

Editorial

Gordon Zerbe

*“Love the LORD your God . . . with all your strength.”
(Deut. 6:5)*

Taking “strength” in Deuteronomy 6:5 to denote property, productive and financial assets—an interpretation Jesus agreed with (see Mark 12:28–44)—the Essene voluntary renewal movement required all who covenanted with the community to present a full financial disclosure of assets. The community imposed serious penalties for lying in matters of wealth, and members made vows never to obtain wealth unjustly and to take special care of the neighbor, especially those who were oppressed, poor, or migrants. Displaying many similarities to the picture of the earliest assemblies of Jesus loyalists in Jerusalem (Acts 2–6), some Essene

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communities took this understanding to involve a commitment to full economic community and the renunciation of private property, while other streams of Essenes required members in their various livelihoods to contribute around 10 percent of their income to a common pool to sustain a system of mutual aid and assistance to people in need in their region.

Drawing on a shared scriptural heritage, New Testament writings and Essene writings, now recovered as the Dead Sea Scrolls,

display a marked interest in what we would call economics, including systemic economic analysis but also directives for communal, interpersonal, and personal conduct in the realm of economics. Like the Gospels, the Scrolls include warnings about the seductive power of Mammon, denunciations of the ruling class of Judea for their oppression of or insensitivity toward the poor,

pronouncements on the literal applicability of sabbath-year and jubilee-year legislation, and affirmations of the virtues of renouncing any personal striving for wealth.¹

When the apostle Paul presented his gospel to the apostolic “pillars” in Jerusalem, and solidified a formal partnership with them, he claims that the only particular stipulation they laid on him was that he take seriously the economic aspects of Jesus’s teaching—that he “remember the poor”—something he claimed he was already eagerly committed to doing (Gal. 2:9–10). Paul’s own letters show a remarkable interest in economic relationships, in particular toward forms of local and global mutualism under

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the framework of partnership (without a hierarchy of donors and clients) and equality, where ultimately no one has either excess or lack, replicating the manna economy of the wilderness. Mutual aid appropriate to a partnership, says Paul, is an obligation in obedience to the gospel, but still somehow voluntary as a display of love.²

Ancient writers, biblical and extrabiblical, did not conceptualize economics as a distinct and separate domain of life. Rather, what we call economics (pertaining to various relationships of production, exchange, and consumption) was embedded in the varied relationships and traditions of local communities, of kinship, and of politics. Ancient economic realities (relationships and structures) and concepts were so different from those of the modern capitalist world that the particular relevance or application of many biblical perspectives or directives at times seems elusive. For instance, we live in a world in which most of our economic relationships are completely abstract, monetized, and impersonal (“the market”). What the Bible invites us to recover is the concrete, personal dimensions of economic relationships (pertaining to our neighbors near and far): our relationships to the means of production, to modes of exchange and distribution, and to the dynamics of consumption.

This issue of *Vision* is designed as a sampler on economics in quite general terms, engaging different topics and various parts of

our scriptures, from differing perspectives and in varied contexts. In assembling them here, I hope that these diverse contributions

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will provide inspiration for continued wrestling with the economic dimensions of the gospel, working out what it means to love God with our strength, using the various aspects of our assets.

Notes

¹ See further my “Economic Justice and Non-retaliation in the Dead Sea Scrolls: Implications for New Testament Interpretation,” in *Jesus and the Origins of Christianity*, vol. 3 of *The Bible and the Dead Sea Scrolls*, ed. James H. Charlesworth (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2006), 319–55.

² See further my “‘Partnership’ and ‘Equality’: Paul’s Economic Theory,” in *Citizenship: Paul on Peace and Politics* (Winnipeg: CMU Press, 2012), 75–92.

About the editor

Gordon Zerbe is professor of New Testament at Canadian Mennonite University, Winnipeg, Manitoba. He has been teaching an undergraduate course on “New Testament Economics” for the last fifteen years, bringing students majoring in business, international development, theology, and other fields into animated and productive conversation.