

Covenant Economics

A Biblical Vision of Justice for All

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Introduction

“All People Are Endowed by Their Creator...”

Many Americans understand themselves as a biblical people. Historically politicians as well as preachers have boldly claimed that the United States is God’s New Israel, a chosen people with a destiny to embody “justice and liberty for all.” This sense of a special calling as the New Israel is deeply rooted in the origins of the country. The groups of English Protestants who settled in New England crossed the stormy Atlantic to escape tyranny, just as the ancient Israelites had crossed the Red Sea to escape hard bondage under the pharaoh of Egypt. They then created new covenant communities patterned after Israel’s Covenant at Mount Sinai. The Mayflower Compact made by those who settled in Plymouth is the most famous covenantal charter. John Winthrop’s sermon “A Modell of Christian Charity” provides a fulsome statement of the Covenant for those who settled Boston. Many such new covenantal communities in New England adopted the Covenant delivered through Moses in Exodus 20 and the restatement of the Covenant by Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount (Matt. 5–7) as their charter documents.

A century and a half later the Revolutionary War for independence was understood as a new exodus. Just as the Hebrews of old had asserted their liberty from Pharaoh’s oppression, so now the colonists were asserting their liberty against the British monarchy. Moreover, the Declaration of Independence was strongly covenantal in substance. The adamant assertion that all people are “endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness,” is a restatement of the most fundamental assumption of Israel’s Covenant with God. The language is that of eighteenth-century natural rights, but the substance is what God declares to the people in the

biblical Covenant (as we shall see in chapter 2 below). In their Declaration the American revolutionaries stated boldly that “with a firm reliance on the protection of Divine Providence, we mutually pledge to each other our Lives, our Fortunes and our sacred Honor.” In that declaration Jefferson and his compatriots sound very much like Joshua and the Israelites renewing the Covenant at Shechem in Joshua 24.

Most significantly of all, the Constitution of the United States, the foundation of the people’s self-government, was understood as a new Covenant. Advocates of its ratification declared that, just as the twelve tribes of Israel had received the Covenant on Mount Sinai as a model of civil government, so now the thirteen states were creating a new model of civil government. The Constitution, like the Covenant, is focused on the protection of people’s rights, as articulated explicitly in the first ten amendments, usually called the Bill of Rights. It follows the Covenant in having no human sovereign. It assumes what the Covenant affirms, that the transcendent Deity is the guarantor of people’s rights. Like the Covenant, the Constitution asks the inner commitment (ratification) of the body politic. And like the Covenant, the Constitution, while providing for the active participation of the people in the creation of positive law, understands law as derived ultimately from a higher source, God or Nature. In Jefferson’s terms, law is ultimately the “law of nature and of nature’s God.”

In carrying out their new exodus, however, arrogantly presuming that they were “the chosen people,” the “founding fathers” were violating fundamental principles of the Covenant designed to protect people from tyranny and oppression. They not only took the land away from the peoples already living on it, but they slaughtered those peoples. While declaring that all people are “endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights,” they systematically denied the rights and the very humanity of the Africans whom they enslaved.

Attended by the inconsistency and hypocrisy involved in its adaptation to North American democracy, the Covenant continued to play a prominent role in political life. In their inaugural addresses, presidents referred to the Covenant that the people had made with God, the land, and one another, often with explicit reference to covenantal images and statements in the Bible. It might not be too much to argue that, following the election by the people, the inauguration of the President before the people’s representatives and Supreme Court justices every four years has been a covenant renewal ceremony. As symbolized in the newly elected President’s solemn oath to uphold the Constitution, the rule of law rather than tyranny has prevailed. And, however fitfully and inconsistently, the political rights of

the people guaranteed by the covenantal Constitution have been protected. Albeit belatedly, the Constitution was finally amended to extend civil rights to the descendants of former slaves and to extend the franchise to women.

Political Rights—But What about Economic Rights?

In retrospect it is clear that the founders' principal motive in drawing on the covenantal tradition in the Bible in the foundational documents of the United States was to establish political liberty and to guarantee political rights. In the 1770s and 1780s the driving concern was to assert independence from the English monarchy and to establish self-government. Political rights were again the principal concern when the covenantal tradition figured prominently in the emancipation of slaves in the 1860s and the civil rights legislation in the 1960s.

The biblical Covenant, however, like the exodus with which it is linked, is focused as much on economic rights as on political rights. The hard bondage under Pharaoh in Egypt that the Hebrews escaped in the exodus was not only political subjugation but economic oppression. The covenant that they received on Mount Sinai focused on principles meant to keep them from falling back into economic as well as political subservience (as we shall see in the chapters below).

Earlier generations of Americans, from Plymouth Plantation to Abraham Lincoln, were aware that the covenant was concerned with economic rights as well as political rights. In his sermon founding the covenantal community in Boston, John Winthrop declared that as "wee entertaine each other in brotherly Affeccion, wee must be willing to abridge our selves of our superfluities for the supply of others' necessities." The framers of the Pennsylvania Declaration of Rights even seriously considered including the explicit economic statement that "an enormous proportion of property vested in a few individuals is dangerous to the rights, and destructive of the common happiness of mankind." In 1865, in his second inaugural address, President Abraham Lincoln interpreted the mutually destructive Civil War as the delivery of the divine curses for having broken the covenant:

Yet, if God wills that it continue until all the wealth piled up by the bondsman's two hundred and fifty years of unrequited toil shall be sunk, and every drop of blood drawn with the lash shall be paid by another drawn with the sword, as was said three thousand years ago, so still it must be said "the judgments of the Lord are true and righteous altogether."

Clearly the founders and the subsequent generations of citizens of the United States knew that the Covenant was concerned with economics as well as political liberty. The founding documents of the United States and the development of institutional guarantees focused on political rights while somewhat neglecting economic rights.

This was surely at least partly because in the formative and early history of the United States a rival ideology rapidly displaced the biblical covenantal tradition in economic affairs. For the founders at the time of the Revolution and the framing of the Constitution, liberty may have meant mainly liberation from British tyranny. But it was understood in a broader framework of social moral values of freedom to do the good for the common welfare. For Jefferson and others familiar with Roman history, freedom was closely identified with “republican virtue,” which meant doing what was good for the body politic. Freedom, however, quickly came to mean the freedom to pursue self-interest. A new faith was emerging that social concord could still be maintained when individuals sought their own private interests without worrying about the social-economic consequences for others. This ideology of freedom as pursuit of self-interest reinforced and shaped the strong sense of individualism in U.S. society. The ideology of individual self-interests gave license to entrepreneurs in nascent capitalist enterprises.

The recognition by the courts of corporations as persons with the same rights as individual citizens gave a considerable boost to the multiplication and expansion of corporations. The marriage of capitalist corporations with industrialization and international trade brought about a complete transformation of the economy in the United States—from agricultural to industrial, from family businesses to huge corporations, from rural to urban, from self-sufficient farming to dependence on wage labor. In all of this the “captains of industry” came to control the economy. Workers became dependent on the owners and management. Fewer and fewer people came to own and control more and more of the wealth and resources. Through most of this development, government in the United States, local, state, and federal, supported the corporations against the efforts of workers to assert their economic rights.

Capitalism, which requires an economic return on capital invested, thus became *the* economic system, with no effective challenge and little serious criticism. One of the principles on the basis of which the American colonists had made their exodus out from under the English monarchy was “no taxation without representation.” They refused to render up a portion of their family income, usually from the sale of their produce,

unless they had a voice in its determination. Once the political revolution was successful and entrepreneurial capitalist enterprises were expanding, however, the equivalent principle was not applied to economic relations. Perhaps because in principle all supposedly enjoyed equality of opportunity, those who worked for others did not rebel against the owners of factories who made a profit by keeping a portion of the value of their labor. Most citizens who bought into "the American dream" accepted as natural and inevitable an economic system in which a vast majority yielded up a portion of the value of their work as profits for the company for which they worked. Until recently little objection was made that executives make a hundred or a thousand times as much as workers, and that the big investors have billions while millions of workers have barely enough to live on. It is even accepted that, since capitalism is a dynamic system, it must grow. Each corporation must grow, and every national GNP must grow, whatever the effects on people or the environment.

The biblical Covenant and its concern for economic rights, however, had not disappeared. Although economic rights had not been institutionally protected in the same way as political rights, the Covenant was still integral to public life in the United States. While the Constitution prohibited the establishment of a religion—"separation of church and state"—churches and synagogues continued to cultivate biblical tradition, including the Mosaic Covenant. Meanwhile the Covenant had become central to what has been called the American "civil religion," the sacred documents (Declaration of Independence, Constitution), celebrations (Fourth of July, Thanksgiving), and ideology ("liberty and justice for all") that lend cohesion to the different peoples, regions, and parties that make up the body politic of the United States. Presidents referred prominently to the covenant in their inaugural addresses. In political discourse and debate of a century ago, moreover, the ten commandments were referred to alongside the Declaration of Independence and Constitution as one of the founding documents of the country, including its economic relations.

In Progressive Era presidential campaigns (around the beginning of the twentieth century), for example, both the Republicans and the Democrats appealed to the ten commandments as the authority for their respective positions and accused the other of abandoning the principles of both Covenant and Constitution. Both sides saw the implications of the eighth commandment in particular for the huge corporations and the trusts they were establishing. Theodore Roosevelt, the great Republican champion of the ten commandments, insisted that "thou shalt not steal" meant that individual corporate heads and politicians should be honest. Each

corporation should receive “its exact rights and nothing more,” but honest politicians would not propose laws that would restrain those corporations. William Jennings Bryan, populist advocate of workers and farmers, on the other hand, accused the Republicans of revising the eighth commandment to read “thou shalt not steal on a small scale.” He appealed to the original commandment as a basis on which to restrain and regulate the large corporations that many feared had become so powerful as to threaten democracy and individual liberty. Gradually sensing the implications of the commandment, Roosevelt moved increasingly toward Progressive policies. When his friends on Wall Street and the Republican Party accused him of attacking their corporations, his defense was that “most of what I preach you can find in the Ten Commandments.”

Influenced by the principles of the biblical Covenant the U.S. government did enact reforms and regulations, first in the Progressive Era and later in the New Deal. The reforms attempted in various ways to restrain the worst abuses of corporate power, with labor laws, environmental regulations, taxation of excessive profits, and a progressive income tax. Labor unions were able to bargain for better wages and a modicum of job security, which provided a minimum of economic security to families. Such reforms, of course, were only attempts to check abuses by those who wielded power in the system, not a fundamental change in the system itself.

With deregulation in the last few decades, however, corporations were cut loose to make profits and “grow” capital regardless of the impact on the environment and on individual and community life, in the United States or elsewhere in the world. The reforms protecting workers and gains in wages and job security had made labor too expensive in the United States. Accordingly, in a relentless process that escalated in the 1980s, giant corporations in major industries steadily closed their plants and laid off millions of workers. Whole industries, such as steel, and many cities along with them were decimated, as the corporations moved their manufacturing to “undeveloped” countries with very cheap labor and no protective labor laws. To avoid layoffs labor unions had to give back wages, while CEOs’ compensation escalated. Weakened unions could no longer defend workers’ rights to decent wages and job security, and transnational corporations could effectively ignore the rights of workers in developing countries. The U.S. government promised that plenty of new jobs in high-tech and service industries would replace those lost. But the service jobs were low paying, and in the last decade those who eagerly trained for high-tech jobs received their own pink slips, as large corporations outsourced the technical support increasingly important to their

operations. The U.S. government promised job-retraining programs, but did not fund them.

In recent years we have experienced the further erosion of economic rights. The profits of the huge corporations and the enormous expansion of wealth among the very rich come at the expense of their workers, whether the ones who lost well-paying jobs in the United States or those working in sweatshops elsewhere. The now globalized capitalist economy does not recognize the economic rights of its workers. Far from protecting such rights, moreover, the U.S. government yielded to the power of the huge corporations. Workers have shrinking wages and little or no job security. As the cost of increasingly high-tech health care escalates, corporations eager to maintain their profit margins have either eliminated or reduced their contribution, forcing employees to pay more and more of the inordinate costs. To avoid or emerge from bankruptcy, corporations expropriate pension funds to pay their institutional creditors, such as huge banks, leaving their employees without pensions. Bankruptcy laws designed to protect families and small businesses from unforeseen contingencies that might mean financial ruin are revised to provide less protection. Simultaneously the bankruptcy laws are manipulated to protect the credit card companies (which charge 18 to 25 percent interest and escalating fees) against cardholders, driving the latter deeply into debt. There are huge government bailouts for corporations, but not for families. In the increasingly globalized capitalist economy dominated by transnational corporations, it is difficult to find laws, programs, or mechanisms that provide economic security for individuals and families.

In the capitalist system, however, it has been deemed necessary for capital to grow, for corporations to make profits, to provide a return on investments, regardless of the effect on individual people, families, and communities. Increasingly the U.S. government has been serving the interests of huge conglomerate corporations at the expense of the interests of the people. Having started out with an assertion of their liberty over against the political tyranny of the English monarchy, the people of the United States are now seeing their lives heavily determined by enormously powerful transnational corporations and their super-wealthy CEOs who claim that their only responsibility is to their investors.

This situation bears a striking resemblance to that of the ancient Hebrews caught in hard bondage under Pharaoh, the enormously powerful head of the imperial economy in Egypt. Those ancient Hebrews, however, once they asserted their liberty from Pharaoh, formed the Covenant, which was concerned with economic as well as political rights. Thus a new

look at the prominent and extensive covenantal texts in the Bible may help us discern the economic concerns that have been missing in the American appropriation of the biblical Covenant. A broader survey of economics in the Bible will reveal that biblical economics more generally centers on the Covenant. We will discover in the biblical Covenant that the “unalienable rights” with which all people are “endowed by their Creator” include economic rights, rights necessary for “Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness.” In the covenantal economics of the Bible, moreover, God-given economic rights are inseparably connected with public communal values. The erosion of these rights and values by the power of huge corporations is a fundamental violation of the Covenant that so informed the foundational events and documents of the United States.

The Bible and Economics

The Bible might seem like the last place one would look for information and guidance on economics. Despite the prominent role that the exodus and Covenant played in the formative history of the United States, the assumption has grown during the last century that the Bible is religious literature about religious matters. This is reinforced by the modern separation, particularly in “secular” societies, of religion and politics and the belief that economics are and ought to remain independent of religious concerns.

As our American ancestors from John Winthrop to Abraham Lincoln recognized in the biblical Covenant, however, economic concerns run throughout the Bible. The foundational event for Israel, the exodus, was an escape from economic as well as political oppression. Books of the Pentateuch include many laws and teachings on economic matters, from prohibition of interest on loans and cancellation of debts to damages for injury to draft animals and damage to crops. Tithes and offerings are the transfers of economic goods to the control and consumption of the priests. The people who are clamoring for a king to reign over them are warned that a king will take their goods and their property. King Solomon imposes forced labor, the very oppression from which God had liberated Israel in the exodus. Ahab and Jezebel frame Naboth so that Ahab can seize his vineyard, against God’s guarantee that ancestral land was inalienable. The prophets rail against royal officers’ economic exploitation of the people.

Economic concerns are central also in the teachings of Jesus. The petitions of the Lord’s Prayer focus on enough food to eat each day and the

cancellation of debts. Jesus declares that it is harder for a wealthy person to enter the kingdom of God than for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle. He advises the wealthy young man who insists that he has kept the covenantal commandments to sell all his goods and give to the poor. In the Gospel of Luke, the decree by Augustus Caesar, the Savior of the Empire, that people must pay tribute forces Joseph and Mary to journey to Bethlehem, where Jesus is born as the alternative "Savior." In his confrontation with the client rulers of Rome in Jerusalem, Jesus is forced to address this same question of the tribute to Caesar—and does so in a way that does not assume the separation of religion from politics and economics. The apostle Paul is not just preaching his gospel, but gathering a collection from the assemblies of Christ for the poor in the Jerusalem community. The revelatory prophetic visions of John on Patmos include an uncompromising condemnation of the merchants and kings of the earth who supply the Roman imperial elite with expensive luxury goods.

Despite the prominence of economic issues throughout the Bible, the field of biblical studies has generally neglected economics. In recent years, however, a few scholars have given special attention to the economic system assumed in biblical books and/or to economic concerns evident in particular texts. Studies of laws about cancellation of debts and inalienability of land in biblical and Mesopotamian law codes have significant implications for economic concerns in the Mosaic Covenant in particular. Sophisticated studies of key prophetic oracles have opened up a far more precise sense of the situation that the prophets were addressing and what they were protesting. Similarly, investigation of the political-economic context in which Jesus and his movement emerged has enabled us to hear previously undetected economic implications in his teachings.

Drawing on these recent studies we can formulate a provisional picture of the economic structures and dynamics in which the ancient Israelites lived and we can gain a sense of the economic concerns of the prophets and of Jesus and the Gospels. In the explorations of key texts in the following chapters it will become clear that a distinctively covenantal concern for economic rights and mutually supportive and cooperative community runs strongly throughout the Pentateuch, the Prophets, the Gospels, and the Letters of Paul.

Procedure

I have attempted to sketch a broad overview both of how economics worked in the society reflected in biblical texts and of how those biblical

texts thought it ought to work—and their relationship. The critical historical analysis in the chapters on Hebrew biblical books depends heavily on the investigations by several key scholars and my own teaching of these materials for many years. For the analysis of the Gospels and Paul I depend heavily on my own research and reflection laid out in many articles and books.

No attempt will be made to apply the academic field of economics to biblical texts. Analysis in the field of economics has been developed to try to understand the working of a modern industrial economic system. Many of its basic assumptions and concepts would therefore be anachronistic with regard to the economic system presupposed or advocated in biblical texts that originated in the ancient world. Indeed, at many key points we will have to make a conscious effort not to impose concepts and generalizations about economics that we simply assume.

This book will be mainly an exercise in historical investigation of biblical texts, examining the relations between the physical environment (land and water), social structure, and culture (religious beliefs, laws, etc.). Often this will mean looking at what biblical texts say that social-economic relations ought to be (or ought not to be) and how that affected or did not affect economic behavior and development.

To take a modern example, a century ago now the German sociologist and economic historian Max Weber argued that “the Protestant ethic” was conducive to the development of capitalism. Calvinism taught that self-indulgent consumption of surplus resources was sinful. Faithful Calvinists saved some of their money rather than consume or spend it on immediate gratification. This led to the accumulation of capital, which in turn could be invested at interest, leading to a further accumulation of capital. Or, for a biblical example, covenantal law forbade the taking of interest on loans as a way of helping the family unit remain economically viable in hard times. But some disobeyed and did charge interest, which led to the concentration of their control of land and labor and the increase in their power and wealth.

Outline of the Book

A quick overview of the sequence of chapters and their argument may help orient the reader to the treatment of economic relations in biblical texts, which has been generally neglected in critical study of the Bible.

Israel, in the multilayered texts that it produced, sets itself off from the dominant ancient Near Eastern civilizations of Mesopotamia and Egypt.

The foundational narrative of Israel's formation as a people is the story of their exodus from hard bondage under the Egyptian Pharaoh. The obvious starting point in chapter 1, therefore, is to sketch the economic structure of those great imperial civilizations. Particularly important for their relevance to biblical economics will be to identify the features that are so oppressive as to lead the Hebrews to withdraw and the other features that carry over into Israel.

The books of the Pentateuch, or the Torah, combine the historical narrative of Israel's origins and its foundational laws. At the center of the Pentateuch/Torah, both substantively and as the organizing structure, is the Mosaic Covenant. From Exodus 19 through the rest of Exodus, all of Leviticus, and up to Numbers 10, Israel is encamped at Mount Sinai receiving the Covenant and covenantal law. The whole book of Deuteronomy is then a "second (covenantal) law" taught by Moses as the Israelites prepare to enter the land. As became quite clear a half-century ago, the Covenant has a constitutive structure of integral components that lay out basic principles for social-economic life. Chapter 2 explores the implication of the basic components of the covenantal structure and the economic principles that they articulate. The rest of the covenantal law-giving in the books of the Pentateuch elaborate on and apply those fundamental principles. Included are a number of mechanisms designed to make the basic guiding principles work. These are the focus of chapter 3.

The second division of the Hebrew Bible, the Prophets, includes both the historical narratives of the rise and actions of monarchs in Israel and collections of oracles delivered by prophets under the kings. The historical books include key passages that summarize and elaborate the political-economic structure of the monarchs, including how they replicate the structure of ancient Near Eastern empires. The earliest oracles of the classical prophets pronounce God's indictment and punishment of kings and their officers for violating the principles of the Covenant and the economic rights of the people. Chapters 4 and 5 examine these developments.

As background and context for examination of the economic concerns of Jesus and the movement that responded to his ministry, chapter 6 examines how Roman domination of Judea and Galilee complicated the economic structure. I focus particularly on how Roman rule brought additional pressure on the already difficult economic circumstances of the Galileans and Judeans.

That Jesus was every bit as concerned with economic issues as the Hebrew prophets has often gone unnoticed. The biblical tradition of

covenantal principles and mechanisms continued into the time of Jesus. This can be seen particularly in the covenant renewal and extensive covenantal teachings evident in some of the Dead Sea Scrolls. The renewal of the Mosaic Covenant was also central to Jesus' proclamation of the kingdom of God. This is most evident in the covenantal speech of Jesus that stands behind both the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew and the Sermon on the Plain in Luke. In this speech, to which I will devote most of chapter 7, Jesus pronounces a new declaration of deliverance ("blessed are you poor . . .") and then lays out renewed demands for covenantal mutual sharing and cooperation. The renewal of the Mosaic covenant also runs throughout the Gospel of Mark, particularly in a series of dialogues in Mark 10 focused mainly on covenantal economics, which will be explored in chapter 8.

In chapter 9 we look briefly at the economic concerns of Paul in the assemblies of Christ he was catalyzing among non-Judean people in Greek cities. Historically unprecedented was the collection that he was gathering for "the poor among the saints in Jerusalem," a unique experiment of "international" economic sharing among peoples subject to imperial rule.

Chapter 10 is devoted to how the Gospel of Matthew continues and further schematizes the economic teaching of Jesus, both the economic sharing and justice within the communities, and the condemnation of rulers for their economic exploitation of subject peoples, in new communities of Diaspora Judeans in Syria. This happens most clearly in the Sermon on the Mount, but also throughout the book.

The conclusion focuses on ways that covenantal principles and mechanisms that protect people's economic rights may be relevant to the very different economic situation today.

The first five chapters could be used independently from the chapters on the Gospels and Paul. Any one of these chapters could even be used separately, although it is difficult to understand the significance of the Covenant and its declaration of economic rights without a sense of the imperial economy of the ancient Near East. The chapters on Jesus' renewal of the covenant community, including covenantal economics, would be difficult to understand without previous acquaintance with both the Roman imperial economy and the original structure, principles, and protective mechanisms of the Mosaic Covenant laid out in chapters 2 and 3 and the prophetic protests of violation of people's economic rights in chapter 5.

A Note to Readers

I strongly encourage you to read the key passages in the Bible that are discussed in the chapters below—indeed to read them repeatedly as you reflect on the texts and their implications. (Often comparing different translations generates additional insights into the texts.) Only in some cases has it been economically feasible to reprint the key passages in these chapters. So have a Bible handy as you use this volume.

Part 1: Economic Justice and the Common Good

Chapter One

Serving the Sacred Forces of Imperial Civilization

The ancient Near East has often been called “the cradle of civilization.” High civilization emerged independently in a number of places, including China, India, and the Americas (among the Incas and Aztecs). Schooling in Western societies, however, has focused on the origin of civilization in the fertile river valleys of the Nile in Egypt and the Tigris and Euphrates in Mesopotamia. The abiding symbols of those civilizations are the great pyramids in Egypt and the massive stepped towers, called ziggurats, in Mesopotamia. We stand in awe of these grand structures, especially at how, long before the explosion of technology in the modern world, it would have been possible to erect monuments on such a huge scale.

What we do not necessarily learn in our “secular” education is that the high civilizations were sacred. They were all focused on the service of the sacred superhuman natural and civilizational forces that determined the people’s lives, forces that we usually refer to as “the gods.” The pyramids and ziggurats were sacred monuments, the tombs of the Pharaohs, who were the sacred CEOs of imperial Egypt, and the palaces of the divine cosmic-civilizational Forces of imperial Mesopotamia, respectively.

But precisely as religious monuments they are clues to the sacred *economic* structure of Egyptian and Mesopotamian civilizations. Lacking heavy construction equipment, the ancients had only their own muscle power and that of their donkeys and oxen. The construction of those huge pyramids and ziggurats would have required thousands and thousands of workers all toiling closely together in careful coordination. That work required captains and commanders whose authority the thousands of workers would have heeded and whose orders they would have obeyed. In addition to the pyramids and ziggurats, these ancient civilizations also

featured the palaces of kings, the mansions of the high-ranking officers, the pleasure gardens for these ruling elite (such as the hanging gardens in Babylon), and irrigation dikes and canals.

What is more, the tens of thousands of workers had to be fed. There were two possibilities. If the same gangs of thousands of laborers worked throughout the year on construction, then the “surplus” produce (in addition to the produce necessary to support the producers) of ten thousand farmers would have been needed to feed every thousand laborers. Or, if the constructional laborers worked in shifts while also still working the land during the crucial farming months, then ten months’ farming was required to support each month’s labor on the sacred monuments of civilization. In addition, of course, the sacred kings/CEOs and their officers, not to mention their military forces, had to be supported in the style to which they had become accustomed.

Given the limited productive capacity of ancient agriculture, the massive monuments of ancient civilizations thus required the labor of hundreds of thousands of farmers and laborers, mainly in the production of food. The high civilizations of the ancient Near East depended on an extensive agrarian economy. At the base of the economy of the great civilizations of antiquity was the agricultural and construction labor of the masses. At the top were the rulers and their supporting officials and military forces who organized and coordinated the people’s labor. Moreover, those at the top required the authority and power to persuade or coerce those at the base to obey their commands. Most of our sources pertain to the rulers and the religion that authorized their power. But the sources also allow us to deduce a few conclusions about the role of the producers who obeyed the commands of the rulers.

Study of economics in ancient Near Eastern societies tends to focus on the plethora of documents (such as records of tax collection) that have been unearthed in the last century or so. Little attention has been given to broad patterns of economic structure and relationships. Interpreters tend to apply concepts and categories derived from modern capitalist economics, such as “the market” and “private property.” But a market economy did not become dominant in any society until modern times. Trade was limited to the wealthy and powerful in the ancient Near East. To think in terms of “private property” and of a “public sector” and a “private sector” may simply prevent us from discerning the different overlapping and often competing claims on economic resources.

Most important is to keep constantly in mind that, in contrast to modern society, there was no separation between economics, politics, and

religion. In most cases there were no words and concepts for what we think of as particular functions or roles. Our textbooks may label Hammurabi as the Babylonian king or emperor. In Akkadian, however, he was called simply “Great One,” which we would have to translate with multiple overlapping terms: emperor of Babylon = high priest of Marduk, the chief sacred Power of Babylon = CEO of the Babylonian imperial economy. What scholars usually refer to as “temples” were literally the “houses” of particular gods where their chief servants offered sacrifices. But these “temples” were also the storehouses in which the tithes and offerings brought to the gods were kept. They were also the political center of the area that they controlled. The economy and politics were thus always sacred, done in service to the cosmic-civilizational Forces or Powers that determined the people’s lives.

The particular structure of economics in ancient Near Eastern societies varied according to topography, climate, and historical development. Thus any broad picture of the ancient Near Eastern economy will involve oversimplification. Nevertheless we can discern certain basic common structures that were shared in the ancient Egyptian and Mesopotamian empires and Canaanite city-states.

The “Great Ones”

The empires of the ancient Near East were built up like elaborate pyramids. The basic unit of production and consumption was the family. Smaller or larger numbers of families lived in villages, and numbers of villages supported temple towns and cities with taxes, tithes, and offerings. After the emergence of large cities, centered around the great temples of several Forces, in both Mesopotamia and Egypt, one city conquered the others and headed an imperial structure. In both Egypt and Mesopotamia these empires also included the great temples, their towns and lands. When another great city became dominant, the center of power changed, but not the fundamental structure of the empire and its economy. The conquered cities were subordinated to and paid tribute to the imperial city or court. But the imperial regime generally did not interfere much with the structure and operations of the subordinate cities and temples. They may have designated their high officers to be governors with oversight over certain cities or areas. But they left the basic local structure intact as the instrument by which they could both control the area and extract their revenues.

The most fundamental structure in the ancient Near East was a relatively simple one. Rulers in command of instruments of persuasion or

coercion demanded that producers who farmed the land (called “black-headed ones,” the term for ordinary humans) produce more than enough to feed themselves, which the rulers expropriated as taxes, tithes, and/or tribute. The rulers also demanded that producers spend a certain number of days or weeks working on their construction or other projects, some of which might be ostensibly also for their benefit. The “great one” of the temple should not be thought of as owning the land. The concept of (private) property does not appropriately describe the economic relationship of ruler and land. Nor can the producers/laborers be thought of as the rulers’ slaves. Everyone in a given society was understood as a “servant of the god(s)” and the farmers/laborers and officials alike were called the “servants” of the rulers as well. But the rulers did not own them. The rulers rather had a claim to a portion of the people’s produce and labor.

There were usually at least two layers of rulers, the local and the imperial. Both (or all) layers had claims on the produce and often the labor of the producers. Local kings levied taxes, temples expected tithes and offerings, and emperors demanded tribute. The imperial rulers usually had the local rulers collect their tribute. Also, since most revenues were extracted in produce—money had not yet been “invented”—and transportation over long distances was prohibitively expensive, imperial rulers did not have all tribute sent to the imperial capital. They rather used tribute to support their military forces in the local area and for local or regional projects.

Rulers provided support for their military forces and officials who carried out functions such as revenue collection in one or both of two ways. One was to give them rations from general tax revenues. This was the principal way of supporting the military forces, which consumed much or most of the revenues in subjected areas. To support high-ranking officers and collateral branches of the royal family, rulers often turned over to them the operation and revenues from estates of various sizes. Many of the latter involved one or more village communities of producers. These holdings were attached to the office, not property owned by the officials. If son succeeded father in the office, the estate could appear as hereditary, although a change of rulers often resulted in reassignment.

While the structure and relationship between rulers and their subjects sketched above continued as the base of the ancient Near Eastern economy, complications and variations had developed over a period of generations and centuries. As rulers and their officers also became creditors, they could extract produce as interest on loans in addition to taxes and tribute. When they came into greater control of the land of heavily

indebted producers, they became in effect absentee landlords who took much of the produce of the people who had become their tenants.

Some such arrangement probably explains the origin of two forms of enhanced control of both land and labor by the rulers and their officials. One was “royal land” and “royal peasants/people.” Both local kings and great emperors held estates, often large tracts of land worked by dependent farmers tied to the soil or tied to the monarchy. In some cases these were the result of a long process of making loans, charging steep interest, and eventually “foreclosure,” in which the land and even the farming families themselves came under the more complete control of the rulers. Some of the vast tracts of royal land and the workers on the land were royal projects to expand production onto new lands.

In the second form of control of land and labor, officials of local and imperial kings and of temples engaged in the same practices of making loans, charging interest, and foreclosing on debts, albeit on a lesser scale. In this way they brought land and peasant producers increasingly under their control. Royal or imperial officers thus ended up holding many small scattered plots (not continuous large tracts of land). They could thereby handsomely enhance their own wealth, prestige, and power in ways that made them semi-independent of the rulers. In effect these officials and their heirs became absentee landlords who lived in considerable wealth supplied by the rents paid by their tenants who worked the land that had come under their creditors’ control. It is worth reminding ourselves that documents mentioning what appears to us as sale of real estate or of persons and rental contracts were written for the elite, mainly high-ranking officials. Hence we should not imagine, on the basis of such documents, that large numbers of “citizens” of ancient Near Eastern cities owned “private property” that was commonly bought and sold or that the persons “sold” had become chattel slaves. The aim of the rulers and their officers alike was to control land and labor to enhance their income.

Since the economy was largely agricultural, the principal way for rulers to “grow” their economy was to conquer more territory, to subject additional cities and smaller kingdoms. Ancient rulers had no sense that wealth could be reinvested in order to enhance productivity. Instead wealth was simply accumulated and used in display, the more grandiose the better. Rulers constructed ever grander temples for the gods, palaces and tombs for themselves, even completely new capital cities for the greater glory of their reign. Palaces and temples were adorned with precious metals. In some cases silver and gold were simply stockpiled. Royal officials also had a passion for display, but on a less elaborate scale.

The elaborate lifestyle to which rulers and their officers became accustomed required support services. Here what might otherwise appear to modern Westerners as markets, merchants, and commerce fits into the economy. Trade was sponsored, although probably not completely controlled, by the rulers. The latter sent or contracted traders to acquire materials or fancy foods not locally available, such as timber or precious metals or gems, and provided them with the products or precious metals to trade for them. Such trade was a very limited part of the overall economy. Because it was important to the rulers, however, it might lead them to take measures to increase revenues, by raising taxes or expanding agricultural production or additional conquests.

Temples, royal courts, and wealthy and powerful elite also managed production of key crafts locally. For example, temples had their own craftspeople, supported by rations from general revenues. In other cases royal or imperial regimes, instead of maintaining substantial numbers of craftspeople or artisans on rations, obtained and allocated raw materials to craftspeople, and in effect contracted the supply of a quantity of finished product with a credit note worth a certain amount of supplies from royal storehouses. But since such production was managed by officers of the king, and not independent entrepreneurs, this was not yet “commerce” in the early modern sense.

The “Black-Headed Ones”

Economic support of rulers and their officers, the heads of the temples, and the supporting artisans and other servants in the cities required (at least) ten people farming for every person in the cities where the rulers and their supporting artisans and military officers lived. Families, the basic units of production, raised crops to feed themselves as well as to support their superiors with tithes and taxes. Larger or smaller groups of families lived clustered together in villages near the land they worked. Families, as well as village communities, were largely self-sufficient, crafting their own clothes and tools. While there was surely barter within the village community, there was little exchange with the outside world. Rulers interfered very little, except to demand their revenues.

In an agrarian society, of course, economic production depended on working the land. The most basic pattern of land tenure, on which several variations developed, was that families possessed hereditary rights to fields on which they raised a subsistence living for themselves as well as enough to meet their rulers’ demands for taxes, tithes, and tribute.

Despite these demands, a certain percentage of peasant families were able to persist on their ancestral lands. Their rights to their family inheritance were protected by time-honored customs that kings and temple officials were supposed to observe, and by restraints on the sale of ancestral land.

Observing the people's customary rights to the land was in the rulers' long-range interest as well, in order to keep their productive base viable on ancestral parcels of land to supply tax and tribute. The Code of Hammurabi, the "Great One" of Babylon, includes some laws that protected people's rights to their ancestral land. The appearance of similar laws in other ancient Near Eastern law codes suggests that these reflect what must have been similar customs in several societies that protected the viability of families on ancestral lands. Also in Mesopotamia over the centuries, often during the first year of their reign, kings issued edicts canceling debts and enslavement for debts so that debt-slaves could return to their lands. These edicts may well have provided propaganda to enhance a king's image at the outset of his reign. But they also attest the persistence of peasants working their ancestral lands.

The customs and "common law" designed to protect people's rights to their land, however, were not sufficient to prevent many from succumbing to rulers' pressures for taxes, tithes, and tribute. Bad weather or a damaged crop, particularly a drought, could spell disaster for producer families. Unable to feed themselves after the rulers had taken their share of the harvest, families had to borrow. After exhausting the tiny reserves of their generous neighbors, they were forced to borrow from the only people who had access to larger surpluses, the officers of the king or temple. Ever eager to take advantage of the misfortune of the poor, the officers charged high rates of interest, which only drove the needy families further into debt when they could not repay the loan plus interest at the next harvest. The result, over several years of inadequate harvests, was that their wealthy creditors seized their children to work off the debt. Many never recovered, as the wealthy creditors took over their lands for default on their debts. A certain percentage of producers thus became mere tenants or sharecroppers, perhaps on the land their ancestors had once possessed as family inheritance.

These poverty-stricken peasants who became debt-slaves or lost control of their land (which they sold for their debts) and their descendants must have provided the tenants or renters on the lands that royal officers acquired by "foreclosing" on indebted peasants. Such tenants were constrained to grow the crops that their "absentee landlords" required, such

as high-quality wines and oil and nicely fattened livestock, either for their own consumption or to trade for luxury products.

The tenants who worked on the royal lands generally had fewer rights and were far more dependent than peasants still working their families' ancestral lands. Many, perhaps most, were in effect sharecroppers or renters. Their continuation on the land was contingent on the favor of the king, or more likely some royal manager or official or relative of the king to whom the king had granted the revenues from the land. Their ancestors may well have fallen into debt-slavery. While they were by no means slaves, they could be exploited more heavily than regular peasants since they were direct tenants of the monarchy. Some royal peasants, however, appear to have had or gained rights on the land similar to those of traditional peasants. The land was transmitted by inheritance. And while the tenants could lease their land (which was also presumably still royal land) for debts, it was not alienable (i.e., they could not sell it permanently).

The peasants subordinate to the great temples and their priest-managers would presumably have stood in similar relation to their rulers. In earlier centuries they may have held hereditary rights to ancestral land, with a temple having a claim to a portion of their produce and labor. By becoming indebted to the priest-managers of the temple who had control of surplus resources, however, a large number of them had also become debt-slaves, lost control of their land, and become tenants or renters of the temple managers.

The general trend in ancient Near Eastern societies was for the peasant producers to lose their economic rights to land, as well as the fruits of their labor, to the wealthy and powerful. That kings, in their public propaganda, posed as the defenders of the poor peasants, "the widow and the orphan," suggests that the rulers at the very top recognized the problem. The periodic royal edicts of release of debts and debt-slaves and peasants' return to their land (land reform, in modern terms) indicates that they took concrete measures, however temporary and inadequate, to preserve their economic base. In the overall political-economic structure, the royal or temple officials' principal means of enhancing their own power and prestige was by heavier exploitation of "the black-headed ones" subject to their influence, bringing the latter more fully under their control. They had little or no incentive to protect the larger economic base. Peasant economic rights had a greater chance of being protected by rulers who exerted relatively greater vigilance and power over their officials.

Peasants, who constituted the economic base of temple and monarchy alike, were always vulnerable to the rulers' ambitions and special proj-

ects, whether wars of conquest or elaborate building projects. A military buildup or the construction of a new palace required both extra produce and higher demands for labor. In this connection we should also take into account the people's vulnerability to the periodic warfare by which empires waxed and waned. Empires expanded their economic base by conquest, leading to wars between empires. Warring armies devastated peasant villages in their advances and retreats, seizing the people's grain and livestock to feed themselves, or destroying crops to weaken the opposing rulers and armies. Only in times of a lull in warfare and especially in times of weak rulers could the peasants even begin to reclaim the land and regain some of their economic rights.

Religion

After this survey of the economy of ancient Near Eastern societies, the obvious question is why "the black-headed ones" would dutifully render up a sizable portion of their crops when it might leave them with less than enough to survive the year. Why would they join gangs of laborers to help build the palace or tomb of "the great one" who took away their produce so that he and his officers could live in luxury? How did the economic system work so that the vast majority of people living at mere subsistence worked so hard to support a tiny elite that lived in luxury? How could the rulers have channeled all that surplus wealth into decoration and display or mere stockpiles rather than invest it in the improvement of the economy or leave the poverty-stricken and often hungry and desperate producers with more of their harvests so that they might live more humanely?

Two dominating factors made the ancient Near Eastern economy work, despite its gross inequality and crass exploitation of the people. One factor was coercion. The rulers had military forces at their disposal. Imperial regimes looked upon failure to render up their tribute as tantamount to rebellion, and sent their armies on punitive expeditions. At the more local level, rulers and their officers had military or strong-arm gangs to "encourage" the peasants to pay their taxes and tithes. As to why many people did not simply flee their desperate circumstances, it would have been impossible for fugitives to survive in the expanse of desert waste beyond the fertile river valleys. Only in cities near hilly or mountainous country, for example, in Canaan or Syria, could peasants have survived after escaping from their village communities.

Equally or perhaps even more important as a motivating factor making the economic system work was the religious-cultural dimension. As

already noted, religion and political-economy were inseparable in the ancient Near East. We also noted that some of the principal economic concepts that we simply assume for modern capitalism are utterly inapplicable to the ancient Near East. Yet so far we have proceeded as if it were possible to analyze the economy in terms of political-economic structure and relations without including the religious factor. But we have now bumped up against the impossibility of explaining how the ancient Near Eastern economic system worked without considering the all-important religious aspect. To do this, however, we also need to reexamine our assumptions about religion and some of our basic religious concepts, such as God/the gods and the separation of religion from politics and economics.

The starting point is to note again that religion and political-economy were inseparable. The “houses of the gods,” which we call “temples,” were also centers of political-economic power. The figures that modern scholars usually label as chief priests were also the managers (CEOs) of the local economy and were the local political heads as well. Kings were sacred, declared at their coronation to be “the son of god.” Taxes were sacred obligations, and tithes were the economic revenues of the houses of the gods.

In order to understand ancient Near Eastern religion as it held together the imperial economic system, however, it is necessary to go a giant step further: to broaden our theology, our concept of God/gods. We usually think of God/gods not just as spiritual realities, but as transcendent above empirical phenomena, as supernatural. We commonly think of ancient Egyptian and Mesopotamian religions as polytheism, in contrast with the monotheism that emerged with the Israelites. But this is simply a pious platitude. It is not even clear that the ancient Near Easterners had a generic concept of the gods. It adds to the confusion not to translate the names of the gods in myths of origins and hymns. The names have meanings. The Akkadian names in the Mesopotamian myth of origin that begins with the words “When on high . . . ,” were Sea (*Tiamat*), River (*Apsu*), Sky (*Anu*) = Authority, Irrigation (*Ea*) = Wisdom, Storm (*Enlil*) = Kingship, and so on. These were the personified forces that determined the people’s lives. Most of them were natural forces. But some, such as Storm-Kingship and Irrigation-Wisdom, were (also) political and/or economic as well as natural. That is, not only were kings and tithes inseparably political-economic and religious, but the Forces that determined the life of society were also inseparably political-economic and religious—as well as, in most cases, natural-cosmic.

The forces, moreover, were Superhuman Persons who could provide or withhold fertility and productivity. In Mesopotamia, River when

benignly disposed could provide water to make the crops grow, but when angry might overflow his banks and destroy villages, cities, and crops. In Syria and Canaan, Lord Storm would send the rain that made for a good harvest, but might withhold the needed rain if angered. Yet, as noted, these forces were not simply natural or cosmic but also social-economic, as best illustrated by Irrigation-Wisdom, which was central to societal life in Mesopotamia. All ancient Near Eastern political-economic-cosmic systems depended on having an incomparably virile executive Force at their apex. In both Syria and Mesopotamia this was Storm-Kingship, who had sufficient forces of violence at his disposal to defeat the counterforces of chaos, thus maintaining cosmic order and its derivative, the sacred political-economic order. In Egypt the executive divine Force at the vortex of the cosmic and the political-economic was none other than Pharaoh.

The people were thus both grateful to the divine forces and extremely fearful of their potential anger and destructiveness. This is what made the economy work. The people did not just worship the Forces but *served* them with their produce and labor. The Forces in their proper balance or relationship, Storm and Sea in the Canaanite city-states or Storm, River, Irrigation, and so on, in Mesopotamia, generated the fertility and productivity from which the people lived. The people were therefore expected, in their gratitude, to bring a portion of their crops to the houses of the Forces as what they owed for their favor. Moreover, because the Forces were also awesomely fearful and easily angered, the people had to appease them with offerings.

The kings and priests were the regents of the divine forces and mediators between the Forces and the people. They received the tithes and offerings on behalf of the Forces. They thus had custody over and power to use the resulting resources for purposes that they determined. One such use was to support military forces, which gave them coercive power over the producers.

Rulers also used resources in impressive ceremonies that awed the people with the power of the divine forces. At the climax of the annual cycle of ceremonies in Babylon was the week-long New Year Festival that included the ritual drama of the origin of the divine Order of civilization imposed by Storm-King's violent victory over the threatening forces of chaos. Rituals reinforcing fear of the divine Forces may well have supported respect for the customs and laws protecting the inalienability of the people's ancestral land. In the hands of the rulers, however, the elaborate festivals and ceremonies became the media of mystification by which

the people's fear of the Forces was manipulated to motivate their obedient service in produce and labor.

In these and other religious rituals the kings and priests, as the official mediators with the divine Forces, also interpreted the Forces' will to the people. Their will might include the construction of new irrigation canals in order to ensure greater productivity. It certainly included the construction of the pyramids as the tombs of the divine pharaohs and the huge temple complexes, including the ziggurats in Mesopotamian cities, requiring gangs of laborers numbering in the thousands.

Biblical Stories of the Imperial Economy in Egypt

The ancient Israelites, whose historical experience is reflected in episodes of biblical books, knew about how the rulers of the ancient Near East commandeered the produce, land, and labor of their people. Two stories in particular give vivid pictures, the one of the Pharaoh's control of the agricultural base of the economy, and the other of the forced labor by which the regime managed its massive building projects. The latter brings us full circle to the starting point of this chapter.

Seven Fat Cows and Seven Lean Cows (Gen. 41; 47:13-26)

The narratives toward the end of the book of Genesis set the stage for the Hebrews' breakaway from the sacred political-economic system dominant in the ancient Near East. The ancestors Abraham and Sarah had left Mesopotamia in search of a new land and life in Canaan. In time of famine, however, the sons of Jacob/Israel had gone to Egypt in search of food. There the precocious eleventh son, Joseph, had found a low-level position in the regime of the Pharaoh, from which he was suddenly elevated when he interpreted Pharaoh's dream. Pharaoh had dreamed that seven sleek and fat cows came up out of the Nile. Then seven ugly and thin cows came up out of the Nile and ate up the seven sleek and fat cows (Gen. 41:1-4). None of the wise men at the Egyptian imperial court trained in the interpretation of dreams and omens could interpret Pharaoh's dreams. But the young Hebrew, a servant of the captain of the guard, explained that the dreams were about the future performance of the Egyptian economy. "There will come seven years of great plenty," followed by seven years of famine, "and the famine will consume the land." Therefore the imperial regime should stockpile one-fifth of the produce

of the land of Egypt during the seven plenteous years as a reserve against the seven years of famine (41:25–36). Pharaoh was so impressed with this interpretation that he appointed Joseph as “chief operating officer” of his regime to manage the collection and storage of the surplus (41:37–49).

So far this story illustrates how instrumental religion was in economic planning, in this case dreams that come from the gods and their interpretation. The story also illustrates how economic planning and organization were done from the top down. The imperial regime commanded the economy, ordering the people to render up one-fifth of their crops to be stockpiled under the control of the regime, ostensibly in the interests of the whole society.

But the story also shows how the regime took advantage of the situation to tighten its grip on producers and production. When the famine became severe and the people cried to Pharaoh for bread, Joseph, chief operating officer of the imperial regime, engaged in what we today would call systematic extortion. The people had rendered up increased taxes supposedly as insurance against the contingency of drought and famine. But when they cried out to Pharaoh for bread, Joseph demanded that they yield up all their donkeys, horses, and herds of sheep and goats in “exchange” (47:14–19). Pharaoh’s regime now controlled what had been the people’s livestock. When they again came desperate for grain so that they would not starve, they were forced to agree that they and their land would become servants of Pharaoh. The regime of Pharaoh thus took advantage of the people’s desperate circumstances, the threat of starvation, to make permanent its claim to one-fifth of the harvest (47:20–26).

This story thus gives a picture, writ large for the whole society, of the steps by which poor peasants, when hit by famine or other misfortune, fell into debt. Their debts mounted during continuing crises until eventually they were forced to “sell” their land and themselves in order to survive. As the ones who had control of the surpluses, moreover, the king or his officers were in position to take advantage of the people’s hunger. If crises continued through several bad harvests, the imperial regime and/or its officials could gain control of people’s land and even of their labor as debt-slaves.

Hard Bondage in Egypt (Exod. 1–2)

The implication of the very beginning of the book of Exodus is that the Hebrews, outsiders who had entered the country in time of famine,

initially had a special arrangement with the imperial regime in Egypt. Perhaps they had been settled along the frontier (as border guards?) and were not treated as ordinary peasants subject to forced labor. When “a new king arose over Egypt,” however, this changed. The new regime took measures to subject them to the same demands as those made on ordinary Egyptians. This seemed sharply oppressive to the Hebrews, as portrayed in the opening paragraph of Exodus:

They set taskmasters over them to oppress them with forced labor. They built supply cities, Pithom and Rameses, for Pharaoh. . . . The Egyptians . . . made their lives bitter with hard service in mortar and brick and in every kind of field labor. (Exod. 1:11–14)

The pharaoh not only expropriated one-fifth of the people’s crops but pressed them into forced labor to construct the storage depots and supply cities where the regime controlled the surplus. But it was precisely by means of forced labor that the pharaohs could also manage the construction of the massive pyramids as monuments to their glory as the heads of the great Egyptian civilization.

Serving the Forces and Serving the Rulers

In the ancient Near Eastern empires from which Israel made its departure, rulers demanded and expropriated a portion of the people’s crops. In response to the demands of their rulers, the people were compelled to produce enough to meet those demands as well as to support themselves and to supply labor for the construction of the monuments of civilization.

The rulers’ control and management of the resulting revenues gave them power over the producers. This can be seen most clearly in the military. Rulers’ expropriation of a portion of every producer’s crops gave them control of resources from which they could support professional military forces that gave them coercive power over the producers.

The rulers’ power over the people also worked in two other ways. Most important for the whole political-economic system was their maintenance of the religion that motivated the people to render up their produce and labor. It was essential to induce and reinforce the people’s belief in and deep fear of the cosmic-civilizational Forces that determined their lives. These Forces provided the fertility and productivity that enabled people to survive and supported the superstructure of civilization. But they could also withhold productivity and destroy houses, crops, and, much worse, the irrigation dikes, terraces, and storehouses on which their complex

social-economic life depended. As the mediators between the people and the Forces, the rulers, who also feared the Forces, managed the media of mystification that maintained the belief in and fear of the Forces.

While it may seem ironic to us, with our critical distance, a key aspect of this sacred economic system was that the Forces that the people feared and appeased with their tithes and offerings were in large part the products of the people's labor and produce. Perhaps the best illustration of this is the Force called Irrigation-Wisdom in Mesopotamia. Irrigation as a system of dikes and canals was obviously designed and constructed by the people over several generations. Irrigation, with its clear connotations of wisdom/design/science, became one of the major Forces on which the production and reproduction of society and civilization in Mesopotamia depended, hence important for the people to serve with further labor and produce. Perhaps less obvious to us, Storm-Kingship (or Marduk in the Babylon of Hammurabi) was also the product largely of the people's labor and produce. That is, the imperial monarchy was utterly dependent on the produce of the people to support the military by which it conquered and maintained the empire and on the labor of the people for the construction of the monuments by which it maintained the earthly rule corresponding to the rule of the cosmos by Storm-Kingship.

Finally, the rulers and their officials also used the power they held to control the people's produce and thus augmented their power by taking advantage of the people's economic poverty and vulnerability. According to sacred custom and religiously reinforced "common law," the people supposedly had certain ancestral rights to land. Presumably partly to keep their economic base viable, some rulers did take measures to enforce those rights. But the persistent pattern was that both rulers and their officials who had control of grain and other staples in official storehouses made loans at high rates of interest to desperate peasants, who fell seriously into debt. Their creditors could exploit their indebtedness to take control of their lands and often their labor, reducing them to tenants. All people were servants of the divine cosmic-civilizational Forces and, in effect, of their rulers as well, who were the regents of the forces. But a substantial percentage of the people were reduced to being the servants of the rulers and their officials in a more complete way.

This was the service of the divine Forces and the rulers from which the Hebrews withdrew to begin an experiment with an alternative society in which the people no longer bowed down and served the Forces of civilization, but served a transcendent Force of freedom, who insisted upon justice in relations with other people, not hard labor.

Study Questions

1. School textbooks and museum displays tend to glamorize the “wonders” of ancient civilizations. How glamorous were those “wonders” for the ordinary people?
2. How did the wealthy and powerful (rulers and their officers) gradually increase their control over the people’s land and labor? That is, how did they turn the produce of people’s labor into power over the people?
3. How did fear and service of the divine Powers lead to the people’s loss of control over their land and labor (the basis of their livelihood)?
4. Did the people have any ways to defend their right to the basis of their livelihood?
5. Is the story of Joseph and the seven fat cows and seven lean cows included in the book of Genesis to glamorize Joseph, or for some other purpose?