faith.

Fortunately, several helpful reading scenarios drawn from models based on the social sciences exist for just such discernment.

**The Social Domains of the New Testament World**

Sociologists and anthropologists in evaluating societies suggest four specific social domains for understanding how a society operates. These include kinship, politics, economics and religion. While all four are important for understanding the New Testament writings, two social domains stand out as most significant for understanding the interactions within the pages of the Bible: kinship and politics. The domains of economics and religion are not absent and are critical; however, they are embedded as sub-domains within both kinship and politics. Thus, a person might quite correctly speak of kinship-economics and politics-economics.

**Kinship**

The writings of the New Testament represent a type of literary style that is highly contextualized writing. This style of writing presupposes knowledge on behalf of the original listeners so that little is explicitly explained. Kinship was so woven into the DNA of all aspects of everyday life that its dynamic was simply assumed and not made explicit within the context of the ancient world. It is one of the cultural cues lying implicitly between every written line of the New Testament. For this reason, contemporary readers need to pay careful attention to the clues and cues implicit within the text, especially when it comes to the dynamics of kinship.
Kinship was the matrix in which all of life was lived and understood. As one writer notes, "...family-centeredness is part of the core cultural value of Mediterranean society."\textsuperscript{14} For this reason, family dynamics appear throughout the writings of the New Testament. The use of terms such as brothers and sisters to designate individual believers within the early church makes perfect sense for a kinship-oriented society. If honor and trust, foundational values for the ancient world, existed anywhere, it was within the boundaries of the kinship group.

Kinship-economics

While kinship is a principle domain in the ancient world and its institutions, economics is embedded deeply within the structure of kinship. This fact is seen in the root word for economics, which comes from the Greek: \textit{oikos}. \textit{Oikos} is the word frequently translated in the New Testament as either house or home. The focus of one's existence (livelihood) revolved around the family unit—the place of production and consumption. A person would not travel miles to a workplace because the home/house was the workplace. All individuals within the context of the kinship network pulled together to insure quotidian survival. Both the present and future depended upon the solidarity of the kinship group and one's continuing relationship to it.

Politics

The second major social domain in the ancient world was politics. This particular term for contemporary readers may conjure up unflattering images or strong emotions related to political parties today such as Democrats and Republicans. Politics in the ancient world, however, related to power and its utilization. In the ancient world, this power at its apex was represented via the Roman government, and the \textit{imperium} used a coercive structure of power to influence its will. In the first century, the power structure was located with ruling elites who were oriented around kinship/family ties. For those in Roman Palestine in the first century, the politics (power) was represented either by occupying Roman forces or by their client-based kings/rulers, such as the Herodians.
Herodians. One can best describe the politics (power) of the first-century Mediterranean world as an autocratic empire. In this empire, governed from the central city of Rome, "aristocrats (defined as a non-laboring, privileged, ruling class) rule agrarian peasants and live from the peasants' labor."  

Politics-economics

Just as economics was embedded within kinship, it also was embedded within politics. Politics (power) was used to control both production and consumption of goods. Power was in the hands of the ruling elites and therefore their "...political organizations were used to control the flow and distribution of goods, especially luxury and temple goods and war material." Perhaps the key word for understanding the politics-economics of the ancient world is control. The elites controlled taxes, land, indebtedness, distribution, and money. They utilized their control for their benefit and their benefit only. On the other hand, to put it another way, in this politics-economic system, the elites were the takers and the non-elites, i.e., peasants, were the coerced givers.

The description found in Revelation of the cargo shipped to Rome is an appropriate image for the centripetal force of Rome:

cargo of gold, silver, jewels and pearls, fine linen, purple, silk and scarlet, all kinds of scented wood, all articles of ivory, all articles of costly wood, bronze, iron, and marble, cinnamon, spice, incense, myrrh, frankincense, wine, olive oil, choice flour and wheat, cattle and sheep, horses and chariots, slaves— and human lives (Rev 18:12-13).

In such a politics-economic system, non-elites survived day-by-day in a subsistence type of existence.

Bruce Malina and John Pilch summarize well the relationship of economics to the social domains of kinship and politics:

...nowhere do we meet the terminology of an economic "system" in the modern sense. There is no language implying abstract concepts of market, monetary system, or fiscal theory. Economics is "embedded," meaning that economic goals, production, roles, employment, organization, and systems of distribution are governed by political and kinship considerations, not "economic" ones.
Before exploring how kinship-economics and politics-economics functioned in the specific New Testament text-segment of Mark 10:29-31, a helpful reminder is to consider how different contemporary American society is in relationship to these two domains. I would suggest that instead of domination by kinship and politics, the most significant domain for western society is economics with kinship, politics, and even religion embedded within economics. A couple of brief examples help illustrate the point that our frames of reference revolve around economics versus kinship or politics.

The U.S. government has conveniently placed a precise dollar value upon family members within a kinship group. Every April 15th taxpayers around the country claim deductions for dependents. In the 2009 tax year, each dependent was worth exactly $3650. One can now calculate in economic terms the total value of family members. People also occasionally make the statement, “we cannot afford to have another child.” This concept of affording children would be foreign to the ancient world of kinship. When I ask students how many of them live more than twenty miles from home and their parents, almost everyone raises their hand. I jokingly inform them that they are bad children for living so far from family. Of course, they live away from home because of employment, getting an education, or some other economic reason. Bruce Malina highlights this sharp contrast between kinship versus economics in this way:

A huge military machine is maintained at great cost to protect American economic interests all over the world. US foreign policy moves in the same direction, with little if any concern for the freedom, democracy and well-being of other peoples. The overall value of illegal drugs...is always assessed in terms of its street dollar value, never in terms of the number of families ruined, individuals crippled, persons dead. 20

Likewise, politics (power) today is also embedded within economics. Consider that the cost of just the Republican primary for governor in 2010 in California was $81 million dollars.21 If one has economic means (money), power (politics) will surely follow. As politician Jesse Unruh once said, “Money is the mother’s milk of politics.”22

While the ancients framed their world around the social institutions of kinship and politics (power), moderns frame their world by economics. This distinction is a key for how we approach the world of Jesus and read the pages of the New Testament.
Case Study: Mark 10:29-31

In order to illustrate the kinship-economics and politics-economics of the ancient world, Mark 10:29-31 will serve as a case study in reading the New Testament through a first-century economic lens. This passage seems appropriate since the domains of kinship and politics stand out in these few verses. It also illustrates how significantly economics is embedded within these two domains.

The pronouncement in Mark 10:29-31 marks the end of a scene that begins in verse 17 with a nameless man who approaches Jesus and asks, "What must I do to inherit eternal life?" Jesus interrogates the young man about his practices of piety, especially in relationship to the Decalogue (v. 19). The man's affirmation of his dutiful piety brings forth two new commandments from Jesus: divest of possessions and follow him. Because of the perceived cost of following Jesus, the young man, with discouragement and sorrow, fades from the scene (v. 22).

With the remaining audience, now comprised of Jesus' disciples, Jesus issues a double pronouncement on the difficulty for elites in obtaining the reign (basileian) of God (10:23, 24). These pronouncements elicit perplexity (v. 24) and astonishment from the disciples resulting in their unison cry, "then who can be saved?" (v. 26). Jesus' reply directs the disciples' hope back to the power of God for the answer to their question. The scene continues to narrow with the focus on Peter and his affirmation to Jesus that the disciples have indeed left everything to follow him (v. 28). Jesus' final pronouncement to Peter and the disciples is the climactic scene (vv. 29-31). The significance of the pronouncement is marked by Jesus' use of the term truly (amen).

The pronouncement in Mark 19:29-31 occurs in parallel form in Matt 19:29-31 and Luke 18:29-30. Several differences exist between the Markan form and the Synoptic Gospels. For example, Matthew, while indicating like Mark that the disciples will receive a hundredfold, edits out, as is his tendency, the repetitive list of what has been left (Matt 19:29). Matthew also does not indicate the chronology of this compensation (now or future) while Mark is clear it will happen both "now in this time" and "in the age to come" (Mark 10:30).

Luke also chose not to repeat the list of persons and items that individuals will receive for faithfulness to the reign of God (Luke 18:30). Luke does modify Mark's list regarding the goods and relationships left behind. Luke adds wife, deletes sisters, combines mother and father into the single term
parent (18:29), and significantly omits leaving or receiving land. Differences also appear in the motivation for leaving family and possessions: “for my [Jesus’] sake and the gospel” (Mark 10:29); “for my [Jesus’] name’s sake” (Matt 19:29); and “for the sake of the Kingdom of God” (Luke 18:29).

In light of Matthew and Luke’s versions, Mark’s account highlights the importance of the hyper-compensation, a hundredfold, taking place in this time and the fact that it includes land. The importance of these two aspects becomes evident when viewed through the lens of kinship-economics and politics-economics.

**Kinship-Economics**

The role of kinship is easily recognizable in this text-segment with terms such as house (*oikia*), brothers (*adelphia*), sisters (*adelphia*), mothers (*meteras*), fathers (*paterna*), and children (*tekna*). To break with the household and kinship network meant a person was no longer associated with a viable social structure for honor. Without a foundation for honor, a person was unable to maintain his or her social status in the first-century world.

Intertwined with losing honor was also the collapse of economic ties associated with the family. To renounce family was to renounce all economic ties because the kinship group was the center of production and consumption.\(^{25}\) As one scholar notes, “...Galileans who joined Jesus groups suffered economic losses and potential destitution. Their downward mobility started with one’s being labeled a deviant.”\(^{26}\)

The earlier actions of the disciples in Mark’s Gospel model this rejection of family and its critical role in kinship-economics. Of the disciples whom Jesus called, at least a third specifically worked as fishers in and around the Sea of Galilee: Simon and his brother Andrew (Mark 1:16) and James and John, sons of Zebedee (Mark 1:19).\(^{27}\) Notably, production, i.e., economics, was embedded within the kinship group as both of these sets of brothers were involved in fishing.

One should also consider the dilemma that the loss of sons had on father Zebedee who was left, no doubt, slacked jawed and shocked by the desertion of his sons. In a Galilee already burdened by the Roman-Herodian taxes, the loss of labor was critical for the sustainability of the family. The rejection of family, therefore, affected not only the ones leaving, but also the ones left
behind. The implications were so crisis-producing that recalcitrant mothers, fathers, sons, or daughters who followed Jesus might expect to be shamed, shunned, disgraced, or even worse, killed (Deut 21:18-21). The writer of Mark makes this point with the terse phrase “with persecutions” in v. 30. Receiving a hundredfold of houses, brothers, sisters, mothers, children, or land comes with a cost. To disregard commitment to consanguinity was to throw the kinship group into chaos. Just as in classic mafia movies one could not disrespect the family without expecting some level of reaction and response, so also was the situation in the first-century kinship world.

**Politics-Economics**

While the kinship issues associated with 10:29-31 are easily seen, politics-economics is often overlooked or given only scant attention. As the last element in the list, lands/fields (*agrous*) is in the most significant position and calls for greater attention. Mark’s Gospel employs *agros* in three different ways. In some contexts, it references the towns or villages (5:14, 6:36, 56). While in other contexts the emphasis is upon the general countryside (15:21, 16:21) or upon fields used for agriculture (10:29, 30; 11:8; 13:16),

*agrous* in 10:29-30 references the tangible plots of lands that lay at the core of production for most peasants.

Roman Palestine in the first-century was an advanced agrarian society and appropriately, 65-70 % of land was used for agriculture. The average peasant cultivated somewhere between one and fifteen acres with the average being around four acres. For a majority of the population in Roman Palestine, and in fact the entire Roman Empire, the whole of existence revolved around the field. The tools of life were the hoe and plow; the rhythm of life was planting and harvest; and a failed crop meant the specter of famine was always hovering around the door. Land, the heart of the well-being of a kinship group, was embedded within politics (power). The elites controlled the land, as demonstrated in almost every facet of any economic realities related to the Mediterranean world.

The elites decided what crops were most desirable to plant and harvest. As Hanson and Oakman note,

Most [peasants] wanted to produce for household consumption, but power relations prevented realization of this subsistence economy. Elites favor production of crops that replenish the estate storehouse (Luke 12:18) or have commercial value. Olives and grapes are more important than figs (Luke 13:6).
In a limited goods society, land, like all other items, existed in a limited and finite quantity. For peasants, it could be divided but rarely multiplied. For the elites, however, power was the method by which they increased their estates. "... there was competition to increase wealth through control of more land. This was economy based on exploitation and not on growth..." The power method used by elites to obtain land was frequently indebtedness.

Peasants, unable to meet the burden of debts owed to powerful patrons, would lose their traditional lands. When landholdings were increased, it was always at the expense of someone else, which is the hallmark of the limited goods society. It was the typical peasant in Galilee who lost land and went from subsistent landowner, to tenant farmer, to day laborer. Loss of land could easily result in the disintegration of the kinship groups that provided stability in the ancient world.

The archaeological evidence, however, suggests that in the time of Jesus peasants were not experiencing the wholesale loss of land. Some peasants may have experienced dispossession as evidenced in the parable traditions of Jesus referencing day laborers and tenants (Matt 20:1-15; 21:33-41//Mark 12:1-11//Luke 20:9-19). Yet almost all peasants were feeling the pressures of politics-economics in other ways. For example, the increased urbanization of the two main cities in Galilee, Sepphoris and Tiberius with population estimations of 8,000 and 12,000 respectively, placed a burden upon the agricultural output of the rural area to supply the city populations.

The extraction of both taxes and tithes from the land of the peasants also exacerbated a precarious and marginal existence. As Richard Horsley notes about the Herodians and their economic policies:
The peasants in the village communities of Judea and Galilee and other districts Herod ruled . . . constituted the principal economic base from which Herod had to extract more production. He increased demands for royal taxes—on top of the tithes and offerings for the temple and priesthood—and increased the efficiency of tax collection.  

In Hanson and Oakman’s study, they suggest that the direct taxes of Herod the Great would amount to 25-33 % of produced grain and 50 % of the fruit. Of course, other direct taxes included a poll (head) tax and rents. Moreover, peasants could expect indirect taxes of transportation and exchange rates.  

Add to these taxes those associated with the temple in Jerusalem, and one comes to understand how peasants were feeling increased pressure upon their land in order to pay taxes.

**Implications of a Prophetic Action**

Reading Mark 10:29-31 through the lens of embedded economics brings about a different angle for understanding this text-segment. First, accepting the call to leave and defect from the foundational domains of kinship and politics economics illustrates a prophetic action. While this prophetic action is not necessarily one followed by all of Jesus’ followers, it was a response some disciples did take. The action of renunciation served as a billboard to emphasize “the need for selfless sharing and economic redistribution.”

Throughout Mark’s Gospel, other examples of prophetic actions against the economic environment appear. For example, Mark 12:41-44 records a poor widow placing two copper coins (lepta) into the temple treasury. Jesus commends the woman since she has “put in everything she had, all she had to live on” (v. 44). While many interpreters present the woman as a model for sacrificial giving (an image often used in typical stewardship sermons), the woman’s actions more likely can be read as a prophetic parable against the temple. As a vulnerable woman on the margins of society, she represented the type of person who should be helped by the redistribution of funds from the temple. Instead, she experiences exploitation (“they [scribes] devour widows’ houses,” v. 40). In her protest against the temple, her action of casting the coins into the treasury says, “You have taken just about all I have; here, take the rest!” Judgment has been rendered against the temple—a judgment confirmed by Jesus in the next verses: “Not one stone will be left here upon another; all will be thrown down” (13:2b). One small widow has shamed the temple.
With both kinship-economics and politics-economics, a person may turn his or her back in prophetic protest on these two most significant aspects for Judean society. These two elements both appear at the heart of the Decalogue, and yet Jesus calls for one to reject and renounce both family and land. Such prophetic action of rejection does not shame the person who leaves land and rejects family, but the social domains themselves—and those who support them.

This rejection of kinship, as noted above, could bring about several ramifications within the kinship network, but one should consider also the specific kinship-economic structures under critique. Note the difference in the Markan list between what is left (v. 29) and what is received (v. 30). Leaving a single house and mother becomes receiving plural houses and mothers. The expected parallel of receiving fathers a hundredfold, however, is absent. The new kinship-economic groups form without the central figure of father. The patriarchal focus of the kinship-economics is radically reoriented. As one writer notes, “The new fictive-kin group’s most profound reform is suggested by the glaring absence of oppressive patriarchal power relations.”

The implication for this reform is that the “... days of males dominating all other males and essentially all peasant females came to end ...".

Rejection of land could also cause havoc in the realm of politics-economics. For a first-century listener voluntarily to leave land was fantastical, especially for those who still owned traditional and ancestral lands; one simply did not leave one’s land voluntarily. Yet, to challenge the politics-economic structures of that day, just like the poor widow with her coins, one can leave the land and say “just take it.” Perhaps abandonment of land was a form of nonviolent resistance to the oppressive pressures placed upon peasants. Imagine the chaos this action could create. Who would plant and harvest? From whom would the retainers and toll/tax collectors gather grains and fruits? How would the Herodians and their retainers support their elite lifestyles? What will those in power do?

Just as fantastical as leaving land was the assurance that one would receive land a hundredfold—in this lifetime (v. 30)! On one level this compensation of a hundredfold may imply sharing and hospitality among those within the Jesus movement, especially among those who are patrons and have access to resources. Instead of these resources going to the elites, they are distributed among those in Jesus’ movement. While this saying may indicate economic cooperation between the followers of Jesus in a communal context, this
compensation, especially of land "in this time," speaks of a complete reversal and reorientation of land ownership and hence also a new politics-economic structure.

This reorientation is undergirded by considering the relationship of the nameless rich man in vv. 17-22 to Jesus' pronouncement in vv. 29-31. The Markan saying of 10:29-31 has quite correctly been connected to the text-segment of the rich man in 10:17-22. This narrative, however, is more than the catalyst for Jesus' climatic saying to his disciples. What links together the man with great possessions and the final pronouncement of Jesus is land, the good earth. In v. 22 the rich man is described as having ktêmata polla (many possessions—NRSV). In most translations ktêmata is translated as possessions or wealth. The term, however, also carries with it the general meaning of property and in later usage came to mean exclusively a piece of land.

Typically the accumulation of resources, such as land, in a limited goods society, occurs either by birth (kinship) and/or power (politics). The text does not reveal by which method or methods the rich man accumulated his property. He is, however, hoping to accumulate eternal life via inheritance (klêponomêso). Perhaps his question about inheriting eternal life indicates the manner in which he also obtained his property. While his land acquisition may be ambiguous, Jesus' pronouncement of a hundredfold compensation for his followers is a stark and clear judgment against the rich man.

In a limited goods society when a person takes land, he or she takes it at the expense of others. For the peasants in Jesus' day, the politics-economics worked in favor of the elites who by the use of indebtedness could accumulate land. Jesus' saying, however, is a radical reversal in which the elites will be losing lands. This realization points the reader to this wealthy man whose initial encounter with Jesus precipitated the saying. His land, the possession he is unwilling to part with freely, will be taken from him and redistributed. Such a radical restructuring of politics-economics helps one appreciate F. C. Grant's insight from over sixty years ago, "the gospel is, in fact, the greatest agrarian protest in all history."

The Markan narrative is vague on how this land reform will take place; it seems to assume God will bring it into being. By what method God brings this land reversal is a mystery. One can assume, however, that those with land, the elites, do not lose it with a jocular spirit.

The jarring phrase in v. 30, "with persecutions," brings an original listener back to reality. One rarely gets crucified for advocating that peasants, who have few tangible goods, come together and peaceably share goods in common. On the other hand, one can get crucified for announcing a land reform in which the
elites will soon be landless and the landless will be land-full. Interestingly, Jesus’ last passion prediction about his death immediately follows this pronouncement about agrarian reform (10:33-34).

Perhaps Jesus’ focus on politics-economics stems from his own family’s experience of being dispossessed. Richard Rohrbaugh makes the interesting suggestion that...

... if Jesus’s family was originally from Bethlehem (and this is by no means certain as a historical fact), and if his Judean family was trying to make a living as artisans in the tiny Galilean village of Nazareth, it means that they were basically landless, displaced economic refugees who carried with them daily the burden of this social class conflict over land.47

If Rohrbaugh’s suggestion is correct, Jesus’ prophetic words and actions related to economics were conditioned not only by what he saw around him in the Galilean countryside but also by his own personal experiences. Just as one writes about what one knows best, so does Jesus preach about what he know best and firsthand.

Conclusion

As an interpretative lens, the embedded social domain of economics helps explicate the major social institutions of kinship and politics as they operated within Jesus’ world. Jesus was keenly aware of and interested in the harsh and unjust economic realities of his day. These realities affected both the stability of the family and how power was used and abused. The challenge the New Testament writings present for contemporary interpreters is to find ways in which to critique our economic system of capitalism and then implement strategies for both individual and group wholeness. Both the critique and strategies, however, have to acknowledge that the economic realities of Galilee in the early first century are not the same as ours in the twenty-first century US. No one-for-one application is possible. Yet the spirit of the gospel message impels us to search for points of connection and to testify to the enduring truths that Jesus words and action had and have.

For the contemporary economic situations of today, perhaps two critiques and strategies are most appropriate and center on those values Jesus espoused related to kinship (relationships) and politics (power). First, when the power of economics (implicitly or explicit) reduces kinship and religions to secondary places of significance, the prophetic voice of Jesus challenges Christians to resist participation in such a system. Second, when economics...
seduce individuals or groups to act in such ways as to disrupt, dispossess, and fragments relationships (love of God and love of neighbor), Jesus’ messages challenges individuals to find alternative systems that guarantee justice and healthy relationships.

1 Margaret Atkins and Robin Osborne, eds., Poverty in the Roman World (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006).


15 Hanson and Oakman, Palestine, 63.

16 Bruce J. Malina and John J. Pilch, Social-Science Commentary on the Letters of Paul (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2006), 393.


18 All Scripture quotations are from the NRSV unless otherwise noted.

19 Malina and Pilch, Letters of Paul, 393.


23 An earlier version of this particular text-segment was explored in “Leaving and Receiving: A Social-Science Exegesis of Mark 10:29-31,” Perspective in Religious Studies 17 (Summer 1990): 141-54.

24 The use of amen is found most frequently from this point on in Mark’s Gospel (3:28; 8:12; 9:4; 10:15, 29; 11:23; 12:43; 13:30; 14:9, 18, 25, 30).


31 Hanson and Oakman, *Palestine*, 99.

32 Ibid., 43-44.


35 Fiensy, *Jesus*, 58.

36 Ibid., 55. The overall population of Galilee has been estimated at 175,000. Typically ten percent of the population lived in urban settings. Of this, 175,000 probably between 1,500 and 2,000 could be classified as elite (Fiensy, *Jesus*, 40).

37 Horsley, *Covenant Economics*, 84.

38 Hanson and Oakman, *Palestine*, 114.


40 See the expository article in this issue by André Resner entitle, "Widow's Mite or Widow's Plight: On Exegetical Abuse, Textual Harassment and Learning Prophetic Exegesis."


42 Ibid.


44 "ktēma," Fredrick William Danker, BDAG, 3rd ed. (Chicago: University Press, 2000), 572. Edgar J. Goodspeed's translation "he had a great deal of property," and the NAS "for he was one who owned much property," both capture the more agrarian texture of the passage. The NET version, however, "for he was very rich," might leave a reader with a more modern understanding of this man as having money versus property/land.


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