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Reflections on Wealth and Poverty in the Hebrew Bible and Today**

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# “The Might of My Own Hand Has Gotten Me This Wealth”: Reflections on Wealth and Poverty in the Hebrew Bible and Today

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## Abstract

The growing gap between the wealthiest and poorest members of society is a pressing social concern regularly invoked in discussions surrounding taxation, the minimum wage, and the social safety net. Advocates of particular positions at times reference various biblical passages. This essay examines several relevant themes and passages within the Hebrew Bible in order to explore ways the Bible might be brought into productive conversation with these contemporary issues.

## Keywords

Deuteronomy, Book of; Hebrew Bible; Poverty; Proverbs, Book of; Taxes; Wealth

Currently in America as elsewhere in the Western world, quite a few academics and many politicians, business owners, employees, and citizens are engaged in debates about the growing gap between the rich and poor and questions of societal equity. One only needs to look at the coverage surrounding the recent federal tax overhaul passed along Republican party lines in late December 2017, the attempt to repeal the Affordable Care Act (“Obamacare”), and the difficulty of getting the Children’s Health Insurance Program (CHIP) funded to see the fault lines in these debates.

While Western economies are radically different than those of the various ancient periods during which the Hebrew Bible was produced, it is less certain that the moral landscape is so different as to make the Bible irrelevant to such discussions. In this essay, I contend that various biblical insights concerning wealth and poverty not only are echoed today (sometimes in distorted ways), but also that the Hebrew Bible still can usefully illuminate and at times inform contemporary debates on such matters.

One of the flashpoints in the debates over wealth and poverty in the United States today can be seen with great clarity in the rhetoric surrounding the 2012 presidential campaign. The Tuesday

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theme of the 2012 Republican convention (August 28, 2012) was “We Built It.” The choice of this theme appears to have been a reaction to a speech that then President Obama had delivered on July 13, 2012 in which he drove home a point by stating: “if you’ve got a business—you didn’t build that.”<sup>1</sup> Obama employed this (in my view poorly chosen) phrasing to articulate the idea that public infrastructure supports wealth creation in the United States. The differences in the rhetoric utilized by liberals or conservatives when speaking about wealth creation and poverty often revolve around where one strikes the balance between personal initiative/personal responsibility and recognizing the unmerited gifts that may undergird any individual’s ability to create wealth and thrive in our society. These discussions at times echo those surrounding works versus grace, and anyone familiar with the Jewish and Christian Bibles and Western history knows that the balance between divine and human initiative have often been among the most central and contested areas of religious discourse in the West from the biblical period to today.

### **Is Wealth Earned or Gifted?**

Interestingly enough, the book of Deuteronomy describes the wealth that the people of Israel will attain within the land they are about to inhabit both as something they will be gifted and as something that they will work hard to obtain. Notice the contrast in the language of the following two excerpts from early chapters in Deuteronomy:

When the LORD your God has brought you into the land that he swore to your ancestors, to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob, to give you, a land with fine, large cities that you did not build, houses filled with all sorts of goods that you did not fill, hewn cisterns that you did not hew, vineyards and olive groves that you did not plant, and when you have eaten your fill, take care that you do not forget the LORD, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery. (Deut 6:10–12)

When you have eaten your fill and have built fine houses and live in them, and when your herds and flocks have multiplied, and your silver and gold is multiplied, and all that you have is multiplied, then do not exalt yourself, forgetting the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery . . . Do not say to yourself, “My power and the might of my own hand have gotten me this wealth.” . . . But remember the LORD your God, for it is he who gives you power to get wealth, so that he may confirm his covenant that he swore to your ancestors, as he is doing today. (Deut 8:12–14, 17–18)

The first passage, from Deuteronomy 6, attributes Israelite prosperity solely to God’s gracious gift of the land to Israel and God’s displacement of the previous inhabitants rather than to any ingenuity or effort by the Israelites. In contrast, while still putting fairly heavy emphasis on God’s graciousness toward Israel, Deuteronomy 8 openly acknowledges that hard work may indeed play a major role in Israel’s eventual attainment of wealth and prosperity once they settle in the land. Yet at the same time Deuteronomy 8 highlights that the ability of individual Israelites to gain wealth still flows from God’s granting the Israelites both the ideal physical circumstances in the land as well as endowing the Israelites with the ability to become prosperous. So even here, where greater human initiative is granted, a divine gift still undergirds this human initiative.

An important nuance found in both passages is that regardless of how one accounts for Israel’s wealth in the land, God’s gift of this wealth-producing land carries within it potential dangers. The accumulation of wealth is quite often accompanied by a (false) sense of security that grows

1 The video can be seen at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YKjPI6no5ng> For a contextual analysis see: <http://www.factcheck.org/2012/07/you-didnt-build-that-uncut-and-unedited/>

out of and also reinforces the notion that one's destiny was self-made, which in turn obscures the recognition of one's dependence on God and hence one's responsibility toward those who might be less fortunate.<sup>2</sup> In a sense, the lesson that Deuteronomy is trying to instill in the reader is a lesson adumbrated as early as the Eden story in Genesis 2–3. God wants humans to enjoy a blessed and bountiful life, and so God places the human couple in Eden, setting only a single constraint upon them. Yet, they soon violate the only explicit command that God asked them to observe, and in turn they are driven from their blessed existence. The Eden passage is closer to the situation described in Deuteronomy 6, where Israel's wealth and security is gifted to them by God whole-cloth, rather than the portrait drawn in Deuteronomy 8, where human initiative is given its due. Yet Deuteronomy 6, 8, and Genesis 2–3 all recognize the following points: (1) God wants humans to enjoy blessing and abundance; (2) God's gift of an abundant life seems to enhance the likelihood that humans might forget about and thus eventually rebel against the very source of all their blessings.

Deuteronomy 8 may be the text that most deeply probes the root causes behind this odd state of affairs in which God's sharing of gracious abundance creates temptations that frequently lead to one's destruction and exile from the Eden-like circumstances one was gifted by God. This can be seen when one widens the lens and notices that much of Deuteronomy 8 is a reminder of the long wilderness journey that the Israelites experienced. Deut 8:1–10 is set in the wilderness and invokes a fairly positive remembrance of the long sojourn there. Unlike Numbers 13–14, which characterizes the forty-year wilderness wanderings as a punishment for listening to the ten spies who brought back a negative appraisal of the land and Israel's ability to conquer its inhabitants, Deuteronomy 8 describes this as a period during which God tested and taught Israel. This text suggests that one of the prime lessons God imparted to Israel during the wilderness era is that human existence is utterly dependent on God's graciousness. Israel's dependence on God was perhaps more readily obvious in the wilderness, where God actively led Israel, protected them from many dangers, and fed God's people with manna from heaven and water flowing from a flinty rock (see Deut 8:3, 15–16). But once Israel was secure in the land, God's daily activities of sustenance were in the background and less easily noticed than in the wilderness period. As Deuteronomy 8 notes, God's gift of strength to the Israelites to enable them to build wealth can create the mistaken impression that they are a self-made people.

One can see just how insulating wealth can become by turning to some of the curse language found later in Deuteronomy, where even "the most refined and gentle" of people will begrudge food to their family members (Deut 28:54–57). The highly disturbing images in this passage of greedily eating one's own children or one's afterbirth are so shocking that the reader may miss the author's attempt to show that even the wealthiest people, who quite understandably might assume that their wealth and status provide them with complete security and insulate them from life's shocks, can quickly fall from a pampered existence into a state of utter degradation. The woman described in Deut 28:56–57 appears to be so wealthy as to be carried around in a palanquin so that her feet never touch the ground. One cannot help notice resemblances to the super wealthy today who often utilize VIP entrances and occupy hotel floors and gated communities not open to the general public and whose feet in some sense do not touch the same ground as the rest of us. But to be clear, Deuteronomy recognizes the problem of wealth as not just a danger to the super rich, but to anyone because of the way wealth

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2 For an interesting discussion of Deuteronomy 8 in relation to social scientific theories suggesting that wealthier and more secure people tend to become more secular, see Zoltán Schwáb, "Faith and Existential Security: Making Deuteronomy 8 Respond to a Current Sociological Theory," *JTS* 68 (2017): 530–50.

can create the illusion of security, resulting in the failure to acknowledge one's utter dependence on God's continual graciousness that enabled the person to become wealthy in the first place.

Unsurprisingly, the Bible's outlook on wealth accumulation does not perfectly match up with the rhetoric on either side of the political spectrum today. The passages discussed above suggest that people who endorse the notion that "We Built It" are dangerously close to the types of hubris and idolatry that Deuteronomy warns against. In fairness, what the Republican party objects to most vociferously is the notion that government initiatives are better at creating jobs and wealth than the private sector. In fact, the Bible does suggest that individuals and communities do build wealth through hard work. Yet the biblical text stresses that the ability to do so still stems from God's grace. Thus, the Democratic impulse to suggest that one owes one's wealth to outside forces in some ways echoes the viewpoint found in these biblical passages. However, Democrats are not pointing to dependence on God. Rather, those on the left highlight our dependence on and hence our need to enhance the funding of broader social supports.<sup>3</sup>

There are yet other issues related to questions of wealth and poverty both today and in the biblical period that the Hebrew Bible addresses. Two that immediately come to mind are: (1) the social responsibility of the wealthy and of society as a whole to give generously to the poor and to seek to end poverty; and (2) in what ways might the poor be responsible for their own dire straits.

## **The Call to Alleviate Poverty**

Deuteronomy, as well as other books in the Hebrew Bible such as Proverbs and Psalms, are filled with calls to help the needy and socially marginalized. Deuteronomy regularly pairs the orphan and widow, at times adding resident aliens as well, and commands that they be cared for and not be preyed upon by those who are wealthier or in a less vulnerable position within society (Deut 10:18; 16:11, 14; 24:17, 19, 20, 21; 26:12–13; 27:19). Deuteronomy also pays great attention to the poor and needy (Deut 15:4, 7, 9, 11; 24:12, 14–15).

Deuteronomy probes the issue of societal poverty and the psychology of the wealthier classes in great depth. There is an apparent tension or possible contradiction in the chapter's discussion of poverty in Israelite society:

However, there will not be among you a needy-person, because the LORD is sure to bless you in the land that the LORD your God is giving you as a possession to occupy, if only you will obey the LORD your God by diligently observing this entire commandment that I command you today. (Deut 15:4–5)

Yet a mere two verses later the people are given guidelines for the proper treatment of the poor in Israelite society that opens with an almost exact verbal parallel to the first Hebrew words of verse 4, but here missing the negative phrase "will not be":

<sup>3</sup> In fairness, not all Republicans think of themselves as self-made. Notice the language Republican Senator Lindsey Graham evoked in his speech announcing his bid to run for the 2016 presidential nomination. "There are a lot of so-called 'self-made' people in this world. I'm not one of them. My family, friends, neighbors and my faith picked me up when I was down, believed in me when I had doubts. You made me the man I am today." <http://www.foxcarolina.com/story/29206820/read-sen-lindsey-grahams-full-speech-announcing-his-presidential-run>.

When there is among you a needy-person, a member of your community in any of your towns within the land that the LORD your God is giving you, do not be hard-hearted or tight-fisted toward your needy neighbor. (Deut 15:7)<sup>4</sup>

Further compounding this apparent tension is that a bit further on in Deuteronomy 15, in a verse alluded to by Jesus in the New Testament (Matt 26:11; Mark 14:7; John 12:8), Deut 15:11 declares: “Since there will never cease to be some in need on the earth, I therefore command you, ‘Open your hand to the poor and needy neighbor in your land.’” This seems to stand in rather stark contrast to Deut 15:4–5, where because of the LORD’s blessings, there will be no needy persons.

While these two passages seem to be in tension or contradiction, a closer look suggests that Deuteronomy 15 contains a coherent message. The chapter begins by presenting the ideal toward which the community should strive, then describes the state of Israelite society, and finally provides guidelines for how to move from the current reality toward the hoped-for-ideal. The fact that there is an eschatological dimension within this passage does not excuse one from striving to eliminate poverty in the present moment, but rather calls the community into action. It is essential to recognize and take account of the motivational thrust of much of the rhetoric within Deuteronomy.

Deuteronomy 15, in a highly realistic fashion, imagines a wealthy person’s mental calculations of potential loss if he were to lend money to a poor person, most especially if the request for financial assistance happened closer to the year of debt remission, which according to Deuteronomy is to occur every seventh year. In an interesting rhetorical maneuver, Deut 15:10 urges such a person: “Give liberally and be ungrudging when you do so, for on this account the LORD your God will bless you in all your work and in all that you undertake.” The passage challenges the lender’s short-term calculations of loss by highlighting that in the longer term any such shortfalls will be more than made up by God’s rewarding virtuous behavior as God promises to continue to bless the future ventures of the generous person so that he continues to prosper. And there is the additional motivation that if one has the means but is hard-hearted and fails to be generous “your neighbor might cry to the LORD against you, and you would incur guilt” (Deut 15:9b). In one sense, blessing begets blessing, and curse begets curse. In another sense, God’s blessing of the people of Israel can lead to a moral blindness and a loss of blessing/prosperity when one fails to understand the source of one’s wealth and the responsibilities one has toward others who are less fortunate.

Of course, applying a passage like Deuteronomy 15 to our vastly different contemporary economy and society is not a straightforward exercise. We do not have anything like the periodic debt remission imagined within Deuteronomy or in the Jubilee legislation in Leviticus 25 in the United States or in the West more generally today. Nevertheless, it appears this biblical legislation has influenced U.S. bankruptcy laws by allowing someone to discharge many forms of debt and by legislating that after seven years various missed payments are expunged from one’s credit record, and after ten years bankruptcy disappears off of one’s credit report. Yet contemporary bankruptcy laws carry much harsher terms than the laws of biblical debt release, because upon declaring bankruptcy, one must forfeit ownership of much personal property. There have been recent policy debates (and even some policies implemented) attempting to alleviate the crushing weight of certain types of housing debt as well as discussions about mitigating the heavy student loan debt carried by college and graduate students in America today. There have also been periodic calls for the wealthier nations in the world to reduce or write off the debts of poorer countries as a modern form

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4 In vv. 4 and 7 I have utilized Everett Fox’s translation (*The Five Books of Moses: The Schocken Bible*, Vol. 1 [New York: Random House, 2000]), as he captures the verbal similarity in the Hebrew phrasing.

of the Jubilee legislation.<sup>5</sup> However, all such proposals for giving relief to those in debt raise thorny questions: Was the initial debt caused by larger social inequities that should be rectified by our society? Or, have the debtors acted recklessly so that dissolving their debt encourages irresponsible financial behavior in the future? Would forgiving fiscal irresponsibility distort the market, hence creating what economists refer to as a “moral hazard”? This provides an apt segue to our next subject, the Bible’s understanding(s) of the roots of poverty.

## **Biblical Reflections on the Causes of Poverty**

Unsurprisingly, the Hebrew Bible contains a variety of views on the causes of poverty, and varying biblical perspectives are often echoed in contemporary debates on poverty. At times, biblical writers acknowledge that poverty can occur through little if any fault of one’s own. One only need think about the story of Elijah and the widow of Zarephath in 1 Kings 17 or the parallel Elisha story involving a widow in 2 Kings 4. The Elijah story in 1 Kings 17 opens with God’s proclamation that God was about to bring a drought, seemingly as a punishment for Israel’s wayward behavior. Although the woman in this story is not even an Israelite, her family is reduced to starvation. Similarly, the Elisha story in 2 Kings 4 implies that the widow is in financial distress because her husband, who we are told was a God-fearing man, has died, and the creditors are swooping in to indenture her two children. It seems probable that part of the message of both stories is that God, through the prophets, rescues these women and their families who through no fault of their own fell into destitution. The notion that the poor person may not be at fault for their situation is also supported by the fact that the poor in general are often associated with the righteous, as opposed to the wicked who frequently are cast as wealthy oppressors of the poor in many passages from Psalms, Proverbs, and the prophetic corpus (e.g., Psalm 10:2–11; Prov 28:6; Isa 3:14–15; Zeph 3:12).

It is possible that a medial position is found in the following passage from Qoh (Ecc) 5:13–17:

There is a grievous ill that I have seen under the sun: riches were kept by their owners to their hurt, and those riches were lost in a bad venture; though they are parents of children, they have nothing in their hands. As they came from their mother’s womb, so they shall go again, naked as they came; they shall take nothing for their toil, which they may carry away with their hands. This also is a grievous ill: just as they came, so shall they go; and what gain do they have from toiling for the wind? Besides, all their days they eat in darkness, in much vexation and sickness and resentment.

One could read this passage as suggesting that a wealthy person made a poor business decision, perhaps driven by greed, to become richer yet. However, it may be that Qoheleth (the author of Ecclesiastes) is simply pointing out how quickly and randomly one can go from being wealthy to becoming destitute, which exemplifies his theme that time and chance can affect one negatively in a seemingly arbitrary fashion (Qoh 9:11).

It is often argued that perhaps the most common biblical understanding of poverty is found in books like Proverbs, which many claim endorses the idea that the poor are responsible for their own predicament, either because they are lazy or foolish. One does not have to go far into the first collection of terse wisdom sayings that begins in Proverbs 10 to find evidence to support this contention: “A slack hand causes poverty, but the hand of the diligent makes rich” (Prov 10:4).

5 For an example, see <http://www.usccb.org/issues-and-action/human-life-and-dignity/debt-relief/jubilee-debt-forgiveness.cfm>.

Elaborations of this notion occur twice in Proverbs, once in ch. 6 and in its close analog Prov 24:30–34, cited here:

I passed by the field of one who was lazy, by the vineyard of a stupid person; and see, it was all overgrown with thorns; the ground was covered with nettles, and its stone wall was broken down. Then I saw and considered it; I looked and received instruction. A little sleep, a little slumber, a little folding of the hands to rest, and poverty will come upon you like a robber, and want, like an armed warrior.

The likely rhetorical function of sayings like these is to shape the work ethic of young men in order to motivate them so that they might act in an ethical fashion, avoid engaging in dangerous behaviors, and thus excel in life. As H. G. M. Williamson notes, the two sayings immediately preceding Prov 10:4 warn that ill-gotten gains are fleeting (v. 2) and that God does not let the righteous go hungry (v. 3), both implicit acknowledgements that a righteous person can be poor and a wicked person rich, at least for a time.<sup>6</sup> I would add that Prov 10:5 contrasts the two types of sons, the wise one who is busy making hay while the sun shines as opposed to the shameful one who slumbers during the harvest season, further supporting the contention that these types of sayings are less about describing exactly how reality plays out and more about motivating one's child.

As mentioned, a close analogue occurs in Prov 6:6–11, here embedded within the lengthy discourses framed as parental advice on how to succeed in life and how to avoid calamity that occupy much of Proverbs 1–9. Williamson's balanced assessment of proverbial advice like that found in 6:6–11 is on target: "On the other hand, ...it is never said that poverty is always the immediate fault of the poor..., so that those scholars who have claimed that Proverbs is uniformly critical of the poor are mistaken. Folly, wickedness, excessive pleasure seeking, and the like may reduce a wealthy person to poverty, but by no means are all the poor in that situation for those reasons alone. Some just are members of the poorer classes."<sup>7</sup> Today, we employ analogous proverbs in analogous ways. When a parent tells their child "an early bird gets the worm," they normally are not implying that the poor folks down the street must be lazy. Rather, the proverb is deployed to motivate one's child to be industrious.

Turning back to Proverbs, I would go one step further than Williamson and argue that in fact the poor are at times praised in Proverbs for choosing poverty over the unrighteous accumulation of wealth. In fact, several proverbs laud those poor people who were willing to forgo illicit profits that other people might gain through sinful behavior: "Better to be poor and walk in integrity than to be crooked in one's ways even though rich" (Prov 28:6).<sup>8</sup>

Furthermore, time and again within Proverbs the speaker urges his audience to be generous to the poor and not to mistreat them. To give two quick examples: "Those who despise their neighbors are sinners, but happy are those who are kind to the poor" (14:21), and "Those who oppress the poor insult their Maker, but those who are kind to the needy honor him [i.e., God]" (14:31). These passages from Proverbs, along with Deuteronomy 15 (explored above) indicate that many biblical texts recognize that poverty often is not caused by some moral defect in the poor person. In fact,

6 H. G. M. Williamson, "A Christian View of Wealth and Possessions: An Old Testament Perspective" *Ex Auditu*, 27 (2011): 1–19 (11).

7 Williamson, "A Christian View of Wealth," 12.

8 For a thoughtful meditation on the complex views concerning wealth and poverty in Proverbs and applications to our contemporary situation, see Timothy J. Sandoval, *Money and the Way of Wisdom: Insights from the Book of Proverbs* (Woodstock, VT: Skylight Paths, 2008). This draws from his more technical study, *The Discourse of Wealth and Poverty in the Book of Proverbs* (Leiden: Brill, 2006).



the Hebrew Bible frequently commands kindness and generosity toward the poor with no qualifications given concerning the possible root causes of their poverty.

It is only within the book of Sirach (one of the books of the Apocrypha), written around 180 BCE, that we find an author (Ben Sira) who implies that some people are poor because they are suffering divine punishment.<sup>9</sup> Here the audience is urged to distinguish between the righteous poor (whom one should indeed help) and the sinning poor, whom one should let suffer, both so God can properly punish them and to avoid the possibility of such a person paying you back with evil.

Give to the devout, but do not help the sinner. Do good to the humble, but do not give to the ungodly; hold back their bread, and do not give it to them, for by means of it they might subdue you; then you will receive twice as much evil for all the good you have done to them. For the Most High also hates sinners and will inflict punishment on the ungodly. Give to the one who is good, but do not help the sinner (Sir 12:4–7).

This Sirach text may come closest to certain contemporary views surrounding poverty that one hears in America and other modern Western nations. Ben Sira recognizes that one can fall into poverty due to happenstance, but also suggests that some forms of poverty are due to personal moral failings or comeuppance for moral failures.

As in this Sirach passage, today it is common to hear that those who fell into poverty due to no fault of their own deserve to be helped out by those with greater means or by government social programs until they can get back on their own two financial feet again. On the other hand, others are categorized as sinful/lazy poor people who are “working the system” and do not deserve any help. Note the language used in a recent debate about renewing funding for the Children’s Health Insurance Program (CHIP) in which Senator Orrin Hatch, while sparring with Senator Sherrod Brown, said the following:

I happen to think CHIP has done a terrific job for people who really needed the help. . . . I believe in helping those who cannot help themselves but would if they could. I have a rough time wanting to spend billions and billions and trillions of dollars to help people who won’t help themselves, won’t lift a finger and expect the federal government to do everything.<sup>10</sup>

In fairness to Sen. Hatch, he concluded this comment by stating: “We’re going to get CHIP through” and this did eventually happen.<sup>11</sup> But he also made clear that he thinks there are many undeserving poor who should not be bailed out by the government.

In a similar vein Sirach is emphatic in urging his readers to help the deserving poor through almsgiving or to help a neighbor through loaning them money in a judicious fashion. While he uses the language of “losing your silver for the sake of a brother or a friend” (Sir 29:10), he goes on to suggest it is not really a loss but actually a transfer payment to a heavenly bank account that one can draw on when unforeseen disaster strikes (Sir 29:11–13). This language, which in some sense builds on the insight of Deuteronomy 15 that generosity toward others will be paid back with interest by God, is picked up and then expanded upon in New Testament texts such as “Do not store up

9 For a nuanced survey of the ethics surrounding wealth and poverty in a wide array of ancient Jewish wisdom texts, see Samuel L. Adams, *Social and Economic Life in Second Temple Judea* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2014), especially 183–205.

10 For the context of this comment made on Nov. 30, 2017 see <http://www.politifact.com/truth-o-meter/article/2017/dec/05/context-orrin-hatchs-comments-about-chip-people-wh/>.

11 CHIP was renewed in early 2018 for six years as part of the deal to end a brief government shutdown.

treasures for yourselves on earth...but store up ...treasures in heaven..." (Matt 6:19–20) and "Sell your possessions and give alms. Make purses for yourselves that do not wear out, an unfailing treasure in heaven" (Luke 12:33–34).

Of course, many Republicans would argue that they are not opposed to charity. Rather, they oppose funding government programs that they believe are ineffective. Truthfully, at times one does not always know the exact consequences of various policy changes. For example, even while the recent tax overhaul may put more money into the pockets of many U.S. tax payers through 2025, in turn freeing up funds for individuals to donate more, it may remove incentives for charitable giving. As fewer taxpayers itemize deductions, fewer will be able to claim a charitable contributions deduction. My point, which I will unpack in the final section of this essay, is that we should be having more conversations about how various policies might square with our ethical and scriptural commitments.

## Applying the Bible to the Contemporary Situation

When considering biblical texts, we need to be aware of the vast differences between ancient and modern socio-economic contexts. Today in the United States, much of the discourse about supporting the poor is framed in terms of state-sponsored benefits such as unemployment payments, Medicaid, and food stamps, now called SNAP (Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program), while in the Hebrew Bible, almost all efforts at poverty alleviation involved wealthier Israelite families helping needy Israelites and resident aliens in their vicinity. Economically, the differences are vast. We live in a highly industrialized, globally intertwined economy, as opposed to local agriculturally oriented economies that permitted debt slavery. This has led some scholars to sideline the Bible by arguing that it really cannot contribute much if anything to the contemporary debates on wealth and poverty and questions of economic equity:

The authors of the Bible would not know about problems that occur in modern life: global markets threatening jobs; cheaper labor in a third-world country, resulting in factory closures in a U.S. city; factory automation, eliminating the need for human employees; and unemployment in an urban setting with 60,000 people competing for a limited number of jobs. These problems are not answered by scripture sound bites, but by careful analyses, nuanced arguments, and the construction of wise, just policy.<sup>12</sup>

In addition, it is important to point out that most Jews and Christians who believe that the Bible contains divine imperatives for how to treat the poor and how to alleviate poverty rarely apply biblical passages directly to contemporary social problems, even if such texts often shape their ethical stance. Also, neither Jews nor Christians read the Bible in an unmediated fashion. Judaism interprets the Hebrew Bible through the vast corpus of rabbinic law and lore found in midrash,

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12 Rodney Werline, "Work, Poverty, and Welfare," *The Bible in Political Debate: What Does it Really Say?* ed. Frances Flannery and Rodney Werline (London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2016), 75–86 (85–86). To be fair to Werline, his essay begins with (and thus is critiquing) an exchange of decontextualized scriptural soundbites between Congressman Juan Vargas (D-California) who quoted Jesus's words drawn from Matt 25:31–46 ("I was hungry and you gave me food...") to oppose cuts in the food assistance budget and Congressman Steven Fincher (R-Tennessee) who responded by citing Matt 26:11 ("You always have the poor with you") and 2 Thess 3:10 ("Anyone unwilling to work should not eat"). Still, the thrust of Werline's argument presumes that because the ancient contexts of these verses is so different than today's context, all such uses of Scripture are irrelevant to the debate today.

Mishnah, and Talmud.<sup>13</sup> Since Christians tend to lay great importance on Jesus's own words and deeds, they interpret stories, laws and proverbial wisdom concerning wealth and poverty found in the Hebrew Bible through the New Testament and through subsequent post-biblical Christian theological and ethical thought.<sup>14</sup>

As much as one needs to be mindful of the above-mentioned caveats, at times we are in danger of missing ways in which today's socio-economic situation eerily resembles that found in various biblical periods, and thus we may fail to see how the Bible could speak to contemporary issues. For example, most Americans today believe we have no societally sanctioned slavery in the United States. Yet such a stance fails to recognize that families holding debt that they are never able to pay off fully are in effect in a form of debt slavery not so different from the situation described in biblical legislation.<sup>15</sup> Thus, certain biblical texts might shed more light on a given contemporary issue than many imagine. Furthermore, if one hopes to solve major social problems, one must engage people in holistic ways that resonate with their deepest commitments. For communities of faith, this means bringing the wellsprings of their religious traditions to bear on difficult societal issues so as to help one's community see that these are not just secular political debates. Rather, these policy decisions are linked to larger moral and religious issues about which their religious traditions have much to say.

To demonstrate how the Bible might be brought into the contemporary conversation surrounding wealth and poverty, I will briefly recount one possible model for how such an approach could work. In the not too distant past, Susan Pace Hamill did a thorough study of Alabama's tax code, developing criteria to measure its consonance with or dissonance from what she labels Judeo-Christian ethical values surrounding the treatment of the poor as expressed within the Hebrew Bible in particular, a corpus revered as sacred Scripture by both Jews and Christians. She noted that the New Testament reaffirms the Hebrew Bible's concerns for the proper treatment of the poor even as it amplifies them.<sup>16</sup>

Hamill's findings that the Alabama tax code at that time was immoral from a biblical perspective influenced then Governor Bob Riley to put an amendment on the Alabama ballot for voter approval in 2003. This initiative sought to make the Alabama tax code fairer and less oppressive toward poorer Alabamians and to raise much needed revenue to fund public education, which in turn would create greater social mobility for those with fewer economic means.<sup>17</sup> This measure was

13 For example, Gregg Gardner, *The Origins of Organized Charity in Rabbinic Judaism* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015) demonstrates how the ancient rabbis developed specific communal institutions to help alleviate various types of poverty.

14 For a provocative study of how Christian views of charity grew out of ancient Jewish antecedents, see Gary A. Anderson, *Charity: The Place of the Poor in the Biblical Tradition* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013). To see just how infrequently New Testament texts on poverty are directly applied to the contemporary situation, see Sondra Ely Wheeler, *Wealth as Peril and Obligation: The New Testament on Possessions* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995). Wheeler makes a compelling case that the New Testament's fairly radical ideas on wealth and poverty transcend their ancient contexts and thus need to be taken more seriously by contemporary Christian communities.

15 According to one report, in 2016 the average American family that carried credit card debt owed \$16,883. <https://www.nerdwallet.com/blog/average-credit-card-debt-household/>.

16 Her fuller argumentation, along with a host of graphs and charts, can be found in Susan Pace Hamill, "An Argument for Tax Reform Based on Judeo-Christian Ethics," *Alabama Law Review* 54 (2002): 1–112.

17 For an overview of her study and the way the politics played out, see Susan Pace Hamill, "Tax Policy as a Moral Issue under Judeo-Christian Ethics," Swig Lecture 2004, University of San Francisco. This lecture can be found at: <https://www.law.ua.edu/misc/hamill/Swig.2.pdf>

voted down and caused the governor who proposed it some political troubles that he ultimately weathered. Even so, it is unlikely this initiative would ever have gotten as far as it did if it were simply pitched as a secular tax hike aimed at redistributing money from the wealthy to the poor. The failure to achieve this change in the Alabama tax code is not proof of the wrongheadedness or impossibility of any attempt to bring biblical ethical concerns to bear on contemporary issues surrounding wealth and poverty. Rather, it shows that today's social reformers face analogous difficulties to those faced by ancient Israelite prophets and religious reformers who sought to take on entrenched interests in order to create a more socially, religiously, and economically just society. And it suggests that some policy debates could benefit from greater involvement of those motivated by religious and moral ideals.

## Conclusion

Bringing religious texts and religious moral views into various contemporary policy or societal debates does not mean we will all agree. Different religious and secular viewpoints will be brought forward. But welcoming a variety of religious viewpoints into such discussions allows for a more spirited debate and avoids sidelining many people's deepest convictions. It also will help those who wish to bring about societal or policy changes to frame their own arguments in morally and theologically richer terms. These arguments ultimately may be more persuasive to those wedded to particular understandings of the Bible (or another sacred text) by showing them that this same text can be interpreted in a different but equally compelling fashion that remains truthful to the text and the tradition.

Of course, some minds will not be changed. But others who have no intention of abandoning their deep commitment to their religious tradition may realize that they actually can support a policy or societal change they once opposed on religious grounds because they can now see that shifting their approach on a particular issue can be consonant with their religious outlook.

Finally, the Hebrew Bible can only function as living Scripture for Jews and Christians if we find ways to make it speak to our contemporary context. And where better to begin this task than by exploring how the Bible might illuminate and contribute to the ongoing pressing discussions surrounding wealth and poverty today?