

# 2. The Genesis of Economics

## or The Economics of Genesis



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In this chapter, we examine the foundations of economics found in the nature of God revealed in Genesis chapter 1,<sup>i</sup> and expanded through the Pentateuch (the first five books of the Bible, ascribed to Moses). Moses heard from God but understood God’s directives in terms of an eclectic set of anthropological sources as an Egyptian General, a desert wanderer, and son of Jewish slaves. Genesis gives the history of a tribal society, which then in the slavery of Egypt encounters the depravity of urban poverty. In reaction, Moses utilises his wealth of knowledge of societal structures from Ethiopia, Egypt and Midian to create the political economic framework of a mixed urban-tribal society in the promised land.

Hermeneutics are important. We cannot just take quotations from an ancient tribal context, or an emerging agrarian society and apply them willy-nilly to post-modern society. Rather we can examine the principles of God’s actions in redemptive history, and their consistency over multiple interventions over the ages. The question for later in the book then becomes how to interpret those principles into 20<sup>th</sup> century conurbanisations.

### King of Creation

*In the beginning, God...* When we speak of God’s creation it is important to remember that God created all things.<sup>ii</sup> He rules and reigns the universe from before the beginning. He is King of Creation. When we speak of the Kingdom of God we speak of *God’s active, interventive rule redeeming humanity and restoring the creation*. This has always existed and always will. The coming of the Kingdom of God in the New Testament is a breaking in of that Kingdom into the human condition. It is a redemption of those things that were once in bondage to other than what God created them to be.

*God is the first creator.* He is the first worker and provider. He does not hoard the economic resources. He creates people to share in the fruits of his creation. God is the example of sharing and of what our creations should be used for.

The first thing that God does with his creation is sit back and reflect on it. God sees that *it is good*. He is the source of this creation and he must take pleasure that what he has done is good. Secondly God creates things *for the benefit of others*. God creates the animals and Eve so that Adam will not be alone. These are the two elements that must be part of all work, production and creation - that it pleases God and that it serves humanity.

## The Nature of Land & Technology

Things were made good by God from the very beginning and they were seen as good. The land, the waters, the animals, humans were all created as good and in a pleasant garden. Work was a gift of expression and creativity not a burden. It was not until after the fall when humans sinned, that the earth was cursed. It was not until after the fall that work became a burden.

After the fall, however, many of these things were cursed: birth, marriage, the ground, plants, work, products (Gen 3:16-19). More importantly than the cursing of resources and earthly relationships was the enmity and distance created between humanity and God. Without this basic central guideline, humanity lost much of its ability to use resources for good. That is, without the relationship with God and a *blessed relationship* with each other, humanity could not use the resources that God gave them for their purpose. This purpose was to please God and to serve the good of our neighbour.

Without this natural relationship that was in the Garden, God had to impose an unnatural one. Not one that is a free-flowing expression of who people are, but instead one that is forced or imposed. This took the form of Torah or Law. The law should be held in high regard considering its source, but it is still not the first intention of God. The Law had to be created because the part of human nature designed to please God and love our neighbour was damaged. These were now things that needed to be learned and followed in obedience. But this did not always happen.

Many times throughout Israel's history there were abuses of God's creation. Their possessions may come to rule them, so God told them, "Beware." Economic success may also cause them to be proud and forget God (Deut 8:17, Prov 30:9).

Many wisely use and manage these resources, but it is God who makes them *fruitful*. Leviticus 26 is a beautiful chapter showing the interrelationship of people's work and God's blessing on a nation.

**Work + Obedience = Blessing & Wealth**  
**Work - Obedience = Curse & Poverty**

The Wisdom Literature tells us that things are an unstable basis on which to build life since they will all vanish away (Prov 23:5). The wisest man tells us that as a goal in life, they are an illusion (Ecc 5:11). Those who depend on them will fall like autumn leaves (Prov 11:28). These point to some of the dangers of riches. They could be good things, but only if they are put to the use that God intended.

As resources have morphed into modern day technological products, most of these derivative products are good and serve the common good. But this need technology is going to disrupt the old, and we need to move with the times, for it is God who gave us the capacity to create such technologies off his creation.

### ***Land***

The land was created by God and was created good. Our job as humans in the garden was to *till and care* for the land. Too often, the emphasis has been on the "subduing and dominion" over the creation of God. Humanity both before and after the curse was to work the land and *manage and care* for it. Land was seen as a way of providing for the family. The land is God's and must be treated as such. It must be nurtured and taken care of. The land will produce abundance if God's people are faithful to the care of it and to the covenant established between them and *Yahweh*. If they are not faithful, then the land would be barren (Lev 26).

The land was created by God and is God's. It is not to be owned in perpetuity by any individual (Lev 25:23). Therefore wanton abuse of it and poor stewardship of the land will result in God's curse instead of his blessing (Lev 26).

God is the one who gives his people the ability to obtain wealth and he is the one who takes it away. These resources are taken away when his people are unrighteous both in idolatry and oppression (Deut 8:18-20, Micah 2:1-5).

### **The Role of Dusty Humanity**

Humans were made from the dust of the earth (Gen 2:7). They were created to subdue and bring it into subjection, to rule the life in the earth, the sky and the sea (Gen 1:26-28). It is delegated authority. They are to rule as the image of God (Gen 1:27) in a caring way of tilling and keeping. This creation mandate is not an excuse for an ecological crisis.

The way that God ruled was to give every living thing that he created away. Every plant and animal was given away for the provision of humanity. If this is the image in which we were created, then we also must have the same attitude when it comes to our resources. They must be given away for the provision of others, not so they may simply eat off our production, but so they also may produce off the resources we have created.

Therefore our role is to both create resources to be given away and to produce things that will be pleasing to God. If we are producing resources for our own gain (beyond our basic needs) or that will be displeasing to God's reflection then we are not existing in the way in which we were created, and not being children of the Kingdom of God. This is the way of godly economics, the way of love.

### **Wealth Management**

The managing of the earth, is a foundational principle. To work hard in the tilling of the soil, brings an increase on average of perhaps 3% per year. On this produce, societies could be built. There are others mentioned in the Genesis narrative who became specialists, artisans, indicating the transition from a tribal form of society to one where there is enough excess income to support such specialists.

Wealth in the Old Testament was usually attributed to righteousness within the tribe. Beginning with Abraham, when the people were obedient to God's commandments then they prospered. Amos warned God's people that they must obey his commands or the Northern Kingdom would be destroyed. The people did not obey and God followed through on his promise (Sider, 60). Wealth and riches are two aspects of the world's resources that it is our responsibility to manage - all resources which must be used to please God and serve humanity. When they are hoarded or are used to increase riches or to oppress others than God's curse is upon those resources. They become not Kingdom resources, but resources of a cursed and barren land.

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<sup>i</sup> It is beyond the scope of these studies to discuss the source of the philosophy and theology of Genesis 1 nor the theories of P and Q and other theses that have been put forward over the last century as to the authorship and exilic or post-exilic integration of these.

<sup>ii</sup> Whether of fundamentalist belief in the processes of creation in seven days being seven actual days or more modern perspectives on evolutionary creative forces across the aeons, nearly all Christians recognise these generic statements about the God of creation who continues to sustain creation as foundational to Christian doctrine.