

Covenantal Economics: God's Household

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So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are citizens with the saints and also members of the household of God—Ephesians 2:19

Introduction

Economics has to do with the production and distribution of the goods necessary for the survival and flourishing of human beings. As a contemporary science it explores the institutions, practices, and virtues that contribute to these ends in modern life. Examining the etymology of the term, however, we discover an older and broader context. Economics, in its original meaning, was the *nomos*—the law—of the *ecos*—the household.

For most of human history, the production and distribution of goods took place within the patterns, institutions, and relationships of the family or clan. The economic questions people faced included whose household it was, who belonged to it, and what they were due. Today the economic questions are different because the institutional and cultural structures within which the production and distribution of goods take place are different. G.F.W. Hegel noted a transition in the West from a familial social order based upon established, hierarchical relationships of identity, belonging, and mutual responsibility to a civic social order based upon free and equal individuals negotiating their temporary and utilitarian relationships according to personal preference and mutual self-interest.^[1] The questions about what is owed to whom and the obligations people have to one another are no longer built upon the settled, permanent, and particular relationships of family and clan, but upon voluntary, temporary, and negotiated relationships in the context of universal freedom and equality.

No wonder, then, that an examination of biblical economics may seem quite foreign, even irrelevant. The economic world was profoundly different then. Nevertheless, a study of the economic world of the Bible can assist contemporary Christians as they try to understand what faithfulness to God demands in the midst of the modern, global economy. Economic practices, institutions, and virtues no longer belong to the sphere of the household. Nonetheless, economic life, like all of life, takes place within the ultimate context of the Divine ordering of existence—the household of God. In other words, our economic lives are still established upon a fundamental set of non-negotiable obligations to, and enduring relationships with, God and one another.

I do not propose a simple return to the familial patterns of economic life described in scripture. Nor do I embrace a merely negative view of contemporary economic practices, institutions, and values. Rather, I offer a scriptural worldview that, in its own time, critically engaged the economic order and, even now, provides some guidance concerning how today's Christians might do the same. The fundamental questions and categories of today's economy are not new: freedom and law; equality and inequality; dependence, independence, and interdependence; and wealth and poverty. These themes find their biblical home within the symbol of covenant and

provide, thereby, the possibility for critical engagement with a contemporary economic worldview associated with the symbol of contract.

Liberation: Where it all begins

At the heart of Hebrew theology and self-understanding is the exodus—liberation from slavery in Egypt. The memory and identity of the Hebrew people is recited in the ancient liturgical text preserved in Deuteronomy 26:5b-10. It is among the very oldest passages in the Bible:

A wandering Aramean was my ancestor: he went down to Egypt and lived there as an alien, few in number, and there he became a great nation, mighty and populous. When the Egyptians treated us harshly and afflicted us, by imposing hard labor on us, we cried to the Lord, the God of our ancestors: the Lord heard our voice and saw our affliction, our toil, and our oppression. The Lord brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm, with a terrifying display of power, and with signs and wonders; and he brought us into this place and gave us this land, a land flowing with milk and honey. So now I bring the first fruits of the ground that you, O Lord, have given to me.[\[2\]](#)

The God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob confronted Pharaoh and his imperial powers. By the end of the narrative, it is clear that YHWH is God and Pharaoh is but a pretender to the cosmic throne. The plagues are signs that YHWH is the true Lord of creation. At the Red Sea, the climactic battle between God and Pharaoh made God's preeminence clear: "Pharaoh's chariots and his army God cast into the sea" (Ex 15:3-4).

In the wilderness, free from the oppression of Pharaoh, God began to introduce Israel to a new economic order under the authority of a fundamentally different sort of sovereign.

This is what the Lord commanded: 'Gather as much of it as each of you need, an *omer*[\[3\]](#) to a person according to the number of persons, all providing for those in their own tents.' The Israelites did so, some gathering more, some less. But when they measured it, those who had gathered much had nothing left over, and those who gathered little had no shortage; they gathered as much as each of them needed (Ex 16:16-18).

Under this new economic order, God provided for the people, rather than the other way around. Moreover, though some gathered more and some less, all had enough and no one had more than enough. Wealth was not accumulated in the hands of a few—as was the case in Egypt. No one could store up riches in great barns—as Pharaoh had. The Hebrew people were no less dependent upon a strong sovereign in the wilderness than they had been in Egypt. What was different was the character of the sovereign upon whom they depended and the patterns of production and distribution the sovereign provoked.[\[4\]](#)

Covenant: Sealing the deal[\[5\]](#)

Liberation is only part of the story. Freedom from tyranny was not an end in itself, but a step toward their true identity as the people of God. They were liberated not in order to become self-interested individuals, but in order to bind themselves to God and one another. The covenant at Sinai, marked by consent to promises of mutual responsibility, established the relationships that

created the people of Israel, symbolically represented by the Ten Commandments (Ex. 20:1-17; Dt. 5:6-21).

Several features of the covenant are worth mentioning. First, it opens with a prologue: “I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery” (Ex. 20:2). The covenant takes place within a relationship that has already begun, through the gracious initiative of God. The justification for the covenant is not instrumental or conditional. God acts on their behalf, doing good for them before asking for anything in return.

Second, the stipulations of the covenant are non-negotiable. Once the commandments were presented to them, the Hebrews were not invited to make a counter-offer that more closely suited their personal preferences or individual interests. YHWH remains the sovereign; by consenting to the covenant the people of Israel simply acknowledged God’s rightful reign and their own willingness to conform themselves gratefully and wholeheartedly to God’s rule.

Third, in this covenant, the people are not only bound to God but also to one another. The first four commandments describe the people’s religious obligations toward God and the remaining six describe their social obligations to one another. God demands sovereignty not only in the religious sphere but also over their whole lives and every relationship. A significant number of these commands, moreover, have to do directly with the economic sphere: “You shall not steal,” “You shall not bear false witness,” and “You shall not covet.”

Fourth, the stipulations of this covenant are not arbitrary commands of a powerful sovereign merely flexing his muscles and proving his power. They designate a social order of a particular sort that suits the particular character and ultimate purposes of God. In both Exodus and Deuteronomy, the commands are associated with God’s gracious intention to bless the people. The fifth commandment, “Honor, your mother and father,” offers a brief commentary on its purpose: “so that your days may be long in the land that the Lord your God is giving you” (Ex 20:12; Dt. 5:16). Deuteronomy places all of the commandments and the whole covenant within the context of this fundamental purpose.

Moses exhorts the people to obey all the commandments, “so that it may go well with you and so that you may multiply greatly in a land flowing with milk and honey” (Dt. 6:3). God’s covenant with Israel is not for God’s sake, but for the sake of the people. Unlike Pharaoh and the other sovereigns of the age, God was not trying to wring blessings from the people. God offered blessings to *them*.

As a model of human existence in relationship to God and one another, covenant offers a rich alternative to organic and individualistic models of society. Organic models tend to interpret people as embedded in natural relationships of dependence and interdependence that give priority to the common good of the whole and place authority in hierarchical structures. In the modern period, an alternative model, based upon contract, has come to the fore to counter the organic model and its abuses. It has tended to understand people as autonomous individuals for whom relationships with one another are voluntary, limited, and temporary. The point of these relationships, moreover, is not the common good, but self-interest. There is no fundamental

unity, or shared purpose, or common good, just various people in a temporary relationship of cooperation for the sake of mutual self-interest.

Covenant is distinct from both of these models while sharing some aspects of each. In covenant, the people are not passively subsumed into an organic whole: they are invited into full participation in the common life. Each person is recognized as an equal partner to the covenant, responsible to do his or her part to maintain it. The source of their unity is not ethnic homogeneity but the promises they make to God and one another. In a sense, then, covenant recognizes individual dignity, freedom, and agency in a way similar to the individualistic model. But the covenant is neither negotiated, as we have seen, nor based upon instrumental self-interest.

The covenant at Sinai recognizes human beings as dependent, independent, and interdependent. The people of Israel are dependent upon God for their liberation from slavery, for their survival in the wilderness, and for the social order that sustains them and promotes their flourishing in the Promised Land. But they are also recognized as independent. Their relationship to God and one another is based on a voluntary act of will and continuing fidelity to the promises made. They are not cogs in a machine or organs in a body but persons in relationship. Finally, they are interdependent. They are bound together. Their mutual flourishing depends upon their faithfulness to one another.

Covenant Economy: Implications

God's purposes for the Hebrew people included land, "a land flowing with milk and honey." As an agricultural society, land was the source of life and the means of livelihood. It was the foundation of all the goods necessary for survival and flourishing.

A covenantal sensibility controlled the people's understanding of their relationship to the land, as well as their relationship to God and one another. First, as in the covenant, so with the land: the people of Israel acknowledged God's ultimate sovereignty. The land did not belong to them, but to God: "The land shall not be sold in perpetuity, for the land is mine; with me you are but aliens and tenants" (Lv. 25:23). God's ultimate possession of the land does not distinguish the Israelite economic system from the Egyptian Imperial order. In each, the sovereign was the true owner of the land and everyone else was a mere tenant. Like the covenant in general, the economic stipulations of the covenant recognized the absolute dependence of the people on God.

What distinguished Israel from the imperial societies that surrounded it was the second aspect of Israel's covenantal understanding of the land. The land was divided equally among the people, each family in each tribe was provided with an inheritance (*nahala*), which was their sacred patrimony and the source of their economic security (Nm. 26:52-56). Every family had a piece of land that was handed down from generation to generation.

In Egypt, a few powerful people controlled the means of production and the distribution of goods. The covenant, on the other hand, created an egalitarian and decentralized system in which families and clans maintained control over their own economic lives.

While the tribal league was highly decentralized, being a loose confederation of independent families and clans, it also had a strong culture of mutuality and interdependence. Hospitality and generosity were not simply admirable traits, but the law of the covenant. These peoples were bound to one another because they were all bound to God. Therefore, they were required, out of a proper sense of gratitude and humility, to treat one another as God had treated them. So, when the Israelites were harvesting their fields and gathering their crops, they were not to be meticulously efficient. Rather they should leave some produce in the fields for the alien, the orphan, and the widow (those without families and therefore without *nahala*). Why? Because they had been helpless and poor slaves in Egypt, and God had helped them! They should do the same for one another (Dt. 24:18-22). All wealth came from God and, ultimately, belonged to God. Property rights were not absolute, except in the case of God. God warns the people not to withhold support from those in need because “your neighbor might cry to the Lord against you, and you would incur guilt” (Dt 15: 7-11). A covenant economy, therefore, includes mutual interdependence in general and support for the less fortunate members of society in particular.

Sabbath Economy: A back-up plan

The covenantal economy was vulnerable to the accumulation of wealth in the hands of a few and the creation of hierarchies of power and control. Sabbath regulations made provision for the ways in which luck (good or bad), skill (its absence or abundance), and personal characteristics (positive or negative) separated winners from losers, the rich from the poor, the powerful from the powerless. The weekly Sabbath commands provided a regular reminder of people’s absolute dependence on God and their equality before God. Their survival and flourishing were not simply a result of their own virtue or due to their own hard work, but came as a result of God’s gracious providence. The fourth commandments states:

For six days you shall labour and do all your work. But the seventh day is a sabbath to the Lord your God; you shall not do any work—you, or your son or your daughter, or your male or female slave, or your ox or your donkey, or any of your livestock, or the resident alien in your towns, so that your male and female slave may rest as well as you (Dt. 5:13-14, see also Ex 20:8-9).

The justification for this practice is different in Deuteronomy and Exodus. In Deuteronomy, obedience to this Sabbath practice is based upon the fact that the Israelites had been slaves in Egypt and God liberated them (Dt 5:15). In Exodus, the Sabbath practice is built into the created order—“in six days God created the heavens and the earth...and rested on the seventh day. Therefore the Lord blessed the Sabbath day and consecrated it” (Ex 20:10). But in each case, the commandment has to do with the character and purposes of God. God is the true source of every good thing and therefore everything must be acknowledged as belonging to God and having independent dignity and worth before God.

But the sabbatical commands were not limited to a weekly pattern. They were also embedded into larger patterns of life and economy. Each seventh year was designated as a Sabbath, during which debts would be forgiven, slaves set free, and the land lay fallow (see Ex 23:10-11 and Dt. 15:1-18). The Sabbath year interrupted the slide into inequality and insecurity. Each seventh year all debts were to be forgiven and all slaves were set free. Each seventh seventh year, moreover, was designated as a Jubilee year.

You shall hallow the fiftieth year and you shall proclaim liberty throughout the land to all its inhabitants. It shall be a Jubilee for you; you shall return, every one of you, to your property (*nahala*) and everyone to your family...In this Year of Jubilee you shall return, every one of you, to your property (*nahala*) (Lv. 25:10-13).

Sabbath practices not only protected the attitudes at the heart of the covenant economy, but also the structures of dependence, independence, and interdependence that were its foundation. The Sabbatical and Jubilee years were a “proposal for periodic, perpetual land reform such as the world has never seen.”^[6] In a society where land was the primary means of economic production, these Sabbath regulations provided structures and practices to resist the reassertion of the hierarchical, imperial economic order that Israel had known in Egypt.

Imperial Insurgency and Prophetic Criticism: The empire strikes back?

Eventually the powers of hierarchy and centralization asserted themselves in Israel. The transition to monarchy should not simply be viewed as a fall from grace, however. In scripture itself, the assessment of the monarchy is mixed. At certain points, indeed, it is presented as a clear rejection of God and God’s reign. When it became clear that the people wished for a king, God said to Samuel, “Listen to the voice of the people in all that they say to you; for they have not rejected you, but they have rejected me from being King over them” (I Sam. 8:7). The consequences of such a move, moreover, are presented as devastating and counter to God’s intentions: oppression, exploitation, inequality, and injustice (see I Sam 8:11-18).

But the Bible does not present the monarchy as unambiguously opposed to the good of the people or the will of God. God, after all, blesses each of the kings, first Saul, then David, then Solomon and on down the line. The threat of the Philistines required a more unified response than the Tribal League could provide and the monarchy definitely produced a higher level of wealth and prosperity than Israel had previously known. Unfortunately, the prosperity and security provided by the monarchy also came at the cost of equality and independence. Therefore, one of the primary apocalyptic images for Israel was borrowed from the monarchy and offered a profound critique of it: the messiah, the “anointed one,” the true king who would rule as God intended.

Meanwhile, in the name of the covenantal heritage of Israel, the biblical prophets proclaimed God’s judgment upon the monarchy and the economic hierarchies that accompanied it. The paradigmatic struggle between the forces of the imperial monarchy and the covenantal vision of the prophets is seen in the story of Naboth’s vineyard. When Naboth refused to give his “ancestral inheritance”—*nahala*—to King Ahab for a palace garden, the queen, Jezebel, and Ahab conspired to have him killed on trumped up charges of blasphemy. The prophet Elijah confronted Ahab and Jezebel and announced God’s judgment against them. It was they who had blasphemed against God and betrayed God’s covenantal order.

The prophet Amos continued this prophetic tradition in the Northern Kingdom. He proclaimed God’s judgment upon Israel, because “they sell the righteous for silver, and the needy for a pair of sandals—⁷they who trample the head of the poor into the dust of the earth, and push the afflicted out of the way” (Am. 2:6-7). God will “tear down the winter house as well as the summer house; and the houses of ivory shall perish, and the great houses shall come to an end”

(Am. 3:15). The whole imperial system of hierarchy is condemned and destined for destruction: “Therefore, because you trample on the poor and take from them levies of grain, you have built houses of hewn stone, but you shall not live in them; you have planted pleasant vineyards, but you shall not drink their wine” (Am. 5:11).

Later Isaiah proclaimed the message to the Southern Kingdom, saying: “Woe to those who join house to house, who add field to field, until there is no room, and you are made to dwell alone in the midst of the land. The Lord of hosts has sworn in my hearing: ‘Surely many houses will be desolate, large and beautiful houses, without inhabitants’” (Is. 5:8-9). The prophets of both the Northern and Southern Kingdoms interpreted their destruction and defeat as a consequence of forgetting the covenant and its economic principles.

But the prophets also held out the promise of restoration. Jeremiah in particular sees the restoration as a recapitulation of the exodus and covenant.

The days are surely coming, says the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah. It will not be like the covenant that I made with their ancestors when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt—a covenant that they broke, though I was their husband, says the Lord. But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the Lord: I will put my law within them, and I will write it upon their hearts; and I will be their God and they shall be my people (Jeremiah 31: 31-33).

The people of Israel continued to hold out hope in the promise of God’s graciousness and the relevance of the covenantal order, despite the dominance of imperial powers and hierarchical orders in their lives, societies, and hearts. Neither Egypt nor Babylon, neither the Kings of Israel nor Judah, could convince them that God’s covenantal order had been ultimately thwarted. In the end, they were no match for the power of God’s kingdom and its covenantal order of dependence, independence, and interdependence.

Jesus and the Kingdom of God: The incarnate economy

Soon enough, Babylon’s imperial pretensions proved false and its empire collapsed. It was replaced by others, until Rome conquered Judea in 63 B.C.E. At the time of Jesus, the Jewish people lived under the patronage system of the Empire, with its hierarchies of dependence, military rule, and stiff taxation. The Romans took the land from many peasants and gave it to their client-rulers, like Herod, who was King of the Jews in name only. The subsistence of peasant families was tenuous at best. Taxes, rents, and loan re-payment ate up more and more of their very limited wealth, as control over their lives and productivity slipped through their fingers into the grip of imperial officials, money lenders, and the regional elite. As a result, peasant farmers felt increasing pressure to hold tight to what little they had—restricting the circle of kinship obligations and distancing themselves from responsibility for the most vulnerable and marginal. Survival in such a context demanded a degree of hard-heartedness radically at odds with the generosity and open-handedness required by the Torah.

Into this environment, Jesus came proclaiming the renewal of God’s Kingdom and God’s family. The heart of his message was to “Repent, for the Kingdom of God is at hand” (Matt 4:17, cf.

Mark 1:15). The Gospel according to Luke self-consciously connects this proclamation of the Kingdom with the Jubilee tradition of the Torah and the Prophets: “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. The Lord has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor” (Luke 4:18-19). And Matthew presents Jesus as an authoritative interpreter of the Torah, who rearticulates the true meaning of the covenant (Mt 5:17-20). Jesus said, do not store up treasures on earth, but treasures in heaven (Mt. 6:19-20), and no one can serve two masters...you cannot serve God and wealth (Mt. 6: 24), and do not worry about what you will eat or what you will wear “but strive first for the kingdom of God and God’s righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well” (Mt. 6:33).

Jesus told parables about this Kingdom and its moral life that ran counter to rational behavior in the kingdoms of the world. The Kingdom of God, he proclaimed, is like a great banquet, but a banquet to which the lowliest of the low were invited and normal seating arrangements were turned on their heads (Luke 14:7-24). In fact, the rich and powerful were to be excluded from this feast, much as they excluded the poor and the powerless from their tables. He told a parable of the Kingdom in which the generous king forgave the massive debts of his servant and became furious when the servant would not forgive the comparatively paltry debts of others (Matthew 18:23-35).

When brothers argued about their inheritance, Jesus told the story of a rich fool, who believed that his abundance of possessions, stored in many barns, provided security. But that very night he died and all his possessions were given into the hands of others. “So it is,” Jesus says, “with those who store up treasure for themselves but are not rich toward God” (Lk. 12:21). Each of these parables calls into question the hierarchical economic system of patronage that dominated the world at the time and offers an alternative kingdom in which forgiveness of debts and egalitarian sharing of resources are the norm.

Not only Jesus’ words, but also his deeds pointed toward this new reality that had drawn near. As God provided bread for the Israelites in the wilderness, so Jesus provided bread for the crowds in a deserted place, “and all ate and were filled” (Mt 14:20, cf Mt. 15:32-39, Mk 6:32-44, Mk 8:1-10, Lk 9:10-17, Jn 6:1-13). Similarly, Jesus sat at table and shared meals not only with the rich but also with the poor, not only with the clean but also the unclean, not only the righteous but also the unrighteous. If the table is the center of economic life, the place where the family gathers to consume what has been produced, then Jesus’ family was very large indeed.

The provision of food and the forgiveness of debts are also central to the prayer Jesus taught his disciples to pray (Mt 6:9-13, Mk. 11:25, Lk. 11:2-4). He taught them to call God Our Father, recognizing the kinship of all people in the family of God. Moreover, they asked God for their daily bread—recalling the manna God provided for Israel in the desert. And they asked that God forgive their debts as they forgave their debtors—making reference to the Sabbath provisions of the covenant.

Jesus not only fulfilled the messianic expectations, but also shattered them. He rode into town on a donkey rather than a warhorse. He told his disciples, “The son of man came not to be served but to serve” (Mt 20:28). And he insisted that his disciples similarly overturn the hierarchies of

reward and become servants of all: “You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones are tyrants over them. It will not be so among you, but whoever wishes to be great among you must be your servant and whoever wishes to be first among you must be your slave” (Mt 20:25-27)

Little wonder that Jesus’ ministry and message met with resistance. But God raised Jesus from the dead, showing that God’s power and purpose cannot be thwarted by any human authority, no matter how intimidating or seemingly invincible.

The Early Church and Economic Life: Living in God’s House

The early followers of Jesus remembered his words and deeds. And, filled with the Holy Spirit, they did their best to live in ways that reflected the gospel of Jesus Christ. This included their economic lives: “All who believed were together and had all things in common; they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all as any had need” (Acts 2:44). Furthermore,

the whole group of those who believed were of one heart and soul, and no one claimed private ownership of any possessions, but everything they owned was held in common...There was not a needy person among them, for as many as owned lands or houses sold them and brought the proceeds of what was sold. They laid it at the apostles’ feet, and it was distributed to each as any had need (Acts 4: 32-35).

The author of Acts makes clear that such sharing of possession was not only a consequence of following Jesus, but also a realization of the Old Testament covenant. In the midst of the Deuteronomic Code, with its laws about Sabbath and sabbatical, is the promise that “there will, however, be no one in need among you, because the Lord is sure to bless you...if only you will obey the Lord your God by diligently observing this entire commandment that I command you today” (Dt. 15:4-5).

As the church spread beyond Jerusalem and moved beyond its Jewish roots to include Gentiles, the Christian community continued to wrestle with the demands of the faith upon their economic lives and practices. In the midst of a decidedly hierarchical society, it is not surprising that some of the sensibilities of social standing and patronage began to seep into the practices of the Christian community.

Paul found himself challenging the Corinthian church to resist the corruption of their *koinonia* (fellowship) by the class and slave structures of the Roman Empire. The table fellowship of the Corinthian Christians was taking on the shape of a Roman banquet with its class divisions and patronage system. So Paul writes, “When you come together, it is not really to eat the Lord’s Supper” (I Cor. 11:20). For the rich eat well and the poor eat nothing—“one goes hungry and another becomes drunk” (I Cor. 11:21).

Paul advocates a covenantal understanding of their lives with its marks of dependence, independence, and interdependence. All depend completely on God for the gifts that they possess (I Cor. 12:4-7). A person’s abilities are not earned or deserved. They come as a gift from God and are no reason for pride or arrogance. Each person, moreover, has been entrusted with

different gifts and abilities, each of which is significant and necessary to the well-being of the whole. These various gifts are not given for individual aggrandizement or personal profit but for the common good. They are entrusted to individuals but meant for the community—for the body of Christ.

Following Jesus in those early days placed Christians radically at odds with the assumptions and institutions of the world. In a context where family and clan radically conditioned a person's identity, role, and prospects, Christians understood themselves as a new family—the family of God (Romans 8:12-17). In a society where Roman citizenship was an important marker of status and belonging, Christians identified themselves as citizens of heaven (Phillipians 3:20). In a world where economic life was embedded within the structures of the family and empire, Christian community sustained a robust critique of, and resistance to, their economic practices.

Conclusion: This is God's house

The heritage of scripture tells us that the sovereigns and structures of this world are ultimately no match for God and God's purposes. Though the power of Kings and Emperors—corporations and politicians—seem irresistible, God freed Israel from slavery in Egypt and raised Jesus from the dead after his execution on a Roman cross. In a world where wealth so often flows up the hierarchies of society until it accumulates in the hands of the few, God made clear the reality of a deeper and more profound order in which blessings flow from the hands of the true sovereign out to all, including, especially, those at the margins of prosperity. There is enough for all, and each is called to use what she has been given not only for her own survival and flourishing but also for the sake of her neighbors, near and far. Through God's mighty acts in history, all of creation is being called back to itself—to the true order of *ultimate dependence* on God, *relative independence* from and equality with one another, and *unavoidable interdependence* and mutual reliance on each other.

This structure and order is not artificially imposed upon us and the world. It is the deeper structure of creation which continues to hold sway despite the corruption and curse of sin. In Genesis 1, each day God created something different and proclaimed it good in and of itself and blessed it for its own sake. But on the final day of creation, God surveyed all that God had made and proclaimed it very good. All together the creation was more than the sum of the parts. Each part was good and valuable all by itself; it was suitable for blessings. But each part was also bound to the others; its blessing depended on the blessings of others.

Human beings, the story says, were given dominion over this creation. But their dominion was to be carried out in the image of God. They were not to lord over one another or lord over the rest of creation. Rather they were to be the ones who blessed one another and the creation. They were to be the servants of God's purposes in the world.

This deep structure of creation was identified and recovered in the covenant at Sinai after God liberated the Israelites from slavery. It was incarnate in the words, deeds, and person of Jesus Christ. And it continues to live in the memory and practice of the church as it becomes the body of Christ by the power of the Holy Spirit. In any and every age, the scriptures provide a memory of God's mighty acts and a witness to the often hidden power and purpose behind existence. In a world where people feel that they have earned what they have, the Bible reminds us of our

absolute dependence upon God. In a time when people feel so powerless that they are induced to passivity, the scriptures remind us of our relative independence and equal dignity. In a world where people protect their own interests and feel no sense of responsibility for their neighbors, the scriptures remind us that we are bound together in webs of interdependence.

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Photo by Leroy Skalstad.

Notes

[1] G. F. W. Hegel, *A Philosophy of Rights*, trans. T. M. Knox (London: Oxford University Press, 1967).

[2] See Gerhard Von Rad, *Old Testament Theology*, vol. I., trans. D.M.G. Stalker (San Francisco, CA: Harper and Row Publishers, 1962), 121-128. All scriptural quotations are from the New Revised Standard Version, unless otherwise noted.

[3] An *omer* refers to a specific weight of wheat or grain (William Smith, “Weights and Measures,” Smith’s Bible Dictionary).

[4] The idea that the story of the manna provides a counter-narrative to the religio-economic system of Egyptian imperialism is taken from Ellen Davis. See *Scripture, Culture, and Agriculture: An Agrarian Reading of the Bible* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), especially Chapter 4, “Leaving Egypt Behind: Embracing the Wilderness Economy,” 66-79.

[5] This covenant-focused survey can only note the more detailed treatment by Norman Gottwald and others of the nature of the liberated “tribes of Yahweh” and the layers of extractive mechanisms present in the several empires referenced in this text.

[6] Ross Kinsler and Gloria Kinsler, *The Biblical Jubilee and the Struggle for Life* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1999), 16.